



As the Master Juror in the first Aga Khan Award, Geneva (1980).

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MUZHARUL ISLAM'S BIRTH CENTENARY

# Forging a Bengali identity through modernist architecture



## THE GRUDGING URBANIST

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After completing his Bachelor of Architecture degree at the University of Oregon, Eugene, in June 1952, the 29-year-old Muzharul Islam (1923-2012) returned home to find a postcolonial Pakistan embroiled in acrimonious politics of national identity. The fragility of the pan-Islamic polity that sought to consolidate the impossible geography of Pakistan was evident. The religion-based, two-nation partition of the Indian Subcontinent into India and Pakistan was designed to create two separate domains for Hindus and Muslims, respectively. Yet, Muslim Pakistan was already in trouble soon after the 1947 Partition. The newly minted country's two regions – East and West Pakistan, separated by almost 1,000 miles of Indian territory – were themselves on a collision course because of their asymmetric power relationship, different languages, and, most of all, conflicted attitudes regarding how their divergent ethnicities and Islamic nationalism intersected. The country's political power was centred on West Pakistan. This lopsided power structure was further exacerbated by an ideological difference. The ruling elites of West Pakistan embraced a brand of political Islam that would not only work as an ideological buffer against the perceived threat of Hindu-majority India but also unify the different ethnic groups of Pakistan with an overarching Islamist spirit. Such a state policy alienated many secular-minded Bengali leaders, intellectuals, and professionals. They were drawn more to a mediating relationship between a humanist Bengali tradition and faith than to Pakistan's geostrategic patronage of Islamic nationalism.

In February 1952, less than a year before Muzharul Islam arrived home from the United States, the police opened fire on agitated East Pakistanis who were protesting on the streets of Dhaka. The people of East Pakistan demanded the right to speak their language Bangla, not Urdu – the language of the ruling elite in West Pakistan and proposed as the national language of Pakistan to consolidate the fragile state. Several Bengalis, including students, killed during the political demonstration on February 21, 1952, in Dhaka, were lionised as martyrs of the Language Movement in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).

The turbulent politics that Muzharul Islam found himself thrust into influenced his worldview, as well as his fledgling professional career. He interpreted the prevailing political conditions in his homeland as a fateful conflict between the secular humanist ethos of Bengal and an alien Islamist identity imposed on the Bengalis by the Urdu-speaking ruling class in West Pakistan. The young architect began his design career in the midst of bitterly divided notions of national origin and destiny. It was not surprising that his architectural work would reflect this political debate. Many secular-minded Bengalis felt the need to articulate their national identity on ethno-cultural grounds, rather than on a supra-religious foundation championed by West Pakistani power-wielders. Muzharul Islam's Institute of Fine Arts (1953-55) at Shahbagh, Dhaka, embodied these beliefs.

The meagre literature on South Asian modern architecture generally identifies

the Faculty of Fine Arts as the harbinger of Bengali modernism – a sort of Bengali Villa Savoye, synthesising a modern architectural vocabulary with climate-responsive and site-conscious design programmes. However, what has not been examined in this iconic building is how Islam's work also provides an intriguing cultural foil against which his architectural experiments with modernist aesthetics could be viewed as part of his inquiries into the ongoing politics of Bengali nationalist activism.

While the Franco-Swiss architect Le Corbusier's influence on the Institute of Fine Arts is palpable, Islam's iconoclastic building sought to achieve two distinctive goals.

First, the building introduced the

critique of political Islam that became a state apparatus for fashioning a particular religion-based image of postcolonial Pakistan. By abstracting his design through a modernist visual expression, Muzharul Islam sought to purge architecture of what he viewed as the political blemishes of instrumental religion. However, to see his modernism as a Western import or an aesthetic remedy for a local challenge would be to reduce both modernism and ongoing Bengali identity politics into isolated instances of parochial simplicity. The faculty's modernism hinges on Muzharul Islam's dual commitment to a secular Bengali character and universal humanity – a post-nationalist worldview rooted in the enlightenment ideals of the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) – as well as his own education in both the East and West. In a Tagorian disposition, Islam refused to see any ideological conflict between Bengali mythos and modern notions of progress and universality.

I, however, dismisses any overarching idea that during the post-Partition ideological battle of identity politics that engulfed Pakistan, neither politics nor architectural



Muzharul Islam's Institute of Fine Arts introduced the aesthetic tenets of modern architecture to East Pakistan.

PHOTO: ASIF SALMAN

aesthetic tenets of modern architecture to East Pakistan. For many, its design signalled a radical break from the country's prevailing architectural language for civic buildings – built either in an architectural hybrid of Mughal and British colonial traditions, popularly known as Indo-Saracenic, or as utilitarian corridor-and-room building boxes, delivered by the provincial government's Department of Communications, Buildings, and Irrigation (CBI). The Faculty of Fine Arts could not be a more unambiguous departure from, say, the colonial-era Curzon Hall (1904-1908) at Dhaka University, within walking distance of Islam's building, or the Holy Family Hospital (1953; now Holy Family Red Crescent Medical College Hospital).

Second, the Institute of Fine Arts' modernist minimalism – rejecting all ornamental references to Mughal and Indo-Saracenic architecture – was a conscious

practices in East and West Pakistan were neatly aligned with secular and Islamicist orientations. As Muzharul Islam struggled to find a modernist architectural language that would resist religious nationalism, so did many first-generation West Pakistani architects who were also caught up in uneasy debates concerning modernity and tradition, Anglo-American influence, and Islamic heritage, and how these constructs intersected with their idea of Pakistan. Yet, what makes Islam's work particularly interesting is that his architectural search sprang forth from a peculiar political predicament resulting from the inversion of the very pan-Islamic argument that was used in the creation of Pakistan. His search needed to engage the realpolitik of the Language Movement and Bengali soul-searching that marked the social climate in East Pakistan in the early 1950s when he returned from the US.

# Trump's third indictment shows America's real national security threat



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Donald Trump continues to make history in the most embarrassing sense of the phrase. Last Tuesday, the former President was indicted for the third time in recent months. Never before in the history of the United States has an ex-President running for re-election been criminally charged this many times. And never before has such an awful candidate also had a real chance of becoming President again. The past two indictments have far from dented Trump's support – he still remains the front-runner in the Republican primaries. Not only that, new polling shows that Trump remains competitive in a race with President Joe Biden.

But the latest indictment, unsealed by special counsel Jack Smith, is the gravest of all. More so, it is the most important indictment ever to protect American democracy against anyone. The indictment charges Trump's attempt to subvert the will of voters – and drive the nation to the brink of a coup – as the biggest attack on the “bedrock” of America's basic principles. Whether it will impact Trump's MAGA voter base remains uncertain because let's not fool ourselves here. Trump's track record is as bad as it gets: three times indicted, twice

major city in the United States.” Clark had responded, “That's why there's an Insurrection Act.” The Insurrection Act authorises the President to bring out military troops to quell civil unrest; the fact that the Trump-allied lawyer went to such extremes to grab power back in the face of a legitimate election loss shows the depth of corruption that was at play.

Trump's response to the indictment was expectedly inflammatory. His campaign published a statement echoing the classic Trumpian twisted rhetoric: “The lawlessness of these persecutions of President Trump and his supporters is reminiscent of Nazi Germany in the 1930s, and other authoritarian, dictatorial regimes.” The indictment is really the lowest standard of accountability for Trump's large-scaled anti-democratic acts, and here they are likening a legal process – with a great deal of merit to the allegations – to Nazi Germany. The irony could not be more unreal.

Fending Trump off, even through the three cases, is no easy task. In a better world, Trump would take the insanity plea or just retire and spend the rest of life playing golf. But in the world we live in, we know he's going to stall and fight



President Donald Trump talks on the phone to Vice President Mike Pence from the Oval Office of the White House on Jan. 6, 2021.

FILE PHOTO

impeached, and deemed liable for sexual assault. But he speaks the nasty and people do like the nasty.

The indictment should instead be viewed as a chilling reckoning for the United States: the biggest national security threat they face today is not in some balloon flying across the ocean, but in their own homegrown soil. Their once “exceptional” political system that was able to get rid of a repugnant leader like Richard Nixon after the Watergate scandal simply does not exist anymore.

In many ways, the indictment criminalises disturbing facts we have already known, or either suspected, since the Capitol riots on Jan 6, 2021. We all knew the ballot tampering claims were absurd lies and that Trump “was determined to remain in power.” But what makes this case remarkable is the crux of Smith's argument that rests on details after details showing how Trump and his co-conspirators “knew” they were lying when they pursued the voter fraud claims. America's affair with fascism during the last few nightmarish days of Trump's presidency is vividly painted in the 45-page document.

The indictment describes that Trump called his vice president, Mike Pence, “too honest” for refusing to overturn certified election results. A chorus of top Justice Department officials, top White House attorneys and campaign staff members, key state legislators and officials, and state and federal courts had told the former President that his frivolous scheme was untenable. Trump, along with accomplices cheering him on, proceeded to get on with it anyway. The case is expected to unfold with Trump's defense lying on the ground that he did not delusionally believe he was lying.

Most abhorrent of all, the indictment also reveals that Trump and his co-conspirators were indeed aware of inciting violence, that it was not a mere by-product of the conspiracy but a purpose. On 3 January, just days before the riot, a member of the White House counsel's office told Jeffrey Clark, a top Justice Department official at the time, that if Trump tried to remain in office, there would be “riots in every

to undermine a trial before the election. Even if it does go on trial, outcomes offer no definitive respite either because he “can” still run if he's convicted. Even if he goes to prison, he “can” still be elected. No one knows what happens then.

But what we do know is that if Republicans nominate him now – which seems very likely – they'll make an utter mockery of themselves and lose whatever is left of their brand as a legitimate party that cares even an inkling about the core values of the country. If Donald Trump does come back to the White House, after

**Trump's track record is as bad as it gets: three times indicted, twice impeached, and deemed liable for sexual assault. But he speaks the nasty and people do like the nasty. The indictment, as such, is a reckoning: the biggest national security threat the US faces today is the return of their worst, most dangerous President in history.**

being charged with conspiring to “defraud the United States,” then the future of the nation will be unthinkably disastrous. Imagine walls, science denial, xenophobia with a mix of anti-semitism, a high dose of racism, making a vendetta machine out of the Justice department, special counsel Jack Smith definitely losing his job, the corrupt Jeff Clark being appointed as attorney general, a whole lot of white supremacy topped with unthawing the China impasse, and a horde of many more horrible things.

The most realistic best-case – or tolerable – scenario we're looking at seems to be the not-so-fun Biden-Trump rematch where the latter loses and goes on again claiming that he won. And then more indictments and embarrassing history making, where hopefully one day, one stop sign somewhere can put an end to the madness.