

***Shah A.M.S. Kibria: Raising the Standard of Political Debate*****by Dr. Reza Kibria**

Following his assassination in a grenade attack in his constituency of Habiganj (in the northeast of Bangladesh) on January 27, 2005, many people have commented not only on my father's contributions to the nation, but also his refreshingly different political style. Shah A.M.S.Kibria will be remembered not just as a successful statesman, diplomat, editor and Finance Minister, but also as a politician whose career was marked by a spirit of tolerance and a genuine respect for democratic processes.

He was surprised by many features of politics in Bangladesh, particularly the bitterness and personal rancour that seemed to mark relations between the members of the main political parties. Despite his being a staunch Awami Leaguer, he sought to maintain friendly or at least correct relations with some leaders of the BNP. My father was also unwilling to succumb to the "winner takes all" syndrome of Bangladesh politics, where the winning political party refuses to give the losing party the room to make a positive contribution to the country's development. When he took office as Finance Minister in the Awami League Government of Sheikh Hasina (1996-2001) he reached out to local opposition party leaders in his own constituency of Habiganj. He invited them to join him in dialogues on local development problems, in which local politicians and government officials met to discuss planned public works and infrastructure development programs. His reasoning was that while there might be differences on issues of national policy, most political parties should be united in terms of their commitment to the economic and social development of Habiganj.

Finding himself in opposition following a flawed election in 2001, my father chose to fight for his principles in a constructive manner. He had recognized from the new BNP-Jamaat-I-Islami Government's earliest actions (including systematic attacks on minority groups and killings of opposition politicians) that a climate of intolerance was likely to prevail while this regime remained in power. He also found that the ruling BNP-Jamaat-I-Islami coalition was determined to prevent M.P.s of the opposition party from speaking freely in Parliament about human rights abuses and other issues. He chose to start up a new weekly magazine, *Mridubhashan* ("Softly Spoken"). Liberal writers and intellectuals found a forum to express their opposition to the rising tide of political intolerance under the BNP-Jamaat-I-Islami regime and to warn of the dangers of inaction in the face of the growing strength of militant Islamic fundamentalist groups. Some of his last writings dealt with the urgent need to modify the caretaker government system in this country. He felt this was imperative in order to block the current government's ill-disguised efforts to ensure that they could rig the next general elections.

My father's political style was not in line with prevailing norms in Bangladesh. I would sometimes be exasperated and angered when someone motivated by political hatred would cast aspersions on his capabilities or his actions, in a newspaper article or a speech. My father, in contrast, would only be mildly amused. He would rarely even bother with a rebuttal to such statements except on the (rare) occasions when he felt there was genuine misunderstanding. I had learned not to be surprised at his typically cool responses to his critics – firm but dignified, often marked by wit and mild sarcasm rather than the vitriolic name-calling that characterizes political debate in this country.

My father almost always focused on bad policies rather “bad” individuals. There is perhaps one notable exception to this – Mr. Latifur Rahman, the ex-judge and former Head of the Caretaker Government at the time of the last general elections. My father was convinced that this man betrayed the trust placed in him by the nation, and that this was done by intention, not through incompetence. Mr. Latifur Rahman, he felt, demonstrated a lack of integrity that was not in keeping with the high standards of our judiciary, a group my father greatly respected. My father felt sure that as the activities of the 2001 Caretaker Government became more widely understood and exposed, historians - and the people of Bangladesh - would come to regard this man with growing hatred and contempt.

Even when the attacks on my father were personal – directed at him or our family – he was always able to restrain his anger in order to face his detractors in a rational manner. My father would say that the attacker's character was reflected in his behaviour and his intemperate language, whereas he (my father) could only respond according to his own character. When I would point to an insulting comment by a senior minister of the BNP-Jamaat-I-Islami government – that my father was an “illiterate” person, my father would just smile slightly, and merely say, “Oh, is that what he said?” I thought to myself, well, everything is relative. Even a very bright person may be regarded as merely competent next to one of genius. If my father could be described as “uneducated”, the man making this statement must have a very high opinion of himself indeed. At another time a statement was made in Parliament to the effect that my father came from a very poor family and lived and studied in another person's house, in an apparent attempt to denigrate him. This was patently false as my father came from a comfortable middle-class background, my paternal grandfather being an inspector of schools and writer of text-books, retiring as District Inspector of Schools of Sylhet in 1954. My father just laughed. He said that if anyone thought that he came from a poverty-stricken background that ought to make them respect whatever his achievements were even more. My father always had the highest respect for those who overcame poverty and great personal hardships to excel in their fields – be it intellectual or creative endeavors, the civil service, politics or business.

The people that are behind the assassination of my father may have had little understanding of the quality of the man they set out to eliminate, nor the loss to this country. Perhaps he had become a threat to some people in that he had boldly taken positions – both in his political activities and his writing – against the defeated forces of our Liberation War of 1971.

My father fought to the last to defend the foundations of the Republic that the people of this country had established through such great sacrifice and suffering – social justice, democracy, tolerance and secularism. However, the forces that have sought to undermine and loosen the cornerstones of our State have managed to insinuate themselves into the corridors of power, aided and abetted by a group of individuals whose lust for wealth and office has led them to abandon all pretence of political principle.

The assassination of my father has forced these dark forces into the bright glare of public attention. The reasons for the “mysterious” failure of this Government in investigating the killings of other liberal politicians and intellectuals are becoming clearer by the day. Those who would protect my father’s killers by blocking an independent investigation are exposing themselves by word and deed, and their moral authority to rule has been torn to shreds. Not a day goes by that I don’t wish that I could turn back time and force my father to give up his political activities for a life of quiet leisure with our family. But I do feel that his ultimate sacrifice for the nation that he loved will not be in vain. My father’s assassination has galvanized the people of this country, uniting all those want to end the current reign of terror. There is little doubt in most people’s minds that the killers’ days of impunity are rapidly drawing to a close.

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