

NATIONAL MOURNING DAY



The personal is political



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Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was murdered 47 years ago. Today, five-sixth of the population of Bangladesh is under 50. A good majority of the country, therefore, has no direct memory of the murder mayhem that took place on the break of dawn on August 15, 1975, when the father of the nation along with most of his family members was brutally killed in a coup d'état. Only his two daughters, Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana, survived the attack as they were in Europe at that time. The sisters have lived through this traumatic experience and relived it while pursuing a prolonged quest for justice in the decades to come.

The personal grief has never faded away for the grieving daughters. In a heart-wrenching emotional article, titled, "My Father Sheikh Mujib," written for the centenary volume: Voice of Millions, the youngest daughter Sheikh Rehana reflects on her father's death. She writes, "I wonder what was going through my father's mind while he was falling down the stairs after being hit by the bullets! Did he even think for once about the two daughters he was leaving behind? Where they were! How they would live! Or was he thinking: is this the reward for the struggles that I went through to end the miseries of the people of the land, to bring smiles to their lives, and to free the land? Or did he not get enough time to think any of this at all?" (p. 132).

As individuals, we can probably offer our deepest empathy to a daughter for the personal loss of her father. The pain is deep, and no words can heal it. But as a nation, we need to internalize the loss to understand its significance in our national and political history. After all, the man who suffered the tragic circumstance is more than the father of Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana or their other siblings; he is the father of the nation who ideated a nation-state, promoting Bengali as the shared language of East Bengal for their cultural manifestations and national identity. He was the one who through his six-point demand made us believe that only through regional autonomy we could secure our national identity and do away with the systemic state repressions of West Pakistan. He is our national hero who prepared us for the ultimate sacrifice for the freedom of our motherland, Bangladesh. The terrible murder is more than a personal story. It is a day that can never, and should not, be forgotten as it is a day that changed history. It is a day that robbed the constitution of its foundational principles, particularly socialist democracy and secularism.

The assassins and their accomplices did their best to erase the crime from the public memory. They almost succeeded as successive generations were not given access to the details of the action of the renegade army officers. Only during the long-drawn murder trial of Bangabandhu, did many previously undiscussed issues come to the fore. With the benefit of hindsight, we now know a lot more about

the coup d'état, the involved parties, their beneficiaries, and their local and international patrons. Those involved in the propaganda machinery to vilify Bangabandhu to justify the heinous murder have only helped us unfold the mystery.

The irony is Bangabandhu was killed by people whom he trusted the most. Call it a tragic flaw—but it was his immense faith in his people that made him not only relax his security such as living in a regular residential area but also ignore the intel available to him through different agencies. The Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi warned Bangabandhu on several occasions of the threats to his life, requesting him to guarantee foolproof security for himself. Her men on the ground could sense that there were conspirators who were using the public dissatisfaction over the food shortage and price hikes of essentials in a war-ravaged country as an excuse to launch an attack on its leader. Bangabandhu's attempt to establish order in a post-war society where corruption loomed large through restrictions on and centralization of political activities created a strong polarization and fragmentation. A section of the oppositional political activists was buoyed by the revolutionary zeal as it believed freedom to be incomplete much in tandem with the Chinese model. Then there were the Islamic leaders who painted the creation of Bangladesh as a weakening of Islam in the region. Many of these agents got connected with different international players who interpreted the secession of Pakistan for their convenience. The growing influence of India on Bangladesh was one major cause; the vendetta of the defeated factions remained another. India's military, humanitarian and diplomatic assistance during the nine-month long liberation war; Soviet veto to stop a UN resolution on "immediate ceasefire and withdrawal of Indian and Pakistani forces to their own sides of the border;" China's tacit support for Pakistan as it was aiming for a US-Sino tie—made Mujib a central Cold War figure. The freedom that he earned for his people proved to be a game changer. Mujib, as a political figure was both hated and loved, but could not be ignored. No wonder, Cuban leader Fidel Castro compared Mujib to the Himalayas that he had never seen; Castro also told Mujib that his championing of socialism had perhaps invited a bullet.

One can only wonder, why a seasoned politician Mujib ignored all these warning signs. Why was he not careful in curating himself? This is the same man, who narrated the power dynamics in Congo in his notebook journals that he kept during his days in Dhaka prison. In 1966, before a general strike called to press home the regional autonomy of East Pakistan, he was surprised to find that the jail authority under the instruction of the intelligence branch, has smudged all news of agitation. Left with a heavily censored newspaper, he ponders over the consequence of political assassination in central Africa. Bangabandhu writes, "What a country, what politics! Those

is one truth that no one must forget. One can always differ in opinions and methods; that should not be used as a pretext to connive against the Opposition party and kill those who hold different opinions; that is a dangerous game. A great many have suffered the consequences of such sin." (PD 41-42).

While in jail, he felt helpless as many of the Bengali opposition parties collaborated with Ayub Khan which was hampering his demand for autonomy. In this connection, he recalled how the last sultan of Bengal Daud Khan Karrani was betrayed by his ministers which allowed the Mughals to take control of Bengal. This was nearly 200 years before Siraj ud Doula met a similar fate in the Battle of Plassey. He wrote, "Even after Pakistan was created, there was no shortage of men willing to play the role of Quislings. These are people eager to give away everything to Pakistan for petty personal gain. There is no lack of men among us ready to imprison their countrymen or aim bullets at the chests of Bengalis struggling for the cause of their country. Bengal is a fertile land of rivers that water its soil; the rich soil produces plentiful crops but there is no shortage of weeds and parasites either! I don't know if this country can be saved from these traitorous collaborators" (PD 93-4).

Bangabandhu's profound knowledge of history shows that he was well aware of traitors. Yet while reading Prison Diaries, we cringe in horror when we see him appreciating Khondaker Mostaq Ahmed for his resolute convictions and loyalty. After all, he turned out to be one of the elite actors behind the coup d'état. Even more strangely, there were several attempts on his

life. According to a 2013 WikiLeaks report, a declassified US document contains a US cable dated May 23, 1975, from the then envoy that notes an assassination attempt occurred as "Mujib was returning to his residence after visiting new TV station on outskirts of Dacca" on the evening of May 21. On a fatal night before the coup d'état, he was probably discussing the security issue with his cousin Sheikh Moni over his visit to Dhaka University the following day. Little did he know, that some army officers have taken control of the armoured tanks that he got as a gift from the Egyptian president.

The attackers carried out a carefully planned attack and successfully mitigated all possibilities of counter-attacks and backlashes. To this day, August 15 remains a dark day in our national history for its sheer brutality. But it is also a day that killed our essential ideals. This attack is a unique event where the personal becomes the political.

A thorough understanding of the mourning day is required to understand the trauma as a society-wide process. Only then, we will be able to heal the wounds created by many public failings and ills. Through revisiting the causes and consequences of this trauma we can reintroduce the future generations "that never saw the murder of Mujib" to a great man who sacrificed his life in pursuit of Golden Bengali while alive, but even more so—after his death.

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