

## Reverence for a political icon

### Political parties pay tribute to Khaleda Zia

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Leaders from across Bangladesh's political spectrum have expressed their condolences over the death of BNP chairperson and former prime minister Khaleda Zia, paying tribute to her long political career and her role in Bangladesh's democratic movements.

In a condolence message, Sheikh Hasina, president of the Awami League, which is currently banned from political activities, said, "As Bangladesh's first woman prime minister, her contribution to the country and the democratic movement was immense. Her death is an irreparable loss to the nation's politics and to BNP leadership. I pray for the forgiveness of her soul."

Hasina, ousted by an uprising last year, also extended her heartfelt condolences to BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman and other grieving members of the family.

Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman extended condolences, praying for Khaleda's forgiveness and eternal peace. In a message, he sought patience and strength for her family members, relatives, and colleagues.

National Citizen Party and its affiliated bodies also conveyed deep mourning over her death.

In a statement, NCP Member Secretary Akhter Hossen said Khaleda Zia spearheaded the struggle against dictatorship and remained unwavering in her mission to safeguard democracy throughout her political life.

The party credited her with playing a pivotal role in the restoration of parliamentary governance and rebuilding a democratic environment following the mass uprising of 1990, which ended nearly a decade of military rule.

Calling Khaleda an inspiration of Bangladesh's democratic struggle, Dr Kamal Hossain, emeritus president of Gonoforum, said in a condolence message that her leadership in the anti-autocracy movement and her efforts to restore democracy will be remembered with respect.

He also prayed for the peace of her soul and expressed sympathy to her family as well as party leaders

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## 'Nation lost a great guardian'

Says Yunus; condolences pour in from govt

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Government high-ups, including President Mohammed Shahabuddin and Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus, along with other advisers to the interim government, yesterday expressed deep shock and sorrow at the death of three-time former Prime Minister and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia, widely regarded as an uncompromising leader for democracy in Bangladesh.

Following her death, the interim government announced three days of state mourning. Today was also declared a public holiday, while Bangladeshi missions abroad opened condolence books to allow people to pay tribute to the former premier.

President Shahabuddin, in a condolence message, described Khaleda Zia's "uncompromising role in establishing democracy and people's rights" as a lasting contribution to the nation's political history. "I pray for the salvation of her departed soul and extend my deep sympathy to the bereaved family members and followers," he said, urging the people to honor her memory and pray for her eternal peace.

Chief Adviser Prof Yunus said the nation had lost "a great guardian" with her death. "I am deeply shocked and saddened," he said, noting that she was not merely the leader of a political party but "an important chapter in the history

of Bangladesh."

He added that Begum Khaleda Zia's role in promoting democracy, multiparty political culture and people's rights would remain memorable.

"Due to her uncompromising leadership, the nation was repeatedly freed from undemocratic situations and inspired to reclaim democracy," he said.

Prof Yunus also highlighted her resilience during political adversities, noting that she stood as a symbol of resistance during Sheikh Hasina's rule and endured long periods of imprisonment due to what he described as politically motivated cases.

Meanwhile, Finance and Science and Technology Adviser Dr Salehuddin Ahmed said Begum Khaleda Zia was a long-standing and influential symbol of leadership in Bangladesh's political arena.

He noted that she had played a key role in upholding democratic values, freedom of expression, and constitutional continuity at various stages of governance.

"Despite political adversities, her leadership and political stance will be regarded as a distinct and memorable chapter in the country's political history," he said.

Dr Salehuddin called her death an irreparable loss to the country's political landscape and expressed condolences to her bereaved family members, BNP leaders, activists and followers.

Information and Broadcasting Adviser Syeda Rizwana Hasan said Khaleda Zia's death marked the end of an important and glorious chapter in Bangladesh's political history.

"Her role in establishing democracy, a multiparty political culture and people's rights will be remembered," she said, adding that the nation would always respect her contributions to the environment, infrastructure, women's education, health, social development and democratic institutions.

Food and Land Adviser Ali Imam Majumder described Begum Khaleda Zia as an important figure in democratic politics, calling her death an irreparable loss for the nation.

Fisheries and Livestock Adviser Farida Akhter recalled that she became the country's first female prime minister through free and fair elections and led the return from a presidential system to parliamentary democracy.

Social Welfare and Women and Children Affairs Adviser Sharmin S Murshid said the country had lost an important political guardian, while Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs Adviser Supradip Chakma said Khaleda Zia would be eternally remembered for her relentless struggle to advance parliamentary democracy and protect people's rights.

The advisers prayed for the eternal peace of her departed soul and expressed deep condolences to her family, party leaders and followers.



A burial site is being prepared for Khaleda Zia beside that of her husband, former president Ziaur Rahman. She will be laid to rest there following her funeral at the South Plaza of the Parliament complex on Manik Mia Avenue at 2:00pm today. The photo was taken last night at Zia Uddyan.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

## 'A towering figure in South Asian politics'

### Global media marks end of an era with Khaleda's death

STAR REPORT

The passing of former prime minister and BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia has drawn extensive global media coverage, with major international news agencies describing her death not merely as the loss of a Bangladeshi political leader, but as the end of a defining era in South Asian politics.

Reuters and the Associated Press (AP) were among the first to break the news globally, describing her as a "towering figure" whose decades-long rivalry with Sheikh Hasina defined the nation's political landscape.

AP wrote that the former prime minister's "archivality with another former premier defined the country's politics for a generation". Similarly, Reuters noted that Khaleda, who became Bangladesh's first female prime minister in 1991, went on to develop a rivalry with Hasina as they "spent decades trading power".

British media focused heavily on

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## 'Khaleda Zia's departure left indelible void in state'

### Transcom CEO Simeen writes to Tarique offering condolences

STAR REPORT

Simeen Rahman, CEO of Transcom Group, yesterday extended her condolences to BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman, following the passing of his mother and former prime minister Khaleda Zia.

In a letter addressed to Tarique, she wrote, "With the passing of Begum Khaleda Zia, the nation and its people have lost one of their foremost political guardians. At the same time, an important chapter of Bangladesh's long democratic struggle -- one in which she stood at the very centre -- has come to an end."

Simeen said Khaleda Zia's

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## Her passing should unite us all to build

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the ideals of democracy will not only remain but reignite.

The nation mourns Khaleda Zia's passing, and this newspaper joins the people in paying tribute to the leader who devoted her life to strengthening democracy in Bangladesh. As the many world and regional leaders express their condolences at this crucial loss for us, we renew our pledge, in her memory, to rebuild all the relevant institutions that are needed to make democracy functional. This is our moment to unite to build Bangladesh.

Her first term in office -- from 1991 to 1996 -- was among the freest for media for which we also pay her tribute.

For all her struggles and sacrifices, she did not get her due in life. Her internment -- in jail and under house arrest for over seven and a half years -- was a case of misuse of law. The treatment meted out to her during her confinement was undignified for a politician of her stature -- three times elected prime minister -- and the solitary confinement that she was made to suffer for around two years was cruel and inhuman.

She was thrust into politics by the assassination of her husband, president Ziaur Rahman, founder

of the BNP, which left the party leaderless. Shy, self-effacing, and wholly unaccustomed to the world of politics, she nevertheless steadily and firmly left her mark on both her party and Bangladesh's political landscape. Her defining trait -- an unwillingness to compromise on opportunistic grounds -- was a core factor behind the BNP's electoral victory in the 1991 election.

Though her contribution to the anti-Ershad movement during the 80s was singular, her election victory in 1991 was transformative. It marked Khaleda Zia's emergence as a political leader with special qualities, qualities of steadfastness and a clear vision of what she wanted to do. BNP's political records during the anti-Ershad movement, to be completely credited to Khaleda Zia's repeated refusal to succumb to Ershad's proposal of compromise, gave the party and its leader a new place in people's hearts that here was a leader who meant what she said and never wavered in spite of offers of lucrative gains.

Apparently, she was not prepared to be the prime minister in 1991, but when she was elected, she rose to the occasion and acted like one. She was dignified, sensitive, open to differing views, respectful of her senior party leaders and fully aware

of the enormity of her task at hand. She knew that she had a lot to learn and was open to the process.

Her real test of political maturity came when she accepted the opposition Awami League's demand for introducing the parliamentary form of government in place of the existing presidential one. Considering our political legacy and preference of the people, she accepted the opposition's demand. This showed an openness and ability to accept views that she did not herself propagate. This was a rare instance in Bangladesh politics and marked an opening for collaboration between the ruling and the opposition parties. Sadly the opposition did not see this as an opportunity to strengthen the parliamentary system but used it to relentlessly harass the ruling party as we later saw through incessant hartals.

As we mourn her loss, we must reflect on her commitment to the growth and development of Bangladesh and unite behind her legacy to take the country forward. We have too much uncertainty and instability facing us today. Let us take this tragic moment to truly unite behind a legacy of patriotism, love for the country and commitment to its people.

## Farewell

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the seats she contested.

Khaleda, a three-time prime minister, possessed a singular electoral magic: she remains the only political leader in the country's history to have won every single parliamentary seat she ever contested.

Her administration's most enduring structural legacy was its pivot towards economic liberalisation and social equity. Guided by her finance minister, M Saifur Rahman, Khaleda introduced the value-added tax (VAT) in 1991 -- a difficult reform that permanently expanded the state's revenue base -- and moved to deregulate the banking sector.

But it was in the classroom where she altered the nation's social fabric to some extent. Recognising that development was impossible without women, her government launched a nationwide stipend programme in 1994 that made secondary education free for girls in rural areas.

In 2001, Khaleda orchestrated a stunning political comeback, leading her four-party alliance, which included Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, to a landslide victory that secured a two-thirds majority in parliament. This triumph was a rejection of the incumbent Awami League as well as a validation of her controversial strategic pivot -- an electoral coalition with conservative Islamic parties.

Her legacy is not without deep fissures. Her career was defined by a bitter, decades-long duel with Hasina and the Awami League, a rivalry that often paralysed the state. Her last tenure was punctuated by the intervention of an army-backed government in 2007 that saw both of them jailed. By late 2006, the country's democratic machinery had ground to a violent halt. As Khaleda's third term ended, a deadlock over who would head the interim caretaker government spilled onto the streets, turning Dhaka into a battleground.

In January 2015, Khaleda found herself in a siege-like state, her Gulshan office barricaded by police trucks loaded with sand to prevent her from leading anti-government protests. It was during this enforced isolation that she received the devastating news of the death of her younger son, Arafat Rahman Koko, in Malaysia.

Her personal tragedy was compounded by the politics of the moment; cut off from her family and the public, she was forced to mourn in isolation. The situation turned surreal when Hasina, the then prime minister, arrived at the gates to offer condolences, only to be turned away from the locked entrance.

The trajectory of Khaleda's final

decade was tragic, yet ended with a twist of historical irony. In 2018, she was sentenced to prison on corruption charges involving the Zia Orphanage Trust -- charges many decried as a politically motivated tool to keep her away from elections.

For over two years, beginning in February 2018, Khaleda was the sole inmate of the abandoned Old Dhaka Central Jail on Nazimuddin Road. While the rest of the prison population had been relocated to a new facility in Keraniganj, she remained isolated in a room of the colonial era structure. This period of incarceration was marked by a profound loneliness that her party and international observers frequently described as solitary confinement.

In those years, it seemed her story would end in a prison cell. Under the increasingly authoritarian regime led by Hasina, Khaleda was effectively silenced, her voice absent from parliament since 2014, and her party was followed out. Even after a conditional release in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic, she remained confined to her home in Gulshan, a shadow of the figure who once commanded tens of millions.

But the wheel turned one last time. Following the massive student-led uprising in 2024 that toppled Hasina's regime, Khaleda saw her political image resurrected. She was completely freed in August 2024 a day after Hasina fled the country. She witnessed the fall of the government that had jailed her. And her political enemy, Hasina, was sentenced to death in absentia for crimes against humanity in November 2025.

In the days following the dramatic collapse of the Awami League government in 2024, Khaleda's most defining political act was perhaps her silence. While her party faithful celebrated the ouster of Hasina in the streets, Khaleda refrained from issuing a single public statement of personal gloating or vindictiveness against the woman who had jailed her. Even in her first public address after six years of silence -- delivered via video link from a hospital bed -- she notably avoided mentioning her rival's name in anger. Instead, she urged the nation to reject the "politics of vengeance" and destruction, choosing to focus her fading energy on a call for peace rather than settling the score with the nemesis who had fled.

Khaleda's health had been in steep decline for years. By the time she was last admitted to Evercare Hospital on November 23, 2025, with heart and lung infections, she was already navigating life with a pacemaker and the scars

of previous stenting procedures. She breathed her last around 6:00am yesterday at the age of 80.

Khaleda's eldest son, Tarique Rahman, remains the undisputed heir apparent to her political dynasty, serving as the acting chairman of the BNP from London, where he had been in exile since 2008. He returned home on December 25, ending his 17-year physical detachment from Bangladesh.

In January 2025, Khaleda travelled to the UK for advanced medical treatment. That visit marked a temporary reunion of the mother and the son -- their first in seven years. As Khaleda's health reached a critical crisis point, the party rank-and-file waited anxiously for their leader to come home. While the interim government signalled a willingness to facilitate his homecoming, Tarique's delay, attributed to lingering security concerns and strategic timing for the upcoming elections, created a poignant backdrop to his mother's final battles.

Today, the focus will inevitably turn to the vacuum she leaves in the BNP. But for a moment, the nation pauses to mark the passing of a person who walked out of the domestic sphere to topple a dictator. In the years that followed, she was tenacious in political survival and grit.

She survived through imprisonment, the isolation of the pandemic, the death of her younger son, and the systematic dismantling of her party. She emerged not as a vanquished prisoner, but as a unifying force for the party and millions of supporters.

Khaleda may have lost her health to the struggle, but she died having secured her indelible place in history.

## Country lost

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with courage and compassion.

"Her resilience was not loud, but it was unbreakable," he added.

Referring to late president and BNP founder Ziaur Rahman and his younger brother Arafat Rahman Koko, Tarique said she endured the pain of losing her husband and son in the service of the nation.

"In that loss, this nation and its people became her family, her purpose, her very soul," he said.

"She leaves behind an unforgettable legacy of patriotism, sacrifice, and resistance, a legacy that will live on in the democratic conscience of Bangladesh," Tarique added.

The BNP acting chairman also requested people to pray for his mother and expressed gratitude to those at home and abroad who conveyed condolences.

## World leaders mourn Khaleda

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In his condolence message, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "Deeply saddened to learn about the passing away of former prime minister and BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia in Dhaka. Our sincerest condolences to her family and all the people of Bangladesh. May the Almighty grant her family the fortitude to bear this tragic loss."

"As the first woman prime minister of Bangladesh, her important contributions towards the development of Bangladesh, as well as India-Bangladesh relations, will always be remembered."

Recalling his "warm meeting" with her in Dhaka in 2015, he said, "We hope that her vision and legacy will continue to guide our partnership."

India's opposition leader and Congress Chief Rahul Gandhi said, "Over her long career in public

life, she played a significant role in Bangladesh's political journey."

Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif described her as a "committed friend of Pakistan." "Her lifelong service to Bangladesh and its growth and development leaves a lasting legacy," he said, adding that the government and people of Pakistan stand with Bangladesh in this time of sorrow.

Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari also extended heartfelt condolences.

Describing Khaleda as a towering figure in the nation's political history, Malaysian government, in a statement, said her leadership shaped modern Bangladesh and left a lasting legacy.

Nepalese Prime Minister Sushila Karki termed Khaleda a true friend of Nepal. "Begum Zia leaves behind a legacy of lifelong public service, with her enduring leadership marking a historic chapter in the democratic

journey of her country."

Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu also conveyed heartfelt condolences to the government and people of Bangladesh following the passing of Khaleda Zia.

The British High Commission in Dhaka expressed deep sorrow and extended condolences to her family and friends.

The German Embassy noted her significant role in shaping the political landscape, while the French Embassy said her legacy will be remembered.

Japanese Ambassador Saida Shinichi expressed sincere gratitude for her dedicated efforts and remarkable achievements.

The Iranian embassy described her as a prominent national leader who made notable contributions to democratic governance. Australia also issued a statement saying its thoughts were with the people of Bangladesh.