

‘When a govt refuses to go, people accept it until they don’t’

Today marks the 50th anniversary of the Fourth Amendment of the constitution that paved the way for a one-party rule in Bangladesh under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Author and researcher Mohiuddin Ahmad talks about the background and formation of BAKSAL in this interview with Priyam Paul of The Daily Star.

In 1972, there were talks about forming a national government. By 1974, there was a national government called BAKSAL. What are your observations on this?

In 1972, many advocated for a national government comprising all political parties that participated in the Liberation War. However, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman did not agree, and instead aimed to establish a one-party government led by the Awami League. As successive crises hit the country, he struggled to manage them. Handling such crises proved impossible for a one-party government.

In 1975, he could have held a midterm election to seek a new mandate. Instead, he chose to form a one-party government called BAKSAL (Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League). This decision was not made with everyone’s consent. Members of parliament at the time were forced to join BAKSAL; they were told that their parliamentary membership would be cancelled if they did not join by April 15. This means it was made mandatory. As a result, two MPs from Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JASAD), Moinuddin Manik and Abdullah Sarkar, lost their membership in parliament. Additionally, two Awami League members, Moinul Hossain and MAG Osmany, had already resigned from the party.

Activities of other parties were suspended and all daily newspapers, except four, were shut down. Of the four, two were government-owned: the *Dainik Bangla* and *Bangladesh*

Observer. The other two were the *Daily Ittefaq* and *Bangladesh Times*. The constitution was amended in such a way that it was not exactly a one-party government; it became the government of one person. Everyone depended on him as he held absolute power over the legislative, executive, and judicial branches.

Was the Fourth Amendment to the constitution done to form BAKSAL?

One month after the amendment, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman announced that there would be a party called BAKSAL and he would be its chairman, while the central committee of Awami League would be known as the committee of BAKSAL. In June 1975, he announced the full committee of BAKSAL. Its affiliated organisations were Chhatra League, Sramik League, Krishak League, Mahila League, and Jubo League. Some members from the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) and National Awami Party (NAP) were included in these committees, but there was none from other parties.

Was forming BAKSAL still necessary after the Fourth Amendment?

Sheikh Mujib wanted a one-party government and absolute power. He believed that with absolute control, he could manage everything. He couldn’t tolerate any criticism or dissent. Due to disagreement on various issues, Tajuddin Ahmad had to leave the cabinet. These are well-known facts.



Mohiuddin Ahmad

PHOTO: COURTESY

Some say BAKSAL was formed on CPB’s advice. Is there any basis for this?

Moni Singh opposed it, while Mohammad Farhad supported it. Forming BAKSAL was Sheikh Mujib’s sole decision.

After a long career in the democratic movement, why did Sheikh Mujibur Rahman undergo this fundamental change after the Liberation War?

When Sheikh Mujib took sole control of Awami League, he did not allow anyone with differing opinions to remain in the party. He

established absolute authority within the party, and since 1964, anyone who opposed him, such as Ataur Rahman Khan and Abul Mansur Ahmad, could not stay. They became his enemies, and the rest were either loyal to him or his subordinates. Therefore, there was never any democracy within the party, and there was no second leader besides Sheikh Mujib either; he was the only leader.

Could you describe the structure of BAKSAL?

BAKSAL had a 15-member executive committee, with Sheikh Mujib as chairman, as well as a secretary general, and three secretaries, including Sheikh Moni. Additionally, there was a 115-member central committee, which included only four members from CPB and NAP.

Did Sheikh Mujib follow any model for BAKSAL?

Sheikh Mujib never mentioned any specific model. It is believed that he came up with this idea on his own. I have detailed this in my book *Bela-Obela*. He mentioned Senegal and Slovenia, among others. He had the mentality of a *morol* (village chief), wanting to control everything. Out of the 300 seats in parliament, 293 were held by Awami League, so why was a one-party system necessary? It was because he could not tolerate any criticism, which some newspapers did. He wanted total control. I would say that he was always a dictator, but by forming BAKSAL, he became a fascist.

What was the outcome of BAKSAL?

A one-party rule was established, but Sheikh Mujib did not realise he had lost his popularity. He saw people chanting his name everywhere, but the ground had shifted beneath his feet, and people had turned against him. Constantly surrounded by sycophants, he assumed everyone would agree with him. He left no opportunity for a constitutional change of government. In a parliamentary democracy, elections were supposed to be held every five years. After the 1973 election, the next one was supposed to be held in 1978. However, he declared himself the chairman and president of BAKSAL for the next five years and would decide how many terms he would serve. This meant there was no scope for any change of power through elections. When there is no option to change a government, people either accept it or stage a coup. That is what happened. In August 1975, we witnessed a coup through which the regime changed. Sheikh Mujib had left no other options.

Awami League still believes that BAKSAL was a good initiative. After the 2008 election, Awami League followed a similar path. Although there was a facade of multi-party democracy, in reality, it was a one-person government under Sheikh Hasina’s leadership. There are similarities between the two. I would say that this fascist tendency has been ingrained in Awami League’s very essence.

INDIGENOUS DEBATE

A nation’s heart beats in every leaf

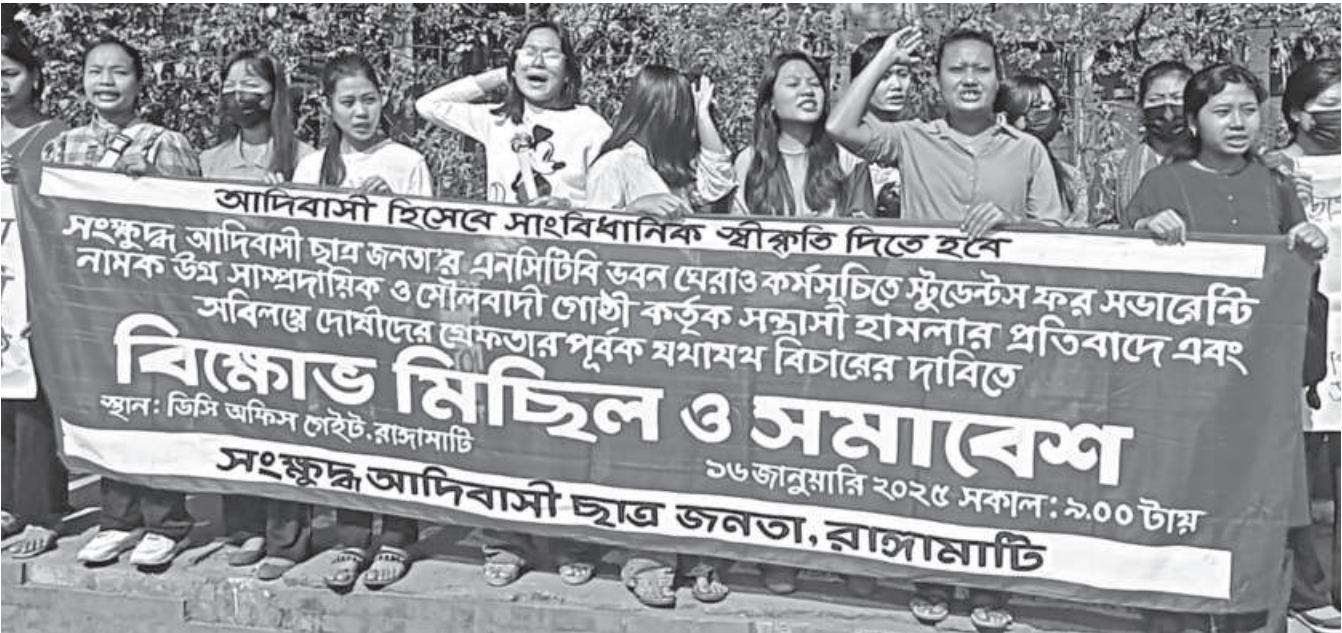


BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

By now, the story of the “Bangladesh: Don’t pluck leaves” graffiti—containing the image of a leafy branch representing different groups (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, and Indigenous/Adibashi)—being removed from a textbook has become stale. On January 12, a group named Students for Sovereignty protested its inclusion in the Class 9-10 Bangla Grammar and Composition textbook, arguing that using the term “Indigenous” was unconstitutional. The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) responded by replacing the plurality tree in the online version of the book with a new slogan that celebrates heroism. The group whose “leaf” was plucked rallied to demand the reinstatement of the graffiti. Members of Students for Sovereignty, clad in national flag bandanas, swooped on them while police remained vigilant in dispersing them. We all read the news of protesters from “ethnic minority” groups being sized up. Journalists have moved on to cover other issues. The minority groups have bled at the hands of the majority to



FILE PHOTO: MONG SING HAI MARMA

Demonstrators stage a protest in Rangamati on January 16, 2025 after a group of Indigenous students and their supporters came under attack while staging a protest against the removal of a graffiti from a textbook in Dhaka.

The people—ethnic minority or not—are still people, with rights guaranteed by Article 27 of the constitution, which states that all citizens are equal before the law and entitled to equal protection of the law. The following clauses further outlaw discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, and place of birth, and provide scope for affirmative action (positive discrimination) in favour of disadvantaged citizens (Articles 28, 29).

prove they are indeed the minority.

The factual words of reports often fail to capture the inward, private world of the “minority.” This is where poets (and, by extension, intellectuals) come in—the ones who react to news, mediate it in invented words, and imagine it in scenarios that can be reimaged and reinterpreted by readers. Poetry, as Ezra Pound would have it, is news that stays news. Poets, then, are the conscientious voices of their time. A note of disclaimer, though: not all poets code and decode news; some simply express their inner thoughts in lyrics.

When we sing of the glory of boxer Sura Krishna Chakma lifting international trophies for his country, of booters Anai and Anuching Mogini, Monika Chakma, Ritu Porna Chakma, and Rupna Chakma wrapping themselves in national flags, we become lyrical poets or factual reporters. Our songs celebrate the tree with all its leaves in green and flowers in red. But such news does not stay news, and such songs do not remain lyrical when we allow one of our groups to bleed. The blood of our minority brothers and sisters bore no race. It displayed the same hue that permeates the veins of all humans. It demonstrated a passion that compelled some of these activists, who are also students, to take part in the July uprising. What distinguishes one group from another is a sociopolitical and cultural construct—a historical strategy. Does history always tell the story of the victor?

Soon after the previous regime fell on August 5, 2024, a short video circulated of a student leader slapping a young bus conductor for demanding the full fare. The conductor held his cheek in pain and utter disbelief. He kept mumbling, “Brother, I was with you in your fight, too. I was there.” The division bell rings.

No amount of plucking leaves will bring the equality, social justice, and democracy that the present government seeks to attain. A government committed to operating within the global human rights

framework to bring the perpetrators of July violence to justice cannot be selective in its orientation. The argument that the constitution denies ethnic minority groups their Indigenous rights serves as a prime example.

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With the surgery currently being done on a comatose constitution, this is actually the right time to address one of the sources of toxicity in our sociopolitical and cultural body. We can finally resolve the disputed status of the “Indigenous” or “small ethnic minority groups”. There are about 54 Indigenous peoples in the country, who speak at least 35 different languages. A significant number of them live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), while the rest are scattered across different regions. Together, they constitute less than two percent of our population. Bangladesh has yet to sign the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, denying them the “Indigenous” status that they have long been demanding. The 1997 CHT Peace Accord between Indigenous peoples and the government made some progress in giving some sort of autonomy to these people. However, little progress has been made in the 27 years since the accord was signed.

For those interested in understanding the nuances and complexities of these terms, the article by mountaineer and social activist Wasfia Nazreen brilliantly

sums up the issue. Without repeating what has already been said, let me focus on the recent news to remind our policy framers of the momentous opportunity to attain a solution to this problem. The path of linear nation-building and majoritarian state formation will keep the issue dormant for future explosion. The recommendation to shift from a Bangalee-centred nation-state to a Bangladeshi identity has opened up

new possibilities.

Let’s also try to understand who benefits from alienating the margins from the centre. With insurgent groups operating within and outside our territory, shouldn’t we be more prudent in dealing with a group that has had years of resentment towards the groups invading their land and culture? We can all argue who was here first by invoking the earliest migration theory. The Caucasians in the US claimed that the Native Americans crossed the Bering Straits to enter the continent. That makes the Indigenous groups nothing but the earliest migrants. People usually use the same logic to identify those who have been living in a land for long, preserving their distinct cultural markers. There is also a restrictive law about purchasing land that is often cited as a discriminatory privilege that these groups have.

The time has come to move past this exclusionary politics. The beating of the minority groups is a regressive policy. Caving to the protests of some students could cause significant damage to our national fabric. The desire for instant gratification may have long-term consequences that can unsettle not only our nation but also our borders. With equality, social justice, and democracy as the guiding principles of the new government, it is time to reflect on the inner world—and create news that stays news.

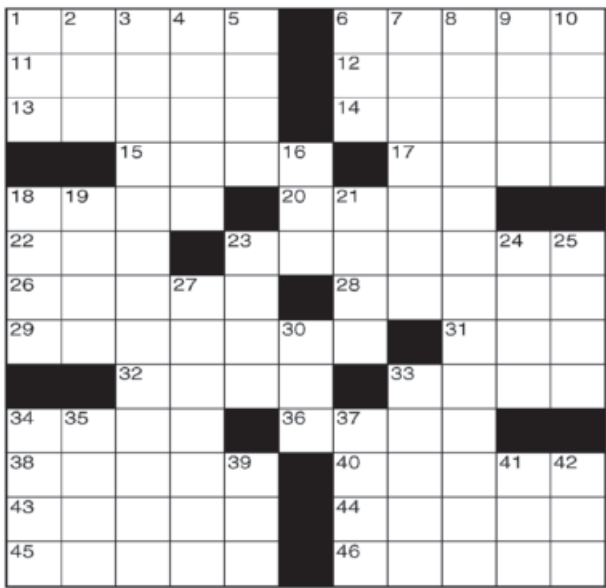
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Dominant
- 6 Crime outing
- 11 Illustrator Edward
- 12 Texas mission
- 13 Outcast
- 14 Prepares leftovers
- 15 Netlike fabric
- 17 Order to Spot
- 18 Compared with
- 20 “Lonely Boy” singer
- 22 Charged bit
- 23 Battering position
- 26 Consumerist Ralph
- 28 Tennis star Agassi
- 29 Heroic deed
- 31 Chart model
- 32 Enthralled
- 33 Halloween buy
- 34 Organ part
- 36 Practice for a fight
- 38 Small thicket
- 40 Open, in a way
- 43 Staggering
- 44 Family member
- 45 Brainiacs, typically
- 46 1945 conference site

DOWN

- 1 Candle count
- 2 Bagel topper
- 3 Straight-laced
- 4 Daughter of Leda
- 5 Pro votes
- 6 Cornfield cry
- 7 Nome native
- 8 Completely
- 9 Austen book
- 10 Optimistic
- 16 Hollywood’s Holbrook
- 18 Fork feature
- 19 Dupe
- 21 Orderly
- 23 Field yield
- 24 “Trinity” author
- 25 Quick look
- 27 Went by
- 30 “— not for me to say”
- 33 Craze
- 34 Work the checkout
- 35 Shredded
- 37 Pathetically small
- 39 City trains
- 41 Congress creation
- 42 Pod item



4-28

YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS



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