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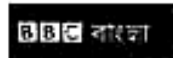
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## Recalling our first Prime Minister-Tribute to Tajuddin Ahmed on his 79th birth anniversary

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Atiur Rahman

Throughout 1971, Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed, the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh, led the war of liberation on behalf of the country's undisputed leader Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, then in Pakistani jail. The whole of the Bengali nation remained united and able to fight the unequal war with so much confidence and heroism only because it was led by someone like Tajuddin and his able comrades.

He led the war from a small office room no bigger than ten feet by ten feet with very modest furniture, like a table, a few chairs, an iron chest, a steel cabinet, and, of course, a photograph of Sheikh Mujib hung on the wall in front of the desk. Indeed, Tajuddin never let us feel that he was leading the war all by himself. Besides being flanked by committed political colleagues like Syed Nazrul, M. Monsur Ali, and Qameuzzaman, he always had Sheikh Mujib in spirit with him. Everything he did was on his behalf.

Once the die was formally cast in the early hours of March 26 by Bangabandhu, just before being arrested, Tajuddin assumed the leadership of the war of liberation as an almost natural continuation of his capable administration during the days of non-cooperation. Besides preparing and then presenting the proclamation of independence on April 10, 1971, and forming a small cabinet to run the government in exile, he also led the war with utmost commitment. He preferred to remain in the war field with the valiant liberation fighters rather than sitting in his office. It was because of his steadfast leadership that we could transform the war of liberation into a people's war and could defeat Pakistan in only nine months.

Unfortunately the complementary leadership between Tajuddin and Sheikh Mujib did not last long. As Tajuddin himself told Mr. Khan, his private secretary, the Awami League was a big party and there were big problems in it. Besides whispering by the Young Turks against Tajuddin's efficient leadership during the war, conspirators like Khandker Husheq and his gang were equally active in dividing the two. Finally, they were able to separate the two leaders and it was then quite easy to make the final onslaught on both Bangabandhu and Tajuddin and the other three senior members of the high command.

Had they all remained alive for some more years, Bangladesh would have surely prospered and started moving towards its ultimate goal of becoming Sonar Bangla. But destiny had other plans and we are still mired in failures and frustrations of paramount dimensions despite many signs of creativity by ordinary people in many areas. The young entrepreneurs from different fields have shown great resilience even after facing all kinds of governance failures. It is because of them that the country is still kicking. Had the country benefited from the committed leadership of the architects of the country, including Tajuddin, we would have perhaps by now reached the stage of development achieved by Malaysia.

What were the leadership qualities of Tajuddin? He was an intelligent person, and yet very close to the masses. Born in a middle-class rural family, he could feel the pulse of the peasants and small artisans. At the same time, he studied economics and had acquired all the qualities of a modern intellect. His involvement in organisational activities gave him an extra edge over others in dealing with ordinary people as party workers, and at the same time running a multi-class party under the guidance of the charismatic leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Tajuddin was not a leader by chance. He systematically prepared himself day by

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day for leading the process of formation of a nation, along with his other political colleagues. All of them participated in the language movement during the early years of Pakistan and helped prepare the ground for germination of the seed of Bengali nationalism. He was a highly organised man. He used to write his diary regularly right from his school days. That he was deeply political and a first class patriot with all the humane qualities could be guessed as early as 1947. As reflected in the page of his diary of August 7, 1947, Tajuddin was involved in forming a political party named East Pakistan Economic Freedom League in association with leaders like late Mr. Toaha, Nurul Islam Chowdhury and others.

When he became the General Secretary of Awami League in the sixties, he was able to articulate more clearly against the wrong kind of development policy followed by the then Pakistan. In one of his political speeches back on December 27, 1969, Tajuddin said 95 percent of the people of the country earned such a meagre income that they were not able to make both ends meet. He also emphasised that the monopoly and cartel promoted by Pakistan's ruling elites were pushing the country towards greater inequality and that the price of commodities was therefore increasing abnormally high.

In another political speech on January 12, 1970, he complained against heavy taxes, both direct and indirect, on peasants, and yet they did not get any support from the government in facing the flood which was nearly perpetual. On June 27, 1970, he made a serious critique of the fourth Five-Year Plan of Pakistan for encouraging more income disparity between the two parts of the country, particularly in the field of education. That he was a great crusader against income inequality was vividly reflected in his first speech given to the nation as the first Prime Minister of independent Bangladesh.

On April 11, 1971, he told the fighting nation: "Let there be a new world for the hungry and suffering millions of Bangladesh where there will be no scope of exploitation. Let us pledge for freedom from hunger, disease, unemployment, and illiteracy. Let 75 millions of brothers and sisters of Bangladesh engage themselves to realise their goals through their collective will and strength. Let there be a newly democratic society out of the blood and sweat of martyrs of new citizens of free Bangladesh."

He was fully confident about the outcome of the 1971 war. He said on April 17, 1971, after the swearing in ceremony of the cabinet, that the only goal of the struggle was to build a new and prosperous Bangladesh out of the ashes left behind by the occupying forces. More clearly, he spoke on September 5, 1971, that the depth of sorrow experienced by the Bengalis was beyond comprehension by any human measure. Yet he felt that Bengalis had endless creative strength. So this creativity of the nation would overwhelm the natural and man-made disaster imposed on the people of Bangladesh. While it became clear that Bengalis were winning the war, he immediately changed his gear and started speaking about peace. On December 8, 1971, he said, "After winning the war, we will have to win peace as well. Sonar Bangla has to be erected on the ashes of a war-ravaged economy. All the sons and daughters of Bangladesh have to engage themselves in the joyous efforts of reconstruction and development."

And he did not wait a minute after returning to Bangladesh before moving fast to reconstruct the countryside and to wage a diplomatic war for the early release of Bangabandhu. He, of course, started sending useful directions to the administration even before coming to Dhaka from his Calcutta office. On December 20, he already passed some orders encompassing stoppage of any financial transaction including revenue with Pakistan either through post-offices or banks. He also made it clear that Bangladesh would follow a self-reliant economic policy and avoid US aid. As soon as he came to Dhaka, his first consideration was to improve the law and order through the help of Indian army. His next concern was how to bring back ten million refugees quickly and help them readjust. He then quickly moved into establishing bilateral economic and diplomatic ties with countries that recognised Bangladesh.

The cabinet came to Dhaka on December 22. On December 23, Prime Minister Tajuddin, in his first cabinet meeting in Dhaka made Bangla the state language. He also passed government decisions to provide salaries to government officials of up to Tk 1000 as the highest ceiling, nationalisation of jute, textile mills, and tea gardens. He also ordered Bangladesh Bank to function as a Central Bank by December 1971. Although he was dead against foreign aid he could realize the depth of the changing realities. As finance minister, he never hesitated to take pragmatic steps to make economic policy pro-people. When he went to Washington in 1972 to attend a finance ministers conference he appealed to the World Bank to support reconstruction of Bangladesh. But he was also vocal on global economic inequality and elaborated on how tariff walls of the rich countries were forcing poor countries to remain poor due to their inability to access rich markets.

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Tajuddin always dreamt of a prosperous Bangladesh which was free from poverty, inequality, hunger, and foreign dependence. He indicated this bent of his mind through his various early actions as Prime Minister during the difficult days of post-independence. But his three budgets are even better testimonies of his pro-poor development thinking. His emphasis on improving the lot of the working class while formulating land and industrial policies was also very straight forward. His enemies, however, were able to create a distance between him and Bangabandhu under the pretexts of events like price-hike, food insecurity, and economic "mismanagement" that were essentially by-products of a very unstable global economy following oil crisis and beyond the capacity of a finance minister.

His nationalistic attitude towards donors was also misunderstood by many. Tajuddin resigned on October 26, 1974, at a time when the country was facing a very difficult time including a famine. Before resigning, he was, however, able to present his third budget and first Five-Year Plan. His thoughts of self-reliant development were adequately reflected in this plan. This plan envisaged the use of voluntary mobilisation of resources including the educated youths and students for poverty eradication through development of physical and human infrastructures.

Gradually, Tajuddin realised the ground reality of Bangladesh vis-a-vis the world economy. He too changed his policy thoughts. This is well-reflected in his 1974-75 budget speech. He said that it was easier to speak against foreign aid. But in the absence of enough national savings, it was quite difficult to reduce poverty without foreign aid. Yet, he was not quite complacent with the development strategy reflected in the first Five-Year Plan. He said this was only the minimum programme of action. If the nation failed to implement even this minimum programme, there was no chance of winning a war against poverty. The fruits of freedom, according to Tajuddin, would continue to elude us if we did not achieve this minimum goal.

The subsequent events, particularly the oil crisis, food shortage, deteriorating law and order, high inflation and all kinds of conspiracies, both within and outside Bangladesh, did not allow Tajuddin to stick to his guns and promote a nationally owned pro-poor development strategy. His was an era of national assertion for self-development and poverty reduction. Destiny did not allow him to pursue this development policy of pro-poor growth. After many years of his departure from this world, we are once-again talking about "pro-poor growth" and "poverty reduction strategy." The difference is that this time it is being pushed by outsiders. Once again, we are talking about "nationally owned" development policy. Again, this slogan has not originated from within.

We can indeed learn a lot from the development thinking of Tajuddin if we genuinely want to go for a nationally owned pro-poor development policy in Bangladesh. Tajuddin Ahmad's life and actions can indeed be inspiring for the policy makers who are genuinely committed to establish the Sonar Bangla we all fought for.

Atiur Rahman is an economist.

Listening to the radio for election results in 1970 with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

*The Daily Star*

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