

Remembering Bangabandhu

Reflecting on his legacy and the struggle for independence

Today, August 15, marks the 49th anniversary of the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and nearly his entire family. We remember his pivotal role in uniting the people of Bangladesh and leading them towards independence with reverence. Emerging as a major opposition figure in Pakistani politics between 1948 and 1971, he became a key leader who rallied opposition to President Ayub Khan and his oppressive regime. It was Bangabandhu who catalysed public support across the then East Pakistan for the Six-Point Movement, advocating for greater autonomy for the region. As the movement garnered widespread support, it became a crucial milestone on the path to Bangladesh's independence.

Sheikh Mujib's most significant contribution came during the tumultuous period leading up to the Liberation War of 1971. Under his leadership, the people of East Pakistan were inspired to fight for independence when West Pakistani leaders refused to acknowledge and respect their wishes. Through his charismatic leadership, Bangabandhu mobilised the masses—particularly through his historic March 7 speech at the Racecourse Ground in Dhaka—to take up whatever arms they could muster and fight for the nation's liberation. Following his call for resistance, millions of brave Bangladeshis put everything they had on the line to liberate the country from the oppressive Pakistani regime led by the ruthless military leader Muhammad Yahya Khan.

Although Sheikh Mujib was arrested and imprisoned in West Pakistan during the war, his indomitable spirit and the leadership he had instilled in the nation kept the fight for freedom alive. The significance of his role in uniting the people of Bangladesh to both dream of and pursue independence cannot be overstated.

The assassination of Bangabandhu in 1975 was a devastating blow to the country. This tragic event marked a dark chapter in our history, bringing the military into our politics—a major issue that the Bangladeshi people had previously struggled with during the Pakistan era. This shocking turn of events set back his vision of creating a fair and just society where every individual would be equal in the eyes of the law. To this day, Bangladesh has yet to fully establish some of the basic principles that Mujib and other independence leaders had advocated for.

That said, on this day, we must recognise the tremendous contributions of Bangabandhu in our history of independence. Without his leadership, the independence of Bangladesh might have been delayed for much longer and achieved at an even greater cost. While his ideals have yet to be fully realised in the independent Bangladesh, the best way to honour his memory is to work tirelessly to establish the Bangladesh that he and countless others struggled and sacrificed so much for.

Biman can no longer be a law unto itself

Revelation of yet another scandal shows urgency of reforms

The Daily Star's revelation of a syndicate within Biman Bangladesh Airlines that manipulated ticket prices for Malaysia-bound flights in April-May is yet another reminder of the systemic corruption that has been plaguing the national carrier. According to our report, a civil aviation ministry probe found that several Biman officials, including those at the highest levels, were complicit in blocking tickets and inflating prices. What this means is that Biman was directly responsible for the crisis that saw several thousand migrant workers failing to fly before the May 31 deadline, when the Malaysian labour market was closed for Bangladesh. This is totally unacceptable.

Reportedly, between April 15 and May 31, the price of an economy class ticket on Biman flights from Dhaka to Kuala Lumpur soared from Tk 20,475 to an outrageous Tk 73,710. It was the result of a deliberate scheme where the syndicate blocked seats—often all of them on a single plane—for the benefit of 14 travel agencies, depriving other agencies of access to tickets (a total of 480 agencies are registered with Biman). The syndication allowed these companies to sell tickets at exorbitant rates. It also led to flights departing with empty seats, while migrant workers were either forced to pay the high price or left stranded. The failure to go, having already paid enough for it, eventually plunged them into further financial hardship.

For years, this is all Biman has been doing—causing one corruption scandal after another, and getting off scot-free. In this column, we have repeatedly commented on the airline's dysfunction, procurement and recruitment irregularities, operational inefficiencies, etc. Its decisions to purchase aircraft were also frequently criticised. Every decision it made seemed to be affected by parochial interests, while the lack of any functional accountability mechanism allowed unscrupulous officials and dubious entities to commit corruption with impunity.

Such corruption and mismanagement led to repeated financial losses, damaging our credibility and reputation on the global stage. The plight of the migrant workers denied passage in May is but the tip of a huge iceberg of sufferings caused over the years. This has to stop. The air of change brought by the recent mass uprising, which saw almost all government institutions and pillars of power being shaken, must reach Biman, too. The urgency for reforms cannot be overstated. We urge the government to take decisive actions to cleanse Biman of its corrupt elements, ensure accountability at all levels, and implement policies that can meet the demands of the new age.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Omagh Bombing in Ireland

On this day in 1998, a car bomb exploded in Omagh, Northern Ireland, killing 29 people and leaving more than 200 injured. The Real Irish Republican Army (Real IRA), an IRA splinter group, claimed responsibility for the bombing, which was the deadliest attack in Northern Ireland since the eruption of violence there in the late 1960s.

Don't let the new dawn be turned false



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

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SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

The end came as it does inevitably to all autocrats and dictators. The five-time prime minister with questionable electoral credentials, who mutated from an elected prime minister in 1996 to the worst autocrat the country has suffered, was forced out of the illegal power she had acquired in the face of a popular uprising, the tide of which no state machinery could stem.

Her deft application of the principles of CMR and her investment in the military in the 15 years of her misrule paid off. She was given a safe exit. Not only that—she, after being ferried to the nearest Indian airport, was eventually deposited in New Delhi, in a BAF C-130, where she is now happily ensconced. Her personally close connection with the Indian authorities and her over-all India policy have paid good dividends, because Delhi is likely to be her next abode for the foreseeable future, a denouement to Hasina's political career that most people had anticipated.

I feel the time is past to dwell on whether she should have left sooner and avoided the killings that she presided on. Enough it is to say that she could have, but drunk in the elixir of power, she suffered from a psychological state that all autocrats and dictators who use the state institutions to validate the usurpation of political power suffer from—a euphoria, a feeling of perpetuity, had engulfed her. She wanted to stay in power on the blood of the youths. No movements in the history of Bangladesh have taken so many lives in so few days as the quota reform movement. Even if one were to take the official count, the numbers will shame even the Kim III Sung and Stalins. What is reprehensible is the attempt by ministers to put the blame on so-called miscreants, washing all responsibilities of the killings off the hand of the law enforcement agencies.

As reports reveal, she wanted sterner action by the army. Providence and good sense helped avoid a catastrophe whose consequence one shudders to think. All credit to the CAS for the subsequent development.

As many had predicted, Hasina's departure came through a mass uprising, the spark provided by a non-political issue that morphed into a political issue, the nine-point demand becoming a single-point demand asking for her departure. As before,

this movement was also given the lead by students. No political party was capable of providing the lead, primarily because the Hasina regime over the last 15 years had unleashed such repressive and coercive measures on the opposition that it was all but neutered. However, political opposition was not the only thing that Hasina had neutered; effectively all the state institutions were made completely dysfunctional, becoming an appendage of the ruling party.

The end came in the way it did for the autocrat because of the ham-



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

handed and amateurish way the issue of quota was handled by the advisers surrounding Hasina. Suppressing the demand by force was what they wanted, proving once again that "History is not a teacher but a warden: it does not teach anything but punishes severely for unlearned lessons." Hasina and her close cohorts and confidants didn't learn from the Pakistanis that the Bangalee spirit needs more than bullets to be suppressed.

The mistake not only cost Hasina the throne, but the nation also lost hundreds of young people who fell victim to one person's lust for eternal power that manifested in unchecked police brutality.

Are we ready for Bangladesh 2.0?



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FARAH KABIR

What just happened in Bangladesh is a revolution led and staged by students with people's support. In this historical moment when Gen Z and reformists are driving Bangladesh, I feel charged and would like to reflect on the call made by Dr Muhammad Yunus for people to come forward and work with him. The Yunus-led interim government along with the student leaders have the task for reform and the establishment of justice cut out for them. So let us take a step in the direction of our action and commitment to materialise this agenda.

Should we call for a new social contract—an agreement among individuals within a social group to abide by rules and laws for collective good—that reflects inclusion and equity? Are we ready to decolonise our minds and refrain from the "fear narrative" across all levels? Can we commit to stop celebrating violence in all possible narratives? If not, can there be a change until we shed old habits and work on our sense of responsible citizenship, moral values, and integrity?

Are we ready to stop discriminating based on gender, class, and caste, responding to the movement's call for an end to discrimination? Will

we refrain from oppressing the marginalised? Will society commit to ending patriarchy? Can we commit to ending abuse due to structural causes as well as child abuse, child marriage, domestic violence, harassment, and sexual abuse perpetrated by individuals in both private and public spaces? Would this be possible in a society where 51 percent of girls in the age group of 15-18 years in Bangladesh are still being married off?

One way to address these will be by taking legal measures and bringing systemic change. However, these efforts will fail if we do not work to end socially acceptable harmful practices, sustained by society. Arguments put forward for harmful practices have always been about the safety and security of the girls and women in society. Did anyone ask if they need protectors or would rather opt for the end of male dominance? Are we ready to acknowledge the toxic traits of the oppressors that have inadvertently infected everyone even though the nation collectively hate them? I, however, understand that patriarchy and oppression by the powerful will take time to wear off.

Also, are we willing to restrain from arrogance and self-promotion, self-

Unlike the cliché "the past is past," I say the past is not past. There is a lot to answer for on the part of Hasina, her party and all those elements in society that helped prop her illegal ascendancy to, and repeated usurpation of, power through the help of state agencies. I am confident that the present dispensation will go into the litany of misdeeds of the erstwhile government over the last 15 years and those responsible for the desecration of people's rights, subversion of the country's interest for partisan gains, destruction of the state institutions and machineries, crippling of the country's economy, gross violation of human rights like enforced disappearance and extrajudicial killings, and the overall breakdown of law and order, will be put in the dock. Not only the past regime, but those government functionaries who knowingly participated in persecuting the regime's plan must also be held to account.

with. Standard of application differed, depending on whether one belonged to the ruling party or the opposition.

The police should be a major concern for the interim government. Hardly have I seen, if ever, the police being subjected to such public wrath. But by the same token, hardly have I seen the police act with such impunity, disregard for the rule of law and human rights. That is the inevitable outcome of a political regime's use of the state law enforcement and intelligence agencies to come to and retain power. The police wanted its pound of flesh from the Awami League and got it, even more, by way of a carte blanche for repression and coercion.

But I have a different take on the attack on police stations following the flight of Hasina. I believe it may have been part of a well-constructed conspiracy to destabilise the country.

The job is not done. It is only the beginning. Hostile intelligence agencies are busy spreading

But now, for the matter at hand.

An interim government is in place, and its members are persons with not only national and international repute but of impeccable character. But in a situation like this, no one will envy their position nor covet their job.

They have a huge task in hand, an Augean stable caused by long years of accretion of muck will have to be cleared. Every single institution will have to be cleansed: the derailed administration, the partisan Election Commission and the Anti-Corruption Commission, whose application of the rules, it is alleged, varied depending on who the alleged offender it was dealing

propaganda and falsehood about the situation in the country. Creating communal strife was, I believe, an alternative plan by hostile elements to start an internal division in the country to create grounds for reversing the result of the student revolution. I am confident that Bangladesh will never see a Gujarat. All sorts of attempts to undermine the student revolution have been thwarted, but many more attempts may be on the anvil to negate the gains.

The country has witnessed a new dawn, a second independence. We must not let our guard down and allow anyone to negate our new dawn.

interest, and power aggrandisement? Experts have repeatedly stated that one of the reasons for the fall of the autocrat is her arrogance that grew from a sense of power over others and intolerance to dissent.

Are we ready not to impose our beliefs and thoughts on others and instead work on universal values? Are we ready to rise above our comfort

No one is safe until all can participate and enjoy their entitlements. Therefore, society's agenda should be: how will we make everyone feel welcome and comfortable to share their thoughts and be heard as a mark of us respecting knowledge leadership, community, women, and youth leadership?

zones and sit at the same table with those with opposing views to be truly inclusive? Can we agree not to force our decisions on children, and respect women and girls? Will we commit not to grab power, business, land, and property? Youth should be aware when the elders try to rationalise these practices as something necessary to secure their future.

We believe malpractice and exploitation cannot be the foundation of any stable or sustainable future.

However, can we expect corporate actors to move away from extractive and exploitative practices and engage in business interests with the environment, ecology, climate change, and climate justice in mind? Will they commit to the transition from fossil fuels to green growth and invest as necessary to make that critical change? Youth engagement in climate justice is increasingly vital for fostering lasting change, particularly in Bangladesh, where recent political shifts have amplified the voices of young people. Their collective demands include accountability and transparency in the management of climate funds, alongside the eradication of corruption in environmental projects. As we rebuild the country, strong advocacy for a green economic recovery emphasising sustainable job creation in renewable energy and eco-friendly industries is needed. Addressing the challenges youth face at the grassroots level is essential, particularly in the context of climate justice. The actions today will shape the future.

No one is safe until all can participate and enjoy their entitlements. Therefore, society's agenda should be: how will we make everyone feel welcome and comfortable to share their thoughts and be heard as a mark of us respecting knowledge leadership, community, women, and youth leadership? Can we be connected to people, thoughts, ambitions, ideas, approaches, and energy in a way that has not been the case before?

Can we commit ourselves to work with women, girls, youth, the discriminated, and the marginalised to build their agency and voice in Bangladesh 2.0?