

# The Proclamation of Independence was a beacon for Bangladesh



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On the historic day of April 17, 1971, the Government of Bangladesh took its oath at Baidyanathala in Meherpur, later renamed Mujibnagar. This was the first official government formed to lead Bangladesh's Liberation War, following the declaration of independence on March 26, 1971. Widely known as the Mujibnagar government-in-exile, it operated from outside the occupied territory but had a profound impact on the then East Pakistan. The formation of this government marked a historic milestone—the emergence of the first modern nation-state of the Bangalee people.

Prior to that, April 10, 1971 stands as a milestone when Bangladesh formally asserted its independence through the Proclamation of Independence, an act of political defiance amid the war, atrocities, and genocide committed by the Pakistan Army. Emerging from an initial vacuum of leadership and direction, the proclamation laid the foundation for the country's distinct political identity and its eventual path to independence.

In March 1971, while President Gen Yahya Khan was ostensibly engaged in negotiations to resolve the political impasse with the Awami League (AL)—led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, leader of the Pakistan People's Party and the dominant political force in West Pakistan, the West Pakistani establishment continued to resist acknowledging the AL's electoral mandate. In Pakistan's first general elections that took place in 1970, the AL had secured an absolute majority—not only in East Pakistan but across the entire country. Instead of transferring power to the democratically elected majority and initiating a constitutional process, the military regime

chose the path of violent repression.

On the night of March 25, 1971, the Pakistan Army launched a brutal and unprecedented attack on unarmed Bangalees in East Pakistan, seeking to crush the political movement and eliminate its leadership. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was arrested from his residence at Dhanmondi 32 that night. The massacre triggered a period of apparent chaos and uncertainty as the political leadership of Bangladesh was left in disarray amid the full-scale military assault.

However, the widespread and spontaneous resistance from students, civilians, members of the army, EPR, and police across cities and strategic locations provided vital momentum. Within two weeks, the political leadership took a decisive initiative to formally lead the war and establish the Government of Bangladesh, a crucial step in organising the liberation movement.

However, it was not an easy task to act promptly and devise a plan to form a government, along with drafting the Proclamation of Independence, in the absence of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of the Awami League and the symbolic figure of the nation. His absence created confusion and internal divisions within the party, making leadership coordination even more difficult. The first step was to bring together the top AL leaders for discussions after March 26.

Despite these challenges, Tajuddin Ahmad, general secretary of the AL, managed to take charge. When he met then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in Delhi along with his associate Amirul Islam, an MLA, Tajuddin informed her that a provisional government had already been formed in Bangladesh. In response, Indira Gandhi assured full support from the Government of India for the

Bangladesh movement.

Tajuddin then entrusted Amirul Islam with drafting a formal Proclamation of Independence. Notably, Amirul drew inspiration from the US Declaration of Independence. It is particularly significant as the US stance on the crisis influenced the tone and structure of the draft that was eventually accepted.

In the Laws Continuance Enforcement

unprecedented non-cooperation movement led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from March 3 to March 25, 1971, following the Pakistani junta's suspension of the National Assembly session that was meant to draft a new constitution.

The core purpose of the Proclamation of Independence was to fulfil the legitimate right to self-determination of the people of Bangladesh, following Pakistan's

*History of the Creation of Bangladesh*, Srinath Raghavan highlights a significant development that followed the Proclamation of Independence and the formation of the Bangladesh government. At the time, East Germany did not have formal diplomatic relations with New Delhi, although it had maintained trade missions in India since 1954. East Germany's stance on the crisis was influenced by its long-standing ambition to gain full diplomatic recognition from India. In the second week of April 1971, anticipating the Proclamation of Independence by the provisional Government of Bangladesh, the East German representative in Calcutta swiftly moved to establish contact with the Mujibnagar authorities, underscoring the international dimensions of that critical moment.

Legal experts consider the Proclamation of Independence as the wartime constitution of Bangladesh, which served as the guiding framework until the formal adoption of the national constitution on November 4, 1972. Acknowledging its historical and legal importance, the proclamation has been rightly incorporated into the Constitution of Bangladesh.

The emergence of a successor state from a post-colonial nation was a rare occurrence on the global stage after World War II. Bangladesh stands as a significant exception, having achieved independence following the disintegration of Pakistan. This path to statehood was powerfully affirmed by the historic speech of Tajuddin Ahmad, broadcast on Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra on April 11, 1971, in which he declared, "Pakistan is dead and buried under a mountain of corpses"—a statement reportedly drafted by Rehman Sobhan and Amirul Islam.

The Proclamation of Independence was a timely and decisive act that not only guided the nation during the Liberation War, but also became a lasting beacon in the post-independence era. Beyond its legal standing, the proclamation justified the right to self-determination, addressed the human rights violations during the genocide, and laid a clear political direction for the people of Bangladesh—one that continues to resonate across time.



Tajuddin Ahmad, the prime minister of Mujibnagar government-in-exile, speaks to journalists on April 17, 1971.

SOURCE: ARCHIVE

Order, dated April 10, 1971, Acting President Syed Nazrul Islam notably emphasised that the establishment of the sovereign and independent state of Bangladesh was a manifestation of the people's will. Accordingly, he exercised his authority to issue the Proclamation of Independence.

The people's aspiration for freedom in Bangladesh was crystallised during the 1970 general elections, shaped by the Six-Point Movement of 1966 and the mass uprising of 1969 against Ayub Khan's dictatorship. These were rooted in the broader experience of political and economic subjugation that East Pakistanis endured under what often resembled a colonial relationship with West Pakistan. This growing aspiration for self-determination culminated in the

declaration of an unjust and treacherous war. It powerfully emphasised the principles of equality, human dignity, and social justice. In response to Pakistan's betrayal, despite ongoing discussions, the elected representatives of Bangladesh—the people's representatives, honour-bound by the public mandate and guided by the supreme will of the people—duly constituted themselves into a Constituent Assembly.

This proclamation served as the legal foundation during the 1971 Liberation War, facilitating international recognition and support, organising war efforts, providing shelter to approximately one crore refugees, and sustaining the nation's morale in its quest for freedom.

For instance, in his book *1971: A Global*

## Dynasties bloom on foreign soil causing Tulip troubles



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NOSHIN NAWAL

It's not every day that you open your morning newsfeed and find a Labour MP from Hampstead and Highgate wanted by the authorities—not in Westminster, but in Dhaka. Tulip Siddiq, niece of ousted Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, darling of North London's progressive set, and former economic secretary to the Treasury, now finds herself tangled in a legal mess that smells suspiciously like a cross-border family drama mixed with post-dictatorship retribution.

A Dhaka court has issued an arrest warrant for Siddiq, accusing her—along with over 50 others, including her mother Sheikh Rehana and brother Radwan Mujib Siddiq—of illegally acquiring land in the diplomatic zone of the city. Not a bad postcode to inherit, one might think, but the allegations are less about location and more about symbolism. Because if you're wondering whether this is about one 7,200-square-foot plot, let me assure you: this is about political karma being served with a side of national catharsis.

To fully understand the implications, one must remember that Tulip Siddiq is not just a British MP. She is the British MP who embodies the soft power of the Bangladeshi ruling dynasty. A Western-educated, well-spoken, multicultural poster child for Labour's diversity credentials, she has long enjoyed the privileges of both proximity to power and distance from the consequences of it. While Sheikh Hasina tightened her grip on Bangladesh's democratic institutions with a precision that would make autocrats weep with envy, Siddiq remained largely unscathed in London, smiling her way through party conferences and ministerial posts. Her loyalty to her aunt was discreet but undeniable. She never bit the hand that buttered her family's legacy.

But Bangladesh is no longer playing the same game. Hasina is gone. The July uprising sent her packing; the student protesters did what international observers and decades of diplomatic side-eyes could not. And now, the country's interim regime—led, almost

ironically, by Nobel laureate-turned-political-plumber Muhammad Yunus—is sifting through the mess. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), armed with more paperwork than subtlety, is rolling out a fully fledged accountability crusade, and the Sheikh family is first on the chopping board. The arrest warrant for Tulip, though legally impotent due to the lack of a Bangladesh-UK extradition treaty, is politically potent.



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

**Tulip Siddiq is not just a British MP, but a British MP who embodies the soft power of the Bangladeshi ruling dynasty.**

It sends a message: the age of impunity is over. Or at least, that's the tagline. In reality, this is a high-stakes theatre of justice, a performance calibrated for both domestic rage and international headlines. Whether it leads to actual convictions or fizzles out in bureaucratic ambiguity remains to be seen. But what's certain is this: Tulip Siddiq is now a symbol—no longer just of multicultural Britain, but of the entangled mess that is globalised nepotism.

She, of course, denies everything, claims she never owned land in Bangladesh and that this is nothing more than a politically motivated smear campaign. And perhaps it is. One doesn't need to be a fan of the Sheikh dynasty to recognise that transitional justice often has the precision of a wrecking ball. But for someone who benefited from the very architecture of dynasty politics, Siddiq's sudden plea for distance and neutrality feels, shall we say, rich.

In the UK, the response has been relatively muted. Some murmurs about reputational risk, a resignation from her Treasury role in January to keep the scandal from distracting the government—how very noble. But one wonders if the British establishment will ever truly grapple with the awkward implications of having democratically-elected officials with familial ties to regimes accused of human rights abuses.

What's even more ironic is the timing. Britain, still recovering from its own post-Brexit identity crisis, now finds one of its

MPs embroiled in a land-grabbing scandal halfway across the world. It's the kind of storyline that writes itself: former colony issues arrest warrant for the niece of a former dictator, who just so happens to be an MP in the imperial centre. Somewhere, a postcolonial studies professor is having a field day.

But let's not get too smug. Because this isn't just about one MP or one dynasty. This is about the consequences of letting familial loyalty trump democratic responsibility. About how diasporic elites often benefit from the best of both worlds—power at home, prestige abroad—and are held accountable in neither. It's about how justice, when delayed or denied for too long, begins to resemble vengeance when it finally arrives.

Tulip Siddiq might survive this scandal. She might stay comfortably nestled in her North London constituency, issuing carefully worded statements about injustice and dignity. But her political sheen is tarnished. The narrative of the polished, progressive MP coexists now with headlines about shady land deals and family empires.

And as Bangladesh hurdles towards its own reckoning—balancing vengeance and virtue, justice and spectacle—Tulip's story serves as a cautionary tale not just for politicians with powerful bloodlines, but for any democracy that lets power pass through the family tree like heirloom jewellery. Eventually, the tree is shaken. And sometimes, the flowers fall the hardest.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

#### ACROSS

- 1 Narrow body of water
- 7 Ranch worker
- 11 Saffron-flavored dish
- 12 Margarine
- 13 Computer program
- 15 In the buff
- 16 Downhill glider
- 18 Bath need
- 21 Gush
- 22 Enters a password, say
- 24 "Dig in!"
- 25 Party staple
- 26 Paid player
- 27 Cause to goof
- 29 Come together
- 30 Rebuff
- 31 Minnow's home

- 32 Intense beam
- 34 Suggestion
- 40 Carry
- 41 Thorny shrub
- 42 Influence
- 43 Just

#### DOWN

- 1 Relaxing site
- 2 Faucet
- 3 Gym unit
- 4 Never before seen
- 5 Homer classic
- 6 Poster holder
- 7 Frank
- 8 Boxing great
- 9 "The Matrix" hero
- 10 Ho from Hawaii
- 14 Fable fellow

- 16 Ship poles
- 17 Admit
- 19 Rockies resort
- 20 Studied (over)
- 21 Filming site
- 22 Gloss target
- 23 Negating word
- 25 City on the Persian Gulf
- 28 Block and tackle part
- 29 Mason's material
- 31 Treaty goal
- 33 Racket
- 34 "— been real!"
- 35 Cut, as hay
- 36 Sch. support group
- 37 Rocks, in a bar
- 38 Motor need
- 39 Opposing vote



5-30

### YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

C	A	R	T	S		E	L	I	T	E
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