

A stunning turnout at a leader's final rites

Khaleda Zia's leadership and silent suffering have touched millions

A funeral with such an overwhelming turnout as witnessed on Wednesday is rare. It speaks volumes about the personality that evoked such an outpouring of love and respect. The janaza of Begum Khaleda Zia—three-time prime minister and the uncompromising leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)—was attended by millions of people not only from Dhaka but from many other districts as well. Central Dhaka came to a standstill as waves of people walked on foot to get to the janaza venue in time. With Manik Mia Avenue and adjacent areas filled to the brim, those who could not reach the venue stood together on the streets to join the prayer. She was laid to rest with full state honours.

The presence of Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus, other advisers, and diplomats from 32 countries—along with visits by India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, Pakistan's National Assembly Speaker Sardar Ayaz Sadiq, Sri Lanka's Foreign Affairs Minister Vijitha Herath, Nepal's Foreign Minister Bala Nanda Sharma, Bhutan's Foreign Affairs and External Trade Minister Lyompo D.N. Dhungyel, and the Maldives' Minister of Higher Education, Labour and Skills Development Ali Haidar Ahmed—highlighted the respect commanded by Khaleda Zia not only in Bangladesh, but across the region. International media gave extensive coverage to the first woman prime minister of Bangladesh and a steadfast champion of democracy.

Khaleda Zia enjoyed immense popularity among her party members and voters, whether as prime minister or leader of the opposition. But Wednesday's spontaneous congregation went beyond political allegiance. It was an outpouring of people's empathy and love for a maternal figure and commanding leader whose personal tragedies evoked deep compassion, making her all the more human. She had to endure the exile of her eldest son, Tarique Rahman, and her own prolonged persecution at the hands of her arch-rival, Sheikh Hasina. She was forced out of her home, falsely convicted on corruption charges, incarcerated and kept in solitary confinement, placed under house arrest during the Covid pandemic, and denied permission to seek medical treatment abroad for illnesses aggravated by the poor conditions of her prison cell. She also had to bear the loss of her second son while her office was under siege by security agencies, leaving her confined and isolated.

While her political rival never missed an opportunity to make derogatory public remarks about her, Khaleda Zia did not stoop to the same level and maintained a stoic dignity. It was this dignified and restrained response to sustained cruelty that endeared her further to the people. Her measured reaction on August 5, 2024 when she was freed—calling for a new Bangladesh and urging the nation to shun the politics of retribution—placed her on a moral high ground that her political rival was never able to attain.

The BNP, and especially Tarique Rahman, while grieving the loss of a matriarch, now face the challenge of upholding the commendable legacy Khaleda Zia leaves behind. It is also incumbent upon the nation to honour her staunch commitment to democracy and national unity, particularly as the country enters an electoral race that promises to be exceptionally challenging.

Act now to stop next dengue outbreak

Preventive measures must begin in January

In the absence of effective dengue control policies and measures by the authorities concerned, another year has ended with a high number of dengue cases. Health authorities recorded at least 412 deaths and 102,673 infections as of December 29, 2025, exposing deep-rooted weaknesses in the state's disease prevention preparedness. Although cases declined with the onset of winter, there is no room for complacency over what has become a year-round threat in recent years. Without decisive and coordinated action right from the start of 2026, as experts have warned, the nation could again face a similar or worse situation.

At present, dengue control remains largely reactive. Authorities tend to act only after widespread transmission begins. As a result, city corporations and municipalities struggle to eliminate breeding grounds, while hospitals become overwhelmed with patients. Experts have repeatedly stressed that *Aedes* mosquitoes require targeted, data-driven interventions, not indiscriminate fogging with ineffective pesticides. Unfortunately, dengue continues to be treated as part of a generic mosquito control programme rather than as a specialised public health challenge requiring dedicated planning and continuous surveillance.

Moreover, the absence of a single, accountable national authority for mosquito control has long weakened the response. Reportedly, different cities and municipalities follow different strategies, resulting in fragmented and often ineffective action. Failures in healthcare preparedness have also contributed to preventable deaths. Delayed diagnosis and late hospital admission remain common, particularly among high-risk groups. Shortages of trained nurses, inadequate logistics, and poor adherence to treatment protocols, especially in private hospitals, have further compounded the problem.

To curb dengue outbreaks, experts have emphasised the need to fully adopt an Integrated Mosquito Management System, establish a dedicated mosquito control authority, and implement coordinated nationwide programmes. A unified system covering surveillance, source reduction, appropriate insecticide use, and community engagement must be implemented across the country under a single coordinating body. Outdated fogging practices, often carried out without scientific justification, should be replaced with targeted measures guided by real-time data. In addition, dengue care must be decentralised, with affordable testing and well-equipped facilities available outside Dhaka. Strengthening district-level hospitals and ensuring proper training for doctors and nurses are also critical to reducing mortality.

However, dengue control cannot succeed without strong community involvement, which must be prioritised going forward. This cannot wait for an elected government, though we do hope the upcoming government will give priority to strengthening the dengue control drive. Dengue is a preventable disease, but prevention demands consistency and commitment. Another year of fragmented efforts and delayed responses would be an unforgivable failure.

TRIBUTE TO KHALEDA ZIA

An uncompromising leader who carved our democratic path



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AKM WAHIDUZZAMAN

Bangladesh stands in grief today. The void created by the death of a political leader is always profound, but the demise of BNP Chairperson and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has multiplied that emptiness for many, for she was not merely the head of a political party, but also an uncompromising leader of the masses as well as an embodiment of humanity who fought for the people rising above partisan identity.

Khaleda Zia's uncompromising stance against autocracy, fascism, and domination repeatedly showed the nation a path out of democracy-starved circumstances and infused it with the inspiration of liberty and freedom. Her long political journey, people-centric leadership, and steadfast role in upholding Bangladesh's independence and sovereignty will remain an enduring inspiration. Her absence is irreplaceable. With her passing, Bangladesh has lost a guardian—one who embraced the nation with compassion and accountability.

In the long journey of people's emancipation and politics, Khaleda Zia never accepted defeat; at the same time, she proved that victory means living eternally in the hearts of the people and in history.

She did not inherit her rise to power; she earned it through struggle, sacrifice, and dedication. After the assassination of President Ziaur Rahman in 1981, she wished to return to private life, but the reality of that moment did not grant her that opportunity. A woman who had spent 21 long years as a homemaker became the party's senior vice-chairperson in 1983.

In 1984, after being elected BNP chairperson unopposed, she demonstrated that politics is not merely a profession, but a profound responsibility. She assumed leadership at a moment of acute political crisis, when the country was captive to the brutal reality of military rule. Her entry into politics was one of duty and accountability, not personal ambition; later, it transformed into a long, arduous and thorn-strewn journey towards establishing democracy.

During the dark years of military autocracy in the 1980s, Khaleda Zia emerged as a foremost voice of democracy. She remained firm and uncompromising throughout the nine-year movement against HM Ershad's rule. Her decision not to participate in elections under that autocratic regime in 1986 was politically risky but morally

significant. She did not compromise in exchange for power, nor did she retreat from the movement despite arrests and repression.

The 1991 election was a watershed moment in Bangladesh's democratic history. In that election, Khaleda Zia contested from five constituencies and emerged victorious in all, a clear reflection of the people's trust in her.

After assuming office as the first woman prime minister in Bangladesh, her most significant contribution was the reintroduction of parliamentary democracy. Ending the presidential system and restoring parliament to

of VAT, capital market reforms and the establishment of the Privatisation Board were aimed at freeing the economy from elite control. Alongside market-oriented reforms, she sought to maintain social balance. The expansion of the ready-made garments industry and the establishment of the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare during her regime brought tangible change to the lives of millions.

Human empowerment was central to Khaleda Zia's politics. The "Food for Education" programme was a landmark initiative in addressing poverty and illiteracy simultaneously. Food assistance conditional on education laid the foundation for subsequent education policies, while free education and stipend programmes for girls played a crucial role in challenging social conservatism. She firmly believed that a nation's progress depends on women's education.

Her role in women's political empowerment is also undeniable. Increasing reserved seats for women

she was listed multiple times among *Forbes* magazine's World's 100 Most Powerful Women.

Despite prolonged imprisonment, serious illness, and political repression, Khaleda Zia did not leave the country. The safe path of exile was open to her, but she chose her country and people. And in the end, it was on this soil that she breathed her last.

Khaleda Zia contested 23 elections (in terms of parliamentary seats) in her lifetime and won all 23—a unique record in Bangladesh's politics. There were times when she held almost 40 election rallies in a single day. She served as prime minister three times, but even at the height of her power, she did not hesitate to reveal her vulnerability.

Despite long persecution and hardship, she rarely complained nor voiced grievance over the oppression or injustice inflicted upon her. This silent endurance distinguishes her not only as a successful politician but also as a statesman with a unique character.

The love people had for Khaleda Zia



Supporters hold posters of Bangladesh's former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia following her death while receiving treatment at the Evercare Hospital in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on December 30, 2025.

PHOTO: REUTERS

the centre of state power was a historic decision, proving that even in power, she believed in the decentralisation of authority.

Another crucial example of Khaleda Zia's political wisdom was the introduction of the caretaker government system. In 1996, in the face of political unrest and opposition demands, she incorporated this system into the constitution. Despite having the chance to cling to power, opening the path for a neutral electoral system remains an example in South Asian politics. This decision established her as a true statesperson.

At the heart of her governance philosophy lay economic democratisation. The introduction

in parliament was not merely a numerical decision; it was a recognition of women's participation within the state structure. This decision further institutionalised their participation in the political process.

Khaleda Zia deserves a mention in the history of world politics. Following Pakistan's former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, she became the second woman to serve as prime minister of a Muslim country. Her leadership also received international recognition; her inclusion among the world's influential women reflected that acknowledgment. In a 1993 report in *The New York Times*, Khaleda Zia was praised for her contribution to women's empowerment in Muslim-majority countries. Later,

was spontaneous, genuine and almost storybook-like—earned through compassion, empathy and social virtue. The immense sacrifices she made in the struggle for the country and democracy will remain an example worth citing in our political history.

Today, she is no more. But the questions she has left behind stand before us: can we uphold the dignity of parliamentary democracy? Can we restore political civility? Khaleda Zia's life teaches us that democracy is not a gift; it must be achieved through struggle and sustained through morality and accountability. She has now departed, but in the history of Bangladesh's democracy, she will remain one of its brightest stars.

When rumours wound millions



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Bangladesh mourned a profound national loss. Begum Khaleda Zia, the country's three-time prime minister, passed away on December 30 at around 6am at Evercare Hospital in Dhaka. She had been receiving intensive medical care in that well-known private hospital. Yesterday afternoon, her namaz-e-janaza was held at the South Plaza of the National Parliament Complex. The janaza drew millions of people—leaders, supporters, and citizens from all walks of life. They gathered to pay their final respects. Following the massive and deeply moving funeral prayers, she was laid to rest at Zia Uddin, beside her late husband, former President Ziaur Rahman. This event brings to a close a life that re-shaped Bangladesh's democratic journey and left an enduring imprint on the nation's political and social history.

Recently, a deeply upsetting narrative has been circulating on social media. It claimed that Begum Khaleda Zia had passed away earlier and that her death was "announced later" for political reasons. This assertion is not only a dirty lie but also extremely irresponsible and corrosive

to the moral foundations of our societal culture. Such malicious falsehoods are particularly disturbing when directed at a woman who rose from the role of a devoted housewife to become one of Bangladesh's most iconic political figures. She stepped into national leadership after personal tragedy, earning the people's mandate through democratic struggle, and emerging over decades as a symbol of national unity, constitutional governance, and political stability at critical moments in the country's history.

Some publicly known social media actors have cynically cited the use of life support in an intensive care unit to justify their claims that Khaleda Zia had died prior to the announcement on Tuesday. This reflects either a deliberate distortion or a serious misunderstanding of basic medical science. Life support is used to maintain normal heart and lung functions during a severely reduced level of consciousness; it does not indicate death. There are numerous documented cases in which people have remained on life support for months or even years, later recovered,

and gone on to live healthy lives. A person is not considered medically or legally dead if there is brain activity, the heart continues to beat, blood continues to circulate, and oxygen continues to reach vital organs. In Begum Khaleda Zia's case, while she was on life support, her heart was functioning and her organs were being physiologically supported; she was even undergoing dialysis, which would not have been possible if she were not alive.

Besides, it is concerning that the rapid expansion and easy accessibility of social media have significantly increased the risk of rumour, misinformation, and deliberate disinformation. In a complex and polarised political environment like Bangladesh's, such unchecked falsehoods about a leader's death can spread quickly, inflame emotions, and undermine public trust, making responsible communication and basic factual literacy more important than ever.

Death is a precise medical and legal determination—it is not a political opinion, not a social media guess, and certainly not a tool for partisan provocation. When individuals knowingly blur this line, they cross not only political disagreement into moral misconduct, but also into a dangerous misuse of modern communication technology. This is not confined to the political arena alone: if social media can be weaponised to malign and dehumanise a nationally revered figure like Begum Khaleda Zia, then no individual, public or private, is safe from similar harm tomorrow.

The damage caused by such rumours

goes far beyond one individual or one family. In Bangladesh, a country with a painful history of political polarisation, misinformation of this kind fuels public frustration, emotional distress, and collective cynicism. It reinforces a vicious cycle in which false narratives thrive, trust erodes, and basic human decency is sacrificed at the altar of political point-scoring.

Even those who may strongly disagree with Begum Khaleda Zia's politics, or with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party more broadly, must recognise that respect for truth and respect for life are non-negotiable democratic values. Democracies do not survive on elections alone; they survive on norms, truthfulness, restraint, and empathy. When these norms collapse, politics becomes a theatre of cruelty rather than a contest of ideas.

Spreading rumours about a former head of government, let alone any lay person, is not "free speech." It is a form of social vandalism. It humiliates families, confuses citizens, and degrades the public sphere. Worse still, it normalises the idea that lies are acceptable if they serve a political purpose.

This behaviour must be condemned unequivocally—not selectively or quietly. Political leaders, media professionals, civil society actors, and citizens alike have a responsibility to push back against such falsehoods. At a time when our nation seeks stability, dignity, and democratic renewal, let us reject rumour as politics and cruelty as strategy. Truth is not a partisan asset; it is a national necessity.