Abu Taher’s Last Testament

Bangladesh: The Unfinished Revolution

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In the past two years alone Bangladesh has been ruled by a succession of four regimes, each succeeding the other by force of arms. Out of the struggle for independence in 1971 nearly a million persons died in war or from starvation. In 1974 a hundred thousand peasants succumbed to a famine which was largely man-made.

In 1975 Bangladesh entered a new phase of political upheavals. Two military putsches involving assassinations and grim jail-house murders were followed by a revolutionary army mutiny. It was a soldiers’ uprising that had not been seen in the subcontinent since 1857, when the colonial army of India rebelled against the British. It was this insurrection on November 7, 1975, which deeply shook the polity of Bangladesh and more than any other event brought historic prominence to Abu Taher.

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The men whom Abu Taher calls upon to realise their moral responsibility or face the condemnation of history, would today face arrest in Bangladesh were they to publicly speak what they know. No doubt one day they will, but until then the report of the present writer, and the publication of Taher’s own testimony, must suffice as an opening statement on the case. The years ahead will certainly provide many more.

DURING the spring of 1908 a legend took root in Eastern India around the life of a young Bengali named Khudiram Bose. In May of that year he was arrested and put on trial, charged with an attempt upon the life of D H Kingford, a British magistrate, who had earned an exceptional reputation for the forms of punishment he passed on members of the underground nationalist movement. It was Kingsford’s habit to sentence participants in India’s early independence struggle to public whippings.

The attack on the British magistrate failed. Khudiram and his associates were arrested. There followed a lengthy trial known as the Alipore Conspiracy Case which ended in a verdict of death. When Khudiram and Kanailal Datta were hanged, the city of Calcutta was overwhelmed by the funeral procession. The vast and spontaneous character of the outpouring unnerved the local colonial authorities and a ban was imposed on any further public funerals of revolutionaries. In the years which followed both the Public Prosecutor and the Deputy-Superintendent of Police who supervised the trial were shot dead by nationalists. The British regarded this period as the opening phase of what their historians would term the ‘terrorist movement’. However, to the colonised peasantry and intellectuals of the subcontinent, it was simply the first sign of militant nationalism.

In the villages of Bengal where music has its own quality of motion, the notes of poems spread faster than the waters of the yearly floods. In this flow of music and history, Khudiram became something of a legend. Minstrels and beggars moved from village to village singing of his bravery against the British government. Even today there is scarcely a child in Bangladesh who hasn’t heard his name. A saying used to go that he would be reborn each day until independence. To anyone who did not notice him or feel his presence in the country, a popular folksong had him remind people: “If you fail to recognise me, look for the sign of hanging around my neck.”

It would be another twenty-six years until the British would repeat a political execution in the volatile atmosphere of Bengal. In 1934, Surja Sen, the organiser of the famous Chittagong Armyoury Raid, was sentenced and hanged. In the years that passed there was never another political execution in Bengal.

This does not mean there were not countless political murders and massacres. The eastern subcontinent is one of the poorest areas of the world. Each day there arise battles between those who own land and those who must work it. For the peasantry of the subcontinent life is an edge. An edge on which questions of food, land, and water are constantly answered by cycles of revolt and suppression. Every day in the subcontinent men die over these issues trying to determine who will command whom. And in a rural economy where commodity production is largely a matter of food, this issue always returns to the ownership of land and the power of the state to preserve the existing arrangement.

Throughout this period of history, as state power moved from the British into the hands of bourgeois nationalist regimes in India and Pakistan, and then in 1971 onto Bangladesh, at least in Bengal no prisoner was ever executed for being a revolutionary. Thous- sands rotted in prison then, as they do today. But the stigma of the death sentence passed by an official court still smelled colonial, and the memory of Khudiram and Surja Sen tempered the gallows instincts of the new authorities.

With state executions of Marxists now almost a macabre routine from Iran to Argentina, this apparent restraint in the subcontinent’s political and judicial culture may appear anomalous, merely a detail out of the or-
ordinary, and not worthy of special mention. But without focusing upon it there would be no way to express the revulsion felt by so many Bengalis where Colonel Abu Taher was hanged inside Dacca Central Jail on July 21, 1976.

THE LETTER FROM CELL NO 8

The story of Abu Taher’s life cannot be summed up easily or simply, nor can the sequence of events which brought it to an abrupt heroic close. The time involved spans more than half a decade. It has been a complex period of extraordinary violence and brutality. In the past two years alone Bangladesh has been ruled by a succession of four regimes, each succeeding the other by force of arms. Out of the struggle for independence in 1971 nearly a million persons died in war or from starvation. In 1974, a hundred thousand peasants succumbed to a famine which was largely man-made. In 1975 Bangladesh entered a new phase of political upheavals. Two military putsches involving assassination and grim jail-house murders were followed by a revolutionary army mutiny. It was a soldiers’ uprising that had not been seen in the subcontinent since 1857, when the colonial army of India rebelled against the British. It was this insurrection on November 7, 1975, which deeply shook the polity of Bangladesh and more than any other event brought historic prominence to Abu Taher.

Three days before he was hanged Taher wrote a final letter from prison. It shall be our starting point.

Dacca Central Jail
18th July 1976

Respected Father, Mother, my dearest Lutfa, Bhajan, my brothers and sisters,

Yesterday afternoon the tribunal announced its verdict against us. I have been sentenced to death. Bhajan and Major Jalil were sentenced to life imprisonment. All their property will be confiscated. Anwar, Inu, Rab, and Major Zia were given ten years rigorous imprisonment and a penalty each of ten thousand takas. Saleha and Rabul have been given five years rigorous imprisonment and fines of five thousand takas each. Thirteen others including Dr. Akhlaqur, Mahmood the journalist, and Mamun have been set free. At the very last moment the tribunal proclaimed my death sentence; and in great haste they left the court like dogs in flight.

Mahmood suddenly broke into tears. When I tried to comfort him he said, "I am crying because a Bengali could have the audacity to pass a sentence on Colonel Taher". Meanwhile, Saleha made her way to the rest room and broke down in tears. When I called to her saying, “I don’t ever expect such weakness from you”, she said, “These are not tears. This is laughter”. What a wonderful vision of laughter are the tears of this sister of mine. I met her first here in the prison’s courtroom. I have such admiration for her! What nation can produce a sister like her?

Among those convicted there was only a single lament: why had they not also been sentenced to death? Suddenly there were cries from all quarters of the jailhouse: Dealing and ever louder: “Taher Bhai! Red Salute! Lal Salamat!” Can these high-walls hold back this cry? Will not the joy of victory be able to reach into the hearts of the people of my country?

Our lawyers were stunned at the announcement of the verdict. They came and told me that, although there is no appeal from this tribunal, they would issue a writ to the Supreme Court. The entire workings and proceedings of the tribunal had been unconstitutional and illegal. They said that simultaneously they would issue an appeal to the President. Then I made it clear to them that no such appeal was to be issued. We had installed this President and I would not petition for my life from these traitors.

Everyone wanted to hear me speak a few words. Meanwhile, the prison authorities were becoming eager to separate us. I said, “When I am alone, fear and selfish desire for life attack me from all sides. But when I am with you, all fear and selfishness leave me. I become brave and I can see myself with all the strength and courage of the revolution. My invincible calmness determined to conquer all obstacles enters into me. We want to sacrifice the isolation of our separate existences and find our true expression among the people - that is what our struggle is for”.

They are all leaving, bidding good-bye one by one. Their eyes wet. We have spent quite a while together. Who knows when we shall meet again. I have to go with Anwar, Bhajan and Anwar show me a stoic calmness. But I know them. This is an act for my benefit. Bela’s eyes are strangely luminous - it is as if they are on the verge of breaking into tears. Jalil, Rab, and Zia firmly embrace me. It is a bond that binds us to the entire nation. A bond which no one can break.

They have left. All of them. Saleha and I come out together. She goes to her cell. As I pass, prisoners and political detainees peer out with eager eyes from behind the doors and windows of their locked cells. Matin Sahib, Tipu Biswas, and the others raise their hands in the sign of victory. This trial has united the revolutionaries almost without their knowledge.

I was taken to Cell Number 8. It is the cell assigned to prisoners who are to be hanged. It is adjacent to mine there are three other victors for the gallows. It is a small cell. Quite clean. It is all light.

When standing face to face with death, I turn to look back on my life and find nothing to be ashamed of. I see many events which unite me irrevocably to our people. Can I have a greater joy or happiness than this?

Nitu, Jishu, and Misu... everyone comes crowding into my memory. I have not left behind any wealth or property for them, but our entire nation is there for their future. We have seen thousands of naked children deprived of love and affection. We wanted a home for them. Is this dawn too distant for the Bengali people? No, it is not too far off. The sun is about to rise.

I have given my blood for the creation of this country. And now I shall give my life to promote and infuse new strength into the souls of our people. What greater reward could there be for me?

No one can kill me. I live in the midst of the masses. My pulse beats in their pulse. If I am to be killed, the entire people must also be killed. What force can do that? None.

This morning’s paper just came in. They have published the news of my death sentence and the sentences of the rest on the front page. The description of the proceedings that has been published is entirely false. It has been alleged during the trial and on the evidence of state witnesses that the Sepoy Revolution of the 7th November was carried out under my leadership. This I do deny. Yet, the papers do not mention this nor that it was under my orders that Ziaur Rahman was released. It was we who installed the government in its place of authority only to be betrayed. During the entire trial there was no reference whatsoever of the Kader Bahini.

It is my ardent hope that our lawyers Ataur Rahman, Zulmat Ali, and all others who were present will expose the secret behind this trial and protest its false propaganda. I do not fear death. Zia is a traitor and a conspirator and has had to take refuge in lies to discredit me before the people. Tell Ataur Rahman and the others that is their personal responsibility to expose the truth and if they fail in this duty history will not forgive them.

My greatest respect, my love, and my everlasting affection be with you all.

TAHER

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PRELUDE TO INSURRECTION

On November 7, 1975, a revolutionary insurrection exploded in Bangladesh. The uprising was unexpected by the major foreign powers—the United States, India, and the Soviet Union—which since Bangladesh’s emergence as an independent state have contended for a position of dominance in this remote but strategic corner of South Asia. The November 7 events followed two military coup d’etats which had badly shaken the unity of the country’s ruling elite. On August 15, 1975 the government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was brought down by an early morning military putsch led by six junior officers and the thousand troops under their command. Although many details of this event are still obscure and remain to be unearthed, the political organisers of the August coup were apparently the circle within Mujib’s own ruling Awami League which for years had been considered a pro-American faction.

The principal and identifiable figures among this group on the morning of August putsch were Mabhubul Alam Chashi, a former Pakistan foreign service officer; Taheruddin Takur, Mujib’s Information Minister; and Khondakar Mustaque Ahmed, the Commerce Minister in Mujib’s administration. The full extent of direct foreign involvement — if any — in the planning of the August coup is yet to be established. But serious allegations have been made claiming prior knowledge and considerable involvement by the United States and Pakistan together with elements within the administrative, police, and intelligence apparatus of Bangladesh, who had remained unreconstructed sympathisers of the old unity of Pakistan. Immediately after the coup many of these individuals surfaced in prominent administrative positions.

Mujib, his nephew Sheikh Fazlul Huq Moni, a brother-in-law Abdul Bab Semniabat, and nearly every member of their families were gunned down on that August morning. The reaction in Bangladesh, although one of extraordinary shock, was not one of a vast popular fury against the coup makers. To a certain degree there prevailed a general mood of deliverance from a regime which had become nepotistic, corrupt, and oppressive. Further on more will be noted about the reasons and forces behind Mujib’s political decline, but it may simply be said that Mujibur Rahman, who had returned from imprisonment in Pakistan in 1972 as an unparalleled national hero to his people, would within three years die almost without a whimper of support.

Between August and November an uneasy period of stalemate and tension set in. Formally, the Commerce Minister Khondakar Mustaque Ahmed took over as acting President. A man highly sympathetic to the United States, Mustaque had been Foreign Minister during the days of Bangladesh’s provisional government in 1971. Together with his Foreign Secretary, Mahbubul Alam Chashi, Mustaque had been the contract point for secret negotiations with the U.S. State Department in late 1971 on American proposals for a settlement of the ‘East Pakistan crisis’. After the coup which toppled Mujib the new president together with the six majors, their tanks, and the artillery which had brought him to power, ensconced himself behind the walls of the Presidential Palace. Mustaque promised national elections within eighteen months and a lifting of the ban on open political activities which Mujib had imposed. He made no concession, however, on demands for the release of an estimated 62,000 political prisoners. But the real issue was now apparent. It was a situation where vying factions among Bangladesh’s ruling class, each with their own distinct international alignment, were engaged in a struggle for control of Bangladesh. And most crucially, since the civilian veneer of power had been blown away on the night of August 15, this struggle now engaged the upper echelons of the military officer corps.

A number of senior officers, including the Deputy Chief of Army Staff, Major-General Ziaur Rahman (referred to in this text as ‘Zia’), had apparently been approached to join the coup against Mujib, but had held back from active involvement in case it failed. Zia, who would soon emerge as a powerful figure, however, did nothing to expose the August conspiracy. But following its success severe tensions began to build up rapidly inside the armed forces. While the three chiefs of staff under Mujib had, following the August coup, been quickly sent abroad as ambassadors, the junior officers, who had pulled off the putsch now began behaving like generals. In the meantime Ziaur Rahman took over as the new Army Chief-of-Staff and into the position of Chief of General Staff moved Brigadier Khaled Musharraf.

Within Bangladesh’s military high command a sharp debate now began concerning the fate of the junior officers who had killed Mujib. The troops involved in the August coup had been ordered by senior officers to return to their barracks. They had refused, fearing they would be disarmed. Khaled Musharraf argued among his officer colleagues that two armies could not exist in one country. Either the chain of military command existed or it did not. And if six junior officers and their troops now refused to return to their barracks, they would have to be dealt with as insubordinates. However, Major-General Zia, head of the Army, refused to support any military action against the August coup makers.

Thus, on November 3 the second coup d’etat occurred. This time the rebellion was led by Brigadier Khaled Musharraf with the support of the Dacca Brigade under the command of Colonel Shafat Jamil. Their forces moved in the early hours of November 3 and seized all major strategic positions in the capital except the Presidential Palace. The Army Chief-of-Staff, Major-General Zia, was arrested and forced to resign his command. Khaled Musharraf immediately appointed himself to the position of Major-General and declared himself Army Chief-of-Staff. Throughout the day of November 3 fear spread that a civil war might break out between contending factions in the armed forces. The artillery and tank units of the Bengal Lancers supporting the majors who had killed Mujib in August, threatened to fight a last ditch stand from the Presidential Palace.

A stand-off began and negotiations between the two sides finally took place. Through the intervention of intermediaries it was arranged that the officers who had engineered the August putsch against Mujib would be allowed safe passage into exile. That evening they were to leave on a special flight
to Bangkok. But moments before their departure men who were allegedly under their command entered Dacca Central Jail and in a grim instant executed by bayonet four senior ministers of Mujib's cabinet. They were killed in their jail cells. The four men — Tajuddin Ahmed, A M S Kamaruzzaman, Manzoor Ali, and Syed Nazrul Islam — would have constituted the leadership of any pro-Mujibist restoration.

But the most telling element of Brigadier Musharraf's November 3 putsch was the extrapolant reaction of India. Before news of the jail-house murders became public on November 5 the official Indian radio and strictly censored press greeted this second putsch with such unrestrained pleasure that few observers failed to suspect India's covert hand. The 'official' Indian press campaign of well-informed leaks seemed too well organised to have been spontaneous. On November 4, Khaled Musharraf's mother and brother led a memorial procession from Dacca University to the residence of the late Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It had been organised by the two pro-Moscow parties in Bangladesh, the National Awami Party (Muzaffar) and the Communist Party of Bangladesh (Mouj). This was the first public expression of sympathy for Mujib since his killing. It was a small procession and drew no crowds. In Dacca itself rumours began circulating that India's covert intelligence organisation RAW (Research and Analysis Wing) had engineered the putsch in co-ordination with Khaled Musharraf. Khaled's own supporters in the Army insisted that there had been no Indian backing whatsoever, and that the coup had occurred over issues internal to the Army itself. As with the August events where the United States and Pakistan are alleged to have played a significant role, the extent — if any — of Indian and perhaps Soviet involvement in the November 3 events still remains to be established. Nevertheless, within days of having taken power Khaled Musharraf had been dubbed an 'agent of the Indo-Soviet axis'. These rumours spread like fire in a city which was turning into a political tinderbox. Their impact irrespective of their accuracy had created an explosive situation.

In the last days of Mujib's regime, following a period of severe famine in 1974, enormous populist resentment had developed towards India and Mujib's political identification with that country. The 1974 period evoked the worst memories of the Great Bengal Famine in 1943 when three million peasants perished. By 1975 the general antagonism towards India and the hostility to Mujib had become virtually indistinguishable. In 1974, a year of severe crisis on the world's commodity markets joined the worst floods in twenty years in Bangladesh. The price of rice in some districts rose 1,000 per cent above pre-independence levels. It was a moment when many remembered Mujib's promise that after independence from Pakistan rice would sell at half its cost. Now it was ten times that. Every village, faced with growing starvation listened to stories of fantastic smuggling and profit-making from the illegal shipment of rice and jute to India. Among the kingspins of the illicit trade was the Prime Minister's own brother. The black market operating across the border was a fact. And India was no longer viewed as that ally which had entered the war to bring Pakistan's massacre to an end, but instead as a new sub-imperial power that was bleeding Bangladesh white.

When Khaled Musharraf's putsch garnered the stigma of being backed by India and All India Radio in appearance cemented these rumours with jubilant news reports, Khaled found his already narrow political and military base slipping from under him. None of the factions of Bangladesh's ruling elite, engaged as they were in a ruthless struggle against one another, could perceive they were on the verge of a revolutionary insurrection.

THE NOVEMBER 7 UPRISING

On the night of November 3 until loyal to Brigadier Khaled Musharraf took up their positions. First, they surrounded the residence of the Army Chief-of-Staff, Major-General Zia. It was 4 am and as Zia awoke in his quarters, he made an urgent and desperate call to the outskirts of Dacca. The man on the other end was Abu Taher, once a close personal friend and battlefield comrade from the 11th Sector. Zia reportedly appealed to Taher to do something. This time Zia's own life was at risk. The conversation was never completed for the line was cut.

Each night between November 4th-6th clandestine meetings of junior officers and sepoys were held under Taher's organisational direction. But Taher and these cadres were functioning under the auspices of the Biplobi Shainik Sangstha (Revolutionary Soldier's Organisation). The organisation had clandestinely existed for some time, but only on the morning of November 7 did it make its existence openly known. Jointly operating with the Biplobi Gono Bahini (Revolutionary People's Army) made up mainly of former guerilla fighters from the independence struggle, the sepoys of Dacca Cantonment took the lead in a general revolt against Khaled Musharraf's putsch. Both organisations — the BSS and the BGB — were the official armed branches of the Jato Samajtantrik Dal (JSD/Socialist National Party), one of Bangladesh's more significant Marxist parties.

What the JSD and Taher, as the Biplobi Gono Bahini's military command, were setting into motion on the morning of November 7 involved much more than a simple restoration of the status quo ante. At the time of Mujib's overthrow the JSD was already preparing for a general insurrection some months ahead. When Mujib was brought down the JSD applauded his downfall, but condemned his assassination. They argued that assassinations and palace coups fundamentally changed little. After August they encouraged their followers to study Marx's "Class Struggles in France", and in particular Engel's introduction which stressed the minority and ruling class character of the military coup.

Since August the country had watched one coup follow another. What the JSD and Taher advocated was something else. Rank and file soldiers, they argued, had been pitted against each other by narrow, competing, and ambitious factionaries among the upper echelons of the officer corps, none of which represented the class interests of the common soldiers or the oppressed masses of the country. On November 5, under the authority of the Revolutionary Soldier's Organisation, thousands of leaflets were spread among troops in the military cantonments and among urban workers. They called upon the thr soldiers to cease being pawns of officers' plots and counterplots and to ready themselves for a general uprising. They issued a set of 'Twelve Demands' as the underlying principles of the insurrection.

There were to be 'two prongs' to the uprising. On the evening of November 6, at a meeting chaired by Taher which included representatives from every military unit in the capi-
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The demand from the classes. November's revolution-ary of the British to institute demands to the British colonial rules and regulations which still dominated military procedure even thirty years after independence from England. “Our revolution is not simply to change one leadership for another,” read the opening declaration of the Twelve Demands. “This revolution is for one purpose — the interest of the oppressed classes. For that the entire structure of the armed forces must be changed. From the very beginning the British army we were the Army of the rich class. The rich have used us for their own ends. The events of August 15 is but one example. However, this time we have revolted neither for the cause of the rich nor for their benefit. This time we have revolted alongside the masses of the country. From today onwards the armed forces of the nation shall build themselves as the defenders of the country’s oppressed classes.”

The second demand of the soldiers called for the immediate “release of all political prisoners”. Other demands set out in the November 7 declaration called for the end of differences and distinctions which separated officers from common soldiers. The declaration demanded a “classless army” as a fundamental step towards the establishment of a classless society. The recruitment of officers from the country’s privileged elite via special schools was also attacked. Instead, the selection of officers from among the ranks of the common soldier was advocated. Among the existing “British rules and regulations” which were to be abolished was the so-called “batman” system which compelled rank-and-file sepoys to serve as household servants to higher officers. A number of economic demands were put forward including improved wages for soldiers and an ending of rent payments for their accommodation.

Most important of all was the call for the establishment of new organs of military authority and decision making. The declaration provided for the establishment of committees similar to the ‘soldier soviets’ of the Russian Bolsheviks. Under a section entitled “The Duties of Revolutionary Soldiers” an appeal was made to every military unit to form “revolutionary army organisations” which would link up with a “central revolutionary army organisation to be formed for the whole of Dacca cantonment”. The declaration stated: “This central organisation will decide all policies. General Zia will not take any decision without consulting the general committee. Only after consultation will General Zia be able to take any final decisions. This central body will keep contact with the other cantonments, the bodies of revolutionary students, peasants, workers, and the common masses of the country. We must remember that with this revolutionary army all the progressive revolutionary students, peasants, and workers are linked up.”

The emergence of a powerful radical force within an organised military was for South Asia an unprecedented development. Its existence, however, should have come as no surprise. The source goes back to March 1971 when Bengali main force units within Pakistan’s Army were abruptly shaken out of the role of conventional soldiers. Officers and men of these units who for years had upheld the stuffy rituals of British colonial and military traditions, and who had spent years putting down tribal and peasant insurgencies of one sort or another, were themselves suddenly and brutally thrust into the role of becoming insurgents organising popular guerrilla forces in the Bangladesh countryside.

Bangladesh’s War of Liberation in 1971 transformed the ideas of many officers and soldiers who, in their common struggle to defeat Pakistan and win independence, came into contact with members of various Marxist groups which proclaimed that their goal was not merely ‘independence’ but also ‘socialist revolution’. In the context of a South Asian landscape which encompassed perhaps the worst poverty of the globe, it was an idea of powerful appeal. On the morning of November 7, it was these forces which after years of quiescence erupted into open rebellion. “The Bangladesh Army,” wrote the Calcutta weekly Frontier, “rose up in the form of a generalised insurrection with rank and file jawans defying their officers and calling not only for the overthrow of the agent” Khaled Musharraf, but also for the immediate implementation of their own ‘Twelve Demands’. They were not simple requests for a cup of tea at noon and a bigger bowl of rice, but constituted a radical expression never before seen in any regular army in South Asia. This was the fruit of a conventional army turned into a guerrilla force during 1971 coming ripe after four years of subterranean gestation.”

By midnight on November 6 all preparations for the rebellion were complete. Shooting broke out not long after midnight on the 7. The main fighting was centered in the capital’s cantonment area. In Rangpur and Chittagong also revolts began. From Comilla and Jessore troops converged on Dacca in support of the mutiny. Within hours the first ‘prong’ of the uprising had succeeded. Khaled Musharraf and the group of officers who had taken power on November 3 were overwhelmed. In a desperate attempt to escape, Khaled and several other officers were killed by mutinous troops just outside the Dacca Cantonment at a place called the second capital.

The city of Dacca itself was alive with rebellion. Where in August on November 3 the streets of the capital had remained completely dead, the day of the mutiny crowds poured into the streets to cheer the soldiers. Sepoys joyously shooting their weapons into the air and shouting slogans — “The Soldiers and People Have United!” — rolled through the capital’s streets. The mood was exuberant. The political spirit of the year of independence, that seemed to have died after so much famine, flood, and pretentious corruption, once more appeared to be alive.

In the early hours of the 7th, Colonel Taher drove to the Second Field Artillery Headquarters where Zia had been taken by the troops which had rescued him. According to witnesses present

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at the encounter, the meeting between Taher and Zia was highly emotional. Zia, who was still in his night dress, reportedly embraced Taher as he entered the headquarters. In front of the others he thanked Taher for saving his life. Later when soldiers draped garlands of flowers around Zia's shoulders, he reportedly removed them and placed them on Taher, saying that this was the man who deserved them.

The relationship between the two men had been a close one over a long period. During the Liberation War they had fought in the same sector and during repeated controversies within the military command they had shared the same standpoint on important strategic issues. In the period following independence, as sharp debates and divisions developed within the command, Zia, as Deputy Chief-of-Staff, had continued to share a tacit backing to the positions taken by his two closest lieutenants — Colonel M Ziauddin and Colonel Abu Taher — the commanders of the Dacca and Comilla Brigades respectively. This support and friendship extended right through the period in which Ziauddin and Taher were forced out of the army by Mujib because of their leftist ideas on military organisation.

The intimacy of these two men made it hardly surprising that it would be Taher whom Zia called upon on November 4 in a desperate hope that he might be rescued. Nor could it be said that Zia was naïve concerning Taher's socialist views. Certainly what Zia did not imagine was the dimension an uprising promoted by Taher and his compatriots in the J S D would take.

The euphoria of November 7 was not to last. The rebels believed — from everything they knew of his personal history — that although Zia might not support the revolutionary dimension of the uprising, he would not actively opposes the establishment of soldiers' committees. On the evening of the 7th Zia signed the 'Twelve Demands' and committed himself to their implementation. Whether it was a ruse or momentary conviction remains an open question. But the backing the rebels gave Zia proved to be their crucial error. They did not expect that Zia would himself become the rallying point of the rightist forces. Lenin had remarked that there could not be a socialist revolution in a country unless half the country's army had become revolutionaries first. While the uprising and its aftermath certainly brought many more into their ranks, the Bangladesh Army on November 7 had clearly not reached the class-conscious stage which Lenin considered the essential condition.

Perhaps only Shakespeare or Thucydides could do justice to the painful drama of betrayal, courage, and death which followed the mutiny. Two men — Zia and Taher — who once called each other brothers, would bitterly break that bond over an issue which in essence could be said to divide the entire underdeveloped world. What would it be — revolutionary socialism in one of the poorest of the world's nations, or a path of capitalist development based on the largesse of the Americans and the plans of the World Bank?

On the 7th and 8th of November the mutiny pressed ahead in the country's other military cantonments. Serious confrontations occurred between officers and soldiers. In Dacca and Rangpur, forty officers were believed to have been killed by their men. Officers and their families fled the cantonment areas. On the 9th of November a senior military official claimed that less than 35 per cent of the officer cadre remained in control of their commands. The rest had fled. A few of those killed were identified with Khaled Musharraf's November 3 coup, but others died as a result of confrontations between officers and soldiers who were pressing their Twelve Demands. While many officers had supported the 'first prong' of the uprising which rescued Zia, they fiercely resisted other demands. Numerous officers at this stage attempted to 'rescued command' of their troops and ordered them back to barracks. Several units in turn told their commanders that officers were no longer in command. Enlisted men were reported to have ripped badges of rank off officers' lapels. Commanders in various brigades and battalions were told they must agree to the demand for the establishment of revolutionary committees in each unit as the new organ of authority.

At this point guns were often pulled by both sides in an attempt to prove their positions. As fighting broke out many sepoys and officers were killed. In Comilla the uprising reportedly developed without major loss of life. Officers were isolated and not allowed to resume command, but killings were avoided. Orders had been issued by the Revolutionary Soldier's Organisation that 'reactionary' officers who failed to support the 'revolutionary demands' were to be segregated for eventual demobilisation.

While the uprising began in the capital, it spread quickly to the district towns and from there to certain areas of the countryside. Few reports have focused on the relationship of the rural areas to the events. One report, describing the effect the uprising had in one village, Tarapur, is worth quoting at length:

Party activity in Tarapur had been sporadic in the last year consisting mainly of occasional visits by local JSD cadres who tried to persuade some of the young men of the village to join the party as a fight for socialism. A few of the young men had become very sympathetic and allowed cadres to stay in their houses overnight. However, the majority of the villagers were sceptical of the party's ability to accomplish anything. After having lived through the 1971 war and the hardships of the Mujib regime, the villagers were reluctant to trust any political figures, although anti-government and anti-rich slogans still stuck a responsive chord in their hearts...

After the November 7 uprising there were a marked change on the streets in Tarapur. The mutiny of the army in the nearest cantonment and the execution of several corrupt police officers were exciting events discussed in the village. JSD cadres suddenly began to move openly in the area during the daytime, barely concealing their weapons. At first, they called for support for Zia's new regime as long as he met their Twelve Demands, and called a large and open demonstration of all JSD supporters in the area. When they thought that the new government had moved rightwards, the cadres openly attacked Zia and demanded immediate elections and the release of all political prisoners. But most importantly, the party began to seriously organise the village of Tarapur. Despite the failure of the JSD to seize power, the way the November 7 mutiny had broken Bangladesh politics wide open and had mobilised the more radical elements in the armed forces gave even the staunchest cynics of Tarapur a gleam of hope that things could change.

Several weeks after the uprising, a young JSD cadre arrived in Tarapur brandishing a sawed-off shotgun. All the young men of the village quickly gathered around him, and groups of women huddled in the entrances of their homes, called him over to explain how the gun worked. The mysterious weapon was thus demystified. Later that evening a meeting was held. Most of the attendants were the young men of the village, although older peasants frequently passed by to lend an ear. The literate young men of the
justice differed fundamentally from that of the landlords.

One of the landlords who lived near Tarapur had formerly been a member of the Awami League and under Mujib had misappropriated large amounts of relief. A few full-time cadres of the union were eager to finish him off because of his past misdeeds. Supporters in the villages were approached for their advice. All of them insisted that the murder would only bring down the forces of government repression on the village and alienate many potential supporters who would see the murder as unnecessary bloodshed. Instead it was decided to approach him and threaten him saying that if he went against the party, he would be killed. Under Mujib a fearless and pompous politico, the landlord now began to say his prayers five times a day and secretly approached party supporters asking them if there wasn’t some way he could also join. Seeing the success of this strategy many villagers for strength in their unity and began to look ahead to the future when the poor people of the village would be able to hold public trials of men such as he. Raggedly dressed sharecroppers would discuss among themselves what would finally happen when they could organise retribution against the big landlords.

The November 7 mutiny was both an outcome and a beginning. Like many such upsurges in world history the bottom rose up against the top with a force which threatened the entire social order. Instead of a few small factions of the army or the top political elite being caught in a deadly game of manoeuvre, whole classes of Bangladesh’s society were hurls into the circle of political activity. The uprising, although it faltered, established a new political terrain and all which followed would exist in its light.

THE NATIONAL QUESTION AND NATIONAL INDEPENDENCE

The turmoil in Bangladesh during 1975 was the outcome of a period of long gestation. Most immediately it represented the re-emergence of new forces which traced their origins to 1971 and the Liberation War. But no clear picture of these developments can be gathered outside of a much wider understanding of the history of the Indian subcontinent. In the very broadest view any analysis must encompass the entire period of British imperialism in South Asia, and in particular the way the Empire manipulated the relationship between various nationalities for its own purpose. At independence in 1947 British India was split into India and Pakistan. With the partition there arose, particularly in the case of Pakistan, a deep and contradictory dilemma of national definition. Pakistan’s ideological premise — the Islamic state — died in the civil war which brought Bangladesh into existence.

Only a week prior to the outbreak of open war between India and Pakistan over the question of Bangladesh, the British journalist, Neville Maxwell and China’s Premier Chou En-lai, reflected upon these issues during a discussion in Peking centred upon China’s own stand on the imminent war.

Neville Maxwel: There is another aspect to the situation. On the one hand the Bangladesh movement now certainly has India’s all-out backing, but on the other hand, there is a genuine Bengali nationalist movement in East Pakistan. And Pakistan herself is, in a sense, the product of the British Empire’s withdrawal from the subcontinent.

Chou En-lai: It all stems from Britain, particularly the Mountbatten policy. Mountbatten carried out the British Empire’s policy ‘divide and rule’, and left many roots of trouble and planted many time bombs. It can be said that this is a law of the development of colonialism. When colonialism subjects a region to its rule, it unifies the region in its own interest to facilitate exploitation. When it quits it leaves some roots of trouble to facilitate its remote control.

Imperialism invariably trains a bunch of flunkies for the control of its colonies. India originally was not a single entity. But the colonial rule of the British Empire fostered the Bahman upper stratum’s idea of building up an Indian Empire. Nehru made this his policy...

Once war breaks out it often develops independently of men’s will, will.

The turmoil could not be easily stopped... And from then on there would be no tranquility on the subcontinent.

On August 14, 1947 out of the partition of British India, Pakistan emerged as a separate state. The notion of Pakistan as a distinct state for India’s Muslims was formally put forward on the 23rd of March 1940 in the Muslim League’s Lahore resolution. This declaration grounded the theory of the Pakistani state in the theocratic concept that ‘two nations’ existed in the Indian subcontinent — one Hindu and one Muslim — and that the partition of these two peoples was an “inextricable historical necessity”.

The Indian nationalist movement’s neglect of the Islamic minority’s fear of Hindu religious domination, and the Muslim bourgeoisie’s own developing
hope for a state of its own, ultimately combined with Britain's own plans for a partition. The manner of Britain's exit from empire, however, left the subcontinent with a geopolitical legacy that thirty years later is still being violently resolved.

India's northwestern regions, comprising the provinces of Baluchistan, Sind, Western Punjab, Northwest Frontier, and the eastern-most province of East Bengal, were designated the Muslim majority areas and constituted the new state of Pakistan. In the process of this religious partition nearly half a million persons lost their lives in a bloodbath of communal carnage. A total of ten million refugees moved both ways across the new borders and religious zealots had their fill in one prolonged religious riot.

The new state of Pakistan, like India, was made up of diverse national groupings with their own distinct languages and cultural histories. India's Congress Party, with its commitment to a secular form of parliamentary democracy based on the power of the most developed and experienced bourgeoisie class in the Third World, did manage following difficult years of regional and linguistic agitations to redraw provincial boundaries along the geographic lines that divide the country's main national groupings. While the bourgeois democratic institutions of the Indian state have dismally failed over three decades to prod Indian capitalism into raising the basic standard of living for the vast majority of India's population, these same institutions were able through federalism and provincial democracy to adequately resolve the more intense regional antagonisms, the main exception being the insurgencies of the Nagas and Mizos. By contrast the authorities in Pakistan imbued with an Islamic fundamentalism whereby all are one under Allah, utterly failed in this task. In 1952 Pakistani authorities declared Urdu, spoken by less than 7 per cent of the population, to be the unifying and Islamising national language. Its most immediate consequence was language riots in East Bengal and the beginning of a popular 'language movement' intent on preserving Bengali culture. Unlike India, the Pakistani authorities did not pursue a policy of interregional compromise and accommodation, but instead aggravated the national question within its borders by means of armed force and the characteristic arrogance of military politics.

Thirty years after the establishment of Pakistan the underlying religious ideology of the state remains a violent issue. Other than Israel, Pakistan is the only nation whose modern times have been formed on the basis of religious principles. The original theory was that Islam alone would unite the diverse cultures of the Sindhi, Baluchi, Pathan, Punjabi, and Bengali. In the eyes of Allah and the state each would be first and foremost a Pakistani. But to Pakistan's 'minority nationalities' — and even to the 'majority nationality', the Bengali — Pakistan's state structure came to be dominated, if not monopolised, by the more advanced province of the Punjab, which at partition already controlled the military. Also, 'Mahajirs', refugees who came from India, rose quickly into dominant positions in business and the professions. This arrangement was institutionalised in 1955, when provincial boundaries were discarded, and West Pakistan adopted the 'one unit' system of national administration.

The struggle over the 'national question' intensified. Between 1955 and 1970 the internal politics of the country was an unending battle against the 'one unit' system. Those who fought it said it denied and sought to destroy their own distinctive cultures while enhancing the privileges of the Punjabi andMahajir elites. After Ayub Khan's decade old Martial Law administration collapsed in 1969, the new military administration of General Yahya Khan which took power promised two major reforms: a return to civilian rule through general elections to be held in December 1970, and the elimination of the 'one unit' system. In November 1969 Yahya Khan officially declared the end of the 'one unit' structure and re-established in West Pakistan the boundaries of the provinces of Sind, Baluchistan, Frontier, and the Punjab.

But the national question was not destined to be so easily resolved. The 1970 elections brought a sweeping victory for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League in East Pakistan. In the provinces of the Frontier and Baluchistan the National Awami Party (NAP) led by Wali Khan won control of the provincial governments. Responsible for the political triumph of the Awami League and the NAP was the fact that both reflected the 'national aspirations' of Bengal, Baluchistan, and the Frontier. Each had laid down as the leading principle of its programme the establishment of broad autonomous rights for the provinces within a democratic republic.

The Awami League won 167 to 169 seats from East Bengal in the National Assembly of the unified Pakistan. This constituted an absolute majority in the assembly, and meant that Mujibur Rahman should have become the Prime Minister of Pakistan. But "at that point it was clear that if the elected National Assembly was called into being, the Awami League would easily be able to enact a constitution based on its autonomy programmes, and this would in turn convert Pakistan into nothing more than a loose confederation. As an elite group with high salaries and entrenched privileges, spending more than half the country's yearly budget, the armed forces had a material stake in keeping East Bengal as an integral part of Pakistan."

Pakistan's military leadership chose not to transfer power to the elected Awami League administration. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, leader of Pakistan's People's party, which had won majorities in the provinces of Sind and the Punjab with 81 seats in the National Assembly, was instrumental in the military authorities' refusal to convene the National Assembly. In demagogic style Bhutto declared that the Punjab and the Sind were the "bastions of power" in Pakistan, and that since his party now dominated those provinces, he would not accept any constitution determined by the "brute majority" of the Awami League. Bhutto threatened to boycott the assembly, if Mujib became Prime Minister on a platform of transforming Pakistan into a loose confederation of provinces.

On March 1, 1971 the martial law authorities announced an indefinite postponement of the date for convening the National Assembly originally scheduled for March 3. The reaction in East Pakistan was immediate and violent. Demands for complete independence were issued by the powerful and militant student federation, the Chhatra League. The Military Junta of Pakistan entered into new negotiations with the Awami League leadership while a mass movement based on non-co-operation and strikes gripped East Bengal. The negotiations, however, were merely a ruse for a massive military build-up. On the night of March 25, 1971 the most violent and brutal act of political repression in South Asian history took place. Tanks and armoured personnel carriers of the Pakistan Army rumbled through Dacca. It was remembered as


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‘Kala Ratri’ or ‘The Black Night’, and on the first evening alone thousands were killed in the indiscriminate firing and shelling. Details of these events have been extensively published elsewhere. The purpose of this work is not to repeat a history of the massacres which followed the night of the 25th. But it was this event more than any other which opened a new and qualitatively different phase in the history of South Asia.

Debates on the ‘national question’ have occupied Marxist writers for more than a generation. The most well known of these discussions were those between Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg during the early part of the century. However, in the context of contemporary history Bangladesh represents an important example of ‘national question’ which occupied these earlier debates.

There is hardly a sharper example where the right of national self-determination presented itself in such definite and clear-cut terms.

This work is not an appropriate place for a comprehensive discussion of these issues. But, nevertheless, certain of Lenin’s more significant comments bear repeating in the present context. For more than any other element, the ‘national question’, combining as it did with frustrations of post-colonial capitalist development, became the driving force behind the emergence of radical politics as a powerful national factor. In his ‘Critical Remarks on the National Question’, Lenin commented that:

The masses know perfectly well the value of geographical and economic ties and the advantage of a big market and a big state. They will, therefore, resort to secession only when national oppression becomes intolerable. But economic ties cannot be broken by force. National friction makes joint life absolutely intolerable and hinder any and all economic intercourse. In that case, the interests of capitalist development and of the freedom of the class struggle will be best served by secession ... The right of nations to self-determination is exclusively the right to independence in the political sense, the right to free separation from the oppressor nation. Specifically, this demand for political democracy implies complete freedom to agitate for secession and for a referendum on secession by the seceding nation. This demand, therefore, is not the equivalent of a demand for separation, fragmentation, and the formation of small states. It implies only a consistent expansion of the struggle against national oppression. The closer a democratic state system is to complete freedom the less ardent will the desire for separation be in practice, because big states afford indisputable advantages, both from the standpoint of economic progress and from that of the weights of the masses and furthermore in view of the growth of capitalism.

Recognition of self-determination is not synonymous with recognition of federation as a principle. One may be a radical opponent of that principle and a champion of democratic centralism, but still prefer federation to national inequality as the only way to full democratic centralism. It was from this standpoint that Marx, who was a centralist, preferred even the federation of Ireland and England to the forcible subordination of Ireland to the English .... It is impossible to abolish national (or any other political) oppression under capitalist modes of production without the abolition of classes, i.e., the introduction of socialism. But while being based on economics, socialism cannot be separated from religion alone. A foundation on socialist production — is essential for the abolition of national oppression, but this foundation must also carry a democratically organised state, a democratic army, etc. By transforming capitalism into socialism the proletariat creates the possibility of abolishing national oppression; the possibility becomes reality only — only! — with the establishment of full democracy in all spheres . . . .

Bangladesh’s independence in December 1971 did not end Pakistan’s crisis over the ‘national question’. In less than two years the new authorities of Pakistan’s central administration under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto dismissed the provincial government of Baluchistan. Following years of agitation for the right to a measure of local government, Baluchistan had elected in 1970 the National Awami Party to head the provincial administration. When Bhutto dismissed the local administration in February 1973 at the encouragement of the Shah of Iran, he alleged that like the Bengalis the Baluchis were nothing but a bunch of secessionists. In the traditional Pakistan manner used to resolve difficult and complex issues, massive numbers of troops were sent into the province to crush support for the elected assembly. Open rebellion among the rugged Baluchi tribesmen broke out and since 1973 an intense and bitter guerilla struggle has been fought out in the hills of the province. In four years the Pakistani military forces are said to have suffered nearly six thousand casualties, a figure which is comparable to their losses in the 1971 conflict. Unlike the Bengali situation, there is no issue of independence being posed, but an interview conducted by this writer in Baluchistan with one of the guejilla military commanders, Chakor Khan Mrari, poses the question which faced both Bengalis and Baluchis in the Pakistani state. Marri’s remarks bring into a subcontinental focus the issues posed by Lenin’s comments on the National Question more than half a century earlier. Chakor Khan Mrari is a military commander of the Baluchistan People’s Liberation Front (Pakistan). The Pakistani Army is reported to have set a price of 50,000 rupees on his head. Marri said:

We consider our struggle not to be a secessionist movement nor a movement towards independence. It is a movement for autonomy within the Pakistani state with equal rights for each nationality in its own government. But the greatest problem goes back to the very founding of Pakistan. The very theory of ‘two nations’ living in India based on religion is a false theory we do not accept. The Muslim leadership in India felt that when the British left they would be in the minority and always in the opposition, but never in power. And therefore they wanted their own state. This expression of the Muslim bourgeoisie is called the Muslim League.

They did not acknowledge the fact that the Pakistan which broke away from India was a ‘multinational’ state of Bengalis, Sindhis, Baluchis, Punjabis, and Pathans. They stuck to the point that religion is the basis of Pakistan and that on the basis of religion there was only one ‘nation’ or national identity. We feel religion is a personal matter of any individual and that no country in the world is based on religion alone except Pakistan and Israel. But in Pakistan today we have the main crisis centres on the rights of the minority nationalities. This cannot be obscured in the name of Islam.

The whole national question concerns the rights of national minorities which in Pakistan today encompasses three provinces and nearly 40 per cent of the population. Prior to 1971 three-fourths of the country’s population was facing the issue. In 1971 Bangladesh came into being and the national question came into sharp perspective at that time. The basic question is that in a multi-national state the very fact if one nation comes to dominate the state and exploit the minority nationalities for its own purpose, then those smaller nationalities are going to resist that exploitation. We are trying to define what a nation is. We do not consider Pakistan to be the sort of nation state the government talks of. A nation is determined by its language, culture, history, and geographical affiliations.

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The culture and language question is very apparent in Pakistan. It led to civil war in 1971. From this point of view there are at the moment four nations in Pakistan. We say that Pakistan is not a one nation state but a multinational state, and we want that each nation should live in this country on an equal basis. We want that each culture in each province should develop on its own historical lines and that no other culture must be imposed on any of the nations.

We feel that the solution to the problems of the national minorities in Pakistan cannot take place in the bourgeois set up in Pakistan as it is today. The way the bourgeoisie is using religion opposes the realisation of these questions. We feel that the problem of national minorities can only be solved through a hard and long nationalist struggle; be it necessary for it to take the shape of an armed struggle. The exact form it will take will resolve itself as the struggle goes on. In our view it will most probably take on a socialist aspect.

Although the Bengali and the Baluchi situations differ in a number of important respects, they share the fundamental feature of having confronted an undemocratic state with the demand for autonomy and democratic rights. In both instances parties representing this standpoint were elected at the provincial level, and in the case of the Awami League it achieved an absolute national majority. Having been obstructed in establishing their elected position, they were forced into conditions of armed struggle.

The Bangladesh Left and the War of Independence

At the time of the Pakistani crackdown in East Bengal the country's revolutionary Left was far from unified on the most pressing question. The controversy engendered by the issue reduced certain groups to impotent disarray and created serious divisions that have persisted until the present day. In addition, the attitude adopted by China towards the 'East Pakistan crisis' further confused a number of 'pro-Peking' Bengali groups whose influence among the country's intelligentsia was significant at the time.

All the pro-Peking factions shared a sense of frustration over the Awami League's leadership of Bengal's greatest mass political movement. The Awami League was a bourgeois nationalist party whose principal objective in the struggle first was autonomy and later for independence was to establish the Bengali bourgeoisie as a class in its own right and not subordinate to West Pakistan's capitalist interests. While the 'pro-Peking' Marxists unequivocally condemned the crackdown of the 'fascist' Yahya regime, several groups among them were reluctant to back a bourgeois nationalist movement which in their view was supported by 'Indian expansionism' and 'Soviet social imperialism'.

Most important of these groups was the East Pakistan Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) led by Mohammed Toaha and Abdul Huq. The party's position on the 'national question' was at best ambiguous and at worst collaborationist. During the late sixties in a series of bitter debates with another 'pro-Peking' faction, Toaha and Huq had condemned the thesis advanced by the East Bengal Communist Party (EBCP) led by Abdul Matin and Alaudin Ahmed. The EBCP had argued that the independence of East Pakistan achieved under the leadership of a worker-peasant alliance was the correct strategy for socialism in the region. Toaha's Party (EFCP-ML) rejected this position, arguing that it emphasised the conflict between different sections of the national bourgeoisie in East and West Pakistan, and diverted the attention of the urban and rural proletariat in both wings from a struggle against their common class enemy. The EFCP-ML criticised Matin's group saying their platform would only aid the East Pakistani bourgeoisie, led by the Awami League, in bringing about the secession of East Pakistan under bourgeois leadership.

The crackdown by the Pakistan Army and the extent of its brutality made the independence of Bangladesh an irreversible certainty. Nevertheless, within the EFCP-ML deep disagreement persisted over the party's position in this the most wrenching crisis to grip the region. A faction led by Abdul Huq argued that the entire confrontation was the product of Indian 'expansionism' backed by the Soviet Union with the sole intent of destroying the territorial integrity of Pakistan. Huq's colleague in the party Mohammed Toaha could not agree fully with this position. Nearly four months into the Liberation War the party split in two. Huq's group maintained the party's original name including the title 'East Pakistan'. His group made contact with the Pakistani martial law authorities indicating they would cooperate against imminent Indian 'aggression', if only the army would stop brutalising the people. Following independence Huq was accused of collaboration with the Pakistan Army. As of 1977 Huq's group continued to exist as an underground splinter group still calling itself the East Pakistan Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist). This writer extensively interviewed Huq in June 1976 in Dacca.

On the other hand Mohammed Toaha established a base in the Noakhali-Chitagong region and organised his followers under a new banner, the East Bengal Communist Party (M-L). While Toaha agreed with Huq that India and the Soviet Union were the major forces behind the Awami League's Calcutta-based provisional government, Toaha remained ambivalent about whether or not to support a movement for national independence led by the Awami League. In both the towns and the countryside the population almost to the last village had turned against Pakistan and in favour of national independence. Toaha's faction ultimately adopted a strategic position they termed a 'two-way war'. On the one hand they fought the Pakistani Army and on the other they fought forces loyal to the Awami League. At times it was difficult to ascertain whether Toaha regarded the Mukti Bahini forces, which he identified with the Awami League, or the Pakistani Army, to be the main enemy.

During an interview with this writer in April 1976 at the Baluchistan port town of Gwadar on the Pakistan coast, Colonel Ashiq Hussain, the Pakistan Army officer, who formerly commanded the Noakhali sector claimed that he personally conducted negotiations with Toaha on the possibility of mutual cooperation in joint operations against the Mukti Bahini guerilla forces. These discussions, according to Hussain, ended without agreement and were ultimately broken off. Within Toaha's camp further disagreements arose over this very ambiguity. Badruddin Umar, one of the country's leading Marxist intellectuals, left the party citing as the reason Toaha's inability to understand the national question. Umar regarded the Pakistan army as the main enemy and argued in support of a united front in the struggle for independence regardless of whether the Bengali bourgeoisie was to play a leading role. Other sections of what was regarded as the 'pro-Peking' Left, under the umbrella of the National Awami party (led by the aged peasant agitator, the 'Red Maulana' Bashani, to whom Toaha had once served as secretary) unequivocally backed the struggle for independence.
To understand the disarray of many so-called 'pro-Peking' parties that developed as the independence war gained momentum, it is necessary to understand China's standpoint during the crisis. From the beginning China emphasised that the entire question of 'East Pakistan' was Pakistan's internal affair which did not warrant outside interference. Radio Peking repeatedly warned that India and the Soviet Union would attempt to interfere to cause the break-up of Pakistan. No public statement was ever issued by the Chinese with regard to the military crackdown of March 25. The Chinese would have considered any such statement interference in the internal affairs of Pakistan. All public comments by the Chinese focused purely on superpower rivalries and India's expansionist drive within the region. No discussion of the 'national question' or Lenin's position on the right to self-determination under certain conditions of severe national oppression ever appeared in these commentaries.

On April 13, 1971 — two weeks after the crackdown — the *Pakistan Times* published a letter from Chou En-lai to Pakistan's military President, General Yahya Khan. In the message Chou stated that the 'unification of Pakistan and the unity of the people of East and West Pakistan are the basic guarantees for Pakistan to attain prosperity and strength'. Chou also referred to 'the enemies' who were always ready to sabotage the unity of Pakistan. By printing this letter and by sending Zulfikar Ali Bhutto on highly publicised visits to Peking, the Pakistani authorities wished to create the impression of unequivocal Chinese backing if war ultimately developed with India. Chou had concluded his note to Yahya with the comment: "Your excellency may rest assured that should the Indian expansionists dare to launch aggression against Pakistan, the Chinese government and people will, as always, firmly support the Pakistani government and people in their just struggle to safeguard state sovereignty and national independence." 13

In private, however, Chinese officials were less than enthusiastic about the military operations in East Pakistan. In November 1971 when Bhutto went to Peking as Yahya Khan's emissary to enlist China's support against imminent military intervention by India, the Chinese presented Bhutto with a list of sixty pro-Peking leaders who had been killed by the Pakistan Army. 14 During the same visit at a dinner reception given in honour of the visiting Pakistani delegation an argument developed between Bhutto and a Bengali diplomat still on the Peking Embassy's staff in Peking. Bhutto was loudly praising the heroism and action of the Pakistani Army, when he said, "If India attacks East Pakistan, the Ganges will turn red". The Bengali diplomat no longer capable of repressing his anger shouted at Bhutto, "It is better, if you first make the Indus [West Pakistan's principal river] red". The Chinese were extremely embarrassed by this public "quarrel among brothers" going on before them in the midst of a state banquet. Chou En-lai reportedly turned to Bhutto and said severely, "You cannot solve this problem in Peking. Go to Dacca and solve it". 15

In 1974 evidence emerged indicating that the Pakistani authorities had apparently tampered with the text of Chou En-lai's message, when they published it. Anwar Hossain, the Bengali foreign-language expert at Peking Radio from 1966 to 1972, and the only private citizen of Bangladesh living in China at the time of the 1971 Indo-Bangladesh War, claimed in an interview that, "Chou En-lai's letter did not appear in full in the Pakistani press. The most important sentence of the letter was deleted by the Pakistanis. I know this, since I did the translation from the Chinese for the Peking Radio broadcast. In the last paragraph of the letter, Chou En-lai wrote: 'The question of East Pakistan should be settled according to the wishes of the people of East Pakistan'.", 16

Hossain said that the Chinese had in private discussions strongly urged Pakistan to release the then imprisoned Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and return to negotiations before the situation led to war with India. In China Hossain himself regularly visited communes and factories to condemn the actions of the Pakistani authorities. In Peking he was told by Chinese friends and officials that they personally condemned Yahya Khan's military action. But on numerous occasions, when he urged them to make their views known - in a public declaration, they replied that at the level of state-to-state relations they could not interfere in the internal politics of another country.

The spring and summer of Bangladesh's War of Independence was also a period of great intra-party struggle within China over which line would win out in foreign policy. Lin Piao's alleged plot climaxed that September ending in Lin's death. The formulation of a policy towards the conflict in South Asia occurred as a sidelight to China's new relations with America and Lin Piao's reported attempt to capture power. Moreover, in 1971 the future of Taiwan was being raised as a major issue in the Western press. Strong lobbies in Japan and the United States were reviving the 'Taiwanes Independence Movement' with an unprecedented state of publicity. China again stated to the world that Taiwan was an integral part of China and that the issue warranted no foreign interference. In these circumstances the Chinese apparently would have found open support for the Bengali independence movement, even within the traditional and specific reference of Lenin's position on the 'National Question', to have been a difficult trial of general principles.

The Chinese leadership's primary concern in this instance as in others such as Southern Africa was the emerging role of the Soviet Union. In China's assessment of the balance of international forces, the Soviets represent a rising and powerful 'social imperialist' force in the process of expanding its influence on a world scale. The Chinese viewed post-Vietnam America as a chastened giant, a declining imperialist power. The main danger in this parallel rise and fall of imperial strength is, in the Chinese view, the Soviet Union. The Chinese, as their public statements indicated, considered the 'East Pakistan Crisis' primarily in its international or superpower context, and not with regard to the internal contradictions of Pakistani Society.

When India did eventually intervene militarily in the Bangladesh crisis, Radio Peking broadcast one deploring the formulation of Indian 'expansionism' and the Soviet Union's role in Pakistan's 'dismemberment'. As Indian soldiers swept towards Dacca eliminating the last pockets of the Pakistani Army's resistance, a senior Chinese diplomat at the United Nations in New York asked this writer, "How can the Indians be genuinely claiming to liberate the Bengalis, when in over 20 years they have not 'liberated' the millions of Indian untouchables from the oppression of the caste system, poverty, and landlordism?" 17
Chou En-lai reportedly did say, however, that by intervening India was picking up a great stone which it would one day drop on its own feet. The Chinese Premier's remarks provoked prophetic as relations between India and Bangladesh deteriorated in the post-independence period. Nevertheless, the Chinese position was throughout a source of great disappointment for many Bengali nationalists. The Chinese were not the only ones on the left who opposed Indian intervention. In Calcutta, the weekly *Frontier*, a prominent left forum sympathetic to Indian "Naxalite" views of the time, supported the Bangladesh struggle for independence while firmly opposing any Indian intervention in the conflict. Except for the Calcutta-based leadership of the Awami League which was pressing for a rapid resolution of the conflict, many Bangladeshs, including Taher, were opposed to Indian intervention. In their view independence won on the coat-tails of foreign soldiers would be an independence of compromise and leave unfixed the great revolutionary transformation they hoped for.

The Awami League and India's authorities both feared that the leadership of the Liberation struggle might gradually slip from their control into the hands of those radical forces which were unambiguous in their stand on the 'national question', and deeply committed to the Liberation War. If a guerilla style insurgency had persisted, these forces would undoubtedly have come to dominate the politics of the movement. It was this trend that the Indian authorities were determined to pre-empt by intervention. Bengali military commanders estimated at the time that with the exception of three Pakistani forces would have been defeated without Indian involvement. At the end of such a period, if the strategic course advocated by Taher, Ziauddin, and other officers of the left military group had been pursued, Bangladesh would have emerged with an army of 100,000 peasants, organised into armed battalions in a pre-formation of a people's army.

While Bengalis were fighting for independence, India had another goal. The pre-emptive quality of the intervention was not the only dimension. The Bangladesh crisis provided the decisive opportunity for the Central power of the subcontinent to destroy its principal national rival in South Asia. Inflicting a humiliating and irreversible defeat on Pakistani forces was not a chance India's leadership was about to pass up.

The confusion and disunity of Bangladesh's 'pro-Peking' parties over the question of independence pushed them into isolation and into a position of peripheral insignificance during the events of 1971. Certain groups ignored the Chinese attitude towards Bangladesh and pushed ahead on the basis of their own judgment. In Rajshahi District a section of the EBCP led by Olidul Rahman gathered more than 1,000 guerillas under its banner and completely co-operated with the guerilla forces of the Mukti Bahini. This wing of the party played a leading role in liberating the Attrai region of Rajshahi from Pakistani Army control. The other wing of the EBCP led by Matin-Alauddin initially took a commanding role in the early resistance of Pabna District immediately following the crackdown. They killed more than 100 West Pakistani soldiers in early acts of resistance and advocated an alliance of all nationalist classes, including the national bourgeoisie, in a united armed struggle of national liberation. But Matin and Alauddin were reported to have later modified their stand when China's own position became known in April.

For Bangladesh's radical movement the situation in 1971 was a difficult test case in the exercise of independent thinking. This extended to groups outside the Marxist ideological orbit. Besides the 'pro-Chinese' groups, there existed a second trend on the left. The 'pro-Moscow' parties — the Communist Party of Bangladesh (Moni) and the National Awami Party (Muzzafar) — gave their active backing and support to the Awami League's struggle. However, their actual activity remained of little significance to the overall development of events. Like the CPI in India, the pro-Moscow left advanced the thesis that socialism could be achieved peacefully through the parliamentary path. Therefore, they advocated a general alliance of all leftist forces and secular democratic political parties. In December 1970 they participated in the elections and supported the 11-point programme of the East Pakistan Student Action Committee, but their distinct form and ideological element had little consequence to the general movement. According to one observer, "neither the pro-Peking leftists nor the Awami League paid any heed to them." 19

Besides the two broad — 'pro-Peking'/'pro-Moscow' — trends in Bangladesh's radical politics, a third Marxist stream existed. Before 1972 little was known of this group. Only recently did details regarding its existence, as a self-conscious centre claiming to have functioned for a decade deep within the Bengali nationalist movement, became known. An understanding of the November 7 insurrection in 1975 and the events leading to the execution of Taher are inseparable from the history of this political stream. Only in 1972 did it first openly identify itself as the Jayto Samajtakrit Dal or 'Jashod' (Socialist Nationalist party/JSD).

The history of the JSD, according to recent party documents and statements by its leadership, began in 1962 when 'a group of conscious young men' formed a 'nucleus' at Dacca University. Their position differed from other radical groups in several important, particularly strategic, respects. Not unlike many others, they held the view that socialism was the only solution to East Bengal's vast poverty, severe backwardness, and increasing underdevelopment. They argued, however, that the independence of East Bengal, or Bangladesh, was a necessary element and condition in the struggle for a socialist society. They organised themselves into what they termed a 'nucleus' which centred around a number of personalities including Sirajul Alam Khan, the former General Secretary of the East Pakistan Student's League. The principal element of the group was that the 'national' question had to be approached as the major political contradiction of Bengali society at that stage of history. The exploitation of East Pakistan by capital based in the western wing had taken on the form of 'national' oppression. And the economic bias of West Pakistani based capitalism provided in their view the pivot for a mass political movement. 30

Other Marxists had argued that any analysis which highlighted the 'national question' between the two wings would only deflect the masses from class struggle and encourage the secession of East Pakistan under bourgeois leadership. This strategy implied a unified struggle throughout all of Pakistan. On this strategic standpoint the early JSD differed fundamentally. The early nucleus of the JSD rejected

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notions calling for a long-term co-ordinated struggle in both wings as being impractical and unrealistic. Pakistan with its thousand mile land breach, its multinational make-up, and the highly distinct economic and social formations existing in the separate halves, represented in their view a unique geopolitical entity.

The experience of an intense nationalist movement in East Bengal which at the same time would struggle for democratic rights against an autocratic military regime would draw millions into the experience of mass politics and agitation. Pakistan's history of anti-democratic military regimes made it certain that state violence would be used to crush such a movement, and thus the final achievement of democratic rights for the people of East Bengal would ultimately have to take the form of armed struggle. Once such a stage had been reached the JSD nucleus believed it would be possible to transform an armed nationalist movement into a revolutionary one.

The failure of communist movements in South Asia had in many important respects been a failure to link the politics of the communist movement unequivocally with the fight for national independence. In 1942 the Indian National Congress launched its 'Quit India' movement against the English. While tens of thousands of nationalists went to prison, India's communists at Stalin's request formed a 'united front' with the British in the world wide fight against fascism. The Indian National Congress also opposed fascism, but it was not willing to cooperate in a common programme while India remained a colony of Great Britain without firm guarantees of independence after the war. After independence it was years before Indian communism overcame the stigma of having collaborated with the British.

In certain respects the thesis of the early JSD nucleus was shared by the East Bengal Communist Party, the Co-ordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries, the East Bengal Workers' Movement, and the 'Mythi' group in so far as they all called for the separation of East Pakistan from West Pakistan. While important theoretical differences existed between these groups over whether East Bengal was a backward capitalist society or still 'semi-feudal', possibly the most significant difference appeared in terms of actual practice and the carrying forward of a long range political strategy. While groups like the EBCP advocated the separation of East Pakistan under the leadership of a workers' party, the early JSD nucleus took a different tactical line. Under the leadership of Sirajul Alam Khan they self-consciously joined the Awami League and immersed themselves within the party. Unto themselves they were a definable, self-conscious, and independent 'nucleus' within the party. To others they were the most prominent, the most militant, and the most radical of the Awami League's youthful cadre. They had joined the Awami League because it was nationalist in orientation and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was willing to advance the struggle for autonomy. But from the very moment of their association they took the view that in reality there existed 'two parties in one'. And when the appropriate moment came, they expected one to emerge from the other.

This group quickly developed a commanding position in the powerful East Pakistan Student's League (EPSL). Together with the 'pro-Peking' East Pakistan Student's Union (EPSU) they played a leading role in the 1966 and 1969 agitations against Ayub Khan's dictatorship. In 1969 the Field Marshall, an autocrat of a decade who before taking power had personally discussed his 1958 coup plans with Allen Dulles, was finally toppled from power in the face of extraordinary student and worker protests. A new interim military regime headed by Yahya Khan took over. Besides dissolving the 'one unit' system it promised national elections.

These elections occurred in December 1970. In East Pakistan many radical groups were against participation in the electoral campaign. The JSD nucleus, however, existing within the Awami League supported the ballot and spread its cadres and student followers into the villages to organise on behalf of the programme of autonomy. The campaign opened, in their view, an important opportunity to send thousands of urban educated youth to the villages. Two goals were accomplished: the urban youth with their idealistic concepts of socialism, democracy, and nationalism were put in real and daily contact with the back-breaking oppression under which the peasantry existed; and the peasants, needing no one to explain to them their misery, did nevertheless garner from these book-learned students new ideas concerning politics and class struggle.

Crucial decisions were being made long before the elections. Four months prior to the voting on national ID, 1970 at an extended meeting of the Central Committee of the East Pakistan Students League, Swapan Kumar Choudhury, a protege of Sirajul Alam Khan, introduced a resolution for a Swadhin Samajtantrik Bangladesh (Independent Socialist Bangladesh). Three months earlier on June 6, the group drafted a declaration of independence and prepared the design for a new national flag. It was to be the image of a red sun having risen on an emerald green background. Today it serves as the country's national banner. If the situation developed as they anticipated, they were prepared to push for independence.

The December elections brought a landslide victory for the Awami League. As has been described earlier, this led to a major impasse when the military authorities refused to convene the National Assembly on schedule and accept the results of the election. On March 1, 1970 when the regime made its announcement of an indefinite postponement, the pro-JSD nucleus within the Awami League issued an immediate call for independence. In the new situation Sheikh Mujib was uncertain and wavering. He was unable to decide whether to push beyond his existing position in favour of federated autonomy or to make an unequivocal demand for independence.

On March 2, at a mammoth rally which Mujib attended, A S M Abdur Rab, who would later become General Secretary of the JSD, ceremonially burned the Pakistani flag and hoisted the new national banner. The following day, March 3, at another mass meeting on the Paltan Maidan, Shahjahan Sirai, who later emerged to become a leading figure in the JSD, read out the "Manifesto of an Independent Bangladesh". Finally, on March 7, the student leadership of what was now called the Bangladesh (no longer East Pakistan) Students League presented Mujib with an ultimatum: he must declare independence or they would abandon him and take an independent course. At this stage Mujib openly complained to an AFP correspondent: 'Is the West Pakistani government not aware that I am the only one able to save East Pakistan from communism? If they take a position to fight I shall be pushed out of power, and the Naxalites will intervene in my
name. If I make too many concessions, I shall lose my authority. I am in a difficult situation."

"Since the strings of the movement were in our hands, Mujib did not dare to defy us", Hamur Rashid, an activist of the 1971 movement, told this writer. Rashid later became the Acting General Secretary of the JSD. On March 7 at a rally of more than a million persons at the Ramna Race Course, Mujib ultimately declared that the struggle had now become one for complete "emancipation and independence". The 25th of March arrived. In a blitzkrieg of death Bengali nationalism found the crucible of the birth: the War of Liberation was on.

THE MILITARY DEBATE: PEOPLE'S WAR vS CONVENTIONAL WAR

Having established the conditions of independence makes it possible to again take up the events of Taher's life. In particular, juxtaposition of this man's biography is an understanding of the history of the independence movement. Every aspect of the two are so deeply intertwined that one could not have been understood without the other. At the time of the crackdown Taher was stationed in West Pakistan. He was serving as an officer with the elite commando unit known as the Special Services Group. However, on the day of the 25th — the day Bengalis were to call the "black night" — Taher was attending an advanced course at Pakistan's School of Infantry and Tactics at Quetta.

Four days later Taher was arrested for blunt remarks he had made concerning the atrocities then taking place in the eastern region. By the intervention of the School's Commandant, a close friend of Taher's, he was eventually released and ordered to return to his headquarters at the Kharai Cantonment. His unit stripped of its Bengali officers and jawans had been split into action in the eastern region.

The civil war brought many Bengali soldiers and officers stranded in the West, face to face with the most difficult dilemma of their lives: were they to remain safely in Pakistan aloof from the nationalist cause or would they risk their lives to escape and join the liberation struggle which so desperately needed their military talent? The war trapped nearly 20,000 Bengali soldiers and 1,000 officers in the West. But it also trapped them in the vortex of the national question. They still had to chose: were they Pakistanis or Bangladeshis? As in all such situations, some became the cowards of their convictions, others risked all they had. Taher vividly captured the atmosphere of this period in the testimony he read before the secret tribunal which condemned him to death in July 1976. [Taher's complete trial testimony remains a secret document in Bangladesh. It has been obtained by the present writer from Bengali sources. The full text is printed, for the first time, at the end of this article.]

Speaking to the Tribunal Chairman, Colonel Yusuf Haider, an officer repatriated in 1974 to an independent Bangladesh, and who had remained in West Pakistan throughout the Liberation War, Taher said in his testimony:

"I recall here the night of the 25th March 1971, when the Pakistani Army unleashed brutal attacks against our people. We had no choice, but to win that war which was thrust on us. Had we lost a worse kind of slavery would have been imposed upon us... Those were the days of trial for us who were in West Pakistan. At that time I did not hesitate to respond to our nation's call. The barbaric purpose of the Military Junta was not unknown to all in West Pakistan when from the General Headquarters of the Pakistan Army the message went out: "Burn everything. Kill everyone in sight."

On the 25th March I was at Quetta attending a Senior Technical Course in the School of Infantry and Tactics. When I heard the announcement of General Yahya Khan over the radio that evening of the 26th of March, I came to know what a catastrophe had fallen on my people. For the whole night I walked on the lips of Quetta...

At the time several junior officers, lieutenants and second lieutenants approached and sought my advice as to what they should do in this time. I told them in clear terms that their only concern was to escape from Pakistan and join the Liberation War. They also informed me that a few senior Bengali officers who were stationed at that time in Quetta had refused to talk to them, refused to entertain them, lost their loyalty, but were doubtful of their master. Some of these same senior officers I find today holding important positions in the Armed Forces and they are now a party in this attempt to try me here.

The Bengali nationalists trapped in West Pakistan believed there was only one possible choice — escape. After one unsuccessful attempt through the Kashimir hills which faltered when a crucial contact failed to show up at a rendezvous, Taher planned a second escape route. This time the attempt involved a young Bengali officer, Mohammed Ziauddin, who was stationed at the Army's General Headquarters in Rawalpindi. Along with two other Bengalis, they made a daring late night crossing into India via the Sialkot sector of the Pakistan border. The escape of these two men was to have an important impact on the development of the liberation struggle, and the post-independence structure of the armed forces. Immediately after independence Taher and Ziauddin would between them command 90 per cent of the country's infantry. Together they would begin to initiate forms of military organisation unheard of in the subcontinent.

On their arrival at the front both Taher and Ziauddin were given sector commands. Fighting a body going on. Immediately following the 25th of March spontaneous resistance began from civilians who organised themselves into irregular guerilla units. Initially, isolated outposts of Pakistani soldiers suffered serious losses. Among the Bengali armed forces stationed in East Pakistan nearly a thousand troops of the East Bengal Regiment and 5,000 paramilitary police stationed in the capital were wiped out by the swift and concentrated attacks of the Pakistan Army. The whole of the East Bengal Regiment numbered roughly 6,000 men of which only 3,000 survived to regroup in India. Of the 14,000 lightly armed troops which constituted the border security force, only 8,000 survived. Except for a handful of collaborators — who were mainly in the police and intelligence branches — all these units immediately joined the resistance.

In the outlying cantonments and military barracks Bengali units had more warning and time to react. Under the leadership of young Bengali officers such as Ziaur Rahman in Chittagong, Khaled Musharrif in Comilla, Usman in Khustia, and Safullah in Mymensingh, Bengali troops mutinied against the Pakistan Army and killed many of their former military colleagues. At Chittagong units under the command of Major Ziaur Rahman managed to hold the town for several days. Over Chittagong Radio Zia declared Bangladesh to be independent. Nearly 100,000 Pakistani troops fanned out from the capital and within a few days had retaken all the major towns, inflicting extraordinary casualties on the civilian population. Regular Bengali military units, by
and large, soon retreated over the Indian border to reorganise.

As the slaughter continued during the night of the crackdown, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman chose to adopt the Gandhian tactic of non-violent resistance. While he waited at his house, the rest of the Awami League leadership ran for their lives. Mujib was arrested and flown to West Pakistan. Most of the other leading figures in the party managed to reach India where the New Delhi authorities welcomed them. Immediate permission was granted to establish the first provincial government of Bangladesh with Calcutta as its base.

By July when Taher took over command of the 11th Sector comprising Tangail and his home district of Mymensingh, an intense debate was already underway within the Bangladesh Command over the strategic course to be adopted and developed. Both India and the Awami League's government-in-exile were well aware that a prolonged nationalist struggle could evolve and be transformed into a revolutionary war.

The military debate revolved around the three principal forms of armed resistance to the Pakistani forces. Each represented a distinct conception of military strategy. At times they flowed together; at other moments they moved independently; but each reflected a particular political trend struggling for ultimate political hegemony in the Liberation War.

The first which may be termed the 'official' resistance, came directly out of the post-colonial army tradition and focused on the surviving members of established Bengali military units which escaped massacre. With the cooperation of the Indian authorities and under the auspices of a number of Bangladesh military officers these remnants were organised into two brigades based in the Indian border territories of Assam and Tripura. In their command structure and organisation they were wholly conventional. Moreover, the strategic concepts which they reflected were typical, in mentality and outlook, of the subcontinent's post-colonial armies. In many ways they still seemed more British than the British. Officers' tents were carpeted, whisky was relished in the evenings, and Bengali batmen waited hand and foot on their officers.

These main force units were under the command of General M A G Osmany, a retired Pakistan Army officer. Operational command of the brigade stationed in the Indian territory of Tripura was under the direction of Khaled Musharruf. With its headquarters at Agartala it took the name of the 'K-Force'. In the north, a brigade based in Assam was under the direction of Ziaur Rahman and called itself the 'Z-Force'. By concentrating at an early stage the best existing military manpower in these two forces, the Bangladesh High Command opted for a strategy of confronting Pakistani forces by staging cross-border raids against enemy targets from bases within India. While each of these units expanded, it remained clear that neither the Z-Force nor the K-Force would be numerically or materially capable of defeating the 100,000 regular and irregular troops of the Pakistan Army. Ultimately this strategic course would require reliance on an allied army — the Indian Army — in order to vanquish Pakistani forces in the 'set-piece' battles of conventional warfare. On this, Osmany, the Awami League, and the Indian commanders were all agreed: a rapid resolution to the war was essential from a political standpoint. Their objective was to bring an Awami League government to power in Bangladesh as soon as possible.

By the middle of April 1971 the Indian government had decided its own national interests warranted massive backing of the Bangladesh cause. India had fought two expensive and inconclusive wars with Pakistan. Now the opportunity of a century lay at its door. It would cut Pakistan to size and establish itself as the unquestioned dominant power in the region. The Indian Congress party's interest in Bangladesh was to bring to power in Dacca a regime similar in character to its own secularism and international alignment. The implication for Bangladesh of a strategy which stressed reliance on conventional military formations was that inexorably it meant dependence on India for bases, training, and equipment.

Within the Bangladesh military command an alternate strategic approach was being put forward. It centred around a group of experienced commando officers who rejected the strategic concepts being advanced by General Osmany and Indian field commanders. This dissident group was most clearly reflected in the military ideas of Taher and Ziauddin. As sector commanders fighting inside Bangladesh, they rejected the main military line of the time which called for all sector headquarters to be set up on Indian territory. Taher and Ziauddin insisted on the contrary, urging that the capital of the provisional government and all military headquarters be based on Bangladesh territory. They also argued against the formation of main force battalions. Instead, they wanted all experienced military personnel to be dispersed into the districts and subdivisions of the country with orders to raise and train guerrilla brigades drawn from the peasantry. Within a year Taher had estimated that a peasant army of more than 100,000 men could have been raised. He argued that if this army were also a 'productive army', as many as 20 divisions could be raised and supported from the country's own resources. Stress was put on capturing enemy equipment rather than relying on foreign supplies. Only through a form of people's war, which relied upon the mass mobilisation and overwhelming support of the Bengali population, could the numerically greater Pakistani force with its superior firepower be overcome. People's war in their view was the only road to military victory where Bangladeshis — not Indians — would defeat Pakistan. This group remained categorically opposed to Indian military intervention.

Armed resistance took a third form. Civilians acting on their own initiative without formal organisation or co-ordination by any centre took spontaneous action and organised guerrilla resistance at hundreds of locations. Armed rebel groups of character from those activated by Abdul Matin's East Bengal Communist Party in Pabna and the Attri to the private armies of bandit elements such as Kader Siddiqui in the Tangail. But most groups arose without prior organisational form and were led by the new young patriots of the Bangladesh movement. It was this last form which Taher in his testimony termed the 'natural development of the forces struggling in our Liberation War'. Officers like Taher and Ziauddin struggled within the 'official' command structure for a policy which would stress the fullest development of the irregular forces of the Mukti Bahini. They hoped to merge their trained personnel among these new units and build up an armed force among the country's peasantry which one day would become the basis of a socialist army.
During the war Taher commanded two major engagements at Chilmari and Kamalpur. Both have gone down in the military history of the struggle as moments of remarkable courage and tactical skill. The campaign at Chilmari was a critical battle in breaking Pakistan’s military control of North Bengal. There were several reasons for the town’s significance as a target. Chilmari is a river port on the west bank of the Brahmaputra. It is also a railhead and possesses road access into the north. By utilising it as an inland naval base gunboats were able to range up and down the main course of the river making attacks on riverside villages and towns. Moreover, a small group of ultra-Islamic collaborators under the local Muslim League Chairman, Abu Kasim, were terrorising sympathisers to the nationalist cause in the Chilmari area. However, Chilmari’s deeper significance lay in Taher’s hope to secure a liberated area in which the provisional government could establish its political headquarters inside Bangladesh. The nearby Raumari subdivision had been discussed as the best site. But in August Pakistani gunboats based in Chilmari began raiding into liberated areas of the subdivision. The strength of the Pakistani outpost at Chilmari therefore had to be destroyed.

During the month prior to the Chilmari assault a conference of sector commanders was held. Taher put forward his strategic concepts in this meeting. He opposed the formation of regular battalions and argued that all military commands be moved inside Bangladesh’s borders and off Indian territory. He was supported by Ziauddin and somewhat surprisingly by Ziaur Rahman [Zia] who was commander of the Z-Force. Years later the relationship between Taher and Zia so firmly forged in this period of war would take on great importance. Until this conference they had operated jointly in the 11th Sector. And at this important meeting Zia had supported Taher’s proposal on moving headquarters inside the country and moving towards a position of minimal reliance on India. However, Colonel Osmanli, Major Khaled Musharraf, and Major Safullah opposed the plan. This history of partnership between Taher and Zia made Zia’s betrayal of the ‘Twelve Demands’ raised during the November 7 Uprising in 1975 all the more incredible for those soldiers and Mukti Bahini elements who backed the revolutionary objectives of the War of Independence. The radicals had regarded Zia as a committed nationalist who had avoided corruption where other officers had not. They considered him a man who might be won over to the ideology of the oppressed classes. But never did they expect he would become the rallying point of the rightist forces within the army. It was a serious miscalculation comparable to the trust the Chinese communists had put in their alliance with Chiang Kai-shek prior to the 1927 massacres.

Following this commanders’ conference a decision was made to move the brigade commanded by Zia out of the 11th Sector where it had been jointly operating with Taher’s forces. The Z-Force was shifted to operations in the Sylhet region while its main headquarters was positioned inside India at Meghalaya. Despite this sudden reduction of forces within the 11th Sector, Taher chose to proceed with the attack on Chilmari. Planning for the attack began in the middle of September at the moment Zia’s forces were being shifted out. Relying mainly on newly trained recruits the Chilmari assualt force moved into position in early October. On October 11 the difficult task of secretly transporting 1,200 guerrilla fighters across the Brahmaputra under cover of darkness was accomplished by organising a fleet of sixty deep-bottomed country boats. The plan of operation called for the carrying out of simultaneous attacks at Courghaca, Rajvita, Thanhat, and the main Pakistani garrison headquartered in Chilmari’s concrete-bunkered WAPDA complex. Other units were sent south of Chilmari to destroy road and railway bridges. The attack began and after bitter fighting Pakistani forces were overwhelmed. The guerrillas occupied the town for 24 hours removing vast quantities of captured arms and ammunition and taking with them a large number of prisoners. The foodstores of the Pakistani Army were opened to local villagers and two leading collaborators who commanded local Razakars [Pakistani irregulars] were captured.

After Chilmari Taher’s forces turned their main attention to Kamalpur. Strategically it was a critical target. In Taher’s view the final assault on Dacca would come from the 11th Sector after sequential attacks through Kamalpur, Jamalpur, and ultimately Dacca. The seige of Kamalpur began on October 24. The strategy was to encircle the Pakistani garrison, whistling it down with small attacks, and cutting off its access to new supplies and reinforcements.

In one account of the Kamalpur battle, published in the Bengali weekly Bichitra and written by a journalist fighting at the time with the 11th Sector’s forces, Taher’s reflections on guerrilla war were summed up:

Taher not only seemed to us an authority on political philosophy, but he was a guerrilla specialist as well. He had every desire and had become enough understanding about the history of guerrilla warfare. When holding a meeting of freedom fighters, he would often talk about this history of the guerilla fighter. One evening he said to us, “You are the nation’s freedom fighters and you must understand the history of liberation struggles. History teaches us that we are not the final determinant in the success of war. Courage and the people’s respect are the driving forces in war — especially guerrilla war. Forget the word ‘attack’. In the dictionary of the guerilla fighter there is no place for words other than raid, ambush, and gherao. Be sure the enemy has no scope to find you. Search for the enemy and keep him busy. If the enemy attacks, then you turn back. If the enemy retreats then you advance. And if the enemy breaks through your lines, you disperse and encircle him. If the enemy encircles you, then break through his weak point with a fierce attack.”

On the battlefield there was no time for speeches. But in those words Taher summed up the whole history of guerrilla struggle. This day his voice was dispassionate. There was a scientific logic to what he said and the boys tried to implement his line of thinking word-for-word. On November 13 after three weeks of ambushes and small-scale assaults had weakened the Pakistan garrison, Taher ordered a final full-scale attack on Kamalpur. On November 14 as he commanded the final assault, Taher’s left leg was blown off. While he was carried to the base’s field hospital, Kamalpur was attacked again and finally fell into Bangladesh hands. Initially there was doubt whether Taher would live, but after several operations at the Poona Military Hospital he recovered.

Despite opposition from the dissident group within the Bengali military command, Indian forces intervened en masse in the conflict on December 3. The Commander-in-Chief of the Bangladesh forces, M A G Osmany, and his regular Bengali brigades, were virtual surrogates of the Indian High Command, as the so-called ‘Joint Headquarters’ of the two nations opted for a final conventional con-
fronton of forces against Pakistan. More than 150,000 Indian troops began their roll towards Dacca. Broken of will and completely isolated from West Pakistan, the Army of Pakistan collapsed and surrendered on the 16th of December. The first forces to reach the Dacca Command Headquarters of the Pakistan Army were those of the 11th Sector. Taher's brother, Abu Yusuf Khan, plucked the flag from General Niazi's (Pakistan's C-in-C Eastern Command) staff car as prized symbol of the 11th Sector's last attack.

THE CONQUEST OF INDEPENDENCE

On the surface the intervention of Indian forces into the conflict was not an unpopular development. The terror spread by the Pakistani Army had been unrelenting and people were genuinely glad to be free of it. As Indian soldiers arrived in Dacca and other towns, they were cheered. The defeat of the Pakistani forces had been accomplished and this was itself a great achievement both for Bengalis and Indians — albeit for very different reasons. And in the process of the war an object deeper than the religious bitterness which had originally separated the subcontinent appeared to have been won.

However, while haloed portraits of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Indira Gandhi adorned homes and hung from tea shops all across a newly independent Bangladesh, the small incidents which would later turn alternation into animosity had already begun. As Indian forces captured Pakistani supply depots, Indian commanders immediately began ordering the removal of a vast quantity of captured arms and ammunition. Four divisions' worth of captured equipment was packed up and shipped across the border into India. Bangladesh commanders who objected were ignored. At the lower levels, it was not so easy. In Khulna District under the 9th Sector Command of a Bangladesh officer, Major M A Jallil, a direct confrontation occurred. Jallil objected to the movement of captured weapons into India. Under Indian pressure Bangladesh's provisional government arrested Jallil for insubordination and ordered him court martialed. Upon his release from prison a year later following a trial which exonerated him, Jallil became the figurehead President of the JSD.

In Jessore and other districts actual fighting broke out at several places between Mukti Bahini irregulars and Indian troops attempting to remove captured equipment across the border. The Bengalis claimed that captured material was Bangladesh property and not Indian war booty. At the Chittagong Naval Base Indian units removed every gram of moveable equipment from typewriters to ceiling fans to the silverware in the Officers' Mess — only the Admiral's desk was left untouched. And while in all fairness it must be noted that a number of Indian officers were ultimately court martialed for looting, the mass removal of captured weapons was a careful policy decision made by India. New Delhi was determined to prevent sophisticated weaponry from falling into the hands either of Bangladesh's politically left; guerrilla forces or for it to become the basis of a well equipped national army on India's eastern flank. India had fought this war to neutralise its eastern front and it now made this clear to the Bengalis. They would be allowed second hand vintage weaponry from Indian stocks for purposes of internal security and no more.

But the first insult came even earlier. According to Taher's military colleagues, it was a matter he often referred to in private. The conquest of the Pakistani Army was symbolised by the moment of defeat when in a dramatic ceremony, the Pakistani Commander, General Niazi, signed the declaration of surrender. Niazi had surrendered to the Indian Commander, General Jagjit Singh Aurora. No Bangladesh officer was in attendance. Taher often said that Osmany, Zia, and other Bangladesh military men had failed the country by depriving the Bangladesh forces of this moment of history. Taher had been wounded during the Kamalapur assault, a month prior to the war's end, but units under his command in the 11th Sector were among the first to enter Dacca on the 16th of December. He would later claim that he had lost his leg at Kamalapur and been in Dacca on the 16th, Niazi then would have had to surrender to a Bengali and not an Indian.

In April 1972 Taher returned to Bangladesh after further surgery on the amputated leg. He was appointed Adjutant General of the Bangladesh Army and while in this post began proceedings against a number of senior officers — most notably Safullah and Mir Sawkat Ali — for their illegal acquisition of property during the war.

Outside the army many senior officials of the Awami League had begun to acquire the 'abandoned property' of West Pakistan's — who had fled or who had allegedly 'collaborated' with the Pakistani Army. Among a small section of the military the looting spirit had also developed and Taher was determined to stop the rot in the troops under his command. "My position", he told the tribunal, "was that everything any officer had illegally acquired must be returned". Within a few months Taher took command of the 44th Brigade at Comilla. His close friend Ziauddin with whom he had escaped from Pakistan took charge of the most important command in the country: the Dacca Brigade. Both Taher and Ziauddin in their respective units began immediate measures against corruption. Taher ordered all officers under his command to surrender the property they had acquired illegally during or after the Liberation War. In a dramatic gesture in front of the Dacca Brigade's Signal Corps Ziauddin built a vast bonfire of the loot handed in by officers and sepoys. As the entire brigade stood to attention television sets, refrigerators, and radios went up in flames. "I had a set of officers whose consciences were completely clear", Taher told the tribunal, "This is what I regarded as leadership. I always sought to appeal to what was good in men. I detested and avoided taking advantage of the weakness of an individual".

Differences which had previously existed over questions of war strategy took a new form in the post-independence period. Attempts to restore and rebuild an army in Bangladesh in accordance with the traditional concepts, practices, and colonial pattern of a 'conventional army' began. At the command level Taher and Ziauddin actively opposed such measures. They argued that in a poor and backward country like Bangladesh only two choices existed for an army that adopted a conventional pattern. If the Army remained simply the defence and security force of the state, as it had always been, then in a poor nation the armed forces could only exist as a great economic burden drawing off the small economic surplus necessary for investment and expanded production. Or such an army must ultimately compromise national independence and become dependent on foreign military assistance or imperialist loans.

In a twenty-year history of associa-
tion with the United States under a series of mutual security agreements, the Pakistan Army had grown to an enormous size. In 1958 this 'sacred cow' of the Pakistani state and child of American aid pushed aside the nascent parliamentary institutions and imposed an era of military dictatorship. It annually consumed close to 60 per cent of the nation's revenue budget. The expansion was financed by draining the domestic economic surplus and by becoming one piece in the complex maze of American military alliances. For Pakistan's loyalty to both CENTO and SEATO the United States was willing to provide a billion US dollars in military assistance.

It was precisely this type of development which Taher and Ziauddin wished to avoid. They proposed, therefore, a policy of 'self-reliance'. Soldiers would not only carry a gun, but would also work like peasants and workers. All brigades were to raise their own food and begin productive work in villages near their camps. During the summer of 1972 at a Brigade Commanders' meeting held in Dacca units made their final proposals for the designs which would become brigade insignias. It was at this meeting, when Taher was asked what was the symbol of the Comilla Brigade would be, that he reportedly pushed a design of a plough across the conference table. From then onwards the men of the Comilla Brigade were called the 'plough soldiers'. In Comilla itself soldiers began intensive cultivation of crops and organised a plantation of several hundred thousand pineapples. All officers and men were required to do physical labour every day. Special work teams were organised to visit villages and identify fallow land which the army offered to help plough and plant. Irrigation and flood control works were also identified by army engineers. Taher called it the 'productive army'. But three years later the euphemism would be dropped when in the language of the November 7 Uprising rebelling soldiers would call for a 'People's Army: An armed force of the oppressed classes'.

The new modes of military organisation which had been advanced by Taher and Ziauddin were not to last. By late in the summer of 1972 Ziauddin in particular had become deeply disillusioned over the political direction of the country. In a signed article in the opposition weekly, Holiday, he openly stated his views. "Independence has become an agony for the people of this country", wrote Ziauddin. "Stand on the street and you see purposeless, spiritless lifeless faces going through the mechanics of life. Generally, after a liberation war the 'new spirit' carries through and the country builds itself out of nothing. In Bangladesh the story is simply the other way round. The whole of Bangladesh is either begging or singing sad songs or shouting without awareness. The hungry and poor are totally lost. This country is on the verge of falling into the abyss."

Ziauddin also argued that there had been a 'betrayal' of the national struggle because a 'secret treaty' had been signed with India. He called for a full public disclosure of the terms of this agreement. He then concluded with a harsh statement against the Prime Minister, Mujibur Rahman. Referring to Mujib who had spent nine months of the war in a Pakistani prison, Ziauddin wrote: 'We fought without him and won. And now if need be we will fight again."

For the Commander of the Dacca Brigade Ziauddin's article was hardly an act of soldierly obedience. It was published while Mujib was out of the country. When he returned, the Prime Minister met Ziauddin and assured him there would be no formal recriminations, if he offered an official apology. Ziauddin refused and late in 1972 he was dismissed from army service. Taher and others who had supported him were also 'released' from active duty.

Throughout 1972-73 radical elements in the state administration and army structure who had opposed foreign aid and argued for an austere and self-reliant approach toward reconstruction were being purged. Within a few months of Ziauddin's dismissal from the Army others who held similar views were finding themselves in an untenable position. Anisur Rahman of Bangladesh's Planning Commission, writing in The Business Review of Dacca, reflected on the dilemma of the period:

"On the morrow of the liberation, the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh had announced its intention not to accept aid from any country which had been hostile to its liberation struggle, no matter what this policy would cost the nation. This was a very exciting decision. If followed, this would have meant no US aid for Bangladesh, and thus the biggest single supply source of foreign aid would have been cut off... the nation would have been forced to adopt a more austere reconstruction and development policy than it has followed... such a highly respectable and courageous policy, if faithfully followed, would have raised Bangladesh as a nation... Besides, a government which could sustain such a challenging attitude to foreign aid, would certainly have adopted equally bold distribution policies at home, so that the suffering from whatever post-liberation shortages there would have existed, would have been widely shared and hence much better tolerated. Dedicated patriots who had taken an active part in the liberation war under trying circumstances, people's committees and vigilance squads would naturally have featured prominently in the distribution system. In short, institutions would have changed, and with it the very social landscape of the nation.

But all this is fantasy. The radicals in the government did attempt a policy coup. The radical aid policy was followed by a thousand taka ceiling on salaries which for a time stunned the high salaried class. But the right-wing regrouped fast and the 'counter-revolution' was swift and decisive. Powerful right-wing pressure soon changed the aid policy and the door was thrown open to any donor who would now pose as a friend irrespective of past conduct; the salary ceiling was raised to two thousand taka plus a car to be run and maintained at the public expense. All other pronouncements about austerity and egalitarianism were reduced to empty slogans. By now, the country has firmly entered into a course of heavy indebtedness, particularly to the very country [USA] which had wanted the destruction of Bangladesh as a nation."

As this commentary indicates, the beginning of the Awami League's decline had set in within the first year of independence. The idealism and enthusiasm the party had inspired in its struggle against Pakistan's military dictatorship was being drowned in a sea of corruption. And the corruption was funded principally by nearly 2 billion dollars' worth of relief commodities, aid, contracts, and international business which poured in from the bountiful overseas cornucopia following independence. While the bribe, the kickback, and the payoff had obviously existed in the familiar form known as bakhsheesh, what was new was the extraordinary sums now involved. In two and a half years the regime in Dacca received more aid than it had received in its previous 23 years as the province of East Pakistan. Talk of 'black money' and stories of illicit trade deals became part of the dark new folklore of the post-independence period.

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Prior to independence East Bengal had been a rather quiet distant place — the most remote province of Pakistan. Travellers journeying from South-east to South Asia via Bangkok,Banggoon and Calcutta invariably skipped Dacca. There were few international flights into the city and after 1965 there were no flights through Calcutta, now the main transit point for Bangladesh. Civil war and independence had suddenly catapulted Bangladesh from a backwater region on the peripheral of the world market into a nation with increasingly strategic importance.

Radical critics who found themselves being shunted out of the army and critical ministries charged that foreign aid had become the prime source for the criminalisation of the country’s politics and the destruction of idealism which emerged from the period of the guerrilla war. "This was, of course, only to be expected", wrote Anisur Rahman on the eve of his departure from the Planning Commission. "The revolution that liberated Bangladesh was a national bourgeois revolution. There was nothing in the class character of the leadership to expect any commitment of self-imposed hardship in pursuance of ideological goals."23

The most notorious example of the style of primitive accumulation indulged in by members of the new régime was that of Gazi Ghulam Mustafa, President of Dacca City’s Awami League and Chairman of Bangladesh’s Red Cross Society. Mustafa established a multi-million dollar black market operation in relief goods which became the principal financial source for party financing. At one stage the Director of the United Nations Relief Operation in Bangladesh (UNROB) observed that it had gotten so bad that roughly one out of seven tins of baby food and one out of thirteen blankets donated to relief ever reached the poor. Besides John Stonehouse, the British Labour Party MP whose illicit dealings ultimately put him behind bars, a number of other foreigners became enterprising 'soldiers of fortune' in the midst of misery. One European official of the United Nations transport division, which at one point controlled the import and shipment of much of Bangladesh’s worth of goods into the country, was reported to have made over a million and to have purchased a hotel in Sardinya from his Bangladesh 'earnings'.24 In 1974 the World Bank, that leading light of international lending, became enamished in a scandal involving its northwest irrigation project, when it was revealed that the Bank had knowingly paid $4 million in bribes.25

It was in this situation that the Awami League’s most militant supporters from 1970 turned into its most active opposition. By late 1974 government officials were openly admitting that more than 3,000 Awami League officials had been assassinated either through intra-party rivalry or by various underground groups. Open forms of insurgency were developing in certain sections of the country. Among the most active of the armed groups was Siraj Siddar’s Purba Bangla Serena Bhara Party (East Bengal Proletarian Party), also known as the East Bengal Worker’s Movement (EBWM). Prior to independence it had existed as a group of young communists committed to the thesis that the main contradiction in Pakistan was a conflict between the ruling class of West Pakistan and the exploited masses of East Pakistan. The EBWM said revolution in East Pakistan had to take the form of a revolution for national independence. By denying this, said the EBWM, other ‘so-called’ pro-Peking groups were denying the main political contradiction of Pakistan. After having taken an active role in the independence struggle the Serena Party reorganised its guerrilla squads. Following independence the Serena Party identified the Mujib government as its main enemy, and gradually it built up a campaign of assaults on police outposts across the country.

In the spring of 1974 the Serena Party and the Marxist underground in general received an unusual recruit. In May of that year leaflets appeared in Dacca’s main military cantonment and in other sections of the city, announcing that Lt Colonel M Ziauddin, the former commander of the Dacca Brigade, had joined Sikdar’s East Bengal Proletarian Party. After his dismissal from the Army Ziauddin began to get to know a side of Bangladesh his upper class education had led him away from. Before the war he had been more conversant in English or Urdu than Bengali. Now he turned in a new direction. For half a year he rode the rails of Bangladesh in third class train compartments visiting rural areas and making efforts to change his old personal habits in order to ‘de-class’ himself. When he came to Dacca, as he frequently did, Ziauddin would often stay with Taher’s family in Narayanganj on the outskirts of Dacca. He borrowed books from new found leftist friends outside the army and tried to learn something of the classics of Marxism.

In February of 1974 Ziauddin’s closest friends suddenly lost touch with him. He had ‘disappeared’. But in late February, a friend received a one-letter sentence from the former Commander of the Dacca Brigade. It read, “I have crossed the line”. Nothing more was heard until May, when the leaflet under his signature appeared throughout Dacca announcing he had joined the Marxist underground.

Over the same period parallel and important developments were taking place within the Awami League itself. In 1972 the two trends which had existed in the Awami League for nearly a decade began to come apart. Ten years earlier in 1962 a ‘nucleus’ of young men had joined the League, with the conscious notion of advancing the socialist cause, by mobilising a multi-class struggle for national independence, through the vehicle of the Awami League. They had fully expected that at a certain stage they would have to break off and establish an independent position. The day Mujib returned to Bangladesh from prison in Pakistan, January 10, 1972, the ‘nucleus’ began publication of their Bengali mouthpiece Gonokontho (Voice of the People). Over the next two years, before its offices were burned and ransacked and its editor arrested, the paper would achieve a daily circulation second only to the leading and traditional Bengali daily Ittefaq.

Mujib returned to mass acclaim in Dacca. But on arrival he was immediately approached by the same leaders of the Students’ League who a year earlier had pressured him into declaring an independent Bangladesh. They outlined their proposals on a vigorous programme of nationalisation, co-operatives, agrarian reform, and post-war reconstruction. They called upon the Awami League to adopt a specific programme for the transition to socialism. They also proposed the formation of a ‘government of national unity’ including all parties — not just the Awami League — which had fought against Pakistan. Mujib rejected this and other proposals. Instead, imbued with his own apparent popularity and new found international image, he advanced his own vague ideological package called ‘The Four Pillars of Mujibism’ (The Mujibad): Nationalism, Secularism, Socialism, and Democracy. To his militant supporters of 1970...
Mujib's new programme was simply an empty pot to be filled with the fruits of a foreign constitution, and not the ideals of the independence struggle. For the militants the time for a complete break had come.

In April 1972, four months after Mujib's return and at the peak of his popularity, the left 'nucleus' broke the Students' League in half. The following month, in May, they divided the peasant federation, the Jatiyo Krishak League. In June, they split the workers' front, breaking up the Shramik League, and forming their own parallel organisation. On October 21, 1972 a Convening Committee of the Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal (JSD/Socialist Nationalist Party) was founded. It included a number of important, but secret members such as Colonel Abu Taher. In May of 1972 the Central Organising Committee expanded further into a National Committee of the JSD.

In June of 1974 following an extended meeting of the National Committee a smaller Co-ordination Committee was formed, and at this session the 1962 'nucleus' officially dissolved itself, and merged into the Co-ordination Committee of the JSD. During the June 1974 session, a draft thesis and a demand for a constitution for a socialist party were put forward. The document had been drafted by a committee which among others included Shaheen Khan, Nasruddin Huq, and Harunur Rashid. No party, however, was officially formed. The National Committee held the position that they were 'in the process of forming a socialist party'. No party could officially be formed until a 'national congress' could be held. The National Committee considered that the overall development of the movement in Bangladesh had not yet reached such a stage, although they thought it near. Members were directed to start forming nuclei at the district and lower levels where the draft thesis would be discussed and Marxist-Leninist principles were to be propagated to a wider and wider circle. In April 1974 the National Committee began publication of the party's theoretical journal Samyabad ("Communism") and at the end of 1974 they began issuing Lari ("Struggle"), as the organ of the 'democratic movement' supported by the JSD. In July 1974 the JSD officially founded its armed wing called the Biplopi Gono Bahini (People's Revolutionary Army) commanded by a still anonymous Colonel Abu Taher.

In the country as a whole stability was deteriorating further as the economic situation stumbled from disarray to disaster. The period of 1973-74, following war in the Middle East, was a period of deep crisis on international commodity markets. The world price explosion in foodgrains and oil occurred simultaneously with a period of deep internal crisis within Bangladesh. Both combined in such a way that the country was driven into the agony of the worst famine since 1943.

Besides, the intransigence, arrogance, and profiteering with which Mujib's Awami League administration approached impending developments only compounded its existing 'man-made' dimensions. Three reports filed by this writer in the summer and fall of 1974 will give some sense of the situation at the level of national administration and its subsequent consequences in the countryside.

August 1974: Inflation of over 40 per cent has decimated real incomes and brought enormous hardship to families whose margins for survival disappeared years ago. The government's cost-of-living index for industrial workers in the Dacca-Narayanganj area reached 325.45 in May (1969-70=100). The price index for workers moved from 314 to 314. In Chittagong and several other district towns the situation is even worse.

Should monetary expansion be viewed as a reason of equal or greater cause for spiralling prices, then, logically not only would smugglers and hoarders be lined up before the firing squad, but so would government officials responsible for monetary policy.

One need not be a follower of Milton Friedman in order to believe that an extraordinary expansion in Bangladesh's money supply, during a period when the economy had not yet recovered to 1970 production levels, is one very substantial cause of the country's rampaging inflation. Official data published by the Bangladesh Bank state that, at the time of independence in December 1971, money supply (currency in circulation and demand deposits) stood at Taka 3,880 million. At the end of June 1974 the Planning Commission put the money supply at Taka 8,400 million, or a 116 per cent increase in a little over a half years. Since 1969-70, the period used as a 'benchmark' level for producing a recovery, it has been at least 290 per cent.

The government's monetary policy has served to finance enormous and unplanned budgetary deficits. In the first year alone, a large-scale influx of relief commodities hid the inflationary power of the growing money supply, as increasing currency and an increasing supply of relief commodities. However, since relief goods did not represent real additions to production and production itself did not increase to match monetary growth, the dragon of inflation was let loose when the flow of relief goods began to ebb.

The poverty and increasing unemployment in the country's 65,000 villages has, if anything, become even worse since independence. 46 million people, out of a total population of 74 million, were living below the poverty line. These are people who do not earn enough to consume 2,100 calories a day. They are mainly landless peasants and agricultural labourers. Of a rural population of 66 million in 1970, roughly 40 per cent or 26 million people, were landless. Real wages for these agricultural labourers have fallen despite a modest rise during the days of East Pakistan. In 1949, agricultural workers earned Taka 697 per annum (with 1966 taken as the base), in 1961 Taka 733, in 1964 Taka 852, and in 1969 Taka 834. By 1973, however, the real income of agricultural workers was Taka 580. In short, the landless peasants of Bangladesh were earning 17 per cent less in 1973 than in 1949. ("A State of Siege", Far Eastern Economic Review, August 30, 1974.)

October 1974: In the first three days of October, nineteen 'official' starvation deaths in Dacca City were reported, but the actual number is believed to be much greater. A chain of stories and stories are linking the deteriorating situation in the rural areas with aocomplicity in the capital that has been born of monetary, pricing policies and hardened by political disillusionment. Medical workers in Faridpur report villagers refusing inoculations, declaring that they would prefer to die quickly from disease rather than slowly from hunger. And in Saitpur there have been numerous stories of suicides in Bihar camps where starvation has been endemic for more than a year.

All the preliminary signs of a major famine have been unfolding for weeks. Large numbers of peasants wandering into the towns, the reports of starvation deaths, and now a decision by Dacca to open gruel kitchens in the districts, are confirmation. The situation is expected to get much worse, mainly because the authorities are unlikely to take effective action on food prices. The phenomenon of the price of rice over the past half year is the main factor for the strava-
tion now overwhelming the ranks of the poorer classes. The harvesters of months of grain available from private stocks, and corruption in the nation's grain trade. The markets are full of grain — at a price.

As the famine intensifies, there will continue to be substantial supplies of grain available from private stocks, but at an increasingly higher price. During the great Bengal Famine of 1943, a number of famous families lost their fortunes in the merchant grain trade. It is widely believed in Dacca that many fortunes are being made in the current situation. Referring to profiteering, one high UN official in Dacca has said: 'What is coming up will be a man-made famine.'

During the third week in September, the price of rice suddenly rocketed to nearly Ta 400 (US $ 30.77) per maund (53 kg), or ten times the pre-independence of three years ago. The increase would be the equivalent of an American family paying $4 for a loaf of bread they bought at 40 cents three years back. ("Reaping A Harvest of Misery", Far Eastern Economic Review, October 25, 1974.)

November 1974: Rangpur District, Northern Bangladesh. It appears the entire year has been a period of preparation for a dreadful holocaust of hunger; awaited, dreaded and yet, like the certainty of a rising wave, is a constancy reminiscent of Bengal's 1943 famine appears to be being re-enacted with all the attendant horror and indifference. For those who have soberly observed the Bangladesh economy and administration, this last terrible descent comes as no surprise.

Rangpur District in northern Bengal has been most seriously affected, although advanced starvation has been reported in other areas, particularly Jamalpur in western Mymensingh and parts of Faridpur, Noakhali, and Khulna. It is Rangpur, however, which has become the nation's central death trap.

On October 24 the Rangpur Treasury was a setting of frenzy, reminiscent of the run-on-the-bank scenes in Europe and America during the 1920s and 1930s, as thousands of people jammed and fought their way through the office to procure the official stamp to attach to their land deeds. By early October, small holders had gone through all their cash, and so came the last desperate throw — an arduous effort to sell land for money to buy rice.

Treasury officials said they could not recall such a massive transfer of land ownership in the district, estimating that more than 100,000 acres of land have been sold in the past three months at half their normal price. A bigha of land (third of an acre) which sold at Taka 2,000 six months ago, is now fetching only Taka 1,000. So the peasants are losing out in two directions, with land prices plummeting and rice prices rocketing. In Rangpur rice is selling at Taka 400 a maund (77 lbs), but only three years ago the price was one-tenth of that level and six months ago, it was half as much. District officials conservatively estimate that between 15,000 and 25,000 people have died in the Rangpur area during the past three months. According to a medical officer, the cause is 'absolute starvation' and not from the famous so-called ailment of malnutrition.

Certain officials speaking very much off the record, claim closer to 50,000 people, have died. The local unit of the opposition JSD claims 100,000 people have perished. Whatever the true figures, all sides admit that with the onset of cold weather and the lack of any major relief effort, the number of victims will roughly treble before the famine is over.

Rangpur officials have agreed privately that one death per village per week was a fair, if not low, estimate. That means if even half the 4,800 villages of the district were free from starvation, which they are not, at least 2,000 people would be dying each week. When projected to the rest of the country's nineteen districts, the figures are not in such a serious position as Rangpur, the magnitude can only be calculated in the realms of imagination reserved for the appalling ("A Death Trap Called Rangpur", Far Eastern Economic Review, November 15, 1974.)

The year of the famine became the pivot of Mujib's decline. Where in 1971 as the unchallenged leader of the nationalist movement Mujib had spoken to crowds of more than a million, in 1974 he rarely ventured out to address an open meeting. Disturbances were too likely. In December 1973 the JSD was already holding mass rallies of crowds up to 100,000 on Dacca's Paton Maidan. In January and February 1974 the JSD led two successful nation-wide general strikes. Then on March 17 after a larger meeting on the Paton Maidan, JSD leaders led a hunger march to the Home Minister's residence. As they reached the Minister's home, units of the Rakkhi Bahini, a special paramilitary force trained under Indian government auspices, arrived. Within moments they opened fire and the procession ended in the blood massacre. An official announcement confirmed 8 deaths while doctors at Dacca Medical College spoke of more than 30. Following this incident many JSD leaders were arrested, the party's offices were ransacked, and Gonokotho, the JSD paper, was burned down and its editor arrested. The party was forced underground.

But by now two of the most active revolutionary groups in the country had senior and experienced military personalities within their ranks. That Ziauddin had joined Siraj Sidkar's Serbbarha Party was widely known from the party's leaflets. Taher's membership in the JSD, however, was a closely guarded party secret known by very few. During this period Taher moved openly in Dacca and stayed in close contact with military colleagues. As individuals Taher and Ziauddin remained intimate friends. Although Ziauddin was now a hunted man, they continued to stay in close touch. Ziauddin had been drawn to the Serbbarha Party because it was the militarily most active form of opposition to a regime he believed had betrayed the Liberation War. While Taher had ultimately hoped for unity among these various underground groups, he considered Sidkar's movement to be lacking in a mass base and a comprehensive programme of political and social analysis. The JSD, however, he regarded as being in the process of building up both a base and a political programme capable of becoming the foundation of a revolutionary socialist government. In the Serbbarha Party the gun seemed to command the party rather than the opposite. As a leading though secret figure in the JSD's armed force — the Biplopon Gonc Bahini — Taher considered himself under the political direction of the National Committee.

During 1974, revolutionary parties such as Sidkar's Serbbarha Party were stepping up their armed assaults on local police outposts. In famine areas there were stories of rebels breaking open government food warehouses and distributing the stocks to the hungry. In December 1974 Mujib put the country under Emergency rule suspending the Constitution and moving toward declaring himself President. The crackdown on underground parties intensified. At the end of December Siraj Sidkar was captured by a police dragnet in Chittagong. Within days of his arrest he was shot in the back while 'trying to escape'. There was little doubt among most observers in Dacca that Sidkar had been murdered in police custody. An explosive situation was developing. Within six months Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would be dead.
Zia’s November 23 Counter-Coup: Taher’s Arrest

This account opened with an execution. It followed with a letter which cannot easily be forgotten by those who read it and care to know the history of Bangladesh in this period. In the letter Taher appeals to those present during the secret sessions of Military Tribunal No 1 to “expose the secret behind this trial... to expose the truth”. The truth on this case is, of course, banned in Bangladesh. The object of this text has been to examine both the history of a period and how out of that period this man paid such a price for being a revolutionary. Taher’s executioners and their foreign patrons would perhaps like him to be forgotten: to have his memory and his principles fade into the silent walls and galleries of Dacca Central Jail. But there is a peculiar quality about the truth. On a few occasions it emerges.

This examination makes no claim to cover the whole matter. There is much more to be written, other details to be unearthed, further statements to be made. It is my hope that these will come from Bengali writers and that my comments will only be an opening crack on the shell of secrecy encasing this and other cases of the special Military Tribunals.

Yet, even in this account there is more to tell before it can be closed. We have touched on many dates — August 15, November 3, November 7 — but the sequence is not complete. As has been discussed, the year 1974 was the year of Bangladesh’s ‘revolutionary left’. From the JSD and the Serbbara Party to Maulana Bhashani and Toaha’s Samyabadi Dal, they collectively developed and expressed the rising public antagonism to Mujib’s corrupt and faltering regime. But, while it was the Left which through open agitation and underground action had assiduously prepared the ground for popular revolt, when the moment came it was the right which struck. The night Mujib and some forty members of his family died, Bangladesh and the world woke up to a story of six army majors and the soldiers immediately under their command having been the ones that pulled the trigger. For the country they offered up little more than the extreme right wing of Mujib’s own Awami League in the figure of Khondakar Mustaque Ahmed. Ideologically they proposed a throwback to the old Pakistan formula of Allah being the pillar of the state and America being the financial and military underpin. China’s antagonism to Soviet-backed Indian ‘expansionism’ could also be drawn in, as Ayub Khan had once done to frighten off New Delhi’s overbearing proclivities. But most importantly, the general impression had successfully been spread that the six majors had acted alone and unilaterally. However, as with much else, even this well constructed illusion may one day become unravelled.

The questions of political theory and history which underlay these events have been examined. Now it is appropriate to return to the account of Taher’s life with which this essay began. Following the violent insurrectionary morning of November 7, Taher and Ziaur Rahman met as if they were once again comrades fighting in the 11th Sector. By several accounts of the moment, Zia emotionally embraced Taher as he entered the compound, expressing his deepest gratitude for the event which had saved him. Only four days previously the two men had been cut off in mid-conversation as Zia, on the verge of being arrested, telephoned Taher hoping he might rally forces opposed to Khaled Musharraf’s putsch.

Immediately after Khaled’s takeover enormous tensions began to develop within the rank and file of the armed forces. NCOs and JCOs converged on Taher’s residence in Narayanganj appealing for leadership and action. A number of these officers and men were members of the Revolutionary Soldiers’ Organisation. Biplopi Sainik Sangstha which the JSD had anonymously been organising for more than a year. They had been planning their own general uprising against Mujib at the time of his assassination. But they opposed putsches and coups. Their plan had been to deepen massive urban and peasant agitations before moving on a military front. But the military putsches of August and November had created a new situation. The JSD chose to back an uprising which they judged would have massive spontaneous support, and if successful, would bring open the straight jacket around the country’s political life. Under Taher’s leadership the JSD activated the military organisation and set the wheel of the rebellion into motion.

According to the JSD’s journal Samaybad, their organisations acted for the following reasons:

When Khaled Musharraf and his faction came to power, they immediately engaged themselves in bringing about an increase in Indo-Soviet political dominance over Bangladesh. The Awami League and its tail — the parties of the Moni-Muzaffar circle — came out openly and made all efforts to re-establish the image of Sheikh Mujib. However, by then the armed forces, in particular the jansuns of the army became agitated by the coups, the power struggles of their officers, and the way the sepoys were being used as tools only to serve the interests of the bourgeoisie. Their sentiments were expressed in the leaflets issued by the Revolutionary Soldiers’ Organisation (Biplopi Gono Bahini) and distributed in the Dacca Cantonment on November 5, 1975. On the night of November 6, the revolutionary membership of the organisation in direct communication with the People’s Revolutionary Army (Biplopi Gono Bahini) took a firm decision to come out of the barracks and bring about the final downfall of the Khaled Musharraf group.

Khaled Musharraf’s faction was completely defeated through the uprising of the sepoys — initiated by a joint organisation of the Revolutionary Forces and the People’s Revolutionary Army — thus giving them their first victory over the new regime. The decision to act was taken:

First: to shatter the unity of the most active, organised, and oppressive armed group of the bourgeois state machinery.

Second: to minimise the organizing capacities of the bourgeoisie.

Third: to weaken the imperialist, revisionist, and hegemonist forces which are the patrons of the national bourgeoisie.

Fourth: to force the new rule to bring back a democratic situation as far as possible with a view to ultimately eliminating the elements of bourgeois democracy.

Fifth: to prepare the ground for an introduction and growth of proletarian state power and political forces parallel to the bourgeois system of state power.

The full extent of our participation and achievements in the events of November 7 and later, in mind, assessment and review of this matter, have been published in the booklets Larat (“Struggle”, fifth issue) and Jorai Jantar Gila Gare Tulon (“Forge Militant Mass-Unity”).

Unlike some interpretations of their activity, the JSD on November 7 did not consider itself to be out to establish a revolutionary government. Their objective was more modest. They hoped first of all to secure a general release of political prisoners detained during Mujib’s regime and held throughout Mustaque’s period in power. A large number of political prisoners, mainly of radical political groups, were under detention. The JSD had 10,000 members, including a number of National Committee members, in prison. They proposed on the 7th the establishment of an interim government, which would
include all parties which had suffered repression during Mujib's regime, and which had supported the independence struggle of the country. Religious communal parties, such as the Muslim League and the Jamat-e-Islami, which actively collaborated with the Pakistan Army, were to remain banned. The JSD called for such a government to hold fresh elections, restore press freedom, and allow open political meetings. Within the army, the urban work force, and in the rural areas they called for the setting up of new organs of authority in the form of soldiers' committees, thus by-passing the state bureaucracy as the source of authority. What they seemed to hope for was a Kerensky style interim regime during which 1917 style soldiers' and workers' soviets would be set up. New opportunities would open for consolidation and the building up of bases before a new crisis would either project their movement into power or drive it underground.

In the aftermath of the subsequent crackdown on the party, the JSD's decision to back Ziaur Rahman on the morning of the upsurge has remained a point of deep puzzlement. It appears that Taher was influential in this tactical choice. He believed, as did others, that Zia, while not a radical, would at least favour immediate democratic measures such as general amnesty, freeing of the press, and elections. They believed at least he would not actively oppose these steps. Taher and Zia had been close personal friends for years. After independence it was Taher and Ziauddin more than any other officers, who had built up Zia's popularity among the sepoys, as an honest nationalist. When Ziauddin had gone underground with the Serbhar Party, Zia discouraged junior officers from pursuing the chase too vigorously. In 1972 Zia had given quiet support within the High Command to Taher's deployment of a 'productive army' unit at Comilla. So on the 7th there was some basis upon which to expect his co-operation. On the evening of the mutiny Zia went and joined Taher at Bangladesh Radio. There Zia signed a document committing himself to the support of the 'Twelve Demands'. On November 8 Zia ordered the release of the JSD leadership from prison. The JSD President, Major M A Jalil, and the party's General Secretary, A S M Abdur Rab were freed. Permission was given for a public meeting at the central Bagal Café on November 9.

It is then that trouble developed. Police showed up at the Mukarram and broke up the JDS procession. The JDS student leader, A F M Mahbubul Haq, President of the Chattro League, was shot and wounded by police. While Zia at first wavered and even initially indicated tacit backing of the radical left inside the army, he soon completely reversed his stance. The aid for which he had appealed to Taher on the night of November 3 had come in a form he never imagined. While he hoped for the overthrow of Khaled's putsch, he now suddenly found himself besieged by 'soldiers' committees' calling for a 'classless army' without officers.

Forces fundamentally antagonistic to the radical dimensions of the upsurge rapidly tried to re-establish their position. Mahabub Alam Chashi, an important behind-the-scenes figure in the coup which toppled Mujib, reportedly was able to persuade Zia onto a new course. Basing its growth in the institutions of the American-trained national police, particularly the Special Combat paramilitary police units, and the National Security Intelligence (NSI) agency of the country, the right formed up its ranks.

A JDS document analysing the events described Zia's role in the following way:

Knowing full well that Major-General Zia was an ambitious man and lacked a progressive personality, he was nevertheless put in power mainly because the prevailing situation called for the 'upholding of national unity'. By placing at the top a seemingly non-political man like Zia, whom the people in general and the army would accept, this could be achieved. In addition, the weak position he was in due to having saved himself from possible death presented an opportunity to utilise him for the cause of working people's politics. He would be used, if possible, for the release of political prisoners, the staging of a free early election, the formation of an interim national government, liberating the country from the Indo-Soviet-US influence, and such other activities conducive to the revolutionary movement.

But shortly after having been put in such a powerful position, Zia realised that his personal class-based hopes and ambitions would not be materialised, if he remained under the influence of progressive forces... By November 10-11, he assumed a full reactionary role. Despite whatever correct statements he put forward at the outset, Zia right from the start moved towards the reactionary camp. By November 15 the JSD had publicly begun to dissociate itself from Zia, when he refused to order further prisoner releases and continued a ban on open political meetings. Newly issued leaflets sponsored by the JSD charged that Zia who had been 'freed' by the revolutionary jutana, was being led in a counter-revolutionary direction by 'the rightist reactionaries and pro-USA elements'.

A parallel might be made here to events in Portugal during 1974-75, when the radical Armed Forces Movement (MFA) overthrew Portuguese fascism. Although the radicals in the army led by Otelo Carvalho had been the ones to stage the April uprising, they temporarily aligned with more conservative elements led by General Spinola. Both groups initially agreed that the establishment of democratic rights and the dismantling of the fascist state were the first tasks of the democratic revolution. But this unity was soon to be broken and Spinola emerged as the new symbol and rallying point of the Portuguese right. It can be said that in less time than his Portuguese counterpart Zia became the 'Spinola' of Bangladesh.

On November 15, the newly freed JSD leaders, M A Jalil and A S M Abdur Rab, urged the immediate formation of 'revolutionary councils' among the army, jaunty, industrial workers, peasants, and intellectuals to assist the Biplou Gono Bahini usher in a proletarian revolution. They considered these to be pre-Soviet forms of state organisation. But events were moving fast. On November 23 Ziaur Rahman staged his counter-coup. Where Spinola failed, Zia succeeded. Relying again mainly on police forces outside the army, Zia ordered the rearrest of the JSD leadership. The night of the 23rd Jalil, Rab, and Hasanul Huq Inu were suddenly picked up. On the 24th of November paramilitary police surrounded Taher and arrested him.

Two days after Taher's arrest four sympathisers of the JSD including two of Taher's younger brothers attempted to take India's High Commissioner, Samar Sen, as a hostage. Sen was grabbed as he entered the embassy. While his abductors shouted — "Don't shoot! Hostage!" — the Ambassador's bodyguards opened fire with light machine guns, wounding the High Commissioner and killing two of the kidnappers instantly. One was Taher's brother. They never fired a shot. The two surviving members of the attempt confessed later to police that they had acted in the hope of holding Sen hostage in exchange for the release of Taher, Jalil, Rab, Inu, and other JSD leaders. They informed the police they acted independently and without party authority, but had done so because they
believed Zia had betrayed the revolution of November 7.

A general crackdown began throughout the country against the JSD. In the districts the police dragnet pulled in a number of local student and trade union leaders. In Dacca a strict curfew was imposed and areas cordoned off as police made house to house searches for party members. Severe trouble was reported from a number of cantonments following these arrests. In Dacca itself two dissident battalions were reported to have been disarmed with difficulty, while from Bogra, Comilla, and Rangpur reports of hundreds of soldiers being detained filtered into the capital. In early December a new mutiny broke out at the naval base in Chittagong, and again in March further disturbances developed in army units stationed with the Chittagong Brigade. Immediate measures were taken by the Martial Law authorities to build up a reliable internal security force outside the now highly politicised army. In early January the first public announcement was made regarding the founding of a police ‘Combat Battalion’ under the direction of the new Home Secretary, Salauddin Ahmed, a rehabilitated official who had directed internal security functions in East Pakistan under Ayub Khan.

According to one western news report, filed by CBS News’ Far East Correspondent, then visiting Dacca:

In view of the question marks hanging over the loyalties of many personalities in the armed forces through their activities during November’s mutiny, Zia is now engaged in an effort to overhaul of Bangladesh’s police and the formation of an elite 12,500-man ‘special police force’. The concept of the force was put public shortly after senior police officials from throughout the country met in Dacca with Zia and other government leaders to discuss how Bangladesh’s police could be ‘reorganised into an effective force to face the challenge of the time’. Although most details of the overhaul have remained secret, sources in Dacca believe Zia ‘reorganised’ the police in order to secure its full loyalty since the armed forces were considered unreliable. It is believed that this factor caused Zia to place the new special operations units, which would normally be part of the military, under police control.

The new 12,500-man force, which is divided into five 2,500-man ‘armed battalions’, is about the same size as the ill-fated Rakhi Bahini. Many observers here suspect that the new formation may have the same function as the Rakhi Bahini, although the government says the force is designed to combat crimes of a special nature, particularly where ‘sophisticated weapons’ are involved. It will also carry out ‘special drives, mopping-up operations and other activities requiring special training and techniques’. The battalions will have no set bases, but will ‘always be in combat readiness’ and available for duty anywhere in Bangladesh.

The force appears to be just what the government needs to carry through its anti-JSD campaign against the left-wing Jayto Samajtantrik Dal (Socialist Nationalist Party). The crackdown, which assumed large-scale proportions in Dacca after the abortive attempt to kidnap the Indian High Commissioner, has now spread throughout Bangladesh. Reports reaching the capital indicate that gunfights, chases, and mass arrests are taking place regularly.

In December, the Dacca press reported the seizure of a ‘huge number of undisclosed weapons’ and the apprehension of over 1,000 ‘miscreants’ (the government’s term for JSD members). Westerners engaged in relief work in eastern and northern Bangladesh claim police have threatened village headmen with arrest if they did not identify JSD cadres. These Westerners also say that detention and harassment of family and friends of suspected JSD members have been occurring with increasing frequency.

Following the November insurrection old divisions on the radical left re-opened. In particular Mohammed Toaha’s pro-Chinese Purba Bangla Samyabadi Dal (East Bengal Communist party), which is 1971 had taken an ambiguous stance on the national question, and thus at that time had been in conflict with the strategic thesis of the JSD ‘nucleus’, now publicly condemned the JSD. While Toaha supported the first dimension of the uprising that overturned Khaled Musharrar, he quickly began to accuse the JSD leaders of being covert Indian agents. He alleged they were weakening Bangladesh’s front line of national defense against an aggressive India by promoting notions of ‘class struggle’ inside the military. Toaha openly condemned these agitations saying in an interview with the Far Eastern Economic Review that the JSD was “trying to sow seeds of discontent and dissension among the jauans of the armed forces by raising the bogey of class differences in the different strata of the armed forces. Using this cunning tactic they have been trying to disrupt the defence forces and to pave the way for the easy walkover of the Indian Army into the soil of Bangladesh.”

The JSD leaders attempted to avoid divisive polemics with other radical groups. They considered left sectarianism a leading internal cause of earlier setbacks in Bengal’s communist movement. While the JSD has remained openly sympathetic in its literature to the Chinese Communist Party’s general polemic and critique against ‘revisionism’, it has resisted following any international communist line. It has attempted to maintain a friendly tenor toward existing pro-Chinese Marxist-Leninist parties and factions in Bangladesh despite bitter attacks from these quarters. At most the JSD has gently criticised those who “blindly copy the statement of a certain foreign communist party”.4

While the JSD was driven underground, Toaha’s East came forward in a pattern similar to the Ayub days and gave open support to the martial law authorities. In Toaha’s view the principal contradiction was one of defending national independence against imminent Indian aggression — not class struggle. Once this contradiction of national sovereignty was resolved, Toaha argued in a somewhat remarkable discussion of dialectics, all others would automatically be resolved.

One of the few serious scholars of radical politics in Bangladesh, Talukder Maniruzzaman, in remarking on the re-emergence of earlier differences in the period after the mutiny, wrote:

Other radical parties issued leaflets accusing the JSD leaders of being covert Indian agents and of encouraging the Bangladesh front line of defence by killing trained army officers and spreading dissension among the soldiers. The JSD leaders applied that Bangladesh could not be defended by the poorly equipped Bangladesh armed forces, but only through the revolutionary unity of the oppressed classes who formed 95 per cent of the people of the country. The JSD leaders asserted that their party was the true nationalist party of the proletariat, and charged that other ‘so-called’ revolutionary parties had been behaving in the pattern of various ‘pseudo revolutionary’ parties of Russia who had accused Lenin of being a German agent before the October Revolution of 1917.

In the months which followed the arrest of Taher and other JSD leaders, those sympathetic to Zia’s new military regime argued that the JSD had in fact had very little to do with the uprising. Besides several groups on the political right, such as the newly legalised Muslim League and the Democratic League, a number of leftist parties like Toaha’s Samyabadi Dal
claimed that foreign press reports had exaggerated Jashod’s role and the part played by Taher. However, events came to belie these arguments, when in June the Martial Law Authorities opened a secret trial inside Dacca Central Jail accusing Taher and 33 others of mutiny, treason, and the “propagation of political ideology and disaffection among the officers and other members of the Defence Services, the Bangladesh Rifles, the Police Forces, and the Ansars”.29

The JSD itself did not regard the reversals which followed November 7 to be either permanent or a reflection of their having mistakenly pressed the mutiny into motion. No revolutionary movement could advance, they claimed, without difficult periods of struggle and the overcoming of defeats. They summed up the period in their journal Samyabadd in this way:

The powerful programme and line of action taken by the revolutionary sepoys under the leadership of the Revolutionary Soldiers Organisation warrants special mention. On the day of November 7, 1975 they put their historic twelve point demands consisting of the release of political prisoners, return of democratic rights, and the elimination of the master-servant-like attitude and behaviour of the officers towards the sepoys. They also objected to being used as tools for safeguarding the vested interests of the ruling bourgeois class. Although Zia had accepted these demands under the existing situation, he was in fact deeply and secretly involved in a conspiracy of his own personal interests against those of his class.

At the very outset he attempted to disperse and weaken the strength of the revolutionary forces by transferring them from cantonment to cantonment and at the same time imposing a number of brutal punishments. It goes without saying that while he tried his utmost, he eventually failed to subdue the revolutionary spirit and consciousness of the sepoys. Thus, his dependence on the police force was increased at the expense of the army, with the consequent establishment of the ‘Combat Battalion’ and the ‘Metropolitan Police’, etc.

In the final analysis, has the 7th November and the course of events following the mutiny weakened the forces of the proletarian movement? Has the freedom of working class men been pushed further back? The answer to these questions is an equivocal ‘no’, because —

First: the jawans of the Bangladesh Army can no more be used as an effective tool in the interests of the ruling exploiting class, since the army is now imbued with revolutionary consciousness;

Second: the development and evolutionary stages of the proletarian political forces and its line of action has been clearly marked;

Third: the polarisation of those forces for and against the proletariat has been speeded up;

Fourth: the organising capabilities of the bourgeois class has been seriously affected;

Fifth: the imperialist-revisionist-hegemonist groups have all understood that the revolutionaries of Bangladesh will never accept their autocracy.40

The Trial to the End

On November 24, as they locked Taher away in Dacca Central Jail, those days from the Liberation War would seem far gone. In that time Zia and Taher had been comrades. Now within two weeks of Taher’s arrest, Zia would order that he be moved out of Dacca and taken to Rajashahi District Jail. Overland movement was considered too risky, and on December 6, locked in handcuffs, he was flown by helicopter to Rajashahi. For the next six months Taher sat life out in solitary confinement and waited, as Ziaur Rahman manoeuvred to put the genie of rebellion back into the bottle Taher had uncorked.

Certain units such as the Bengal Lancers were disbanded and new trouble among the troops was suppressed at Chittagong in March and Bogra in April. Pressure began to build up among the councils at the top echelon of the officer corps for an act of revenge against Taher from which there could be no recall. The composition and ideological orientation of the officer corps had shifted significantly following the repatriation in 1973 of nearly 1,000 Bengali officers from Pakistan. In general, this group reflected a deep-seated military conservatism. In 1971 many had timidly stood by on the sidelines not knowing which way the civil war might go. Nearly all the Bengalis, who were stranded in Pakistan and who were determined to join the liberation struggle, had managed to escape. However, for the 'repatriates', as they are called, discipline, order, a clear hierarchy, and a glass of Black Label in the evening remained the touchstone of their military philosophy.

Although the Army cannot be strictly divided between those who fought in the Liberation War — the Muktibahini elements — and those who did not — the ‘repatriates’ — there is something in this distinction. For the war itself had ideologically transformed many of those who participated in it. Those who returned to Bangladesh from the cantonments of Pakistan two years after independence remained largely unchanged in spirit and in conceptual view from their days as officers in the Pakistan Army. In 1976 the ‘repatriates’ and their Islamic oriented conservatism were to emerge from the background they had inhabited in the three years since their return. Zia having turned against the radicalised Muktibahini elements in the Army, represented by Taher and the JSD, was now compelled more and more to rely upon the most conservative wing of the army for backing. Zia, who had once openly despised these men as ‘Johnny-Come-Lately’ nationalists, now listened quietly as they demanded Taher’s death.

Other pressures built up from the top officials of the National Security Intelligence (NSI) and the Home Ministry for a trial which would settle the matter. A trial of Ziaur Rahman’s left-wing friend would answer the question of where Zia’s loyalties truly lay. These two organisations, the first directed by A.M. Sattar, and the second by Salauddin Ahmed, were headed now by men who were the senior-most intelligence and internal security officials during the era of Ayub Khan. These men moved into their positions immediately following Mujib’s assassination. A number of these suddenly rehabilitated technocrats had during 1971 been accused of active collaboration with the Pakistan Army, and it was this sector which collectively pressed for a trial. Zia, recognising that his main rival for leadership in the armed forces had to be dealt with, moved with the wishes of the Islamic right and ordered a trial.

On May 22, 1976 Taher was flown by helicopter from Rajashahi to Dacca. Under tight security he was placed in solitary confinement in Dacca Central Jail. No news of what was about to take place touched a newspaper. However, on June 15 an announcement was made that a Special Military Tribunal, designated ‘No 1’, had been formed. It was to be chaired by a full army colonel, Yusuf Haider, a conservative repatriate who had not fought in 1971. No information was given as to who would be tried before the military board, but the sections of the old British colonial law which were cited covered mutiny and high treason.
Within days of the tribunal's formation, The Bangladesh Times carried an obscure legal notice buried on its back page. It ordered eleven people to surrender to the tribunal before June 21, or they would be tried in absentia. The first man listed was Sirajul Alam Khan, a leading personality of the Jatio Samajtantrik Dal (JSD). Of the ten others listed, seven were members of the army or airforce.

In a mild violation of an undeclar ed, but well understood news blackout, Dacca's leading Bengali daily, Ittefaq, had published a one inch back-page news item entitled "Conspiracy Case to Begin". Ittefaq's editor, Anwar Hossain, was immediately called to Army Headquarters and told if he tried it again, he would be arrested. For those who wanted to understand what was coming the news was there.

This correspondent arrived in Dacca in late May to report on the continuing crisis Bangladesh then faced over the severe restriction of water flowing down the nations principal river — the Ganges. India had opened a multi million dollar river diversion project known as the Farraka Barrage which threatened agriculture in western Bangladesh with disaster. However, shortly after my arrival sources inside Bangladesh's Home Ministry, the Army, and in the JSD's underground, all informed me that the country's most explosive political trial, since Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was put before a court in the 1969 Agartala Conspiracy Case, was about to begin.

Besides Taher 33 others including 22 members of the armed forces were to be put on trial. The civilians in the dock included all the leading personalities of the JSD then in detention. They were M A Jalil, the JSD President; A M S Abudur Rab, General Secretary of the JSD; Hasanul Huq Inu, General Secretary of the Krishak (Peasants') League; Mohammed Shajahan, President of the Shramik (Workers') League; and M R Manna, General-Secretary of the Chattra (Students') League. A leading Bengali economist, Aklauqar Rahman, and K B M Mahmood, the Editor of the English weekly Wawe, were among the accused.

The trial opened on June 21, 1976 behind the tall yellow-stained walls of Dacca's Central Jail. Never before in the history of either Bangladesh or 'East Pakistan' had a trial been held within the confines of any jail. A complete news blackout on the case was imposed inside the country and lawyers defending the accused had to take an oath of secrecy regarding the proceedings. Security at the prison was exceptional: sand-bagged machine gun nests circled every entrance. It was assumed the authorities were convening the tribunal within the jail to avoid the possibility of trouble occurring en route to the courthouse.

There were many ironies that morning when the heavy iron gates at Dacca's Central Jail swung open and snapped closed admitting thirty blackcoated barristers into the opening session. The trial and the charge of armed rebellion against established authority occurred at a time when there had been four governments in the past year, each succeeding the other by force. Moreover, those officers who were part of Khaled Musharrafs November 3 coup d'etat and who were dubbed at the time by the official press as 'Indian agents', had all been released from detention. Most notable among these was Brigadier Shafat Jamal who had been Khaled's second in-command. It was Shafat and Khaled who had placed Ziaur Rahman under house arrest during the four days they had taken power. So it was that those officers who were freed under the November 3 anti-Zia coup were freed, and those men who staged a general uprising which freed Zia, now went on trial for their lives.

The tribunal first convened on June 21 and then recessed for a week to permit defense lawyers seven days to prepare a defence for a case the prosecution had been working on for six months. The accused, despite repeated requests throughout the period of their detention, had been denied access to legal counsel and communication with relatives. Following the opening session, this correspondent filed despatches to the Far Eastern Economic Review (Hongkong) The BBC, and The Guardian (London). Transmission of these reports did not go through from Dacca due to censorship. However, copies flown to Bangkoko by a passenger on an outgoing international flight meant that ultimately the news was transmitted from Thailand. The first report residents of Dacca had of the case came over the BBC Bengali Service.

On June 28, when the trial reopened, this correspondent who had reported from Bangladesh for a full year in 1974, stood outside the gates of Dacca Central Jail taking photographs of the Chief Prosecutor, A T M Afzal, the Chairman of the Tribunal, Colonel Yusuf Haider, and others as they entered the prison gates. I was told by the police officials present that the trial was top secret and I was not allowed to photograph anyone or anything. I said I had been reporting on events in Bangladesh for several years and was unaware of any official guidelines or orders. If they wished me to stop photographing or reporting the case, I suggested they should show me a written order from the Information Ministry to that effect. Otherwise, I would continue my work as a journalist without interruption. I then photographed the police officer questioning me who threw up his hands in front of his face and ran away.

I was left alone for more than two hours, as I waited outside the prison gates for the day's session. I had wanted to interview the Tribunal Chairman so as to have an official statement of why the case was being held in such secrecy. But at 11.00 a.m on June 28 I was arrested and detained in Dacca Central Jail. I was asked to surrender the film of the photographs I had taken. I informed the police officials and the army lieutenant who had taken me into custody that I would not voluntarily give up the film. Calls were made to the National Security Intelligence and Martial Law Headquarters. Within the hour ten officials arrived to sort out the case.

I was asked by an MSI man calling himself Shamim Ahmed why I was interested in the Taher case. I explained secret political trials tended to rub me the wrong way whether done by Stalin, Franco, or Zia. I said I was a reporter, and if the six majors who killed Mujib had been put on trial by Khaled Musharrarf inside Dacca Central Jail, I would have reported it. And if Khaled had lived, and Zia had put him on trial, I would have been at the jail, as I was now, trying to report. And if Zia was now putting Taher on trial, inside a prison with frightened lawyers sworn to secrecy, I would report it. What was wrong with people knowing what was happening, I asked Ahmed. He picked up my camera and handed it to a young telecommunications officer, who some years earlier had trained in New York under the American 'Office of Public Safety' programme. This young fellow ripped the film out.

A phone call soon arrived from Martial Law Headquarters ordering my release. An army major said that Headquarters thought the detention of
a foreign correspondent might be embarrassing. That evening I cabled the other despatch concerning the case. The cable office accepted the story, but did not transmit it. The next evening, as I returned to my residence, I was met by five Special Branch officers who informed me I was under arrest. They were under orders to take me directly to the airport and put me on the available flight out of the country. The next flight out was to India where I had been expelled six months earlier for reporting from the capital of Indira Gandhi's Emergency. Censorship was tough during those days in Delhi and no foreign correspondent paid any attention to it. And thus, I had not been the only journalist so honoured with deportation from India — merely the last. I explained patiently to the Special Branch officers that they could not deport me to India, since I had already been deported from there. Ultimately, following a modicum of intervention from the US Embassy, I was kept for three days under house arrest until the next flight to Bangkok. On July 1, I was deported to Thailand and the last foreign or domestic news report on the Taher trial ended. The authorities now had their secrecy buttoned up.

The case went on for seventeen more days. Taher initially refused to attend the tribunal calling it "an instrument of the government to commit crimes in the name of justice". He also said, if he were to be judged, the panel must be made up of Mukti Bahini officers from the Army, who had fought for the independence of the country, and not by men like Yusuf Haider who had taken no part in the Liberation War. But when the tribunal was formed no Mukti Bahini officer would sit on it. Taher's lawyers were finally able to persuade him to participate in the trial. They believed at first the tribunal would be able to function without intimidation. It is a decision many of them regretted later, when it became known that Taher's sentence had been decided even before the tribunal opened. On July 17, the Chairman of the Tribunal, Yusuf Haider, announced the sentence: Taher was to hang.

On July 18, the government ordered newspapers to publish an official statement on the case and nothing more. Banner headlines in the Bangladesh Observer read Taher TO DIE. It was the first news through the Bengali media that the country had of the case and it came at the end of the trial as a fait accompli.

An appeal for clemency made to President A M Sayem was turned down. Sayem was a former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Five years earlier, he had written the most significant legal decision on capital punishment and the rights of an accused ever to be handed down by the Supreme Court. In the case against Purna Chandra Mondal Sayem threw out a death sentence passed on the accused. The judgment established a legal precedent as significant as the Miranda decision in the United States. Sayem argued that "the last moment appointment of a defence lawyer for an accused virtually negated the right of an accused to be properly defended in the case".

In the Mondal case Sayem had written: The Code of Criminal Procedure confers a right on every accused person brought before a Criminal Court to be 'defended' by a lawyer. That right extends to access to the lawyer for private consultations and also affording the latter an adequate opportunity of preparing the case for the defence. A last moment appointment of an advocate for defending a prisoner accused of a capital offence not only results in a breach of the provision of the 6th paragraph of Chapter XII of the Legal Remembrances Manual (1960), and frustrates the object behind the elaborate provisions of that Chapter. Such an appointment results also in a denial to the prisoner of the right conferred on him by section 340 of the Code... The denial of this right must be held to have rendered the trial as one not according to law, necessitating a fresh trial."

Taher was not allowed access to a lawyer until the day the case against him opened. Nevertheless, Sayem, who as a judge had written that no man under law could be sentenced to death were he not given the right of an adequate defence, now in the position of President of the country, reaffirmed the death sentence on Taher. And he made his decision within twenty-four hours of the sentencing.

The Chief Prosecutor, A T M Afzal, after the trial would be rewarded with an appointment to the position of Judge of the Dacca High Court. But Afzal, a worried man, would anxiously claim to his colleagues that he was more stunned than anyone with the sentence of death. As prosecutor, he claimed, he had never asked for the death sentence. He said such a judgment was impossible. There was no law in existence under which Taher could be executed for the crimes with which he was charged. Ten days after Taher was dead the Law Ministry remedied this 'legal' discrepancy. On July 31 the ministry published the Martial Law Decree's 20th Amendment which made it a crime "punishable with death" for anyone who "propagates any political opinion" among the armed forces of Bangladesh.

In London Amnesty International's Headquarters issued an urgent appeal to the Bangladesh President to grant Taher clemency. "A martial law trial held in camera inside jail falls short of internationally accepted standards as laid down in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Before criminal courts the case against the accused can be established according to the normal process of law and with all legal safeguards, including the right of appeal to the highest judicial authorities", read the Amnesty cable. Amnesty called for a complete retrial for Taher and other JSD leaders. Its appeal to Sayem went out on July 20.

The next morning at 4 a.m. Abu Taher was hanged in Dacca Central Jail.

My dear bora bhajan,

I cannot think of what to write you today. I cannot realise that Taher is no longer with me. I cannot imagine how I will live after the partner of my life has left. It seems that the children are in great trouble. Such tiny children don't understand anything. Nitu says, "Father, why did you die? You would have been alive, if you were still here." The children do not understand what they have lost. Every day they go to the grave with flowers. They place the flowers and pray, "Let me become like father". Jishu says that father is sleeping on the moon.

Unfortunately Nitu saw father in November, but could not see him up to the last moment, since she was in Kishorganj. But I am very fortunate. The path Taher has shown me is my chief weapon. When he was alive, he gave me the greatest honour among Bengali women. In his death he gave me the respect of the world. All my desires he has fulfilled in such a short time. When the dear friends and comrades of Taher convey their condolences to me, then I think: Taher is still alive amongst them, and will live in them. They are like my own folk. I am proud. He has defeated death. Death could not triumph over him.
I shall describe all that happened:

On Saturday July 17 at 3 o’clock the verdict was delivered: the death sentence for Taher was read out. All became speechless including our twenty-five barristers. People all over the country were shocked because the tribunal’s verdict could not prove anything. Even the state witnesses admitted the conviction of Taher on November 7. The procurator-general Ataur Khan, Zulmat Ali, Alam and others became restless. They went to the President condemning the tribunal and declaring it had been set up illegally. Taher told the barristers: “This government which I have brought to power — you are not to request anything from them.” At the same time hearing them declare the death sentence he broke out into a tremendous laughter. All the other prisoners broke down in tears. He told everybody, “If lives are not sacrificed in this way, how will the common people be liberated?” We have made a great effort, though Taher has written me, “Don’t bow your head. I do not fear death. If you can feel proud, that is enough.”

He gave us so much courage that we came out laughing as well. We did not know this was our last meeting. All politicians, teachers of the country, as well as foreigners, made requests to the government. But the authorities did not have the guts to let Taher live. They have made Taher transcend time, they made him immortal.

All the brothers of Taher were with him: Yusuf, Belal, Monu. On the 20th in the evening Taher informed that on the 21st, early in the morning at 4 o’clock, the death sentence would be carried out. He accepted their news and thanked those who had to deliver the message. And then he took his dinner completely normally. Later the Maulvi [priest] was brought and asked him absolution for her sins. He said, “I am not touched by the evils of your society, nor have I ever been. I am pure. You go now, I want to sleep.” He went to sleep quietly. At 3 o’clock, he was woken up. He asked how much time was left. After knowing, he cleaned his teeth and shaved himself and bathed. All those present came forward to help him. He forbade them to do so, saying, “I don’t want you to touch my body which is pure.”

After his bath he told the others to prepare tea and to cut the mangoes we had given. He himself put on the artificial limb, shoes, and pants. He put on a beautifully shirt, his wristwatch, and combed his hair carefully. After that he took tea, mangoes, and smoked cigarettes with all those present. Looking at his courage all burst into tears about the death sentence of such a man. He consoled everybody, saying: “Come on! Why are you so gloomy? I had wanted to make the face of the distressed bloom with smiles. Death cannot defeat me.” He was arrested when he had any wish. He said, “In exchange for my death — the peace of the common man”.

After that Taher said: “Is there any time left? They answered: a little bit. He said: In that case I shall recite a poem to you. He read out a poem about his duty and his feelings. And then he said: All right, I am ready. Go ahead. Do your duty. He went towards the gallows and took the rope in his own hand and put around his neck. And he said: “Good-bye countrymen. Long Live Bangladesh! Long Live Revolution!” He told them to press the body down. Then one of the prisoners said: “Why, don’t you have courage?” Then somebody did it. It was all over. His brothers were shown.

No one amongst the 7,500 prisoners of the jail took any rice that day. We were given the body at 2:30. In the midst of the strictest security a car was taken inside the jail, and the body lifted into it. After that 5 trucks and buses filled with heavy security guards escorted the body to the helipad and lifted him onto a helicopter. It was 7:50 in the evening. He was buried in the family graveyard.

A special camp was set up and the grave was guarded for 21 days. They fear even the dead. He has left us, but he has left behind a rich legacy. In performing his great task to mankind, he flung both poison and nectar. He drank the poison and left us the nectar. Although it is total darkness all around me and I cannot find my pathings, and am lost, yet I know this distress is not permanent, there will be an end. When I see that the ideals of Taher have become the ideals of all, then I will find peace. It is my sorrow that when that day of happiness comes, Taher will not be there.

Affectationally, Lutfu

What dreadful crimes this regime must have committed, to so fear the voice of one accused man! As a result of so many obscure and illegal machinations, due to the will of those who govern and the weakness of those who judge, I find myself here in this little room of the Civil Hospital — to which I have been brought to be tried in secret; so that my voice may be stifled and so that no one may learn the things I am going to say. Why, then, do we need that imposing Palace of Justice which the Honourable Magistrates would without doubt find rather more comfortable? I must warn you: it is useless to administer justice from a hospital room, surrounded by sentinels with bayonets fixed; the citizens might suppose that our justice is sick and that it is captive...

I remind you, your laws of procedure provide that trials shall be “both audible and public”; however, the people have been barred altogether from this session. The only civilians admitted here have been two attorneys and six reporters, whose newspapers’ censorship will prevent from printing a word that I say. I see, as my sole audience, in this chamber and in the corridors, nearly a hundred soldiers and officers. I am grateful for the polite and serious attention they give me. I only wish I could have the whole army before me! I know, one day this army will see with rage to wash away the awful, the shameful bloodstains splattered across the uniform by the present ruthless clique in their lust for power. On that day, oh, what a fall awaits those mounted, in arrogance, on the backs of the noble soldiers! — provided, that is, that the people have not pulled them down long before!

“History Will Absolve Me”

Fidel Castro, 1953

The Testimony of Colonel Mohammed Abu Taher before the Special Military Tribunal Number 1.

COLONEL ABU TAHER:

The charges against me are very vague. I ask the tribunal to specify exactly what the prosecution witnesses have said. The charges of conspiracy are baseless and absolutely false. I am innocent.

I have made an application to the Tribunal. The application’s fate is best known to the Chair. Yes, I have summoned the President Jushtaka, SM Sayem, Major-General Ziaur Rahman, Rear-Admiral M H Kahn, Air Vice-Marshal M G Tawab, and General M A G Osman. They should all be brought here and made to give evid-
The Taher Testimony

This is the statement of Colonel Abu Taher of the Bangladesh Army. It was given before the Special Martial Law Tribunal convened inside Dacca Central Jail between June 21—July 17, 1976. The charges against Taher were mutiny and treason. This testimony has never before been published.

The trial of Taher was held in conditions of complete secrecy. Newspapers were proscribed from reporting on what was widely considered the most important political trial in Bangladesh since its independence. This testimony is now being published in spite of the ban which still exists in Bangladesh. This is to obtain a public record of details of the case. The text was obtained from sources inside Bangladesh's Martial Law Administration who wish at this time to remain anonymous.

ence. I should like to add one more name. Major-General Ershad. And I would also like to state something more.

It is part of the recorded document of this tribunal that there was an uprising of soldiers in Dacca's Cantonment on the night of 6th and 7th of November 1975, and thereby the malicious objectives of a group of conspirators was frustrated. Major-General Rahman went from his captivity and the sovereignty of this country was preserved. If this is the act which constitutes treason, then I must agree.

And to establish this fact there was no need to go through the unpleasant torture and threats which I have been subjected since the 21st June 1976. This fact is well-known to Justice Sayem and his government which by our own efforts installed on the 7th November 1975. There were agreed principles that all political prisoners be released; political activities be allowed; a general election be held, and a people's government be established. This fact is well-known to my fellow countrymen who will remember me with gratitude.

It is an insult to this nation that they are attempting to try me inside this jail and by such an inferior court like the present one. You have no right to judge me.

I was in jail in sight of the 25th March 1971 when the Pakistani Army unleashed brutal attacks against our people. We had no choice, but to win that war which was thrust on us. Had we lost a worse kind of slavery would have been imposed upon us. The Pakistani Military Junta did not make it a secret when they announced in the newspapers that Bengalis did not deserve any higher education. Their education could be confined to Madrasa Education. Their culture is inferior. They should be compelled to speak in one language — Urdu.

Those were days of trial for all of us in West Pakistan. At that time I did not hesitate to respond to the nation's call. The barbaric purpose of the Military Junta was not unknown to us. We were in West Pakistan, when from General Headquarters of the Pakistan Army the message went out: 'Burn everything, kill everyone in sight.'

I had no hesitation to escape from Pakistan to join the Liberation War. It is not unknown to the Chairman of this tribunal that I was not a back-bencher in the Pakistan Army. I was commissioned in the Baluch Regiment and later joined the Special Services Group, an elite para-commando force in the Pakistan Army. Six long years I served with this elite unit. I took part in the 1971 Indo-Pak war in the Kashmir and Sialkot sectors. I bear the sign of wounds from that war on my body.

I am the only Bengali Officer who was awarded a Maroon Parachute Wing and I had to my credit 135 static line jumps. In recognition of my service I was sent to the United States to attend different courses. I was awarded the Ranger Award by the Ranger Training Command, Fort Benning, Georgia. I am an Honours Graduate from the Special Forces Officer Training Institute, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Since I am on trial, I might as well mention here that such service distinctions were never achieved by any Bengali officer until that time. In the month of December 1970, I returned from the States.

On my return I found the General Election was over and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's party, the Awami League, had won the election with an overwhelming majority — and that created trouble in the politics of Pakistan. It was during this time the Military Junta and Mr Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, a curse upon the politics of Pakistan, would not allow the Awami League its rightful claim to power. I also knew Bengalis would not let it go unchallenged. Sensing trouble, I sent my wife in the month of February to my home town, Mymensingh.

On the 25th March I was at Quetta attending a Senior Technical Course in the School of Infantry and Tactics. When I heard the announcement of General Yahyo Khan's war in the radio on the evening of 26th of March, I came to know what a catastrophe had fallen upon my people. For the whole night I walked on the lonely roads of Quetta.

On the 28th March the course was called off and we were ordered to report to our unit. The next day as we were passing through Quetta, I was detained and charges were brought against me that I expressed my displeasure regarding atrocities committed in the then East Pakistan.

At that time several junior officers, Lieutenants and Second Lieutenants approached and sought my advice as to what they should do in this time. I told them in clear terms that their only concern was to come back from Pakistan and join the Liberation War. They also informed me that a few Senior Bengali Officers who were stationed at that time in Quetta had refused to talk to them; refused to entertain them, lest their loyalty be doubted by their master.

Some of these same Senior Officers I find today holding important positions in the Armed Forces and they are now a party in this attempt to try me here. These officers before the 25th of March went all out to announce their acquaintance with Sheikh Mujib; after the 25th of March they termed him a traitor.

Taher at this point is interrupted by the Tribunal's Chairman. He is told he will not be permitted to read such a statement. There is shouting and arguing in the courtroom. Taher tells the Chairman, Col. A. M. Haider, "If you do not give me the opportunity to depose of my statement, I had better keep silent. It will be a duty of these lawyers to argue on behalf of myself before such an inferior officer." There are further arguments and finally after the intervention of Taher's lawyer, he is permitted to continue.

Later I was happy to learn that among the junior officers I encouraged to escape, Second Lieutenant Noor and Second Lieutenant Eram were successful and joined the Liberation War.

At Quetta after a few days, due to the intervention of Major-General M.M. Musaddique, Commandant of the School of Infantry and Tactics with whom I had a good relationship, the charges were withdrawn, and I was allowed to return to the Khor chowk hills.

At Khariar I was attached to a medium regiment and not allowed to join my unit which was brought into the East Pakistan to cover the Bengali people. It was this unit which arrested Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. At Kharar I convinced Captain Delwar and Captain Patwari to escape with me. It was decided that a Bengali engineer stationed at Mirpur in Azad Kashmir would give us shelter and arrange transport up to the border. At the appointed date and time we reached Mirpur. On our arrival, to my utter surprise we found the engineer had been taken away by the Pakistan Army. There was a dum in the 1977 special number August
were about 1,000 Bengali officers. I approached many and tried to induce them to escape and join the Liberation War. But it was unfortunate to find that none of the Bengali officers had any understanding of the organization of a guerrilla struggle. These conventional officers with their conventional military ideas were, in fact, a hindrance in the natural growth of guerrilla warfare.

Third: the existing military leadership of the Liberation War was scanty. Whatever adequately trained soldiers or officers we had were concentrated in regular force units. Independent units of freedom fighters were deprived of obtaining necessary military skills and equipment. This was due to the fact that the commanders of the Liberation Forces had no concept whatsoever of a Liberation struggle. Their only concern was to raise regular main force brigades to consolidate their own power. Had the two brigades of trained troops, one at Agartala under Khaled Musharraf and the other at Meghalya under Major Zia, been correctly deployed, we could have raised 20 divisions of peasant fighters in the next eight months. This is the distinction between people’s war and conventional war. This was not understood by Colonel Osmani. It is not correct to attempt to raise a regular force at an early stage of guerrilla struggle. At an appropriate time, a guerrilla force will be converted into a regular force.

Taher is interrupted again by the Tribunal. There is an argument in the court. The Tribunal orders him to finish up. If you talk to me like this, it will be impossible for me to depose. I have seen many small men in my time, but none smaller than you.”

Fourth: the forces which developed spontaneously inside Bangladesh under the leadership of famous freedom fighters such as Major Azfar, Kazi Siddique, Hemayet, Baten — this form was the natural development of the forces struggling in our Liberation War. Unfortunately the regular military command under Colonel Osmani and the provincial government looked at the development of such a force with suspicion. Consequently, there was no co-ordination between the normal forces raised under Colonel Osmani and the force developing inside the country.

Fifth: there was the evil influence of India’s Border Security Force on our glorious freedom fighters. The BSF has been8 irritated about their personal greed and lack of ideological understanding forced some of our fighters to participate in the looting of the houses of collaborators.

Besides these principal shortcomings there were many other minor defects in the planning and the conduct of the war.

The answer to all these problems was that the present leadership should have shifted inside Bangladesh into a liberated area. Sector Headquarters and all officers should have left Indian territory and taken positions inside Bangladesh. I put forward this suggestion and Major Zia readily agreed with me. We took the decision that all commands should be moved inside the border. We wanted that other sectors should do the same at an appointed time. According by a conference of sector commanders was held. Colonel Osman, Major Khaled Musharraf, and Major Safiullah opposed the proposal. Not only were we prevented from moving sector headquarters inside Bangladesh and off Indian territory, Major Zia’s Brigade was taken away from my sector.

I was left with one Air Force officer, Flight Lieutenant Hamidullah and one Battery of artillery officer, Major Mannan. Only one jeep was left for transport. At the time Brigadier Singh [Indian Army] thought he would be able to direct us as we were left with no resources. He suggested we set up Headquarters along with his HQ at Tura, which was 40 miles away from Dacca. I should mention here that most of sector Headquarters were well inside India. Most of our Sector Commanders used carpets to cover their tent floors.

I refused Brigadier Singh’s offer and reached my Sector HQ 800 yards off and opposite Kamalpur port. I knew well that the enemy would attack with which would give us final victory. The access was Kamalpur, Jamalpur, Tangail and Dacca.

Here I would like to mention a freedom fighter called Subedar Aftab. When he reached Sector 11, I told Subedar Aftab is a rebel. He never listens to anyone’s orders. He had stationed himself at a place called Kudal Kati. This information was reported to Major Zia or Brigadier Singh in spite of repeated orders. I was curious about him and I decided to go and meet this man. I walked 18 miles to reach Kudal Kati and on reaching there I found Subedar Aftab waiting for me. He smartly saluted me and said, ‘I accept you as my commander, because you are the first one who ever came to see me for yourself what I have done’.

The Chairman of the Tribunal breaks in. Taher responds, “These portions are very relevant. You [speaking to the Chairman] were not present in the Liberation War, how would you have any idea about freedom fighters?” Taher continues.

Subedar Aftab informed me that he was the one who kept a vast area of Rohindar. They were barred and remained so until the December 16. Throughout he refused to go to Indian territory to establish a base. I spent the night talking with him. I found that he was a natural leader of men and I found myself very small in front of him.

When he said he could do anything, I proposed an attack to dislodge the Pakistanis. They had entrenched them- selves on an island in front of his position. There was a river between the two. The island on which the Pakistanis had taken their position was divided in two halves by a small canal. Subedar Aftab and I crossed the river with a ferry boat and found the Pakistanis on the furthest side. The near
side was covered with thick elephant grass. I advised that a company of fighters cross the river at night and take up position inside the elephant grass on the bank of the small canal. Soon the next morning a small patrol should go out and allow the Pakistani forces to chase them. After four days Aftab was ready with his troops.

As expected the Pakistanis attacked after the early morning patrol. Their units were drawn within the killing zone of the freedom fighters. In the first round, the Pakistanis suffered a large number of casualties. The Pakistanis launched a second and third attack, both of which were repulsed. They panicked and abandoned the position. With this the whole of Roumari Thana right up to Bakadarab came within our position.

Next we turned our attention to Chilmari, a battle that is well known to me and which I commanded. It was in the middle of September. During one night 1,200 freedom fighters crossed the Brahmaputra River. The Pakistanis were guarded by two companies of Pakistani regulars supplemented by a large number of Razakars. We held Chilmari under our control for 24 hours and returned with a huge quantity of arms and ammunition, and a large number of prisoners. It was a daring raid, one of those that are rare in the history of war.

From September onward much of the news of the liberation war was broadcast from the radio in our sector. Even the American journalist, Jack Anderson, noted the contribution being made in our area. He said, "With the fall of Kamalpur the Pakistanis lost the war". It was while leading the attack on Kamalpur that I lost my leg. Our units were the first to reach Dacca.

It is here that I would like to mention my brother because there appears to be a deliberate attempt to victimise our family. My brother, Abu Yusuf Khalil, was used in this case. He was in Saudi Arabia on deputation with the Saudi Air Force when the Liberation War broke out. He escaped and joined the battle in our sector. No matter how it may sound today, I will say there were many Bengali officers at that base, but no others escaped to join the war. Instead they returned to West Pakistan and were later repatriated to Bangladesh in 1973. My brother distinguished himself in the battle of Khasab and was awarded the Bijram. He was the first one to reach the Pakistani Command Headquarters on December 16 and obtained the surrender of General Niazi. He is a proud possessor of General Niazi's car flag. To me it seems the world has known few better men.

My brother Anwar is also an accused in the zamindari case that is not yet concluded by the University. During the Liberation War he was a staff officer at Sector 11 HQ. He is the type who would refuse to wear a khaki shirt just because a freedom fighter was not one. I must also mention my brother Bahar whom we recently lost along with three other heroic boys due to the treachery of the present government. He commanded a company of more than 200 boys and by November had liberated the major part of Netrakona Subdivision. For his exceptional bravery he was twice awarded the gallantry award Bir-Pratik. He, too, is our national hero. My brother Belal, who also could not escape the treachery of this government, has also been brought here as an accused. He was awarded the Bir-Pratik twice. Six brothers and two sisters — we all took part in the Liberation War. Due to our involvement in the struggle, our village was ransacked. My parents were taken as prisoners at Mymensingh.

When speaking about the Liberation War I must mention the loyalty, the courage, and the patriotism of our freedom fighters. The nation found its best people in them. How unfortunate it is that they are not making use of them. I must also mention the poor and the villagers who gave us food, who gave us shelter, who supplied us with everything on enemy positions, and who were more than an inspiration to us. I had a weapon in my hand. They had none. In helping us they faced Pakistani bullet, their houses were burnt, and their women and folk disgraced. They were the most courageous of all and it is to them that I will always give my deepest loyalty.

In the month of April 1972, after all necessary treatment following the amputation was completed, I returned to Bangladesh. I rejoined the Bangladesh Army in the position of Adjutant General. I reinforced discipline in the Army when it was a difficult task. The Chairman of this Tribunal is a witness to how I initiated disciplinary proceedings against certain senior officers, such as Brigadier Mir Sawkat and Major General Saffullah concerning certain matters. My position was that everything any officer had illegally acquired must be returned, so that they may stand up as brave and clean men before the nation's freedom fighters.

I never compromised with these principles. Within a few months I was posted as the new Commander of the 44th Brigade at Comilla. On assuming command of the Comilla Brigade, I asked my officers to return everything they had illegally acquired during and after the Liberation War. My officers complied with my orders and I had a set of officers whose consciences were completely clear.

This is what I regarded as leadership. I sought to appeal to what was good in men. I detested and avoided taking advantage of the weakness of an individual or of our nation.

My effort at the Comilla Brigade to raise and organise an Army on the lines of a modern army was well known among different sections of the Army. I constantly tried to develop a strong army based on those who had fought for freedom. Our basic principle was that of a 'productive army' where officers and men worked as do peasants and workers. We ploughed our own fields, grew our own food, and went to the villages to join in production. This was the path to self-reliance. It is with happiness that I recollect that with a very small force my officers in the Comilla Brigade understood these principles and turned an insignificant unit into a productive force.

At the same time, I resisted the vendetta to the then Prime Minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, regarding the existence of a secret treaty with India and also regarding the organisation of the paramilitary Rakhi Bahini. In Army Headquarters there is documentary evidence of my protest. It is on these two points and due to my insistence for a complete and total departure from the existing colonial pattern of the Army that differences arose within the government.

As a consequence Lieutenant-Colonel Ziauddin and myself felt it necessary to dissociate ourselves from the Army. This occurred in the month of November 1972. It is with relief that I hear this morning, from a member of this tribunal that Lieutenant-Colonel Ziauddin is now not an accused in this case.

In 1973 I took up job with the Ministry of Flood Control and Water Resources as Director of the Dredger Organisation. I took the job at a time when the organisation had already been absolutely shattered due to corruption and mismanagement. Within a short time we revived the organisation which achieved its highest ever income since its creation in 1952. From the watchman to the Superintendent of Engineers you can ask how I was running that organisation.

Tahir says following an interruption of his statement: "Mr Chairman and the Honourable Members of this Court — I must bring everything out. It will bring you close to me...".

On August 15, 1975, Sheikh Mujib was killed by a group of officers and a section of the Army. On that day early in the morning an officer in the Second Field Army rang me up and gave me a message which he said came from Major Rashid. He asked me to go to Bangladesh Betar (Bangladesh Radio). He also informed me of the killing of Sheikh Mujib.

I turned on the radio and came to know that Sheikh Mujib had been killed and that Khondakar M. Khalilur Rahman had taken power. This was shocking news to me. I thought it would create political instability and that in this situation we could even lose our independence. Meanwhile, several telephone calls came urging me to go to Bangladesh Betar. I thought I should go and see the situation.

At 9 a.m., in the morning, I reached Bangladesh Betar. I was taken by Major Rashid to a room where I found Khondakar Mustaque and Taheruddin Thakur along with Major General Choudhury M. Khalilur Rahman. I had a brief discussion with Khondakar Mustaque.
and emphasised that the need of the hour was to protect the country’s indep-

andembled was to take to the Cabinet. I told him to get hold of every person in the Defense

erces, discuss the problems with them, and to reach a suitable solution. Major Rashid insisted that I, together with Lieutenant-Colonel Ziauddin, save the situation and that he had no faith in any service chief or any politi-
tician. I advised him that no BAKSAL leaders should be taken into any cabi-
et and I said an all-party govern-
ment composed of all patriotic politi-
cal parties should be formed. Rashid kept insisting that I attend the swear-
ing ceremony of Khondakar Mustaque at Banga Bhavan.

At 11-30 I left Bangladesh Betar with a feeling of deep concern. I sensed that some outside power was involved in the killing of the father of the nation.

When I reached Banga Bhavan at mid-day, the swearing in ceremony was already over. I sat down with the officers who were involved in the killing. They were headed by Major Rashid. I put forward my sugges-
tion that the order be can-
celled, the constitution be abrogated, and that all political parties be allowed to function and that a general election of the people in the coun-
try. I insisted that the release of all political prisoners be done immediately before any firm future course of action could be decided.

During the latter part of our discus-
sion, I called General Zia to join in our discussion. All agreed with my suggestions and considered it the only suitable course open in the present. The next day I had a long discus-
sion with Major-General Safiullah, Major-General M Khalilur Rahman. They all agreed to what I had recom-

But at that stage on August 18, I realised that Major Rashid and Major Farooque were using my name op-

andembl off to give their troops the impression that they were with me. On August 17, it became clear to me that the whole game was backed by the United States of America and Pakistan, I also understood that Khondakar Mustaque was directly involved in the killing of Sheikh Mujib. This group, it was also clear, had a pre-determined course set for themselves.

From the 17th onwards I stopped going to Banga Bhavan. General Os-
mansur, General and Military Coun-
tact Lieutenant-Colonel Ziauddin. I told him that the government first must withdraw the death warrant which had been against Ziauddin’s life by the Mujib government. Only then would Ziauddin emerge from living underground.

In the last part of September, Major

Rashid brought a message from Pre-
sident Khondakar Mustaque Ahmed to General and Lieutenant-Colonel Ziauddin should form a political party and that he would provide all facilities of fin-

anace. I rejected his proposal and sent back word that insisted upon the release of all political prisoners. It was clear that Mustaque had absolutely no political base. But for a small frac-
tion, he was the Army as a whole, and he had no support among the people.

It was in this situation that Brig-

adier Khaled Musharraf took the advan-
tage and came to power on the 3rd of

October. On that day I was ill and

confined to bed at my house in Narayanganj. Yet, early in the morning

of that day at 4 o’clock I received a telephone call. It was Major-General Ziaur Rahman who implored me to

help him. We could fini our task — the line was cut. On the same day many soldiers, NCOs, and JCOs came to my Narayanganj house. I was unable to speak with all of them, but I talked with a few in my room.

They informed me that Khaled Mus-

harrar’s friends were attacking the In-

dians and that BAKSAL forces were

attempting to take power again. They

also informed me that tensions be-

tween the Bengal Regiment and the core troops were rising very high. At

any moment there could be shooting. I

dvised them to go back to the cantonment, not to shoot each other whatever the provocation. The general situation in the country after the 3rd of November is well known to all. People believed Khaled Mushi-

arrar was backed by the Indians. On

4th November the victory march of

BAKSAL leaders and workers together with the rehabilitation on Indian radio proved it was backed by the Indians. The people of Bangladesh were not prepared to accept this. They thought that they were losing their sovereignty.

At this stage of the crisis, it is understandable that General Zia re-

signed. He was being kept under house arrest and he was forced to resign. What is not understandable is why Rear-Admiral M H Khan and Air-Vice Marshall M G Tawab assist-
ed Khaled Musharraf in assuming the rank of Major-General while the very sovereignty of the country was at stake. These chiefs of the forces be-

haved in a cowardly manner. This na-

tion cannot afford the luxury of keep-

ing such cowards as their service

chiefs.

On the afternoon of the 4th Novem-

ber a message reached me from Major-

General Zia through one of his rela-
tives. He appealed to me to use my influence with the troops to rescue him and save the sovereignty of the coun-

try. In the meantime many soldiers, NCOs, and JCOs were coming to me. On the 6th November I appealed

through representatives of all units in the Dacca Cantonment for the troops to come out of their barracks with

weapons to rescue Ziaur Rahman. At

1:20 a.m. I first heard the sound of firing. Soon after the shooting began

trucks loaded with soldiers came to me — shouting for me. They inform-

ed me they had acted as I had asked. Zia had been rescued and was now

being kept in the Second Field Artill-

ery Headquarters. They came to take me to the HQ. At about 3 a.m. we reached the H.Q. of the Second Field Artillery

Regiment.

I found Zia in his night dress with Brigadier Mir Sawkat and a few other officers and men. They embraced me, embraced my brother and with tears in his eyes, expressed his grati-

tude for saving him. We then had some discussion regarding the course of action to be taken.

The ‘Tribunal’ interrupts Taher. There are arguments in the Congress. Taher says: “You must listen to what I have to say. Otherwise I will not make any

statement. Hang me... Hang me now... have no fear. But don’t disturb me... from where did we leave off?”

He continued with his statement.

I wanted Zia to take over as Chief

Military Law Administrator and accord-

ingly an announcement was made on

the radio. I had instructed the sol-

diers assembled at the Shahid Minar

where a mass meeting would be ad-

ressed by Zia and myself, so that

no one would be able to go back from the commitment and embarrassment that the revolutionary soldiers — the sol-

diers who, minus their officers, had

protected the sovereignty of the con-

ty.

I set the time for the meeting at

Shahid Minar for 10 o’clock. The

soldiers out of joy were moving

toward the town and I thought it

would take some time to gather. At

8.30 I was informed by the troops

that Khondakar Mustaque Ahmed had en-

tered Bangladesh Radio and was at-

tending to make an announcement on the radio station. I told Mustaque in clear terms that the days of politi-

cal conspiracy were over and that he must leave the radio station imme-

diately. He complied with my orders and left.

After that I went to the cantonment to bring Zia to address the meeting. When I reached there, I found the atmosphere was a little changed. Zia had shaved and was in uniform. He seemed to have recovered from the shock of his captivity. When I told him it was time to go to the Shahid

Minar, he refused — although very politly. He pleaded that he was a soldier and that he could not go out and speak in a public meeting. He

asked me to go and address the troops. Instead I sent a message to the Shahid

Minar for the troops to return to the cantonment.

At 11 o’clock we held a meeting at

Headquarters. We decided in princi-

ple to form an interim government.

Present at that meeting were myself, Tawab, Tawakat, and M, I asked

Rashid Osman and the Principal

Secretary Mahbubul Alam Chashi. A legal question arose over the contin-

uity of the government. The others
wished Justice Sayem to be the President of the country. [Sayem had been appointed by Major General Ershad on 5th November.] I agreed to that but wanted Zia to be the Chief Martial Law Administrator. After some discussion, it was decided that he, along with Tawab and M H Khan, would each be appointed Deputy Chief Martial Law Administrators. It was not decided in that meeting that they would hold charge of any ministry. Justice Sayem as President and Chief Martial Law Administrator along with his three Deputy Chief Martial Law Administrators would form an advisory council. But most important of all it was decided that all political prisoners were to be released.

After a discussion with political leaders, political activities were to be allowed and a general election would be held much earlier than what was promised by President Khondaker Mustaque.

In the afternoon I went to the radio station. The soldiers who had taken part in the attack wanted me present when they handed over their ‘Twelve Points’ to Major-General Zia. From the radio station I telephoned Ziaur Rahman and informed the soldiers’ wish. At the time the troops were so excited they did not allow anyone inside the radio station. In the evening, about 7.45, Sayem and Mustaque who accompanied Zia were not allowed inside the radio station. Only after representatives of the revolutionary soldiers had handed the Twelve Points to Zia who acknowledged his agreement by signing a copy, were Sayem and Mustaque permitted inside.

Major-General Zia and myself sat in the TV room of the Radio Bangladesh and watched Khondaker Mustaque and Sayem speak to the nation. Zia explained out clearly the principles which had been agreed upon in the earlier meeting. In keeping with these principles, on the 8th November 1976, A S M Habibur Rab was released from prison. On the 8th I rang up General Zia thanking him for this act and insisted that Matin, Alauddin, Tipu Biswas and other prisoners be released on the same day.

On 8th November in the evening I was informed by Zia that there were some incidents involving the killing of officers. I offered him all necessary help in bringing this situation under control. I also offered to move immediately up to the cantonment and inform him that my orders to the soldiers taking part in the revolution had been that no officer should be hurt in this manner. Until the 12th November, Major-General Zia kept in constant contact with me. After the 12th I found he was unavailable.

On 23rd of November, a large police contingent surrounded the house of my brother and took him to the police control room. When I came to know this, I rang up Major-General Zia and I was told that he was not available. Instead of him, Major-General Ershad, the Deputy Chief Martial Law Administrator talked with me. When I informed him about the arrest of my brother, he said that it was a police matter and he knew nothing about it. It became very clear to me that a new conspiracy had taken control of those we had brought to power on November 7th.

On 24th November I was surrounded by a large contingent of police officers. The police officer asked me to accompany him to have a discussion with Zia. I said I was surprised and asked him why there was need of a police guard for me. I was put in Zia. Any way they put me in a jeep and drove me straight to this jail. This is how I was put inside this jail by those traitors who I saved and brought to power.

In our history, there is only one example of such treachery. It was the treachery of Mir Zafar who betrayed the people of the Eastern Province and the sub-continent and led us into slavery for a period of 200 years. Fortunately for us it is not 1757. It is 1976 and we have as many traitors and revolutionary people who will destroy the conspiracy of traitors like Ziaur Rahman.

Once more Taher is stopped by the Tribunal. Procedures are stopped by arguments in the court. Taher declares: ‘You have no power to hang me. No power to convict or acquit me.’

After a few days in the Central Jail, I was flown by helicopter to Rajshahi Central Jail. There I was put in solitary confinement. My family members were kept from meeting me.

Meanwhile, our country faced two important problems. One was a large number of workers of a particular political party went over to India and started carrying out armed action along our border. The second was the continuous flow of the Bengal Ganges by the Ganges and by the Farakka barrage. Both these actions were a direct threat to the sovereignty and economy of our country.

In spite of my incarceration, my solitary confinement, and the accompanying harassment, I did not fail to register my protest against this threat. On 10th May 1976 I wrote a letter to the President of the country which I would like to read out to this Court.

Taher is not allowed by the Court to read the letter. The Tribunal also says it was not allowed to give his statement unless the prisoner is to cut it short. After the intervention by Taher’s senior lawyers, he was allowed to speak. Taher’s Advocate said to the Court: ‘It is the discretion of the tribunal not to, but because he is the principal accused, he must be allowed no matter how elaborately to make clear his contention before you.’

Mr Chairman and Honourable Members of the Court, my letter to the President is the manifesto of a man’s desire to protect the sovereignty of his country from foreign aggression. A free man has the same freedom from his life as from the jail. The broken walls of this jail, solitary confinement, and handcuffs, cannot take away that freedom.

On the 22nd of May I was flown to Rajshahi Jail and brought in this jail. Since my arrival I had heard that I would be tried by a Military Tribunal inside this jail. On the 15th August, they formed a tribunal which is trying me, visited the jail. I refused to attend because a Military Tribunal inside a jail is only an instrument of the government to commit crimes in the name of justice.

On the 21st of June, four lawyers went to my cell and assured me on behalf of the tribunal that justice would be done and the tribunal would function without intimidation from anyone I agreed to appear before this court.

But I would like to mention here the ordinance under which this tribunal is constituted. It was promulgated on the 15th June 1976. Yet, the tribunal itself was constituted well before the promulgation of the ordinance. Otherwise, how the Tribunal have visited the jail on the 15th June. Moreover, the preparation of the court room inside the jail began on the 12th June.

Mr Chairman and Honourable Members of the Tribunal, a law is not a law unless it is a good law aiming at the good of the people and the good of the country. The ordinance promulgated on the 15th June 1976 is a black law. It was promulgated merely to suit the designs of the government. The ordinance is illegal. So this tribunal has to obey any law that he wants to make up to murder me.

I would like to describe the events which have occurred since the 21st June 1976, the day this trial opened.

Taher is not allowed to give this section of his statement. He says he has been made a scapegoat as the Chairman and the members of the Tribunal.

The act of this Tribunal has put to shame what good things human civilization achieved through constant endeavours from the beginning of time until today.

Before I conclude I would like to say that I have stated in detail what occurred on the night of the 6th/7th of November and also the day of the 7th November. This Tribunal will understand now as to why I have asked for Sayem, Zia, M H Khan, Tawab, and Osmani to appear as witnesses. Let them come and say if there is anything that is not true that I have said to this tribunal.

I would like to say a few words about the defence personnel who have been brought here along with me as accused. I have a responsibility towards them. I was under orders of the commanding officers in the Bangladesh Army in its formative period. It pains me to see that now this Military Junta in
order to achieve their malicious design will sacrifice such an important part of our army and thereby disable the armed forces.

In conclusion, Mr Chairman, I will only say that I love my country and my countrymen are part of the soul of this nation. I ask if you be in part of the same soul that you protect it as if it were your own. And I warn this tribunal as I warn the corrupt generals of this country, do not dare in my life. If you do, you will burn the soul of this nation.

Victory to the revolution!
Victory to my people!
Long live Bangladesh!

Abu Taher was hanged at 4 a.m. on the morning of July 2, 1976 in Dacca Central Jail.

Notes
[I would like to give special thanks to Aijit Singh and John Llewelyn of the Faculty of Economics at Cambridge University for the time they granted me to write this work apart from my other responsibilities.]

1 In his final letter written from Dacca Central Jail on July 18, 1975, Taher stated, "During the entire trial there was no reference whatsoever of the Kader Bahani". However, The Bangladesh Observer and other Dacca newspapers in their only report on the trial, published the day following the sentencing, stated that the government had alleged that Kader Siddiqui had been at the "beck and call" of Taher. Taher records in his own testimony his condemnation of those who in 1975 had gone "over to India and started carrying out armed action along with ... in spite of my incarceration, my solitary confinement and the accompanied harassment, I did not fail to register my protest against this threat". Taher was released from the tribunal from reading in full this section of his testimony.

Kader Siddiqui, the personality concerned, first developed his reputation during the war of 1971 as a guerrilla fighter in Tangail District. A lumpen and bandit style personality, Kader Siddiqui appealed to both Bengalis and foreigners, when shortly after the liberation of Dacca, he personally and publicly bayoneted to death three alleged collaborators. The entire incident was filmed from start to finish by foreign film crews who had been invited to the display by Siddiqui. He returned to Tangail both flush independent and became the recipient of substantial Awami League patronage. Following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975, Siddiqui and his followers began to offer resistance to the post coup authorities headed by Khondaker Mustaque. Elements identifying themselves with Siddiqui gathered in north to India, and with the active and direct assistance of the Indian government's Border Security Force set up training camps in the Assam border area.

In the period following the failure of Khaled Musharraf's November 3 counter coup, Siddiqui's followers began staging regular cross border attacks from their bases in India. After the defeat of Indira Gandhi's government in India's national elections, the new Janata government reportedly ordered the closure of these bases, and the Indian External Affairs Minister stated in Parliament that while no force had been used on Bangladesh nationals who had taken refuge in India to return to their country ... the government would not extend the political liberty enjoyed by citizens in the country to permit the use of Indian soil for hostile activities against "neighbouring countries". (The Statesman Weekly, July 2, 1977.)

2 "The Twelve Demands", Far Eastern Economic Review, December 5, 1975. For the complete text of the twelve points see Lari (8th issue), November 1975.

3 Ibid.


6 The Sunday Times, December 5, 1971.

7 Talukdhar Maniruzzaman, "Radical Politics and the Emergence of Bangladesh", (Bangladesh Books International, Dacca, 1975), pp 41-2. See also "Radical Politics in South Asia" (Macmillan Press, 1975), editors Paul Brass and Marc Franda.


12 Maniruzzaman, "Radical Politics and the Emergence of Bangladesh", pp 22-3.

13 Pakistan Times, April 13, 1971; see also Robin Blackburn's, "Explosion in a Subcontinent" (Penguin, 1975), pp 359-9.


18 Maniruzzaman, "Radical Politics and the Emergence of Bangladesh", p 52. According to Maniruzzaman, "The pro-Peking leftists, who had already split into several factions prior to the liberation struggle, became totally confused when Peking chose to support the Yahya regime in its brutal suppression of the liberation movement" (p 51).

In West Bengal the Bangladesh crisis produced similar splits in the 'pro-Chinese' Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) known as the Nasalites. As with their counterparts in East Bengal, the Indian Naval Officers were deeply divided over the Bangladesh issue. Ashim Chatterjee, a Central Committee member of the CPI (M-L), in 1971 denounced the exigible line of the party's chairman, Charu Mazumdar, as "opposed to the stand on this issue of the great, glorious, and correct Communist Party of China". Chatterjee argued at the time in a vein similar to that of the ECP (M-L)'s Abdul Huq in maintaining Pakistan was fighting a just war. Mazumdar, however, said that even if India as an aggressive power intervened, it would not have been correct for a communist party to support Yahya Khan, 'Taking a position somewhat similar to Toaha, Mazumdar said that communists would have to fight the two fronts against Indian aggression and against Yahya Khan's forces. Neither Chatterjee nor Mazumdar opened a serious discussion on the relevant aspects of the 'national question'.

What seemed apparent was that neither the Nasalites in West Bengal nor the 'pro-Peking' factions
in Bangladesh had taken to heart one of the most fundamental aspects of the Chinese Communist Party’s breach with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The Chinese said, despite their 1976 endorsement, to have become a bit concerned with the form of ‘Maoism’ emerging in South Asia which appeared more pre-occupied with China’s position on issues than with developing its own independent analysis of the conditions facing India and Pakistan. In 1970, a year prior to the Bangladesh crisis, a member of the Central Committee of the CPI (M-L) visited Peking to discuss with Chinese leaders a number of questions being debated inside the Naxalite movement. The visitor to Peking had extended discussions with Chou En-lai and Kang Sheng. It is also said that he met Mao Tse-tung.

In these discussions Chou En-lai reportedly criticised certain slogans of the CPI (M-L). The Naxalites had been actively plastering Calcutta and other cities with posters of Mao and slogans such as “China’s Chairman is Our Chairman” and “China’s Path Is Our Path.” Chou En-lai mentioned these in particular saying, “The world is divided into classes and nations. The proletariat of each territory is the chief representative of its own country. So we cannot but take into consideration the national limits. To refer to the leader of our country as the leader of another party is against the sentiments of the nation. It is difficult even for the working class to accept it. To respect a great Marxist-Leninist is one thing; but to declare him as one’s own leader is a different matter. It is a question of principle.” Kang Sheng was more explicit, “We cannot agree that our party is leader. Also we do not agree about your calling our Chairman your Chairman. This is against principle and Mao Tse-tung Thought. Our relation is fraternal and equal.”

Chou went on to say that conditions in each country differed and each revolutionary movement must find its own way. “This is not modesty, but a statement of fact. Your path can be worked out only by you. The relation between our two parties is of fraternal friendship, a relation of exchange of opinions. If you go beyond this limit, it will be against Mao Tse-tung Thought. It is not right to take our party leader’s name. In 1957, the Chairman said in Moscow that he was against any patriarchal party.”

For a full description of this meeting in Peking see Shukla Ghosh’s, “The Naxalite Movement” (K J Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1974), pp 12-23.

21 The original design of the new national flag contained a map of East Bengal placed in the centre of a red sun. The image of the map was later dropped simplifying the design.
23 From an unpublished interview with this writer conducted in Dacca in June 1976. Harunur Rashid, a National Committee member of the JSD, became ‘Acting’ General Secretary of the organisation following the arrest by the Mujib Government (March 17, 1974) of A M S Abdur Rab, General Secretary of the JSD. Rab was sentenced to 10 years rigorous imprisonment in July 1976 as a co-defendant in the Taher case.

During June 1976 this writer also had an extended discussion with Abdul Huq of the ‘East Pakistani Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist)’, and several short discussions with Mohammed Toaha of the ‘East Bengal Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist)’. Huq at the time was underground, Toaha was above ground, and Rashid was underground.

28 Ibid.