

Bangladesh: The execution of Mujibur Rahman's killers

Wije Dias
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Five former army officers convicted of murdering Bangladesh's first prime minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in August 1975 were hanged on January 28 in the Dhaka central jail. Two days later, his daughter Sheikh Hasina Wajed, the current prime minister, told a rally of 10,000 activists from the ruling Awami League that the executions had "rid [the country] of the curse for the assassination of its founding father".

Amid waning support for her government, Hasina cynically exploited the hangings to exhort supporters to strengthen the Awami League. She spoke not only of her personal "satisfaction" at the event but declared, "it is a great job for her government". She called on party activists to sacrifice in "the spirit of Bangabandu"—Friend of Bengal, as her father was known.

Since Bangladesh was formed nearly 40 years ago as a breakaway from Pakistan, none of the country's immense economic and social problems has been resolved. Bangladesh remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with an annual per capita GDP of just \$450. An estimated 40 percent of the population lives below the official poverty line. The global financial crisis has impacted on the country's garment exports, leading to factory closures and rising unemployment.

The history of the country is testimony to the organic incapacity of the national bourgeoisie to meet the social needs and democratic aspirations of working people. To boost her political standing, Hasina now seeks to paint a glorious past for her father and the Awami League. But it was the failure of Mujibur Rahman to address the problems confronting the masses and his increasingly anti-democratic methods of rule that were used as a pretext for the 1975 military coup and his own murder.

Before 1971, Bangladesh was known as East Pakistan. It was separated from West Pakistan and the Pakistani capital of Islamabad by more than 1,500 kilometres of Indian territory. This irrational arrangement was product of the reactionary communal partition of India worked out in 1947 between Britain and the political representatives of the Indian bourgeoisie to abort the independence movement that was convulsing the subcontinent.

The newly independent states of Hindu-dominated India and Muslim Pakistan were based on arbitrary borders that divided Punjab in the west and Bengal in the east. The partition led to violence that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. A proposal to form three states, including an independent Bengal in the east, was opposed by

the Indian National Congress, which insisted that the predominantly Hindu areas of Bengal, including the major city of Calcutta, had to be part of India.

Only the Trotskyists of the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India (BLPI) opposed the partition of India and fought to unify workers throughout the subcontinent on a socialist perspective. In March 1948, when he was a Marxist, BLPI leader Colvin R. de Silva, addressing the All Bengali Student Federation in Calcutta in March 1948, made the following far-sighted warning:

"The tragedy of the partition flows particularly from the declared objects of its architects. This gruesome cutting up of the living body of India on the one hand and two living 'nationalities' (the Punjabi and the Bengali nationalities) on the other was put forward as a *solution* of the communal problem on the one side and as a means of opening the road to freedom on the other. Both pleas have proven false. Partition has proven in one respect only a means of re-forging chains for imperialist enslavement of the masses (as we shall see). In the other respect, it has proved but a means of beguiling two states to thoughts of mutual war as the only means of canalising internal communal feeling away from civil convulsions."

The speech was made as the first of three wars between India and Pakistan unfolded over Kashmir.

Political friction between the eastern and western wings of Pakistan emerged almost immediately over the issue of the state language. While the Bengali speakers in East Pakistan formed the majority of the country's population, the ruling elites in West Pakistan insisted that Urdu should be the only state language. A widespread movement calling for Bengali to have equal status with Urdu emerged in East Pakistan. Strikes and protests came to a head in February 1952 when the government cracked down on a demonstration in Dhaka, killing five people and injuring many more.

The Bengali language movement was the precursor to the formation of the Awami Muslim League, later renamed the Awami League. In addition to the language issue, the party called for greater autonomy and economic emancipation for East Pakistan, reflecting concerns in the local ruling elites that they were being marginalised. The bulk of the state bureaucracy and armed forces were drawn from West Pakistan, which was also favoured in state investment and funding. As explosive political and social tensions built within and between the two wings of Pakistan, the military under commander-in-chief Ayub

Khan seized power in 1958.

From the late 1960s, South Asia was convulsed by political crises and social struggles—part of an international wave of upheavals associated with the break-up of the post-World War II economic boom. In 1968-69, a new wave of political unrest, including mass strikes and student protests, in Pakistan compelled Ayub Khan to step down. He was replaced by the army commander-in-chief, General Yahya Khan, who ended the ban on political activities and announced a national election, which took place in December 1970. The Awami League won all but 2 of the 162 seats allotted to East Pakistan in the 300-seat National Assembly and the prospect of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman forming the national government provoked a political crisis in the Islamabad establishment and the military.

When efforts to reach a compromise failed, Yahya Khan ordered a brutal military crackdown in March 1971 that provoked an armed rebellion and the exodus of more than 1.5 million refugees into neighbouring India. Around 100,000 Mukti Bahini or freedom fighters, assisted by India, battled the Pakistani army to a standstill in the ensuing months. In December 1971, the Indian government of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi seized on Pakistani air raids on India as the pretext for a full-scale invasion of East Pakistan.

The Indian intervention was not to defend the democratic rights of East Pakistanis. It was aimed above all at controlling the radicalised independence movement that threatened to spill over the border into India, triggering demands for a unified, independent Bengal. Sections of the Mukti Bahini and their supporters were already moving beyond the control of the conservative Awami League leadership.

Across the border, the Indian state of West Bengal had been shaken by mounting social struggles, involving workers, peasants and students since the mid-1960s. In the year preceding the outbreak of the Bangladesh war, the Gandhi government intervened in West Bengal to precipitate the collapse of a coalition government in which the Communist Party of India (Marxist) was the largest partner, later placing the state under presidential or central government rule.

In East Pakistan, the Indian military rapidly routed the Pakistani army. In January 1972, Mujibur Rahman was released from a Pakistani prison and returned to head the newly independent Bangladesh. However, the new nation, cut off not only from its western counterpart in Pakistan but also from India, where half the Bengali people lived, quickly ran into insurmountable economic and social crises.

The country was devastated by the war. The state apparatus was in tatters following an exodus of Pakistani officials and soldiers. By 1973, agricultural and industrial production stood at just 84 and 66 percent of their pre-war levels. In 1974, the country was hit by a devastating famine that by one estimate claimed nearly 1.5 million lives.

Bangladesh confronted a hostile US, which viewed the country's ties with India and the non-aligned movement, as well as the Awami League's socialistic rhetoric, with suspicion. In the midst of the 1974 famine, the US imposed an embargo on food aid as retaliation for the export of a jute consignment to Cuba worth just \$5 million. The

Awami League, which represented the emerging Bangladeshi bourgeoisie, further inflamed popular anger by failing to carry out its promised land reform, its corrupt management of so-called nationalised industries and its extortion and thuggery.

As political opposition mounted, Mujibur Rahman proclaimed a state of emergency in December 1974 and suspended all fundamental constitutional rights. In early 1975, he sought to consolidate his rule by establishing a one-party presidential system with himself as head of state. Resentment within the army over Awami League corruption and Mujibur's ties with India boiled over in a coup by junior officers later that year. The president, his wife, sons and daughters-in-law were murdered on August 15, 1975. His two daughters, including the current prime minister, were in Germany at the time.

The fate of the killers was bound up with that of the regimes that followed. The short-lived government of Mushtaque Ahmed issued an Indemnity Ordinance granting immunity to Mujibur's assassins. The military dictatorships that followed led by Lieutenant General Ziaur Rahman (Zia) and Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad made no attempt to overturn the ordinance. After Ershad's fall, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the party founded by Zia and led by his widow Khaleda Zia, won national elections in 1991 but made no attempt to bring Mujibur's killers to justice.

After the Awami League came to power in 1996 Sheikh Hasina scrapped the Indemnity Ordinance and paved the way for the trial of her father's assassins. A Dhaka court convicted and imposed death sentences on 15 individuals in 1998, three of whom were later acquitted by a high court. But the legal processes were disrupted by the Awami League's loss of office in 2001 and only resumed after it won in a landslide victory in 2008. In addition to the five executed last month, six others are living abroad and one died in exile in Libya.

The Awami League's efforts to use the executions to promote the glories of Bangladesh's founding father are a crude attempt to deflect attention from the economic and social crisis confronting the masses. The dead end of Bangladeshi nationalism underscores the bankruptcy of bourgeois separatist movements throughout the subcontinent. They seek to redraw the patchwork of states created by the 1947 partition to favour local and regional ruling elites. Nearly 40 years after Bangladesh was formed and more than 60 years after the subcontinent's partition, the program advanced by the BLPI, and today by the Socialist Equality Party, offers the only road forward: a political struggle to unify workers throughout the subcontinent and internationally around a socialist perspective.



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