



Obituary for Barrister Moudud Ahmed

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In 1988 he was almost at the zenith of his career. Presenting his country at the headquarters of the Federation of German Industries (BDI) in Cologne, the Minister of Industries advertised his country that had won independence from Pakistan only a few years ago. Charming, witty, well mannered and well dressed, our bosses were quite impressed by this well dressed gentleman and his excellent English. His was one of the poorest countries of the world that only slowly recovered from the devastations of the War of Independence: The Deputy Prime Minister did not come as a beggar and talked of opportunities. The country had opened its borders hoping for

further progress with the help of the industrial countries, but that took time.

That was not his first visit to Germany. Barrister Moudud Ahmed had come as visiting fellow in early 1976, sponsored by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, recommended by the German Ambassador to Bangladesh, who happened to be his neighbour. In the turbulent times after the assassination of 'Bangabandhu' Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Father of the Nation, when Moudud constantly had to fear to be arrested, he only had to climb the border wall to be safe. The Foundation had asked Professor von Urff, Head of the Department of International Comparative Agricultural Policy and Rural Sociology of the South Asia Institute of Heidelberg University, to look after him. When von Urff left for Munich, Professor Dietmar Rothermund, Head of the Department of History, and Dr. Dieter Conrad, Head of the 'small' Department of Law, saved our guest from becoming orphaned.

The Institute had been founded as a regional research-cum-teaching institute, where professors were free to decide on their field of interest, academically and geographically, and Bangladesh so far was not really on the map, so to say. In the 1960s the Department of Tropical Hygiene and Public Health (then part of the SAI) had been working in what was until 1971 East Pakistan. The Department of Anthropology had sent a group of young researchers to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, but they had been thrown out of the country when the 1965 war between India and Pakistan had begun. Professor Otto Schiller, the first professor at the SAI (Agricultural Policy) had been working there, his successor, had started a major project for the Ministry of

Development and Cooperation. When we just had started analysing German aid to Pakistan, the War in its eastern 'wing' broke out and we had to find out why and what consequences were to be expected. Thereafter the German Research Foundation funded a project on the interdependencies of economic growth and regional distribution, as Pakistan had become a textbook case of how a growth fixated economic policy could lead to the break-up of a country. But altogether, interest in this part of the subcontinent was limited.

After the military clampdown in East Pakistan began, now exactly 50 year ago, Dr. Hans Christoph Rieger initiated a Pakistan Working Group that met once a week to discuss the events in East Pakistan. We invited whoever competent expert was available, and followed what has become known as the Bangladesh Genocide 1971. The results were published as a special issue of Internationales Asienforum (now: International Quarterly for South Asian Studies). As soon as Germany and Bangladesh had started diplomatic relations, the first Bangladesh Ambassador came to address us. That the interest in Bangladesh otherwise was muted, had to do with the politicalisation and roll back of democratization of our universities. Bangladesh had won freedom with the help of India, directly, and the Soviet Union, indirectly. In West Germany, academics tried to keep out of politics, while in East Germany politics determined academia, which meant more scholarships for Bangladeshi.

Moudud, one must say, put Bangladesh on the Institute's map. He was young, energetic, hospitable and full of drive. He came with family, and took with good humour, when his landlady, a school teacher, introducing him to her first-graders confessed that she did not know much about Africa. His wife, Hasna, was the daughter of famous poet Jasimuddin and a writer, poet, politician and environmental activist in her own right.

In his months at the SAI in Heidelberg he finished his 'Bangladesh: Constitutional quest for autonomy 1950-1971', published as number 41 of the 'Beiträge zur Südasiensforschung' in 1978. More books on Bangladesh politics were to follow, written either in jail or abroad as visiting fellow or professor at Heidelberg, Harvard and George Washington Universities, because when in government, there was no time for writing.

Moudud Ahmed was born as an Indian citizen on May 24, 1940, in Companyganj Upazila, a sub-district of Noakhali district in the southeast of (then undivided) Bengal, to Mamtaj Uddin Ahmed and Begum Ambia Khatun. His father was a Sufi Islamic scholar and imam in Paribagh, a neighbourhood in Dhaka, close to the University. In his 'Foreword' Rothermund introduced the reader to the history of the seminal work: 'The author was first drawn into the vortex of Bengali nationalism when he participated in the language movement at the age of 15 and had to spend a month in jail. Later as a student leader he was opposed to the dominant political currents because the politicians tended to use the students only for their own end.' Karl J. Newman, professor of political science at Dhaka University remembered him as stone pelting radical.

In England Moudud met Mujib, but was disappointed by his constitutionalism. At Lincolns Inn he was called to the Bar in 1966. He proudly carried the title Barrister that in Bangladesh is still used to indicate that it was won in England. He now saw Mujib in a different light and 'was the first to volunteer to take up his defence' (Rothermund) in the

so called Agartala Conspiracy Case, where Mujib was charged with having crossed over to Agartala, an Indian border town, to conspire against the Government of Pakistan. President General Ayub Khan had become increasingly unpopular, especially in East Pakistan: After all, the economic development of the early 1960s, celebrated in Germany as a 'model of a developing country', had happened only in the west, funded by the foreign exchange earnings of East Pakistan's jute export. The war with India in 1965 had left the eastern province, Pakistan's 'soft underbelly', undefended. The Awami League's Six Point Programme demanded far reaching regional sovereignty that the military government was not ready to concede. In the end, the Central Government had to drop the case. Mujib took him along to the Round Table talks with Ayub that as we know failed, where Moudud became a participant observer of unprincipled power politics. For almost a year he acted as Mujib's honorary secretary before returning to his legal practice.

After the beginning of the brutal military clampdown, codenamed 'Operation Searchlight', he escaped to Calcutta and joined the Provisional Government of Bangladesh and served as Postmaster General. He never became a member of the Awami League and finally, after criticizing Mujib's increasingly autocratic regime, was arrested within hours after the state of emergency had been declared in December 1974. He was released after four weeks, and after the murder of Mujib and a series of coups and counter-coups came to Heidelberg.

Shortly after returning he joined General Zia ur Rahman's government. When he came to Heidelberg again, he was Minister of Post and Telecommunication and on his way to the Quadrennial World Postal Congress in Rio de Janeiro. He was the young, western and democratic face of a military government, raising high hopes, especially among the young. But as Syed Badrul Islam, editor, current affairs, of the Daily Star, Bangladesh's leading English newspaper, writes in his review of Moudud's 'Choloman Itihas' (Living History): 'Moudud praises Zia, and then makes it clear the general left him, eventually feeling hurt'. Moudud's reaction was to return to Heidelberg in 1980 and write his account of the Mujib years: 'Bangladesh. Era of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman', published as number 93 of the 'Beiträge zur Südasiensforschung' in 1984. 'Moudud Ahmed devotes a considerable span of his book on the evils that accrue from military rule' (Badrul Islam). And despite having been 'led, blindfolded, by military intelligence into the cantonment and quizzed on allegations of corruption against him' joins the dictator a few months later, again becoming minister, deputy prime minister, prime minister and finally vice-president. Ershad's fall ends his top job. By 1995 he returns to the Bangladesh National Party and in 2001 becomes Minister of Law and Parliamentary Affairs in Begum Khalida Zia's second (technically: third) government. When asked, he had no hesitation to confirm that he helped to bring about the coalition of the BNP and the Islamic parties. The Army dominated Caretaker Government put him again into jail, but this time without any privileges. Treated like an ordinary criminal and without his medicine, his health deteriorated. His house, prominently located across the street from the German Embassy, no longer had a guard, nameplate and house number. Finally he was thrown out of the house, in which he had lived for more than four decades.

Barrister Moudud Ahmed died on 16 March 2021 at the age of 80 years in a hospital in Singapore. Prayers were held in Singapore, Dhaka and Companiganj, where he was

buried next to his parents. He is survived by his wife, Hasna Jasimuddin Moudud and his daughter, Ana Kashfiye Moudud, a writer, who is married and lives in Norway. Of his sons: Asif Momtaz died at the age of three, Aman Momtaj at the age of 37 of Dengue.

What will remain? He will be remembered as a very likeable person, but also as a politician who has been part of nearly every government in Bangladesh. As a lawyer, he defended political opponents, even without money. As an advocate he made his money in business law. As a politician he fought lawlessness, in favour of a strong state. That he served both dictators, alienated many. He was the perfect representative of his country, but without a strong power base, although he won his seat in Parliament five times. So to say, he was a perfect second man. As leader of the opposition for some time and member of the Executive Board of the BNP that he once had co-founded, he held the party together, but his influence waned over the years.

Md. Mahmudul Hasan, in 2009-10 at the Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies of Heidelberg University, remembers meeting Moudud: 'The impression that I formed from my Heidelberg rendezvous with him is that the man was a true patriot and believer in Bangladesh and in his religion. Those meetings left an incredible mark on me and increased my respect for him [...] His broadmindedness, self-esteem and esteem for others made it possible for him to be friendly with me and with those students at Heidelberg. His kindness and generosity struck a chord with me and have remained unforgettable.'

The South Asia Institute has lost an old friend. Academic interest in Bangladesh is rising, not the least thanks to him. A closer look at his life with all the contradictions might also serve a better understanding of his country and its society.