

TAHER'S LAST TESTAMENT:

BANGLADESH THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION

by Lawrence Lifschultz

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. Kingsford, 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 colonized 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 tied him remind people: "If you fail to recognize 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 organizer of the famous Chittagong Armory 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. Thousands 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 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 the 21st July 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 the lives of 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 7th, 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, Mother¹, my dearest Lutfa, Bhaijan, my brothers and sisters,
Yesterday afternoon the tribunal announced its verdict against us. I have been sentenced to death. Bhaijan and Major Jalil were sentenced to life imprisonment. All their property will be confiscated. Anwar, Inu, Rob, and Major Zia were given ten years rigorous imprisonment and a penalty each of ten thousand takas. Saleha and Rabiul have been given five years rigorous imprisonment and fines of five thousand takas each. Thirteen others including Dr. Akhlaqur, Mahmood the journalist, and Manna 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 should have the audacity to pass a sentence on Colonel Taher." Meanwhile, Saleha withdrew to the restroom 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 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 jail house. Defiant and ever louder: "Taher Bhai'. Red Salute! Lal Salam'." Can these high walls hold back this cry? Will not the echoes of this call 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 procedure 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. An invincible calmness determined to overcome 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? Saleha will go with me. Bhaijan and Anwar show me a stoic calmness. But I know them. This is an act for my benefit. Belal'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. In the cells adjacent to mine there are three other victims for the gallows. It is a small cell. Quite clean. It is all right.

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 Mishu ... 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. Let this illuminate and infuse new strength into the souls of our people. What greater reward could there be for me?

Ho 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 occurred under my leadership. This I do not 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 present 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 it is their moral 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

The purpose of this article is to describe the history of the events which gave birth to the November 7th Uprising.¹ But more than that the object is to reveal the details of Taher's secret trial and subsequent execution. The men, whom he calls upon to realize 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 this correspondent, 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.

PRELUDE TO INSURRECTION

On November 7th, 1976, 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 7th 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 organizers 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 the August putsch were Mabubul 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 sympathizers 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 Rab Serniabat, 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, Mabubul Alam Chashi, Mustaque had been the contact 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 15th, 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 3rd 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 3rd 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 3rd 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 Musharrafs November 3rd putsch was the exuberant reaction of India. Before news of the jail house murders became public on November 5th 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 organized to have been spontaneous. On November 4th Khaled Musharrafs mother and brother led a memorial procession from Dacca University to the residence of the late Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It had been organized by the two pro-Moscow parties in Bangladesh, the National Awami Party (Muzzafar) and the Communist Party of Bangladesh (Moni). 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 organization 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 3rd 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 popular 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 1000% 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 kingpins 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-imperialist power that was bleeding Bangladesh white.

When Khaled Musharrafs 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.

TAHER'S LAST TESTAMENT

THE NOVEMBER 7TH UPRISING

On the night of November 3rd units 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 a.m. 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 sepoy were held under Taher's organizational direction. But Taher and these cadres were functioning under the auspices of the Biplopi Gono Bahini (Revolutionary Soldier's Organization). The organization had clandestinely existed for some time, but only on the morning of November 7th did it make its existence openly known. Jointly operating with the Biplopi Gono Bahini (Revolutionary People's Army) made up mainly of former guerrilla fighters from the independence struggle, the sepoy of Dacca Cantonment took the lead in a general revolt against Khaled Musharraf's putsch. Both organizations - the R.S.O. and the P.R.A. - were the official armed branches of the Jatyo Samajtantrik Dal (J.S.D./Socialist Nationalist Party), one of Bangladesh's more significant Marxist parties.

What the J.S.D. and Taher, as the Biplopi Gono Bahini's military commander, were setting into motion on the morning of November 7th involved much more than a simple restoration of the status quo ante. At the time of Mujib's overthrow the J.S.D. was already preparing for a general insurrection some months ahead. When Mujib was brought down the J.S.D. 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 J.S.D. and Taher advocated was something else. Rank and file soldiers, they argued, had been pitted against each other by narrow, competing, and ambitious factions 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 5th, under the authority of the "Revolutionary Soldier's Organization", thousands of leaflets were spread among troops in the military cantonments and among urban workers. They called upon the 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 6th, at a meeting chaired by Taher which included representatives from every military unit in the capital, final instructions were issued for the first stage of the revolt. Simultaneously orders went out to other cantonments around the country. In the first "prong" Major-General Zia was to be rescued from detention, and if at all possible, Brigadier Khaled Musharraf and his associates were to be captured alive. The "second prong" of the mutiny was to be set in motion at the same

Time. Demonstrations and processions supporting the insurrection were to be organized for the morning of November 7th, and the "Twelve Demands" of the soldiers were to be made the fundamental issue once Khaled's group had been defeated. Zia's rescue would serve as a symbol of the uprising, while the demands of the sepoy soldiers would constitute the principled basis of the revolt. It was this second aspect, in addition to the support of thousands of people who poured into the streets of Dacca to cheer the rebel soldiers, which distinguished the mutiny from the narrow conspiracies of August 15th and November 3rd.

The soldiers' demands ranged from a call for the establishment of a "revolutionary army" to the total destruction of 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. For many days we were the Army of the richer class. The rich have used us for their own interests. The events of August 15th are but one example. However, this time we have revolted neither for the cause of the rich nor on their behalf. 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 defender of the country's oppressed classes."² The second demand of the soldiers called for the immediate "release of all political prisoners". Other demands set out in the November 7th 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 soldiers 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 sepoy soldiers 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 given 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 organizations" which would link up with a "central revolutionary army organization to be formed for the whole of Dacca cantonment." The declaration stated: "This central organization 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."³

The emergence of a powerful radical force within an organized 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 organizing 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 persuasive appeal. On the morning of November 7th 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 generalized 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."^{1*}

By midnight on November 6th all preparations for the rebellion were complete. Shooting broke out not long after midnight on the 7th. The main fighting was centered in the capital's cantonment area. In Rangpur and Chittagong revolts also 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 3rd 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 3rd 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 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 and give 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 organization.

The intimacy of these two men made it hardly surprising that it would be Taher who Zia called upon on November 4th in a desperate hope that he might be rescued. Nor could it be said that Zia was naive 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 7th 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 oppose 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 7th 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% 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 3rd 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 "resume 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 press 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 Organization that "reactionary" officers who failed to support the "revolutionary demands" were to be segregated for eventual demobilization.

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 these events. One report describing the effect the uprising had in one village, Tarapur, is worthwhile quoting at length:

"Party activity in Tarapur had been sporadic in the last year consisting mainly of occasional visits by local J.S.D. cadres who tried to persuade some of the young men of the village to join the party and 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 horrors of 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 struck a responsive chord in their hearts... After the November 7th uprising there was a marked change of atmosphere in Tarapur. The mutiny of the army in the nearest cantonment and the execution of several corrupt police officers were exciting events much discussed in the village. J.S.D. 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 J.S.D. 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 organize the village of Tarapur. Despite the failure of the J.S.D. to seize power, the way the November 7 mutiny had broken Bangladesh politics wide open and had mobilized 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 J.S.D. 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 village were given the responsibility of reading some simple Marxist texts and then explaining them to the illiterate among them. Recruitment of members for the B.G.B. was also considered. Most of the young men were afraid to volunteer or reluctant because of work at home. But they all showed a great curiosity in the concept of the people's war.

The immediate goal of the J.S.D. in the village seemed to be the organization of a nucleus of supporters who, having been taught the basic principles of Marxism-Leninism, would then proceed to organize and educate other villagers in the area. Several of the village young men were sent to attend a large meeting of the J.S.D. cadres of several unions. There they became acquainted with the local leaders of the party. The broader strategy for the area however was the elimination of dacoits and corrupt former Awami League members and the assumption of law and order functions by the party. Direct attacks on landlords and the upper strata of rural society were considered premature. However, a number of local leaders were threatened with assassination if they turned over party cadres to the police or in any way obstructed the party's work. Fearing for their life many eagerly agreed to cooperate with the party and some even made contributions in kind - warm shawls for cadres who moved around at night and cigarettes and bidis for meetings. During the course of a few weeks, two notorious dacoits (bandits) were killed by the party and some smaller thieves received milder punishment. Besides having harassed the local population, the two dacoits had also committed robberies saying that they belonged to the J.S.D. That proved to be a fatal mistake. The villagers' reaction to the party's drive against thieves was extremely positive. Previously, cadres had had a difficult time finding places to sleep and eat: suddenly they were besieged with invitations to stay at people's homes. One old lady confided, "Now the thieves are going to get it. Just like Mujib got it in the end. The party is going to get them. They came to us last night asking us who had stolen all the rice from Awolmia's house." People's confidence in the ability of the party to govern the area grew steadily as they witnessed for the first time concrete action being taken against the real anti-social elements. The villagers' long experience of the police and army had been just the opposite. In most cases, the government forces had been in close league with the most corrupt and hated people of the area and whenever a pretext arose, they freely looted the houses of the villagers and made false arrests. In taking over the law and order functions of the area, the J.S.D. demonstrated that their concept of justice differed fundamentally from that of the state.

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 his 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 meekly approached party supporters asking them if there wasn't some way he could also join. Seeing the success of this strategy many villagers felt a new 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 organize retribution against the big landlords."⁵

The November 7th 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 hurled 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 Maxwell: 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 Brahmin 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 subjective will. The turmoil could not be easily stopped... And from then on there would be no tranquility on the subcontinent.⁶ (The Sunday Times, December 5, 1971.)

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 "inevitable 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, Sindh, 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 bourgeois 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% of the population, to be the unifying and Islamizing 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 national state in modern times to have been formed on the basis of religious principles. The original theory was that Islam alone would unite the diverse cultures of the Sindh, Baluchi, Pathan, Punjabi, and Bengali. In the eyes of Allah and the state each would be first and foremost a Pakistani. But Pakistan's "minority nationalities" - and even to the "majority nationality", the Bengali - Pakistan's state structure came to be dominated, if not monopolized, 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 institutionalized in 1954, when provincial boundaries were dissolved, 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 and Mahajir 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 Sindh, 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 (N.A.P.) led by Wali Khan won control of the provincial governments. Responsible for the political triumph of the Awami League and the N.A.P. 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."⁷

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 Sindh 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 Sindh 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 1st 1971 the martial law authorities announced an indefinite postponement of the date for convening the National Assembly originally scheduled for March 3rd. The reaction in East Pakistan was immediate and violent. Demands for complete independence were issued by the powerful and militant student federation, the Chattra League. The Military Junta of Pakistan entered into new negotiations with the Awami League leadership while a mass movement based on non-cooperation and strikes gripped East Bengal. The negotiations, however, were merely a ruse for a massive military build-up. On the night of March 25th 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 "Kala Ratri" or "The Black flight", 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.⁸ However, in the context of contemporary history Bangladesh represents an important example of the principles 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 the 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 and

national friction make 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 implies 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 expression of struggle against all national oppression. The closer a democratic state system is to complete freedom the less frequent and 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 interests of the masses and, furthermore, these advantages increase with the growth of capitalism.

Recognition of self-determination is not synonymous with recognition of federation as a principle. One may be a determined 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 capitalism, since this requires the abolition of classes, i.e. the introduction of socialism. But while being based on economics, socialism cannot be reduced to economics alone. A foundation - socialist production - is essential for the abolition of national oppression, but this foundation must also carry a democratically organized 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...." 9

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 Baluchi's were nothing but a bunch of secessionists. In the traditional Pakistani military 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 guerrilla 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.¹⁰

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 guerrilla military commanders, Chakar Khan Marri, sums up 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. Chakar Khan Marri 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.

"We consider our struggle," said Marri, "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 governing. But the roots of the current problem go 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 was the Muslim League.

They did not acknowledge the fact that the Pakistan which broke away from India was a 'multi-national' state of Bengalis, Sindhis, Baluch, Punjabi, 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

nationality in Pakistan. 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 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% 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 multinational 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. Let us try 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.

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." 11

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 "national question". The controversy engendered by the issue reduced certain groups to impotent disarray and created serious divisions which 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 for 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 unitedly 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 Alauddin 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 (EBCP-ML) rejected this position, arguing that it emphasized 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 EBCP-ML criticized 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 EBCP-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 co-operate against imminent Indian "aggression", if only the army would stop brutalizing 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-Chittagong region and organized 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 villager 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 Hossain, the Pakistan Army officer, who formerly commanded the Noakhali sector claimed that he personally conducted negotiations with Toaha on the possibility of mutual co-operation in joint operations against the Mukti Bahini guerrilla forces. These discussions, according to Hossain, 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" Bhashani, to whom Toaha had once served as secretary) unequivocally backed the struggle for independence.

CHINA AND THE BANGLADESH MOVEMENT

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 emphasized 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 intervene 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 super power 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 "a handful of persons" who wanted to sabotage the unity of Pakistan. By printing this letter and by sending Zulfikar Ali Bhutto on highly publicized 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 Pakistan Government and people in their just struggle to safeguard state sovereignty and national independence."

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.¹¹ 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 Pakistan 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 original into Bengali 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 Pakistan 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 his 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 "Taiwanese Independence Movement" with an unprecedented spate 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 denunciation after another 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 proved 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 Bangladeshis, 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 unfinished the 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 guerrilla 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 within three years 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, organized 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 judgement. In Rajshahi District a section of the EBCP led by Ohidul Rahman gathered more than 1,000 guerrillas under its banner and completely co-operated with the guerrilla 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.¹⁸

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 attraction was of 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

JASHOD: FROM A 1962 'NUCLEUS' TOWARDS A PARTY

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, become known. An understanding of the November 7th 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 Jatyo Samajtantrik 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 organized 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 thesis 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.²⁰

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 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 co-operate 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 Coordination 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 Alan 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 Alien 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 organize 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. Six months prior to the voting on August 12, 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 6th 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.²¹ 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 1st, 1970 when the regime made their announcement of an indefinite postponement, the pre-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 2nd 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 3rd, at another mass meeting on the Paltan Maidan, Shahjahan Siraj, who later emerged to become a Reading figure in the JSD, read out the Manifesto of an Independent Bangladesh. Finally, on March 7th 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."²²

"Since the strings of the movement were in our hands, Mujib did not dare to defy us," Harunur Rashid, an activist of the 1971 movement, told this writer. Rashid later became the Acting General Secretary of the JSD.²³ On March 7th 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 its 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. A pre-condition to 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 Khariar Cantonment. His unit stripped of its Bengali officers and jawans had been sent 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 choose: 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 this correspondent from Bengali sources. The full text is simultaneously being released for the first time with the publication of this article.]

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

"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 us who were 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 on the 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 lonely roads 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, 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."²⁴

The Bengali nationalists trapped in West Pakistan believed there was only one possible choice - escape. After one unsuccessful attempt through the Kashmir 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 command 90% of the country's infantry. Together they would begin to initiate forms of military organization unheard of in the subcontinent.

On their arrival at the front both Taher and Ziauddin were given sector commands. Fighting was already going on. Immediately following the 25th of March spontaneous resistance began from civilians who organized themselves into irregular guerrilla 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.²⁵ 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 Musharraf in Comilla, Usman in Khustia, and Saifullah 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 reorganize.

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 provisional 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 co-operation of the Indian authorities and under the auspices of a number of Bangladesh military officers these remnants were organized into two brigades based in the Indian border territories of Assam and Tripura. In their command structure and organization they were wholly conventional. Moreover, the strategic concepts which they reflected were typical, in mentality and outlook, of the sub-continent'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 Musharraf. 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 mobilization 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 organization or co-ordination by any centre took spontaneous action and organized guerrilla resistance at hundreds of locations. Armed rebel groups ranged in character from those activated by Abdul Matin's East Bengal Communist Party in Pabna and the Attraï to the private armies of bandit elements such as Kader Siddiqui in the Tangail. But most groups arose without prior organizational 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 utilizing 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 terrorizing sympathizers 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 Osmani, Major Khaled Musharraf, and Major Safiullah opposed the plan. This history of partnership between Taher and Zia made Zia's betrayal of the Twelve Demands raised during the November 7th 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 commander's 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 assault force moved into position in early October. On October 11th the difficult task of secretly transporting 1,200 guerrilla fighters across the Brahmaputra under cover of darkness was accomplished by organizing a fleet of sixty deep bottomed country boats. The plan of operation called for the carrying out of simultaneous attacks at Gourgacha, Rajvita, Thanshat, 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 Pakistan 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, Tangail, and ultimately Dacca. The siege of Kamalpur

began on October 24th. The strategy was to encircle the Pakistani garrison, wearing it down with small attacks, and cutting 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 a very deep and extensive understanding about the history of guerrilla warfare. When holding a meeting of freedom fighters, he would often talk about this history of the guerrilla 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 weapons 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. From today onwards forget the word "attack". In the dictionary of the guerrilla 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 you 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. That 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."²⁶

On November 13th 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 14th 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 3rd. 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 confrontation 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 a 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 Sheik Mujibur Ranman and Indira Gandhi adorned homes and hung from tea shops all across a newly independent Bangladesh, the small incidents which would ultimately turn friendship 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. Jalil, a direct confrontation occurred. Jalil objected to the movement of captured weapons into India. Under Indian pressure Bangladesh's provisional government arrested Jalil for insubordination and ordered him courtmartialled. Upon his release from prison a year later following a trial which exonerated him, Jalil became the figure head President of the JSD (Socialist Nationalist Party).

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 said that captured material was Bangladesh property and not Indian war booty.

At the Chittagong Naval Base Indian units removed every gram of move-able 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 courtmartialled 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 leftist 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 neutralize 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 symbolized by the moment of defeat when in a dramatic ceremony, the Pakistani Commander, General Niazi, signed the declaration of surrender. Niazi surrendered to the Indian Commander, General Aurora Singh. 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 Kamalpur 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 had he not lost his leg at Kamalpur 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 Safiullah 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 Pakistanis 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 any 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 sepoy. 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 defense 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 association 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% of the nation's revenue budget. The expansion was financed by draining the domestic economic surplus and by becoming one piece in the complex puzzle of American military alliances. For Pakistan's loyalty to both CENTO and SEATO the United States was willing to provide a billion U.S. 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 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 organized a plantation of several hundred thousand pineapples. All officers and men were required to do physical labour every day. Special work teams were organized 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 7th Uprising rebelling soldiers would call for a "People's Army: An armed force of the oppressed classes".

The new modes of military organization 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."²⁷

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. Dr. 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 the prestige of 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 active participation 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 the one 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 all previously existed in the familiar form known as bakhshesh, 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.

Prior to independence East Bengal had been a rather quiet distant place -the most remote province of Pakistan. Travellers journeying from Southeast to South Asia via Bangkok, Rangoon, 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 periphery 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 criminalization of the country's politics and the destruction of the 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."³¹

The most notorious example of the style of primitive accumulation indulged in by members of the new regime was that of Gazi Gulal 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 M.P. 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 Nation's transport division, which at one point controlled the import and shipment of millions of dollars' worth of goods into the country, was reported to have made over a million and

to have purchased a hotel in Sardinia from his Bangladesh "earnings".³⁰ In 1974 the World Bank, that leading light of international lending, became enmeshed in a scandal involving its northwest irrigation project, when it was revealed that the Bank had knowingly paid \$4 million in bribes.³¹

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 Sikdar's Purba Bangla Serbhara 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 Serbhara Party reorganized its guerrilla squads. Following independence the Serbhara 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 Serbhara 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-sentence letter 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 mobilizing 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 pressed him into declaring an independent Bangladesh. They outlined their proposals on a vigorous programme of nationalization, 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 aid bonanza, 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 Jatyo Krishak League. In June, they split the workers' front, breaking up the Shramik League, and forming their own parallel organization. On October 21st, 1972 a Convening Committee of the Jatyo Samajtantrik Dal (JSD/Socialist Nationalist Party) was founded terming itself not a party, but a "socialist mass organization". Among those who made up the committee were Bidan Krishna Sen, Shajahan Siraj, Nur Alam Ziku, Abdur Rab, Sultan Uddin Ahmed, and Major M.A. Jalil. In December 1972 the Convening Committee of the JSD was expanded into the Central Organizing Committee of the JSD. It included a number of important,

but secret members such as Colonel Abu Taher. In May of 1972 the Central Organizing Committee expanded further into a National Committee of the JSD.

In June of 1974 following an extended meeting of the National Committee a smaller Coordination Committee was formed, and at this session the 1962 "nucleus" officially dissolved itself, and merged into the Coordination Committee of the JSD. During the June '74 session, a draft thesis and a draft constitution for a Socialist Party were put forward. The document had been drafted by a committee which among others included Sirajul Alam Khan, Hasanul Huq Inu, 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 '74 the National Committee began publication of the party's theoretical journal Samybad (Communism) and at the end of 1974 they began issuing Larai. (Struggle), as the organ of the "democratic movement" supported by the JSD. In July '74 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 food grains 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. But the ineptness, 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% 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 clothing rose to 514. 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 statistics 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 Ta 3,880 million. At the end of June 1974 the Planning Commission put the money supply at Ta 8,400 million, or a 116% increase in just two and a half years. Since 1969-70, the period used as a 'benchmark' level for productive recovery, it has been at least 200%.

The Government's monetary policy has served to finance enormous and unplanned budgetary deficits. In the first year and a half, the large-scale influx of relief commodities hid the inflationary power of the growing money supply, as increased currency matched 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 are 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 small farmers. Of a rural population of 66 million in 1970, roughly 40%, 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 Ta 697 per annum (with 1966 taken as the base), in 1961 Ta 733, in 1964 Ta 852, and in 1969 Ta 834. By 1973, however, the real income of agricultural workers was Ta 580. In short, the landless peasants of Bangladesh were earning 17% less in 1973 than in 1949." ("A State of Siege", FAR Eastern Economic Review, 30 August 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 from the districts are linking the deteriorating situation in the rural areas with a complacency in the capital that has been born of months of rising prices 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 Saidpur there have been numerous stories of suicides in Bihari 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 phenomenal rise in the price of rice over the past half year is the main factor for the starvation now overwhelming the ranks of the poorer classes. The harvesters of months of profiteering, speculation, 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 made 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 (35 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, 25 October 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, a tragedy 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 become apparent 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 the transfer of land deeds. By early October, small holders had gone through all their cash, and so came the last desperate throw - an all-out 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 costs rocketing. In Rangpur rice is selling at Taka 400 a maund (77 lbs), but only three years ago the price was one tenth of today's 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 4,000 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, although they are not in such a serious position as Rangpur, the magnitude can only be calculated in the realms of the imagination reserved for the appalling." ("A Death Trap Called Rangpur", Far Eastern Economic Review, 15 November 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 Paltan Maidan. In January and February 1974 the JSD led two successful nationwide general strikes. Then on March 17 after a large meeting on the Paltan Maidan, JSD leaders led a hunger march on 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 "Minto Road 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 Gonokontho, 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 Sikdar's Serbhara 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 Serbhara 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 Sikdar'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 Serbhara 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 Biplopi Gono Bahini -Taher considered himself under the political direction of the National Committee.

During '74 revolutionary parties such as Sikdar's Serbhara 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 Sikdar 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 Sikdar had been murdered in police custody. An explosive situation was developing. Within six months Sheik Mujibur Rahman would be dead.

ZIA'S NOVEMBER 23RD 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 gallows 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 3rd, November 7th - 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 Serbhara 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 throw-back 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 7th, Taher and Ziaur Rahman met as if they were once again old 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. N.C.O.s and J.C.O.s 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 organizing 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 mass 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 break open the straight jacket around the country's political life. Under Taher's leadership the JSD activated the military organization and set the wheel of the rebellion into motion.

According to the JSD's journal Samaybad, their organizations 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 the country. The Awami League and its tail - the parties of the Moni-Muzzafar circle - came out openly and made all efforts to reestablish the image of Sheikh Mujib. However, by then the armed forces, in particular the jawans of the army became disillusioned and 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' Organization (Biplopi Shainik Sangsha) and distributed in the Dacca Cantonment on November 5, 1975. On the night of November 6th, the revolutionary membership of the organization 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 organization of the Revolutionary Forces and the People's Revolutionary Army -thus giving them their first victory over the reactionaries. The decision to act was taken:

First: to shatter the unity of the most active, organized, and oppressive armed group of the bourgeois state machinery. Second: to minimize the organizing capacities of the bourgeoisie.

Third: to weaken the imperialist, revisionist, and hege-monist 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 7th and after, including our assessment and review of this matter, have been published in the booklets Lorai ("Struggle", fifth issue) and Jangi Janatar Gikya Gore Tulun ("Forge Militant Mass Unity")."31a

Unlike some interpretations of their activity, the JSD on November 7th 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 Serbhara Party, Zia discouraged junior officers from pursuing the chase too vigorously. In '72 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 cooperation. 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 8th 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 Baikal Mukarram on November 9th.

It is then that trouble developed. Police showed up at the Mukarram and broke up the JSD procession. The JSD student leader, A.F.M.

Mahbulul Huq, President of the Chattra 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 3rd 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 reestablish their position. Mabubul Alam Chashi, an important behind-the-scenes figure in the soup which toppled Mujib, reportedly was able to persuade Zia onto a new course. Basing its strength 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 JSD document analyzing 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 support, this could be achieved. In addition, the weak position he was in due to having been saved from certain death presented an opportunity to utilize 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 realized that his personal class-based hopes and ambitions would not be materialized, if he remained under the influence of progressive forces... By 10-11 November 1975 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."³²

By November 15th the JSD had publicly begun to disassociate 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 jawans, was being led in a counter-revolutionary direction by "the rightist reactionaries and pro-USA elements".³³

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 Spínola. 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 Spínola 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 "Spínola" of Bangladesh.

On the 15th of November, the newly freed JSD leaders, M.A. Jalil and A.S.M. Abdur Rab, urged the immediate formation of "revolutionary councils" among the army jawans, industrial workers, peasants, and intellectuals to assist the Biplopi Gono Bahini usher in a proletarian

revolution. They considered these to be pre-Soviet forms of state organization. But events were moving fast. On November 23rd Ziaur Rahman staged his counter-coup. Where Spínola 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 sympathizers 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 had acted independently and without party authority, but had done so because they believed Zia had betrayed the revolution of November 7th.

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 politicized 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, Salaudin 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 a full-scale overhaul of Bangladesh's police and the formation of an elite 12,500-man 'special police force'. The concept of the force was made 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 'reorganized 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 'reorganized' 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 Rakkhi

Bahini. Many observers here suspect that the new formation may have the same function as the Rakkhi 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 permanent base, 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 rapidly accelerating campaign against the left-wing Jatyo 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 unauthorized 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." (January 16, 1976),

Following the November insurrection old divisions on the radical left reopened. In particular Mohammed Toaha's pro-Chinese Purba Bangla Samaybadi Dal (East Bengal Communist Party), which in 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 overthrew Khaled Musharraf, 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 dissention among the jawans 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."³⁵

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 criticized those who "blindly copy the statement of a certain foreign communist party".³⁶

While the JSD was driven underground, Toaha's EBCP 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.³⁷

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 destroying the Bangladesh front line of defense by killing trained army officers and creating dissension among the soldiers. The JSD leaders replied 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% 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."³⁸

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 legalized 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."³⁹

The JSD itself did not regard the reversals which followed November 7th to be either permanent nor 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 Samyabad in this way:

"The powerful program and line of action taken by the revolutionary sepoy's under the leadership of the Revolutionary Soldiers Organization warrants special mention. On the day of the 7th November 1975 they put forward the 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 sepoy. They also objected to being used as

tools for safe-guarding 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 repugnant conspiracy on behalf of his own personal interests and 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 it 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 unequivocal 'no', because —

First: the jawans of the Bangladesh Army can no more be used as an effective tool in the interest 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 polarization of those forces for and against the proletariat has been speeded up;

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

Fifth: the imperialist-revisionist-jjgemonist groups have all understood that the revolutionaries of Bangladesh will never accept their autocracy."!*

THE TRIAL TO THE END

On the 24th of November, 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 the capital, and taken to Rajshahi District Jail. Overland movement was considered too risky, and on December 6th, locked in handcuffs, he was flown by helicopter to Rajshahi. 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,

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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 Mukti Bahini 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 radicalized Mukti Bahini 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 (N.S.I.) 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 where Zia's loyalties truly lay. These two organizations, the first directed by A.M.S. Safdar, 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. It was this lobby which collectively pressed for a trial. Zia, recognizing 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 22nd, 1976 Taher was flown by helicopter from Rajshahi 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 15th 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 '71. 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 Jatyo Samajtantrik Dal (JSD). Of the ten others listed, seven were members of the army or airforce.

In a mild violation of an undeclared, 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 nation's 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, in 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. Abdur 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, Dr. Aklaquar Rahman, and K.B.M. Mahmood, the Editor of the English weekly Wave, were among the accused.

The trial opened on June 21st, 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 black-coated 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 of arms. Moreover, those officers who were part of Khaled Musharraf's November 3rd 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 Jamil 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 behind the November 3rd 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 Bangkok 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 28th 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 such 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 recess. 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 28th 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 NSI man calling himself Shamin 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 Musharraf 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 another despatch concerning the trial. 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 first 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 U.S. Embassy, I was kept for three days under house arrest until the next flight to Bangkok. On July 1st 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, that 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 sentences: Taher was to hang.

On July 18th 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 Nurul Huq Bhuiya, Sayem threw out a death sentence passed on the accused. The judgement 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 Bhuiya 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 Remembrance's 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."41

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 judgement 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.⁴² On July 31st 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.

Kishorganj 18th August 1976 My dear bora bhajan,

I cannot think of what to write you today. I cannot realize 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 amongst 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 17th at 3 o'clock the verdict was delivered: the death sentence for Taher. We all became speechless including our twenty-five barristers. People all over the country were shocked because the government could not prove anything. Even the state witnesses admitted the

Contribution of Taher on November 7th. The prominent barristers Ataur Rahman Khan, Zulmat Ali, Alam and others became restless. They went to the President condemning the tribunal and declaring it Had been set up illegally. Taker 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 every effort, though Taher has written me, "Don't bow your head. I do not fear death. If you can feel proud, that is enough."

In the afternoon on the 19th he met all of us. He was completely natural and cheerful. He read to us what he had written after the tribunal gave the verdict. To me he said, "It does not befit you to feel sad. After Kudi Ram I will be the first in South Asia to die like this. "When I told him others had asked me to file a mercy petition, he said, "Is that to bring me the illusion of life? Is my life smaller than the life of Sayem and Zia?"

Be 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 was 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 to seek absolution for his 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 wish to sleep. " He went to sleep quietly. At 3 o'clock at night he was woken up. He asked how much time was left. After knowing the time he cleaned his teeth and shaved himself and bathed. All those present came forward to help him. He forbid 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 mangos we had given. He himself put on the artificial limb, shoes, and pants. He put on a beautiful shirt, his wristwatch, and combed

his hair carefully. After that he took tea, mangos, 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, laugh. Why are you so gloomy? I had wanted to make the face of the distressed bloom with smiles. Death cannot defeat me." He was asked whether 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 taking the rope in his own hand he put it around his neck. And he said: "Good-bye countrymen. Long Live Bangladesh! Long Live Revolution!" He told them to press the button, but nobody came forward. He 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 pice that day. We Were given the body at 2:50. In the midst of the strictest security a car was taken inside the jail, and the body lifted into it. After that S 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 came upon 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 moorings, 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.

Affectionately, Lutfa

An unheard of situation had arisen, Honourable Magistrates. Here was a regime afraid to bring an accused before the courts; a regime of blood and terror which shrank in fear at the moral conviction of a defenceless man - unarmed, slandered, and isolated. Thus, having deprived me of all else, they finally deprived me of the trial in which I was the principal accused.

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 unwise 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 of the court. 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 seethe 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

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 inside Bangladesh on any details of the case. The text was obtained from sources inside Bangladesh 's Martial Law Administration who wish at this time to remain anonymous.

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 Chairman. Yes, I have summoned - the President, Justice A.S.M. Sayem, Major-General Ziaur Rahman, Rear-Admiral M.H. Kahn, Air Vice-Marshal M.G. Tawab, and General M.A.G. Osmani. They should all be brought here and made to give evidence. 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 my call on the night of the 6th and 7th of November 1975, and thereby the malicious objectives of a group of conspirators was frustrated. Major-General Ziaur Rahman was freed from his captivity and the sovereignty of this country was preserved. If this is the act which constitutes treason, then I am guilty.

And to establish this fact there was no need to go through the unpleasant torture and threats which have been pursued against me since the 21st June 1976. This fact is well-known to Justice Sayem and his government which by our own efforts we 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 it with gratitude.

It is an insult to this nation that there is now an attempt to try me Inside this jail and by such an inferior court like the present one. You have no right to judge me.

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. 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 Madrasha Education. Bengalis are unpatriotic. Their culture is inferior. They should be compelled to speak in one language -Urdu.

Those were days of trial for us who were then 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 who 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 I 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 1965 Indo-Pak war in the Kashmir and Sialkot sectors. I bear the sign of wounds from that war in 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, Columbus, 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 clear to me that the Military Junta and Mr. Zulfikar 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 Yahya Khan over the radio on the 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 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 preparing to leave Quetta, I was detained and charges were brought against me that I expressed my displeasure regarding atrocities committed in the then East Pakistan.

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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 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, 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, Colonel Yusuf Haider, "If you do not give me the opportunity to depose of my statement, I had better keep silent. It truly must be a heinous act on my part to argue on behalf of myself before such an inferior officer." There are further arguments and finally after the intervention of Taher's lawyers, 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 B.M. Mustafa, Commandant of the School of Infantry and Tactics with whom I had a good relationship, the charges were withdrawn, and I was allowed to move to the Khariar Cantonment. At Khariar I was attached to a medium regiment and not allowed to join my unit which was brought into the then East Pakistan to kill my own people. It was this unit which arrested Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. At Khariar 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 left with his family and the house was locked. That was the first time I came across the unpatriotic quality of our Bengali gentry.

We spent the afternoon on the lawn of his house. At nightfall we took to the hills. My companions Captain Delwar and Captain Patwari were not used to rough hills and after a few hours they refused to proceed further. We were forced to come back to the Khariar Cantonment. After that I was posted to the Baluch Regimental Centre at Abotabad.

In West Pakistan at the time there 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 the patriotism of the Bengali gentry is confined to heated drawing-room discussion.

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I was fortunate that of the lot, Major Ziauddin, at that time serving at General Headquarters in Rawalpindi, agreed to escape with me. Accordingly we made a plan. With all my savings I purchased a used car by which we could reach the border. Myself and Ziauddin started from Pindi and on our way we connected up with Captain Patwari from Jhelum. Since we had to pass some daylight hours, we went to Major Manjoor's house who was stationed at Sialkot Cantonment. To our good luck when he came to know about our escape plan, Mrs. Manjoor insisted upon escaping with us. Thereby Major Manjoor, his family, and his Bengali batman joined us. At nightfall we drove up to the border, abandoned the car, and walked across the border and reached India.

Here I would like to mention Major Ziauddin. Later I will discuss him more. Following Liberation, he was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel and commanded the Dacca Brigade. He also happens to be an accused in this case. Major Manjoor is now Brigadier Manjoor and is presently Chief of General Staff of the Bangladesh Army. Captain Patwari, I believe, has become a Lieutenant-Colonel, if not a Colonel, commanding a Battalion.

On joining the Liberation War I was asked by Colonel Osmani, C-in-C of our forces, to visit different sectors and find out weaknesses in the conduct of the fighting. The first sector which I visited was Sector No. 11 comprising Mymensingh and Tangail Districts. Major-General Zia, now Deputy Chief Martial Law Administrator was at that time raising a brigade in the area. The sector was being commanded by Brigadier S. Singh [Indian Army].

It was a surprise to me that such an important sector was left to the command of an Indian officer. The importance of that sector was enormous -to hit Dacca. I made a decision to stay there. I thought it was useless to waste time moving in different sectors. Immediately we began organizing operations with local freedom fighters. Osmani was rather annoyed with me, but since I would not go back he was forced to appoint me Commander of Sector 11.

Within a short period the weaknesses in our conduct of the war could be easily pinpointed. First: we waged a war; the people waged a war; but there was no political leadership. Without political leadership, guerrilla warfare can never develop. And the Awami League failed to provide political leadership to our Liberation struggle.

Second: the command structure had no theoretical concept of guerrilla war. Few conventional officers like Colonel Osmani, Major Zia, Major Khaled, Major Safiullah, and others, 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 leadership. 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

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regular main force brigades to consolidate their own power. Had the two brigades of trained troops, one at Agartala under Khaled Mussaraf and the other at Meghalaya under Major Zia, been correctly deployed, we could have raised 20 divisions of peasant fighters within seven or 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. Taher says: "If you disturb 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 Afzar, 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 provisional government looked at the development of such a force with suspicion. Consequently, there was no co-ordination between the freedom fighters 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 B.S.F. of India due to 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 provisional government 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. Accordingly a conference of sector commanders was held. Colonel Osmani, Major Khaled Musharraf, and Major Safiullah opposed the proposal. Not only were we prevented from moving sector headquarters inside Bangladesh and off Indian territory, but Major Zia's Brigade was taken away from my sector.

I was left with one Air Force officer, Flight Lieutenant Hamidullah and one battle injured officer, Second Lieutenant 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 H.Q. at Turag, which was 40 miles away from the border. 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.

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I refused Brigadier Singh's offer and set my Sector H.Q. 800 yards off and opposite Kamalpur port. I knew well that I must concentrate on the access 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 I reached Sector 11, I was told Subedar Aftab is a rebel. He never listens to anyone's orders. He had stationed himself at a place called Kudal Kati in Roumari Thana. He never 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 me to see 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 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 Roumari Thana liberated and it remained so until the 16th December. 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 who had entrenched themselves on an island in front of his position. There was a river between the two. The island on which the Pakistanis had taken up 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. I suggested that early in the morning a small patrol should go out and allow the Pakistani forces to chase them. After four days Aftab was ready with his plan.

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 attack 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 Bakadurab came within our position.

Next we turned our attention to Chilmari, a battle that is well known and which I commanded. It was in the middle of September. During one night 1200 freedom fighters crossed the Brahmaputra river. The target was 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 warfare.

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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.¹ 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 victimize our family. My brother, Abu Yusuf Khan, an accused in this case, 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 Jamalpur and was awarded the Bir Bikram. He was the first one to reach the Pakistani Command Headquarters on the 16th December and obtained the surrender of General Niazi. He is the 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 this case. He is a lecturer at Dacca University. During the Liberation War he was a staff officer at Sector 11 H.Q. He is the type who would refuse to have a second shirt just because a freedom fighter or a refugee needed 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 Sub-Division. Due to his exceptional bravery he was twice awarded the gallantry award Bir-Pratic. He, too, is our national hero. My brother Belal, who also could not escape the treachery of this government has been brought here as an accused. He was awarded the Bir-Pratic 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 the maker did not make use of them. I must also mention the poor and the villagers who gave us food, who gave us shelter, who supplied us information on enemy positions, and who were constantly an inspiration to us. I had a weapon in my hand. They had none. In helping us they faced Pakistani bullets, their houses were burnt, and their women 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 Safiullah concerning certain illegalities. 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.

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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 always 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 organize an Army on the lines of a "people's army" is 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 organizing 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 recall that within a very short time my officers in the Comilla Brigade understood these principles and turned our unit into a productive force.

At the same time I resisted and protested to the then Prime Minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, regarding the existence of a secret treaty with India and also regarding the raising 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 found 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 the Chairman of this tribunal that Lieutenant-Colonel Ziauddin is now not an accused in this case.

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

Taher 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 the 15th August 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 from the Second Field Artillery 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.

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I turned on the radio and came to know that Sheikh Mujib had been killed and that Khondakar Mustaque 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. On reaching there I was taken by Major Rashid to a room where I found Khondakar Mustaque and Taheruddin Thakur along with Major Dalim and Major-General M. Khalilur Rahman. I had a brief discussion with Khondakar Mustaque and emphasized that the need of the hour was to protect the country's independence. I was taken to another room by Major Rashid where he asked me whether I would like to join the Cabinet. I told him to get hold of all the Chiefs of the Defence Forces, discuss the problems with them, and to reach a suitable solution. Major Rashid insisted that I, together with Lieutenant-Colonel Ziauddin, could save the situation and that he had no faith in any service chief or any politician. I advised him that no BAKSAL leaders should be taken into any cabinet and I said an all-party government composed of all patriotic political parties should be formed. Rashid kept insisting I attend the swearing in 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 over. In the evening I sat down with the officers who were involved in the killing. They were headed by Major Rashid. I put forward my suggestion that Martial Law be proclaimed, the constitution be abrogated, and that all political parties be allowed to function and that a general election of the people establish a people's government. I insisted that the release of all political prisoners must be done immediately before any firm future course of action could be decided.

During the latter part of our discussion, 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 discussion with Major-General Safiullah, Major-General M. Khalilur Rahman. They all agreed to what I had recommended.

But at that stage on the 16th of August, I realized that Major Rashid and Major Farooque were using my name opportunistically to give their troops the impression that they were with me. On the 17th of August 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 Osmani was appointed Military Advisor to Khondakar Mustaque and kept in close touch with me. He took me along with him to various places in Bangladesh and constantly asked me to contact Lieutenant-Colonel Ziauddin. I told

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him that the government first must withdraw the death warrant which had been issued 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 President Khondakar Mustaque Ahmed that I and Lieutenant-Colonel Ziauddin should form a political party and that he would provide all facilities of finance. I rejected his proposal and sent back word that I insisted upon the release of all political prisoners. It was clear that Mustaque had absolutely no political base. But for a small fraction, he had no support in the Army as a whole, and he had no support among the people.

It was in this situation that Brigadier Khaled Mussarraf took the advantage and came to power on the 3rd of November 1975. 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 not finish our talk - the line was cut. On the same day many soldiers, N.C.O's and J.C.O's 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 Mussarraf's coup was backed by the Indians and that BAKSAL forces were attempting to take power again. They also informed me that tensions between the Bengal Regiment and the core troops were rising very high. At any moment there could be shooting. I advised them to go back to the cantonment and 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 Mussarraf was backed by the Indians. On 4th November the victory march of BAKSAL leaders and workers together with the jubilation over Indian radio proved it was backed by the Indians. The people of Bangladesh were not prepared to accept this. They thought that we were losing their sovereignty. At this stage of the crisis, it is understandable that Major-General Zia resigned. 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 assisted Khaled Mussarraf in assuming the rank of Major-General while the very sovereignty of the country was at stake. These chiefs of the forces behaved in a cowardly manner. This nation cannot afford the luxury of keeping such cowards as their service chiefs.

On the afternoon of the 4th November a message reached me from Major-General Zia through one of his relatives. He appealed to me to use my influence with the troops to rescue him and

save the sovereignty of the country. In the meantime many soldiers, N.C.O's and J.C.O's 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 informed me they had acted as I had asked. Zia had been rescued and was now being kept in the Second Field Artillery Headquarters. They came to take me there. At about 3 a.m. we reached the H.Q. of the Second Field Artillery Regiment.

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I found Zia in his night dress with Brigadier Mir Shawkat and a few other officers and troops. Zia embraced me, embraced my brother and with tears in his eyes, expressed his gratitude 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 Court. Taher says: "you must listen to what I have to say. Otherwise I will not make any statement. Hang me ... Hang me now ... I have no fear. But don't disturb me ... from where did we leave off Sharif?" He continued with his statement.

I wanted Zia to take over as Chief Martial Law Administrator and accordingly an announcement was made on the radio. I had instructed the soldiers to assemble at the Shahid Minar where a mass meeting would be addressed by Zia and myself, so that no one would be able to go back from the commitment they had made to the revolutionary soldiers - the soldiers who, minus their officers, had protected the sovereignty of the country.

I set the time for the meeting at Shahid Minar for 10 o'clock. The soldiers out of joy were moving through 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 entered Bangladesh Radio and was attempting to make a speech. I went to the radio station. I told Mustaque in clear terms that the days of political conspiracy were over and that he must leave the radio station immediately. 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 politely. He pleaded that he was a soldier and that he need 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 principle to form an interim government. Present at that meeting were myself, Zia, Tawab, M.H. Khan, M. Khalilur Rahman, Osmani, and the Principal Secretary Mahbubul Alam Chashi. A legal question arose over the continuity of the government. The others wanted Justice Sayem to be the President of the country. [Sayem had been appointed by Khaled Mussarraf on 5th November]. I agreed to that but wanted Zia to be the Chief Martial Law Administrator. After some discussion in which Zia balked at becoming C.M.L.A. 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.

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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 Khondakar Mustaque. In the afternoon I went to the radio station. The soldiers who had taken part in this revolution wanted me present when they handed over their "Twelve Points" to Major-General Zia. From the radio station I telephoned Ziaur Rahman and informed him of the soldiers' wish. At the time the troops were so excited they did not allow anyone inside the radio station. In the evening at 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 down in the T.V. room of Radio Bangladesh and watched Khondakar Mustaque and Sayem speak to the nation. Sayem spelled out clearly the principles which had been agreed upon in the earlier meeting. In keeping with these principles, on the 8th November 1976 Major Jalil and A.S.M. Abdur Rab were 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 informed 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 11th November, Major-General Zia kept in constant contact with me. After the 12th I found he was unavailable.

On the 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 action and they 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. The police officer asked me to accompany him to have a discussion with Zia. I said I was surprised and I asked him why there was need of a police guard for me to go to Zia. Anyway 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 Bangladesh and the subcontinent and led us into slavery for a period of 200 years. Fortunately for us it is not 1757. It is 1976 and we have revolutionary soldiers and a revolutionary people who will destroy the conspiracy of traitors like Ziaur Rahman."

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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 that 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 India's stopping of the flow of water down the Ganges by use of 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 accompanied harrassment, I did not fail to register my protest against this threat. On the 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 will not allow him to give his statement unless he promises to cut it short. After the intervention by Taher 's senior lawyers, he was allowed to speak. Taher's Advocate said to the Court: "Please allow him. 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.

I am a free man. I have earned that freedom from my deeds. The high walls of this jail, solitary confinement, and handcuffs, cannot take away that freedom.

On the 22nd of May I was flown from Rajshahi Jail and brought into this jail. Since my arrival I had heard that I would be tried by a Military Tribunal inside this jail. On the 15th June the present 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 the government. Only on that assurance 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 could the tribunal have visited the jail on the 15th June. Moreover, the preparation of the court room inside the jail began on the 7th June.

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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 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 ceases to have any right legally or morally to try 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 never seen men of such low integrity 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 endeavour 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 be anything that is not true that I have stated 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 one of the top ranking 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 people. I am part of the soul of this nation. I ask if you be 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 gentry of this country, do not dare my life. If you do, you will burn the soul of this nation."

Victory to the revolution! Victory to my people: Long Live Bangladeshi

Abu Taher was hanged at 4 a.m. on the morning of July 21, 1976 in Dacca Central Jail.

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Tagore's poetry

Udoyer pothe shuni kar bani

voi nai ore voi nai

Nisshese pran je koribe dan

khoi nai tar khoi nai.

-Robindranath Tagore

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