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**Sheikh
Mujibur
Rahman**

From Liberation to
Authoritarianism in
Post-Independence
Bangladesh
(1972-1975)

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**Fascist
Sheikh**

**Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1972-1975):
From Liberation to Authoritarianism in Post-
Independence Bangladesh**

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To further its objectives, SAPI has launched Global Voice for Humanity (GVH), an inclusive platform dedicated to advancing human rights activities at both regional and international levels. The GVH collaborates with civil society organizations, policymakers, academics, and various stakeholders to advocate for the rights of dissidents and victims facing persecution under authoritarian and corrupt kleptocratic regimes. Through advocacy efforts, educational programs, and initiatives aimed at raising awareness, the GVH works towards fostering a more equitable, just, and democratic society in South Asia. By combining research and advocacy, SAPI and GVH work together to drive meaningful and positive changes within the region and beyond.

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'72-'75: Road To Autocracy

Picture: Doinik Ittefaq

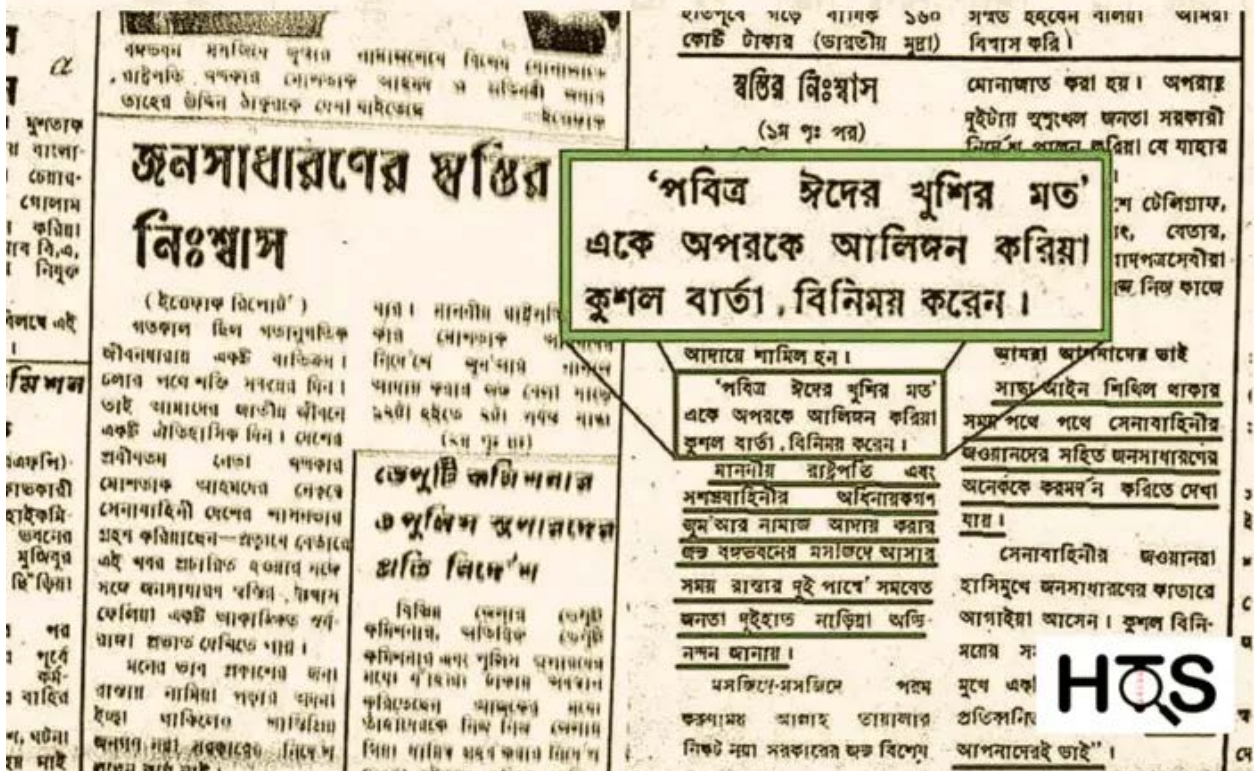


Photo: <https://htsociety.org/articles/road-to-autocracy/>

Introduction

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's ascension was celebrated as the dawn of democracy in Bangladesh. Yet, within just a few years, he systematically dismantled its foundations, erecting in their place a totalitarian regime that mirrored history's most infamous fascist states. With calculated precision, Mujib seized absolute power, using the rhetoric of socialism as a mask for political repression. What began as a leader's promise to uplift a war-torn nation morphed into the unchecked despotism of a ruler who saw himself as synonymous with the state. In the short span of three years, the great parliamentarian had become the great dictator,¹ forging a regime built on one-party rule, violent purges, and enforced ideological conformity. His transformation was not unique—it was the classic path of autocrats, from Mussolini to Kim Il-sung, who, under the pretext of national unity, extinguished political opposition and enshrined their absolute authority. The following sections will demonstrate how Mujib's governance bore the unmistakable hallmarks of fascism—intolerance for dissent, militarization of politics, economic devastation, and the deliberate construction of a personality cult that demanded blind submission.

¹ Mascarenhas, A. (1986). *Bangladesh: A legacy of blood* (pp. 17, 22, 28, 30, 37, 43, 44, 165-167, 170-172, 45). Viking Press, p45.

A Brief Timeline: From a National Hero to an Autocratic Ruler

1971

- 16 December: Independence of Bangladesh was declared.

1972

- Restrictions on Parliament Members from casting conscience votes or expressing their own opinions.
- 8 January: Mujib was released from Pakistan jail.
- 12 January: Mujib assumed office as Prime Minister of Bangladesh.
- 17 September: More than 100,000 people gathered to protest against Mujib's government at Paltan Maidan.

1973

- The Printing Presses and Publications Act: Granting bureaucrats significant control over newspapers and magazines.
- Formation of Jatiya Rakkhi Bahini (JRB): JRB killed thousands of youths suspected of Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JASAD) ties and assassinated its leaders.
- 7 March: The first general election in independent Bangladesh was held. Mujib's political party Awami League was accused of violence, ballot stuffing, and intimidation, even preventing many candidates from filing nominations. Opposition was wiped out and one-party rule was enabled following the election result.

1974

- 17 March: JRB opened fire on a protest rally, killing at least 50 people and injuring many others.
- Mujib's man-made disaster: famine. 1.5 million people died.
- The 1974 Special Powers Act: allowed the government to detain people indefinitely without charges.

- 28 December: Mujib declared a state of emergency, suspending fundamental rights and stripping the courts of their power. This move significantly reduced parliamentary authority and cemented Mujib's grip on power.

1975

- 25 January: Enacted Fourth amendment of the Constitution of Bangladesh. Mujib was sworn in as President, marking his transition from a parliamentarian to a dictator.
- 24 February: Mujib established the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL), a one-party system that abolished all other political parties, effectively ending democratic pluralism.
- 18 April: General Osmani, the 1971 commander-in-chief of the Bangladesh Armed Forces, resigned from the Bangladesh Parliament in protest against establishing the one-party system of BAKSAL.
- The 1975 Newspaper Ordinance
- 16 June: Mujib banned the publication of all newspapers except four (Daily Ittefaq, Dainik Bangla, Bangladesh Times, and The Observer), further consolidating his control over information.
- 15 August: Mujib was assassinated, along with most of his family. His death came after significant public discontent, and the bodies were left unattended for over 24 hours, reflecting the deep resentment against him.

The Path to Authoritarianism: The Fascist Turn of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman



Photo: <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/son-of-ousted-bangladesh-leader-warns-of-chaos-without-swift-polls>

One-Party Rule:

Mujib's implementation of the Fourth Amendment in 1975 was not merely an administrative decision—it was the moment Bangladesh ceased to be a democracy. By outlawing political opposition, he enacted the quintessential fascist maneuver: the total annihilation of pluralism. Just as Hitler's Enabling Act of 1933 abolished Germany's multi-party system and centralized power under the Nazi regime, and Mussolini's Acerbo Law solidified fascist rule in Italy, Mujib's BAKSAL marked the complete subjugation of political diversity in Bangladesh.

The transition to one-party rule was swift and ruthless. Opposition leaders were arrested, independent political organizations were dismantled, and Mujib positioned himself as the unchallenged dictator of an ideologically sanitized state. Under BAKSAL, the government, media, and economy were forcibly realigned to serve a single political agenda—Mujib’s own. Dissent was criminalized, elections became hollow rituals, and Mujib’s inner circle acted with unchecked impunity. In doing so, he transformed Bangladesh into a full-fledged autocracy, complete with absolute ideological control and violent repression of opposition.

Control of Media and Censorship:

Between 1972 and 1975, Sheikh Mujib systematically obliterated press freedom, ensuring that all media served as propaganda outlets for his regime. The Press and Publications Act, along with the closure of all newspapers except four state-controlled publications, effectively eradicated independent journalism. The Mujib government did not simply regulate the press; it weaponized censorship to create a monolithic state-controlled information network, akin to the tightly orchestrated propaganda machines of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Dissenting journalists were harassed, imprisoned, or killed, reinforcing the absolute control of information. The result was a totalitarian information monopoly, where Mujib’s rule could not be questioned, and the Awami League’s narrative was the only permitted reality.

Militarization of the State:

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman heavily relied on the military to consolidate his political control and suppress dissent. The military was deployed to enforce government orders, stifle opposition, and maintain political conformity, even within Mujib’s party. Key administrative positions were occupied by military personnel, further entrenching the army’s role in governance. Protests and political unrest were met with force, showcasing the regime’s reliance on military power as a tool of totalitarian control. Additionally, the morale of the military was deliberately

undermined to maintain control, as highlighted by Mascarenhas,² who observed that officers were kept on ad hoc appointments without promotions or job security, fostering uncertainty and limiting their capacity to challenge the regime. This deliberate manipulation of the military, coupled with its use for political repression, exemplifies a classic fascist strategy of utilizing armed forces to maintain dominance and suppress dissent. Scholars like Nawaz³ have documented this militarization as a central feature of Mujib's increasingly authoritarian rule.

Suppression of Political Opposition:

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's regime did not simply suppress opposition—it terrorized Bangladesh's political landscape with ruthless efficiency. The creation of the Jatiya Rakkhi Bahini (JRB) was the hallmark of his totalitarian rule. Operating as Mujib's private death squad, the JRB carried out extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, and torture with complete impunity. This paramilitary force mirrored the role of Hitler's Brownshirts and Mussolini's Blackshirts, serving as Mujib's instrument of political intimidation. Opposition leaders, activists, and even former allies who questioned Mujib's rule were systematically eliminated. The JRB's unrestrained violence instilled a climate of fear, ensuring that any resistance to Mujib's fascist rule was brutally crushed before it could gain momentum.

Cult in Governance:

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman did not merely command loyalty—he demanded worship. His personality cult was not a natural outcome of admiration but a state-orchestrated apparatus, carefully engineered to elevate him beyond political critique. The title "Bangabandhu" (Friend of Bengal) was more than an

² Mascarenhas, A. (1986). *Bangladesh: A legacy of blood* (pp. 17, 22, 28, 30, 37, 43, 44, 165-167, 170-172, 45). Viking Press.

³ Nawaz, S. (2021). *The battle for Pakistan: The army, the people, and the lasting legacy of the 1971 war* (pp. 45-48). Viking.

honorific—it became a political litmus test. Public buildings, textbooks, and currency bore his image, ensuring that his presence loomed over everyday life. To question Mujib was to commit political heresy.

His regime rewrote history in real-time, presenting him as the singular architect of Bangladesh's survival. State-controlled media enforced his supremacy with relentless propaganda, broadcasting his speeches as sacred texts. Just as Stalin's image was woven into the Soviet consciousness and Kim Il-sung's ideology became North Korea's state religion, Mujib's persona became Bangladesh's ideological cornerstone. The 1975 formation of BAKSAL was not merely a political restructuring—it was the final consolidation of his rule as an unquestioned autocrat, indistinguishable from the state itself.

The cult was not just about glorification—it was a mechanism of terror. Dissenters were labelled as national traitors and eliminated. The regime's repressive machinery ensured that ideological purity was strictly enforced; those who failed to demonstrate unwavering loyalty faced harassment, exile, or death. As history has shown, such personality cults are the hallmark of fascist governance—where the state serves not the people, but the supreme leader.

Abolition of the Parliamentary System and Rise of Executive Power:

In July 1975, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman dismantled the parliamentary system, replacing it with an executive presidency that centralized all state authority under his control. This constitutional amendment shifted Bangladesh's governance structure dramatically, consolidating executive, legislative, and judicial powers in the hands of the president. By eliminating the parliamentary system, Mujib effectively removed institutional checks on his authority, making himself the unchallenged leader with nearly absolute power. This structural transformation aligned with fascist governance principles, where a single individual wields unaccountable control, bypassing democratic safeguards. Such centralization of power, particularly in a one-party state, not only undermined political pluralism but also entrenched authoritarianism as the defining characteristic of Mujib's rule.

Tharoor⁴ has documented this consolidation as a key moment in Bangladesh's political history, highlighting its alignment with classical patterns of fascist leadership.

Use of Military and Paramilitary Forces for Repression:

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman relied heavily on militarized governance to maintain control and suppress opposition. A central tool in this approach was the creation of the Jatiya Rakkhi Bahini (JRB) in 1972, a paramilitary force sworn to personal loyalty to Mujib. Often likened to the Nazi Brown Shirts, as described by Mascarenhas,⁵ the JRB acted as a private army, committing widespread acts of murder, torture, and intimidation to silence critics of Mujib and the Awami League. The JRB's officers were primarily political cadres, and its brutal actions terrorized the population. Mujib ensured the JRB's institutional legitimacy by approving its Table of Organization and Equipment (TO&E), unlike the Bangladesh Army, whose formal recognition and funding were deliberately delayed. This strategic favouritism created a perception, as noted by Khandaker Abdur Rashid,⁶ that Mujib intended to dissolve the army and merge its personnel into the JRB.

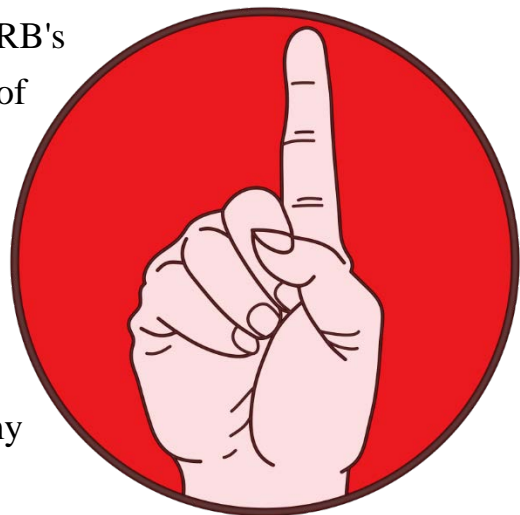


Photo: JRB Insignia, Source: Wikipedia

The national army, meanwhile, was used to quell strikes, protests, and public disorder but faced political interference. Colonel Ziauddin, in an account documented by Rashid (2024), revealed that individuals arrested for corruption and unrest were predominantly Awami League members and were often released due to their political affiliations. When Ziauddin reported these issues directly to Mujib, pointing out the corruption and political obstruction within Mujib's party,

⁴ Tharoor, S. (2011). *The war for Bangladesh* (pp. 92-93, 100-102). Penguin.

⁵ Mascarenhas, A. (1986). *Bangladesh: A legacy of blood* (pp. 17, 22, 28, 30, 37, 43, 44, 165-167, 170-172, 45). Viking Press.

⁶ Khandaker, A. R. (2024). *Colonel Rashid | Ep-1548(2) | Tritiyo Matra*. Retrieved from Tritiyo Matra.

he and other officers, including Colonel Taher and Colonel Manjur, were dismissed from their positions. This action showcased Mujib's prioritization of loyalty to his regime over institutional accountability.

The militarization of the state, epitomized by the JRB's dominance and the marginalization of the army, is a hallmark of fascist governance. Such regimes use paramilitary forces to maintain control, enforce conformity, and suppress dissent. Bose⁷ highlights the JRB's role in systematically terrorizing the public, while Mascarenhas⁸ emphasizes the force's unchecked brutality. This dual reliance on paramilitary and military forces, coupled with political favouritism, entrenched authoritarianism and fostered a governance structure deeply aligned with fascist principles.

Paranoia and Purges: The Final Descent into Authoritarianism:

In 1975, as Bangladesh faced escalating political unrest and economic instability, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's governance took an increasingly paranoid and authoritarian turn. Fearful of conspiracies and betrayal, Mujib initiated widespread purges within both the military and political ranks. Military officials and political leaders perceived as threats were either imprisoned or executed, a strategy aimed at consolidating his grip on power. This period was marked by erratic decision-making and heightened suspicion, as Mujib began to view even his closest associates as potential conspirators.

The internal purges in Mujib's final months exemplify a pattern commonly observed in fascist regimes, where paranoia often drives violent suppression of dissent and elimination of perceived rivals. Such measures create an atmosphere of fear and instability, weakening institutions and exacerbating internal conflicts. Bose⁹ highlights this phase as a critical point in Mujib's rule, where his leadership

⁷ Bose, S. (2011). *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (pp. 72-74, 134-136, 144-146, 152-154, 156-158, 169-171, 177-179). HarperCollins Publishers.

⁸ Mascarenhas, A. (1986). *Bangladesh: A legacy of blood* (pp. 17, 22, 28, 30, 37, 43, 44, 165-167, 170-172, 45). Viking Press.

⁹ Bose, S. (2011). *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (pp. 72-74, 134-136, 144-146, 152-154, 156-158, 169-171, 177-179). HarperCollins Publishers.

transitioned into outright autocracy, culminating in the alienation of his support base and contributing to the events leading to his assassination.

The purges, characterized by their scope and intensity, underscore the alignment of Mujib's governance with fascist principles, where consolidation of power is achieved through fear, violence, and the systematic removal of opposition. This phase of governance reflected the ultimate breakdown of institutional trust and political coherence, solidifying Mujib's authoritarian legacy.

Human Rights Abuses and State Corruption:

During Mujib's tenure, human rights abuses and governance failures highlighted his inability to manage a fractured nation effectively. The Mukti Bahini (freedom fighters), once celebrated for their role in Bangladesh's liberation, were accused of egregious human rights violations during the 1971 war. Reports described horrifying atrocities committed against non-Bengalis, including rape, mutilation, and mass killings, with estimates of 20,000 to 100,000 lives lost, as documented in a HuffPost blog.¹⁰ These atrocities created long-lasting tensions within the nation, underscoring the failure to establish justice and accountability in the aftermath of independence.

Bangladesh has been criticised as a global hotspot for extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's rule in the 21st century. This pattern traces back to her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who initiated such practices during his tenure. Mujib's regime oversaw the extrajudicial killing of Siraj Sikder, a leftist opposition leader, by the JRB. Following Sikder's death in custody, Mujib's infamous rhetorical remark in the national parliament – "Where is Siraj Sikder now?" – signalled the elimination of political opponents. These actions, which violate international human rights standards like the ICCPR, established a legacy of state-sanctioned violence that persists even today.

¹⁰ Bangladesh: Baptism By Fire, by Atif Choudhury, 18 February 2014, accessed on 15 January 2024, accessed at: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/bangladesh-no-justice-wit_b_4455782

By 1972, Mujib's Awami League government had lost the public's confidence, becoming synonymous with corruption, lawlessness, and economic mismanagement. Armed gangs openly terrorised the populace, and Mujib's creation of the 'Lal Bahini,' a paramilitary group to control industrial areas, further exacerbated the situation. Mascarenhas¹¹ described the state of the districts as chaotic, with armed young men looting markets at will. Despite being fully aware of the corruption within his administration, Mujib used this knowledge not to enforce accountability but to maintain control over his officials, as evidenced by intelligence records that tracked bribery, market manipulation, and smuggling networks.

The economic crisis peaked with the catastrophic famine of 1974–75, referred to as a “man-made disaster.” Official records attribute 27,000 deaths to food shortages, but independent estimates suggest between 300,000 and 1.5 million people perished. Relief materials, though available, were mismanaged, diverted for partisan purposes, or sold on the black market. As famine ravaged the countryside, desperate people flocked to cities seeking food, prompting the government to initiate mass expulsions to villages and relocation to overcrowded camps. In one camp alone, more than 50,000 people were confined under inhumane conditions, guarded by the JRB, with insufficient food, medical supplies, or shelter. Dutch volunteer Grace Samson aptly described the tragedy as “not an act of God, but an act of government.”

These crises were compounded by Mujib's failure to address the fundamental issues of governance and justice, solidifying his legacy of inefficiency, corruption, and authoritarianism. His inability to control lawlessness, coupled with his manipulation of power structures for personal and partisan gain, transformed the Awami League into a degenerate institution, leaving the nation in turmoil.

¹¹ Mascarenhas, A. (1986). *Bangladesh: A legacy of blood* (pp. 17, 22, 28, 30, 37, 43, 44, 165-167, 170-172, 45). Viking Press.



Personality

A noteworthy incident involving Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and renowned Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci provides insight into this dictator's deeply troubling and megalomaniac character. Fallaci, known for interviewing numerous influential world leaders, shared her experiences in a 1976 Rolling Stone magazine feature. In this interview, conducted by Jonathan Cott, she reflected on her interactions with fascist leaders and recounted her meeting with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of Bangladesh.

“Unrequited interview! [Laughing] That it was. And it happened again with Mujib Rahman, the man who was martyred in Bangladesh. I started the tape recorder, and all at once he started behaving so badly. He was so arrogant and so stupid – one of the most stupid men I’ve ever met in my life, maybe the most stupid. So I said: “Listen, Mujib, I’m not going to go on like this, you know. If you’re not polite, I’m not going to do this interview.” Argh, argh, argh . . . he started yelling. We both yelled, there was a big fight, and he said: “Get out of my country, don’t come back again, leave my people, leave us alone, leave us alone!” And I yelled back: “Be sure I’ll leave you alone!” It went on and on and on like that. The Mukti Bahini – the guerrillas – almost lynched me because of that, and I was only saved by two Indian officers.”¹²

¹² How to uncloth an emperor: A talk with the greatest political interviewer of modern times, by Jonathan Cott, 17 June 1976, accessed on 15 January 2025, accessed at: <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/oriana-fallaci-the-rolling-stone-interview-73491/3/>

Conclusion

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's rule was not an aberration—it was a textbook execution of fascism. His regime embodied the fundamental pillars of totalitarianism: absolute political control, enforced ideological conformity, a militarized state, and a cult of personality that demanded unquestioning submission. His authoritarian ambitions did not just devastate Bangladesh politically—they disfigured its democratic foundations.

By the time of his assassination in 1975, Mujib had alienated the very people he once claimed to represent. His downfall was not an accident, nor was it a coup—it was a reckoning. His rule collapsed under the weight of its own oppression, proving an eternal truth: when a leader mistakes himself for the nation, he ensures his own destruction. The legacy of his rule serves as a grim warning—unchecked autocracy, no matter how glorified, will always meet the same fate.

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