

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Tribute to AMA Muhith

With his passing, the country has lost a voice of integrity and patriotism

We are deeply saddened by the passing of former Finance Minister Abul Maal Abdul Muhith at the age of 88. With his passing, we lose one of the iconic figures in our politics, who started his career as a bureaucrat and ended it as the country's longest-serving finance minister (placing the national budget in the parliament a record 12 times) as well as an important figure of the ruling Awami League. During his stint as finance minister, Bangladesh witnessed a significant increase in its budget size, quite an extraordinary growth of its economy, and impressive inflation control. As a result, the country earned great recognition on the world stage.

Muhith was a freedom fighter and among the earlier diplomats who pledged their allegiance in support of an independent Bangladesh. He was part of a group of diplomats in Washington—while serving in the Pakistan embassy—who, along with many other important persons, inspired the Bangladesh diaspora to lobby and build support in the US Congress for the independence of Bangladesh. For his role in drumming up global support for Bangladesh and contribution to our Liberation War, Muhith was conferred with the Swadhinata Puroskar, the highest civilian award in the country—a fitting reward for his patriotism which he so courageously displayed during the most challenging of times.

As a politician and finance minister, he was a voice of reason, somebody with whom one could engage—as he was open to multiple views, and was not just another politician who would uncritically toe the party line. Even after retiring from public service, he did not want to stop serving the public, as he expressed his desire to start a foundation to fight the Covid-19 pandemic.

On a personal level, he was one of the erudite politicians who authored many books, some of them scholarly, on the economy of Bangladesh. He was also a big admirer of art, and was frequently seen inaugurating and attending various events and exhibitions of famous artists. One of his striking features was his dignity. At a time when politics had gone into such a rot and fortunes were being made by many in the lower positions of politics and government, Muhith maintained his honesty and served the country with integrity. For that, he earned our respect as well as the respect of many others.

With his demise, the country has suffered the loss of a voice of integrity, intellectual honesty and patriotism.

Another alleged enforced disappearance

Law enforcers must show legal papers during arrests

It is disturbing that despite much criticism of the practice of picking up alleged criminals by police officers in plainclothes, or arresting them without showing any proof of identity or supporting legal documents, it is still going on in the country. A report by this daily on Saturday mentions a case in which law enforcers allegedly picked up a man on April 19, who hasn't been returned or shown arrested till date. Reportedly, a group of six to seven men, all in plainclothes, picked up Mohammed Mohasin from his residence in Dhaka saying an arrest warrant had been issued against his village address in Bhola.

They, however, produced no legal documents to support their claim and refused to have their ID cards photographed by the family members. What is more distressing is that while taking him away, they told the family not to take any action and that he would be returned within three days. Afterwards, the Kafrul Police Station reportedly refused to file any case in this regard, but allowed to file a GD on the condition that no name of any law enforcement agency would be mentioned. Finding no help from the local police station, the wife of the victim, in a press conference, urged the higher authorities to at least show him arrested in a case so that the family knows if he lives.

The appeal captures the trauma that so many families of disappeared individuals have had to go through in Bangladesh, some longer than others, some never seeing their faces again. It also highlights that enforced disappearance may still be taking place, despite recent international scrutiny of such illegal practices, and that there are efforts underway to hide such practices. After all, why would a police station not file a case on such a grave allegation and only allow filing a GD on the condition of not naming the security agency involved? As regards the alleged plainclothesmen telling the family not to take any action, it was clearly a threat born of malicious intentions. The fact that the man hasn't been returned or shown arrested even after ten days proves the point.

We urge the higher authorities to look into this manner and take urgent steps to return the victim to his family. The government should also investigate the allegations raised and see if there was any foul play behind the incident. At a time when the whole world is watching us following the US sanctions on Rab, the government must ensure all law enforcers operate within the law and respect individual rights and dignity.

A towering personality who led us courageously

MA Mannan
is the Planning Minister of
Bangladesh.

MA MANNAN

I first heard about Abul Maal Abdul Muhith in the 60s when I was a young unemployed man eager for a job. We heard about Mr. Muhith who had been a brilliant student and topped his batch in the highly esteemed civil service examination of Pakistan. Prior to the civil service exam, he had excelled in all academic exams starting from matriculation to MA. I myself qualified in the erstwhile CSP Cadre (now called BCS) following my participation in the said exam held in 1970/1971. Mr. Muhith's youngest brother, Dr. AK Abdul Momen, now our Foreign Minister, qualified in the same exam with me and so we became colleagues and friends. I naturally got to know more about him from Dr. Momen. Mr. Muhith was then a much-praised secretary in the Economic Relations Division (ERD) of the Ministry of Finance. Furthermore, his name was already highly circulating in the administrative set-up and the public arena as a brave young diplomat who had left his comfortable position of a counsellor at the Pakistan embassy in Washington in June 1971. He then joined the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

I directly got to know him some years later in Geneva, Switzerland, where I was then posted as Minister (Economic) in our permanent mission. Mr. Muhith, by then a retired civil servant, was visiting Geneva for two weeks as a consultant of a UN organisation. We had some intensive interactions and got to know each other quite well. It appeared to me that he took a liking to me which, fortunately, lasted for the rest of our lives.

In July 2005, I joined Bangladesh



▲
Abul Maal Abdul
Muhith (1934-2022)

elections with Awami League tickets and won our coveted seats at parliament. Mr. Muhith became finance minister in the new cabinet in January 2009. I remained a back-bencher in parliament. Following Awami League's return to power after the 2014 general elections, in which both of us were successful, Mr. Muhith again became finance minister, and I was included in the cabinet as a state minister of finance.

We both fought in the 2008 general

budgets year after year, and consciously diverted more and more public funds towards infrastructure, energy, education, health and agriculture. This strategy perfectly reflected my own position. There were occasions, I admit, when we disagreed but these became no barriers to our joint path towards achieving higher growth. In hindsight, I can say that we both belonged to the left of centre arena in the development trajectory. But I think he was to my right. We both agreed that the budget had to tilt progressively towards the huge low-income groups of our citizenry. We agreed that the level of poverty was unacceptable and it needed to be addressed bravely. This resulted in the considerably large Social Safety Net Program (SSN) we see now. Fortunately, our team leader and trendsetter was none other than the prime minister herself. She set the tune for the new development strategy of Bangladesh, which can be called growth-with-justice-oriented. She wanted, inter alia, to lower poverty, increase literacy and provide respectable healthcare for the general population. She wanted electricity to reach every home in the country by 2021! And she achieved it in 2021! Mr. Muhith and I, therefore, wholeheartedly enjoyed working under Sheikh Hasina's progressive humanist economic policies.

The prime minister wanted to build the Padma Bridge with our own money, and Mr. Muhith stood by her courageously. Our achievements in all these fields are now known to everyone at home and to many abroad. It has been my pride and honour to have served Bangladesh during this time of leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and contribute heartily in translating, on the ground, the operational Programs largely authored by Mr. Muhith.

Our country is now credibly poised for take-off into the higher-middle-income country level by 2030, and a developed country status by 2041!

For all of these positive changes in Bangladesh, I will always remember Mr. Muhith with gratitude and admiration. I wish for him a place in the heavens as ordained by the Almighty.

Despite being a respected senior in every way, his attitude towards me was warm and brotherly. I also had a very respectful approach towards him, particularly because of his towering personality. Although my position at the ministry was really marginal, my obedience to him was total. I am happy to assert that I fully enjoyed working directly under him.

In my view, his position with regard to public finance management was inclusive, liberal, market-oriented and generally growth-friendly. He presented ever-larger

We are 99%: From factory workers to new working middle class



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ANU MUHAMMAD

IN 1886, three years after the death of Karl Marx, the May Day movement took place. Earlier, in his book *Das Kapital*, Marx analysed the simultaneous rise of capitalism and the development of the working class. He cited many reports of factory inspectors as references to describe the precarious condition of workers at that time. Almost 150 years later, in Bangladesh, the condition of factories and workers remains almost the same. But there is no authentic documentation of it, as the government is more interested in recruiting industrial police than factory inspectors, because that's what the owners want.

There is no instance where the industrial police have ever brought anyone from the owners' side to account for wage theft, torture or cheating, but their action against the workers is decisive. The industrial police have thus been transformed into a tool to arrest or harass workers at the owners' behest. The latter bestows gifts, including vehicles, to the police. What can the workers give?

Wage workers are an essential cog in the capitalist machine, the driver of its growth through the centuries. We have seen how they were exploited during the Industrial Revolution in Europe as well as the United States. There were no fixed working hours, no decent wages. Filled with resentment at the inhuman condition in which they lived, the workers, including women and children, organised themselves and held numerous protests. On May 1, 1886, 35,000 workers walked off their jobs. Tens of thousands more joined strikes in the subsequent days. There were police shootings. Workers were shot dead, and later some of organisers of strikes were hanged in a farcical trial. Their sacrifices didn't go in vain.

May Day continues to resonate with the working class in a capitalist world order. It calls on them to unite and transform into a political force to fight their continued marginalisation. For lack of unity or organised political presence can be

hurtful, as we've seen in Bangladesh, in the form of a lack of security for workers, poor wages and curtailed rights. Even the Rana Plaza massacre couldn't turn the tide around. It didn't help that there has been little organised resistance to the unlimited greed of employers, corrupt officials and international profiteers, which repeatedly turned factories into

On the other hand, thousands of millionaires have emerged in the country. Their goal is to earn money by exploiting workers in any way possible. They and their enablers and beneficiaries hold control over the state machinery, while workers in most industrial sectors are deprived of their basic rights such as a fair minimum wage, 8-hour working day, appointment letters, etc. Proper work environment and security are almost absent. The functioning of trade unions is still a thorny issue, and there have been instances of attacks on workers for trying to organise under unions.

Changes in the gender composition of the working class have been significant through the development of the garments industry. Most of the workers are women. Apart from this, participation of women in various professions has increased. In dealing with continued deprivation and oppression at the workplace, women workers have become a new social force. We hear stories of women's empowerment, although reports of insecurity, rape, and harassment abound.

Equally significantly, because of the current capitalist trend and arrangements, the number of temporary, day-wise, part-time, contractual, and informal workers is also on the rise in all sectors. The largest number of workers are in the informal sector, who are unorganised and endure extreme hardship. The main demand of the May Day—fair wages by working for 8 hours—thus remains a dream, not just for these workers but for the educated working class as well.

In all regions of the capitalist world, the idea of labourer has spread far and wide into different levels of society. That is why limiting the identity of workers to the industrial sector does not illustrate the real picture of the effects of capitalism anymore. There are now many who hold a degree and belong to the so-called middle class, but their work is as precarious as that of any industrial worker. In fact, 99 percent of men and women in our society can match that description as they suffer the same uncertainty and struggles in life. Their shared misfortune and marginalisation in the hands of the financial elites has been rightly captured in the slogan—"We are the 99%". Therefore, the May Day today is not only for the factory workers, but also for the so-called middle-class educated labourers. And together, they must rise again.



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ILLUSTRATION:
ANWAR SOHEL

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mass graves.

Over the last few decades, one of the major manifestations of the changes taking place in our economy is the shift in the composition of the working class. In the name of economic reforms, many state-owned mills have been closed since the 1980s. The last major industrial establishment to be closed was the Adamjee Jute Mills, while the remaining factories are in the process of being closed or privatised. Until the 1980s, workers of these state-owned units were the main organised group among all industrial workers. Their closure, thus, was part of a long-term project to break down the organised force of workers. At present, the state-owned industrial sector is in a pathetic state. The number of unionised workers is also much less. The garments industry, which is now at the forefront, has a handful of pro-worker unions, and the condition of other labour organisations is also very weak.