

# The president and the professor

How Ziaur Rahman was influenced by Muhammad Yunus on rural development policies



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Good ideas can emerge from anywhere and anyone. Confident political leaders search for the best ideas and embrace those. Politics should not get in the way. This is an important lesson for politicians in Bangladesh today, as we are busy preparing for the forthcoming democratic elections. Instead of emphasising “ideology,” the politicians should campaign on “good ideas.”

Academics often complain that politicians are either unaware of their research and policy recommendations or simply ignore their work. Perhaps we, the “armchair” academics, should contemplate our own modus operandi to understand why our ideas lack credibility and are ignored by those in power. Our research must go beyond the knowledge and theories learned from textbooks written by experts who may never have visited Bangladesh, let alone lived in a village.

This article describes a few episodes from Bangladesh’s history that illustrate how an interested political leader, President Ziaur Rahman, reached out to an academic, Muhammad Yunus, producing positive results for the nation. The president took this extraordinary step because the professor had earned credibility through his field work, living and working in villages, as part of his “action research” agenda on poverty alleviation.

After the great famine of 1974, which claimed more than a million lives, Prof Yunus became increasingly involved in rural development efforts. In 1975, he developed the “Nabajug Tebhaga Khamar” (New Era Three-Share Farm) project, a real-world action-research initiative to increase farm productivity. Given the success of this innovative project, he received the prestigious President’s Award in 1978. The

BNP government under Zia adopted and scaled up core elements of this programme, renaming it the Packaged Input Programme (PIP). Unfortunately, the nationwide scale-up was not as successful, since it was made mandatory.

The award elevated Professor Yunus’s profile both on campus and nationally. Consequently, a professional relationship developed between the two, with President Zia often seeking Yunus’s ideas and feedback on his own rural development initiatives. The two corresponded and even partnered on a few projects aimed at rural development.

To enhance the effectiveness of rural development efforts, Dr Yunus had proposed the idea of village governance called “Gram Sarkar,” to empower local communities to take initiatives for their own progress and prosperity.

President Zia’s government formally adopted this concept, leading to the formation of over 40,000 village governments (implemented during Khaleda Zia’s 2001–2006 government), serving as a fourth tier of government. A key difference, which rendered the nation-wide programme less effective, was its mandatory nature as opposed to Yunus’s initiative, which was voluntary.

Alex Counts, the author of *Small Loans, Big Dreams: Muhammad Yunus, Grameen Bank and the Global Microfinance Revolution*, (2025 edition), cites several instances when the two men interacted in the late 1970s.

Counts writes on these two programmes: “While he was working to establish his ideas at the local level, Yunus continued to be involved with national political figures. He had a warmer and more complex relationship with President Zia Ur Rahman than he’d had with Sheikh Mujib. The two had first come

into contact in 1977 when Yunus received the President’s Award on behalf of the Tehbhaga Khamar project. On several occasions, Zia called on Yunus as a representative of the younger generation of academics to speak out on subjects ranging from the wisdom of conducting state planning on two-year cycles (rather than the traditional five) to the proposal for beginning to transmit television signals in color instead of black and white...”

in an issue—rural development in this case—spending significant amount of time visiting villages to understand villagers’ problems and inspiring them to work hard to escape poverty. Secondly, it is uncommon for a young academic to be so influential that the head of state would be impressed by his ideas and work in the field, to the extent of adopting and scaling them up nationally. In 1975, Yunus was a 35-year-old academic

secondary sources, running regressions on computers, and writing scholarly articles for publication, which is considered the “gold standard” for academic success. These publications carry great weight in terms of tenure and promotion. However, they are normally of little immediate practical benefit for farmers and the impoverished villagers, who are often the subject of academics’ research.

In his book, Counts mentions several interactions between Zia and Yunus:

“On that hot Friday in April, Yunus followed Zia and his entourage for seven miles. On two occasions, he listened to the president’s speeches, and both times Zia made sure that Yunus was sitting next to him when he delivered his remarks...”

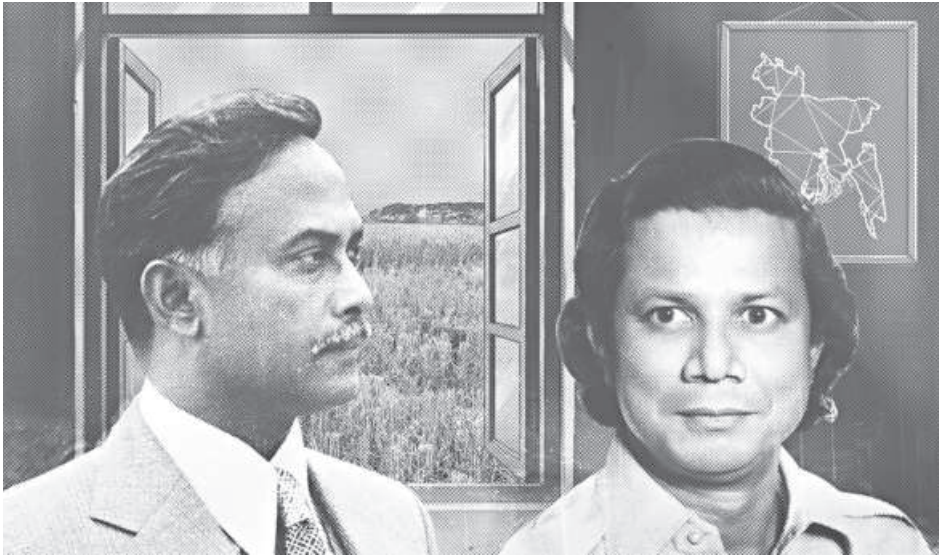
...Soon after Yunus left Zia so that he could unwind, presidential assistants came running in search of him. He was told that the president wanted to speak to him. When Yunus, still drenched with sweat from the walking, entered the room where Zia was resting, he was ushered into a chair by the president’s bedside. Zia looked up at his guest and said, ‘So, what did you think?’

Taken aback, Yunus innocently asked, ‘About what?’

‘About my speech.’

Measuring his words carefully, Yunus said: ‘Well, I think people were very inspired to hear from you.’ He paused, and then continued: ‘But there is one thing I would have changed. You see, people are talking about how bad this drought is, but I saw a lot of water in the river we passed over in the helicopter. If some of that water was diverted to the fields by canals or even lifted by hand, then we would be seeing some green fields instead of brown ones. And that’s something people can do right now. What I’m trying to say, Mr. President, is that in your speech you kept telling people what you are going to do for them. I think it would be much more useful if you talked about what they could do for themselves.’ (Counts, page: 52–53)

To summarise, good-to-great ideas are essential for a nation’s growth and prosperity. As Bangladesh moves towards the 2026 elections, the benefits of partnership between politicians and researchers must not be lost on the next elected government for the nation to move forward.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

(Counts, page 51)

....After taking over, Zia discussed the matter with Yunus and indicated that he, with the help of Mahabub Alam Chashee, intended to implement gram sorkar nationwide. Many Bangladeshi intellectuals were outraged that the proposal was being taken seriously, perhaps because on some level it valued the knowledge of semiliterate villagers more than theirs. (Counts, page 31)”

It should be noted that though Grameen Bank was formally established as an independent financial institution in 1983, after Zia’s death, the idea for this unique bank originated in 1976 from a microcredit research project of Prof Yunus.

The story of partnership and collaboration between the Zia and Yunus offers valuable lessons for future politicians. It is rare for a head of state to take such a personal interest

with a degree from Vanderbilt University in the United States, teaching economics at Chittagong University (CU). He frequently visited villages near the CU campus to learn about the lives of both men and women. He called his approach “action research,” involving colleagues and students who shared his passion for this work. His colleague, Prof H I Latif, recently shared with me that, when HYV, the high yield variety of rice, was newly introduced, the farmers were somewhat reluctant to adopt it. “We would sometimes get into the field ourselves to demonstrate how to plant the saplings in straight lines,” he said.

Clearly, Dr Yunus was not your typical academic. Most young professors early in their career are interested in securing research grants, recruiting students to collect data, either in the field or from

# What the BBC controversy tells us about Western media bias



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The recent departure of BBC bosses Tim Davie and Deborah Turness is a masterclass in unspoken power dynamics. The headlines told a story of scandal and pressure. But if you listen closely, you hear the real plot twist: the story wasn’t about their journalism; it was about whom they offended.

Their exit was precipitated not by a failure to accurately report on one of the great crimes of our age in Gaza that has claimed over 69,000 lives and prompted accusations of genocide from leading international lawyers, but by the controversy surrounding a BBC programme that mis-edited a Donald Trump speech delivered just before the Capitol riot in January 2021.

Let that sink in. Offending a powerful Western politician carries more consequences than the systemic dehumanisation of an entire people. This exposes the hidden script that Western state-affiliated media like the BBC and others have been following for decades. They are not neutral chroniclers of truth. They are architects of narrative, and it is long past time we in the Global South stopped treating their broadcasts as gospel.

For the last 80 years or so, Western media has been considered the primary engine of global “common sense.” Its newsrooms, with their imposing glass facades and sonorous



Smoke rises during an Israeli military operation in Gaza City, as seen from the central Gaza Strip on September 29, 2025.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

voiceovers, project an aura of impartial authority which is a carefully crafted illusion. Outlets like the BBC World Service were founded explicitly as instruments of British soft power during the Cold War. Today, they continue to be funded by their governments to shape a worldview that is favourable to Western foreign policy.

The narrative is always framed through

their lens. A “clash” in a foreign land is rarely a “massacre.” A “militant” is seldom a “freedom fighter.” The language is sanitised, the context curated, and the experts are almost exclusively drawn from Western think tanks. The result is a corruption of history itself, as the lived experiences of billions are filtered through a narrow, self-interested prism.

There’s a scene in the film *The Matrix* that captures this phenomenon perfectly.

destruction, much of the Western media, including *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, became a megaphone for the administration’s claims. The catastrophic consequences—hundreds of thousands of Iraqi deaths and a region plunged into chaos—were, for their audiences, a distant tragedy, often framed as the unintended consequence of a noble mission. The “common sense” was that America spreads democracy, even when the facts on the ground scream otherwise.

This narrative power is not passive; it is integral to the machinery of domination. As the Palestinian-American academic Edward Said argued, the West has long created an “Orientalist” image of the East as backward, irrational, and violent to justify its colonial and imperial projects. The media is the modern vehicle for this. When a population is systematically dehumanised in news reports—their deaths downplayed, their grief unseen, their history erased—it creates a permissive environment for their physical destruction. Narrative becomes a weapon.

Why do we, in the Global South, then continue to treat these outlets as the gold standard? The answer lies in the lingering ghost of colonialism. Our universities teach their theories, our policymakers quote their reports, and our own media outlets exhibit a Pavlovian reflex to republish their “breaking news” without cross-checking. We have been taught that our own stories are less valid, our own perspectives parochial. We have internalised our own marginalisation.

The great awakening of our time is the realisation that the multipolar world is not just a geopolitical reality but a narrative imperative. We must seize the means of storytelling.

This is not about creating a mirror image

of propaganda or trading one set of biases for another. It is about achieving genuine pluralism. It is about building our own institutions that can tell our stories with the nuance, context, and humanity they deserve. Look at the impact of Al Jazeera, which burst onto the scene and fundamentally changed the media landscape by giving a platform to Arab perspectives. It proved that there is a hungry audience for narratives not filtered through London or New York.

We must actively follow and amplify media from the countries of the Global South. Why must a crisis in Senegal be explained to a Nigerian audience by the BBC? Why must an economic shift in Bolivia be interpreted for Colombians by the *Financial Times*? We have vibrant, independent media across our continents—from *The Continent* in Africa to *Daily Maverick* in South Africa and *TeleSUR* in Venezuela. We must platform our own experts, our own historians, and our own journalists.

The task is to decolonise our newsrooms and minds. This means implementing a simple but radical rule: never republish a report from a Western outlet without cross-referencing it with a local source or a source from a different geopolitical bloc. It means cultivating a critical literacy that asks of every news report, old or new: who benefits from this story being told this way? What is being left out? Whose voice is missing?

The resignations at the BBC are a mere subplot. The main story is our collective journey towards narrative sovereignty. It is the most important story we will ever tell, because whoever tells the story defines the world. It is time we took back the pen, and the camera, and directed our own future.

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Use mouthwash
- 7 Minor fight
- 11 Spain setting
- 12 Half a sextet
- 13 Biased, in a way
- 14 Took the bus
- 15 Musical mixture
- 17 Spiked club
- 20 Plentiful
- 23 Make goofs
- 24 Yokel
- 26 In addition
- 27 Low bill
- 28 U.N.’s Hammarskjöld
- 29 Hires
- 31 Try out
- 32 Swift

33 Ignored the limit

- 34 Guarantee
- 37 Put together
- 39 Inn
- 43 Photo problem
- 44 Aviator Earhart
- 45 Skiing mecca
- 46 Bygone cab

DOWN

- 1 USO patrons
- 2 Penny prez
- 3 Mystery writer Stout
- 4 Filth
- 5 Maggie and Bart’s sister
- 6 Puts away
- 7 Makes banjo music
- 8 Braced

9 Lend a hand

- 10 Sock part
- 16 Grant’s successor
- 17 Taxi part
- 18 Fragrance
- 19 Arose
- 21 Tenant’s paper
- 22 Defeated, but barely
- 24 Parka parts
- 25 One or more
- 30 Cruise ships
- 33 Middling card
- 35 Golden Spike state
- 36 Hindu hero
- 37 CEO’s deg.
- 38 Utterly
- 40 Golfer Ernie
- 41 Carnival city
- 42 “Platoon” setting



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