

## LEADERSHIP, GOVERNANCE, AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: BANGABANDHU'S VISION FOR BANGLADESH (1972–1975)

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### Abstract

Between 1972 and 1975, Bangladesh was at a crossroads, free to do as it pleases but reeling from war. Under the guidance of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League, the fledgling nation was to translate a promise of independence into reality. The 1972 Constitution adopted the national, socialist, democratic and secular values, helping secure the basic needs of food, skills and dignity in children (as well as their ability to lead) were enshrined. But it was far from an easy road. The 1974 famine, political instability and external economic shocks had revealed the young nation was not immune from those challenges, and had ultimately made way for BAKSAL to emerge in controversial fashion. Nonetheless, these years made initial strides toward what we today call sustainable development: people-centered governance, equity and resilience. The relevance of the vision of Bangabandhu is alive, not only for Bangladesh but also for a world looking for ways toward a just and sustainable future.

**Keywords:** *Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman; Awami League; governance; leadership; sustainable development; Bangladesh; nation-building.*

### Chapter 1: Introduction

When Bangladesh won its independence in December 1971, joy swept across the land but so did uncertainty. The war had delivered freedom, yet it also left behind devastation: villages burned, families displaced, schools and factories in ruins, and an economy on the brink of collapse. At that fragile moment, the nation's survival depended not only on food and rebuilding but also on leadership. At the center of it all stood Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader who had guided the independence struggle and now faced the harder task of turning a dream into a working reality.

From 1972 to 1975, his government carried the burden of building a state while addressing the daily needs of its people. One of the earliest and most significant achievements was the Constitution of 1972. It did more than set up a government; it gave the new nation a moral compass, built on four principles: nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism. These ideas promised not just freedom from colonial rule, but a fairer, more inclusive future.

Two urgent concerns demanded immediate attention: food and education. Agriculture was in ruins, crippled by war and floods. To respond, the government launched land reforms, irrigation projects, and cooperatives to empower farmers and secure food supplies. The outcomes were uneven, but the vision was clear: sustainability in a rural nation had to start with feeding people. Education was treated with equal urgency. The Qudrat-e-Khuda Commission (1974) proposed reforms to widen access, emphasize science and technology, and prepare young citizens to build a self-reliant Bangladesh. For Bangabandhu, education was not simply about literacy; it was about dignity, empowerment, and preparing for the future.

Leadership in these years was a mix of inspiration and institution-building. Mujibur Rahman's personal authority, rooted in the liberation struggle, gave him the trust to push ambitious reforms, while planning commissions and administrative restructuring aimed to build systems for long-term governance. But progress was constantly challenged: economic stagnation, natural disasters, political unrest, and the famine of 1974 revealed just how fragile state capacity was. The move toward one-party rule under BAKSAL in 1975 showed the tension between the hope for unity and the risks of losing democratic pluralism.

Despite these struggles, the period from 1972 to 1975 remains central to Bangladesh's story. The policies of those years in governance, food, and education continue to shape today's debates as the nation pursues the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and faces global challenges like climate change. This study asks three questions: How did leadership and governance shape early development? In what ways did policies reflect sustainability before it was a global idea? And what lessons can leaders today learn from that experience?

### **Research Objectives**

This paragraph must indicate what the paper aims to accomplish. According to your title, the aims may look something like:

- To analyze the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and its contribution to the consolidation of governance in Bangladesh (1972–75).
- To scrutinize how policy on education and agriculture served to manifest the notion of sustainability before its global popularity.
- To interrogate the prospects and shortcomings of governance in a postcolonial context wrought by war.
- As we reflect on the enduring legacy of Bangabandhu's vision in current discussions on leadership, governance and sustainable development.

### **Research Methodology**

Given that this is historical and qualitative research, there should be explicit attention to the sources and the analytical framework:

**Approach:** Qualitative, historical analysis.

**Sources:** Archival documents (the 1972 Constitution, Awami League policy papers), government reports (Quadrat -e- Khuda Education Commission report), and secondary literature (scholarly books and journal articles).

**Framework:** Governance and leadership theory, for example charismatic authority (Weber, 1978) and good-enough governance (Grindle, 2007), when applied to the context of Bangladesh.

**Comparative Lens:** Mention of other postcolonial countries (Tanzania, Ghana) to frame Bangladesh's path in perspective.

**Time Frame:** Centered on the years 1972–75, with recognition of longer-term effects.

### **Chapter 2: The Promise of Leadership in a Land on the Rocks**

Bangladesh was a devastated land when it became an independent nation in December 1971. The war had taken millions of lives, broken up families and left the economy in ruins. Roads, schools and factories were in ruins and food shortages and refugee crises heightened despair. In a place where life was so vulnerable, physical survival relied on leadership that could rebuild bodies as well as renew their spirit.

At the center of this moment was Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He was more than a politician to the people; he was their battle and their sacrifice wrapped in flesh. His words were

both warm and strong – convincing citizens that their hard-earned freedom could be the beginning of a better tomorrow. This mirrors Max Weber’s theory of charismatic authority, in which legitimacy is derived from the ability to inspire and mobilize during a crisis (Weber, 1978).

But charisma couldn’t feed people or build institutions. The Awami League, which had spearheaded the independence movement, now needed to reinvent itself from a resistance party into one of governance. This was a difficult transformation, for this party of protest had to turn overnight into an administrative machine with its bureaucracy, budget and institutions (Maniruzzaman 1980). Yet its experience in organizing became an important conduit between Bangabandhu’s dream and daily life.

In 1972, Bangladesh was, as one observer wrote, “a country of battered towns and starved countryside” (Jahan, 1973). Leadership meant rolling up sleeves, delivering famine relief, reestablishing order and resuming production. This was continued by Mujibur admitted during his rule with the creation of the Planning Commission in 1972, under the leadership of Nurul Islam, as an expression of commitment to social recovery and planned development (Islam, 2003).

Expectations, however, were immense. The 1973 oil crisis and continuing floods further complicated the recovery, as Earthquake Belt residents prayed for a swift transformation. Mujibur Rahman’s accessibility to even ordinary villagers, confrontations with whom did wonders for relationships hearing grievances, lent the man an aura of trust. Academics highlight that it is precisely this kind of relational leadership which is so crucial in post-conflict societies, where what counts are relationships and trust, as much as physical infrastructure (Grindle 2007). The candidates of those years offered a promise of leadership that was not about perfection, but about persistence. Crisis after crisis, Bangabandhu’s dedication to democracy and to education, and his vision of self-reliance, provided continuity, courage and challenge for Bangladesh. His personal stewardship was vested in a collective burden to translate freedom, compromised and incomplete though it might have been, into the operations of nationhood based on the belief that somewhere leaked between ruin and despair his hope would take hold.

### **Chapter 3: Crafting Governance: The Constitution and Institutions**

In the fragile dawn of independence, Bangladesh needed more than food or relief it needed direction. For Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League, the Constitution of 1972 became that compass. It was not simply a legal code, but the moral foundation of a nation determined never again to live under domination.

Drafted within a year of independence, the Constitution carried extraordinary symbolic weight. It enshrined four principles: nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism, each deeply rooted in the people’s struggle. Nationalism affirmed identity, socialism promised social justice, democracy offered participatory governance, and secularism guaranteed harmony in a diverse society (Ahmed, 2010). Scholars note its clarity and speed, standing out among South Asian constitutions for its forward-looking vision (Chowdhury, 2014). For ordinary citizens, these principles expressed not just laws, but hopes.

Yet a constitution is only as strong as the institutions that sustain it. The war had left ministries hollow, records destroyed, and civil servants scattered. Bangladesh inherited a bureaucracy designed for control rather than service. Reforming it into an engine of development required both patience and vision. Mujibur Rahman’s establishment of the Bangladesh Planning

Commission in 1972, led by respected economists, symbolized this effort to anchor governance in expertise (Islam, 2003).

Institutional rebuilding also meant restoring trust. Courts, police, and schools had to resume functioning so that independence would feel real in daily life. Citizens needed more than abstract freedom; they needed justice, rations, and classrooms. This everyday governance helped bridge the gap between lofty ideals and lived realities.

Still, the challenges were immense. Corruption, inefficiency, and limited resources quickly became concerns, as noted by observers (Maniruzzaman, 1980). Balancing principles with pragmatism was never easy: socialism was proclaimed, yet aid from donors was necessary; secularism was enshrined, yet sensitivities required care. Governance became a constant negotiation between ideals and circumstances.

Despite imperfections, these years laid crucial foundations. The Constitution and new institutions represented resilience and ambition. They were imperfect tools in a fragile state, but they gave direction and structure to a nation still reeling from war. In them, citizens could glimpse not only survival, but the possibility of a more just and inclusive future.

#### **Chapter 4 Seeds of sustainability: Food, farmers and the struggle against hunger**

For a fledgling nation like Bangladesh, the post-independence success depended on one basic principle: freedom would not measure up much unless people were well-fed. Agriculture formed the basis of the economy, engaging almost 80% of the population (Ahmed, 1986). But fields had been left fallow and food supplies had become dangerously thin by war, displacement and natural disasters. In 1972, the question was acute: how would Bangladesh feed its people?

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman believed that reconstruction had to start in the villages. His administration implemented land reforms to reallocate the khas land to the landless and organized cooperatives as an instrument for resource sharing in an attempt to embrace the socialist values enshrined in the 1972 Constitution (Chowdhury, 2014). There were attempts to increase investment in irrigation, tube wells and mechanization to raise farm yields. "If there was an uneven impact on these policies, they all signaled very clearly that farmers were at the center of national development," she said.

But optimism turned to tragedy with a famine that hit in 1974. Floods destroyed crops; the prices of food spiked, and distribution ground to a halt. Amartya Sen (1981) eventually argued that the famine was not caused by a lack of food but rather by an insufficient distribution of it. People were unable to get food, even if the food was there. For the government, the famine was a bitter test of power that undermined trust and revealed flaws in administration.

Still, lessons emerged. The famine illuminated the fact that food security was about more than just production; it was also about systems of accountability, distribution and social protection. Early cooperative farming was less successful, though land redistribution and irrigation opened the way for further advances. A budding green revolution in Bangladesh would make use of these early efforts in the 1980s and 1990s (Hossain, 1988).

The fight over food during the 1970s is another example of how governance and sustainability are linked. To Mujibur Rahman, the liberation of farmers was not only an economic imperative but also a moral responsibility. Hunger was a threat to freedom itself, and responding to it became central in creating resilience. Those troubled years sowed the seeds of one of Bangladesh's proudest achievements: its transition from a country that faced famines to becoming largely food secure.

## **Chapter 5: Education as Nation-Building**

If food secured the present in the early years of independence, education pledged to the future. Schools and literacy were as crucial to nation-building for Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as roads or factories. He felt that freedom would be inadequate unless it was attended by knowledge and skills and pride.

To implement this policy, the government of Bangladesh formed the Qudrat-e-Khuda Education Commission in 1972. Its 1974 report put forward an ambitious plan, with three major components: universal primary education, increased technical and vocational training, and greater emphasis upon science and technology (Choudhury 1975). Language was also central. Bangla was introduced as the medium of instruction, reaffirming a cultural identity born out of the 1952 Language Movement. Mujibur Rahman was not just being a pragmatist, but he was also honoring the people's struggle.

The idea behind the Commission was that of education as an equalizer. In a country long divided by class and geography, access to schools could help close the gaps. Technical and vocational curriculums prepared young people to join the workforce and head into agriculture, industry or public service, which connected classrooms to the pressing project of reconstruction. Education was couched in terms of empowerment: an opportunity for citizens to help build a self-reliant nation.

At the same time, the reforms faced outward. In focusing on science and technology, Mujibur Rahman indicated that Bangladesh would have to fight in a modern, connected world. This combination of cultural pride and scientific progress expresses a tension between the impulse to preserve tradition and that towards innovation that has continued to shape our understanding of sustainable development.

Challenges, however, were many. There were few resources, overcrowded classrooms and too few teachers trained to teach. Implementation lagged behind ambition. But the vision was distinct: education was not a privilege for a few but a right for everyone. It can be said that while full reform was never achieved, the recommendations of the Commission built a bridge between literacy and primary education schemes which came to transform Pakistan (Khan, 2000).

Education is more than learning how to read and write in those early years. It was to create autonomous citizens who could preserve the spirit of independence and sow the seeds that would make it possible for a modern Bangladesh to be established.

## **Chapter 6: Storms and Struggles: Early-Year Crises**

The early years of Bangladesh's independence were a time of storms, some natural, others political, and all profoundly testing. The euphoria of 1971 soon dissipated onto the hard landscape of a war-ravaged country to be ruled.

Economically, the challenge was immense. Industrial production had fallen off a cliff, infrastructure lay in ruins and inflation was spiking. Matters were made worse by the oil spending crisis of 1973 through increased import costs and depletion of foreign reserves (Sobhan, 1982). While the First Five-Year Plan (1973–78) set ambitious targets for rehabilitation, resource constraints and weak organizations hindered their implementation (Islam 2003).

Nature, too, was unforgiving. Floods, cyclones and drought wiped out crops and buildings over and over again. The worst blow was delivered by the 1974 famine, which killed thousands and left a deep scar on the young nation. Subsequently, it was pointed out by Amartya Sen (1981)

who argued that famine did not predominate due to food shortages but people's inability to purchase or get food even when it was available. It made clear the weaknesses of state capacity and depleted public trust.

Meanwhile, political unrest was on the rise. Citizens impatient of hardship pushed for change to occur more quickly. Strikes, demonstrations and movements of opposition flared up while corruption in the bureaucracy made people lose faith in the government even more (Maniruzzaman 1980). The leadership of Bangabandhu, the binding force of liberation, was challenged more and more. His government did so by redoubling the grip on political life to bring back stability, an effort that raised questions about the relative weight of democracy and stability.

In these storms, Mujibur Rahman felt the weight of expectations personally. His speeches combined optimism with frustration, calling for patience while acknowledging to take on the pain. In those years, leadership was as much about resilience as vision.

The crises of the early nineteen-seventies are a reminder that state-building is never seamless. For Bangladesh, these fights established a national identity based on resilience. While famine, floods and violence rocked the foundations of independence, they also underscored the imperative for stronger institutions and longer-term planning lessons which continue to shape the country's trajectory.

### **Chapter 7: Turn of BAKSAL: Hope or a Way Back?**

By the time I arrived in 1975, the enthusiasm for independence had been watered down by drought, rioting and economic crisis. For Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the question was stark: how to govern and develop when institutions are weak and public confidence is slipping. It was in this spirit that he undertook a bold political experiment: the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League, or BAKSAL.

Formed in early 1975, BAKSAL turned the country into a one-party system. Its backers argued that power had to be centralized for reforms to pass and corruption to fall. Mujibur Rahman desired a slim and trim state structure, with civil servants, peasants and workers working together under the same roof in pursuit of development (Ahmed 2010). In the abstract, this model echoed socialist projects in other places, a mix of a mode of government and mass participation.

Yet the move was controversial. BAKSAL was widely perceived by many critics, as entailing a repudiation of the democratic values enshrined in the 1972 Constitution (Chowdhury 2014). Political parties were banned, the opposition muzzled, and the press brought to heel. While the government promised it was temporary, for many it looked like an alarming concentration of power.

The pivot also revealed a deeper paradox of post-colonial governance: How is democracy to be reconciled with stability? When he assumed power, Mujibur Rahman inherited "a nation fatigued by hunger and disillusionment", writes Maniruzzaman (1980). In such conditions, the temptation to trade pluralism for order proved irresistible. So BAKSAL was an act of supreme defiance, but it was also a scream of desperation.

Unfortunately, the experiment ended prematurely. Mujibur Rahman was assassinated in August 1975, only months after BAKSAL's creation. This system never had a chance to mature, and scholars dispute whether it could have evolved toward stability or entrenched authoritarian rule.

Sunday's verdict capped one of the most polarizing chapters in Bangladesh's political history. To others, it was a visionary effort to reset governance in a time of crisis. To others, it was a step

back from democracy. What is definitely the case is that it was one super freaky emanation, a particularly gnarly reflection of the extreme pressures encountering party leadership in the early 1970s as they sought to walk a tightrope between hope and retreat.

### **Chapter 8: Legacy and Lessons for Today**

The first decades of Bangladesh's history were difficult, but the seeds that were sown then are still relevant. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's rule between 1972 and 1975 highlighted food, education and governance as the pillars of national resilience. Even if the word 'sustainable development' had not been internationally popularized by then, much of his policies were shaped by some principles considered to be in it: equity and inclusiveness, and farsightedness (Rahman & Islam 2019).

Agricultural reforms, though uneven, underscored the importance of farmers and food security. Education efforts aimed to strengthen future generations, the 1972 Constitution upheld the values of justice and pluralism. These priorities, in retrospect, align with the three foundational pillars of sustainable development that Sachs (2015) now calls human well-being, resilience and fairness.

But leadership was put to the test by a series of crises. The famine of 1974, political instability and frail institutions illustrated how fragile post-colonial states could be. Comparative reflection makes us realize that many post – colonial states have all undergone comparable processes, but there were few leaders who symbolized national unity like Mujibur Rahman did (Young 1994). It was a vision that combined charisma with institution-building, even if the results were frequently deficient.

Today, Bangladesh is known for its success in poverty alleviation, women's empowerment and food security stand as a testament to the impact of early choices made (World Bank, 2021). Those laid in the 70s are still 'self-reliance; education and governance based on what people need' to forge its path.

Internationally, those years hold enduring lessons. Sustainable development is not technical or economic alone; it is political and moral, as well. It needs leadership that people can trust, governance that serves citizens rather than lobbyists, policies that keep our fellow human beings at the center. The intimation of Mujibur Rahman's truncated project is that even in the grimmest context, a vision rooted in justice and human dignity can light a way for an entire nation.

### **Chapter 9: Findings and Discussion**

In reflecting on Bangladesh's foundational years, 1972 to 1975, there are a number of insights. First, leadership was central. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the very embodiment of Weber's (1978) charismatic authority during a moment of national despondency that saw despair turn to unity. But charisma was never enough on its own. The transition of the Awami League from a resistance party to a ruling institution has illustrated that leadership and organizational factors need to be balanced in order for the vision to become reality (Maniruzzaman, 1980).

The second, as George W. Bush demonstrated with his Medicare drug benefit and other outrages ten years later, was an agricultural policy that was positively visionary at the time of passage (and 35 years later still looks pretty good) that actually included an education policy with a certain amount of foresight. Land reform, irrigation and cooperatives put the farmer at the center of development, while the Qudrat-e-Khuda Education Commission aimed to make people science and technology conscious (Choudhury 1975) As with any such efforts, the results were

uneven, but these early programs foreshadowed concepts that decades later would become core to sustainable development: equity, resilience and investment in human capacity (Sachs, 2015).

Third, the crises of the moment: famine, natural disasters and economic shocks raised questions about what fragile choke-chains can accomplish. As Sen (1981: 279) has pointed out in his analysis of the 1974 famine, it is not just about food deficiency but entitlement and access; development, according to Sen, demands functioning distribution and accountability.

In comparison, Bangladesh's spell reflected the difficulties experienced by other postcolonial states, but its early making of constitutions and concern with education were a unique outcome (Young 1994). The findings again suggest that nation-building in fragile contexts is always a balancing act: between charisma and institutions, ideals and realities, democracy and stability.

These conversations together tell us that sustainability is not just about the technical, but it's profoundly political: of leadership, legitimacy and the day-to-day toils of citizens.

### **Chapter 9: Conclusion**

The years between 1972 and 1975 were a defining moment in Bangladesh's journey from liberation to statehood. Emerging from the devastation of war, the nation looked to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League to transform the promise of independence into everyday reality. In these short years, leadership and governance laid foundations in agriculture, education, and constitutional design, even as crises repeatedly tested the fragile state.

What stands out from this period is not flawless achievement but courageous vision. Mujibur Rahman recognized that rebuilding required more than physical reconstruction; it demanded investment in people, farmers who needed food security, children who needed education, and citizens who needed dignity. Though the famine of 1974, economic strain, and political unrest exposed deep weaknesses, these struggles underscored the importance of long-term resilience and inclusive governance.

The turn toward BAKSAL revealed the dilemmas of leadership in fragile contexts, the tension between democratic pluralism and the urgency of stability. Yet, even this contested episode highlights the immense pressures faced by leaders in postcolonial states.

For Bangladesh today, and for the wider world, the lesson is clear: sustainable development is inseparable from leadership and governance rooted in legitimacy, equity, and vision. Bangabandhu's unfinished project reminds us that even in brokenness, nations can find the courage to build, and in struggle, the seeds of a sustainable future can be sown.

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