

Mujib Led Long Fight to Free Bengalis

By ALBIN KREBS

Sheik Mujibur Rahman, who was reported killed yesterday in a coup d'état in Dacca, is widely regarded as the father of Bangladesh.

When Sheik Mujib returned in 1972 to his native land to become its leader, after nine months in a West Pakistani prison, he told thousands of his worshipful followers, his voice choking with emotion: "My life's goal has been fulfilled. My Bengal is independent."

An ecstatic Bengali chant surged up from the throngs: "A new nation has come upon the earth—Bangladesh! Bangladesh! A new ism has come to the world—Mujibism! Mujibism!"

A Charismatic Leader

The new ism may have ended yesterday when it was reported that the charismatic 55-year-old Sheik Mujib, the national hero who had shed himself of the office of Prime Minister and made himself an autocratic President in January, had been overthrown and killed.

For more than 23 years, Sheik Mujib was a martyr to the cause of autonomy and independence for what was once East Pakistan. His goal was achieved in 1972 following a two-week war in which India defeated Pakistan and secured independence for Bangladesh, which means Bengali Nation.

During his long agitation for such a nation, he spent more than 10 years in various prisons. "Prison is my other home," he once said.

His equanimity at being arrested had become so pronounced that, by 1971, when he was dragged from his home by Pakistani soldiers about to embark on a campaign to wipe out East Pakistani dissidence, he was able to stop at the soldiers' jeep and say: "I have forgotten my pipe and tobacco. I must have my pipe and tobacco." The soldiers went back with him.

A Demagogic Manner

During his "revolutionary" period, the handsome, burly man—rather tall for a Bengali—loved to address crowds from the flat roof of his modest villa. Holding a battery-powered bullhorn, he would exhort the crowds, often in a frankly demagogic manner, with stirring calls for autonomy and independence.

He often ended these somewhat evangelistic speeches with the chant "Sangram Cholei!"—"The Fight Must Go On." His Bengali disciples, a notably emotional and excitable people, invariably took up the chant.

His history as a crusader for



Photo Trends
Sheik Mujibur Rahman

Bengali nationalism went back to his schooldays. Born March 17, 1920, in Tungipara, a village 60 miles southwest of Dacca, Sheik Mujib was one of six children of a moderately well-to-do Moslem family. The "sheik" in his name is not titular, but a result of the fact that his father was a landowner.

He attended British-run mission schools, where he probably picked up the distinctly non-Eastern habit of pipe-smoking. As a teen-ager, he was jailed for six days for agitating for Indian independence from the British Raj. That was his first of many jailings.

Illness Delays Schooling

He was not able to finish high school until he was 22 because of a severe attack of beriberi, but he later earned a degree in political science and history at Islamia College in Calcutta. He was married in his 20's and was to have four children.

Although he cultivated a taste for the plays of Bernard Shaw and the work of the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, Sheik Mujib's friends never considered him an intellectual.

His political life dates to the early nineteen-forties, when he was elected to the Council of the All-India Moslem Students Federation and then to the Moslem League. He broke with the latter, however, following partition of the Indian subcontinent. The Moslem League, which came to power in East Pakistan, jailed him for his association with the first Bengal Language Movement.

Arrest in 1966

Sheik Mujib was a prime organizer of the Awami League, the East Pakistani party, and served briefly as a provincial minister in 1954 and 1956, and as a member of the constituent assembly of Pakistan in 1955. Later he served as chairman of the Pakistan Tea Board.

The rise to his ultimate posi-

tion of power and the undisputed leadership of Bangladesh dates to 1966 and his arrest under the "defense of Pakistan rules" by President Mohammad Ayub Khan.

This came after Sheik Mujib first publicly stated a six-point program for regional "autonomy" in East Pakistan—he avoided use of the word "independence" in those days. He spent 21 months in prison and then, after being put under military custody, became the principal defendant in the Agartala conspiracy case, in which it was alleged that he had plotted with members of the armed forces to achieve East Pakistani independence.

Popular demonstrations and strikes followed Sheik Mujib's arrest, and continued throughout his trial, which lasted a year. He became the focal point for Bengali nationalism, even though the trial ended inconclusively with his release.

However, the political unrest stirred up by the trial contributed to the downfall of President Ayub Khan and the rise of Gen. Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan and the military regime that was to conduct the harsh repression in East Pakistan that led to the India-Pakistan war.

Throughout that tense time, preceding his imprisonment in Pakistan, Sheik Mujib was defiant.

'They Have All the Guns'

"Let the Army come and take me to prison," he would scoff. "I have nobody guarding me. They have all the guns. They can kill me. But let them know they cannot kill the spirit of 78 million people."

While in prison at Rawalpindi, Sheik Mujib escaped an assassination plot worked out by military leaders. A friendly prison superintendent saved his life.

When East Pakistan became Bangladesh, Sheik Mujib assumed the prime ministership of the new nation, one of the poorest in the world, beleaguered by starvation, floods, drought, and bureaucratic incompetence.

He became increasingly autocratic, imposing a strong presidential system in January by ramming through a constitutional change. Later he nationalized the press because it had become too critical of him.

Not long after he came to power, Sheik Mujib made a comment to newsmen that might have been a self-prophecy: "Maybe it takes one man to lead this people to independence and another to build that nation afterward."