

# The night she won, and the legacy that followed

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It was the night of February 27, 1991. After a full day of voting, the streets were pulsing with excitement. People at home, in shops, at tea stalls were glued to their television and radio sets. They waited for one announcement.

Finally, the announcement came—the BNP, under the leadership of Khaleda Zia, had won.

To many, the result was unexpected. The main contest had been between Sheikh Hasina's Awami League and the BNP—two parties that had led a decade-long campaign against autocracy. It was that very movement that had forced Hussain Muhammad Ershad, military dictator turned president, to resign just months earlier.

Many believed that after such a massive anti-autocracy movement, the BNP—established only a few years earlier by Ziaur Rahman, another military强人 turned president—would hardly be trusted by the people to assume power. Moreover, the party was led by Khaleda Zia, who had entered politics only seven years before.

Analysts say the main reason was Khaleda Zia's uncompromising leadership against Ershad's military rule. Unlike her rival Sheikh Hasina, she refused to take part in the 1986 election, and that decision established her as an uncompromising leader and turned the BNP into a formidable force on its path back to power.

Many people enter politics, but only a few become symbols during their lifetime. Even fewer manage to maintain influence over the political trajectory of a nation after leaving power.

Khaleda Zia has done both. Rising from ordinary life to the



pinnacle, then through decline, imprisonment, illness, and repeated comebacks—she has earned a degree of acceptance that transcends party lines.

She will never walk the corridors of power, but her shadow will remain in the nook and cranny of Bangladesh's politics. She is an indomitable symbol of a nation born from struggle—one who never compromised, never bowed.

Despite criticism, her many decisions have left an indelible mark on Bangladesh's democratic journey.

Over time, she transformed the BNP. She turned a party born around a military ruler into a democratic force for the masses. Her unwavering faith in Bangladeshi nationalism established the BNP as the guardian of multi-party democracy—first against military

dictatorship, and later against one-party dominance.

Under her leadership, the party stayed intact and reorganized itself in opposition. Even under persecution, she remained resolute. Over the past fifteen years, the Awami League government evicted her from her home, placed her under house arrest, and convicted her in corruption cases—

charges her party and supporters have viewed as politically motivated. These legal battles were part of broader attempts to weaken her leadership and the BNP's influence. Denied medical treatment, subjected to pressure—she still remained uncompromising and dignified.

BNP leaders and activists were prevented from sitting in offices, standing in the streets; they faced widespread arrests and repression. Yet they did not abandon her. This shows her sweeping acceptance within the party.

She served as prime minister three times—twice for full terms and once for nearly a month, during which the caretaker government system for election-time administration was incorporated into the constitution in response to opposition demands.

After her first victory in 1991, when Khaleda Zia assumed power, Bangladesh witnessed a historic moment: for the first time, a woman was leading the nation. Her journey had not begun from ambition, but from personal tragedy.

In 1981, her husband—president and BNP founder Ziaur Rahman—was assassinated. At just thirty-six, determined to keep the BNP intact, she entered politics in 1983 at the urging of committed party workers. The following year, she became party chairperson—a position she held for decades.

Her first term ushered in major reforms. She transformed Bangladesh from a presidential system into a parliamentary one—a long-standing demand that had emerged from the anti-autocracy movement of the 1980s. Almost immediately, her government

SEE PAGE S7



## UNDEFEATED, UNMATCHED

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

Twenty-three contests. Twenty-three victories. No losses.

In the history of Bangladesh's parliament, no politician has matched Khaleda Zia's electoral record. Across five general elections from 1991 to 2008, she never tasted defeat. Bogura, Feni, Lakshmpur, Chattogram, Dhaka, Khulna—the geography changed, but the outcome didn't. Her name on a ballot worked like a charm.

That is perhaps why, the BNP nominated her for three constituencies even as she fought for her life in a

Dhaka hospital. The nomination for the 13th national election looked like confidence in her recovery. In reality, it was something more profound: an acknowledgment that no one else in the party could match her popularity.

Even on life support, Khaleda Zia remained BNP's most credible candidate.

Her political rise coincided with Bangladesh's democratic awakening. After the restoration of parliamentary rule in 1991, she and Sheikh Hasina became the two poles of national politics—rivals whose fifteen-year

duel shaped everything from policy to identity. They traded power. They traded accusations.

For a decade and a half, Bangladesh belonged to these two women.

Khaleda contested from five seats in 1991. She won them all. She swept another five in first election of 1996, which was marred by controversy since it was boycotted by the opposition. But even as BNP's popularity plummeted and Khaleda had to give in to the demand of the opposition by agreeing to a caretaker government, she still

swept five seats in June 1996. The

pattern held through 2001, when she returned to power with another five-seat haul.

Even in 2008, when the BNP suffered its worst-ever electoral defeat as it was reduced to just 30 seats, Khaleda Zia won all three of her races. The party collapsed around her. She remained standing.

That invincibility ended in 2018. But it was not by the ballot. It was in a courtroom. A corruption conviction disqualified her from contesting. For the first time since 1991, the BNP went to the polls without Khaleda Zia's name

on the ticket. The party had prepared to nominate her for Feni-1, Bogura-6, and Bogura-7. Instead, she sat in prison while her candidates lost ground across the country.

Six years later, she was nominated again. But this time, the context was different. The woman who had never lost an election was losing a battle no political strategy could win. Inside Evercare Hospital, machines regulated her breathing. Outside, party workers held vigils, clutching posters of a leader who might never address another rally.