

**“Kothai Aj Shei Shiraj Sikder (Where Today Is that Shiraj Sikder)?”
Terrorists or Guerrillas in the Mist**

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*The man who had stuck the gun in his mouth now came over and warmly shook his hands.
The young man was no longer a terrorist.*

¡ Afsan Chowdhury

Introduction

In 1971, Pakistan's eastern wing (today's Bangladesh) broke away after a genocide where an estimated 1 million Bengalis were killed.¹ On 16 December, celebrating Bengalis poured into the streets to greet the liberating forces of the Bengali *Mukti Bahini* (Liberation Army) and its ally, the Indian army. In the middle of ecstatic celebrations, not many people noticed the scattered members of the Sharbahara Party, giving out leaflets with a counter-narrative

dramatically opposed to the national mood. Copies of the leaflets have not survived, but the slogan was similar in spirit to that circulated by the Pakistan Communist Party after the 1947 Partition of India:

Lakhon insaan bhookhen hai/Yeh azaadi jhooti hai
Millions of people are still hungry/This freedom is a lie

In that moment of extreme and unexpected euphoria, dissonant notes were easily ignored. But indicators of the potential brutality of the future Bengali state were nested in moments like the ruthless and porno-voyeuristic public bayoneting of people accused of collaborating with the Pakistan army.² Similarly, within this quiet moment of leaflet distribution were the roots of a decade-long guerilla war, and retaliatory 'dirty' wars that ripped apart the fabric of Bangladesh and initiated an anarchy trajectory from which it has never recovered.

The turbulent 1970s were a textbook case of Third-World disillusionment. *Bongo Bondhu* (Friend of Bengal) Sheikh Mujib was a powerful symbolic force for the liberation movement, but an inept peacetime leader, tolerating cronyism, corruption and a brutal security apparatus. Mujib's downward spiral was marked by the eventual abrogation of democracy (preceding Indira Gandhi's Emergency rule by two years) and the birth of paramilitary squadrons that created a reign of terror. One key justification given for these excesses was the alleged need to fight back against the underground guerrilla armies of the left, dedicated to capturing state power through armed insurrections.

Between 1972 and 1975, Bangladesh saw the rise of many factions of Communist and ultra-left parties. Some key groups followed the China line of people's wars, which spread from the villages into towns and were marked by lightning strikes, bomb attacks, targeted assassinations and seizures of public buildings. Among many factions, the most powerful and well-armed were the Sharbahara Party (*sharbahara* translates as 'those who have lost everything'), led by the charismatic Shiraj Sikder. In a short span, the Sharbahara succeeded in destabilising much of the country, culminating in the successful nationwide strike of 1974. Reacting with ferocity, the government's paramilitary squads (*Rokkhi Bahini*) unleashed a counter-terror campaign against suspected Sharbahara members, executing hundreds of civilians. The finale came in 1975, when Shiraj Sikder was captured and killed while trying to 'flee' police custody.

While Shiraj Sikder's programme of a Maoist Bangladesh did not materialise, in death he exacted a vengeance of sorts against Sheikh Mujib. The execution of Sikder, the most visible of a series of state killings of 'terrorists', precipitated a rapid decline for the Mujib government. Eight months later, Mujib and his whole family were dead, killed by a military coup (the same army he had infuriated by creating the *Rokkhi Bahini*). At the time of his death, there were many things that puzzled Asia analysts. How could such a successful coup be mounted by a coterie of junior officers? Why was there no people's resistance on the streets? What happened to the bondhus of *Bongo Bondhu*? One military officer later told

author Anthony Mascarenhas, "We were ready to do anything for [Mujib]. But look how he behaved".

This sentiment was shared on the streets, aided by revulsion over the *Rokkhi Bahini's* campaign of terror. Of course, not everything can be ascribed to the Sharbahara Party ; there were other factions that were also launching attacks against the state. The army itself was a hotbed of intrigue and factions ; Maoist, Islamist, pro-Indian, and anti-Indian. But the Sikder killing accelerated the unravelling of Mujib's legitimacy. If the state could take any measure in the hunt for 'terrorists', so could the army, the leftists, and all other factions fighting for control of Bangladesh.³

Before looking at the Sharbahara Party, it is necessary to explore the contours of the post-1971 conflict, including the contradictions of a liberation war waged on behalf of a city elite, replacing a Pakistani bourgeois with a Bengali petit-bourgeois. We need to also examine the role of mythmaking, that turned Shiraj Sikder into a sanitised Che icon, extending to the recent use of his image in a campaign against suicide bombings by 'militant Islamists' ; a juxtaposition that Sikder would have either approved or abhorred. The current-day parallels are almost banal when we look at the deployment of the terminology of 'terrorism' in justifying rapid increase in state power, surveillance, torture and extra-judicial killings ; a technique first rehearsed during the 1970s 'dirty wars', and revived in the last two years as Bangladesh faces a repetition of the turbulent 1970s through conflicts with new militant Islamist groups.

A Dirty Independence

The years 1972-75 marked a dramatic reversal of fortune for Bangladesh. In four short years, the reign of Sheikh Mujib had transformed into a Shakespearean tragedy. Beset on all sides by corruption, crime and spasms of extreme violence, each fresh incident smeared even more dirt on Mujib's image. In a vignette from Mujib's final years, the late author Humayun Azad reflected on the 'twilight of the gods':

During the 1974 floods, the Guardian wrote a long feature about Bangladesh; they wrote that Mujib's time was coming to an end, he had become a dictator, he would not last more than six months. But Sheikh Mujib is still flying over the flood-hit areas and speaking in possessive terms like 'my people', 'my', 'me'. When I read that report, my heart ripped apart, for the country and its leader.⁴

While there were many aspects to this downward spiral, a defining factor was the 'people's war' waged by the Sharbahara Party and other groups like the National Socialist Party (JSD)'s *Gono Bahini* (People's Army), and the ferocious response from the Bangladesh government, culminating in the creation of the infamous *Lal Bahini* (Red Army) and *Rokkhi Bahini* (Protector Army). Like Peru against *Sendero Luminoso*, Germany against *Rotee Armee Faktion*, and many others, the government's suspension of civil liberties, declaration of emergency powers, mass detention, torture and random killings gave a pyrrhic victory

to the underground groups. By forcing the government to take extreme repressive measures, their charges against the 'bourgeois, exploitative state' were being proven true.

The roots of this conflict stretch back into the first years of independent Pakistan. From the early 1950s, various communist parties emerged as significant forces in East Pakistan, attracting scores of young members. Following the line of 'violent, socialist revolution', the East Pakistan communists successfully staged the Mymensingh and Nachol revolts, but failed to convert these actions into mass support, or capture of state power. Some efforts were stymied by Pakistan's repeated military dictatorships, but other setbacks were due to being eclipsed by the more popular Awami League (AL, eventually led by Sheikh Mujib) and National Awami Party (NAP). At key moments, the various left parties were superseded by more crafty political players (as during the 1968 mass uprising that ousted the Ayub Khan dictatorship) or were out of step with mass sentiment (as when pro-Peking groups refused to support the 1971 liberation war because China and Pakistan were allies). Leading up to the 1968 revolt, violent protests against the Pakistani military junta had a marked class-conscious face, with noted industrialists dragged from their cars and beaten by students. An exuberant young Tariq Ali visited both Pakistans and wrote in breathless prose⁵ about events that appeared, at the time, to have the inevitability of 'revolution'.

But very quickly after the fall of the Ayub military regime, Mujib's Awami League asserted control over the East Pakistan half of the movement and shifted the focus to Bengali nationalism. This accomplished two strategic tasks, which accelerated the isolation and radicalisation of the left parties. First, it replaced class-based demands with a narrower linguistic and ethnic agenda, splitting the movement from the allied uprising in West Pakistan. Second, it blunted the more strident anti-capitalist critique of the movement, instead moulding it to the interests of the AL's middle-class leadership.

Events in Pakistan gained momentum after 1968, moving in rapid succession to the first universal elections of 1970, Sheikh Mujib/Awami League's unexpected victory, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's refusal to allow a Bengali politician to rule united Pakistan, 'good faith' negotiations between Bhutto and Mujib while the Pakistan army secretly deployed in the streets, the breakdown of negotiations and army crackdown of 26 March, and finally the beginning of the Bangladesh liberation war. Through all this, the Awami League decisively took control of the movement, marginalising the left parties and later turning on them during the war.

For the pro-Peking left (East Pakistan Communist Party: Marxist-Leninist, which had already split into three factions), the war presented a crisis of indecision. Many of their theorists, inspired by China's support of the Pakistani position, described Bengali nationalism's clash with the Pakistani ruling class as a "fight between two ruling dogs". From that position, a boycott of the war seemed logical. Some in the left front became entangled in these rhetorical gymnastics and stayed on the sidelines. This was to prove fatal for part of the left, losing vital leverage over post-independence government formation.

While pro-Peking groups were hamstrung by China's endorsement of Pakistan, groups like the Sharbahara Party faced no contradictions. The Party had already gone underground and started attacks against Pakistani institutions in 1970. The war simply allowed them to

continue those attacks. Ironically, it was the Sharbahara Party that called for a total break from Pakistan as early as 1968, while Mujib's programme for independence remained unclear until the Pakistan army crackdown forced the decisive break. Although Mujib antagonised Pakistani negotiators by flying the Bangladesh flag on his car during negotiations, he also sent mixed messages by saying "*Pakistan Zindabad* (Long live Pakistan!)" at the end of his famous "the struggle is for freedom" speech of 7 March, and by allowing himself to be arrested after the crackdown. By contrast, Sharbahara Party historians argue that Shiraj Sikder was actually the first to call for independence, and that even the current Bangladesh flag is a metamorphosis of a design first created by the Sarbahara Party.⁶ In the decisive party document "The Thesis of East Bengal's Worker's Movement"⁷, Sikder outlined the following conflicts for East Bengal:

1. Pakistani colonialism's national conflict with East Bengal's people
2. East Bengal's agricultural class' conflict with feudalism
3. East Bengal people's conflict with American imperialism, Russian social imperialism and Indian expansionism
4. East Bengal working class' conflict with the bourgeois class

The slogan was Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, but one of the primary enemies was Pakistani neo-colonialism. The thesis went on to outline four paths of armed rebellion against the state: guerrilla warfare; red army, formed by farmers; eventual regular army from the nucleus of the guerrilla army; and finally, long-lasting, 'difficult' war.

The Sharbahara Party were already underground, having launched bomb attacks (on Marx's birthday) against the Pakistan Council building, the Pakistan National Reconstruction Bureau and the American Information Center⁸ in 1970. When war broke out, the group stayed underground and joined the battle against the Pakistan army. But as the fighting continued, the Indian high command expressed concern that leftists within the Bengali liberation army would link up with Indian guerrilla groups like the Naxalites, creating the dreaded pan-Bengal insurrection. To counter this possibility, the Awami League encouraged another faction to rise up inside the regular *Mukti Bahini*, this one imaginatively dubbed *Mujib Bahini* and tasked with sidelining the leftists within the guerrilla army. The *Mujib Bahini* was at various times accused of killing key leftist members of the Bengali liberation force, with the Indians quietly supporting these fratricidal struggles. The Sharbahara Party also lost members in these struggles, which hardened their enmity towards the Awami League. On liberation day, Sharbahara members were already passing out leaflets calling this a "false freedom" and preparing for the coming armed struggle against the new government.

People's War without End

By 1973, the Bengali nationalism that was a unifying force in anti-Pakistan agitations was losing cohesive power, as in contemporary writer Ahmed Sofa's sarcastic polemic: Our leaders are constantly talking about doing this and that to the Bengali language. The gist

of their speeches are: O Bengali people, you have suffered a lot to get an independent nation. Bangladesh is a beautiful country, that is why we call it the mother. Bengali language is the mother goddess' language. Those who speak against it, we call them collaborators and Pakistani spies. You have sacrificed a lot for this Bengali language. If independent Bangladesh cannot give you clothes to wear, cover up your privates with Bengali culture. And if you cannot get two meals of rice a day, chew on Bengali language with great relish! f⁹

Instead of a period of calm, 1972 and '73 were ruptured by witch-hunts against those who were alleged to have collaborated with the Pakistani army; a golden opportunity, as during 1947 Partition riots, to settle scores and grab property. Phrases entered the lexicon for the chief inquisitors: *hajji* (those who had gone to India during the war), *khalifa* (Awami League student leaders who began a reign of terror in the universities) and 16th Division (those who hid out during the war but came out with guns on 16 December 1971, when the Indian army marched into Dhaka). The *hajjis* who had returned from Calcutta kept attacking everyone as collaborators. Finally, the leftist newspaper *Holiday* lashed out with an editorial: "Seventy-Five Million Collaborators!" The country paused in its collective madness. If every Bangladeshi who stayed behind was a collaborator, who was left as a patriot?

As things continued to deteriorate, confrontation through guerrilla war was a declared core of the Sharbahara Party's programme for 'socialist revolution'. But armed struggle was not the default choice for other groups such as the leftist Chatra Union and the JSD (National Socialist Party, a splinter group of radicals who left the Awami League). These non-violent positions shifted after police firing killed Chatra Union students protesting against the Vietnam war outside the US embassy. Mujib, who had earned American enmity during the war, was now reversed into being an "American stooge", and anti-Mujib fury boiled over into violent street protests. Another decisive moment came when Mujib's Awami League started losing local elections at the universities to JSD and Chatra Union. Frightened by the spectre of militant communism, Mujib threatened in public to "*lal ghora dabrayya dibo* (smash the red horse)". Unwilling or unable to trust the army, Mujib created his private militias of *Lal Bahini* and *Rokkhi Bahini* to fight the insurgents. It was the rise of the *Bahinis* that pushed JSD and others to also start arming themselves. There is an apocryphal story that Fidel Castro, during his first meeting with Mujib, warned him against unpunished collaborators: "Your Excellency, they will finish you!" Mujib carried that paranoia back with him, imagining traitors in every corner. The Sharbahara Party was the most obvious enemy, but Mujib isolated himself from all other left factions as well.

While JSD and others were taking up guns, Sharbahara Party's basic strategy remained the same. They had always argued that participating in elections was a sham; only Mao's 'barrel of a gun' thesis would bring about 'Marxism-Leninism-Maoism'. The strategy was to gain control of remote areas of the country, especially through targeted assassinations of 'class enemies', bomb attacks, gun battles with the *Rokkhi Bahini*, sabotaging railway stations, blocking roads, taking over police stations, camps and administrative posts. We can decode party pamphlets to find evidence of numerous guerrilla operations, including those aimed at grabbing control of Mymensingh Medical College, Dhaka Bydder Bajar Bank,

Pathrail Camp, Sunamganj Dhormopasha Camp, and Tangail Pathrail Camp. Targeted assassinations were aimed at 'class enemies', especially high-profile victims such as Madaripur Police Assistant Samad Mathbor, Mogbazar paramilitary leader Razlul Huq, Mohammedpur leader Abdur Rahman, Barisal MP Mukim, Sheikh Mujib's private bodyguard Mohiuddin, Tekerhat leader Shahjahan Sardar, Madaripur leader Niru and Bhola leader Ratan Chowdhury. In 1974, attacks intensified as bomb attacks blew up the Titas Gas Centre, the Nakalpara railway lines and finally, in a move possibly telegraphing future social-conservative tendencies, bomb attacks on the offices of three pornography magazines ; *Kamona*, *Bashona* and *Binodon*.¹⁰

The increasingly violent attacks were celebrated inside the Sharbahara Party as being in line with a strategy of pushing the state towards chaos, which would allow areas of the country to be liberated. A September 1974 leaflet, one of many issued by Shiraj Sikder, outlines a grand strategy of apocalyptic confrontation:

Even though our enemies have increased pressure on us through army, BDR and *Rokkhi Bahini*, they have not been able to harm us and our rainy season attacks continue. Our guerillas are killing national enemies and grabbing hold of thanas and police faris. Eventually we will form a regular army and create liberated areas. This is the right answer to smash the teeth of the puppet government of Bangladesh. Eventually these puppets will be forced to call in the Indian army to save them. When the colonialist Indian army enters East Bengal, all the masses will join our national liberation struggle.¹¹

Even though the Sharbahara had cornered the Mujib government with a relentless series of actions, this strategy of armed struggle leading towards total breakdown of the state was not without debate inside the party. Particularly controversial was the policy of targeted assassinations, and debate raged as to whether this was winning converts or alienating the masses. Sharbahara member Raisuddin Ariff later became an apostate against this policy, as he outlined in his autobiography: In the villages, I noticed that the landless, day labourers and poor farmers accepted the party line slowly. Young men grabbed the line about killing class enemies like a fish on a hook, but the farmers were the inverse. A day or two after joining the party, young men would show up with a list of 'national enemies' in the area. When I looked at these new recruits and their long list of 'enemies', I would feel a revolutionary zeal, but also the first pangs of fear¹².

Internal documents from this time indicate enthusiasm for successful actions, coupled with a growing unease about mass support ; as explored in pamphlets such as "Lack of Recruits & Several Solutions" (1973) and "Several Points About Economic Operations" (1973).¹³ In a dramatic shift at the end of 1974, the Sharbahara Party now attempted a transition to a mass movement by launching a national strike. For the first time, the strike call also included groups that were formerly identified as "enemies". Strike leaflets began by addressing the combined "Workers-Farmers-Students-Teachers-Intellectuals, Employees

of Government & Private Sector, Army, BDR, Police, Patriotic Political Parties, Groups and People of East Bengal", and then went on to say: There is famine in the land. Naked, hungry crowds wander our towns, villages, roads, terminals and stations. Their screams for one mouthful of rice, one piece of bread, tears Bengal's skies apart. Meanwhile, the Awami League traitors, black marketeers, assassins and hoarders are becoming rich overnight. These traitors promised rice at 20 taka per *maund*, wheat at 10 taka per *maund*. And now rice sells at more than 300, wheat at 200...^{f14}

The two-page leaflet continued in this fashion with a litany of state crimes, all of which rang true for most people, and ended with a call for a two-day nationwide strike.

It is an indicator of how much the tide had turned against Mujib that the Sharbahara felt that a strike could be held on 15 and 16 December, the latter being Bangladesh's Victory Day. In 1971, when Bangladesh first became independent, the nucleus of the Sharbahara was distributing leaflets calling it a "false freedom". This rhetorical flourish of labelling victory day as "black day" was out of step with the popular mood of the time. Yet, within three years, the disintegration of Mujib's authority was complete; and now the Sharbahara tapped into a vein of popular anger that responded to the symbolism of the 16 December strike. Bangladesh has seen many *hartals* (strikes) in its 35-year history. But the Sharbahara Party *hartal* was the first successful national strike in post-independence Bangladesh. By taking Sheikh Mujib's most famous weapon against the 1960s Pakistan regime, and inverting it to target him, Sikder invaded the popular imagination. Where Mujib once thundered, "I want to say it very clearly, from today all the courts, schools and offices of Bangladesh will be closed indefinitely!"¹⁵, Sikder now taunted a Mujib-become-Caesar: "Offices, courts, schools, factories, transportation, markets, everything will be closed. We will use meetings, rallies, strikes, gherao, revolt, uprising and armed struggle to expel the Awami traitors and their masters"¹⁶.

Facing an unprecedented challenge to state power, the Mujib government understood that simply calling their opponents *shontrashis* (terrorist) and *dushkrithokari* (evil-doers) was no longer enough. Capture and execution of underground leftists became the highest priority for the state apparatus. Manhunts went wide and indiscriminate. Historian Afsan Chowdhury describes an experience with one such raid and mistaken identity:

In the rooms where the books were kept, they found a few Russian editions of the Marxist literary pantheon on his table with old Karl's face printed on them. "Is it you?" The young man wondered if it was better to deny or to affirm. They seemed to have made up their minds anyway. "Yes, it's me". They nodded and kept urging him to search as they stood with guns cocked at the full. So, a few people were alive that day who thought that Karl Marx lived in Dhaka and wrote books with his own picture on the cover. Finally they shoved the barrel inside his mouth. The metallic taste was strange and repulsive, mixing death and saliva in his throat. Then they asked the question again. He couldn't answer with this mouthful. He tried to move his head. Is this how it's done finally?... A sort of senior officer stormed inside and demanded

to know what the charges were. Suddenly nobody seemed to know any. Was there a complaint? There was no answer. Intelligence report? Silence. He then asked to them to set him free. The man who had stuck the gun in his mouth now came over and warmly shook his hands. The young man was no longer a terrorist.¹⁷

But mistakes like this did not continue forever; eventually the security forces became more cunning and efficient. Infiltration of the Sharbahara ranks had already begun, and within two weeks of that fateful national strike, Sikder was captured in Chittagong on 1st January 1975. Within 24 hours he was dead, shot in the back while trying to 'escape' from the police van. It was an account no one believed, the Sheikh's personal stock had sunk that low. Even a pro-government newspaper felt the need to add the phrase "the government alleges" to the news report.

Conflicting statements surround the execution of Sikder. Facts and fiction are hopelessly intertwined, and separating them would require a separate archaeological project. Each little piece of the legend gives rise to many associated curiosities. Various accounts talk about Sikder being transported blindfolded in a civilian plane from Chittagong to Dhaka (another book talks about a 'special' helicopter),¹⁸ pilots who refused to fly because of violation of international aviation laws (yet none of them came forward in three decades), passengers who heard Sikder beg for water (an odd detail which sounds like a remix of the Karbala martyrdom scenario), a police officer who ran over and kicked him on the chest on the airport tarmac, savage beatings and torture in Dhaka (a valuable political prisoner killed without any information being extracted), and the secret meeting with Mujib where Sikder allegedly sealed his fate with his defiance. None of these stories have been verified, since every account is second- or third-hand, and eyewitnesses are never named.

What is uncontested is the fairly prosaic nature of Sikder's death, shot in the back while 'trying to escape'. Whatever controversies may continue about those last 24 hours, the public perception was final: Mujib had personally ordered this very public, not-so-secret killing. This impression was solidified when Mujib gave his infamous parliamentary speech (often referred to as *Kothai aj shei Shiraj Sikder* (Where today is that Shiraj Sikder?)) which would haunt the Awami League in decades to come: We forgave them all. [We] told them love your country. Accept the independence of the country. Stay in the country. But some did not change. They even now get money from abroad to conspire against the independence of Bangla. They think I don't know anything (about them). One that kills people in the darkness of night, he thinks no one can catch him. Where today is that Shiraj Sikder?¹⁹

Revolutionaries or Trojan Horses?

Today, 35 years after independence, Bangladeshi history continues to be hotly debated. Many of these 'facts' have the power to wreck political careers that are closely identified with foundational lore. Each political party has an assigned, or acquired, performative role on the national stage. Awami League is the party that brought independence under Mujib; Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is the group that 'righted the wrongs' of Mujib and

brought Islam back; Jamaat-e-Islami is the party that denies its leadership of death squads for the Pakistani army in 1971; and finally, the left has been on the losing end of each of the major historic turns. 'Live' debates continue over whether Mujib intended to declare independence, why Mujib allowed himself to get arrested by the Pakistan army, whether Zia-ur Rahman was the first to give the radio announcement of the independence war, who knew about the anti-Mujib coup in advance, who gave the order to kill the remaining Awami League leadership in jail when the anti-Mujib coup-plotters were overthrown, why Zia gave the order to execute the red-sympathiser Colonel Taher who had freed him from prison, and which Jamaat members headed up death squads.

Some of the more complex questions involve Shiraj Sikder, especially his death in police custody, the extent of Sharbahara Party's popular appeal, and whether the Party would eventually have entered open politics. There is even a question of whether his sudden execution was arranged by anti-Mujib forces, since with Sikder dead, the Mujib assassination could proceed without any fear of bringing a Red Bengal to power. Today there is no political party that can claim to be Sharbahara heirs and effectively control (or choke off) this debate. Sikder's death, and the government's subsequent infiltration of the Party, brought an effective end to this underground force. In the years following his death, the Sharbahara were riven by a suicidal impulse as the guerrilla army split apart to form numerous warring factions. The issue of who had betrayed Sikder became the most pressing ideological issue, as party factions saw traitors in their midst and slaughtered internal class enemies. Even party members who were caught by the police were suspect, as Raisuddin Ariff describes in his memoirs: If any party leader or member was seized and put in jail, they would lose connection with underground activities and would be considered diseased by 'inactivity', 'opportunism', and 'surrender'. And since we were finally released from jail by a reactionary government in spite of being underground leaders, this proves without a doubt that we have compromised and become 'renegades'²⁰.

As the Sharbahara devoured its own children, the party faded from view and by the 1990s had ceased to be a player. The rightist Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) now emerged as an unexpected supporter of an investigation into the death of Shiraj Sikder. But this was only politics as usual. The BNP that had replaced 'socialism' with 'Islam' in the constitution, and executed Colonel Taher and his dreams of 'red revolution', was hardly interested in the class warfare thesis of Sikder. But it was useful to revive the memory of the brutal 'anti-terrorist' campaigns of 1973-75, because this would embarrass the BNP's main rival the Awami League.²¹ The only part of Sikder's thesis that does fit the BNP platform is his strident anti-Indian language, although by a sleight of hand his opposition to 'American and Russian imperialism' is made irrelevant. Today, election cycles often return the Sikder killing to the news, continuing to prod public imagination and revive conspiracy theories.

Beyond the rhetoric of 'terrorism', there were many among the Bengali intelligentsia who blame the armed left movements for creating anarchy in Bangladesh and ushering in two decades of military rule (the fact that Pakistan needed no such leftist insurgency to impose martial law is ignored in this analysis). In some recent text, a mixture of admiration-

loathing comes through, as in Humayun Azad's description of the end of the liberation war: Their long hair and flowing beard looked like a flag to us, the rifle in their hand was freedom's signal^a Just as Che and Castro had appeared as romantic heroes in the '60s, after December 1971, thousands of Ches and Castros appeared in our midst^f. But later, that same admiration is transformed to hate: The fakes now appeared as revolutionaries; dressed in masks of Mao Zedong, Charu Majumdar, Guevara, they ran riot in our cities^a Many of those revolutionaries were only killers, the core of their socialism was murder. They thought that random killings were class struggle^{f22}.

Although more restrained in his rhetoric, Afsan Chowdhury satirises the effectiveness of these movements, and also hints at a common fear; that India and other external forces were using insurrectionary left movements to destabilise the country: In secret meetings, comrades swore to kill all class enemies and swore at the cigarette that had died bitterly on tired lips. The butt ached from sitting on hard floors. Tomorrow we would have a revolution surely. "At best next year", the man from Calcutta promised. He was an Indian Maoist imported from Ballygunge. He soon had a Bangladeshi passport, soon he had friends dropping in, soon he had set up a network. And soon he had picked up the local accent. He knew the enemy better than the local lads did. He knew the friends even better^{f23}.

Looking at the voluminous legend that sprung up around the Sharbahara Party, we always note a desire to make Shiraj Sikder into a permanent icon. This tendency comes even from Raisuddin Ariff, a man attacked after release from jail as a "traitor" to the Sharbahara cause because he had started questioning the policy of 'slaughtering national enemies'. In his three-volume memoir, Ariff sets out a partial *mea culpa* for the Party's mistakes, including the policy of targeted assassinations. For these sins, Ariff was designated a "renegade" by the remaining rump of the Sharbahara Party. Yet even though his books commit the sin of self-criticism, Ariff does not blemish the personal reputation of Sikder.

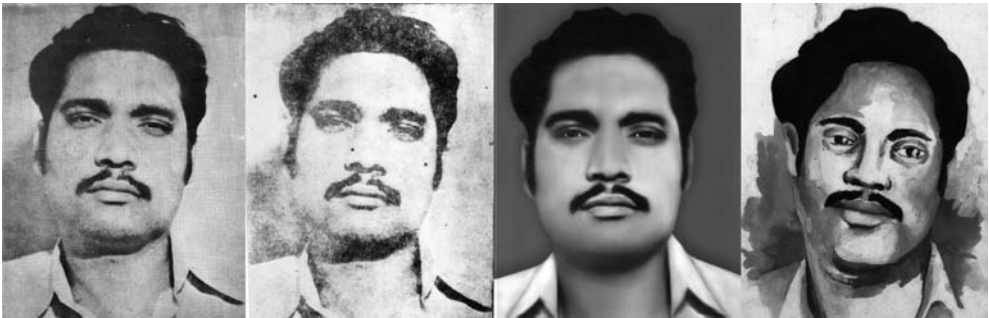
A typical party-sympathetic account comes from Khokon and Tushar,²⁴ who talk in hushed tones about the "brilliant young student of the engineering university", and provide small personal details such as his eating habits ("Shiraj Sikder enjoyed eating biscuits while dipping them into thick *mashuri daal*"). Minute observations were especially necessary for constructing a visual of a mysterious leader, whose sightings were rare and limited to the inner circle. Even more important were stories of his martial prowess ("at that time there were very few people who could survive a bare-hand fight with Sikder"), his fight against capture ("as soon as he pulled out his revolver, Shiraj Sikder punched him with his left fist. Shiraj Sikder had another identity. He knew martial arts very well") and his last words to Sheikh Mujib ("Don't touch me, Mr President, remember you talk to *the* Shiraj Sikder!").²⁵ These accounts, while plausible, are riddled with the problem of invisible witnesses (nothing in Khokon-Tushar has footnotes) and conflicting accounts. To take just one example, Khokon-Tushar write that Sikder was flown by "special helicopter" to Dhaka, even though all other narratives talk about a commercial airline. Did a "helicopter" simply sound more dangerous and heroic?

The necessity for a mythology around Sikder was intensified after his capture. Talking about the reaction to the newspaper reports announcing his death, Ariff remembers:

Looking at that photograph of a man with thick moustache and two sideburns, party workers grabbed the photo and ripped it into shreds, screaming that it was a fake. Their great leader Shiraj Sikder could never look like a 'thug' like that. Perhaps in their imagination Shiraj Sikder was a rare angelic demi-god whose face would have a heavenly glow, the aura of a freshly flowered rosebud²⁶.

Ariff's assessment of this hero-worship came in 1991, when he published the first volume of his memoirs. At that time, his disenchantment with the party seemed particularly high ; everything was written through the lens of "historic mistakes" and contradictions. By 1998, when the third volume came out, his stance seemed to have softened. Now, it was his own prose that had a quiet, reverential tone:

In my imagination, a revolutionary leader would be wearing a dirty, oily *khaddar panjabi*, high-powered thick-frame black glasses, face covered with prickly beard. From his fingers would hang cheap *bogla* cigarettes made from the harshest tobacco. And how old would he be? White-haired and over 65, like Ho Chi Minh? Or knocking at the gates of 60, like Lenin-Stalin? Or over 60 at least, like Mao Tse-Tung? But no, I learnt to my total shock that our revolutionary party leader was only 28 years old. He preferred to wear smart, sharply turned-out pant-shirts and expensive sunglasses. In fact, he was the sort of ultra-modern man we used to get jealous of in a past life. As for vices, not only did he not smoke *bidis* or cigarettes, even betel-*shupari* had not passed his lips.²⁷



Return of the 'Terrorist'

Today, 30 years after the synchronised deaths of Sikder and Mujib, the rhetoric of 'terrorism' vs. 'guerrilla army' has returned. The language may remain similar but the players have gone through a reshuffle. The current crisis started four years ago with a series of bombings targeting cultural events like the Bengali New Year. Later the target shifted to judges, public buildings and Awami League politicians (who may be forgiven for thinking they are stuck in a re-run of the 1970s). In a dramatic acceleration, a series of coordinated bomb blasts went off all over Bangladesh in 2005. Finally, the introduction of

suicide bombers, a new ingredient in the political cocktail, has pushed the country towards the panic button.

This time around, the protagonists reflect our post-Cold War axes. The bombers are believed to be 'Islamist terrorists'; and the shadowy underground Islamist group JMB (Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh, or Awakened Muslim Masses) has obligingly stepped forward to take credit. In the 1970s, every insurrectionary movement was tagged as 'CIA agent' or 'Indian agent' (the Sharbahara inconveniently did not fit this pattern as they were against 'American and Indian imperialism'). Today's conspiracy theorists look at India's RAW (Research & Analysis Wing) or Pakistan's ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) as the puppet-masters behind groups like the JMB.

The exact political agenda of the new militant groups is not clear (and perhaps it was unclear in the '70s as well). If their intention is to establish an Islamic state, is it really necessary to push the country towards anarchy to take over? The largest Islamist party, Jamaat-e-Islami, is now fully recovered from the misadventures of 1971 and could ride into power in the future on a wave of anti-corruption disgust (perhaps a repeat of the Hamas scenario). But it is possible that groups like JMB represent strands within political Islam for whom Jamaat is not radical enough. We are reminded that Sharbahara, JSD and many others talked of establishing a socialist state, and yet their anger was directed at an Awami League that had inserted 'socialism' into the Constitution. Clearly the League's 'socialism' was insufficient to placate the left, as Jamaat today is seen as too slow by the more militant Islamists.

Whatever the political configurations, on an individual level today's suicide bombers seem to have rejected the escalating 'modernity' project represented by the mushrooming of an aggressive consumerist culture (or you could argue that consumerism has rejected them). The militant recruits can't afford to drink Coke, have Josh ringtone cell phones, buy bar-coded fruit at Agora mall or wear jeans from Westecs. Within their violent, anarchic program (what Tariq Ali calls "Islam-anarchists") is also fury at an economic system that has left them behind. Regardless of the inspiration, funding and ultimate goals, the arrival of 'Islamic terrorism' has led to a revival of the rhetoric of the 1970s and a repetition of the deployment of a brutal, repressive security regime.

Some elements seem so familiar as to make the whole enterprise a slow-motion farce. In a bid to 'control' a worsening law and order situation, the government created the paramilitary group Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). With its black uniforms, bandanas, sunglasses and machine guns, RAB seems the epitome of a modern, weaponised, thug force. From *Rokkhi Bahini* to RAB ; 30 years have brought a change in acronyms, but the tactics remain the same. The RAB has become infamous for executing 'criminals' in what is always described as "crossfire" ; today no Bangladeshi newspaper will print that term without inserting quotation marks. A long-planned surveillance act that allows security agencies power to spy on phone calls and e-mails was passed in the New Year. Bearded men are targets again on the streets ; only this time, no one mistakes them for Guevara or Castro. Now, every beard is a potential Bin Laden, Zawahiri, or Zargawi.

A leaflet produced for Sikder's death anniversary in 2006 called for remembering his legacy and opposing "Islamic militant" suicide bombers. Of course Bangladeshis want the new bomb attacks to stop. But the juxtaposition with the Sharbahara party brings up troubling questions. The Sharbahara Party also launched bomb attacks in its heyday, but no one is worried about them today. In some ways that phase is old history ; mummified, sanctified and safe. Obviously, there are many differences between the two historical moments and movements. The goals of a Maoist insurgency may be poles apart from the Islamists. The two movements were implacable enemies then and now (in fact, the JMB's shadowy leader Bangla Bhai got his start with campaigns against groups that operate today under the name of Sharbahara). But on a larger level, the wholesale demonisation of all Islamist movements could lead to a repetition of the 1970s conflagrations as well.

Biodiversity activist and philosopher Farhad Mazhar recently found himself in a hornet's nest of controversy when he said during a lecture: In 1971, I fought with a gun in my hand, was I a terrorist? We fought in 1952, in 1969. But at that time, many people called us terrorists. Pakistan government called us terrorists. Now we glorify those same people as freedom fighters. The basis for that action was damage. The victims were [our] people^{f28}.

In spite of Mazhar's attempts to contextualise and unpack "Islamist terrorism", the comments were widely misunderstood as endorsing Islamist militancy. The ensuing press fracas, protest rallies and effigy burnings decisively established that philosophical debates over terminologies of power and conflict were not to be tolerated in crisis times.

Soon afterwards, government officials ignited this debate further. During a press conference about anti-terror training, the country's top police official proudly told reporters: The police are dedicated to their duties and trying to arrest the bombers and their bosses. They are also alert against possible attacks on them while on duty. They will watch out for anyone approaching them and act accordingly. They will also be given bulletproof vests, sophisticated weapons and necessary briefing on how to cope with suicide attacks. They have the experience of facing off Siraj Sikder, founder of Maoist outfit Purba Banglar Sarbahara Party and *Gono Bahini* ^{f29}.

These police statements provoked an angry response from an unexpected quarter ; Shuvro and Shikha, the two children of Shiraj Sikder. The family arranged a huge press conference in response, where the police official's comments were strongly condemned. The Sharbahara Party was briefly back in the headlines, if only to establish that it had provided no ideological or tactical inspiration to Islamist militants. Inspired by the UN investigation of the assassination of Lebanese premier Rafik Hariri, some now express interest in bringing the case of Sikder's murder to the UN Special Tribunal. Whether such a 'cold' case would gain traction is doubtful (the problem of unreliable and invisible witnesses is scattered through every text related to the killing), but the timing of such moves can always be a source of embarrassment for the Awami League.

Shiraj Sikder's people's war is over, but struggles over the meaning of his movement, words, actions, contradictions and, finally, his death, continue to shadow Bangladesh. A younger generation often expresses frustration over 'stale' history, but without adequate

exploration, these debates will continue to play out in newspaper editorials, speeches, international fora, oral histories and an ongoing process of mythologising. Perhaps myth-making is a necessary pre-condition to get to its inevitable opposite ; demythologisation. The latter would be a healthy trend in any project that explores the hidden history of underground guerrilla movements in Bangladesh.

NOTES

1. Official estimates are in the range of 3 million, but there is some debate over the feasibility of such a high death toll without the existence of centralised death camps. I have chosen the more moderate estimates.
2. Historically exaggerated by Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci in her post-9/11 diatribe *The Rage and the Pride*: "To make you cry I'll tell you about the twelve young impure men I saw executed at Dacca at the end of the Bangladesh war. They executed them on the field of Dacca stadium, with bayonet blows to the torso or abdomen, in the presence of twenty thousand faithful who applauded in the name of God from the bleachers. They thundered "Allah-akbar, Allah-akbar" at the conclusion of the slaughter, the twenty thousand faithful (many of whom were women) left the bleachers and went down on the field. Not as a disorganised mob, no. In an orderly manner, with solemnity. They slowly formed a line and, again in the name of God, walked over the cadavers. All the while thundering Allah-akbar, Allah-akbar. They destroyed them like the Twin Towers of New York. They reduced them to a bleeding carpet of smashed bones" (*La Rabbia e l'Orgoglio*, 2002).
Besides the sheer psychosis of most of Fallaci's recent text, there is also clear fabrication of the "Allah-akbar" chant, an unlikely coda to a liberation war that had, at least temporarily, obliterated the idea of an Islamic Pakistan. It is possible that in her dotage she has mixed this up with scenes from the Iranian revolution.
3. Parallels to an Agamben-like "State of Exception" during a "War on Terror" are obvious.
4. Humayun Azad. *Amra ki Ey Bangladesh Cheyechilam* (Is This The Bangladesh We Wanted) (Agamee Prakashani, 2003, Dhaka).
5. Tariq Ali. *Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power* (Jonathan Cape, 1970)
6. In a December 2005 interview with the author, ex-Sharbahara Raisuddin Ariff claims that among the flag's co-creators was party member and non-Bengali Saifullah Azmi; if this is true, it is an awkward sidenote for the Bengali nationalist project.
7. *Purbo Bangla'r Stromik Andolon'er Thesis* (Thesis of the East Bengal Worker's Movement), adopted by East Bengal Worker's Movement Revolutionary Council on 8 January 1968, and further revised on 1 December 1968.
8. There is some debate as to whether the Pakistani buildings, rather than the American building, were their main target - as in the author's interview with another former party member, December 2005
9. Ahmod Sofa. "Bangla Bhasha: Rajnithir Aloke (Bengali Language in a Political Light)". In *Selected Essays of Ahmod Sofa* (Student Ways, 1993).
10. S.M.H. Khokon and S.M. Tushar. *Bangladesher Gopon Rajniti* (Secret Politics of Bangladesh) (Nuzaim Prakashani, 1996).
11. Shiraj Sikder. *1974-er Borshakalin Rononoithik Akromoner Ogrogothi* (Wet Season Guerilla Warfare Progress Report) (Sfulungo No. 1, September 1974).

12. Raisuddin Ariff. *Underground Jibon* (Underground Life), Vol. 2 (Pathak Shamabesh, 1995, Dhaka).
13. *Kormisholpotha o tha Shomadhaner Kothipoi Upai* (Lack of Workers and Several Solutions), Resolution from 7th full meeting of the Central Committee. Source: Shuvro Sikder.
14. "Purbo Banglar Nipiritho Jonogoner Uddeshhye (To The Oppressed Masses of East Bengal)", December 1974. Leaflet from collection of Shuvro Sikder
15. Sheikh Mujib. *7i March-er Bhashon* (Speech, 7 March 1971).
16. *Purbo Banglar Nipiritho Jonogoner Uddeshhye* op. cit.
17. Afsan Chowdhury. "Dhaka in the '70s". In HIMAL magazine, August 2001. (
18. S.M.H. Khokhon and S.M. Tushar, op. cit.
19. Bilayet Hossain. Parentheses, Footnotes & History *f*, newagebd.com/2005/feb/23/fb.html
20. Raisuddin Ariff, op. cit.
21. There is a parallel with former Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's sudden interest in culpability for the 1971 breakup of Pakistan, since the involvement of Zulfikar Bhutto would embarrass his main political rival, Benazir Bhutto.
22. Humayun Azad, op. cit.
23. Afsan Chowdhury, op. cit.
24. All quotes from Khokhon and Tushar, op. cit.
25. Whether imaginary or not, it is interesting that this penultimate confrontation is imagined to be in English. In a different context, Humayun Azad (op. cit., p. 61) talked about the power of English: "After Mujib took full dictatorial powers, there was a dramatic increase in use of English words in his parliament speeches and in front of officials. Perhaps this increase in English shows that he had drifted far away from his people". Ahmod Sofa (op. cit., p. 37) hits a closer note while talking about attempts to introduce Bengali in government functions: "The Minister secretly cannot deny the power of that English language. After all, he is also a Bengali like us. Bengali cannot be used successfully to scold your employees".
26. Raisuddin Ariff. *Underground Jibon* (Underground Life), Vol. 1, (Muhammad Munirul Alam, 1991, Dhaka).
27. . *Underground Jibon*, Vol. 3, (Pathak Shamabesh, 1998, Dhaka).
28. "Ederke Criminal Bolle Dekha Jabe Amra Criminal Chilam Amra Political Na (If We Call Them Criminals, We Will Have to Conclude, We Were also Criminals, not Political)". Transcript of speech given by Farhad Mazhar, *Amader Shomoi*, 12 September 2005. This transcript is debated, and Mazhar has stated that the newspaper distorted his statements.
29. Les Communistes' archive. See lescommunistes.net