

The CG and the Army Chiefs and the Eternal Fight Over the Dead: Mujib Versus Zia

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The chiefs of CG and the army taking sides in some of their actions and statements may invite unnecessary trouble for the country. While they have been overwhelmingly hailed for taking many historic bold steps fighting corruption and cleaning up the age-long piled-up mess and should go on leading the nation on the path of work and development, some of their recent actions and statements with regard to Sheikh Mujib may not be very pleasant and palatable to all across the board. There is no need for them to open more wounds, more debates by pleasing some and touching something better left untouched. The army chief's prescription of "recognition" cannot be a panacea for curing the disease it is supposed to refer to. Instead of uniting the country it may plunge the nation further into trouble—more violent, more militant, more confrontational. Sometimes it is better to leave something to itself and its natural course of evolution, politically ignored and overlooked, especially by those who claim themselves to be non-partisan and neutral and objective. Let such matters be rather prudently resolved politically through an elected parliament on bi- or multi-partisan consensus.

Bangladesh is painfully fraught with many politically divisive issues. One of them is over who the two leaders were, what their respective roles were and what their titles should be or should have been. This has to do with who the father of the nation is, whether there has to be and ought to be a father regardless of how fragmented and contradictory his role, vision and philosophy might have been and how his leadership and statesmanship were viewed to have fallen short of the widest possible national appeal going a

long way to unite the war-torn country and whether it is better to have a controversial father than no father at all (on the basis of something is better than nothing, “nai mamar cheye kana mama bhalo”). The issue is related to who first declared the independence of the country and in what form and style, whether one should respectfully utter the title of “Bangobandhu” every time one utters the name of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and do the same by adding “Shaheed President” before the name of Ziaur Rahman.

Such divisive issues would also include whether the current two female leaders of the country need to be distinguished by their separate yet similar and synonymous appellations—“Desh-Netri” Khaleda and “Jono-Netri” Hasina, whether we should be known as “Bangalee” (according to the post-independence constitution) or “Bangladeshi” (according to the 5th amendment to the constitution), whether we should raise the slogan of “Joy Bangla” or “Bangladesh Zindabad,” call it “Bangladesh Betar” or “Radio Bangladesh” and whether we should continue to have the existing national anthem—highly lyrical and emotionally charged, true, but considered objectively, rationally and logically, untenable, non-consensus and disuniting—as our national anthem, let alone the recent controversies over the role of RAB, Anti-Corruption Commission, Election Commission, Care-taker Government and the inclusion of Jamat in the proposed reform dialogue.

The issues across the historical political divide can be worked out politically and should have been done so long ago to foster and instill the spirit of tolerance and understanding in the political culture of Bangladesh which has long been dominated by cynical distrust, conflict and power struggle. For instance, the dispute over the status and contribution of both Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman in the history of Bangladesh

should have been permanently solved with an open, objective and dispassionate mind. While we should not turn a blind eye to the role of Sheikh Mujib as the boldest leader of the country during the pre-independence time, who, despite some confusion and controversy, called for the independence of Bangladesh according to his March 7 speech but who, as ill (or good) luck would have it, had a chance, either carefully orchestrated or thrust upon him, to stay away from the war of independence in (the so-called safe haven of) Pakistani jail and who, following his release, reportedly did not want to come to Bangladesh straight away and instead sought the opportunity of using the Pakistan Radio to form a certain public opinion in the new-born Bangladesh but failed to obtain the approval of the Bhutto government to do so. Likewise we should not turn a deaf ear to the role of Ziaur Rahman either, who most heroically took the risk of his life not only to make the most crucial and most direct announcement of independence (of course on behalf of “Bangobandhu” Sheikh Mujib) over the radio in the most timely fashion on the night of March 26 but also to organize the historic armed struggle to meet the need of the hour and who thus most courageously and successfully took part in the war of independence, let alone the much-needed leadership and statesmanship he provided to tide over the political crisis in which the country was plunged in 1975.

The semantic issues, however, are not a problem in (and by) themselves and would not have been a problem had they not openly reflected the disgusting and disrupting political divide sweeping across the nation. If the people of all groups across the political spectrum and the general public loved to show their respect for both Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman as “Bangobandhu” and “Shaheed President” respectively

and Khaleda and Hasina as “Deshnetri” and “Jononetri” respectively, without any hesitation and discrimination, it would not only have promoted tolerance and understanding but also have helped solve many problems facing the country by paving the way for political dialogue between the feuding parties. Unfortunately, those symbolic titles are limited to the followers of the respective parties. With a few exceptions, generally, if you are a follower of Awami League, you do admiringly use “Bangobandhu” before the name of Sheikh Mujib and you do not use, even reluctantly, “Shaheed President” before that of Ziaur Rahman (and vice versa), clearly associating the terms with your party affiliation and thus widening the difference between the two sides. The same is true about “Deshnetri” and “Jononetri” and other similar issues, which may not be as serious as others but which still color, even determine the divide. Ideally, both sides should call their leaders who are either no more or still ruling the country the way they would like them to be called. This certainly would have contributed to creating an atmosphere of harmony and tolerance auguring well for the country.

Since it all continues to be divisive, widening the gap, breeding distrust and intolerance, drawing sharper and sharper lines among the opponents and opening more and more wounds, old as well as new, why not drop all those merely decorative and ornamental titles out of use and instead simply make note of them on rare occasions and in the history books? I do not know of any such practice in the world in which people make it a fashion to use home-coined or self-styled titles before their national leaders in various fields including politics, literature and science. George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Winston Churchill, Vladimir Lenin, Mao Tsetung, Margaret Thatcher, De Gaulle,

Francois Mitterand, Fidel Castro, Lee Kuan Yew, William Clinton, Anthony Blair, Shakespeare, Milton, Yeats, Goethe, Newton, Galileo, Einstein—all are known to the world by their simple proper names. With Mahatma Gandhi, Netaji Subhash Bose, Kobiguru/Viswakobi Rabindranath Thakur, Kaed-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Bidrohi Kobi Nazrul and Bangobandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman including the long titles before the names of many religious saints, South Asia is an exception for no good reason except developing the evil cult of worshipping a personality. With funny page-long titles before and after the names of royalties and the royally conferred long titles on the dignitaries to make them happy and thereby please and silence them politically and ensure their loyalty in some Asian Muslim countries, those countries are yet another exception for no good reason except the continuation of the tradition of colonial master-slave mentality, decadent pomp and splendor syndrome, inferiority complex and outlandish royal trappings. In this 21st century such remains should better be buried for the sake of democratic equality and unity and true human rights and dignity.

Finally, today's major political parties should not remain mired in the problem of "remembrance of things past" in their stream of consciousness. Such a technique is hurting them as well as the country both of which are suffering from look-back/backward-looking politics. The major political parties are deeply engulfed in the politics of the past with no agenda for the future and for real economic development of the country. The only agenda is how to bring the government down and get to power by creating unrest and instability. It seems Awami League is the biggest abuser of democracy doing politics in the name of '71, '72, '75 and the anniversaries of Sheikh Mujib's birthday, the March 7 speech, the day of his return from Pakistan and the

day of his assassination only as if it has nothing else to claim as an achievement accomplished by them in the past or as a comprehensive program to be translated into action in the future for the country.

God knows how many times a day Sheikh Mujib's name is invoked and mentioned in the political meetings, speeches and rallies in the morning, afternoon and evening. How many times a year, let alone a day or a month or even months, Americans or the British invoke or remember the names of their great political predecessors or founding fathers? Hardly any. Great presidents like Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy were assassinated but their death anniversaries come and go without notice. They met their fate but their respective parties, while remaining loyal to their legacies and without letting them fade or die down, moved forward campaigning, taking their agenda to the public and taking the country to newer and newer heights without regressively falling back or solely banking upon the memory of their long-lost leaders. Too much praise or attention to a dead leader in the worldly political sense is a hindrance, an obstruction to the creation of new leaders to be at the helm with a new vision and statesmanship. Successful Western democracies know that the best way to honor the dead is to serve the country well and they are therefore busy talking about their current and future programs to be debated, reviewed and implemented. Awami League's '71-and-'75-centric politics is a counterproductive boomerang, almost a menace or nuisance or anathema to the public. Politics and political parties must map out and follow a future-oriented, action-packed, realistic yet dynamic, patriotic yet tough, popular yet determined, flexible yet principled course, not just to survive but succeed—and succeed well—and serve the country admirably better.

To resolve the issue of the status of the national political leaders, let it be done on the basis of consensus through an elected parliament in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance and understanding and compromise. Such an issue should not be imposed or forced on the nation by a non-political caretaker/interim government, let alone by an army chief who should remain above such political fray by all means.

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