

Zia ur-Rahman



Bangladesh president Zia ur-Rahman, popularly known as Zia (1936-1981), succeeded to a significant extent in bringing political and economic stability to the new nation following a period of great disruption.

Mansur Rahman, father of Zia ur-Rahman, was a chemist working for the government of India stationed in Calcutta. Ziaur Rahman was born there on January 19, 1936. When Calcutta became the target of Japanese air strikes in 1940, like many urban Bengali families with rural links Mansur Rahman sent his family to his ancestral home in the small town of Bogra in northern Bengal. After Germany surrendered and the Japanese threat to Calcutta diminished, Mansur Rahman brought his family back and enrolled Zia in one of the leading boys schools of Calcutta—Hare School—where Zia studied until the independence and partition of India in 1947. On August 14, 1947, Mansur Rahman, like many Muslims working for the old British government of India, exercised his option to work for the new state of Pakistan and moved to Karachi, the first capital of Pakistan.

Zia's character and style as one of the most effective leaders in the underdeveloped world was largely shaped by the issues, attitudes, and events during his years at Hare School. Subhas Bose, a former president of the All India Congress Party, and Mohandas K. Gandhi were the two charismatic leaders of India whose lives baffled the young students. For trying to use the Japanese to force the British out of India, Bose was regarded as a hero by the students, but the British and their supporters in India considered him a traitor for his collaboration with the Japanese. To most of the Hare School boys treason and patriotism did not seem to make much sense. Nor did Gandhi's open support of India's involvement in British war efforts clarify the appropriate role of India's leaders. What dismayed many students, particularly Zia ur Rahman, most was the inability of the authority figures teachers, parents, and leaders—to clarify the issues or to help achieve a consensus in regard to what was a just Policy.

After the war the political situation became even more amorphous. Gandhi's Congress Party and Muhammad A. Jinnah's Muslim League Party, representing the two main communities of India—Hindu and Muslim—failed to come to an agreement about sharing power in the future independent republic of India. When Syed Ahmed's two nation theory became a reality after the referendum of 1947 which ensured the division of India the life of Muslim boys in Hare School became almost intolerable. Having lost faith in mutual cooperation and sharing as means to diffuse tension and resolve conflicts, Zia took it upon himself to justify the impending creation of Pakistan and, in the process often became engaged in fist fights. An otherwise reserved and somewhat introverted boy of 11 often took on older school bullies and beat them.

The Making of a Reformer

Communal conflicts, political uncertainty, and family dislocation convinced Zia of the need for changes which the leaders seemed to be unable to bring about. During his later schooling in Karachi's D.J. College and the Pakistan Military Academy at Kakul he was struck by the economic disparities between the Bengali East Pakistan and non Bengali West Pakistan that resulted in inequities and deprivations being suffered by East Pakistani Bengalis.

Graduating from the Pakistan Military Academy in 1955 in the top ten percent of his class, Zia went to East Pakistan on a short visit and was amazed by the attitude of the Bengali middle class towards the military, which consumed a large chunk of the country's resources. The low representation of the Bengalis in the military was largely due to discrimination, but Zia felt that the Bengali attitude towards the military perhaps prevented promising young Bengalis from seeking military careers. As a Bengali army officer he became a staunch advocate of military careers for Bengali youth. Zia argued that Bengali attitudes

would change when they were in a position to share the resources and power of the military which was traditionally enjoyed by West Pakistanis, particularly those from the Punjab and Northwest Frontier provinces. Ayub Khan's highly successful military rule from 1958 to 1968 further convinced Zia of the need for a fundamental change in the Bengali attitude towards the military. During that period Zia offered a role model for Bengali youth, excelling in his army career both as a field commander in the Indo Pakistani War of 1965 and later as an instructor of the Pakistan Military Academy. He was instrumental in raising two battalions manned largely by Bengalis, called the 8th and 9th Bengals. In the late 1960s he was promoted to major. After serving in Pakistani military intelligence he was posted as second in-command of the 8th Bengal battalion in Jaidebpur, near Dhaka, and later moved to Chittagong with his battalion.

Bangladesh Becomes Independent

In late March 1971 Zia became aware of the resolve of the Pakistani military to crush the nascent Bengali autonomy movement, starting with disarming and selectively eliminating Bengali officers and men of the armed forces in East Pakistan. On March 24 he preempted the military move in Chittagong and three days later unilaterally declared the independence of East Pakistan as the new nation of Bangladesh. A nine month war followed until independence was fully established on December 16, 1971. Sheik Mujibur Rahman returned from a Pakistani jail to take over the new government. Zia was appointed deputy chief of staff of the army, making an officer who was junior to him (same class) his boss. Quietly but determinately Zia bided time.

The opportunity came when Sheik Mujib was overthrown and killed in 1975 by a handful of junior officers who immediately chose Zia as the new chief of staff. Within three months two more coups took place, one by right-wing military officers headed by Brigadier Khaled Mosharraf and the other by privates who had received support from the Jatio Samaj Tantrik Dal—a leftist political party (which Zia later suppressed). Uninvolved in both coups, Zia emerged as the most dependable military leader and one who could perhaps bring stability to an unstable nation. With most potential opposition dissipated, Zia took over the government of Bangladesh.

Zia succeeded to a great extent in ushering in political and economic stability to Bangladesh through three stages. First, he used moderate and left-leaning groups and their leaders to neutralize the strength of the radicals who were insisting on bringing about fundamental changes to Bengali society through revolution, if necessary. Second, he legitimized his power through a referendum (1977), local elections (1977), a presidential election (1978), and a parliamentary election (1979). Except in the local elections of 1977, Zia and the candidates of his newly created political party—Bangladesh National Party—won landslide electoral victories.

By 1980 Zia made a complete transformation from a military man to a charismatic, populist political leader, enjoying the full confidence of the vast majority of Bangladeshis. During this time he embarked on the last stage of bringing about national stability. His three-pronged peaceful revolution to achieve self-sufficiency in food, full literacy, and zero population growth signalled an era of hope for the new nation. He instinctively realized that without global cooperation his peaceful revolution could be replaced by a bloody revolution. Perhaps for this reason Zia continuously sought cooperation not only from developed countries, through the North-South dialogue, but also from other less developed countries through the non-aligned movement. In fact, it was Zia who first conceptualized a possible regional cooperation among seven countries of South Asia and took the initiative to formally propose a plan for the South Asia Regional Cooperation in 1980, which culminated as a cooperation movement through an agreement between the seven countries in 1983.

Through Zia's "open arms" policy the traditional factionalism of Bengali politics was contained and a balance between opposing views and camps in civilian and military vested interests was struck, at least for the time being. But personal rivalries coupled with the perception of injustice by one of his trusted

lieutenants, Major General Abul Manzoor, abruptly ended Zia's presidency. On the early morning of May 31, 1981, in the city of Cittagong, Zia was assassinated in a coup led by Manzoor. After several months of turmoil General Hossain Mohammad Ershad (born 1930) took over the government.