

A life of measured resistance



MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

With Khaleda Zia's passing, Bangladesh has lost a towering political figure whose calm restraint often stood in stark contrast to the country's bruising, combative political culture.

In 2009, she was evicted from her longtime residence in Dhaka Cantonment. At a tearful press conference afterward, she described being forced out of her bedroom, the door broken down, and her belongings seized. Awami League leaders mocked her grief as "crocodile tears," setting the tone for years of hostility to come.

Her silence spoke louder than words; it was a deliberate political posture that shaped her identity and, at times, unsettled her fiercest opponents. This became evident around one and a half years before her final days. Khaleda was confined to her home, denied permission to travel abroad for urgent medical treatment. Her party

appealed repeatedly, and human rights groups raised alarms. But the then government held firm. Meanwhile, Sheikh Hasina, then at the height of her power and virtually unchallenged, maintained a public posture of absolute dominance. Khaleda, frail yet composed, remained silent. That composure became a defining feature of her character. Hasina's rhetoric often cut sharply but Khaleda rarely responded. In a political culture driven by verbal confrontation, her restraint was not a sign of weakness but a form of political quietude that overshadows the clamour of politics. In 2009, she was evicted from her longtime residence in Dhaka Cantonment. At a tearful press conference afterward, she described being forced out of her bedroom, the door broken down, and her belongings seized. Awami League leaders mocked her grief as "crocodile tears," setting the tone for years of hostility to come. The most symbolic moment of

that hostility came on December 29, 2013. As the BNP prepared for its "March for Democracy", the exit from Khaleda's house was blocked by five sand-laden trucks -- an image that instantly crystallised the era's political suppression. Dubbed "sand-truck democracy", it marked the first time since 1990 that she was unable to reach the political stage she had long dominated. Her frustration boiled over only once, in a sharp retort to police officers -- a rare crack in an otherwise tightly controlled persona. Then came her incarceration. Under the army-backed caretaker government, corruption cases were filed against her. When Hasina returned to power, all the cases against her were swiftly cleared, while Khaleda was put in jail. Hasina repeatedly mocked her, branding her a "thief" and dismissing BNP rallies as "marches for a thief". The cruelty extended beyond politics; at times, it became personal. Senior AL figures even casually spoke of throwing Khaleda off the Padma Bridge. During a visit to London in

October 2023, Hasina dismissed public concern over Khaleda's deteriorating health with striking coldness, saying, "She is over 80. Every day they say she's dying. Naturally, the time has come. No need to cry so much". Khaleda never reciprocated the verbal attacks. Even as her health declined and political pressure mounted, she chose not to respond in kind. Her restraint, often dismissed as passivity, ultimately emerged as a form of moral high ground -- a refusal to descend into the cycle of insult and retribution that defined much of contemporary politics. The tide of history turned suddenly. Hasina, once unshakeable, was forced to flee amid a wave of public anger, leaving behind her loyalists and the long-cultivated aura of invincibility. Khaleda, still battling illness, left the country for better treatment -- not in disgrace, but on a tide of affection. People who had not seen her active in years poured into the streets -- not to protest, but to bless her journey. Before her departure, she issued

what would become her last political message: "No destruction, no anger, no revenge". At a moment when she could have demanded retribution, she instead pleaded for peace. Her death closes a chapter in Bangladesh's political history -- yet it also clarifies her place in it. Among the five major political figures who shaped the nation's trajectory -- Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Ziaur Rahman, HM Ershad, Khaleda Zia, and Sheikh Hasina -- she alone departs without the imprint of authoritarian rule. She wielded power but never weaponised it. She governed but did not silence opponents. She fought but never humiliated anyone. Khaleda's life was not theatrical. It was defined by endurance more than spectacle. And in a political culture where rhetoric often masquerades as strength, her quiet defiance carved out a legacy uniquely her own. Her silence, in the end, proved far more powerful than the clamour of her rivals -- and that unspoken strength will be remembered forever by the nation she has left behind.

