

**SAI**

**SÜDASIEN-INSTITUT  
SOUTH ASIA INSTITUTE**



**UNIVERSITÄT  
HEIDELBERG**  
ZUKUNFT  
SEIT 1386

**SOUTH ASIA INSTITUTE PAPERS  
BEITRÄGE DES SÜDASIEN-INSTITUTS HEIDELBERG**

**Prof. Dr. Harun-or-Rashid**

**Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur  
Rahman (1920-75): His Political  
Thoughts and Ideals**

**ISSUE 01 2022**

**CONTACT**

South Asia Institute  
Heidelberg University  
Voßstraße 2  
D-69115 Heidelberg

P: +49(0)6221-5415200  
info@sai.uni-heidelberg.de  
www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de

# **Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1920-75): His Political Thoughts and Ideals**

Harun-or-Rashid

*This paper is a reproduction of the inaugural lecture by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Professorial Fellow Dr Harun-or-Rashid, delivered at the South Asia Institute (SAI), Centre for Asian and Transcultural Studies, University of Heidelberg, on January 20, 2022. The lecture marked the revival of aforementioned annual fellowship in the presence of Bangladesh's Ambassador to Germany, Md. Mosharraf Hossain Bhuiyan.*

*After a survey of Bangabandhu's life and political career, Professor Rashid discusses his ideas about 'Bengaliness', economics, statehood, and democracy. He pays particular attention to his controversial introduction of one-party system in Bangladesh in 1975, months before his assassination. Professor Rashid argues that Bangabandhu had to temporarily curtail democratic rights in order to resist extreme pressure from the political Left.*

The processes of state formation in the Indian subcontinent heralded by British withdrawal in 1947 and ensuing partition that created India and Pakistan, were unsettled once again 24 years later, when Pakistan disintegrated and Bangladesh gained independence in 1971 under the visionary leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Popularly called Bangabandhu (friend of Bengal and/or Bengalis), Sheikh Mujib lived a life of only 55 years, but one that was replete with turmoil, including the War of Liberation against the Pakistani army that eventually created Bangladesh when he was fifty-one. His unspeakable suffering for national emancipation of his people and long struggle for democracy and constitutional rule earned him unstinted international admiration. However, he was widely misunderstood for the introduction of one-party system and curtailment of people's democratic rights in 1975 in the name of 'second revolution' or systemic change.

This paper is an attempt to reflect on his life, political career, and political struggles with a special focus on his political thoughts and ideals.

### **Life, political career, achievements**

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of Bangladesh, was born in 1920 in a middle-class family in a remote village in southern Bengal, surrounded by greenery, paddy fields, and marshy lands. He finished school in the sub-divisional (now district) town of Gopalganj in 1942 from a Christian Mission School, and proceeded to Calcutta for college education. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree (1947) from Islamia College (present, Maulana Azad College) under Calcutta University, and later began studying law at Dhaka University. In 1948, still in his first year as a law student at Dhaka University, Sheikh Mujib was expelled for leading a movement of workers doing menial jobs who had gone on a strike demanding bare subsistence rights.<sup>1</sup>

Sheikh Mujib was a gifted and charismatic leader (Khan 1994; Blood 2002; Kari 2005; *Newsweek* 1971). Handsome, and taller than an average Bengali at 5 feet 11 inches, he was an exceptional orator blessed with a thundering voice. He could hold large throngs of people spellbound in public meetings. Not surprisingly, he showed the promise of leadership early in his school life.<sup>2</sup> In Calcutta, besides student politics,<sup>3</sup> he was actively involved in Muslim League's Pakistan movement during 1942–47, belonging to the progressive section (known as Suhrawardy-Abul Hashim group) of the Bengal Muslim League (Rashid 2003). At the age of 29, he became the founder joint secretary of Awami Muslim League (1949), the party which spearheaded the Bengali nationalist movement while still in prison. Later, he served as general secretary (1953–65) and president (1966–74) of the party. For playing the role of a crusader in the struggle of national emancipation of the Bengalis from the yoke of Pakistani colonial pattern of rule and exploitation, Mujib had to suffer frequent imprisonment at the hands of the Pakistani rulers right from the beginning. He was in prison for a period of more than 12 years out of the 23 years of Pakistani rule.<sup>4</sup>

In his parliamentary political career, Mujib was elected member of East Bengal/ East Pakistan Provincial Assembly (1954); Pakistan Constituent and National

Assembly (1955–58); and minister in provincial governments twice in 1954 and 1956–57 for a very brief period.<sup>5</sup> During the 1971 War of Liberation, he was the president of the Bangladesh government formed to lead the war (known as ‘Mujibnagar government’) *in absentia*. In post-liberation Bangladesh, he headed the government as prime minister (1972–74), and subsequently the president of the state under the changed political system from parliamentary to a presidential one in 1975.

### ***Political thoughts and ideals***

Though establishing a separate state for Bengalis was at the core of Bangabandhu’s politics, he was further embedded in distinct political thoughts and ideals covering society, economics, politics, political organization, education, humanity, gender, right to self-determination, and global peace. He had a clear vision of what shape Bangladesh state should take in future. The salient features of his political thoughts and ideals are discussed in the following sections.

#### ***Bengali identity***

Mujib’s love of the Bengali language, literature, history, traditions, syncretic culture, and Bengal’s distinctive geographic identity, and his reverence for Bengal as a motherland, made him a proud Bengali. In his own words, ‘[a]s a Bangalee, I am deeply involved in all that concerns Bangalees.’<sup>6</sup> He played a leadership role in Bengal’s language movement of 1948 and 1952 in the Pakistan state. He was one among the first who were arrested in connection with the language movement during its first phase (March 11, 1948). During the second phase of the movement in February 1952—when many students were martyred as a result of firing on students’ processions by Pakistani security forces (February 21)—Mujib was not only directing student leaders from the prison, he himself went on a hunger strike for 11 days (Rahman 2012; Rashid 2020; 2021).

For him, the language movement of the Bengalis was not merely a demand for recognition of Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan. Its significance was deeper as the Bengali language was at the core of Bengalis’ distinct identity formation, irrespective of religious or other differences. Among the Bengali

leaders, he was the only one who dared to protest in the Pakistan Constituent Assembly (Karachi, August 25, 1955) against the changing of name of Pakistan's eastern wing from 'East Bengal' to 'East Pakistan', holding that 'the word "Bengal" has a history, has a tradition of its own' (Iqbal 2016; Rashid 2021). In another session of the constituent assembly held in the same place on September 21, 1955, while claiming the right to speak in his mother tongue, Mujib stridently said to the speaker, '[we] want to speak in Bengali here [...]. If that is not allowed, we will leave the House [...] that is our stand' (Iqbal 2016; Rashid 2021). Bangabandhu's speech in Bengali in both the Peking Asia-Pacific Peace Conference, 1952 during the Pakistani period and again at the UN General Assembly in 1974 as the Chief (then Prime Minister) of Bangladesh bears a testimony to his deep sense of Bengali identity. More such instances may be cited.

### *Bengali statehood*

The state of Pakistan that became independent in 1947 was divided in two wings separated by over thousand miles of Indian territory. This division was not commensurate with the vision of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Like many others of the progressive section of the Bengal Muslim League, before Partition he had imagined three separate independent states—one in the Eastern zone of India (present Bangladesh and adjoining areas); another in the Muslim-majority North-Western zone (present Pakistan); and the third in the Hindu-majority rest of India (Rahman 2012)—as stipulated in the 1940 Lahore Resolution of the Muslim League (Pirzada 1970; Rashid 2021). Guided by the separate statehood ideal, he was actively involved in the movement for a united independent Bengal as a third state aside from India and Pakistan. H. S. Suhrawardy, the last chief minister of undivided Bengal, in collaboration with a section of Bengal Muslim League and Congress leaders preceding Partition (Rashid 2003), led the movement. However, their attempts were unsuccessful and a communally divided Pakistan with East Bengal as its part came into being.

Pakistan, thus established, did not solve the question of Bengali identity as a national category. The 1948 and 1952 language movement of the Bengalis was its first manifestation. Added to this was the imposition of classic pattern of colonial rule over the Bengalis of East Bengal by the western wing of Pakistan. As a far-sighted leader, Mujib understood that the just rights of the Bengalis would not be

achievable within the framework of Pakistani state structure, let alone the question of their national emancipation (Talukder 1987). From language movement, he moved steadfastly towards his ultimate political goal i.e., national emancipation of the Bengalis.

In the aftermath of the 17-day India–Pakistan war in 1965, he presented his historic six-point programme (February 1966), called ‘Our Charter of Survival’. This included: (a) a federal state and parliamentary form of government based on universal adult franchise; (b) defense and foreign affairs as federal subjects leaving all others, including residuary powers, with federating units; (c) two separate but freely convertible currencies for the two wings, or one currency with statutory safeguards against flight of capital from East to West Pakistan, along with a separate banking reserve, fiscal, and monetary policy; (d) power to collect taxes and revenues, vested in the federating units with the center entitled to a fixed share; (e) two separate accounts for foreign exchange earnings for the two wings; constitutional rights of a unit government to establish trade and commercial relations with foreign countries; and (f) establishment of a militia or para-military force and an ordnance factory in East Pakistan; and transfer of naval headquarters there for its own security (Rashid 2016; Sen 1986).

Indeed, the six-point programme was a charter of independence of the Bengalis. The reactions of the Ayub regime (1958–69) were harsh and immediate. Describing it as ‘secessionist’, ‘disruptionist’, and ‘a demand for greater Bengal’, General Ayub warned its protagonists with using ‘language of weapons’, prompting the arrest of Sheikh Mujib (May 8, 1966) and many more of his party. A case with charges of treason was filed, widely known as ‘Agartala Conspiracy Case’, against 35 Bengalis mostly from civil and military services, with Mujib as the first accused.<sup>7</sup> However, Ayub regime’s oppressive measures proved counter-productive. A countrywide mass upsurge followed Mujib’s arrest forcing the government to unconditionally withdraw the ‘conspiracy case’, and set Mujib and other co-accused free midway of their trial. This mass opposition, in turn, began the downfall of Ayub himself.

In 23 years of united Pakistan, the first general elections were held on December 7, 1970 under the military junta headed by General Yahya Khan. In this election, Sheikh Mujib and his party Awami League won a landslide victory securing 167

seats (all in East Pakistan) out of 313 seats in the Pakistan national assembly on the basis of six-point programme. Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party won 88 seats in the western wing on the plank of strong center and extreme anti-Indianism. Awami League's victory in the provincial assembly elections held on December 17, 1970 were equally marvelous, with 298 out of 310 seats.

One unmistakable outcome of the elections was rise of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the sole spokesman of the Bengalis or East Bengal. The elections had pushed Pakistan further down a crossroad. However, instead of allowing Mujib to form a government, the Yahya junta conspired to thwart peoples' verdict in connivance with Bhutto. The session of the national assembly scheduled to be held in Dhaka on March 3, 1971 was suddenly postponed. This triggered the final death-knell for united Pakistan. Bangabandhu responded by calling upon his people to observe peaceful non-cooperation on the Gandhian model. Mass participation in the movement followed from March 2 until the Pakistani army cracked down on the protestors on March 25, 1971. During this period, Pakistani administration in East Pakistan completely collapsed. Bangabandhu established total control over the province and became a *de facto* ruler. His Dhanmondi 32 residence in Dhaka turned into a hub of administration, virtually comparable to 10 Downing Street 'in imitation of the British Prime Minister's residence' (*Evening Standard* 1971).

During the non-cooperation movement, on March 7, 1971 Mujib made a historic address at the Dhaka Race Course addressing a sea of people, calling upon every Bengali to prepare with what little they had for a final struggle against the Pakistani enemy. Announcing his vow to shed 'my own blood' for the cause of emancipation of the Bengali nation, he declared: 'The struggle this time is the struggle for our emancipation. The struggle this time is the struggle for independence.'<sup>8</sup>

Contrary to widespread speculations at home and abroad, Mujib desisted from unilaterally declaring independence on strategic grounds. He did not want to be identified as a 'secessionist', a stance he very carefully maintained throughout the struggle. A recent example before him was that of the Biafran (Nigeria) secessionist movement (1967–70) that had been crushed by reigning powers of ideological variance (Rashid 1995). Against this backdrop, as non-cooperation and attempts at dialogue continued side by side from March 16 onwards, on the night

of March 25 the Pakistani army cracked down on unarmed Bengalis, killing indiscriminately. This was Operation Searchlight, directed by President Yahya Khan to suppress Bengali national aspirations for good by applying brute force before he quietly left Dhaka earlier. This was followed by the declaration of independence of Bangladesh by Bangabandhu<sup>8</sup> in the early hours of March 26, immediately before he courted arrest at the hands of Pakistani commandos.

Bangladesh ultimately saw independence after a bloody 9-month-long War of Liberation that ended with the surrender of over 93,000 Pakistani soldiers at the Dhaka Race Course to a joint command of Indian allied forces and the Mukti Bahini (Bangladesh's freedom fighters). On January 10, 1972 Bangabandhu had a triumphant homecoming, released from Pakistani captivity (he was awaiting execution of a death sentence), traveling via London and Delhi. Bangladesh's independence was the fulfilment of Bangabandhu's lifelong dream. To quote *Newsweek* magazine, '[...] Mujib's emergence as the embattled leader of a new Bengal nation is the logical outcome of a lifetime spent fighting for Bengali nationalism, his presence there is no accident' (*Newsweek* 1971).

#### *Peoples' power and organization*

Mujib did not believe in the maxim (followed by many Marxist revolutionaries) that power grows out of the barrel of a gun. He had profound faith in peoples' power. Bangladesh's Constitution, framed under his leadership and overall guidance in 1972, maintains that all power in the Republic belongs to the people (Article 7). He believed that peoples' power and national emancipation need to be built ground up, through sound political organization. Whenever out of prison, he spent most of his time in organization building. His voluntary resignation from a ministerial position in 1957—after serving for 9 months—was aimed at expanding and strengthening Awami League's grassroots base. This, more than anything, turned the Awami League into an indomitable political power, and a platform for Bengali national emancipation.

#### *Faith in democracy and constitutionalism*

Mujib was an ardent advocate of modern liberal democracy and constitutional governance, for which he incessantly fought throughout the Pakistani period. Despite untold suffering and frequent imprisonments, sometimes for years at a stretch, he



never shied away from this struggle, but never took recourse to violence. For him, the path of democracy and constitutional means were the sole valid instruments of conflict resolution. His call for peaceful non-cooperation in response to Yahya Khan's sudden postponement of the national assembly in Dhaka in early March 1971 is a testimony to his belief in constitutionalism. However, in his March 7 address, Mujib did not foreclose the room for negotiations with the military junta. He set four conditions<sup>9</sup> to be met beforehand to make it happen. In his address, as a good liberal democrat, Mujib maintained: 'I even went to the extent of suggesting that despite our being in a majority, if anyone proposes anything that is legitimate and right, we would accept his proposal' (Rashid 2021). Rule of law was vital to him and drafting of a Constitution was his first priority. Despite the numerous challenges that a war-ravaged country has to deal with, his government took only 10 months to frame the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh—regarded as one of the best constitutions in the world. This stands in sharp contrast to constitutionalism in independent Pakistan. Pakistan took over 9 years to formulate its first constitution in 1956 only to fall into military rule again in 1958.

### Parliamentary democracy

Both India and Pakistan inherited imperfect systems of parliamentary democracy as a colonial legacy following British withdrawal from the subcontinent. However, unlike India, parliamentary democracy did not grow and flourish in Pakistan, principally owing to an overdeveloped civil–military nexus with bureaucracies vis-à-vis political institutions such as political parties. This state of affairs was further exacerbated by inherently antagonistic relationship between the two wings, East and West Pakistan. The façade of parliamentary democracy that was in existence during 1947–58 was overrun by general Ayub Khan's takeover in October 1958, as he introduced a dictatorial system *per se* for over a decade (1958–69).

A strong believer in Westminster-style parliamentary democracy, Bangabandhu struggled for basic demands of Bengalis as well as restoration of democratic institutions and processes. In the 1965 presidential elections, he was one amongst the top-ranking opposition leaders who unitedly fielded Miss Fatema Jinnah (sister of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan) against Ayub Khan on the grounds that she stood for a parliamentary system of governance. As already observed, the demand for parliamentary form of government was number one

among Mujib's historic six-point programme (1966).

Though he was president of the first Bangladesh government, constituted in 1971 to lead the War of Liberation, on the very next day of his return to Bangladesh after the War on January 11, 1972, a smooth transition of power took place. His position was successfully revoked in favour of a parliamentary system in fulfilment of his long-term commitment towards parliamentary democracy, even before the Constitution of the new-born state was framed. Despite his stature as Father of the Nation and Creator of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujib did not hesitate in relinquishing his former position to take on the responsibilities of a Prime Minister under the new President, Justice Abu Sayed Chowdhury. Within 15 months of victory in the War of Liberation, his government held the first parliamentary elections of Bangladesh on March 7, 1973. It was not at all an easy task to make such a system work in the midst of a very hostile political milieu.

#### *Secularism and communal harmony*

A religious man in private, Sheikh Mujib was a firm believer in *dharmanirapekṣatā* (secularism) and communal harmony in public life. These two values were the cardinal principles of his political life. Never ever in his political life, not even when he was actively involved in Muslim League led Pakistan movement in the 1940s, did he drift from these principles. On the contrary, many instances may be cited bearing testimony to his faithfulness to these ideals. During the dreadful communal riots in Calcutta that erupted on August 16, 1946 (also termed the great Calcutta killing), as the Muslim League called for a 'direct action day' to achieve Pakistan, Mujib, despite being a prominent League activist was engaged in rescue operations, saving lives of both Hindus and Muslims, ignoring the risk to his own life (Rahman 2012; Rashid 2003; Tucker 1950). Further, following Partition in 1947, unlike many who immediately left Calcutta for East Bengal/East Pakistan, he stayed over in India for several weeks to join Gandhi's peace mission at the Sodepur ashram near Calcutta. It may also be mentioned that when Awami Muslim League was founded on June 23, 1949 as an opposition party in Pakistan, the word 'Muslim' was retained after its name deliberately as a countervailing instrument for dealing with the harshest commentary from the *sarkari* (ruling) Muslim League. However, on his initiative and proposal, the word 'Muslim' was dropped from the party name (Rashid 2016) at its council in 1955 (Mujib was then general

secretary) opening up its membership for everybody regardless of faiths. Mention may also be made that while speaking in the Pakistan Constituent Assembly on the 1956 Draft Constitution, he proposed the renaming of 'Islamic Republic of Pakistan' to 'Republic of Pakistan' (Constituent Assembly Debates 1956; Rashid 2021).

In tandem with Mujib's firm conviction, the 1972 Bangladesh Constitution contained a specific provision (Article 38) prohibiting the formation of any communal organization based on religion with 'a political purpose'. Mujib's understanding of 'secularism' was not absence of religion or the right to practice religion. He was stubbornly opposed just to the use of religion in politics. In order to remove misperception and fear from ordinary Muslims' minds, he assured them many a time that his brand of secularism was akin to 'religious neutrality' or 'non-communalism', hence, not a threat to Islam or any other religion. In his words (Maniruz-zaman 1994):

Secularism does not mean the absence of religion. The 75 million people of Bengal [Bangladesh] will have the right to religion. We do not want to ban religion by law ... Muslims will observe their religion ... Hindus will observe their religion ... Buddhists and Christians will observe their respective religions.... Our only objection is that nobody will be allowed to use religion as a political weapon.

Bangladesh is possibly the only country in the world where recitations from four holy scriptures are made at state functions.

### *Emancipation of toiling masses*

Apart from establishing a Bengali nation-state, Bangabandhu's chief political goal was socio-economic emancipation of the marginalized, down-trodden, hapless people. He wanted to see a 'smile on their faces' by providing basic necessities of life including food, clothing, shelter, education and medical care. This goal was enshrined in the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh (Article 15). Mujib was a peoples' leader, and dedicated his life and politics to them. As he toured the length and breadth of Bangladesh organizing people under the umbrella of Awami League, for the cause of their self-emancipation through independence, he saw abject poverty around him. Nobody knew Bangladesh society better, as he mixed freely with people, slept and ate in the houses of the poor, and was

known to easily recall their names even after a long break. In his interview with a world-renowned British journalist David Frost, within a week (January 16, 1972) of his homecoming at his Dhanmondi residence, in reply to one question, Mujib said: 'I feel for my [...] people and then my family. I love people more. I suffered for my people and you [Frost] have seen how my people love me' (Rahman and Frost 1972).

### Women's rights and empowerment

Mujib's belief in gender equity and his respect for women's rights were well known. In 1955, when he was the general secretary of Awami League, the constitution of the party was amended to open up its membership for women for the first time in its history. In the same year, a post of 'women's affairs secretary' was created among the office-bearers of the party (Rashid 2016). In 1956, as a member of Pakistan's constituent and national assembly he demanded doubling the number of seats reserved for women from 10 to 20 (Iqbal 2016). After independence, the 1972 Bangladesh Constitution affirmed the right of women to get elected from all territorial constituencies. In addition, 15 seats were reserved for them initially in the parliament, to be elected by its members for a period of 10 years (Article 65).<sup>10</sup> Under Bangabandhu's president-ship, the Awami League in its 1974 council reserved 10 per cent seats among its councilors representing different units of the party for women (Rashid 2016). In today's Bangladesh, the sterling empowerment of women under the premiership of his daughter Sheikh Hasina may be seen as a continuation of his policies.

### Socialism/mixed economy

Mujib envisioned a state for the Bengalis which would be just and 'free from exploitation of man by man'. In other words, his major concern was the economic emancipation of toiling masses. This was possible, he believed, through a socialist pattern of economy. He might have been greatly influenced by his visits to China in 1952 and, again, in 1957 that gave him an opportunity to notice and closely understand the pace of development in that country. Though he was in favour of socialism in economic sphere, in the political domain he was outspokenly opposed to any kind of regimented system (Rahman 2020; Rahman 2012). Mujib stood for an egalitarian and inclusive developmental approach. He was in

favour of three types of ownership: state, cooperative, and private. As a matter of fact, his understanding of socialism was that of a mixed economy supported by a welfare state. The push for nationalization could also be seen as a response to the compelling circumstances created by radicalization of politics during the War of Liberation, along with a dire need to operationalize industries left behind by Pakistanis. However, at one stage during Mujib's rule, a continued move towards economic liberalization was evident.<sup>11</sup>

### Fundamental state principles

The ideological foundations of the Bangladesh state showed a marked influence of Bangabandhu's thoughts. It is clearly notable in the Constitution (part two), which incorporates four fundamental state principles, (Bengali) nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism as guiding policies. These could be seen as drawn from the national struggle of Bengalis (Bengali nationalism); Mujib's belief in just means to achieve the goal of economic emancipation and an egalitarian society (socialism); his pathway to political life (democracy); and, finally, his cultural trait (mixed or syncretistic) well-grounded in Bengali society (secularism).

Under the military rule of generals Zia and Ershad (1975–90), the above stated principles went through fundamental changes. The principle of secularism was dropped from the Constitution, initiating a process of Islamization that led General Ershad to declare Islam, the religion of the majority population, as state religion in 1988 (Eighth Amendment to the Constitution). In 2011, the government of Sheikh Hasina (2009–14) restored the original four guiding state principles through 15th Amendment to the Constitution, while leaving the question of 'state religion' untouched mainly in view of Muslim sensitivity.

### Education policy

Sheikh Mujib firmly believed in education for all and held that no investment is better than that in education. In his national address on behalf of Awami League on the eve of 1970 elections, Mujib made a policy statement observing that at least 4 per cent of GNP should be spent in education sector. He gave elimination of illiteracy top priority, a crash programme was to be undertaken to impart compulsory primary education to all children of 5 years of age. He advocated enhancement of salaries of teachers particularly in primary schools, and establishment of

medical and technical universities on an urgent basis, maintaining that poverty must not be an impediment to higher education for all meritorious students. In the same address, he underscored the need for giving priority to women's education (Malek, Rashid 1997). The 1972 Constitution incorporated a provision (Article 17) covering his major policy guidelines on education, while stipulating that education must cater 'to the needs of [the] society' creating 'properly trained' citizens 'to serve those needs'. In order to frame 'a uniform, mass-based and universal system of education' for the nation in the light of constitutional provision, in 1972 he also appointed a commission headed by an eminent scientist of the country, Dr. Quadrat-i-Khuda.<sup>12</sup>

### Promotion of world peace

Sheikh Mujib's understanding of Cold War politics and his vision for world peace was evident from his address in the UN General Assembly in 1974. He stood for world peace through disarmament, pacific settlement of disputes, mutual respect for national sovereignty and policy of non-interference, opposition to application of force, narrowing gap between developed and underdeveloped/developing countries. In opposition to military alliances and counter-alliances and arms race, he was in favour of a non-aligned foreign policy for his country. 'Friendship to all, malice to none' formed the foundation stone that he had imagined for Bangladesh's foreign policy. However, as a fighter for national emancipation of Bengalis, he was, as a matter of principle, in support of the right of self-determination of different nationalities in the world as enshrined in the UN Declaration of Universal Rights (December 10, 1948).

### **'Second revolution' or system change**

Having experimented with western-style multiparty parliamentary democracy for three years, on January 25, 1975 Mujib effected a system change through the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution, termed as his call for a 'second revolution'. Major changes under the new system included, among other things, a presidential system in place of parliamentary form of government; election of Mujib as president by the parliament for the next 5 years; a single national party comprising of all pro-liberation forces including civil-military servicemen, named

Bangladesh Krishak-Sramik Awami League (*Baṅlādeś Kṛṣak-Śramik Āoyāmī Līg*, literally the Bangladesh People's League for Peasants and Workers; short: BAKSAL); restricted media, with only 4 national dailies to be published at the behest of the state; upgradation of sub-divisions into districts with an elected governor in charge of each backed by an administrative council consisting of representatives from different sections of people; limits on power of courts; and curtailment of civil liberties.

Such a fundamental change evoked stern criticism from political parties, political observers, journalists, and the intelligentsia. The move was seen as 'authoritarian personal rule' (Jahan 2005), an 'authoritarian one-party state' (Lewis 2011), 'one party dictatorship and totalitarian control' (Maniruzzaman 1980), 'a monolithic system' (Ahmed 1983), 'populist authoritarian' (Riaz 2012, 2016), and a 'totalitarian semblance' (Hasanuzzaman 1998). It is indeed true that civil liberties and personal freedoms were denied, and judicial independence was constricted in the new system. Nonetheless, it may not be justified to call Mujib an absolute authoritarian for trying to effect systemic changes at this point. Was Mujib really an authoritarian?

He was not just a political leader or prime minister in his government when he proclaimed the onset of the 'second revolution'. He was Bangabandhu, the Father of the Nation and the Creator of Bangladesh. What more power did he require and to what end? It is now known to everyone that when he was assassinated in 1975, he died almost a pauper. Did Mujib declare a one-party system immediately after the liberation of Bangladesh, or in 1973, or even in 1974? Did he not lead the nation into establishment and workings of western liberal democracy with freedom of speech, media, and independence of judiciary against a hostile and challenging environment until 1975?

In my understanding, before characterizing Mujib as an authoritarian leader and to arrive at an objective assessment of his call for a 'second revolution', we need to contextualize his decision in the extant political situation. A few pertinent questions must be asked, such as what was the role of other political actors, particularly the opposition, in precipitating a national crisis? Did they keep themselves within the bounds of democratic fair play?

The most formidable challenge to Mujib's government came from a breakaway section of Awami League, young in age and most radical in political persuasion. They formed a separate party on October 31, 1972, called *Jātīya Samājl'tāntrik Dal* (National Socialist Party, JSD). Its avowed goal was establishing *kṛṣak-śramik rāj* (peasant-worker rule) or 'scientific socialism' by pursuing a revolutionary course. Terming the Bangladesh War of Liberation as 'an unfinished revolution', the party called for 'class struggle' and 'social revolution'. Stating it in clear terms that 'democracy was not on its priority list' (Jahan 2005), JSD leaders described the parliament as *śuyorer khoṃyār* (pig stable). It created clandestine cells inside the armed forces under the name of *Biplabī Sainik Saṃsthā* (Revolutionary Soldiers' Council) and another armed wing including civilians, namely *Gaṇabāhinī* (People's Army) to seize state power. On March 17, 1974, JSD carried on a mass *gherāo* (siege) of the Home Minister's residence resulting in massive violence including killings and arrest. The anti-liberation communal forces, who were banned in independent Bangladesh under the Constitution, found in JSD a platform to oppose the newly formed state. Since the leaders and most of the members of JSD were active freedom fighters, they were bold enough to present a direct challenge to the Mujib government.

Alongside JSD, there were a host of ultra-left, doctrinaire, pro-Peking Marxist-Leninist parties, many of which saw the 1971 War of Liberation as *dui kukurer laṛāi* (fight between two dogs) and the role of India as 'an act of expansionism'. They were bent on overthrowing the Indian 'puppet' Mujib government, and had made a general call for 'peoples' war'. They engaged in annihilating 'class enemies', and destructive activities such as disrupting communication lines, uprooting railway tracks, setting fire to jute godowns, attacking police stations and looting arms and ammunition<sup>13</sup> and so on. In the ensuing violence, thousands of Awami League leaders and activists including five members of parliament lost their lives.

The octogenarian Maulana Bhasani, also known as 'Red maulana' for his Leftist political activism, joined hands with those parties, while also fomenting anti-India sentiments among the people. A section of newspapers, including organs of aforementioned parties, joined in whirlwind vilification campaign against India and the Mujib government. Meanwhile, Golam Azam, the chief of *Jamaat-i-Islami* of East Pakistan and a champion of Pakistani collaborators and evacuees, campaigned against Bangladesh's independence in Britain and Arab countries under



the banner of so-called 'East Pakistan Recovery Movement'. Further, both US and China, who sided with the Pakistani military junta during the Bangladesh War of Liberation, were yet to ease their relations with the new-born state. It was China's veto that blocked Bangladesh's entry to the UN until September 1974. The situation was made worse by a famine in 1974 which took several thousand lives.

Mujib first strove to prevail upon this opposition within the system by adopting certain measures, which included, among other things, a tripartite alliance (September 3, 1973) comprising of Awami League, National Awami Party-NAP (Muzaffer) and pro-Moscow Communist Party of Bangladesh; the Second Amendment to the Constitution providing for declaration of emergency power (September 22, 1973); Special power Act (February 5, 1974), etc. Though the law was made in 1973, the state of emergency was not declared until December 28, 1974 (one year later), the day when his parliamentary member Golam Kibria was slain in broad daylight while attending a religious congregation.

Having faced with a war-like situation, in order to protect the nascent state from the onslaught of ultra-left radicals and anti-liberation forces, and to avoid another famine caused by a state in disarray, Mujib tried to bring in systemic changes in the name of 'second revolution'.

Besides introducing a new national party (BAKSAL), Mujib made a comprehensive programme under the new system. Five major goals of this programme were: national unity, elimination of corruption, self-sufficiency in food production, population control and administrative decentralization (Rashid 2020). To accelerate the pace of development, he had a plan to supply electricity to every *thānā* (police station). To ensure transparency and accountability in local governance, 'citizen charters' were introduced with government showcasing information on developmental programmes, such as funding, availability of agricultural inputs, and so on. He also planned to create a 'pool' of experts and knowledgeable persons to associate them with developmental activities and administration.

So, BAKSAL was not synonymous with Mujib's 'second revolution'. It was an instrument to bring about political stability through broader national unity of pro-liberation forces. Further, for Mujib, being a life-long believer in democracy, it was a kind of temporary or interim arrangement. Even within the system of BAKSAL,

provision was there for election of members of parliament by popular votes in contested elections. S.A. Karim, the first foreign secretary to Bangladesh government and a biographer of Mujib, gives a closer view of Mujib's mind vis-à-vis his 'second revolution' (Karim 2005),

What an irony of fact that it is I, who for my life have struggled for democracy and spent many years in prison for it, should now have to create a one-party [BAKSAL]. [...] I did not want this. I have been obliged to do this. Pro-Peking parties, armed followers of the JSD, Sarbahara [proletariat] party and others are out to destroy the normal political life and administration of our country [...]. Since there is no other way, I have established BAKSAL as a platform for like-minded people in favour of independence. [...] This one-party arrangement is purely temporary. Once I have saved the country from counter-revolution, I'll restore multi-party democracy.

Though Mujib was elected president of the state for a period of the next five years by the parliament, as already stated, there was provision for the election of president by popular votes at the expiry of the term (Article 48 of Fourth Amendment to the Constitution).

### *Humanitarianism*

Mujib's humanism, often a rare occurrence among politicians, was exemplary. During the 1943 Bengal famine, still a student at the Islamia College and a Muslim League activist, Mujib engaged in relief works in Calcutta day and night at the call of humanity serving both Hindus and Muslims. A veteran social worker and Gandhian, Chandra Ghosh, once advised him in Faridpur jail in 1951 to avoid communalism and 'treat people as people.' Bangabandhu's reply was: 'Don't worry; I always treat people as people. In politics I make no distinction between Muslims, Hindus and Christians; all are part of the same human race' (Rahman 2012). About his own sense of humanism, Mujib wrote, '[as] a man what concerns mankind, concerns me [...]. This abiding involvement is born and nourished by love, enduring love, which gives meaning to my politics and to my being' (Rahman 1973).

## Conclusion

Bangabandhu Mujib is revered as a proud Bengali, a great leader, staunch patriot, and a true humanist. He was a visionary with Bangladesh's future and peace and tranquility in the world at large as his political ideal. There is wide agreement among scholars and observers that as a dedicated democrat Mujib rightly set Bangladesh on the road to democracy, an experiment which lasted for three strenuous years. For a fledgling democracy, in a newly founded, war-ravaged state without well-grounded institutions, to survive a deadly onslaught by an armed ultra-left radical opposition bent on destroying the system, is indeed a tall order. If the introduction of a one-party system (though for a temporary period, as Mujib was said to believe) was a 'colossal blunder', the onus must lie also on the opposition, and Mujib must not be seen as the sole purveyor of autocracy. It was true that after the implementation of the 'second revolution' the overall law and order situation was remarkably improving and prices of necessary commodities were coming down. Yet, it could not be denied that it also created a vacuum and a sense of transitional uncertainty in the same vein. Taking full advantage of the situation, on August 15, 1975, a group of junior army officers, both in service and retired, made a brutal attack on Mujib's Dhanmondi residence (where he used to live instead of the president's or prime minister's official residence) killing him and all his family members present. Thus, Mujib, who incessantly fought all his life for the independence and emancipation of the Bengali nation, met a most tragic end. However, he will always remain immortal in the hearts of the Bengalis as the Father of the Nation and creator of Bangladesh.

## Notes

1. In this connection, Mujib was also arrested and put in jail. About his retaining studentship *in lieu* of bond, the Intelligence Branch reported to the higher authority: 'The prisoner was of opinion that the University authorities should unconditionally withdraw the orders of punishment inflicted on some of the students. He was not ready to offer any apology to the University authorities, and said that the students did nothing for which they morally owed any apology to anybody.' See

Hasina (2018, 155, 159); also, Rahman (2012, 119–22).

2. While Mujib was a school student, he was precept in his class; captain of the school football team. He used to collect contributions from villages in aid of poor students.

3. Mujib was General Secretary of Islamia College Students' Union in 1946.

4. About Mujib, Pakistani Intelligence Branch very often reported to the higher authority: '[The] most militant of the League', 'full of potentialities for mischief making'. See Raśīd (2021, 44); also see, *Secret Documents*, pp. xxii-xxiii, 51–52, 58, 90, 354, 437, 448.

5. For two weeks in 1954 and nine months in 1956–57.

6. Excerpt from Mujib's notebook dated 3.5.1973, see Rahman (2012, vii).

7. *The State vs. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Others*. About the case and its reaction among the Bengalis, see Rashid (2021, 170-71).

8. Bangabandhu's message was: 'This is my last message, from today Bangladesh is independent. I call upon the people of Bangladesh [...] to resist the army of occupation to [the] last. Your fight must go on until the last soldier of [...] Pakistan is expelled from the soil of Bangladesh and final victory is achieved.' *The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*, p.78; also see Salik (1997, 75).

9. See Bangabandhu's 7<sup>th</sup> March Address in *The Bangladesh Constitution*, October 2011, pp. 75–77 (Fifth Schedule).

10. The conditions were: Martial Law must be withdrawn; all military personnel must be taken back to the barracks; an inquiry must be conducted into the manner in which the killings had been caused; and power must be transferred to the elected representatives of the people. Cf. Bangabandhu's 7<sup>th</sup> March Address in *The Bangladesh Constitution*, October 2011, pp. 75–77 (Fifth Schedule).

10. At present, the number of reserved seats for women stands at 50 in a parliament of 350 seats.

11. Starting from TK.1.5 million, the private investment was allowed to grow up to

Tk. 3.5 million in 1973. In July 1974, it was raised almost 10 times from Tk.3.5 million to Tk. 30 million. See Humphrey (1990, 34, 37).

12. In May 1974, the commission submitted its 430-page report to Bangabandhu based on his overall guidelines; however, before its implementation he was assassinated. At long last, a National Education Policy was adopted in 2010 during Sheikh Hasina's government.

13. This is discussed in detail in the author's forthcoming book, *Understanding Fifty years of Political Development in Bangladesh*.

14. Only in a period of 5 months in 1973, as many as 60 police stations were looted for arms. See Maniruzzaman (1980, 156); also see, Jahan (2005, 126).

#### References

Ahmed, Moudud (1983). *Era of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman*. Dhaka: UPL.

Archer, K. (2002). *The Cruel Birth of Bangladesh: Memoirs of an American Diplomat*. Dhaka: UPL.

*Constituent Assembly of Pakistan Debates*, 21 February 1956.

*East Pakistan Assembly Debates*, 1 October 1956.

Hasanuzzaman, Al Masud (1998). *Role of Opposition Politics in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: UPL.

Hasina, Sheikh MP (ed.) (2018). *Secret Documents of Intelligence Branch on The Father of The Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, vol. 1, 1948-1950*. Dhaka: Hakkani Publishers.

Humphrey, C. E. (1990). *Privatization in Bangladesh: Economic Transition in a Poor Country*. Dhaka: UPL.

Iqbal, Shahryar (ed.) (1997). *Sheikh Mujib in Parliament (1955-1958)*. Dhaka: Agamee Prokasoni.

Jahan, Rounaq (2005). *Bangladesh Politics: Problems and Issues*. Dhaka: UPL.

- Karim, S.A. (2005). *Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and Tragedy*. Dhaka: UPL
- Khan, Zillur Rahman (1994). *The Third World Charismat: Sheikh Mujib and the Struggle for Freedom*. Dhaka: UPL.
- Lewis, David (2011). *Bangladesh: Politics, Economy and Civil Society*. Dhaka: Prothoma Prokashan.
- Mālek, S. A., Raśīd, Hārun-or- et al. (eds) (1997). *Baṅgabandhu: rājnīti o praśāsan* [Bangabandhu: Politics and Administration]. Ḍhākā: Baṅgabandhu Pariṣad.
- Maniruzzaman, Talukder (1994). *Bangladesh Politics: Secular and Islamic Trends*, Dhaka: UPL.
- Maniruzzaman, Talukder (1980). *The Bangladesh Revolution and Its Aftermath*. Dhaka: UPL.
- Newsweek* (New York), 5 April 1971, 'Poet of Politics'.
- Pirzada, Syed Sharfuddin (ed.) (1970). *Foundations of Pakistan: All India Muslim League Documents 1906-1947, vol.II*. Karachi: National Publishing House Ltd.
- Rahīmān, Śekh Mujibur (2020). *Āmār dekhā nayā cīn* [New China as I Saw it]. Ḍhākā: Bāṃlā Ekāḍemi.
- Rahman, Sheikh Mujibur (2012). *The Unfinished Memoirs*. Dhaka: UPL.
- Rashid, Harun-or (2021). *Bangabandhu and State Formation in Perspective: From 1947 Partition to Bangladesh*. Dhaka: UPL.
- Rashid, Harun-or (1995). 'British perspectives, pressures and publicity regarding Bangladesh, 1971'. In *Contemporary South Asia* (Oxford), 1995, 4(2), 139-149.
- Rashid, Harun-or- (2003). *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh: Bengal Muslim League and Muslim Politics, 1906-1947*. Dhaka: UPL.
- Raśīd, Hārun-or (2016). *Āmāder bāccār dābī: chay daphār pañcās bachar* [Fifty Years of Six-point as Our Charter of Survival]. Ḍhākā: Bāṃlā Ekāḍemi.
- Raśīd, Hārun-or- (2021). *Baṅgabandhukoś* [Encyclopedia of Bangabandhu]. Ḍhākā: Journeyman.

Raśīd, Hārun-or (2020). *Baṅgabandhur dviṭīya biplab: kī o kena* [Bangabandhu's Second Revolution: What and Why]. Ḍhākā: Bāṃlā Ekāḍemi.

Raśīd, Hārun-or (2020). *Bhāṣā āndolane baṅgabandhur bhūmikā* [Role of Bangabandhu in Language Movement]. Ḍhākā: Anyaparakās.

Raśīd, Hārun-or (2016). *Mūl'dhārār rāj'nīti: bāṃlādeś āoyāmī līg kaunsil 1949-2016* [Mainstream Politics: Bangladesh Awami League Council 1949-2016]. Ḍhākā: Bāṃlā Ekāḍemi.

Riaz, Ali (2016). *Bangladesh: A Political History Since Independence*. London and New York: I.B. TAURIS.

Riaz, Ali (2012). *Inconvenient Truths about Bangladesh Politics*. Dhaka: Prothoma Prokashan.

Salik, Siddik (1997). *Witness to Surrender*. Dhaka: UPL.

Sen, Rangalal (1986). *Political Elites in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: UPL.

Talukder, Mohammad H.R. (ed.) (1987). *Memoirs of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy*. Dhaka: UPL.

*The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*, October 2011 (Sixth Schedule).

*The David Frost Show*, WNEW-TV, New York, January 18, 1972.

*The Evening Standard*, London, March 12 1971.

Tuker, Sir Francis (1950). *While Memory Serves*. London: Cassell and Company Limited.



The political scientist Prof. Dr. Harun-or-Rashid, University of Dhaka was at SAI in Winter term 2021/2022 with the „Bangladesh Chair: Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Professorial Fellowship“. The lecture published here was held in this context on January 20th 2022. Prof. Dr. Harun-or-Rashid received his doctorate from the University of London in 1983, after which research visits took him back to London and to Sweden and Japan, among other places. From

1995, he was Professor of Political Science at the University of Dhaka, and in the meantime he was Rector of the National University Bangladesh for two terms. The author of numerous academic monographs, his work includes the formation of the Bangladeshi state, the role of political Islam, the judiciary in Bangladesh and the marginalization of indigenous peoples in the country.