

Reclaiming Bangabandhu's True Image:

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Prologue

Bangabandhu rose from a humble rural background to become the undisputed leader and architect of independent Bangladesh. He epitomised the aspirations of 75 million Bengali people. Bangabandhu's empathy for the common people was legendary. As a true son of the soil, he was a down to earth person.

Interestingly, Bangabandhu demonstrated deviation from his avowed political ideology in delivering critical political directions, particularly during his rule in post-liberation Bangladesh. This aspect had been side lined in the popular narrative of his political persona, in favour of a populist version of his story.

Bangabandhu's Role in Non-cooperation Campaign-Prelude to Liberation War

Bangabandhu played an over-arching role in the non-cooperation campaign after Yahya postponed the inaugural session of Pakistan national parliament on March 1, 1971. Bangabandhu's historic speech of March 7, 1971 galvanized the political sentiments of his people, as he spelt out directives to get prepared for armed resistance to Pak army intervention in case. A constitutional campaigner all through his political life, perhaps armed struggle was the last resort in Bangabandhu's mind. In the negotiation meetings with Yahya during March 20-24, 1971, Bangabandhu demonstrated his willingness to resolve the crisis through constitutional means, while remaining vocal about the Bengali people's rights. Deep inside, he harboured the mission to break away from Pakistan to carve out an independent Bangladesh, today or tomorrow.

Outside, the army build up indicated preparation for an all-out Pak army armed intervention, while the activists, student fronts desperately sought Bangabandhu's declaration of independence. In his interview with David Frost he phrased his delay in declaration as a ploy to wait for the army intervention first to launch a counter attack in response. A simplistic assessment of the escalating volatile situation indeed.

Bangabandhu's Absence in War of Liberation for Independent Bangladesh

Question may be asked, why Bangabandhu let go the opportunity to lead the Bangladesh liberation war. Given that he was always at the forefront of political movements for the rights of his people, this would come as a surprise to many. Bangabandhu decided not to (Tajuddin Ahmad: Neta O Pita, Sharmin Ahmad, 2014) go underground and cross the Indian border with his trusted compatriots. As Bangabandhu bade farewell to Tajuddin even as the Pakistan military prepared to strike Bengalis late on Mar 25, 1971, he knew the future of the nation was in safe hands (Syed Badrul Hasan, BDnews24 column, October 25, 2021). Tajuddin, perhaps was disappointed, but led the liberation war in Bangabandhu's absence admirably.

Bangabandhu Fell Out with Tajuddin in His Quest for Nation Building

After Bangabandhu returned to Bangladesh, Tajuddin was relieved to hand over to him the reins of rebuilding war torn Bangladesh. Under the leadership of Bangabandhu, within one year of his take over the constitution of Bangladesh was written, enshrining four state ideals (Nationalism, Socialism, Democracy and Secularism).

Bangabandhu's trust in democracy waivered later on when he grappled with issues like corruption, food shortage, economic decline due to large scale smuggling across India-Bangladesh border, underground militant politics orchestrated by extreme left politicians. However, the most disheartening political fallout during this period was the growing rift between Bangabandhu and Tajuddin Ahmad, as they differed on the issues of war crimes trial, creation of a national militia with freedom fighters, acceptance of World Bank's aid, and BAKSAL formation. Prof Serajul Islam Choudhury said in Tajuddin Ahmad memorial lecture (Daily Star, Sep 7, 2014) that Mujib Bahini leaders were more successful in creating a distance between Bangabandhu and Tajuddin Ahmad, than Khandaker Mushtaq Ahmed's ploys. Though Tajuddin initiated the Collaborators Act of 1972, he grew frustrated when Bangabandhu declared a general amnesty for many war criminals in 1973 without consulting him. The widening rift between the two culminated in Tajuddin's resignation from the cabinet.

BAKSAL

Bangabandhu was deeply frustrated as he saw the law order situation and corruption getting out of his control. To arrest the declining situation he replaced the multi-party system by one-party BAKSAL rule to implement reforms

under his so called 2nd revolution, through 5th amendment of the constitution, following a 15 minutes' parliament session. BAKSAL made Bangabandhu the President of the country vesting him with sweeping powers, which virtually precluded his removal by constitutional means. Headstrong as he was, Bangabandhu continued to believe in his mass support base, which actually was declining fast once he established BAKSAL. The decision to appoint BAKSAL Governor at district level was viewed by the civil administration as a potential threat to the administrative power vested upon them.

After declaration of 2nd Revolution, Bangabandhu approached Pro-china leftists for them to join BAKSAL (Shotabdi Periyé, Memoir of Haider Akbar Khan Rono, 2005), as he was not sure of delivering the reforms with his party men only (About 95% of the leaders of BAKSAL came from Awami League). But he could not win their hearts, as Pro-china leftists looked upon BAKSAL with suspicion.

Tajuddin vehemently opposed BAKSAL, which he termed a "sohomoron party" (party of collective death) (Tazudding Memorial Lecture, Dr. Sirajul Islam Choudhury, Daily Star, Sep 7, 2014).

Assassination of Bangabandhu and His Family

The assassination of Bangabandhu and his family on 15 August 1975 stunned the whole nation. It was the outcome of a conspiracy, spearheaded by a group of disgruntled army officers, and supported by a pro-pakistani politicians hiding within the ranks of Awami League party, with the blessings of Nixon administration. Bangabandhu was alerted about the conspiracy, but he dismissed it straight away because he couldn't believe his countrymen could do this to him. In the interview with David Frost, Bangabandhu stressed: his strength was his love for people, and weakness, he loved them too much. He had to pay dearly for his naivety.

The reverberation from the shock and the disbelief that such tragedy could happen to the founder of the nation put to rest any possibility of opposition from the people and Awami League. Except few sporadic protests from the Communist Party and its student wing Chatra Union, unfortunately, there was no organised protest and opposition from the ranks and files of Awami League.

Epilogue

Bangabandhu's BAKSAL reform program backfired with tragic consequence, paving the way for army rule, which in its wake revived religious based politics,

fundamentalism, intolerance and cronyism. The restoration of multi-party democracy since then went through ups and downs, even after a series of constitutional amendments and electoral reforms. The current ruling power of Awami League has brought about tremendous economic development, although with un-even distribution of economic benefit. The unprecedented communal violence of 2021 perpetrated on Hindu community concludes that Awami League failed to foster the thousand years old communal harmony of Bengali people, as ordained in the constitution's Secularism ideal.

One disheartening feature of Awami League's political agenda is that they are carefully pursuing a persona cult of Bangabandhu. This essentially has led to edification of Bangabandhu, replacing common people's perception of his down to earth image. They promote the idea that Bangabandhu single-handedly created independent Bangladesh and he could do no wrong. It's high time that we restore the true image of Bangabandhu back to the popular imagination.

We can debate what went wrong with Bangabandhu's politics, but his patriotism and empathy for people remains unquestionable. Isolating Tajuddin from Bangabandhu was a severe blow to the nation building process in accordance with the constitution's four ideals.

Bangabandhu swore that he would, if needed, lay down his last drop of blood for his country, which he did. But the fulfilment of four ideals of constitution and people's right still remains elusive.