

50 years on, Sheikh Mujib's killing deserves a nuanced reading



Mohiuddin Ahmad is a writer and researcher of Bangladesh's political history.

MOHIUDDIN AHMAD

During 1974-75, all the opposition political parties wanted Sheikh Mujib's ouster, but it was not possible to remove him through street agitation. He had amended the constitution and concentrated absolute power in his own hands, leaving no constitutional or electoral means to change the government. Therefore, it can be said that, in a way, he himself had created the conditions conducive to a potential removal from power.

At that time, Sheikh Mujib's popularity had hit rock bottom. If we look at the backdrop, apart from the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) and Muzaffar Ahmed's NAP (National Awami Party), every political party outside of BAKSAL wanted Sheikh Mujib's downfall. That downfall eventually came, but it happened through a military coup—and a brutal one at that.

After the horrific tragedy of August 15, 1975, many were forced to accept it, many were stunned, some were saddened, and some were happy—we saw a range of reactions. As a result, those on the outside welcomed the coup, while Mujib's followers remained inactive. Some were arrested, some went underground, and quite a few fled to India.

Afterwards, a vacuum was created within Awami League, which then saw multiple internal splits. Such coups happened in various countries around the world—they were bloody, and in many countries, the

head of government was killed. What was exceptional here was that in Sheikh Mujib's house, all the family members present were killed. The same thing happened in two other houses—the homes of Sheikh Fazlul Haque Moni and Abdur Rab Serniabat—because they were close relatives of Sheikh Mujib. I would say that the coup was, on the one hand, an Awami League-centric political overthrow, but at the same time, it was an attack on the family of Sheikh Mujib. There were two elements: one was the change of power, and the other was the massacre. Both happened together.

One thing is clear here: the incident that took place in 1975 was not unprecedented. Similar events have occurred in some other countries. After the Russian Revolution, all members of the Tsar's family, who were in captivity, were executed; we called that a revolution. In Iraq, when the monarchy was overthrown under the leadership of Brigadier Karim Qasim, all members of the Iraqi royal family were killed. These are just two examples I can think of; there may be more. So, historically, this was not the first such incident.

However, I would say that killing Sheikh Mujib might still have been given some form of political legitimacy had he been the only one killed. But killing all his family members had no moral legitimacy whatsoever.

Among those killed, his two elder sons faced allegations for many reasons, and people may have harboured resentment against them. But the way his wife and youngest son were killed had nothing to do with the coup, and the killing of his two daughters-in-law was nothing short of cold-blooded murder.

Sheikh Hasina has always said that Sheikh Mujib's assassination was the result of a massive conspiracy, with many players



SOURCE: PHOTO BOOK BY AFTAB AHMED

Given his legacy pre and post 1971, what score should we assign Sheikh Mujib and what is his place in history?

working behind the scenes. After 1975, she had plenty of time—she was in power for 20 and a half years in total. She repeatedly claimed that the masterminds behind the scenes would be identified and brought to

justice. She made politics out of it, but never managed to form a commission of inquiry. Had she set up such a commission, it could have shed light on the matter. This shows that she was not truly serious or sincere about investigating Sheikh Mujib's assassination; rather, she used it for political gain.

In the years following Sheikh Mujib's assassination, his positive image was gradually revived. This continued until the election at the end of 2008, when Sheikh Hasina came to power. Then it became clear that Sheikh Hasina could not think beyond her own family. For her, the country, the nation, and the party all revolved around her family. She began building establishments in her father's name, her mother's name, her brothers' names, her grandparents' names, and so on. Many universities were established under Sheikh Hasina's relatives' names. Ironically, in so doing, the image of Sheikh Mujib, which had gradually been restored, once again began to erode.

During Hasina's regime, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and the ability of opposition political parties to operate all came under threat. Finally, last year, widespread protests against her rule swept the country. We witnessed a mass uprising in which, outside of Awami League, practically every party and its supporters united. At one stage, Sheikh Hasina was overthrown and she fled to India. But in people's eyes, Sheikh Mujib became the symbol of Sheikh Hasina's misrule and tyranny because Sheikh Hasina had ruled by using Sheikh Mujib as a political commodity.

Though Sheikh Mujib himself was not responsible for Hasina's misrule, people began to see him as the icon of that authoritarianism. His statues were pulled down, all the establishments bearing his name were changed, his house in Dhanmondi—which had been turned into

the Bangabandhu Memorial Museum—was attacked and demolished. In the end, he became a victim of his daughter's misrule.

In Bangladesh today, there are still two opposing views about Sheikh Mujib. One side believes that he was a great hero of history, that without him, Bangladesh would never have become independent. The other side believes that Sheikh Mujib was a traitor, that he deceived the people, and therefore, the fall of a traitor took place. These two streams of thought represent a kind of psychological civil war between two camps. I see no possibility of it being resolved unless one group completely annihilates the other, metaphorically speaking. That's how the situation continues.

A question might arise about how we should view the coup or Sheikh Mujib after 50 years of his assassination. The answer lies in the fact that human beings have both good and bad qualities. All things considered, it is difficult to place a person on a scale and assign them a score.

There is no denying that Sheikh Mujib was the main leader of the nationalist movement in this country, and the Liberation War was fought in his name. Until 1971, he could be called the great hero of this nation—he had no rivals in politics. From 1972 onwards, however, he exercised state power, and many opposed him. So, in the post-1971 period, we see him as a ruler. At one time, he was a leader loved by the masses; later, he became a ruler disliked by many.

Combining these two phases, what score should we give him, and what is Mujib's place in history? Where does he stand? If we are to judge that, we must inevitably look back and acknowledge the process of forming a nation-state through the bloody war of 1971, from which we achieved our independence. Therefore, as long as this country exists, we cannot erase Sheikh Mujib from our history.

The hope of a new dawn for RTI and democracy

Dr Shamsul Bari and Ruhi Naz are chairman and deputy director (RTI), respectively, at Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB). They can be reached at rib@cittech.bd.com.

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

Two recent developments have alleviated, at least temporarily, the creeping despondency among right to information (RTI) enthusiasts in Bangladesh, which was triggered by the September 2024 departure of all three information commissioners, following the July uprising and the assumption of power by the interim government. The departure of the commissioners made the Information Commission of Bangladesh virtually dysfunctional.

The first development was the release of draft amendment to the RTI Act, 2009 by the information ministry last month, seeking inputs from citizens for further improvement to the law. The draft was based on the recommendations of Public Administration Reform Commission, one of several such commissions set up by the interim government to strengthen and safeguard democracy. It raised hope that the government was at last focusing on the beleaguered RTI Act, which is considered to be the most effective instrument for citizens to monitor the work of government bodies.

The second development was the declaration on August 5, 2025 by the chief adviser of the interim government on the much-awaited July Charter that aims to concretise the aspirations of July uprising.

Added to it is the announcement, on the same day, of the equally anticipated general election, to be held by February 2026 to elect a new government. Together, they raised hope that the momentous developments which followed the violent overthrow of the previous regime would lead to a new dawn of democracy in Bangladesh.

A close look at the two developments would reveal a close link between them and the avowed aspirations of the July Charter. On several occasions in the past, this column has sought to underline the importance of the RTI Act for democracy in the country and recognising its proper use by citizens to be as important, if not more, as their right to vote. The reason is that elections are held every five years, while the right to seek relevant information on the work of the government is available to citizens at all times. Elections lead to a government chosen by the people, but once completed, there is little citizens can do to change it during its term of office. RTI empowers them to monitor its work continuously and contribute to good governance.

Good governance requires that public offices abide by the policies, laws and rules of the land. Failing to follow them leads to arbitrary abuse of power and corruption, as witnessed frequently in our country and all over the world. The RTI Act, 2009 seeks to eliminate/avoid them. The preamble to the law asserts that its primary objective is to increase "the transparency and accountability of all public, autonomous and statutory organisations," as well as "other private institutions constituted or run by government

or foreign financing," so that "corruption shall decrease and good governance... shall be established." It is unfortunate, however, that the promise of the law is little appreciated by the majority of our population, including our youth who spearheaded the July uprising. Otherwise, its use would not have been so limited even after 16 years of its adoption.

The time is ripe, therefore, for our civil society and political workers to come together and devise a strategy before the upcoming

This column has cited many success stories of the RTI Act in the country over the years, while bemoaning that more could be achieved if only both citizens and the government gave more attention to promoting the law.

The amendment to the act proposed in the draft recommendations will hopefully result in an improved law, but the need of the time is to put it to a greater and more effective use by citizens. We know that NGOs and civil society groups have already submitted their inputs for

and its citizens with an effective mechanism to keep the government on guard at all times. Traditionally, government bodies and bureaucracy are wary of open governance for well-known reasons. The interim government should have no such qualms and will earn the country's gratitude for such a gesture.

The interim would also be well-advised to set the Information Commission in full motion with prompt appointment of the commissioners, long before they hand over power to an elected government. It will set in motion a healthier interaction between citizens and public officials, which is essential for good democracy. An effective Information Commission, supporting the efforts of well-meaning citizens to keep the government on guard, will be a lasting legacy of the interim government that will perpetuate the spirit of the July uprising in the country's governance system. It will also end the frustrations of ardent users of the law who have been lamenting the absence of the mechanism for almost a year now.

We ask the readers to ponder a situation where, after the much-anticipated election, there is a mechanism for well-balanced interaction between citizens and the new government, where transparency and accountability of public offices are well-established. Where there is a smaller scope for abuse of power by public authorities, and citizens can play their roles as effective watchdogs for democracy and whistleblowers against corruption without fear or intimidation. It will be the fulfilment of a long-held dream of the nation.

The time is ripe, therefore, for our civil society and political workers to come together and devise a strategy before the upcoming general election to secure the commitment of political parties to unstinted implementation of the RTI Act. We now know how effective the RTI Act can be in supporting a watchdog role for citizens to monitor the work of public offices and act as whistleblowers against corruption.

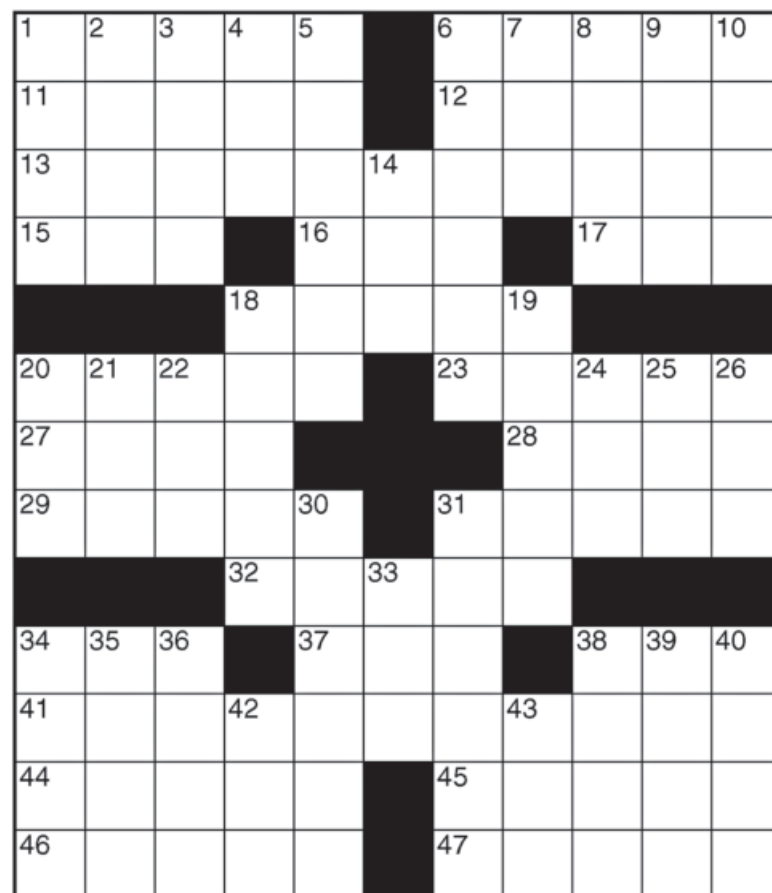
general election to secure the commitment of political parties to unstinted implementation of the RTI Act. A strategy to include such a commitment by the political parties in their election manifestos was adopted by civil society groups before the 2008 election, which many consider to be perhaps one of the fairest elections in the country. This should be done this time too, but with greater force, since we now know how effective the RTI Act can be in supporting a watchdog role for citizens to monitor the work of public offices and act as whistleblowers against corruption.

the amendments. If accepted, we can expect more citizen-friendly provisions, including stricter adherence to them by public bodies. One particular provision that we would like to emphasise is the inclusion of a specific "public interest override" clause. It exists in the laws of most advanced democracies in the world. It seeks to ensure that, in balancing between the government's interest while dealing with RTI requests and the public interest at large, the latter should prevail. It is worth noting that the interim government is uniquely positioned to provide the country

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
1 Nuisance
5 Writing tablets
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16 By way of
17 Pub drinks
18 Natural gift
21 Homer's neighbor
22 Tool kit tool
23 Painting holder
24 Some silverware
26 Inquire
29 Desire for a drink
30 Pinnacle
31 Mine yield
32 Texas capital
34 Full of caffeine, perhaps
37 "Don't cry over - milk"
38 Audacity
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- DOWN**
1 Convict's hope
2 Wed in secret
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7 Colorado capital
8 Beer hall vessels
9 Moon of Saturn
11 Try for a fly
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22 NFL players
23 Gift tag word
24 Cry of terror
25 South Dakota capital
26 On the go
27 Obeys the photographer
28 Superman's adoptive family
29 Hamlet
30 Jellied dish
33 Meat-rating org.
35 Genesis woman
36 Cozy retreat



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

