

OPINION

Khaleda Zia: Immovable force against oppression, bridge to democracy



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The unprecedented outpouring of grief and love for Khaleda Zia after her death powerfully affirms that the nation has lost someone deeply cherished. Witnessing the historic farewell to such a towering figure invites reflection on our political landscape. What made her so dignified and so revered in death—after enduring perhaps the harshest state persecution faced by any politician in independent Bangladesh?

She suffered the humiliation of forced eviction from the house granted by the state in recognition of her husband, Liberation War hero and former president Ziaur Rahman's contribution to the country. Later, while leading a democratic movement as leader of the opposition, she was forcibly isolated from her party, family, and followers when her party office was besieged—its gates blocked by sand-laden trucks. During this period of siege, she lost her youngest son, who died in exile in Malaysia.

Then came her conviction on a trumped-up charge of embezzling foreign donations intended for an orphanage that, in fact, remained intact in a separate official account. The cruelty deepened when the High Court doubled her sentence and placed her in solitary confinement until her health deteriorated so severely that authorities were compelled to move her to a hospital. She never fully recovered. Her condition was further worsened by the Hasina government's refusal to allow her access to advanced medical treatment abroad. Only after the fall of that regime did she receive the best medical care available to any Bangladeshi, involving multidisciplinary specialists from the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Australia, and Bangladesh. Had such care been made available earlier, the outcome might have been very different.

It is a shame that we failed to prevent such cruelty. Perhaps this shared guilt brought the country together in an unprecedented display of unity—one that sets a new benchmark of purpose: to follow her path and commit to building a democratic future. Asked what defines Khaleda Zia, many say she was



FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Khaleda Zia's electoral success will remain a testament to her immense popularity among voters nationwide.

uncompromising. That is only half the truth. She was uncompromising against autocracy, yet more compromising than her peers when it came to build and strengthen democracy. The full truth is that she made historic compromises for democracy, constitutional rule, and institution-building—and she defended those achievements resolutely.

She assumed leadership of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in 1984, when the party faced an existential crisis marked by factionalism and palace intrigues. She reorganised and revitalised it, launching an indomitable movement to restore democracy by freeing the country from General HM Ershad's military rule. Notably, she refused to legitimise any election under military

abandoning her party's preference and historical legacy of a presidential system. She embraced consensus and delivered a constitutional amendment—the first of its kind in Bangladesh's history, long marred by bitter discord. If any politician deserves to be given a funeral prayer (namaz-e-janaza) in front of the Jatiya Sangsad, it is Khaleda Zia because she established parliamentary democracy in the country.

She also deserves credit for introducing the 13th Amendment, establishing the caretaker government (CG) system to oversee elections, albeit under intense opposition pressure. Although, she initially rejected the idea of caretaker government, she later took

fresh election under caretaker administration and accepted the humiliation of defeat.

These were not minor concessions; they were epoch-making. While concentration of power breeds autocracy, parliamentary democracy alone proved insufficient without a democratic political culture and accountability. The caretaker system demonstrated its centrality to credible elections, especially as the nation later witnessed mass disenfranchisement in three consecutive elections under Sheikh Hasina's rule after her arbitrary abolition of the 13th Amendment.

Among her many contributions, perhaps the most significant was shaping the politics

and direction of the BNP. Founded on the 19-point programme of Ziaur Rahman, the party was led by Khaleda Zia for 41 years, matched only by Sheikh Hasina's 45 years at the helm of the Awami League. While Hasina tarnished the legacy of a party that led our Liberation War by sliding into autocracy, Khaleda Zia anchored her party firmly in democratic belief.

She inspired a unity so resilient that

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repeated attempts by the Awami League government to fracture the BNP—through inducements or intimidation—failed. The BNP's claim that 40 lakh of its activists were implicated in cases during the AL regime, testify to the unprecedented scale of repression, yet the party remained united. Khaleda Zia emerged as the enduring symbol of unity and democratic resolve.

Her electoral success is equally remarkable. She remains the only person in Bangladesh to have won elections 23 times (in terms of parliamentary seats), representing at least 12 constituencies across the country (excluding constituencies of her relections) from Rajshahi to Feni, a testament to her immense popularity among voters nationwide.

Do fireworks serve a purpose, or is it time to let them go?



MIND THE GAP

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Every year, Dhaka repeats the ritual of selective amnesia. We count fires, injuries, frightened animals, and hazardous air readings, then gently fold the conversation away until the next celebration rolls around. We are told fireworks and sky lanterns are traditional. They are joy. But do they serve a purpose that justifies their environmental, health, and safety costs, or are we clinging to a habit simply because it sparkles at midnight?

On December 31, 2024, fires broke out in the Dhanmondi and Mirpur areas, triggered by sky lanterns and firecrackers. On December 31, 2023, three teenagers suffered severe burns when a sky lantern they were releasing caught fire on a rooftop. Moreover, at least 40 sky lanterns were found stuck in the overhead electric wires of the Dhaka Metro Rail, forcing a suspension of services for several hours on New Year's morning. These are not isolated mishaps or unforeseeable tragedies. These are predictable collisions of sparks, dense housing, flammable materials,

largely emotional. They are associated with celebration, national milestones, religious festivals, and the visual language of joy. They look impressive. They create a sense of occasion. In some cases, they provide short-term income for people involved in manufacturing, transportation, and retail. That is the case in favour. It is not insignificant, but it is thin. What fireworks do not provide is any essential public service. They do not meet a basic need. They do not deliver a benefit that cannot be achieved through safer alternatives. No festival collapses without them. No cultural identity dissolves because the sky is not set on fire. Against this limited emotional return sits a catalogue of costs that are neither speculative nor minor.

Environmentally, fireworks are chemical events. Each burst releases fine particulate matter, including PM2.5, alongside heavy metals such as barium, strontium, and copper, as well as sulphur compounds and carbon residue. These particles do not disappear

health impacts follow predictably. Medical literature consistently links fireworks-heavy events with spikes in asthma attacks, breathing difficulties, cardiovascular stress, sleep disruption, and emergency room visits.

Noise pollution adds another layer of harm, triggering stress responses and aggravating mental health conditions. The burden does not fall evenly. Children, the elderly, people with respiratory illness, and low-income

problem, not the ignition source.

Besides, animals experience the consequences in ways we rarely consider. Birds rely on stable light and sound cues to navigate. Explosions and flashes disorient them, sending them crashing into buildings or flying until exhaustion. Pets experience acute fear responses, trembling and hiding at night. Stray animals have no shelter, no warning, and no understanding of why the



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FILE PHOTO: STAR

communities living in dense neighbourhoods bear the brunt. Celebration, in practice, becomes a health risk disproportionately absorbed by those with the least capacity to avoid it.

Then there is safety, the part we insist on treating as a coincidence. Fires caused by fireworks are foreseeable outcomes in neighbourhoods where buildings sit close together, electrical wiring is often informal, and fire response capacity is stretched. When explosive devices are sold widely, used casually, and set off in confined urban spaces, fires are not anomalies. They are statistical likelihoods. Every year, we act surprised when buildings burn, as if sparks and flammable surroundings were an unexpected combination. We mourn damage without questioning design. We treat the fire as the

world has turned hostile.

Economically, the defence of fireworks as a livelihood generator does not survive serious scrutiny. Seasonal income is outweighed by long-term healthcare costs, fire damage, emergency response expenditure, environmental clean-up, and productivity losses. What looks like a celebratory industry often externalises its true costs onto the public, while the gains remain concentrated and temporary. So why does resistance to banning fireworks altogether remain so strong? Once something is labelled tradition, questioning it feels taboo. There is also fear of backlash, the idea that regulation will be read as moral policing rather than harm reduction. These concerns are real, but they are not insurmountable.

Policy does not mean erasure. It means

and lax enforcement. And still, by morning, the framing softens—an unfortunate turn of events. Never the obvious follow-up question of whether what caused these should continue to be freely sold, manufactured, and detonated in one of the most densely populated cities in the world.

The argument for fireworks remains

transition. Banning the manufacture and sale of fireworks does not mean banning celebration. It means redirecting how celebration happens. Many cities have already done this. Laser light shows, drone displays, quieter public spectacles, and community-based events offer visual impact without chemical fallout. Employment tied to fireworks can be redirected into lighting technology, event management, and regulated public displays that prioritise safety.

What is striking is how quickly we accept regulation in other areas once harm becomes undeniable. We no longer tolerate leaded petrol, indoor smoking, or unregulated industrial dumping, regardless of how normal they once were. Each of these practices was defended in the name of convenience, culture, or economic interest until evidence made denial impossible. Fireworks sit in that same category. The difference is aesthetic appeal. Pollution looks less offensive when it arrives wrapped in colour.

From a governance perspective, the status quo reflects a failure. Regulations often exist on paper, limiting timing, noise levels, or sales, but enforcement evaporates during festivals. Advisory notices replace action. Accountability reappears only after buildings burn or air quality rankings embarrass us.

The question is why continuing to allow a product that pollutes the air, endangers lives, traumatises animals, strains public health systems, and now very visibly sets neighbourhoods on fire is considered reasonable. If fireworks were introduced today as a new consumer product, there is little chance they would pass any serious environmental or safety assessment. They survive only because they are familiar.

Perhaps the most telling sign that this conversation is overdue is how defensive it makes people. Joy, we insist, must be loud. Celebration must explode. Anything quieter is framed as joyless. However, cities change. Practices evolve. Celebration, like everything else, must adapt to the realities it creates. At some point, we must ask whether clinging to fireworks is about honouring the past or refusing to grow up. Because if a product causes this much harm and our only defence is that it looks pretty in the sky for a few minutes, that is not a strong cultural argument. It is just a weak excuse, briefly illuminated, before the smoke settles again.