

Blood on the Barred Walls

The 1975 Jail Killing Revisited

The success of 1971 was the result of a glorious people's war. However, a troubling question persists: how did this unified spirit of hope and resolve so swiftly give way to chaos, culminating in the assassination of the nation's supreme leader and the four key figures who had guided the liberation movement in his absence?

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In 1975, Bangladesh's political landscape was irrevocably altered by the brutal assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and almost his entire family (except for his two daughters, who were abroad) at their Dhanmondi 32 residence. This tragedy marked the beginning of a period defined by an atmosphere of fear and revenge in politics, a stark departure from traditional democratic values, and a cycle of reprisals that continues to resonate in the national consciousness. The violent killings of November 3 intensified the impact of the August 15 tragedy, leaving an enduring scar on the nation.

A similarly horrific event unfolded in Khapra Ward of Rajshahi Central Jail on April 24, 1950, when police gunfire claimed the lives of seven communist revolutionaries and seriously injured over 32 others. While this incident occurred under Pakistan's rule—a regime often viewed as a form of colonial domination—the Jail Killing of November 3 took place in an independent Bangladesh, just a few years after a long democratic struggle and a decisive war for freedom from Pakistan. Notably, those who fell victim on this day were the very leaders who had guided the nation to independence in 1971.

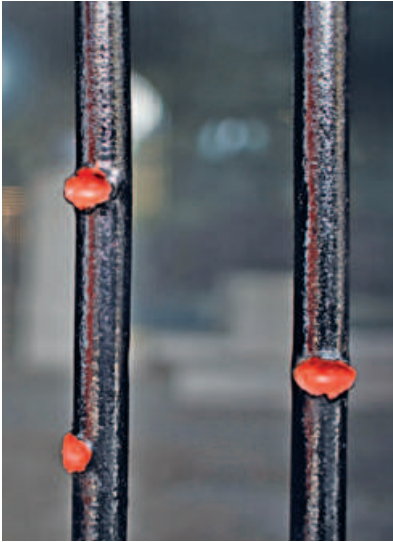
Political Turbulence Leading Up to November

After Sheikh Mujib's assassination, a new government structure emerged with Khondakar Mostaq Ahmad appointed president, without dissolving parliament. Junior army officers involved in the August 1975 killings wielded significant influence over governmental decisions. These officers operated from Bangabhaban, the presidential residence and maintained military presence in key areas, including tanks stationed at Suhrawardy Udyan.

In September 1975, President



(L) Within the Old Central Jail, the Martyrs' Memorial Cell stands as a solemn reminder of the tragic assassination of four national leaders and is now an integral component of the National Four Leaders' Memorial Museum. (R) Visible bullet impacts on the prison bars tell the grim tale of the ghastly murder that unfolded there. PHOTO: STAR



freedom fighter, felt morally compelled to reassert command by returning the majors to the cantonment and removing them from Bangabhaban.

During this period, Tajuddin Ahmad was taken to Central Jail on August 22, charged with corruption following his house arrest on August 15. Many senior Awami League leaders faced similar arrests.

Colonel Taher noted a shift in influence following the assassination of Sheikh Mujib, with Indo-Soviet influence giving way to American imperialism. This transition brought heightened political repression and an increase in law enforcement's severity, leading to intensified harassment of the public. Colonel Taher, who was dismissed from the army during Mujib's regime and aligned himself with JASAD, the principal opposition party seeking to overthrow Mujib's government, was another key figure in the emerging political landscape.

Tensions within the cantonment

turned Bangabhaban into a makeshift secretariat; Shafat Jamil; and Colonel Taher. He aptly referred to this dynamic as a "Triangular Quest" for power, with some players visible and others lurking in the shadows.

Lieutenant Colonel Hamid, stationed at Army Headquarters, closely monitored the unfolding incidents and noted widespread speculation about a potential coup at the end of October, largely fuelled by Shafat Jamil's frequent public discourse on the topic. However, Jamil's intention was to restore discipline within the army. Hamid also observed that Rashid, Farooq, and Dalim were acutely aware of a potential counter-uprising while at Bangabhaban, perceiving it as likely driven by a pro-Awami League faction within the army, possibly linked to Khaled or Jamil, and they remained vigilant against this emerging threat.

November 3, the fateful day
On the night of November 2, a series of events unfolded when Shafat Jamil ordered Major Iqbal, the company commander of the 1st East Bengal Regiment, to withdraw his 300 infantry troops from Bangabhaban to the Cantonment. This order was executed successfully and quickly became notable news among the President and officers at Bangabhaban. Jamil outlined four key objectives behind the uprising on November 3: (a) to restore law and order within the army, (b) to conduct a thorough investigation and trial regarding the rebellion and killings of 15 August, (c) to dismantle the unconstitutional government, and (d) to establish a caretaker government led by a neutral figure, tasked with restoring democracy within six months.

During the planning stages in October, junior officers discussed strategies for the impending uprising. When Jamil and Khaled joined their meeting, the junior officers proposed the assassination of Zia. However, this suggestion was swiftly dismissed, as Khaled opposed any form of bloodshed.

Meanwhile, Army Chief Zia was arrested at his residence. While his main telephone line had been disconnected, an extension line in his bedroom remained active. After detaining Zia, Khaled learned that the uprising had already commenced while he was asleep. Jamil strategically ordered a halt to radio broadcasts from Savar, and the airport was also closed. Two MiG fighters and a helicopter circled over Bangabhaban as the opposing factions faced off: one side advancing from the cantonment with infantry and the other defending Bangabhaban with tanks and artillery. The Bengal Lancers positioned twelve tanks, while the opposing faction prepared the Bengal Regiment's anti-tank guns. General Osmani arrived at Bangabhaban, where Brigadier Khaled connected with him by phone.

The battle over the telephone began around the Fajr prayer on the morning of November 3. Intense communication ensued, featuring continuous exchanges over the phone and delegations sent back and forth. Khaled laid out several conditions, which were then relayed to Bangabhaban. These conditions included: (a) all military personnel involved in the coup currently stationed in Bangabhaban must surrender; (b) Ziaur Rahman would be removed as army chief, with a new chief appointed in his place; (c) Mostaq could remain as president if he disbanded his cabinet; and (d) all orders and decisions made by Mostaq's government were to be annulled.

Numerous witnesses remarked that the uprising was unplanned and lacked proper coordination. Consequently, both sides were stalling, with Rashid, the coordinator from Bangabhaban, deliberately delaying proceedings. In

listening to the conversations, Rashid told Mostaq that they would never go to the cantonment. Instead, he advised Mostaq to arrange for them to leave the country. At 9 a.m., Mostaq spoke with Khaled and expressed agreement with all the conditions but requested, in the interest of avoiding bloodshed, that Farooq, Rashid, and their associates be permitted to leave the country unconditionally. After lengthy discussions, officers from the cantonment side decided to allow them to depart the country.

Only Brigadier Nuruzzaman argued that they should not be allowed to leave and should instead face trial for Mujib's murder. However, the other officers supported Mostaq's proposal, viewing it as a way to avoid bloodshed; meanwhile, Zia was compelled to resign as army chief. Finally, on the evening of November 3, all majors involved in the assassination of 15 August who were staying at Bangabhaban departed for Bangkok, with the exception of Major Mohiuddin. Surprisingly, however, what transpired in the central jail remained almost entirely concealed.

At 4 a.m. on November 3, the DIG of Prisons urgently contacted Bangabhaban to reach the president, reporting that a combat team led by Naik Risaldar Muslehuddin had arrived at the central jail, demanding custody of the four national leaders. Muslehuddin had also played an active role in the incident at Dhanmondi 32 on August 15. This development terrified both the IG Prisons and the DIG. In his Jail Killing Report, IG Prisons Nuruzzaman documented that he had received a call from Rashid at Bangabhaban, instructing him to allow Muslehuddin's team access to the four national leaders. When Nuruzzaman insisted on speaking directly with the president, Mostaq confirmed Rashid's authority and instructed him to follow all given orders.

The team immediately gathered the four national leaders in Tajuddin's cell and executed them at close range with automatic gunfire; three of the leaders died instantly, while Tajuddin, suffering gunshot wounds to his abdomen and leg, requested water. The team then entered the cell, using bayonets to ensure their deaths, effectively ending the lives of those who had led the successful war in 1971. By mid-afternoon on 3 November, the DIG Prisons called Bangabhaban again to inform the president of what had transpired in the jail; Khalil, the Chief of Defence Staff, answered the call and was shocked to hear the news.

He informed the president's secretary, Mahbub Alam Chasi, to relay the message to the president. Chasi entered the president's room, returned shortly after, and stated, "The president knows." Surprisingly, Khalil did not disclose this grave killing, leaving the cantonment unaware of the incident. Finally, on November 4–30 hours after the event and long after the majors had left the country—the leaders of the uprising learned what had occurred. It was only then that IG Prisons Nuruzzaman and DIG Prisons Kazi Abdul Awal were granted permission to come to Bangabhaban to reveal the tragic news publicly.

Internal Dynamics and External Connections

The assassination of national leaders in the central jail took place merely three and a half years after the hard-fought victory of 1971. The success against the formidable Pakistani army, which was the result of a true people's war, garnered international attention and support for Bangladesh's fight for independence. However, a troubling question persists: how did this unified spirit of hope and resolve so swiftly give way to chaos, culminating in the assassination of the nation's supreme leader and the four key figures who had guided the liberation movement in his absence?

The crisis began to take shape during the 1971 Liberation War when army officers viewed the Awami League as strategically ineffective without Sheikh Mujib. Convinced that they alone bore the responsibility—and the associated risks—of leading the fight against the Pakistani army while Awami League leaders remained safely in India, some officers started to perceive themselves as capable of governing the country post-independence if political parties proved ineffective. Historians and political analysts widely regard this perception as misguided, arguing that without the political strategy and leadership of the Awami League, especially its core figures, India might not have lent its crucial support to the liberation effort, which was vital for the war's success.

Simultaneously, allegations emerged from ordinary freedom fighters asserting that sector commanders were out of touch with ground realities, as their posts were primarily based outside Bangladesh, in India. Moreover, problems such as internal party conflicts, corruption, famine, a deterioration of law and order, and the formation of the Rakhi Bahini as an auxiliary paramilitary force to restore order troubled the army. Ultimately, the formation of the one-party BAKSAL not only eroded the popularity of Sheikh Mujib and the Awami League but also undermined their legitimacy within national politics. Consequently, various factions sought to dethrone Sheikh Mujib, with a small group led by Rashid and Farooq eventually succeeding in this endeavor, bolstered by ties to Khondakar Mostaq, a senior leader of the Awami League. There are also indications of connections to foreign missions, the full extent of which remains largely unexplored.

The events that unfolded within the cantonment, at Bangabhaban, and in the central jail were profoundly complex, with many details and connections still unclear. Witnesses and other prominent figures have suggested various motives behind the actions of the assassins. In a recently aired interview, which was recorded more than ten years ago, Major Rashid claimed that the scheme to eliminate the national leaders stemmed exclusively from President Mostaq, emphasising that he harboured personal grievances against them for reasons that remained unspecified. According to Rashid, Mostaq feared that these four leaders could potentially instigate another Indian intervention.

Major General (Retired) Moinul Hossain Choudhury noted that when President Mostaq, along with Rashid and Farooq, learned about the uprising and the potential threats against them, they grew fearful that the four national leaders might be liberated from jail and positioned to lead a government to oust Mostaq. Consequently, these national leaders were executed in jail.

Journalist Anthony Mascarenhas, however, suggested that this decision was not impulsive; rather, it was part of a pre-existing 'contingency plan' designed to preemptively counter a possible counter-coup aimed at restoring the Awami League. Thus, the killings were swiftly executed as the first signs of trouble emerged for Mostaq's government.

There are also suspicions that international powers or intelligence agencies played a role in these events. For example, Shafat Jamil recounted that during the counter-uprising against Khaled Mosharraf on November 6, he spoke with Zia over the phone from Bangabhaban. Their conversation alternated between Bengali and English, but Jamil noticed that the Bengali portions were being translated into English, likely through Bangabhaban's telephone exchange. He speculated that this translation could have been intended for foreign agencies, highlighting significant vulnerabilities in the state's secrecy and security.

Davis Eugene Boster, the then-American ambassador to Dhaka, submitted a report on November 10, 1975, detailing the events of the preceding days. He noted that the three successive governments following August 15 were neither anti-American nor pro-Indian or pro-Soviet. However, soldiers perceived Khaled Mosharraf as pro-Indian, prompting them to shift their support toward Zia. Boster reported no indications of Indian involvement in the November incidents and suggested that the jail killings were likely executed under the orders of one or more of the same majors who killed Sheikh Mujib. Notably, he also expressed his belief that a 'contingency plan' was indeed in place.

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Left to right: Khondaker Mostaq Ahmad, Tajuddin Ahmad, Syed Nazrul Islam, Captain Mansur Ali, and AHM Kamaruzzaman are depicted in this photograph taken on December 28, 1971, at the Governor House, upon their return from India. Khondaker Mostaq Ahmad was one of the masterminds behind the conspiracy that ultimately led to the tragic assassination of his four colleagues. PHOTO: AFTAB AHMED

Mostaq promulgated an "Indemnity Ordinance" to protect those involved in the August 15 killings from prosecution. He also promoted Major Khandaker Abdur Rashid and Major Syed Farooqur Rahman to lieutenant colonels without formal army recommendations and reinstated Major Dalim, previously dismissed under Mujib, to the rank of lieutenant colonel. Rashid and Farooq, who had suspiciously joined the Liberation War at late stages—Rashid in November and Farooq on December 12—deepened their bond by marrying two sisters, further solidifying their association, which would later play a role in the August 15 incident.

In this restructured military hierarchy, Ziaur Rahman was promoted to Chief of Army Staff, replacing KM Safiullah who was assigned an ambassadorial role, while Khaled Mosharraf took over as Chief of General Staff. All three had been notable sector commanders during the 1971 Liberation War. Additionally, Colonel Osmani was appointed as the president's security adviser, and Khalil, an officer who had served in Pakistan, became Chief of Defence Staff. Colonel Shafat Jamil commanded the Dhaka Brigade, overseeing the 2nd Field Artillery and the 1st Lancers, which were led by Rashid and Farooq. Known for his integrity and deep respect for Sheikh Mujib, Jamil, a committed

were palpable, with the threat of conflict ever-present. Officers from the 1st, 2nd, and 4th Bengal regiments expressed significant discontent towards Rashid, Farooq, and their associates, raising concerns for Shafat Jamil about maintaining discipline. Meanwhile, Chief of General Staff Khaled Mosharraf consistently called for measures to restore order within the ranks.

In the lead-up to November 3, the atmosphere was shaped by key factions within the Dhaka cantonment. Army Chief Ziaur Rahman maintained amicable relations with both Shafat Jamil and Colonel Taher, the latter of whom, despite residing outside the cantonment, exerted considerable influence over certain segments of the army due to his political connections. Insiders observed that while Zia retained these ties, he adopted a "wait and see" stance towards the unfolding events. In contrast, Shafat Jamil of the 46th Brigade and Khaled Mosharraf were actively challenging the junior majors, pressing Zia to take decisive action to restore order within the cantonment. However, Zia remained silent, carefully evaluating the situation.

Brigadier General (ret'd) M. Sakawat Hossain described the environment prior to November 3 by identifying three key factions in the army: the junior majors, who had effectively