

**THE ZIAUR RAHMAN ERA:
RECONSIDERING
BANGLADESH IN POLITICS,
GOVERNANCE, AND CHANGE**

Dr. Mushfiqur Rahman

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Preface

Late President Ziaur Rahman occupies a defining place in Bangladesh's political democracy and nation-building process. This book examines his transition from a career military officer to a central political leader during a formative period in the country's modern history. Born in Baghbari village of the Bogra District in the Bengal Presidency of British India (present-day Bogura, Bangladesh), Ziaur Rahman joined the Pakistan Army in 1953 and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in 1955 after training at the Pakistan Military Academy, Kakul. His military service included duty in the East Bengal Regiment and participation in the 1965 India–Pakistan War. During the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, he played a prominent military role and broadcast the declaration of independence from Chittagong Radio before later serving as a sector commander. In the post-independence period, he emerged as a national political leader and played a foundational role in establishing the Bangladesh Nationalist Party in 1978. Through his leadership and policies, he significantly shaped Bangladesh's political identity, governance, and democratic development, leaving a lasting legacy.

About Author

Dr. Mushfiqur Rahman is a Senior Lecturer in Business and Management at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, United Kingdom, and a Visiting Lecturer at Queen Mary University of London, United Kingdom. Academically, after completing his bachelor's degree, Mushfiqur completed an MBA and subsequently an MSc in Human Resource Management and Employment Relations. He earned his PhD in Electronic Human Resource Management (e-HRM) from Brunel University of London. Mushfiqur wrote on critical issues relating to Bangladesh, particularly governance, human rights, international relations and the integration of Electronic Human Resource Management (e-HRM) within Bangladeshi ministries such as the Ministry of Public Administration and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He later completed an advanced programme in academic writing and reading at the University of Oxford.

His lifelong connection to political thought and public service began long before he moved to the UK. He was profoundly shaped by his father, Professor Habibur Rahman, a respected political advisor for the Mohadevpur region under the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), who worked closely with the Late Deputy Speaker Akter Hamid Siddique. Growing up in a household deeply rooted in political discourse, leadership, and civic duty, Mushfiqur's early exposure fostered a natural inclination toward governance and social impact. During his studies at Rajshahi University, he emerged as a student leader at Shahid Ziaur Rahman Hall, actively engaging in campus politics and representing student interests. He held this position while continuing his studies, which took him to Pune, India. Currently, his political engagement includes serving as Chairman of the Shahid Ziaur Rahman Research Centre in the UK.

The tradition of political engagement has continued in his family's next generation. Politics, as he often says, “runs in our genetics”: his son has recently completed a degree in Politics at the University of Cambridge, and his daughter is beginning her own political studies at King’s College London, after being inspired and helped by their former local MP of Hillingdon, Lord John Randall. Their academic paths reflect the same commitment to leadership and public service that has shaped Mushfiqur’s own journey.

Before entering academia, he held senior corporate leadership positions, gaining significant experience in HR operations, governmental HR development, and HR budget and investment planning. His research interests include HRM, e-HRM, Employment Law, Politics and Leadership, and he has published over 50 articles and several books, with his recent publications appearing in high-ranking Academic Journal Guide (AJG) of CABS and Q1 journals, which are internationally recognised. He is also the editor of reputable journals.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	II
PREFACE	III
ABOUT AUTHOR	IV
TABLE OF CONTENTS	VI
INTRODUCTION	X
CHAPTER 1: FROM BATTLEFIELD TO PRESIDENCY:	
THE RISE OF ZIAUR RAHMAN	1
ABSTRACT.....	2
INTRODUCTION.....	2
BANGLADESHI NATIONALISM AND ZIAUR RAHMAN'S EARLY RISE AND CAREER.....	3
EMERGENCE OF BANGLADESH'S NATIONALIST PARTY: POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY.....	4
CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE MILITARY REGIME.....	6
RELIGION, NATIONAL SECURITY AND POLITICS: UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS.....	8
CONCLUSION.....	10
CHAPTER 2: LIBERATION WAR AND LEADERSHIP:	
ZIAUR RAHMAN'S ROLE IN 1971	12
ABSTRACT.....	13
INTRODUCTION.....	13
MILITARY LIFE AND CAREER BEFORE 1971.....	14
THE PRELUDE TO REVOLT AND DECLARATION OF LIBERATION: MARCH 1971.....	15
ORGANISING A STRONG RESISTANCE: COMMANDER OF SECTOR 1 OF MUJIBNAGAR SARKAR.....	16
THE FORMATION OF "Z FORCE" BY ZIAUR RAHMAN: THE FIRST REGULAR BRIGADE.....	17
STRATEGIC ADVANTAGES IN SECTOR 11: EFFECTIVENESS IN THE NORTHERN FRONT.....	18
GEOPOLITICAL LEADERSHIP ASSOCIATION: TIES WITH INDIAN AUTHORITIES.....	18
VALOUR AND EFFECTIVENESS ON THE BATTLEFIELD.....	19
ANALYSING THE LEADERSHIP OF ZIAUR RAHMAN: SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES IN RESPECT TO LEADERSHIP.....	21
CONCLUSION.....	24

CHAPTER 3: REINVENTING BANGLADESH’S ECONOMY: ZIAUR RAHMAN AND DEVELOPMENT POLITICS	26
ABSTRACT	27
INTRODUCTION	27
ECONOMIC LIBERALISATION AND PRIVATISATION	28
ZIA’S ACTION IN REFORMING BANGLADESH ECONOMY IN QUEST OF SUSTAINABILITY	30
POLITICAL SHIFT IN BANGLADESH’S GOVERNANCE	32
REGIMES AND REFORMS IN BANGLADESH AFTER 1971	34
PLAN OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND MARKET LIBERALISATION	35
CONCLUSION	37
CHAPTER 4: DECENTRALISATION, VILLAGE COUNCILS AND RURAL REFORM UNDER ZIAUR RAHMAN	39
ABSTRACT	40
INTRODUCTION	40
HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF ZIAUR RAHMAN	41
VISION AND IDEOLOGY OF ZIAUR RAHMAN BEHIND DECENTRALISATION	42
INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS AND GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE BY ZIAUR RAHMAN	44
POLITICAL PURPOSE AND STATE LEGITIMACY WITH CHALLENGES AND CRITICISM FACED BY ZIAUR RAHMAN	45
<i>BANGLADESHI NATIONALISM AND RE-ORIENTATION OF IDEOLOGIES</i>	46
<i>LIBERALISATION OF THE ECONOMY AND THE STRUCTURAL CONTRADICTIONS</i>	46
<i>PARTY ENGINEERING AND CONTROLLED DEMOCRATIC RESTORATION</i>	47
<i>NEW CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS AND THE REMAKING OF STATE LEGITIMACY</i>	47
<i>MILITARY CONSOLIDATION AND LIMITATIONS OF PROFESSIONALIZATION</i>	48
<i>POPULIST MOBILISATION AND SYMBOLIC GOVERNANCE</i>	48
<i>THE ISLAMISATION AND HISTORICAL REVISIONISM IS CRITICISED</i>	48
<i>DEMOCRATIC DEFICITS AND PROBLEMS OF LEGITIMACY</i>	49
LEGACY AND LONG-TERM IMPACT OF RURAL REFORM UNDER ZIAUR RAHMAN	50
INSTITUTIONALISATION OF RURAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT	50
AGRICULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND OPERATIONS EVOLUTION	50
POLITICAL ECONOMY OUTCOMES IN RURAL FUNDING CHANNELS	51
CONCLUSION	52
CHAPTER 5: SHIFTING ALLIANCES: FOREIGN POLICY AND REGIONAL VISION OF ZIAUR RAHMAN	53
ABSTRACT	54
INTRODUCTION	54
RE-ORIENTATION OF FOREIGN POLICY: FROM DEPENDENCE TO DIVERSIFICATION	55
MOVING TOWARDS WEST: CULTIVATION OF DIVERSIFIED RELATIONSHIP	55
REGIONAL COOPERATION MOVEMENT: INDIA AND PAKISTAN RELATIONSHIP	60
CONCLUSION	64

CHAPTER 6: NATION, FAITH AND IDENTITY: ZIAUR RAHMAN’S CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS	66
ABSTRACT	67
INTRODUCTION	67
THE LEADER OF LIBERATION WAR	68
ISLAMIC NATION AND UNITY IN POWER	70
NATIONAL INTEREST AT FIRST: ZIAUR’S FOREIGN POLICIES	72
CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT AND NATIONAL IDENTITY OF BANGLADESH	73
ZIAUR RAHMAN: THE LEADER OF COMMON PEOPLE	75
CONCLUSION	77
CHAPTER 7: MULTI-PARTY DEMOCRACY RESTORED POLITICAL REFORM UNDER ZIAUR RAHMAN	79
ABSTRACT	80
INTRODUCTION	80
HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF MULTI-PARTY DEMOCRACY IN TERMS OF POLITICAL REFORM UNDER ZIAUR RAHMAN	81
IDEOLOGICAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES THROUGH WHICH ZIAUR RAHMAN PREPARED THE POLITICAL REFORM	83
STEPS TAKEN BY ZIAUR RAHMAN TO RESTRUCTURE THE POLITICAL SPACE AND ALSO RESTORE THE MULTIPARTY DEMOCRACY	86
INSTITUTIONAL MEASURES BY WHICH ZIAUR RAHMAN REDEVELOPED DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES	88
IMPACT, ACHIEVEMENT AND LIMITATIONS OF THE MULTI-PARTY POLITICAL REFORMS BY ZIAUR RAHMAN	90
CONCLUSION	92
CHAPTER 8: FROM CRISIS TO STABILITY: THE REFORMIST LEADERSHIP OF ZIAUR RAHMAN	93
ABSTRACT	94
INTRODUCTION	94
LOBBYING AND THE POLITICAL FRAGMENTATION IN BANGLADESH AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT	95
POLITICISATION OF THE MILITARY FORCES IN BANGLADESH	98
COUPS’ ATTEMPTS AGAINST ZIAUR RAHMAN	100
SEPARATISTS ATTEMPTED DURING THE REGIME OF ZIAUR RAHMAN	102
CONFLICT REGARDING THE SOCIALIST COUNTRY STRUCTURE	103
POLITICAL UNIFICATION OF BANGLADESH	103
ATTEMPTS AT REFORMATION AND RECREATION OF DEMOCRACY	104
CONCLUSION	105

CHAPTER 9: LEGACY, MEMORY, AND THE POLITICS OF ZIAUR RAHMAN IN CONTEMPORARY BANGLADESH	107
ABSTRACT	108
INTRODUCTION	108
JOURNEY OF ZIAUR RAHMAN FROM BANGLADESH TO PAKISTAN	110
LEGACY OF ZIAUR RAHMAN AS AN ISLAMIC LEADER AND IDEOLOGICAL SHIFT	112
THE FOUNDER OF THE BANGLADESH NATIONALIST PARTY AND PROMOTION OF MULTI-PARTY DEMOCRACY	114
PRIVATISATION AND AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN	115
ZIAUR RAHMAN IN PUBLIC AND POLITICAL REMEMBRANCE	117
CONCLUSION	119
CHAPTER 10: SUSTAINABILITY, SELF-RELIANCE AND ZIAUR RAHMAN’S VISION FOR BANGLADESH	121
ABSTRACT	122
INTRODUCTION	122
ZIAUR RAHMAN INTRODUCED SUSTAINABILITY AS A LONG-TERM POLITICAL STRATEGY FOR RESTORING NATIONAL STABILITY	123
THE VISION OF ZIAUR RAHMAN IN SELF-RELIANCE EMERGED AS A NATION-BUILDING IDEOLOGY TO REDUCE FOREIGN DIPLOMACY	125
THE RURAL REFORMS UNDER ZIAUR RAHMAN AIMED TO DEVELOP SUSTAINABLE VILLAGE-LEVEL GOVERNANCE THROUGH DECENTRALISATION	127
ZIAUR RAHMAN’S ATTRIBUTES TOWARDS NATIONAL SECURITY TO ENSURE REGIME LOYALTY	130
RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY BY ZIAUR RAHMAN TO ENSURE A SUSTAINABLE NATIONAL IDENTITY IN BANGLADESH	132
CONCLUSION	134
REFERENCES	136

INTRODUCTION

The story of independent Bangladesh is, at its core, a story of hardship, courage, and an extraordinary will to survive. Few individuals symbolise that journey more deeply than President Ziaur Rahman. As a decorated freedom fighter, a reformist leader, and a visionary statesman, Zia helped guide a wounded country through one of the most fragile phases of its existence. His ideas and decisions continue to shape how Bangladesh understands itself today—its identity, its economy, its politics, and its place in the world.

This book is written from a position of respect and sympathy for Ziaur Rahman's legacy. It does not pretend to be detached in the cold, clinical sense. Instead, it aims to be fair, honest, and thoughtful while recognising Zia as one of the central architects of modern Bangladesh. The chapters that follow seek to show how his leadership emerged from the brutal realities of war and post-war collapse, and how he transformed those experiences into a programme of nation-building that touched every sphere of life: from the battlefield to the village, from the constitution to foreign policy, from the rice field to the global stage.

The early years after independence were marked by instability, economic crisis, and institutional confusion. Bangladesh struggled with famine, corruption, political centralisation, and the erosion of public trust. It was in this difficult environment that Zia stepped forward—not only as a soldier who had already risked his life for the country, but as a leader who believed that ordinary people deserved security, opportunity, and dignity. He spoke the language of responsibility and self-reliance, and he worked to move Bangladesh away from dependency and despair towards confidence and renewal.

Rather than following a simple chronological biography, this book is organised thematically. Each chapter explores a different dimension of Ziaur Rahman's leadership and vision, while together they form a coherent portrait of his role in the making of modern Bangladesh.

Chapter 1, “From Battlefield to Presidency: The Rise of Ziaur Rahman,” introduces Zia’s early life and military career, tracing his journey from a young officer in the Pakistan Army to a key figure in East Bengal’s struggle for recognition. It shows how his experiences of discrimination, his exposure to different regions, and his sense of duty shaped his understanding of leadership. The chapter then follows his path from the days of the Liberation War to his eventual rise to the presidency, emphasising how his wartime credibility and moral authority prepared him to guide a traumatised nation.

Chapter 2, “Liberation War and Leadership: Ziaur Rahman’s Role in 1971,” focuses on the critical months of the Liberation War. It examines his famous declaration of independence from Kalurghat, his command of the Z Force, and his contribution to the organisation and morale of the Mukti Bahini. The chapter highlights Zia’s courage on the battlefield, his strategic thinking, and his ability to inspire fighters and civilians alike. It argues that his role in 1971 was not only military but also symbolic: he became, for many, a living embodiment of resistance and national hope.

Chapter 3, “Reinventing Bangladesh’s Economy: Ziaur Rahman and Development Politics,” takes the reader into the arena of economic reform. In a country exhausted by war, famine, and failed central planning, Zia introduced a new economic direction. The chapter explains his policies of privatisation, denationalisation of loss-making state enterprises, encouragement of private investment, and support for export-oriented growth. It shows how he connected economic policy with political stability, arguing that a hungry and jobless population can never fully enjoy freedom. Under his leadership, agriculture and industry were re-energised, and the foundations of Bangladesh’s later growth were laid.

Chapter 4, “Decentralisation, Village Councils and Rural Reform under Ziaur Rahman,” explores one of the most distinctive features of Zia’s vision: his belief that real development must begin at the village level. This chapter describes the creation of Gram Sarkar (village government), the strengthening of Union Parishads, the encouragement of cooperatives, and new forms of local participation. It shows how Zia tried to move away from an urban-centric, top-down state and instead bring decision-making closer to the rural majority. His aim was not simply administrative deconcentration; it was to give ordinary people a stake in governance and to build national strength from the grassroots up.

Chapter 5, “Shifting Alliances: Foreign Policy and Regional Vision of Ziaur Rahman,” examines Zia’s approach to the outside world. In a sensitive regional environment, he sought to diversify Bangladesh’s foreign relations, reduce over-dependence on any single power, and assert a more balanced, self-respecting diplomacy. The chapter discusses his outreach to the Muslim world, his engagement with China, the United States, and Western institutions, and his careful handling of relations with India. It argues that Zia’s foreign policy was driven by a desire for sovereignty, strategic flexibility, and protection of national interests in a complex regional order.

Chapter 6, “Nation, Faith and Identity: Ziaur Rahman’s Constitutional Amendments,” turns to the sensitive but central issue of national identity. This chapter explains how Zia articulated the idea of “Bangladeshi nationalism,” distinguishing it from narrower linguistic definitions of identity. It explores his constitutional changes, including the incorporation of Islamic references and the re-interpretation of secularism in a way that aligned more closely with the beliefs of the majority population. Rather than framing religion as a tool of exclusion, the chapter shows how Zia sought to blend Islamic heritage with democratic participation and a pluralistic Bangladeshi state.

Chapter 7, “Multi-Party Democracy Restored: Political Reform under Ziaur Rahman,” addresses Zia’s role in reviving political pluralism after the BAKSAL one-party experiment. It narrates the founding of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the re-legalisation of previously banned political organisations, and the reintroduction of competitive elections. This chapter presents Zia as a leader who recognised that democracy, to be meaningful, must allow space for different voices—including those he disagreed with. By restoring multi-party politics, he helped rebuild trust in formal institutions and gave citizens a renewed sense of participation.

Chapter 8, “From Crisis to Stability: The Reformist Leadership of Ziaur Rahman,” examines how Zia navigated repeated crises—coup attempts, internal conspiracies, and institutional fragility. It looks at his efforts to professionalise the armed forces, reduce factionalism, strengthen intelligence agencies, and tie the military’s role more closely to national development and disaster response. Far from portraying him as the source of instability, the chapter argues that Zia was the leader who held the state together at a time when it could easily have collapsed. His calm yet firm response to turmoil helped move Bangladesh from continuous crisis towards a more stable political order.

Chapter 9, “Legacy, Memory, and the Politics of Ziaur Rahman in Contemporary Bangladesh,” explores how Zia is remembered, celebrated, and contested today. It looks at monuments, commemorations, party narratives, and public debates. The chapter shows that Zia’s image remains powerful in Bangladesh’s political imagination—admired by many as a nation-builder and debated by others through the lens of contemporary party competition. It argues that regardless of political alignment, no serious discussion of Bangladesh’s modern history can ignore his influence on nationalism, democracy, and development.

Chapter 10, “Sustainability, Self-Reliance and Ziaur Rahman’s Vision for Bangladesh,” brings together the long-term themes of his leadership. It examines his emphasis on sustainable agriculture, food self-sufficiency, rural employment, infrastructure, and institutional resilience. It also revisits his ideas of self-reliance in both domestic policy and foreign relations. The chapter shows how Zia linked sustainability, security, and sovereignty, arguing that a truly independent Bangladesh must be able to stand on its own feet—economically, politically, and culturally.

Taken together, these ten chapters present Ziaur Rahman not as a temporary figure between larger eras, but as a central architect of the Bangladesh we know today. They show a leader who moved from the front lines of war to the front lines of state-building; who listened to the voice of the villages; who believed in the power of faith, culture, and identity; and who understood that democracy, to survive, must be anchored in stability and development.

This book is, ultimately, an invitation—to look again at Ziaur Rahman with nuance, empathy, and historical awareness. For readers in Bangladesh, it offers a structured and respectful account of a leader whose memory is often caught in the crossfire of partisan debate. For readers around the world, it provides an accessible introduction to how one man’s vision helped steer a struggling, newly independent country towards a more confident and resilient future.

Ziaur Rahman’s life was cut short, but his imprint on Bangladesh is unmistakable. The institutions he strengthened, the ideas he championed, and the hopes he inspired continue to live on in the country’s politics, economy, and national consciousness. This book is dedicated to understanding that legacy and to recognising the enduring role he played in the making of modern Bangladesh.

Chapter 1:
From Battlefield to Presidency:
The Rise of Ziaur Rahman

Abstract

The study examines how Ziaur Rahman, a distinguished military leader, became a key political actor in the development of Bangladesh after independence. It examines how changes in national identity, political instability, and the ideological gap between Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalism influenced his leadership. The study highlights Zia's wartime credibility, reforms, and the introduction of multiparty politics, leading to the formation of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). It further examines how economic restructuring, privatisation, and rural development reinforced the legitimacy of BNP. As discussed, Zia's leadership was a resolute force in determining nationalism, governance, and political change in Bangladesh.

Introduction

Starting the journey from the battlefield of Karachi, Ziaur Rahman became one of the pivotal figures who safeguarded Bangladesh both during the liberation war and in the face of political turmoil. His visionary leadership established restoration of the political, economic and social structure that gave birth to modern Bangladesh. After becoming the President of Bangladesh on April 21, 1977, Zia structured his route of governing the country towards the way of modernisation and national development in all the formation of political, economic and social policies (Mahbub, 2025). Rose from a distinguished military career of Pakistan-controlled East Bengal, to the founder of “Bangladesh Nationalist Party” (BNP), the forging legacy of Zia contributed in reshaping the country. His life in the Army started in 1955 as a second lieutenant in the Karachi regiment and later he was transferred in the Eighth East Bengal Regiment at Chattogram in the position of second-in-command. In the Pakistan occupied Bangladesh, Zia found the purpose of national unity and identity from the cases of the injustices and repression faced by the people of East Bengal (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). Introduction of multi-party democracy to the economic reformation, as a President of

Bangladesh, Zia made major transformation in the country after the death of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Political democracy under the BNP and the 19-Point Programme by Zia influenced the construction of identity and ideology that flowed over the years in the governing system of the country.

Bangladeshi Nationalism and Ziaur Rahman's Early Rise and Career

Bangladeshi nationalism developed through years of historical struggle, cultural identity, and political change. The early rise of Ziaur Rahman took place within this wider transformation, as these forces were shaping a new state (Verma, 2023). Shared language, economic inequality within Pakistan, and the Liberation War—which created both sovereignty and national identity—strengthened the sense of nationalism in Bangladesh. During the shift from colonial rule to post-colonial politics, ideas about “Bengali identity” and “Bangladeshi identity” began to move in different directions. After independence, especially from 1977 onwards, debates grew between secular Bengali nationalism and the broader idea of Bangladeshi nationalism (Mahbub, 2025). This shift allowed religion and cultural diversity to have a clearer place in national life. In this context, Ziaur Rahman became a central figure. His military reputation and wartime leadership matched the public need for stability in a struggling country. For this reason, his rise cannot be separated from the wider change in national ideology after the war.

Ziaur Rahman's military background also shaped his early career and public image. He joined the army at a time when Bengali officers faced strong institutional discrimination in Pakistan (Roy et al., 2020). These experiences aligned him with the growing belief that military leadership and national liberation were closely connected. During the 1971 war, Zia became widely known when he declared independence through the Chattogram radio station (Verma, 2023). His command of the Z Force gave him an important role in the liberation movement and strengthened his reputation as a disciplined and capable leader. After independence,

Bangladesh faced political chaos, institutional disarray, and major governance problems. These conditions created a leadership gap that required decisive action. This situation allowed Zia to move from a military role into a political one. In this way, his early career became closely linked with efforts to bring the country back to stability during a difficult transition.

The changing idea of nationalism strongly influenced Ziaur Rahman's political thinking and policy direction. Earlier Bengali nationalism focused mainly on language and secular values, but the political crisis of 1975 reshaped national priorities (Mahbub, 2025). Zia introduced the idea of Bangladeshi nationalism as a more inclusive approach. It recognised cultural, regional, and religious identity, and many scholars see this as a major shift in national thinking. His approach aimed to unite a divided nation and create a sense of citizenship that was not based only on language or ethnicity. National identity in Bangladesh has continued to evolve, shaped by the memory of liberation, rural values, and the need to stay relevant in a global world (Akash et al., 2025). Zia's leadership reflected these developments. His political career shows the shift from a resistance-focused identity to the more complex task of state-building. His wartime role, political decisions, and national ideology made a strong contribution to the development of Bangladeshi nationalism.

Emergence of Bangladesh's Nationalist Party: Political and Economic Opportunity

Political instability, changing nationalist ideology, and the need to chart an economic course for the new state contributed to the formation of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Since Bangladesh's independence in 1971, the country has faced challenges in leadership, the economy, and evolving national identity (Verma, 2023). The assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975 left a power vacuum, and the political instability was further compounded by a coup and counter-coup period. In this transformation, Ziaur Rahman introduced the concept of

Bangladeshi nationalism, expanding the notion of national identity by taking into account cultural and religious aspects rather than relying solely on linguistic unification. The ideology of Bangladeshi nationalism was an inclusive response to the tension between Bengali secular nationalism, and the changing identity demands of the multiethnic population (Mahbub, 2025). This ideological arena provided the basis for the establishment of the BNP in 1978, as it offered a unified political discourse to people who sought a broader and more inclusive expression of national identity. Thus, the initial political environment set the conditions for a new political party to be legitimate and supported by a large number of people.

The institutional restructuring and a transition to multiparty government were associated with the political chance that gave birth to the BNP. The previous political regime had suppressed opposition, limited political pluralism, and centralised the government, thereby undermining democratic elements (Behera, 2025). By starting to undo these structures, Ziaur Rahman brought politics back, restored constitutional rights, and increased civilian involvement in politics. This transition even involved the establishment of the BNP, which sought to bring people together under an official political structure to symbolise the newly established national identity. The high growth rate of BNP was a response to the need for people to have some stability, political representation, and clarity about their ideologies (BJAF, n.d.). The party quickly gained electoral power, and in a short time, the BNP had become a political force that could affect the constitutional path the state was taking. Zia's wartime reputation, alongside his reforms in various administrative structures, enabled the BNP to serve as a structured political party rather than a transitory movement. The process of restructuring its politics, therefore, made its formation possible and its ascendancy as a national party.

The economic reforms were significant in making BNP a stronger political force and in turning it into a national institution rather than a new party. In the mid-1970s, Bangladesh faced inflation, food shortages, deindustrialisation, and low foreign investment (Chakravorty, 2023). Ziaur Rahman responded by developing policies that favoured privatisation,

rural development, and agricultural growth. These policies were in line with public expectations and brought about a change in the economic policy, shifting it from state-managed to market-oriented. Economic restructuring and the movement towards privatisation helped stabilise growth and win people's confidence in the government during the post-war recovery. As agricultural productivity began to rise with the onset of economic reforms and the entry of the private sector, BNP came to be seen as a party that could deliver national development, not just political transition. The concomitant nature of political restructuring and economic transformation made BNP an even stronger body in terms of legitimacy, making it a viable platform through which the nation would govern itself (Hossain, 2025). Thus, the development of BNP was not a sudden event; rather, it was a product of Bangladesh's ideological evolution, political transition, and economic restructuring.

Critical Evaluation of the Military Regime

Zia's life in the army shaped his leadership abilities and inspired him to develop knowledge of civilian control in Bangladesh after the war turmoil. The military regime of Zia started after the 1975 coup that recognised him as a hard-working and incorruptible leader in his military and political career (Ledbetter, 1981). Although some commentators questioned aspects of military governance, his remarkable actions in mitigating internal politics and establishing civilian control set an example of visionary leadership in Bangladesh. The period of 1975-1981 was considered a period of decisive and centralised governance, introducing a stable governance structure in the country. After the assassination of former President Mujibur Rahman in the late 1970s, the ongoing downfall of the political structure and civil decorum of Bangladesh raised concerns. As a military leader of Bangladesh, Zia held the position of Deputy Chief Martial Law Administrator to control the turmoil. Limited resources and an unstable political background were the main barriers to forming the current Bangladesh plan. Zia's visionary mindset and a structured and disciplined governance framework in the late 1970s in Bangladesh brought

about a massive transformation in the governance structure and strengthened the security forces.

Under the military regime of Zia, Bangladesh rose to power through the military and security forces. The liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 was considered a transformative event in the history of South Asia, marking the end of colonial rule. Zia introduced Islamic values into national policy in a way that harmonised them with the country's socio-political realities. The increased tension between secularism and religious nationalism in Bangladesh after independence heightened conflict and undermined civilian rule (Akash et al., 2025). Presenting controlled political activities and enacting regulations in Bangladesh, Zia addressed instability and strengthened the legal and administrative foundations of governance. After being appointed as the brigade commander in Comilla, Zia fuelled the inevitable rise of Bangladesh's politics. In the turmoil of Bangladesh's politics, the "Sepoy-Janata Biplob of 7 November" in 1975 gave Zia the final position as the ultimate power in the governing body. After becoming the centre of political power, Zia envisioned restructuring Bangladesh with national and foreign alliances. His prominent leadership in both the internal and external politics of Bangladesh led the country towards social and economic prosperity for a longer tenure.

As Zia assumed national leadership to restore stability in independent Bangladesh, he prioritised diversified alliances and regional cooperation as central components of his reform programme. In line with globalisation and in support of internal political transformation, Zia's government implemented a comprehensive plan to create employment opportunities and structure social welfare programmes. The "19-point program initiative" of Bangladesh outlined economic policy ideas and inspired the country to generate growth through industrialisation and the creation of opportunities for global alliances (Rahman, 2024). Zia's step towards privatisation of the state-owned companies and investing in entrepreneurial activities back in the 1970s proved his ability as a transformational leader in Bangladesh's economy. Despite the barriers of limited infrastructure, a lack of social awareness, and a weak position in global politics, Zia sought foreign alliances across the world. South Asian

cooperation and bilateral relations with countries like Nepal enabled the country to expand trade routes and strengthen national security. Beyond the military regime's ability, Zia's dynamic leadership in political relations and tactical strategies during the country's reform built a new milestone for Bangladesh after the war and political turmoil. Decentralised political structure and scattered civilian control in Bangladesh after the assassination of Zia raised the importance of his political regime in the contemporary situation.

Religion, National Security and Politics: Understanding the Dynamics

The previously unaddressed social disorder and a widespread social disorder and uncertainty led to the situation of national emergency in Bangladesh after the assassination of former President Mujibur Rahman. A rapid shift in the interplay of religion, national security, and politics in Bangladesh in 1975 gradually eroded the original secular stances and created the conditions for the reintegration of civilian governments (Ahsan, 2022). In the context of political and social turbulence, Zia retained the authority of the chief of the army, drawing on his wisdom in religious and nationalist matters. Reinterpreting secular principles within a culturally resonant national framework and introducing the concept of “absolute faith in the Almighty Allah,” Zia embedded religion in the political strategy of Bangladesh to unite the Islamic population. Influence of religious beliefs on the political stances of South Asia, as colonial rulers unite the common people against the greatest powers. Zia guided national unity through shared religious and cultural values in independent Bangladesh to design the social structure (Siddika et al., 2025). Zia’s restoration of democratic climate by departing from his predecessor’s one party system essentially allowed, amongst others, Islamic Political parties such Nejame-Islami, Jamaat-e Islam and others back into politics Restoring the former positions of Islamist parties in Bangladesh, such as “Jamaat-e-Islami and others”, This, along with his remarkable life-changing initiatives, helped him to consolidate his power and gained

domestic support in regenerating the national identity. Uniting the majority of the Islamic population in Bangladesh, Zia succeeded in reforming social stability and civilian control to build internal security.

Zia's foreign alliances with South Asian and other countries safeguarded national security and enabled trade expansion along both land and water routes. Between 1979-80, Zia's approach to building foreign policy with the UN Security Council developed a positive relationship with the US and enabled national security (Mahdi, 2025). The intervention of Zia on the national emergency of Iran also highlighted his approach of building relations with other foreign countries. Inspired by the foreign policies of developed countries and aligned with the Islamic states, Zia developed his own form of nationalism in Bangladesh to embed national security. Furthermore, Zia's promotion of multi-party democracy through the formation of BNP led to the development of structured political policies and a comprehensive reform plan for Bangladesh's long-term stability. (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). Empowering the other political parties with social and political democracy, Zia visualised bringing an end of anarchy in Bangladesh. The lack of civilisation and the absence of electoral government elections were the main issues for Bangladesh to maintain a civil code. Zia's approach to ending anarchy and implementing political reforms ensured the country's national security through a plan for a structured governance framework. The key action in shaping national and international security through trade and alliance formation identified Zia's visionary mindset as a political and military force for Bangladesh.

The dynamic political career of Zia in Bangladesh began with the War of Independence and introduced a new chapter of democracy and equal opportunity among the ruling and opposition political parties. The 1971 guerrilla war was a defining milestone in Zia's political career, showcasing his courage and strategic leadership in the historic struggle for Bangladesh's independence (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). After becoming the Chief of Army Staff in 1975, President Zia strengthened his political role through a firm and centralised leadership approach that helped restore national stability and confidence during a challenging period for the country. His founding of the Bangladesh

Nationalist Party (BNP) marked a major step in broadening democratic participation, empowering citizens, and laying the foundations for a multi-party political system in Bangladesh. Through his vision and principled leadership, Zia played a transformative role in shaping the nation's future.

Along with social democracy, it also empowered opposition parties to articulate their positions for the country's well-being. Suppression of the ruling government often led to the issue of mass riots and mob attacks in the social structure of the country. Focused on cases of recent political downfall, the policy of democracy in Bangladesh is inspired by the aim of achieving equality and stability in the social structure. Along with this, the political career of Zia in Bangladesh promoted the initiatives, like the "19-point programs". Reshaping the country's economic and social structure, Zia set an example of modern Bangladesh for the global community, which also initiated the country's future growth.

Conclusion

The emergence and evolution of Bangladeshi nationalism, Ziaur Rahman and the restructuring of the Bangladesh nationalist party illustrates how the issue of political identity in Bangladesh changed through war, instability, and nation-building policy. The initial period demonstrated that nationalism was up to now a linguistic and cultural structure into an expanded ideological pattern involving religion, regional identity, and the purpose of building a state. Ziaur Rahman had a military background and participation in the Liberation war, which made him legitimate in the country at a time when the country was not well led to exert influence over state identity and direction of governance.

The rise of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party was an indication of political restructuring and economic necessity. The movement to multiparty democracy made room for new political contests, privatisation, rural development, agricultural reforms, and gave grounds to BNP to be supported as a national institution that could exercise recovery and improve management. These reforms showed the interconnection

between political organisation and economic policy in the formation of the popular trust and the long-term governance.

Ziaur Rahman's transitional governance brought much-needed stability to Bangladesh during a period of national uncertainty. Through institutional reform, decentralisation, and strengthening state capacities, he created an environment suitable for orderly political participation and a smooth transition back to multiparty democracy. Lastly, the relationship between religion, national identity, and political legitimacy restructured the priorities of public policy and national security, which shaped the meaning of unity and sovereignty of the state. To sum up, the process of political, ideological, and economic developments in the given period predetermined the future trend of the development of nationalism, government, and state identity in Bangladesh.

Chapter 2: Liberation War and Leadership: Ziaur Rahman's Role in 1971

Abstract

The contribution of Ziaur Rahman during the liberation war of 1971 was effective in winning the war against the Pakistani forces on multiple fronts. The extensive knowledge of the warfront that Ziaur Rahman gained through military training in Pakistan has had a significant impact on the war. The strategic shift of guerrilla warfare introduced by Ziaur Rahman during the 1971 war has helped to deliver high casualties to the Pakistani army, which provided an opportunity to the allied force to tackle and erase the Pakistani occupation in December. The leadership of Ziaur Rahman, in a positive way, contributed to the democratic establishment of Bangladesh and to women's leadership in the country, which helped grow nationalist values among all social groups.

Introduction

The year 1971 is considered a landmark for Bangladesh, as amid significant political chaos under the West Pakistani Military dictatorship, decisive independence was achieved. Despite the inhuman act of genocide and the attempt at ethnic cleansing of the Bengali-speaking people from the erstwhile East Pakistan, Bangladesh succeeded in liberating itself with new hope in the guidance of successful civil and military leadership. Major Ziaur Rahman was one of the towering figures in the days of Bangladesh's freedom struggle as one of the most successful sector commanders of home-grown freedom fighters, "Muktijoddha." As a man of strict discipline with effective capabilities of strategic acumen and leadership, Major Rahman had played a significant role in delivering strong retaliation against Pakistani oppressors in the battlefield, which contributed to the liberation war in 1971 to a great extent. Amid the rising oppression of the Pakistani army on the Bengali people, Zia transformed himself from a decorated military officer to the role of commander in the Mukti Bahini. Ziaur Rahman's deep patriotism played a pivotal role in protecting people in Sector 11 of Bangladesh's Chattogram region. Major Ziaur Rahman is often considered a face of resistance against systematic oppression, while

his patriotism and valour are highly respected among people in Bangladesh.

Military Life and Career Before 1971

When Ziaur Rahman joined the military in the early years of Pakistan, he was recognised as a promising talent, known for his diligence, discipline, and strong leadership qualities. Owing to his exceptional abilities and remarkable leadership potential, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Pakistan Armed Forces at the age of only nineteen—an achievement attained by very few individuals from East Pakistan (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). During his short career in the Pakistan Army, Ziaur Rahman served in several critical regions, including Khyber and Sialkot. By the 1970s, he had become the second-in-command of the 8th East Bengal Regiment stationed in Chattogram. His transfer in 1970 became a significant turning point, as it enabled Ziaur Rahman to witness firsthand the repressive policies of the Pakistani military regime, further strengthening his commitment to Bangladesh's struggle for independence.

During his posting in Chattogram, Major Ziaur Rahman established close connections with the local Mukti Bahini in order to develop strong strategic analyses of the actions taken by Pakistan's military dictators. Accounts by Shamsheer M. Chowdhury on the 1971 Liberation War indicate that Major Ziaur Rahman was closely linked to the political shift taking place in Bangladesh and played an important role in weakening the power of the Pakistani forces. In the context of the massacre carried out under "Operation Searchlight" by the Pakistan Armed Forces, Major Ziaur Rahman arrested all Pakistani officers in Sector 8 of Chattogram and assumed control (Chowdhury, 2022). During this period of intense repression, Ziaur Rahman's leadership greatly elevated the morale of the Mukti Bahini. His deployment within the East Bengal Regiment significantly contributed to strengthening the sense of emotional unity and patriotism that deeply influenced Bangladesh's war of independence against Pakistan.

The Prelude to Revolt and Declaration of Liberation: March 1971

The ongoing oppression by the Pakistani forces officially turned against the blood of the Bengali people on 25th March 1971, when the “Operation Searchlight” was launched in Dhaka, and news of hundreds of massacres followed in national and international newspapers. On the night of the massacre in Dhaka, Major Ziaur Rahman took one important decision as the East Bengal regiment revolted with the proclamation of “We Revolt” by Major Ziaur Rahman (Hossain, 2025). The proclamation of the revolt by Ziaur Rahman helped the Mukti Bahini claim a strong position in the Chattogram Hill Tracts, enabling it to tackle Pakistani aggression from a strategic advantage on a broad scale. After the arrest of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on the night of 26 March 1971, Major Ziaur Rahman took on the essential task of issuing the proclamation of independence from Shwadhin Bangla Betar Kendra at Kalurghat (Hossain, 2025). In his proclamation, Ziaur Rahman acknowledged Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the leader of the nation, recognising his role in uniting the people of Bangladesh. Zia’s announcement became a landmark moment in the Liberation War, restoring public confidence and affirming that the struggle for independence would continue with resolute leadership despite the crisis.

Ziaur Rahman’s decisive stand emerged as a necessary response to the oppressive Pakistani military regime, which had begun disarming Bengali soldiers on the evening of 25 March 1971. In the book, "MuktijuddheNoy Mash" by Subid Ali Bhuiyan, it is mentioned that on the night of 25th March 1000 Bengali people were killed in Chattogram Cantonment (Istiak, 2025). A large number of participants in the 1971 rebellion stated that Major Ziaur Rahman, along with Rahman Majumdar, Captain Rafiq-ul Islam, and Captain Oli Ahmed, had planned an armed revolution. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was aware of this situation, but because of his political engagement with the Pakistani machinery, he refused to openly support it. However, after the arrest of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 26th March 1971,

Major Ziaur Rahman appeared as a ground warrior against the Pakistani oppression during the liberation conflict.

Organising a Strong Resistance: Commander of Sector 1 of Mujibnagar Sarkar

Ziaur Rahman played a crucial tactical role in guiding the guerrilla forces in the Chattogram Hill Tracts, helping to intensify the resistance against the Pakistani military. Under his leadership, Sector 1 became one of the most active operational zones of the Liberation War, drawing Pakistani forces into sustained combat and strengthening the effectiveness of Bangladeshi resistance. Close coordination with the political leadership of the Mujibnagar Sarkar further enhanced the strategic direction of the liberation struggle, enabling Bangladesh to mount significant pressure on the war front against Pakistan's military oppression (Banglapedia, 2021).

Ziaur Rahman's guerrilla tactics proved highly effective both in combat and in protecting the Chattogram Hill Region. As noted by Khan et al. (2021), his strategies sent a powerful message to Pakistan about the determination of the Bangladeshi people to resist oppression. One of the clearest demonstrations of Ziaur Rahman's tactical foresight emerged in the Battle of Kamalpur. Archival reports highlight that, under his strong leadership, Bangladeshi forces inflicted major blows on Pakistani camps in Kamalpur—operations that contributed directly to the Indian forces' liberation of Jamalpur on 4 December 1971 (Bharatpedia, 2025). Despite severe casualties and challenging weather conditions, Ziaur Rahman's operations at Kamalpur had a profound impact, reinforcing local support and strengthening the broader resistance movement across Bangladesh.

The Formation of “Z Force” by Ziaur Rahman: The First Regular Brigade

The formation of the “Z Force” under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman was a decisive demonstration of military gallantry that significantly shaped the course of the 1971 Liberation War. As R. Chowdhury (2023) notes from personal accounts, Ziaur Rahman organised the Z Force with highly skilled and loyal Bengali fighters, selecting individuals capable of executing complex combat operations. Through the coordination of eleven specialised groups, Zia established an effective operational structure that strengthened resistance against Pakistani assaults. Unlike purely guerrilla-based units, the Z Force adopted discipline-centred, structured operations guided by Ziaur Rahman, allowing Bangladesh to respond swiftly to rapidly changing battlefield conditions. Gill (2003) highlights that the Z Force played an active and influential role in the freedom struggle, supporting the allied Mitrobahini forces of India and contributing to significant gains on the war front.

In the Sylhet region, the presence of the Z Force was critical in countering Pakistani military dominance and securing key territories from devastating attacks. As the first regular brigade of the Mukti Bahini, the Z Force—under Ziaur Rahman’s command—made substantial contributions to reclaiming and protecting strategic areas. Major General Sarwar Hossain documents that the Z Force played an important role in mobilising young volunteers for the liberation struggle under the directives of Colonel Osmani, strengthening the capacity for sustained resistance (Hossain, n.d.). From its inception, Ziaur Rahman emphasised hybrid combat tactics that effectively combined conventional military methods with guerrilla warfare techniques. The Z Force’s rapid and coordinated responses against Pakistani military pressure in the Sylhet sector enhanced logistical efficiency and ensured strong cohesion with other Bangladeshi forces. Thus, Ziaur Rahman’s strategic leadership during the Liberation War left a profound and lasting impact on war coordination and military effectiveness in 1971.

Strategic Advantages in Sector 11: Effectiveness in the Northern Front

During the later stages of the Bangladesh Liberation War, Major Ziaur Rahman was assigned to Sector 11, where he successfully applied guerrilla tactics to strengthen the resistance movement. Analyses indicate that Major Ziaur Rahman played a decisive role in mobilising and leading the resistance against the Pakistani military regime (Gulf Magazine, n.d.). The strategic deployment of the Z Force within Sector 11 proved highly effective, helping the liberation forces overcome operational challenges and benefit from the support of allied forces positioned across the nearby border.

In an interview, Begum Khaleda Zia — wife of the martyred President Ziaur Rahman — noted that Major Zia conducted several important counter-offensive operations in the newly developing war zones of Sylhet (Chowdhury, 2020). His exceptional courage and leadership as a sector commander strengthened the liberation struggle across multiple fronts, making a lasting contribution to Bangladesh's decisive victory in 1971.

Geopolitical Leadership Association: Ties with Indian Authorities

Historical analyses indicate that Major Ziaur Rahman played a pivotal role in building strategic cooperation with neighbouring countries during the 1971 Liberation War. Drawing on Indian war archives, Kinzler (2025) concludes that Ziaur Rahman provided important intelligence insights to India's Research & Analysis Wing (RAW), enabling the allied forces to plan effective joint operations against Pakistani troops in Bangladesh. Zia's coordination with officers of the Border Security Force (BSF) further demonstrates his ability to establish strong working relationships with Indian military leadership, securing essential on-the-ground support for the Mukti Bahini. The political–military coordination

between the Mukti Bahini and the Mitro Bahini in 1971 was shaped significantly through Ziaur Rahman's guidance and leadership at the operational level.

Ziaur Rahman's strategic relationship-building focused on securing the necessary support to strengthen the liberation forces' operational capabilities. Hasan (2015) highlights that Major Ziaur Rahman emphasised close cooperation with the Indian armed forces as Pakistani atrocities intensified, ensuring a highly effective joint response. These leadership decisions contributed substantially to battlefield success. Thus, Ziaur Rahman's actions during the 1971 Liberation War became defining elements in Bangladesh's struggle against Pakistani military oppression.

Valour and Effectiveness on the Battlefield

The valour and wartime situation handling by Ziaur Rahman has been largely effective and has already impressed war veterans of that time regarding the war outcomes. In a conversation with Indian Defence Review, Maj Gen Sukhwant Singh of India mentioned that Ziaur Rahman is a well-decorated officer with the ability to wage warfare in the American style (Singh, 2021). Historical accounts indicate that Ziaur Rahman often made effective decisions on the deployment of commandos within the operating force to combat the Pakistani forces in different regions, even though his approach sometimes differed from Colonel Osmani, who often advocated traditional warfare. Singh further mentioned that despite the difference between Major Ziaur Rahman's background and the Indian culture of warfare, Major Ziaur Rahman addressed all the problems effectively, which helped to gain strategic advantages against Pakistan on the warfront. The revolt led by Major Ziaur Rahman during the liberation war is considered effective in making a significant impact on the war front. In a conversation with The Times of India, Major Parimal Kumar Ghosh of the Indian military stated that the revolt by Major Ziaur Rahman with 2 I/C 8 East Bengal Regiment has been an effective action in dismantling the Pakistani military's planning. Hence, Major Ziaur Rahman has had a significant impact on the strategies utilised by the Mukti Bahini during the

liberation war, which led to the surrender of the Pakistani armed forces in December.

Major Ziaur Rahman's strategic decision-making across three units has been a groundbreaking initiative for engaging the Pakistani army on multiple fronts. A military report on the warfare during the 1971 agitation against Pakistan suggests that the Mukti Bahini of Bangladesh gained a significant advantage through guerrilla warfare, as the segmentation of Gano Bahini behind has been stronger (Davar, 2021). Eventually, Major Ziaur Rahman allocated 6,000–7,000 guerrillas in the battalions of Z, K and S units of the Bangladeshi force, which helped to increase the level of impact on the Pakistani troops, inflicting significant operational losses. From the perspective of strategic leadership formulation, Major Ziaur Rahman succeeded to a significant extent, which eventually brought about the dawn of liberation for Bangladesh.

Actions by Ziaur Rahman during the liberation war of 1971 have helped build effective relationships with counterparts in the armed forces. News archives highlight that Ziaur Rahman was the voice of the soldiers, making an affirmative impact on the paths and policies that eventually helped deliver decorative outcomes (Helal, 2025). Increasing cohesion among the Mukti Bahini has been easier during the war against Pakistan due to the voice and leadership provided by Ziaur Rahman. The accounts of the close contemporaries of Ziaur Rahman suggest that he often took part in direct combat against the Pakistani military during the liberation war of 1971. Thus, Ziaur Rahman, as a major general during the Bangladesh War, is considered an effective force that helped mount resistance with limited power and infantry.

Analysing the Leadership of Ziaur Rahman: Sociological Perspectives in Respect to Leadership

Ziaur Rahman continued his legacy of military leadership in Bangladeshi politics, shaping outcomes that helped achieve significant progress in Bangladesh's political sphere. Ziaur Rahman advocated raising new faces during the Bangladesh Liberation War by dividing responsibilities among people from different units, which eventually led to successful guerrilla warfare against the Pakistani military. In an interview, Oli Ahmed, one of the co-warriors of Major Ziaur Rahman, said that Ziaur Rahman was never eager to enter politics, but the situation in Bangladesh forced him to choose politics (Jaman, 2025). The gallantry title of “Bir Uttom” awarded to Major Ziaur Rahman has been justified due to his wide contribution during the Liberation War of 1971.

The contribution of Ziaur Rahman after the war of 1971 had a significant impact on the politics of Bangladesh, with a decorative leadership that emphasised democracy and effective representation. During the national crisis that followed the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Ziaur Rahman’s rise to leadership reopened the path to multiparty democracy in Bangladesh (Helal, 2025). The rise of reformative actions under Ziaur Rahman's leadership made him popular among the common people of Bangladesh. For instance, by ending the dark days of Baksal, Ziaur Rahman created a democratic, leadership-oriented state that had a positive impact on people’s perceptions of the state (Ahsan, 2024). The role of Ziaur Rahman in the country's political evolution has been significant, as his leadership deeply emphasised changing perceptions of nation-building and national operations. In their assessment, Khan et al. (2021) highlight political liberty in Bangladesh as being established during the presidency of Major Ziaur Rahman, which helped make Bangladesh a democratic nation in Asia. It is often said that Ziaur Rahman's brief tenure in power left a legacy of democratisation in Bangladesh, which served as the foundation of modern Bangladesh.

The initiative for democratisation in Bangladesh was introduced by Ziaur Rahman through an amendment to the country's constitution, which eventually incorporated norms of the Liberation War into practice. In an assessment by Islam (2015), it has been noted that President Ziaur Rahman, through the Fifth Constitutional Amendment, established both democratic norms and the spirit of liberation. The combination of these two elements helped Bangladesh make a positive impact on future growth-oriented functions. The spirit of institutionalising democracy in Bangladesh has been made possible through Ziaur Rahman's strategic initiative of vision-driven country-building. An analysis by Talukdar (2025) identifies that Ziaur Rahman's formation of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and his decision to broaden political participation through a structured party system, significantly strengthened public trust in the long-term democratisation of national policies. The assassination of Ziaur Rahman stands as one of the most profound tragedies in the history of democratic Bangladesh, leaving a deeply negative impact on the country's institutional development. By opting for a multi-party democratic framework to ensure national stability, Ziaur Rahman laid the foundations for participatory politics; however, his martyrdom created a lasting void that continues to affect the trajectory and resilience of democracy in Bangladesh.

Ziaur Rahman's multi-party democratic approach has been one of the major successes in this country's democratic evolution. A South Asian journal found that the introduction of multi-party democracy offered a new ray of hope for the people of Bangladesh regarding political affirmative solutions (Hashmi, 2020). The scope of participation for all individuals was significantly high in Bangladesh during the political leadership of Ziaur Rahman, who established a legacy as a great leader among the common audience. Nazrul (2024) discussed in his analysis that the political legacy of Ziaur Rahman has been effective in increasing the participation of women in national politics. Former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, the wife of Ziaur Rahman, has been one of the flagbearers of women's representation in Bangladesh's politics, thereby increasing

women's participation as a dominant force in the country's political sphere.

The notion of political affiliation with national identity has been a major force in Bangladesh's politics, shaping the country's national framework. In Verma's (2023) analysis, Zia introduced the notion of nationalism and secured the protection of the majority of people on the basis of religious affiliation, with a positive impact on a large number of people. The creation of a common identity for the people of Bangladesh became feasible through the nationalist initiative of Ziaur Rahman, which helped create a modern state with an affiliation to Islam. Mahbub's (2025) assessment noted that Ziaur Rahman's reformulation of Bangladeshi nationalism emphasised an inclusive identity that integrated cultural and religious diversity. The creation of a common identity and shared values among the people of Bangladesh has been regarded as an affirmative solution to achieving future goals of participation and greater national achievements. Ziaur Rahman's legacy offers Bangladesh the opportunity to unify under one roof while maintaining the nation's unique identity. Hence, from the perspective of inclusive leadership, Ziaur Rahman made a groundbreaking impact on Bangladesh's political environment, ensuring representation and democracy.

The formation of political parties by Ziaur Rahman is often considered a remarkable step that helped manage the level of political integration at the national level. An analysis by Zahangir et al. (2023) highlights that BNP, as a political force established by Ziaur Rahman, has made a firm impact on Bangladesh's multi-party political framework. The strategic shift of Bangladesh towards a land of people with a Bangladeshi identity has been a major positive outcome under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman, which helped incorporate the values of cultural collaboration. An analysis by Al Zobair (2025) noted that Ziaur Rahman emphasised nationalist identity and pursued cultural affiliation, helping to restructure the state in a more modern direction, increasing ease for future growth.

The creation of diverse political standards in the country was one of Ziaur Rahman's integrated visions, helping to generate positive impacts

on nationwide political situations. It has been mentioned that Ziaur Rahman emphasised the creation of diverse political views within the country, thereby creating scope for the flourishing of different political opinions throughout the nation. Strategic inclusion of people from diverse backgrounds enabled Ziaur Rahman to deliver policies at the ground level rather than distribute resources only at the surface level. As per Hashmi's (2022) assessment, Ziaur Rahman's rural-level policy implementation has been a groundbreaking initiative that has helped provide services to large numbers of people. The critical problem of elite influence on Bangladesh's governance was reduced under the regime of Ziaur Rahman. Hence, the timeline of Ziaur Rahman's leadership can be considered a positive change, helping to overcome political fragmentation in Bangladesh's history.

Conclusion

Ziaur Rahman has created a broader image among the countrymen of Bangladesh through his contributions to both the independence war and post-war reconstruction. During the Liberation War, the tactical moves by Major Rahman created significant opportunities to counter the Pakistani infantry, making a major impact on the Bangladeshi fighting forces' effectiveness. The leadership of Ziaur Rahman helped create a positive image among the warriors through his deep, confident voice, which eventually inspired thousands of young Bangladeshis to join the forces of “Mukti Bahini” and “Gono Bahini,” reenergising the armed freedom struggle of Bangladesh in the absence of political leadership under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The strategic outline of Major Ziaur Rahman's decision to form multiple brigades during the battle has been one of the factors that helped reduce the Pakistani forces' ability on multiple fronts. Ziaur Rahman's wide adaptability skills have had a significant positive impact on leadership during the liberation war of 1971, as they helped the allied forces achieve better outcomes. The valour of Major Ziaur Rahman has been an important factor in helping to rejuvenate belief among the people of Bangladesh in the possibility of liberation. The

revolt and declaration of independence by Major Ziaur Rahman in the history of Bangladesh's liberation had a significant impact on the reinforcement of the Bangladeshi liberation war, helping secure a historic victory for Bangladesh.

Ziaur Rahman's leadership in the post-independence context has been a significant factor in shaping and organising the values of a democratic nation in Bangladesh, maximising the spirit of the liberation war. Ziaur Rahman was a military leader but also contributed to the nation's development through democratic values, making amendments that significantly advanced their implementation. The ruling system of Bangladesh has been made available to people at different levels of the country's political system because of Major Ziaur Rahman's effective leadership focus. The decision to participate in politics with the BNP has helped Bangladesh develop a shared sense of pride, boosting nationalist sentiment among the country's people. The spirit of nationalism in Bangladesh has helped take a strong stance against external forces during the independence struggle, which eventually contributed to the nation's growth.

CHAPTER 3: Reinventing Bangladesh's Economy: Ziaur Rahman and Development Politics

Abstract

Ziaur Rahman's economic liberalisation supported the nation's economic growth, which relied on multidimensional projects. The key actions on privatisation, market-oriented economy, and agricultural development are the key models of economic liberalisation in the country. Highlighting the issues of national emergency and stagnant political conditions, Zia's actions on social and political reform are contributing to the country's economic growth. The policies and reform plan of Ziaur Rahman are promoting privatisation and economic reform, thereby significantly improving national policies and financial growth.

Introduction

The Bir Uttam leader Ziaur Rahman's political career in Bangladesh was considered the country's rising star of development after independence. As President of Bangladesh, he took action to pursue economic and political reforms with the vision of creating a prosperous future for the country. The Ziaur Rahman era (1976–81) in Bangladesh brought major economic transformation through industrialisation and privatisation plans (Rahman, 2025). Zia's decision to abolish the state-owned industrial structure and invite private company owners in Bangladesh strengthened the country's economic structure and improved government alliances. The long-term impact of economic liberalisation contributed to the development of a long-term plan for Bangladesh's employment and social growth. By driving foreign investment and promoting the active engagement of private company owners, Zia successfully paved the way for liberalisation and economic growth in the country. By drawing a distinction between local and global trade policy, Zia structured the country's economic reform to align with industrial goals.

The consequences of Bangladesh's war and political turmoil after the assassination of Mujibur Rahman were clearly evident in the vulnerable social and economic conditions of the country. Through a reorientation

of domestic and foreign policy, Zia led the country towards a market-oriented economy. The shift from a secular socialist model to an Islamic identity was also viewed as a success for the former President in building national unity against the country's fragile governance structure (Murshid et al., 2021). Beyond a structured political career and traditional forms of governance, Zia believed in transformation and in putting those ideas into action. As a result, Bangladesh established its first democratic party, the "Bangladesh Nationalist Party" (BNP). By promoting economic liberalisation and multi-party democracy, General Ziaur Rahman integrated politics with the country's internal and external environments to support Bangladesh's rise. Following Zia's example, subsequent government bodies and leaders had the opportunity to reshape Bangladesh with the vision of achieving maximum stability.

Economic Liberalisation and Privatisation

Economic liberalisation and privatisation were central to Ziaur Rahman's strategy for restoring the country's financial health and contributed to its long-term development. After Bangladesh's independence, over 90% of industries and companies were nationalised by the government, leading to inadequate maintenance and economic stagnation (Rahman, 2025). The economic growth model in Bangladesh was initially reluctant to promote the private sector, believing the public sector should take precedence. Zia's presidency reversed this approach and established privatisation as the dominant force in the economy. Plans for denationalising the industrial sector and promoting private enterprise within Zia's socialist model brought significant changes to the country. The 1982 Industrial Policy in Bangladesh accelerated private-sector-led industrial growth by privatising the jute and cotton textile industries to maximise revenue and implement a disciplined service process (Mollah, 2020). Under the Promotion and Protection Act of 1980, the government encouraged foreign investment to support entrepreneurship and industrial growth. Zia's visionary plan for industrialisation not only contributed to

economic reform but also served as a positive force by generating employment opportunities and substantially developing foreign alliances.

Zia's plan for economic reform surpassed the traditional nationalisation model of Bangladesh and was regarded as the dawn of privately owned industrialisation amid a national emergency. Decentralised development planning and market-driven distribution under Zia's political regime also connected privately owned businesses with foreign market investment. By building dynamic economic policy, the former President encouraged both local and foreign businesses to promote private entrepreneurship and gave significant support to agricultural development (Rahman, 2017). According to Hamidul Huq Chowdhury, "Ziaur Rahman's visionary plan on economic and social reform resulted in successful growth for Bangladesh and also enabled stability." By introducing economic liberalisation through privatisation and the gram sarkar, Zia also broke down the barrier between urban and rural areas and created economic opportunities for all. Zia's privatisation plan created a centralised, stable structure across Bangladesh's jute and cotton industries, with the vision of greater economic prosperity. In line with his democratic agenda, industrial privatisation was also a crucial policy for Zia to maintain stability and control the situation in the industrial sector. By reversing the previous nationalisation approach, Zia gained social trust and became the leader of Bangladesh's ordinary people amid social turmoil.

Modern economic policy suggests that the fewer restrictions imposed by government on the market, the greater the country's efficiency, competition, and economic growth. By adopting this modern stance of economic liberalisation, General Rahman formulated Bangladesh's economic policy in the 1970s to promote growth and attract foreign investment. Reducing government control over industries was the primary condition for economic liberalisation, involving enterprises in privatisation and free trade policies (Omoredede and Ogaga, 2023). With Bangladesh's economic growth in mind, Zia initiated reforms by inviting interested private owners to take over contemporary enterprises. Under the 1982 industrial policy, Zia successfully privatised 90% of nationalised

enterprises and also allowed for independent operation by eliminating state controls. Bangladesh also gained global recognition and attracted significant financial investment in trade under his leadership, thanks to his approach to foreign policy. Previously, 70% of the maintenance and operating costs of industries were sourced from state funds, as industries were categorised as public enterprises (Haque, 2002). Compared to the profits generated, the industries placed a greater drain on the country's resources, creating challenges in maintaining economic sustainability and reducing the economic gap. The successful transition to privatisation addressed issues of fund allocation and initiated a systematic plan of economic liberalisation. Zia's contribution was significant not only in boosting economic prosperity but also in providing the opportunity to reshape the long-term economic plan of independent Bangladesh.

Zia's Action in Reforming Bangladesh Economy in Quest of Sustainability

Zia's quest for sustainability in Bangladesh's reform plan emphasised self-reliance, a rural development plan, decentralisation, the growth of the private sector, and agricultural growth. Market liberalisation and the private sector's promotion of Zia reduced the government's additional expenses on industrial plans and on maintaining service growth. The government of Ziaur Rahman planned the country's sustainable growth by encouraging private-sector development through foreign direct investment (FDI) and an industrialisation plan (Akhtaruzzaman, 2021). Focused on the recent economic crisis and the increased poverty level after the war, turmoil created an economic emergency and the need for mass food production. In controlling the situation, Zia's "19-point program initiative" reached the height of food production under the agricultural development plan. In contemporary times, the main condition for sustainability in a country is successfully balancing present and future needs (Hariram et al., 2023). Producing a record amount of food and supporting the privatisation plan, the BNP government successfully reduced poverty and contributed to economic growth after a long period

of Independence. Following this plan, Zia established a future-centric vision for Bangladesh to retain its economic and social growth for a longer tenure. In the context of the contemporary sustainability quest, Zia succeeded in meeting Bangladesh's food, economic resource, and national security needs as a true leader.

Zia's "19-point programme initiative" brought revolutionary changes to both economic and social growth in the aftermath of war turmoil and increased poverty in the country. The BNP's "19-point programme initiative" was designed to protect the country's independence, integrity, and sovereignty through socio-economic liberation (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). In pursuing social and economic growth, Zia embraced four basic principles of governance: faith and beliefs, democracy, nationalism, and social and economic justice. Central to Zia's political agenda, industrial and agricultural development played a crucial role in generating economic growth. As a political leader, Zia aimed to lead Bangladesh towards self-sufficiency and reduce poverty within society (BSS, 2025). From the war period until Zia's assassination, the country experienced loss of civilian control, rising poverty, and stagnant economic conditions. After restoring peace in multi-sectoral politics, Zia initiated the national development process, beginning at the village level. Through actions such as agricultural irrigation, canal excavation, education, security, development, and electrification, Zia engaged directly with people at the grassroots. His plan not only enabled the BNP to strengthen the rural economy but also connected the party to a broad base of support, helping it secure a strong position for the future.

The development of the sustainability concept in the 1970s led to the integration of environmental and economic concerns in political governance. Following the "Brundtland Report" in 1987 by Gro Harlem Brundtland, a clear framework for sustainable development in countries was established. According to Gro Harlem Brundtland, sustainability requires a country to meet the needs of the present generation without depleting the resources needed by future generations (Akhtaruzzaman, 2021). The report also introduced the principle of reduce and restore as a concise definition of sustainability. Demonstrating foresight, Zia

embedded this idea in his leadership, aiming to achieve long-term financial growth by cutting expenses in nationalised industries and fostering future employment growth through entrepreneurship. The privatisation plan reduced government spending, while industrial growth and foreign investment supported the restoration of the economic structure for the future. Communication between former President Ziaur Rahman and the United States, concerns about global food shortages, and the urgent need for agricultural development and family planning were clearly evident (Office of the Historian, 1978). The President also noted that only 30–40% of Bangladeshi farmers' land was being utilised, given the country's growing population. Concerned about the food shortage both in Bangladesh and globally, Zia took the initiative in agricultural development and promoted family planning, demonstrating a sustainable leadership approach in the 1970s that addressed these issues and conserved resources for future generations.

Political Shift in Bangladesh's Governance

The political shift in Bangladesh's governance from a secular-autocratic structure to a democratic Islamic framework brought both the ruling and opposition parties together in the reform plan. The complex and tumultuous journey of Bangladesh's national politics led to issues of political instability and economic hardship after independence (Subanthore, 2023). The assassination of Mujibur Rahman, the founding leader of Bangladesh, worsened the situation, leading to a series of upheavals and multiple coups by various political or nationalistic parties. The rise of Ziaur Rahman as a military leader during this period established political stability and marked the beginning of a new regime in the progress of national democracy. Despite the authoritarian style of suppressing coups, Ziaur Rahman established a democratic political background in Bangladesh during his military regime (Talukdar, 2025). In his political career, Zia demonstrated that national unity was essential to ensuring peace and reducing violence. Recognising the situation of mob riots and the potential for future social disruption in Bangladesh, General Rahman

proposed the establishment of a multi-party democracy. His vision of shifting from direct leadership to democracy fostered national unity and developed a sense of civil identity among the people of independent Bangladesh.

Despite Ziaur Rahman's disciplined behaviour and actions as the military leader of former East Bengal and modern Bangladesh, he believed in promoting democracy during the political reform. Rahman's enduring philosophy of “Bangladeshi Nationalism” fostered a sense of identity and ideological direction among ordinary people in Bangladesh (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). The founding of the BNP in 1978 filled the vacuum in Bangladesh's national politics after a prolonged period of social and political turmoil. The founding declaration of the BNP aimed to achieve “national unity and a broad-based democratic political structure” to ensure lasting stability in the country's development. Accompanied by policies of national economic liberation, the establishment of the BNP marked a major political shift in Bangladesh's history. The BNP, founded in 1975, was envisioned to empower the people and support the country's economic prosperity, relying on multi-party democracy (BSS, 2025). In contrast to the direct leadership and authoritarian approaches of contemporary political parties, the BNP provided equal opportunities to the people of Bangladesh in maintaining stability for the future. Relying on Bangladesh's centralised and democratic political structure under BNP governance, Zia was able to draft further policies to advance the common goal of nation-building.

The formation of the BNP under the supervision of Ziaur Rahman safeguarded Bangladesh's national interests and strengthened national unity through a democratic approach. This enabled the country to promote national identity and form alliances with foreign countries. Ziaur Rahman's efforts to strengthen relationships with other Muslim countries fostered positive relations and attracted foreign investment (Hossain, 2008). Zia promoted foreign relations with Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia and China during the country's liberation movement. However, due to Pakistan's propaganda, he failed to secure support from Saudi Arabia during the liberation movement. Subsequently, Zia expanded

Bangladesh's foreign relations with the US and other developed countries to attract foreign investment and secure trade support to advance industrial growth. Bilateral relations between China and Bangladesh in 1978 contributed to a high level of understanding, supporting the country's future prosperity (Hossain, 2008). Zia also extended gestures of goodwill towards India, Nepal, Vietnam, and others, which helped to reduce geographical and political barriers to trade. Zia's clear understanding of the need for positive alliances, particularly with South Asian countries, enabled seamless land and water trade operations and later extended to aviation routes.

Regimes and Reforms in Bangladesh after 1971

Several regimes and reforms in Bangladesh under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman simplified the way of developing the modern structure of the country since 1971. After abolishing the one-party BAKSAL system of former President Mujibur Rahman, Zia established multi-party democracy to address religious, social, and political conflicts in Bangladesh. (Rashid, 2022). Under the political reform of Zia, the BNP party promoted the "freedom of press, free speech, and market-oriented economy" in the country for all political and social groups. Zia's action on embedding religious influences in the political reforms also replaced the secularist model of Bangladesh by promoting the Islamic parties as a national identity. Inspired by the political and religious leadership of Pakistan, Zia mobilized religious sentiment in Bangladesh's governance plan to promote national identity and unity (Hussain, 2024). In the military regimes of Zia, his taken policies and actions were a combined action of his entire life's learning from the Karachi regiment to German training to the experience of East Bengal's genocide. The influence of religious aspects on Bangladesh's political reforms strengthened Islamic identity to ensure social unity among the common people. Also, the adoption of transformational leadership and visionary plans inspired by developed countries reflected the nature of adaptation in Zia's leadership style.

Redefining Bangladesh's foreign policy, Zia played a significant role in shaping the country's political structure by expanding its alliances globally. In the diversified bonds and political shifts during the military regime of Zia, he developed a close alignment with India and the Soviet bloc (Khondker, 2025). The country also aligned its foreign relations with the “United States, Western Europe, China, and other Islamic nations” to establish its position in global affairs and secure foreign aid to support industrial growth. Inspired by global political dynamics, Zia introduced a transformative approach and a visionary mindset that contributed to the country's social and economic growth. The geo-political compulsion between India and Bangladesh united the countries under a 5-year agreement on the Farrakka barrage plan in December 1977 (Hossain, 2008). This foreign alliance with India supported the country's agricultural development plan and provided the opportunity to improve Bangladesh's irrigation system. Keeping the national interest first, Zia always designed the country's internal and external affairs to ensure the nation's utmost privilege. Most of the foreign policies and political relations under Zia's regime in Bangladesh with the South Asian region focused on global trade, which provided economic benefits to the country and sustained it.

Plan of Rural Development and Market Liberalisation

The rural development plan of Bangladesh during the political regime of Zia derived economic prosperity and provided the scope of supporting industrialisation in the late 1970s. Zia's initiation of launching the rural development program in 1977 was a part of the rapid industrial growth plan and agricultural development in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2017). It not only supported the economic stability of villagers but also significantly reduced the cost of industrial growth by using the nation's resources. Zia's plan for rural development shaped Bangladesh's economic and social reforms at the grassroots level through trade and agricultural development. By upgrading the rural development plan and initiating the “19-point programme,” Zia accelerated agricultural growth to provide

equal opportunity and support economic growth (Akhtaruzzaman, 2021). Establishing a multi-party democracy and a modernised approach, BNP took action to reform the country's agriculture from the grassroots level. The Gram Sarkar initiative by the BNP party in the late 1970s uplifted the participation of common people at the rural level of the country. Under this project, Zia also focused on developing the irrigation system and supporting economic liberalisation. Following this rural upliftment plan and the country's agricultural reforms, Zia also supported his industrialisation and privatisation plan for Bangladesh, which contributed to economic growth as well.

The rural electrification plan of Bangladesh in 1977, under the national rural electrification initiative, stimulated economic growth and supported the rural development plan. The “Rural Electrification Board (REB) Ordinance, 1977” of Bangladesh focused on extending public electricity supply and contributed to improving the quality of agricultural and small-scale industries (Laws of Bangladesh, 1977). As an extension of market liberalisation and agricultural development, REB 1977 subsequently promoted the modern village model and Zia's industrialisation plan. This plan also supported Zia's agricultural development plan, as the electrification project added value to the transformation and transmission of industries and irrigation systems. Zia's visionary approach and his adoption of foreign policies also supported market liberalisation and agricultural development, thereby generating economic growth. Zia's partnership with the “U.S. National Rural Electrification Cooperative Association (NRECA)” was an example of his comprehensive master plan back in the 1970s that supported the REB project (Laws of Bangladesh, 1977). Keeping the national interest in mind first, his actions towards the rural electrification plan not only improved people's living conditions. This also had a significant influence on developing agricultural infrastructure and addressing the issue of limited resources and an unsuitable industrial environment. The multidimensional approach of General Rahman under a single policy was a sign of his visionary mindset and his ability to transform uncertainty into certainty.

Privatisation and the abolition of investment callings in Bangladesh's industrial plan reinstated the country's modern economy during the emergency situation and war turmoil. Focused on the need for liberalisation and the lack of a centralised approach in the country's economy, Zia implemented a market liberalisation plan in Bangladesh by promoting public ownership and encouraging economic growth through the private sector (Junayed et al., 2025). Inspired by global politics and the Industrial Revolution, Zia adopted a market-oriented economic structure for the country to create opportunities for industrial growth. The rise of the economic crisis and lack of a centralised approach after the assassination of Mujibur Rahman led to the issue of lowered economic growth from industrial investment. Initiating sweeping economic reforms in the groundwork of Bangladesh, Zia developed the structure of the modern economy and contributed to social growth as well (Jahedi et al., 2024). Limited financial growth and the lack of equal opportunities among entrepreneurs create barriers to the country's social and economic reforms. The market liberalisation plan of Ziaur Rahman broke down these traditional forms of a stagnant economy and fuelled the country's entrepreneurial drive based on a market-oriented economy. Compared to the condition since the establishment of Independent Bangladesh in 1971, the country's partnership with global powers in trade and politics demonstrated Ziaur Rahman's strong leadership and political ability in supporting a visionary change.

Conclusion

Visionary leadership and a democratic approach in Ziaur Rahman's political career supported the country's social and economic growth after the turmoil of the war. In the reinvention of Bangladesh's economy, Zia combined the country's political, religious, and social plans to address the national emergency. Starting from the militant group in Karachi, the former President of Bangladesh became a pillar of Bangladesh's modern economic structure and contributed to social reform. After his participation in the liberation war of Bangladesh, Zia rose as a militant

leader of the country in the independent country. A valiant career in coups and in structured policy to improve the national plan, he proved himself to be suitable personnel in the history of Bangladesh's development plan. His actions on market-oriented economy, privatisation, and agricultural development during the country's economic reform and social growth promoted economic liberalisation. The initiative of the electrification program added value to the project of agricultural development and a market-oriented economy in Bangladesh by transforming infrastructure. The multidimensional approach in Zia's regime for reform and the key action of improving the country's economic conditions were considered a stage of growth in Bangladesh's history.

Influenced by global politics and the contemporary situation of Bangladesh, Zia aligned his foreign policy with the national interest of Bangladesh. Zia demonstrated his visionary mindset and ability to enable a complete transformation in Bangladesh through the "19-point program initiative," which integrated social and economic growth through multiple projects. Bangladesh's alliances with South Asian countries, along with the US and European states, are also examples of its proactive efforts to regenerate the country's economic structure. For example, Bangladesh's alliance with India led to the country's irrigation project through the Farakka barrage, followed by the mutual agreement between Ziaur Rahman and Morarji Desai. For the sake of national interest and economic growth, Zia relied on foreign investment and on developing new trade routes for the country through his alliances in Nepal and India. The former secularistic view of Bangladesh limited the scope of developing a nationalistic view and leadership, which also led to the issue of several coups and violence. Zia's reform policy, through multi-party democracy and Islamic alignment with national interests, serves as a strategy to generate national unity. Hence, referring to the statement of Hamidul Huq Chowdhury, Zia was considered the leader of Bangladesh's common people who not only led the economic reform but also formulated a long-term sustainability plan for the country, in the form of social and political prosperity.

Chapter 4: Decentralisation, Village Councils and Rural Reform Under Ziaur Rahman

Abstract

This study examines the decentralisation and rural governance reforms initiated by President Ziaur Rahman in Bangladesh's post-independence era. It explores how political instability and economic vulnerability shaped Ziaur Rahman's strategy to restructure Bangladesh's governance. In 1977, Zia formalised the village council system nationwide, and in 1979, expanded rural planning to include Union and Thana levels. His rural reform legacy suggests a gradual adoption of committee-based rural infrastructure management and beneficiary tracking systems after 1981. These reforms influenced rural decision-making by introducing structured oversight within local institutions.

Introduction

Rural reform in Bangladesh began with early cooperative and community-based experiments, such as the Comilla Model in the 1960s, and later expanded into national policy under Ziaur Rahman. The post-independence era after 1971 was characterised by political instability, economic hardship, and institutional weakness, shaping Ziaur Rahman's approach to governance. Following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975 (Hasan and Islam, 2021), Bangladesh experienced high leadership turnover, military interference in politics, and administrative disorder. This critical event eroded citizens' trust in the state. Ziaur Rahman emerged as a prominent leader, taking responsibility for a country recovering from starvation, declining agricultural production, weak rural service delivery, and overly centralised administration in Dhaka (Ahsan, 2019). Bangladesh inherited its centralised structure from Pakistan, and under the Mujib Baksal framework, 85% of the rural population was excluded from participating in state decision-making. Ziaur Rahman's leadership agenda sought to reposition rural society as the centre of national governance and development, emphasising increased public participation. His rural

reforms prioritised political participation, economic autonomy, and institutional reorganisation to foster local responsibility. This approach underpinned decentralisation as both a governance policy and a nation-building tool. Therefore, Ziaur Rahman's introduction of decentralisation and village councils represented not just administrative restructuring, but a substantive response to political instability, economic vulnerability, and the disconnect between the state and its rural majority.

Historical and Political Background of Ziaur Rahman

Ziaur Rahman was a Bangladeshi military officer and politician who served as president from 1977 until his assassination in 1981. Ziaur Rahman was born on the 19th of January in 1936, in Bagbari, East Bengal. Ziaur Rahman joined the military as a Cadet in 1953, obtained a military commission in 1955, and later became a para-commando (Britannica Editors, 2025). To understand the reasons for the ways in which decentralisation became a major aspect of Ziaur Rahman's governance plan, it is important to refer to his historical and political background. Ziaur Rahman was an important figure in the country for his role in the 1971 Liberation War for the independence of Bangladesh. He has served as the commander of the Z Force of the Bangladesh army and enhanced his publicity by sending a message through a Kalurghat Radio Station, proclaiming independence. He remained associated with the Bangladesh Army even after independence, and he was also appointed to senior leadership, serving as the Chief of Army Staff. Additionally, by 1977, Ziaur Rahman consolidated his political position and also officially became the President of Bangladesh.

As president of Bangladesh, Ziaur Rahman became a stabilising figure who bolstered national morale. According to Talukdar (2025), the collapse of administrative centralisation was evident during the early years of his presidency. During Ziaur Rahman's tenure, Bangladesh faced food insecurity and declining state legitimacy. The 1974 famine, corruption in

public distribution, and lack of local representation exposed the significant vulnerabilities in the governance system following independence. Yeasin (2022) noted that the rural population, the backbone of Bangladesh's agricultural sector, was largely excluded from the state except through bureaucratic intermediaries. These conditions contributed to the adoption of decentralisation as a strategy to restore citizens' trust in the state and reduce bureaucratic dominance. Additionally, decentralisation strengthened rural reforms by transferring resources, authority, and decision-making power from the central government to local governments (Atisa et al., 2021). This shift enabled villages to manage development according to their own needs rather than being subjected to rigid bureaucratic control. The reorganisation of power and the reconnection between government and rural areas, through the creation of villages as small administrative units, reflected Ziaur Rahman's efforts to restructure Bangladesh's power dynamics (Amin, 2023). Thus, Ziaur Rahman's historical and political background shows that decentralisation was not merely a unique policy, but a response to the political crises that led to his presidency.

Vision and Ideology of Ziaur Rahman Behind Decentralisation

Ziaur Rahman's ideology played a pivotal role in shaping Bangladesh's decentralisation policy. His vision aimed to transform the country's status in light of independence, political instability, volatile governance, and the longstanding neglect of rural areas (Rashiduzzaman, 1982). Zia believed that centralised power weakened the state's operational capacity, especially as more than four-fifths of the population lived in rural areas with little access to decision-making. Between 1977 and 1980, his administration continued to prioritise village-based governance, viewing villages as the fundamental political and economic units of the state. Ali (2022) argued that Zia's decentralisation was driven by a genuine desire to reconnect the government with rural populations and to move away from the legacy of elite-centric rule that persisted during both Pakistani rule and

the early years of independence. However, Azubuike et al. (2024) contended that the ideological rationale for decentralisation was also politically strategic, intended to reinforce regime legitimacy after multiple coups and waning public trust. As a result, Zia's slogan of self-reliance became a central theme, linked to rural development initiatives such as cooperative agriculture and small-scale irrigation subsidies. He also advanced credit expansion in the agricultural sector through institutions like the Bangladesh Krishi Bank (Rahman, 2024). Ziaur Rahman's approach drew inspiration from earlier rural governance experiments, notably the Comilla Model, which Sayeed and Hasan (2021) noted was established in 1960 under Dr Akhter Hameed Khan. This model demonstrated the effectiveness of village-based cooperatives and small governance units in promoting participation and agricultural productivity. Rather than simply replicating this approach, Zia adapted its core principles into national policy through the "Gram Sarkar (village government)" system. Amin (2023) described this change as a significant step toward participatory or cooperative development, recognising that democratic culture cannot flourish if people remain passive subjects of centralised authority. However, critics such as Sayeed and Hasan (2021) argued that Zia's decentralisation was limited in its political depth; he restricted partisan activity within local bodies and maintained close state control over the process. As a result, decentralisation became a means of controlled participation, with the government retaining dominance while rural actors operated within a managed political framework. Despite these criticisms, the ideological background of Ziaur Rahman's reforms reflects a blend of democratic principles, political pragmatism, and developmental imperatives.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the ideology behind Ziaur Rahman's decentralisation policy reflected both a sincere commitment to empowering the rural population and the practical political requirements shaped by the unrest of the late 1970s. His vision has widely been recognised as an important step toward establishing grassroots democracy and meaningful citizen participation. While some scholars have interpreted certain aspects of the reform as responses to the broader

political realities of the period (Ong, 2022), supporters emphasise that these measures were necessary to address the failure of previous governance models, rural marginalisation, and the urgent need to restore the state's legitimacy. Hence, the differing perspectives illustrate that Zia's decentralisation agenda was not merely administrative, but also a strategic and principled effort to strengthen national unity and rebuild public confidence in the state.

Institutional Reforms and Governance Structure by Ziaur Rahman

Significant reforms transformed Bangladesh's institutional structures with the adoption of decentralisation under Ziaur Rahman. The administrative setup was reorganised, and new systems of rural governance emerged during his leadership (Britannica Editors, 2025). The most notable change was the formation of Gram Sarkar in 1977, establishing village councils with elected representatives from households, teachers, farmers, religious leaders, and women. Each Gram Sarkar was linked to a Union Parishad, a body that had existed since British colonial times but previously lacked authority and resources. Ziaur Rahman restructured the Union Parishads, assigning them administrative duties such as rural development planning, local dispute resolution, and resource distribution. Tibriji and Chowdhury (2023) noted that Union Parishad councils coordinate agricultural inputs, rural works programmes, and infrastructure projects including roads, irrigation canals, and schools. Hasan and Islam (2021) considered the introduction of these institutional levels the first real step toward integrating decentralisation into Bangladesh's administrative system. Other reforms targeted the sub-district (thana) level by strengthening Thana Development Committees, which organised government and local activities and connected central government with local institutions. Development planning and financial management at the rural level fell under the *Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB)* (Asian Development Bank, 2008).

By 1980, government records show thousands of small-scale irrigation machines, tube-wells, and agricultural loans had been distributed by these decentralised bodies. Atisa et al. (2021) argued that decentralisation not only advanced rural development but also improved relationships between the state and citizens. However, critics claim the reforms remained overly bureaucratic, limiting local autonomy. Some scholars contend that, even after restructuring, power often remained with local elites (Yin and Rui, 2023), thereby reinforcing pre-existing hierarchies rather than challenging them. Despite such criticism, Ziaur Rahman's institutional changes marked a significant shift in governance. The new structures provided villagers with greater opportunities for participation and improved administrative outreach, shifting planning from centralised control to locally informed decision-making (ALBD, 2021). While problems persisted—such as unequal implementation, bureaucratic dominance, and elite control—the framework established by Zia continued to influence subsequent governments. Ultimately, Zia's institutional reforms created a system that combined decentralised participation with state oversight, ambitiously redefining the relationship between government and the rural population.

Political Purpose and State Legitimacy with Challenges and Criticism Faced by Ziaur Rahman

Ziaur Rahman came in at a time when Bangladesh was politically divided, economically stagnant, and institutionally weak following a series of assassinations (Bhaduria, 2025). His political agenda focused on stabilising the state and redefining national direction, though his methods remain highly debated (ALBD, 2021). While Ziaur Rahman positioned himself as a reformist eager to end authoritarian socialist centralisation, he also relied heavily on military rule and political negotiation (ALBD, 2021). This dual identity—as both reformer and military ruler—complicates his legacy, reflecting a delicate balance between stability, ideological change, and personal power.

Bangladeshi Nationalism and Re-orientation of Ideologies

A defining feature of Zia's political agenda was the construction of Zia-Bangladeshi nationalism, which shifted focus from Bengali cultural identity to a broader conception based on territory and citizenship. He emphasised the Islamic legacy, multilingualism, and a stance of non-reliance on India (ALBD, 2021). This approach expanded the national base and offered a more pragmatic identity for a multi-party and multi-ethnic state (BSS, 2025). However, this ideological shift is often seen as undermining the secular principles that inspired the Liberation War. By introducing Islamic symbolism into national identity, Zia enabled the politicisation of religion and legitimised previously marginalised anti-liberation groups. These changes not only diluted historical memory but also fostered lasting ideological polarisation, challenging the foundational narrative of Bangladesh.

Liberalisation of the Economy and the Structural Contradictions

Zia's economic policy aimed to address inefficiencies in state-owned enterprises and spur growth through market-based reforms. Emphasising rural development, agricultural modernisation, and private sector involvement, his policies contributed to post-war economic recovery. These measures are credited with improving food security, increasing access to microfinance, and fostering entrepreneurship (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). However, liberalisation under Zia also generated new inequalities. Regime-aligned rural elites often benefited disproportionately, reinforcing patronage networks rather than inclusive development. Rapid and poorly regulated privatisation widened urban-rural disparities and concentrated economic assets among loyalist elites. Thus, while liberalisation stimulated growth, its uneven distribution undermined the goal of equitable development.

Party Engineering and Controlled Democratic Restoration

The reintroduction of multi-party politics and the founding of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) by Ziaur Rahman are widely recognised as decisive steps toward restoring democratic normalcy in Bangladesh (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). By lifting restrictions on political parties and calling national elections, Zia signalled a clear transition from prolonged instability toward civilian governance. Scholars note that Zia's political restructuring reflected both his commitment to expanding political participation and the practical need to ensure stability during a turbulent period in national history. Within this context, his careful approach to political inclusion aimed to maintain order while creating space for emerging political voices. Although some observers have debated the pace and structure of these reforms, supporters argue that Zia's actions laid the foundational framework for Bangladesh's modern democratic practices by broadening participation, restoring public confidence, and institutionalising multi-party politics after years of upheaval.

New Constitutional Amendments and the Remaking of State Legitimacy

To embed his political vision in state institutions, Zia enacted constitutional amendments that redefined the country's ideological foundations (UNB, 2023). He reinstated references to faith, reversed socialist policies, and elevated Bangladeshi nationalism as the organising principle. Although these changes were presented as efforts to promote national unity and restore constitutional norms, they effectively centralised executive power. Critics argue that Zia undermined the constitution's secular and democratic foundations by introducing religious symbolism and restricting ideological opposition. As a result, his reforms produced a hybrid system: outwardly constitutional, but dominated internally by military authority.

Military Consolidation and Limitations of Professionalization

A key component of Zia's state-building project was the reorganisation and professionalisation of the armed forces. He introduced welfare programmes, restructured the chain of command, and dismissed officers deemed disloyal to restore discipline after years of factionalism. However, by appointing military personnel to key administrative posts, Zia blurred the lines between civilian and military roles. This fostered a system where political authority depended more on military loyalty than democratic legitimacy. Despite efforts to stabilise the armed forces, frequent mutinies—including the violent 1977 Air Force mutiny—exposed ongoing discontent and the fragility of his regime (ALBD, 2022). Bhaduria (2025) notes that Zia's assassination by military officers in 1981 starkly highlighted the limitations of his professionalisation agenda.

Populist Mobilisation and Symbolic Governance

Zia employed a populist approach to build popular support and project an image of being connected to ordinary citizens. His countryside tours, promotion of self-reliance slogans, and establishment of Gram Sarkar institutions were intended to foster a sense of participatory development (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). However, these initiatives were largely symbolic and lacked meaningful empowerment. Gram Sarkar bodies operated as extensions of centralised authority, lacking independence, resources, and real decision-making power. Although Zia succeeded in generating an appearance of grassroots engagement, the structural obstacles to true decentralisation remained unaddressed, resulting in a gap between rhetoric and genuine local empowerment.

The Islamisation and Historical Revisionism is Criticised

Zia's incorporation of Islamic principles into state ideology attracted substantial criticism. He was accused of diluting secularism and legitimising groups previously considered threats to national unity—

groups that had been banned for collaborating during the Liberation War—by including religious references in the constitution (ALBD, 2021b). Many view this as historical revisionism, suggesting the state had moved away from its liberation ethos. These changes intensified ideological conflict, deepened political polarisation, and enabled the use of religion as a tool for political legitimacy. While some argue these reforms promoted inclusivity, their polarising effects remain pronounced.

Democratic Deficits and Problems of Legitimacy

Despite formal democratic reforms, Zia's legitimacy was persistently questioned due to his military background and the centralisation of political power. Opposition parties accused him of enabling military influence over civilian governance, manipulating elections, and using state institutions to suppress dissent. Although Zia projected an image of democratisation, real power remained concentrated in the military hierarchy and the presidency (Islam, 2015). As a result, his legitimacy was continuously contested, both politically and legally. The central criticism of his rule remains the tension between procedural democracy and authoritarian practices.

Ziaur Rahman's political objectives included revitalising the economy, redefining national identity, and stabilising a fragmented state. In the wake of repeated coups, he sought to restore legitimacy through Bangladeshi nationalism, economic liberalisation, controlled pluralism, and constitutional reform. Yet, his presidency was marked by contradictions: democracy versus military dominance, decentralisation rhetoric versus centralised control, and secularism versus Islamisation (Bhaduria, 2025). The fragility of the state he tried to rebuild was evident in ongoing military unrest, ideological conflict, and contested legitimacy. Zia's legacy is defined by both his efforts to stabilise Bangladesh and the enduring controversies surrounding his methods.

Legacy and Long-Term Impact of Rural Reform under Ziaur Rahman

In 1977, Ziaur Rahman established rural councils and expanded the planning authority of Union Parishads in 1978, shaping later trends in local administration. In 1979, the Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB) assumed control of Thana Development Committees, overseeing rural projects and seasonal works schedules. The legacy of these reforms was the establishment of resilient administrative processes, with central fiscal control over villages persisting until 1981.

Institutionalisation of Rural Local Government

In 1977, Zia introduced the Gram Sarkar system, creating village councils that coordinated with Union Parishads for rural planning. In 1978, thana committees verified household-based rural work project lists within Union Parishads. By 1979, more than 460 thana committees employed full-time rural officers to inspect land records and review intake registers biannually. In 1980, the BRDB trained thousands of union officials in file regulation, population records, dispute registers, and seasonal work calendar management (Shahbaz, n.d.). The Union-level routing of the Gram Sarkar system was discontinued in 1982, but aspects of the system persisted in later reforms without granting villages control over fund disbursement. Thus, Zia's legacy was a layered administrative structure, yet villages did not achieve lasting fiscal autonomy beyond 1981.

Agricultural Infrastructure and Operations Evolution

Beginning in 1977, thana committees developed seasonal irrigation machine demand lists and Boro rice water-stress calendars that required review before any fund approval. In 1978, farm road weaknesses were mapped and Aman flood drainage schedules were checked at the thana level. In 1979, Zia authorised canal repairs to align with the Aman rice production schedule in northern irrigation areas, ensuring union-level verification (Amin, 2023). In 1980, the BRDB financed thousands of embankment repairs coordinated with monsoon timing and verified twice

annually. By 1981, committees managed seasonal repairs of feeder roads and canals, with local infrastructure agencies adopting these scheduling practices. Zia's most enduring agricultural legacy was the implementation of disciplined, seasonal infrastructure planning, which improved production reliability but did not create equal access to machinery at the village level.

Political Economy Outcomes in Rural Funding Channels

In 1977, Zia allowed councils to submit rural funding requests certified by Union Parishads and reviewed by thana committees, but local authorities did not gain disbursement power. The 1979 national election re-established party competition at the parliamentary level, excluding villages from partisan control over funds. In 1980, Zia introduced BRDB beneficiary logging rules, requiring biannual reviews of household credit, work fund lists, and dispute intake registers. By 1981, BRDB thana archives contained thousands of rural works fund files and household beneficiary credit maps. Later reviews by the Local Government Commission and Upazila funding assessments mirrored the earlier Union, Thana, and BRDB processes, still withholding fiscal release rights from villages. Thus, Zia's most lasting funding legacy was the committee-based system of beneficiary logging, which persisted structurally, though village councils and households did not gain direct fiscal authority at the same scale.

Between 1977 and 1981, Zia created rural committee routing policies, implemented seasonal infrastructure schedules, and established household beneficiary credit logging procedures. Subsequent governments continued these Union, Thana, and BRDB planning systems, still without granting fund-release rights to villages. While Zia's agrarian reforms left a durable administrative legacy, they did not result in lasting fiscal autonomy at the rural level.

Conclusion

The administrative and political reforms of decentralisation introduced by Ziaur Rahman were a turning point in Bangladesh's administrative and political development. His policies have brought governance closer to rural people by developing new institutional arrangements, such as Gram Sarkar and Union Parishad. These reforms were intended to address political instability, re-earn the people's trust, and reduce elite-based central governance. Additionally, the initiatives enhanced local involvement, improved rural service delivery, and facilitated agricultural growth; however, their execution had contradictions. Power was usually held by bureaucratic and political elites, and the idea of decentralisation existed within a regulated political framework aimed at ensuring the regime's legitimacy rather than completely democratising governance. Moreover, given the major reforms, Zia has an institutional base that has shaped subsequent administrations and redefined the relationship between the state and society in rural Bangladesh. His legacy remains an enigma of both the genuine reformist spirit and the political realities of governing a weak post-independence nation.

Chapter 5: Shifting Alliances: Foreign Policy and Regional Vision of Ziaur Rahman

Abstract

From being called an “international basket case” to becoming the first non-permanent member of the UNSC, Bangladesh's foreign policy underwent a significant shift under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman, which eventually helped the nation gain significant influence among international powerhouses. The foreign policy of Bangladesh had undergone a significant shift under the regime of Ziaur Rahman, as ties with Islamic nations were initiated with an approach towards oil-exporting nations. Focusing on economic liberalisation helped manage the relationship to a significant extent. The global think tank often considers Ziaur Rahman a father figure of the SAARC nations, which helped leverage pressure on Indian influence in Bangladesh's economy while developing a competitive environment for India in Bangladesh's market.

Introduction

Ziaur Rahman played a pivotal role in reshaping Bangladesh's foreign policy, enabling the country to build strong relationships with major global powers and reduce dependence on any single partner. Under his leadership, Bangladesh navigated Cold War dynamics with pragmatic and dynamic diplomacy, securing national sovereignty. Ziaur Rahman strengthened ties with countries such as China and the Islamic world, enhancing Bangladesh's long-term influence in global affairs. His approach also facilitated the development of diplomatic relations with international bodies like the United Nations, allowing Bangladesh to engage more effectively in matters of diplomatic security.

Bangladesh's future participation in regional organisations like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was made possible by Ziaur Rahman's emphasis on collective regional action. His effective relationship-building with Islamic nations improved the security of remittances from Bangladeshi workers abroad and boosted economic outcomes. Zia's straightforward and participatory diplomatic strategies enabled Bangladesh to play a more active role in global affairs. This shift—

from vulnerability to diplomatic assertiveness in South Asia—was driven by a foreign policy rooted in national interest and a focus on sovereignty.

Re-Orientation of Foreign Policy: From Dependence to Diversification

Ziaur Rahman's reorientation of Bangladesh's foreign policy was a major step toward broadening the nation's diplomatic engagement. By diversifying foreign relations, Ziaur Rahman strengthened Bangladesh's diplomatic standing and reduced dependence on India and the Soviet bloc during the Cold War (Hossain, 2008). His efforts to balance relations with India were seen as a move to assert Bangladeshi sovereignty and limit Indian dominance in national affairs. Zia fostered strong ties with global powers such as the US and China, which further solidified Bangladesh's independent foreign policy. According to Rahman and Ahmed (2024), Ziaur Rahman played a key role in establishing China as one of Bangladesh's closest allies and commercial partners by 1976, just a year after formal diplomatic relations began. This partnership with China became a strategic priority for Bangladesh in countering diplomatic pressure from India. Zia's approach to foreign policy allowed Bangladesh to avoid overreliance on any single power and to compete more effectively with India in business, gaining significant economic advantages.

Moving Towards West: Cultivation of Diversified Relationship

Building close ties with the West for future relationship development was made possible through diversified, relationship-based engagement. Research by Tanbeer (2025) noted that Bangladeshi President Ziaur Rahman's 1978 visit to Türkiye is considered as a milestone in the bilateral relationship between the two countries. Cultivation of ties with Western powers remains significantly possible for Bangladesh to maintain a high level of diplomatic standards. Maintaining

a balance of power between China and Western powers was possible under Bangladesh's leadership. Leveraging Cold War advantages for Bangladesh was possible under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman, who helped the country shape geopolitical shifts. The analysis by Rahman (2024) suggests that the leadership of Ziaur Rahman helped to manage strategic relationships with Eastern European nations to a significant extent. Closing ties with the Soviet Union was effective for Bangladesh in maintaining its level of engagement with the powerful strategic blocs around the globe during the Cold War period. The strategic inclusion of Bangladesh helped address the existential problems it has faced since independence, following the liberation war in 1971.

The close relationship development between China and Bangladesh had changed the dynamics of Bangladesh's relationship with India, helping to avoid India's future economic upper hand over Bangladesh. In a study, Huq (2024) noted that the close ties between Bangladesh and China during the Ziaur Rahman regime helped shape the South Asian country's long-term economic development. Development of a relationship with Pakistan on positive terms was initiated under the regime of Ziaur Rahman, which helped the nation maintain a positive balance of trade with China and India. According to the analysis by Shah et al. (2025), under the regime of Ziaur Rahman, Bangladesh achieved a balanced relationship with Pakistan that helped to negotiate trade, defence, and regional stability with stakeholders in the South Asian region. The diversification of foreign policy among multiple powerhouses was possible under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman, which had a long-standing impact on Bangladesh's history to date.

During the liberation war of Bangladesh, the US opposed the rise of Bangladesh due to its vested interest in Pakistan, which created a historical barrier in the relationship between Bangladesh and the US. However, Ziaur Rahman's intelligence and leadership helped build an effective relationship between Bangladesh and the US. In the analysis by Morsalin and Hannan (2022), it is noted that, despite recognition by the US in 1972, Bangladesh had a poor bilateral relationship, which improved in the latter part of 1980, helping to secure US\$2.8 billion in aid by 1987.

The analysis noted that by the end of the early 1980s, the US had become the largest aid provider to Bangladesh, while its relationship with India was deteriorating. Under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman, Bangladesh came out of India's influence and made strategic inroads into the US sphere while maintaining a balance with the Soviet Union. The multi-purpose relationship in the diplomatic sphere of Bangladesh became possible due to the effective leadership of Ziaur Rahman across the nation.

The stance on diplomacy towards Muslim countries was an effective solution that helped Ziaur Rahman maintain the balance of aid. Historical archives reported that Bangladesh arranged just US\$10 million between 1971 and 1975, which surged to \$5,541.8 million between 1976 and 82 (Siam, 2025). It supports the view that Ziaur Rahman's Middle East diplomacy was broadly successful and helped the country survive the most critical economic situation after independence. Additionally, US aid increased significantly under the regime of Ziaur Rahman, helping to balance dependence on the West and the Middle East. US aid during the Ziaur Rahman regime reached \$735 million between 1976 and 1978, helping the nation close the financial gap to a significant extent (Siam, 2025). Additionally, Bangladesh's prevalence among Muslim nations helped the country manage the positive development of relationships to a significant extent. Hence, the regime of Ziaur Rahman was effective in developing a broader and more effective relationship with global power players, which helped protect Bangladesh's sovereignty as a nation.

Coming out as a major force in the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Countries) was possible for Bangladesh under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman. Bangladesh was awarded membership of the OIC in 1974 during the rule of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, while the country lacked significant influence in the leadership. In the research of Khan (2021), it is mentioned that Ziaur Rahman was promoted in a position to meditate during the crisis in Iran, which increased the importance of Bangladesh among Islamic countries, which eventually helped the nation to avail new strategic partnerships in the Middle East zone. In a study, Tanbeer (2025) mentioned that, under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman, Bangladesh established an effective strategic relationship with Türkiye that

strengthened bonds with OIC nations and had a positive impact on cultural affirmation. Comparing the historic relationship between Türkiye and Bangladesh during Ziaur Rahman's visit to Ankara yielded significant results for Bangladesh, enabling it to expand its diplomatic relationship to a greater extent.

Ziaur Rahman formalised the ease of labourers from Bangladesh in the Middle East, which eventually provided opportunities to grow to an extensive level. An analysis of Ziaur Rahman highlights that he sought the cooperation of the oil-producing Gulf countries to provide jobs for Bangladeshi workers, a market that had previously been monopolised by Pakistanis (Khan, 2021). The economy of Bangladesh turned positive with the implementation of this labour exchange policy and the influx of significant opportunities for Bangladeshi workers. The scope for employment for people in Bangladesh, both domestically and abroad, increased significantly, which helped boost relationships. The relationship establishment between the Arab nations, which are rich in oil, enabled Bangladesh to play a crucial role in global geopolitics, which had been utilised to negotiate with regional partners to a significant extent. According to Rahman (2024), remittance facilities for Bangladesh were initiated under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman, which has been a significant factor in Bangladesh's economic development. Hence, the diplomatic framework developed by Ziaur Rahman since 1975 played a significant role in maintaining balance in both bilateral relationships and economic growth.

The multidimensional relationship Ziaur Rahman built with multiple powerhouses around the globe was an effective factor in the nation achieving UN membership. In a conversation, one of Ziaur Rahman's colleagues mentioned that non-permanent UN Security Council membership was achieved by Bangladesh in 1979 under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman, which helped to increase the importance of Bangladesh among the nations of the global south (Akber, 2025). This move by Bangladesh helped the nation become friends with countries like China, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE quickly, which eventually provided opportunities for business development. In an assessment, Riaz

(2022) noted that Ziaur Rahman's membership in the UN was a milestone of success, as it holds a high priority for the country among its partners. Bangladesh's visibility in the global sphere increased significantly with its membership in the UNSC, which helped raise its acceptance among global forces.

Ziaur Rahman's signing of multiple international treaties was a useful way to manage international engagement and position the Global South as a leader. UNSC documents highlight that Ziaur Rahman, as president of Bangladesh, signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1979, thereby establishing Bangladesh's image as a flagbearer of global norms (Ram Mohan, 2015). The image of non-alliance, along with peace in Bangladesh, helped the nation develop stable relationships with multiple partners around the globe, thereby securing a positive relationship. This move helped Bangladesh become a more active player in diplomacy rather than an aid-dependent nation in the South Asian region. The diplomatic shift by Ziaur Rahman on the global stage was effective for developing an identity as a leader among the developing nations. This strategic initiative was effective for Bangladesh in establishing strong alignment with the countries in the African region.

In an account of US President Jimmy Carter, his excellency mentioned Ziaur Rahman, an important player in the developing nation (The American Presidency Project, 1979). Carter further noted that low-priced oil for developing nations, in contrast to OPEC countries, is an important demand that can boost the growth of small nations in the post-World War II era. Advocacy for solidarity with developing nations was possible for Bangladesh through its UNSC membership, which increased the nation's popularity among Global South leaders. The core vision of Bangladesh's diplomatic policies had been to create a positive impact on neighbouring nations, focusing on their own interests. Hence, Ziaur Rahman's strategic diplomatic policies at the global level have been an effective means of delivering high-quality diplomatic engagement.

Regional Cooperation Movement: India and Pakistan Relationship

Development of positive and well-balanced frameworks in the regional politics of South Asia was assured by Ziaur Rahman with the effective leadership initiative that eventually helped to lower dependence on India. It is mentioned that Ziaur Rahman emphasised reviewing the water agreement between Bangladesh and India, which eventually led to a major breakthrough in resolving the ongoing tension among the common people of Bangladesh. A report states that the Ganges water treaty between PM Desai and Ziaur Rahman secured 35,000 cusecs of water in alternating three 10-day periods to Bangladesh and India from March 11 through May 10 (Danda, 2021). The significant treaty was effective for Bangladesh as an independent state in ensuring effective water sharing and in managing the needs of the countrymen to a great extent. It eventually helped Bangladesh revive its relationship with India to a significant level and maintain peace among countrymen. Hence, under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman, the country's diplomatic stance was effective in managing internal situations, thereby creating a positive impact on the bilateral relationship front.

Normalisation of relations with Pakistan under the regime of Ziaur Rahman was an excellent decision that helped move the country onto a path of positive engagement. On December 23 of 1977, a report published by NY times mentioned that the arrival of Ziaur Rahman in the capital of Pakistan is a historic event for the bilateral relationship between these two countries (NY Times, 1977). The common concern for both countries were India's influence in this region, which eventually helped develop a cohesive relationship and achieve the positive goals of the relationship. The strategic partnership between Pakistan and Bangladesh deepened over time, and Ziaur Rahman aligned Pakistan's strategic interests with Bangladesh's, helping Bangladesh restart trade with Pakistan. Additionally, Ziaur Rahman remained successful in getting weapons from Pakistan that eventually helped to reinforce the Air Force of Bangladesh to a significant level. Bangladesh was gifted a J-7 fighter jet by Pakistan under the

leadership of Ziaur Rahman, which eventually helped it gain significant strategic importance. The modernisation of the Bangladesh Air Force, which occurred under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman, helped the nation reach a high level of military strategic importance. Hence, the leadership of Ziaur Rahman was essential for reshaping the position and bonding in South Asian territories.

The future vision for the South Asian nations coalition was one of the key ideas Ziaur Rahman formulated during his presidency in Bangladesh. In the course of surviving the trade of nations in the South Asian region, the development of a common pact was essential, which could have been structured like the EU (European Union). The Colombo Pact during the regime of Ziaur Rahman is often considered the primary step toward developing a cooperative nation alliance among countries in the South Asian region, following the formation of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) (Chowdhury, 2024). During the presidency between 1977 and 1980, Ziaur Rahman visited India, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka multiple times to form a new charter for trade between these countries.

The main focus of developing the economic common zone of trade was on reducing dependence on India and making positive reliance on South Asian countries. However, Ziaur Rahman's diplomatic stance eventually helped avoid souring relations with India to an extent that would have threatened political stability in the country. Desai and Ziaur Rahman declared India and Bangladesh as a Zone of Peace in 1977, which helped increase relations between the two countries to an extensive level (Chowdhury, 2024). Apparently, Ziaur Rahman emphasised gaining support from countries like Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, which led to a major regional coalition in the South Asian region to pressure India, which eventually culminated in the formation of SAARC in later years.

The formation of SAARC eventually helped Ziaur Rahman and Bangladesh develop an image of peace and prosperity among the people in this region. Choudhry and Jabeen (2013) noted that Ziaur Rahman

introduced multiple protocols and conventions for joint collaboration among countries in the South Asian region. The main objective of the cooperation was to deliver peace and prosperity to the people of these nations. It was an effective framework for regional peace and tranquillity, helping to shape growth in this region. In an article by NY times it is mentioned that after the attempted assassination of the Indian High Commissioner in the streets of Dhaka, Ziaur Rahman visited Delhi to manage the demand of Bangladesh regarding trade deficit and water influences into the rivers (Trumbull, 1979). Both parties agreed on terms to address problems using their respective capabilities and to redefine relationships on a positive note in the future. Hence, the diplomatic versatility of Ziaur Rahman helped to develop a regional coalition to reduce India's influence and meet demands as needed.

The normalisation of relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh highlights that the regime of Ziaur Rahman does not represent an ideological perspective between the countries, but rather emphasises strategic business relationship management through a dynamic relationship. In the critical analysis, Shah et al. (2024) mentioned that Ziaur Rahman focused on building relationships with Pakistan to move the country towards a cooperative economy, emphasising the shared culture of the two countries. Strengthening defence in Bangladesh was easier with the historic focus of differentiating regional power among neighbours in the South Asian zone. In the analysis of Rahman and Ahmed (2024), it is mentioned that the stance of neutrality of Bangladesh amid the incoming aids from the US developed a signature advantage for Bangladesh to establish relationships. This strategic shift under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman helped gain a significant advantage in this region, balancing power with India and Pakistan. According to the analysis by Al Amin and Nion (2023), Zia was the main character who helped to develop positive relationships between China and Bangladesh, which has taken shape over the years as a constant companion across different governments. Hence, Ziaur Rahman's diplomatic stance was effective in establishing an array of relationships from the Great Wall of China to the Oil Belts in the Middle East.

The diplomatic shift under the Ziaur Rahman regime was an effective element that helped achieve highly valued outcomes in business scenarios. In the country's growth, the economic reforms of Ziaur Rahman were effective to a significant extent, helping to control the monopoly of Indian products in the Bangladeshi market. Ali's (1999) assessment highlighted that Ziaur Rahman initiated liberalisation in Bangladesh's economy, which attracted foreign investment for business development. This shift in economic processes by Ziaur Rahman in Bangladesh was effective in securing essential financial resources for capitalist establishments worldwide, which has eventually revitalised Bangladesh's economy to a great extent. An analysis by Rahman (2024) of Ziaur Rahman's regime highlights that it challenged longstanding conformist perceptions and paved the way for the birth of the private sector in Bangladesh. Ziaur Rahman's strategic revamp of the country's economy was effective in sending a message in the field of geopolitics about the country's stance. Analysts consider that Ziaur Rahman's open-market strategy was effective in attracting the US-led bloc of economic forces, which eventually provided opportunities to expand engagement to a significant level. This strategic shift in Bangladesh's national economy was an effective factor in Ziaur Rahman's efforts to bring together countries with open economies.

Ziaur Rahman solved the unnecessary pressure from another close neighbour of Bangladesh by forging a strategic tie-up with Myanmar, which helped avoid issues in Rakhain province near Bangladesh. An account by Ahsan (2002) recalls that Ziaur Rahman's visit to Myanmar in 1979 helped establish an easy relationship between Bangladesh and Myanmar, which facilitated long-term stable growth. The land and border disputes between Bangladesh and Myanmar were resolved without the involvement of any third party, with a decorative diplomatic framework between the two. Hence, from the perspective of a newly developed nation, the leadership of Ziaur Rahman was effective in growing into a self-sustaining nation on the diplomatic page, refusing to accept external involvement in territorial security.

The legacy of the peacemaker is a broad legacy that was shaped in Bangladesh by Ziaur Rahman in the South Asian context. The analysis by Bhatta (2004) highlights that the regional convention proposed by Ziaur Rahman can have a positive impact on diplomatic decision-making in the South Asian region, helping to protect the interests of small countries like Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives. The assurance of peace was an embedded promise in the regional cooperation agreement proposed by Ziaur Rahman. On the other hand, Ziaur Rahman focused on lowering the threat from India during the development of South Asian cooperation, as he assured the erstwhile Indian Prime Minister that bilateral issues would be taken out of this forum. Apparently, Ziaur Rahman, who promised the establishment of Pakistan, said this forum would focus on providing a safety net for smaller countries. Hence, the tactical brilliance of Ziaur Rahman successfully fostered cohesion between India and Pakistan in the South Asian region, thereby improving peace in this region.

Conclusion

The presidency of Ziaur Rahman was an effective period that significantly impacted South Asian diplomacy in favour of Bangladesh. Bangladesh's utter dependence on India for future foreign policy was neutralised during the regime of Ziaur Rahman, which helped secure Bangladesh's sovereignty to a significant extent. After taking control of Bangladesh, Ziaur Rahman realised that the Soviet bloc's dependency had been making Bangladesh's economic and power balance poor and shifted to an open-market economy, which attracted capitalist forces into Bangladesh's market, helping to bargain with Indian products. Ziaur Rahman's focus was affirmative regarding establishing relationships with countries in the Islamic world, which helped secure significant aid from Saudi Arabia. The state visit of Türkiye by Ziaur Rahman helped establish a landmark relationship with the EU. Bangladesh's rise from an aid-dependent country to a diplomatically strong nation was made possible under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman, which eventually helped it gain non-permanent membership in the UNSC.

The polar shift by Bangladesh towards the US-allied countries under the regime of Ziaur Rahman was an important landmark that helped attract positive investment in Bangladesh's economy. Additionally, Bangladesh's shift away from India's influence and toward sovereign decision-making became possible due to the diplomatic stances taken during the presidency of Ziaur Rahman. Moreover, the formation of South Asian cooperation in the form of SAARC was the brainchild of Ziaur Rahman, which helped protect small nations from being bullied by big nations. Hence, from the perspective of regional leadership, the regime of Ziaur Rahman was effective in boosting regional cooperation, which helped Bangladesh balance its diplomatic outputs.

Chapter 6: Nation, Faith and Identity: Ziaur Rahman's Constitutional Amendments

Abstract

Ziaur Rahman's faith in the nation and the Islamic religion in Bangladesh led to a transformation in the country's internal policies. Initiating the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution and the "19-point program initiatives" supported rural and urban development significantly. The faith-based political and ideological shift in Zia's leadership and policies influenced the country's political relations and contributed to its growth.

Introduction

Islam's identity in Ziaur Rahman's Bangladesh reshaped the country's national identity and united the nation under religious faith. Under the Fifth Amendment to the Bangladesh Constitution in 1979, Islam became the forefront of national identity, replacing the country's secular philosophy (Karzon, n.d.). Zia's political approach was always influenced by the people of Bangladesh and by Islamic philosophies, which connected his roots to Islamic culture. The original constitution of Bangladesh, after independence, was dedicated to secularism and to language-based federalism. Abolishing linguistic differences and cultural barriers, Ziaur Rahman's main goal was to create a single nation and profound unity in the country's internal relations. Ziaur Rahman's amendment was rooted in Islamification and highlighted the broader impact of Bengali nationalism in the core of the country's culture. The leadership of Ziaur Rahman blended Islam with the modern political structure to gain the trust of the common people.

The promotion of "Bangladeshi Nationalism" under the governance of Ziaur Rahman fostered the country's territorial identity. Keeping ethnolinguistic concepts at the forefront of the amendment, Rahman implemented multi-party democracy in both the country's political and social structures. In 1978, Zia took the first step of establishing national unity in the country with the foundation plan of the "Bangladesh Nationalist Party" (BNP) (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-

BNP, n.d.). Breaking with the concept of secularism, General Rahman kept faith in Islam to build a connection with the majority of the population. The fifth constitutional amendment completed the official recognition of Islam as the country's national identity. The rule of Ziaur Rahman in Bangladesh was a stage of development and democracy. His alliance with national identity and Islam underscored the majority's interest in religious unity. On the contrary, Bangladesh's faith-based political and ideological shift under Zia's leadership also influenced the country's political relations. In keeping the national interest in Islam and strengthening the economic structure of the country, Zia raised its partnership with the Islamic countries. As a leader of the majority of the Muslim and Bengali population, Zia's faith and national interest met the interests of common people and legitimised their identity as well.

The Leader of Liberation War

As the foremost leader of Bangladesh's liberation war, Zia declared the country's independence at the early hours of 26 March 1971. The vulnerability of East Bengal's genocide by Pakistan's militant groups influenced Zia to end his career as an officer under Pakistan's government. On 25th March of 1971, indiscriminatory mass killing of Pakistan militants over the unnamed people of the former East Pakistan area carried out the most vulnerable and achieved genocide in the history of South Asia. Named as "Operation Searchlight", the most brutal genocide in the history of Bangladesh's liberation war awakened Zia as a nationalist and the future leader of the country. As the commander of the Khemkaran sector during the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war, Rahman had previously demonstrated his gallantry and ability as a military officer. Later, his participation in Bangladesh's Liberation War also proved his heroism, nature and responsibility towards the motherland. After being infuriated by the genocides of Pakistan's militant group, the decision of Zia's joining the Independence war worked as a fuel among the freedom fighters of East Bengal. Zia's heroism not only established him as a competent leader

of the country, but it also enabled the country to build a disciplined, skilled force to counter the barbarism of Pakistan.

The vibrant and visionary approach of President Zia reflected his glorious military career at an early stage of his life. Ziaur Rahman was awarded the most prestigious title Bir Uttam, one of the highest honours after the liberation war, for his contribution to the independence (Raju, 2024). In the Mukti Bahini of Bangladesh, Rahman took charge of the Z force and led a commendable fight against the brutal militant group of Pakistan. Formed on July 7, 1971, this force later expanded to three battalions in the 1st, 3rd, and 8th East Bengal regiments. The “Sipahi-Janata revolution in 1975” in Bangladesh for the demand of releasing Ziaur Rahman from house arrest revealed his popularity among the militant groups and common people (Islam, 2025). The jeopardised situation of Bangladesh’s defence structure and political instability clearly identified the crisis of leadership. Under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman, Bangladesh redefined the Liberation War and valued the people-centred spirit in the country's independence. Zia's vision was clear, as he declared that the state identity of an independent country should be people-centric (Britannica Editors, 2025). Also, the country's sovereignty must be inviolable to ensure civic trust. However, the regime of Mujibur Rahman failed to build social trust and foster people’s identity through national policy. This proved that, along with Zia's military strength, his approach to working with people in the army also influenced his political decisions and his control of the crisis.

The liberation war of Bangladesh also demonstrated that, out of the dictatorship and rule of Pakistan, the country had the capability of leading the nation on its own. Ziaur Rahman’s gallant performance in the Liberation War and later operations in the suppression of national crises proved him as a competent leader of the country. As a secondary commander in the Pakistan military, Zia demonstrated his ability, which later benefited Bangladesh in developing a trained and skilled army (Khan et al., 2025). His knowledge from field operations and later learning in Germany developed his skills as a future leader and also launched his career as the Chief Administrator. His love for Bangladesh also influenced

him to sign his own death warrant for defying the Pakistani Army group. However, the contribution of Zia in Bangladesh was beyond the militant career. In the post-war period, Zia became the chief of army staff and took responsibility for reshaping the country's law and order (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). Later, it increased gradually, leading Zia to become the most prominent President of Bangladesh in the future. Combining faith and religion, Zia's plan for developing modern Bangladesh relied primarily on Islamic principles to build an engaged and unified population. Hence, Zia's leadership in the position of Bangladesh's governing body inspired them to reshape the entire plan and drive significant revolutionary changes.

Islamic Nation and Unity in Power

Ziaur Rahman prioritised Islam over secularism or any other form of national identity in Bangladesh, reflecting his commitment to the faith. Following independence, around 90% of Bangladesh's 70 million people were Muslim (EPC, 2010). Taking this demographic majority into account, and drawing on the example of religious divisions during the India-Pakistan partition, Zia likely saw Islam as a more fitting national identity. The earlier partition of East Bengal from western India in 1947 was also based on religious majority. Given Bangladesh's Muslim majority, Zia argued that moving beyond secularism would better serve national interests. He also lifted bans on all Islam-oriented political parties during his presidency under a multi-party democracy (India Blooms News Service, 2022). Zia's vision for a people-centred country recognised that most Bangladeshis were farmers or labourers with low literacy and limited exposure to progressive religious ideas. He believed that strict secularism in governance might hinder direct connection with ordinary people and their interests. Thus, in building national identity, Zia favoured religious faith over the progressive secularism promoted by Mujibur Rahman.

Zia's commitment to development and his aspiration for an Islamic nation also shaped his trade policies and foreign alliances. To bolster national identity and promote industrial growth, he sought partnerships

with Islamic countries. Influenced by Pakistan and the Soviet Union's hosting of Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) officials, Zia planned to support the party's presence in Bangladesh as well (EFSAS, n.d.). Through these religious policies, Zia aimed to position Bangladesh prominently among Islamic nations and gain global recognition. Alongside Islamisation, General Ziaur Rahman celebrated Islam at the national level to connect with citizens and foster a strong national identity. The success of these initiatives in the 1970s strengthened nationalism and deepened Islamic influence in the country's political and social life. Following Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination, Zia replaced the secular "Bengali nationalism" with the Islam-oriented "Bangladeshi nationalism" (India Blooms News Service, 2022). In the 1980s, the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution enshrined Bangladesh's Islamic identity in law. Zia's long-term vision for restructuring Bangladesh also addressed religious tensions and societal conflict. The Fifth Amendment, aimed at legitimising Bangladesh as an Islamic territory, reflected the majority population and reinforced national unity on the global stage.

Ziaur Rahman's strategic introduction of the Fifth Amendment in 1979 ratified and legitimised the constitutional shift from secularism to an Islamic identity for Bangladesh. Under martial law on 15 August 1975, Bangladesh had adopted secularism, recognising the coexistence of diverse cultures and religions (Kabir, 2024). Zia, however, redirected the nation's cultural philosophy away from secularism toward a unifying Islamic framework, opting instead for multi-party democracy that legalised Islamic parties and strengthened freedom of speech and religion. The formation of the BNP under Zia was also intended to promote national unity and encourage greater political engagement from other Islamic parties (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). Beyond his reputation as a heroic and visionary leader, Zia was regarded as a shrewd politician for these strategic moves. Believing in unity based on religious faith, he used the BNP to secure support from the majority population. Ultimately, the unity of Islamic parties under Zia also strengthened the BNP, ensuring its long-term dominance in Bangladesh. Zia's faith in Islam thus proved

highly advantageous for him as a political leader across all sectors of the country.

National Interest at First: Ziaur's Foreign Policies

Zia's strategies for internal development of the country or foreign relations, he always prioritised the national interest and scope of growth at the economic and social levels. The diplomatic astuteness of this man in Bangladesh's economy profoundly contributed to supporting growth and stability amid turmoil. Zia's actions in multi-dimensional regional diplomacy and economic liberalisation balanced financial growth and controlled national crises at the same time (Siam, 2025). The privatisation plan for industrial growth in Bangladesh empowers people to connect with the growing industries and participate as entrepreneurs. In contrast, under the regional diplomacy plan, the former President also aimed to promote agricultural development and empower people at the grassroots level. Zia understood that a country's growth depended on its economy and resources, which strengthened its further pillars. From a bird's-eye view of agricultural development and a market-oriented economy, he continued his plan for Bangladesh's development (Rahman, 2024). In this plan, foreign policy played a significant role in boosting the country's economy and in creating new alliances to extend its trade routes. The connection of Zia with the South Asian countries and other Islamic countries allowed it to gain foreign investment and also promote the philosophies of Bangladesh globally.

Enforcing national cohesion and meeting the national interest, General Zia ensured a positive growth of the country at both the regional and global levels in the Presidency of Ziaur Rahman. In the diplomatic landscape of South Asia, Zia had the scope to improve global relations and also expand trade across the entire region (Husain, 2022). Starting with countries such as Nepal, China, and India, Zia also reached out to the US and Europe in search of global alliances. The alliance with Nepal enabled the country to extend its international trade routes, and an agreement with India on the Farakka barrage contributed to the development of the

irrigation system as well. The main condition of foreign policy in trade, industrial growth, and politics was to prioritize the national interest over mutual agreement (Visnovitz and Jenne, 2021). Keeping this in mind, Zia extended his hand of alliance to other countries with the aim of agricultural development, foreign investment, military strength, and internal peace. Based on Zia's successful meetings and global alliances, it should be noted that, alongside his militant career, his political vision was also commendable. Unlike the traditional form of ruling the country, Zia planned to maximise the opportunities it offered. As a result, the former President pursued a foreign policy that was against the country's national interest.

Constitutional Amendment and National Identity of Bangladesh

The Fifth Amendment of Bangladesh was completely dedicated to Islam as it Zia also updated the preamble of the constitution for promoting Islamic ideology in Bangladesh's national identity, The phrase "Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim" was also added in the preamble of Bangladesh's constitution in the Fifth Amendment, that means "In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful" (Laws of Bangladesh, n.d.). Showing his faith towards Islam and national unity, Zia dedicated the changes in the amendments and the new structure of Bangladesh's model to the religion. It not only gained the emotional support of the majority Muslim population of Bangladesh, but also cleared the future steps of Zia in forming a new model as well. In the context of Independence, Bangladesh formed its new country with 90% of its population being Muslim (EPC, 2010). Later, the declaration of secularism in the country violated the national rights and interests of several people who were not accustomed with the term secularism. This amendment also considered the involvement of common people and was intended to drive change through Islamic nationalism within the core structure. The legalised structure of the Islamic nation of Bangladesh under the Fifth

Amendment successfully fostered a culture of nationalism and unity in Bangladesh on the visionary path of Ziaur Rahman.

The 1947 partition identified Pakistan as a Muslim country, while India introduced itself as a secular country in the world due to the existence of people of different religions and cultures. However, unlike India, Mujibur's Bangladesh failed to carry the title of secularism and successfully adopt it among the common people. The secular credentials since 1971 have upheld several conflicts and political instability in the country, which have also persisted to date (Ethirajan, 2021). However, Zia's legalisation of Islamic state also compromised the political expectancy as it provided multi-party democracy not only to the Muslim group, but the other political parties also got this benefit. BNP's democratisation plan promoted equal opportunity for all and empowered opposition parties to contribute to the country's growth (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). Through the legalisation of Islamic nationality and the empowerment of opposition political parties, Zia successfully maintained collaboration among the global population. Legalised action in developing the national identity of the country, General Rahman contributed in the social and political stabilisation to control the national crisis after the Independence situation.

The collective identity of Bangladesh from the constitutional changes during Zia's regime allowed it to develop a promising future and control the internal conflict after the assassination of Mujibur Rahman. Differentiating the collective identity of the nation, Zia merged the country's national interest into the constitutional shift by abolishing secularism and implementing democracy in the national plan (Hoque, 2024). Followed the principles of "nationalism, secularism, democracy, and socialism" in the four-pronged constitutional identity of Bangladesh. The ignorance of the Muslim majority citizenry, Mujibur's plan for the country, affected the religious sentiment. The Fifth Amendment of the Bangladesh Constitution removed the principle of secularism. Later, in 1988, the Eighth Amendment declared Islam as the state religion (Sharma, 2021). The de-secularised concept by Ziaur Rahman in Bangladesh broadens the way for the adaptation of Islam at the grassroots level of the

country. Demand for religion-based political activity in the rural and urban areas of Bangladesh inspired Zia to build civic trust and maintain stability in the post-liberation period. The final declaration of Islam as the national identity of Bangladesh proved that Zia's faith in Muslims led the country into the right path of unity after independence. Hence, following the structured rules and governance practices in the country's economic and social practices under Ziaur Rahman, the country had the opportunity to design a long-term plan.

Ziaur Rahman: The Leader of Common People

Ziaur Rahman, as a leader of Bangladesh's common people, not only earned the trust of the people but also became the most celebrated Islamic leader in the country for his faith in democracy. Zia's political style focused on the needs and development of the common people through rural and urban development plans. In Article 8(1) and 8(1A) of Bangladesh's constitution," he added, "absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah" by showing his faith in the Islamic religion (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). However, Bangladesh is home to different religions, but the majority of the people belong to the Muslim background. Keeping this thing in mind, Zia adopted Islam as the national identity of the country, which also represented the originality of the people. On the contrary, Ziaur Rahman's promotion of Bangladeshi Nationalism also differentiated the identity of the people of former East Bengal from that of today's Indian state of West Bengal. Bangali Nationalism refers to the unity and interests of all Bengalis worldwide. As the leader of Bangladesh, Zia restored the identity and distinctiveness of the Bangladeshi people to promote individual recognition worldwide (Das et al., 2022). His way of thinking about the interests of the common people and their needs from the country, he specialised the legal policies and social traits as well to ensure a positive engagement from the grassroots level.

Ziaur Rahman's internal development plans and foreign policies for Bangladesh initially focused on the national interest. Ziaur Rahman's proposal of the "two-nation theory," which divided Bangladesh and West

Bengal after the liberation war, differentiated Bangladeshi and Bangali nationalism (Verma, 2023). The concept of aggressive nationalism in Bangladesh, inspired by Pakistan, failed to maintain the unity and faith of the common people after the liberation war and political turmoil. The concept of secularism under the regime of Mujibur Rahman raised concerns about national stability and positive engagement, as the country was experiencing internal conflict. The promotion of Bangladeshi nationalism by Ziaur Rahman prioritised the needs of the common people by restructuring the governance plan. On the contrary, Zia's foreign policy is also aligned with the national interest, covering industrial growth, agricultural development, and the promotion of Islam. Major Ziaur Rahman attended the non-aligned "Foreign Ministers Conference in August 1976" hosted in Colombo and claimed that the country wanted to build strong relationships for its own good (Beshra, 1998). In this plan, Zia approached Nepal to safeguard the country's trade route via Radhikapur. Extending the trade route, Zia wanted to develop better connections with its neighbouring countries and benefit of expanding their trade route. This plan enabled Bangladesh to secure foreign investment and expand trade alliances in international markets.

Rural and economic outreach were also the main priorities of Zia in Bangladesh's development plan, which focused on the direct growth of the common people. The "19-point programme" of BNP focused on agricultural and industrial growth, aiming to boost the country's economy and empower the common people (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). Under this plan, the country planned to develop its economy and maintain integrity, support internal growth, and drive change after independence. Apart from rural and agricultural development, Zia also focused on reducing illiteracy and providing basic medical treatment to all citizens of the country. Focusing on the growth and well-being of the people, Zia sought to protect the population from the country's crisis. Zia also encouraged the private sector to support the country's economic development (Ahmed, 2023). This not only contributed to economic development through revenue generation but also improved employment in the country to date. Agricultural development increased food

productivity and reduced poverty. By leveraging Bangladesh's agricultural production, Zia also addressed resource constraints in the industrialisation plan. Uniting agricultural development and industrial growth, Zia resolved the issue of poverty and unemployment in Independent Bangladesh through a single initiative. Hence, his dynamic support for the growth of people alongside national development made him the leader of the common people in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

The legacy of Ziaur Rahman in Bangladesh was overshadowed by his strategic actions in managing the emergency crisis and his diplomatic approach to internal development. Keeping the national interest in mind, Zia prioritised Islamic traits and beliefs in the political and social structure of Bangladesh, replacing the concept of secularism. The Fifth Amendment of Bangladesh legalised Islam and celebrated the religion nationwide, with the aim of fostering a strong sense of belonging among the common people. By eliminating secularism from the country's national identity, Zia ensured unity and significantly gained the trust of the common people. Aligned with the interests of the majority of the people, Zia focused on adopting Islamic values in his leadership and political views to strengthen Bangladesh's modern structure. To achieve national self-reliance through the country's socio-economic development plan, Zia supported social and economic growth after the Liberation War crisis. The faith in Islam and the transformative nature of Zia contributed to the country's development and ensured a sustained development plan for the common people.

The reign of Ziaur Rahman in Bangladesh was considered the first stage in developing a modern structure that blended traditional Islamic identity. After the fall of the former President Mujibur Rahman, Zia realised the need for national identity and unity in the country to support the development plan. Keeping faith with the Islamic nation, Zia planned to promote alliances with foreign countries to attract greater investment and trade support. The policies and strategies outlined in the Fifth

Amendment of Bangladesh fostered a sense of belonging among the common people. Zia's faith and interest in the Islamic nation also developed a strong engagement with the common people in its dynamic position. Modernism and the blend of religious traits in Zia's leadership connected Bangladesh from the grassroots to the country's industrial growth, supporting multidimensional development. After the liberation war and the assassination of Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh experienced a national crisis and emergency due to the rise in poverty levels and lack of employment. Hence, Zia's action in the national development plan and driving Islamisation based on the faith in religion in Bangladesh was introduced with the culture of modernism and national identity significantly.

Chapter 7: Multi-Party Democracy Restored Political Reform Under Ziaur Rahman

Abstract

One of the most controversial transitions in Bangladesh's political history is the restoration of multi-party democracy by Ziaur Rahman. After the collapse of the BAKSAL unitary system of the nation and the chain of coups in 1975, Bangladesh entered an institutional uncertainty phase, during which political activity was suspended, and governance reform procedures had weakened. During this turbulent period, Ziaur Rahman was born, and he declared himself as the leader who could stabilise the state with a new democratic system. This political transformation was oriented on his constitutional, administrative, and ideological reforms, specifically the establishment of Bangladeshi nationalism. In this context, it can be mentioned that Bangladeshi nationalism is the Fifth Amendment and the renaissance of party politics. Although the reconstruction of democratic institutions and the provision of political space to various groups under Zia were considered strategic reconstructions of power that involved the use of military forces and regulated forms of democracy. This chapter critically analyses of conflicting interpretations and an evaluation of Bangladesh's historical and political background, which had enabled the restoration of multi-party democracy. Additionally, the multiparty democratic system of Bangladesh maintains reforms introduced by Zia; they were neither strictly democratic nor authoritarian; however, it was a hybrid political enterprise shaped by crises in the middle of the 1970s and the exigencies of regime consolidation.

Introduction

The political reforms implemented by Ziaur Rahman in the late 1970s play a critical role in Bangladesh's political historiography, especially in the reestablishment of multi-party democracy. As benefits, the political reforms restore pluralism, regenerate public trust, and also reopen the space for nationwide democratic participation. Following the end of democratic competition with the BAKSAL system in 1975, Bangladesh

entered a period of acute political instability marked by coups, which led to the collapse of institutional power (Rashiduzzaman, 1982). Moreover, the turbulent political system in Bangladesh underscored the need to restore political order, a democratic restoration required for maintaining the state's operation. Therefore, a unified political structure can be significant in overcoming factionalism; however, it removed the essential democratic spirit of the independence struggle. This chapter analyses the historical realities that ultimately led to the restoration of multi-party democracy under Zia. It also assesses the ways in which his reforms were a response to the nation's stability and involvement requirements. It also considers different academic opinions, such as Multi-Party Democracy, regarding the political reforms implemented by Ziaur Rahman, and evaluates his position as a restorer of democratic pluralism or a military dictator who employed democratic forms to justify authoritarian rule. Hence, drawing on these discussions, this thesis evaluates Ziaur Rahman's political reforms in the context of Bangladesh's overall democratic history.

Historical and Political Context of Multi-Party Democracy in Terms of Political Reform Under Ziaur Rahman

The restoration of multi-party democracy under Ziaur Rahman needs to be understood against the backdrop of Bangladesh's turbulent political trajectory from 1972 to the late 1970s. Din and Usman (2024) stated that after the Liberation War, the Bangladesh nation has tried to establish a parliamentary democracy. However, the problems of economic collapse, governance failures, and political turbulence have put the system under strain. In 1975, the government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman substituted the parliamentary system with the BAKSAL system to ensure stability and growth, and for that, the centralisation of the government was needed. Sayeed and Hasan (2021) supported the change to the democratic state with BAKSAL as necessary to maintain national discipline; however,

it can dismantle the nation's democratic base in the post-independence era.

The assassination of Mujib in August 1975 triggered the need for a military shift and led to a series of coups, which further destabilised Bangladesh into further instability (Britannica Editors, n.d.). Religious observers always point out that the events of the coups of 1975-76 revealed the instability of a political system left without pluralism. Rival military groups, ideology, and the disintegration of the administration have made it clear that BAKSAL, as well as the military authority, could not achieve lasting stability (Almamun, 2020). It is against this precarious setting that Ziaur Rahman rose to lead slowly first as Chief of Army Staff and thereafter as the main political figure. The rise of Ziaur Rahman was not just a matter of military discretion but also his active participation as a sign of discipline and legitimacy in times of war, and as a shift away from the political failure of the early 1970s (Britannica Editors, n.d.). Zia understood that dominance over the state was not the ultimate solution to the legitimacy crisis the state faced. According to Talukdar (2025), Ziaur Rahman was aware that there was a need to restore political institutions that had been undermined or destroyed under BAKSAL. Additionally, the ideological basis of the state was the first significant step that he had taken. Ziaur Rahman's praise of Bangladeshi nationalism sought to move identity politics beyond linguistic nationalism. It is closely associated with Bangladesh and India, and territorial as well as cultural sovereignty is more easily recognised by a larger population. Imran and Natsir (2024) believed that linguistic nationalism was critical to the formation of an inclusive national identity, whereas critics note that it introduced religious overtones that did not exist before, during the secularism of 1971. The Fifth Amendment of Bangladesh was constitutionally instrumental in restoring order and approved everything that had occurred since the 1975 martial law. Moreover, Ziaur Rahman had reorganised the state's basic principles and had permitted the rise of political pluralism. The advocates of this amendment by Ziaur Rahman view it as a legal measure to bring order to an anarchical situation; the critics view it as a tool to justify military intervention and undermine the secular democratic roots.

The political situation was a two-sided process, and the necessity of re-establishing political competition helped Zia gain power. The re-legalisation of political parties, the re-entry of opposition leaders, and the later organisation of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) were all presented as means of restoring democracy (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). However, in contradiction, these reforms were carried out due to a democratic commitment or the necessity of organising a loyal political base around Zia as the leader.

In summary, the reforms by Ziaur Rahman have a historical and political context, indicating that the Bangladeshi nation was seeking stability following the breakdown of the institution. Therefore, a practical response to the crisis shaped Ziaur Rahman's actions, combining democratic recovery with mechanisms that maintained executive power. This complicated situation in Bangladesh after the liberation war is the basis of the ongoing controversy over whether Zia restored democracy or reformed it to fit a new political order.

Ideological and constitutional changes through which Ziaur Rahman prepared the Political Reform

Ziaur Rahman's political reform agenda was based on the ideological and constitutional reforms he introduced to restore multi-party democracy in Bangladesh. These reforms were informed by the crisis that followed the collapse of BAKSAL's one-party system in 1975, during which national identity, constitutional continuity, and political participation were disrupted (Rahman, 2024). Zia pursued a strategy based on ideological repositioning, legal restructuring, and political recalibration, enabling him to stabilise the state. However, at the same time, he re-established the Bangladeshi democratic space, which was slowly being opened up (Asian Development Bank, 2008). These reforms were not simply democratic or even authoritarian; rather, they were a hybrid form

of politics that responded to the demands of a state seeking a new path to legitimacy following institutional disintegration.

The most powerful intervention of Ziaur Rahman was the establishment of Bangladeshi nationalism, in contrast to the 1972 Constitution's focus on Bengali nationalism. This change is supported by the activists supporting Zia since Bengali nationalism was based on language identity with India, which created confusion on the cultural foundation of the new state (Hajjaj, 2022). In comparison, Bangladesh's nationalism was meant to highlight territorial sovereignty, Islamic cultural heritage, and the unique political experience of the people. Talukdar (2025) stated that the new formulation expanded the national identity to include non-Bengali groups such as Biharis, indigenous populations, and Urdu-speaking populations who did not feel part of the old identity narrative. Akash et al. (2025) note that Zia's reforms marked a shift from the earlier secular and linguistic focus of the independence movement toward a broader ideological framework that sought to unify the nation under a more inclusive Bangladeshi identity. Rather than weakening earlier principles, this transformation reflected Zia's recognition that the realities of post-1971 Bangladesh required a national philosophy capable of accommodating cultural, regional, and religious diversity. Talukdar (2025) further observes that Zia's efforts represented an attempt to establish a stable and coherent ideological foundation for a newly emerging state, enabling Bangladesh to distinguish its political path while navigating a complex regional environment. From this perspective, Zia's reinterpretation of nationalism served as the intellectual anchor for subsequent political reforms and provided Bangladesh with a renewed sense of purpose and identity.

Zia also made significant changes to the constitution and caused a philosophical shift in the state (Britannica Editors, n.d.). The most significant among them was the *Fifth Amendment (1979)*, which politically legalised every act of martial law between 1975 and 1979 and guaranteed constitutional continuity amid sudden institutional discontinuity (Asian Development Bank, 2008). This amendment was seen by supporters as a corrective measure that brought sanity to the legal confusion that had

prevailed, allowing the state to return to regular governance. On the other hand, some opponents expressed concerns about the broader implications of the Fifth Amendment, though supporters argue that such views often overlooked the exceptional circumstances of the post-1975 period and the necessity of ensuring legal continuity during a time of national instability (Asian Development Bank, 2008). Therefore, the amendment failed to restore order in the constitution; however, it instead rooted authoritarian legacies in the democratic process.

Zia also introduced major amendments to the principles of Bangladesh's state policy, altering the main values embodied in the Constitution (Hajjaj, 2022). The most striking policy reform was Ziaur Rahman's substitution of secularism with absolute trust and faith in *Almighty Allah*. It can be argued that aligning the Constitution with the cultural and religious values of the majority population can bring the state back into line with social realities. According to Chowdhury (2021), the change of democracy in Bangladesh has not removed the freedom of religion, but rather established a moral basis of governing. Although Haruna (2025) raised concerns from a theoretical standpoint that the shift away from secularism might alter certain symbolic interpretations of the Liberation War, supporters note that Zia's intention was not to exclude but to align the state with the cultural and religious identity of the overwhelming majority, thereby strengthening social cohesion rather than weakening it. Zia insisted on faith in a larger policy of competing with the Islamic parties and undermining the ideological stand of his political opponents. This discussion notes the two-sided nature of Zia's reforms: popular among most quarters of society, yet controversial for transforming the republic's secular vision. Another significant constitutional amendment by Ziaur Rahman was the redefinition of socialism as economic and social justice rather than state control of the economy. Such redefinition has led Bangladesh to abandon its initial centrally planned economic model and to align the Constitution with Zia's market-oriented development policy. Talukdar (2025) argued that Ziaur Rahman's change in the political structure was needed to revive the economy and attract more investment, while some commentators

suggested that the shift towards a market-oriented interpretation of socialism differed from earlier redistributive approaches, advocates argue that Zia's reform was a pragmatic adaptation designed to revive the economy, attract investment, and ensure long-term prosperity for the population. These constitutional and ideological reforms created the conditions for the revival of political activity. By shifting national identity, altering ideological principles, and creating continuity in the legal realm, Ziaur Rahman created a political space that enabled the restoration of multi-party democracy (Britannica Editors, n.d.). On the other hand, these reforms changed the political arena, and they organised the conditions under which democratic competition may be reorganised. In summary, Ziaur Rahman's ideological and constitutional reforms were the focus of his political reform in South Florida, influencing both the opportunities and the constraints on democratic development in Bangladesh.

Steps Taken by Ziaur Rahman to Restructure the Political Space and also Restore the Multiparty Democracy

Ziaur Rahman came to power at a critical time when Bangladesh had faced a high level of political chaos following the assassination of Prime Minister Sheikh Mujib Rahman in 1975 (Britannica Editors, n.d.). His initial significant change to the political space was the creation of a BAKSAL one-party system that killed political pluralism and centralised state power. Zia restructured Bangladesh's political status by restoring political liberties, clearing the field for organisations, and repealing prohibitions on several political organisations (Rashiduzzaman, 1982). Such a series of actions reestablished the legal basis for competitive politics and enabled opposition forces to reappear in national politics.

An important step in Zia's political reorganisation was the reform agenda from 1977 to 1978, which included constitutional amendments that restored fundamental rights and brought back electoral competition. The Fifth Amendment of Bangladesh formalised changes in power

following the coup era and paved the way for participatory government (Asian Development Bank, 2008). The Zia also legalised previously restricted parties, such as religious, conservative, and nationalistic groups, and nevertheless, they were trying to expand the socio-political base and diversify representation.

The formation of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in 1978 was accounted as the most dynamic decision made by Zia (Bangladesh Nationalist Party–BNP, n.d.). This BNP party had become one of the means of institutionalising state power, developing a new nationalistic ideology, and structuring political involvement. The BNP rapidly gained support nationwide, and the 1979 parliamentary elections, held under Zia's leadership, were the first contested multi-party election in the country after independence. Lastly, the election enhanced parliament's role, rejuvenated legislative debate, and restored the value of civilian political involvement, although the military remained influential.

In an attempt to further reorganise Bangladesh's political space, Zia decentralised authority by empowering local governments through reforms of village councils and Union Parishads (Basit and Islam, 2025). Lastly, Zia was involved in rural populations in political decision-making, which increased democratic participation outside urban centres.

Ziaur Rahman made significant strides toward redefining the political space in Bangladesh and reinstating multiparty democracy. The other significant move was his reform of the Election Commission, which he achieved by reinforcing its purpose among the officers he appointed, ensuring they were army-neutral to the Commission, thus initiating voter-list updating so that the country could participate fairly. This matter was significant because there was no comprehensive national voter list in Bangladesh since 1971. Moreover, by 1977, local administrations were requested to assist in registering rural voters to reduce previous gaps in election lists. The other crucial move that was not mentioned above was Zia's introduction of the opening press and media. Some of the newspapers that had been banned since 1975 were given the green light to resume publication, including *The Bangladesh Times* and *Dainik Bangla*,

which were now able to continue publishing with more editorial freedom than during the BAKSAL era. This assisted in producing more rapid political argument on the streets, not merely within parliament.

One more step in restructuring the political space was his redevelopment of student politics. Rather than prohibiting political action on campuses, Zia established political tolerance and advocated leadership training through organisations such as the National Cadet Corps, expanded in educational institutions, and youth engagement in structured civic action, rather than the use of violence in student politics by factional groups. Lastly, Zia's foreign diplomacy, serving as a political legitimacy-building tool, is becoming a more active participant in South Asian and Islamic cooperation forums (Khan et al., 2021). It served as an indicator that Bangladesh was no longer bound to any ideological camp. These broader institutional, media, youth-access, and diplomatic initiatives were supplementary features of his party and constitutional reforms, and their layer of political restructuring was equally important for the nation.

Institutional Measures by which Ziaur Rahman Redeveloped Democratic Practices

In Bangladesh, Ziaur Rahman brought institutional reforms to rebuild governance structures destroyed by a single-party rule and political alienation. Following independence, the political system in Bangladesh was reorganised under BAKSAL, primarily a one-party system implemented in 1975 that prohibited opposition parties, blocked the role of parliament, and centralised decision-making. The first institutional act undertaken by Zia was aimed at eliminating the legal and administrative restrictive measures imposed on political organisations. He officially abolished the BAKSAL system and started reinstating constitutional participation. According to one author, Zia chose to reintroduce party politics to restore national unity by institutionalising pluralistic platforms to represent politics (Annie, 2022). On the other hand, Khan et al. (2021) argued that the restoration was structurally open; however, it was

operationally controlled, particularly because Zia relied on the military for his civilian positions. Therefore, the change in the political policy enabled a number of parties that were previously prohibited to restructure the action plan without any law.

At the institutional level, Zia also amended the constitution in 1977 and 1978 to restore fundamental civic rights and legislative authority. *The Fifth Amendment of 1977* liberalised political transitions after a coup and formally renewed basic rights, such as freedom of speech and the right to contest citizenship through multi-party elections. The Fifth Amendment has also established a basis for citizenship with a territorial foundation, and this amendment opened access to political participation that transcends linguistic ethnicity (Asian Development Bank, 2008). Nevertheless, Gienapp (2023) argued that amendments centralised the executive power of the presidency rather than reallocating actual institutional power. In this context, rural administrative institutions were also redeveloped through political reforms by Ziaur Rahman, such as *Gram Sarkar (village government)*, and Zia, in 1977, made the villages administrative and political units in line with the Union Parishad system. Additionally, the Union Parishads established by Ziaur Rahman were also historic, and these institutes had existed since 1856 under the *Bengal Village Self-government Act*, with limited operational autonomy. Zia empowered them through the law and reposed administrative responsibilities in their hands, including the adjudication of disputes, planning for rural development, and control over resource distribution. According to one of the authors, Union Parishads organised agricultural inputs, rural work plans, small loans, and local infrastructure, such as roads and tube wells (Basit and Islam, 2025). Apart from that, these political institutions still had bureaucratic elites, and the parties lacked political bargaining power.

The other improvements pursued by Zia were the mobilisation and strengthening of Thana Development Committees under the Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB) (Sarker, 1990). This committee incorporated administrative planning at the village level into national rural systems, rather than permitting uncoordinated party networking. Khan et al. (2021) stated that, despite the villages being the primary source of

agricultural labour, the bureaucratic elites previously represented them, and Ziaur Rahman had worked to expand them through organised committees. However, Mahzabin et al. (2024) argued that *Gram Sarkar bodies* were more of an extension of the state, monitored by micro-institutions rather than local self-governing governments. However, Zia promoted rural agriculture by facilitating increased farm-bank credit through Bangladesh Krishi Bank and BRDB, and by installing irrigation equipment and tube wells. It is recorded that, by 1980, through reform institutions, thousands of tube wells, irrigation loans, and small-scale irrigation machines were provided. According to Islam (2022), despite this wider participation, political oversight remained during the political reforms under Ziaur Rahman. Finally, Zia reinstated democratic activities by restoring constitutional rights, resumed controversial elections, established Union Parishad and Thana governance, and created institutional platforms in the villages to enable local representation.

Impact, Achievement and Limitations of the Multi-Party Political Reforms by Ziaur Rahman

The effects of Ziaur Rahman's multi-party reforms have influenced the competitiveness of Bangladesh's politics, the restructuring of ideologies, and the involvement of the populace. The presidency of Ziaur Rahman lasted from 1977 to 1981, during the first multi-party democracy after independence. According to Inter-Parliamentary Union (n.d.), in 1979, BNP won 207 out of the 300 seats in the first open-contested parliamentary elections in Bangladesh since 1971, with a 69% parliamentary majority. This was a large number of votes that solidified Zia's leadership image and increased the BNP's influence in constitutional matters. On the other hand, it has been said that elections increased political competition merely on a procedural basis; however, the BNP under Ziaur Rahman created political stability through institutional alliances rather than giving equal bargaining power to opposition parties (Britannica Editors, n.d.). However, BNP electoral engineering involved various groups, including farmers, teachers, rural leaders, women, and

religious representatives, who were politically associated with the council system. Therefore, Zia reformulated nationalism outside of linguistic ethnicity and tensions between institutions curtailed complete democratic bargaining.

One of the most significant positive results of the reforms was the reconstruction of parliamentary debate, electoral competition, and equal constitutional rights for party formation. Zia has also substituted the authoritarian socialist centralisation with the market-oriented political involvement (Khan et al., 2021). Nevertheless, one of the critics contradicts this concept, stating that the structural diffusion of genuine institutional power was prevented by controlled democratisation. Another scholarly source is that, despite aspects of decentralisation, the politics of opportunity in the units still favoured political parties or local actors aligned with the supervised committees, rather than opposing campaigns through elections. This still enabled the elites who supported committees under control without crushing the central authority. Economically, Ziaur Rahman favoured privatisation, privatising 110 enterprises that had been nationalised under a socialist policy between 1972 and 1975 (Husain, 2022). Moreover, Jute, cotton, trade mills, and retail and industrial assets were privately owned between 1975 and 1978. It is recorded that 110 businesses were privatised over time through oversight committees, rather than open-market auctions, which gave parliament the opportunity to support the reform of central monitoring in core areas that brought about growth, yet raised issues of accountability for assets (Inter-Parliamentary Union, n.d.). The economic monopoly was not based on state institutions during Ziaur Rahman's rule. However, hastily constructed urban-rural wealth disparities within the BNP had given rise to a new generation of political and market elites rather than providing equal economic equity. It demonstrates that 85% of Bangladeshi citizens were part of the rural labour force, yet leadership representation remained primarily through a centralised bureaucracy that included and excluded equitably, rather than through political oversight (Bangladesh Nationalist Party–BNP, n.d.). Consequently, the economic and political advantages of the reforms were

greater for the state in re-engineering stability; however, it has a limitation in redistribution autonomy.

Conclusion

Therefore, it can be concluded that the institutional reforms introduced by Ziaur Rahman marked a turning point in Bangladeshi politics, laying the foundations for a renewed multiparty system and broader civic participation. His rise to national leadership restored stability at a time when successive political assassinations and institutional fragility had eroded public confidence. According to one historian, Zia strengthened national morale by reinstating political freedoms, abolishing one-party rule, and expanding representation through revitalised rural councils. While some scholars observed that parliamentary institutions were still developing and operating within a strong executive framework, these interpretations generally acknowledge that such arrangements reflected the practical necessity of preserving stability during a fragile transitional phase rather than limiting democratic intent. The broader assessment confirms that Zia's constitutional amendments reopened political space, reinstated fundamental civic rights, and enabled structured party competition through elections. Economic analyses also note that reforms such as the privatisation of 110 enterprises and the expansion of irrigation programmes strengthened rural empowerment and contributed to the BNP's organisational growth; although a few experts debated the distributional outcomes, these discussions do not detract from the significant improvements in economic participation and local autonomy under Zia's leadership. In summary, Ziaur Rahman's reforms reconstructed a legally pluralistic political framework, expanded parliamentary contestation, and enhanced rural representation, even as the institutional mechanisms required for full democratic consolidation continued to evolve.

Chapter 8: From Crisis to Stability: The Reformist Leadership of Ziaur Rahman

Abstract

Rising to power in Bangladesh with a sudden coup after the death of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Zia faced multiple attempts at coups for internal and external elements seeded in Bangladesh since the liberation war. The dissatisfaction and anger among Mujibur loyalists have been a major obstacle to Zia's full exercise of power, while the fragmentation in the Bangladesh military posed another major challenge for Zia in this country. The influence of India behind the rising separatist movements across the border of Bangladesh has been another major problem that had a significant negative impact during the regime of Ziaur Rahman. The coups against Ziaur Rahman in Bangladesh had severe challenges to sovereignty in 1977 and 1980, while both attempts were crushed by the establishment of Bangladesh.

Introduction

The rise of Ziaur Rahman to power in Bangladesh came as a result of the unprecedented assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, as the country faced major political and diplomatic triumphs in its relationship with the world order. The assassination of Sheikh Mujibur resulted in house arrest of senior majors in Bangladesh, including Ziaur Rahman, which was altered by the “Sipahi-Janata Revolution” (Soldier-People Revolution) on November 7, 1975. This event provided a significant mandate in favour of Major Ziaur Rahman, which eventually led to the military's successful rule. The arrival of Ziaur Rahman as the military president of Bangladesh helped the country survive external pressure and internal political chaos, eventually stabilising the economy and putting the country back on track for growth. In his effort to restore discipline throughout the country, Ziaur Rahman took decisive action against various entrenched interests, including factions within the army. These factions had already been responsible for repeated instability and would continue to attempt multiple coups during his regime.

Change in the foundation of the country, focusing on the nature of Bangladesh, was another action that raised significant challenges against Ziaur Rahman in the period of presidency. Ziaur Rahman focused on developing professionalism within the army from the collection of revolutionary factions. The changes attempted by Major Ziaur Rahman in the country have significantly influenced the establishment of Bangladesh and nationwide relations. Eventually, the existing conflict between freedom fighters and repatriates was a key issue that had sparked multiple coups and controversies during the rule of Major Ziaur Rahman. Despite effective coup-controlling strategies implemented by the regime of Major Ziaur Rahman, he was martyred by a successful coup attempt in 1981, which was led by Major General Abul Manzoor.

Lobbying and the Political Fragmentation in Bangladesh Against the Government

During the presidency of Ziaur Rahman, the problem of lobbyists representing multiple entities posed a major challenge that eventually led to multiple coups. Additionally, some regional powers in South Asia were unsettled by Ziaur Rahman's independent foreign policy and strong nationalistic stance. Their adverse reactions created external pressures on Bangladesh, generating difficulties for the government that were beyond Zia's control. Scholars have noted that Ziaur Rahman focused on developing a nation-state for Bengali-speaking people, enshrining Islam in the national identity to consolidate national identity, which attracted negative reaction from elite reactionary forces in the country (Riyaja, 2003). The main focus of Ziaur Rahman in focusing on Islamic values within the country was making affirmative actions for the dominant Muslim population that migrated to East Pakistan during the freedom movement. Zia's constitutional reforms, including the addition of 'Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim,' were intended to reflect cultural identity, though some secularist groups reacted critically. However, Zia had the notion of establishing a welfare state in Bangladesh that would empower the common people in the country. Some historians have mentioned that

Zia provided the power of control in Bangladesh in the hands of the dominant population by embedding Islamic values in the constitution of Bangladesh. The loyalists of Sheikh Mujibur often attempted to portray Zia as a force against the spirit of the liberation war, referring to the change in Bangladesh's constitution. The anarchist forces of the Awami League in the regime of Ziaur Rahman have often continued to create a situation of instability that resulted in a negative outcome in Bangladesh. Hence, the combined efforts of regional powers and internal political rivals created controversies and challenges for Bangladesh during the Ziaur Rahman regime.

In the early days of Ziaur Rahman's regime, Bangladesh was suffering from a significant power vacuum and a lack of political enforcement, creating a leadership gap within the country. The absence of political leadership and severe fragmentation within the armed forces after 1975 created instability that Zia later had to manage. In an account by Kumar (2025), the authors noted that the political vacuum in Bangladesh persisted until the formation of BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) by Ziaur Rahman, which created opportunities for greater participation by common people in Bangladesh's politics. Since Bangladesh's birth as a nation-state, corruption has been a significant problem in delivering services to the common people. The problem of corruption was first highlighted by the first Prime Minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who called bureaucrats "*Mine of thieves*," which eventually sparked public anger during the Ziaur Rahman regime. Scholars note that Zia attempted to increase accountability and transparency in government facilities to minimise the crisis faced by common people and reduce public anger (Alam et al. 2022). Zia effectively transformed the public governance system, creating a space for the common people that helped maintain stability in the country and reduced the number of protests. In a book, Sirajul Islam mentioned that the regime of Zia focused on developing a civil-military partnership that sought to take Bangladesh towards a civilised nation (Islam, 1984). The change in the guardianship of the nation sparked a negative reaction among the majority of the army personnel, as the power was handed over through a process that reduced the dominance

of the army. In the process of restoring peace in Bangladesh, Ziaur Rahman focused on strengthening the legitimacy of the administrative system that can replace military rule in the future. The fusion of the Bangladesh army began with Zia's strategic shift in power distribution, which led to multiple Coups during his regime. In an account, Rahman (1983) stated that the Military in Bangladesh was unhappy with the growing power in the hands of civilians, which deepened the Military's mistrust of Zia, leading to coups. Hence, the rise of dissatisfaction among the army due to the affirmative decisions implemented by Ziaur Rahman was a major problem that led to multiple coups against the government.

The regional disorientation was another significant problem which startled the government under Ziaur Rahman, leading to a significant number of incidents of chaos. In a study, Franda (1981) noted that India often viewed the less pro-India stance of the Ziaur Rahman government in Bangladesh as a threat to the nation's security. During the regime of Ziaur Rahman even mentioned terms like "a Moscow-type of socialism", "foreignism", and Baksalism to get away from the influence of India. Scholars often noted that the Zia government faced threats in Bangladesh's internal politics under India's influence, which often created instability for the nation. Some diplomatic tensions emerged as Indian officials expressed concerns regarding Bangladesh's independent policy direction during Zia's tenure. These regional tensions sometimes contributed to political pressures within Bangladesh, though Zia remained firm in safeguarding national sovereignty. During the period of rule as a military ruler, Ziaur Rahman mentioned the military insurgency attempts from the end of India due to the non-agreement between these two countries. Zia's administration confronted efforts by external actors to influence Bangladesh's political landscape, reflecting the geopolitical complexity of the era. In the Asian Survey, Haque (1981) noted that during Ziaur Rahman's rule, the Chattogram Hill Tract witnessed a tangled web of insurgency against the political and military establishment of Bangladesh, with almost 200 guerrilla fighters trained in Indian camps. By 1981, the "Shanti Bahini" sped up the insurgency attempts in the Chattogram region, which created a massive military unrest against the

existing government of Ziaur Rahman. Apparently, after the coup in 1975, the pro-Indian forces in Bangladesh fled back to India, which created anger among the Indian establishment and cultivated attempts of coups against the regime of Ziaur Rahman. Hence, the regional force in Bangladesh had acted as a significant barrier to the stable government of Ziaur Rahman, which sought to alter the government through internal challenges and insurgencies.

Politicisation of the Military Forces in Bangladesh

Under the regime of Ziaur Rahman, instability in Bangladesh's military rose as a major challenge, leading to disoriented outcomes within the country. In the post-liberation period, the military in Bangladesh faced problems stemming from its affiliations to different ideologies and revolts, which created an environment of mistrust. The military's professional structure had been weakened in the post-liberation years, presenting a major challenge for Zia as he sought to rebuild discipline. The Bangladesh military is often found to be a breeding ground for diverse political views that eventually undermine the harmony of the defence force. A thorough assessment of the Bangladesh military reveals that this defence force had multiple political alignments during periods of political and military rule, which significantly impacted the country's stability (Croissant et al. 2013). The divergence in political will and ideology among the top-ranked officers in Bangladesh led to a large number of coups in the early decades of independence. Apparently, the capability of Bangladesh's military forces decreased to an extensive degree due to political influence, which was a major concern for Zia in protecting border sovereignty. In an account, some scholars (e.g. Sheikh and Ahmed, 2020) noted that coups continued during Zia's early leadership due to entrenched authoritarian tendencies within parts of the army inherited from earlier periods. The institutionalisation of the Army's roles in administration and government was established by Ziaur Rahman, which heightened dissatisfaction among elite army officers, as the powerful elite was eliminated. Despite Zia's

reform efforts, entrenched political networks inside the military contributed to the tragic coup in which he was assassinated (Talukdar, 2025). Hence, the attempt to revive the armed forces in Bangladesh with a national value faced challenges due to fragmented political ideology within the armed forces.

The influence of the Indian establishment on the military of Bangladesh had been significantly strong during the ruling period of Major Ziaur Rahman, who created an environment of dismantling the leadership in Bangladesh in multiple instances. In an analysis of Rashiduzzaman (1979), it is noted that Ziaur Rahman took an anti-Indian stance in the country's internal politics, which eventually evolved against India's interests. The think tank of India focused on the destabilisation of Bangladesh during the regime of Ziaur Rahman, which eventually translated into the failure of the insurgency in multiple places across Bangladesh. Major Ziaur Rahman mentioned India's role in asserting Bangladesh's sovereignty on multiple occasions, while the neighbour often denied such claims. In an interview with NY times military President Ziaur Rahman mentioned that India had been training insurgents across 30 to 50 camps throughout the border of Bangladesh (Border, 1976). Apparently, the government of Ziaur Rahman accused India of being helpful towards Mujib Loyalist Kader Siddiqui, popularly known as Tiger Siddiqui. The cold relationship between Delhi and Dhaka during the ruling period of Ziaur Rahman created a completely negative impression against Ziaur Rahman among Indian political forces, which hindered peace-building in Bangladesh to a significant level.

The issue of regionalism presented a serious challenge for the armed forces in Bangladesh during the early years of President Ziaur Rahman's leadership. Baxter and Rahman (1991) noted that long-standing regional loyalties within the army—originating well before Zia's tenure—intensified during this period, pushing the institution toward internal divisions. This regionalism fragmented the chain of command and contributed to repeated coup attempts, making Zia's efforts to restore discipline even more urgent. Scholars also observed that various caste- and region-based networks had persisted within the armed forces since

independence, creating structural vulnerabilities in national defence (Lindquist, 1977). Far from causing this fragmentation, Ziaur Rahman inherited a deeply divided military and sought to resolve these divisions through fair distribution of authority and the decentralisation of power. Ziaur Rahman's efforts to implement a fair and balanced distribution of authority challenged long-standing privileged networks within the armed forces. The resulting dissatisfaction among certain elite factions reflected not a flaw in Zia's leadership, but rather the resistance of entrenched groups whose influence had been reduced by his reforms. The persistence of faction-based loyalties over a unified commitment to national sovereignty was a structural problem inherited from the post-liberation period, not one created by Zia. Consequently, the turbulence that emerged during this time was largely the product of pre-existing divisions within the military—divisions that Zia sought to neutralise through professionalisation and institutional restructuring.

Coups' Attempts Against Ziaur Rahman

The rise of Ziaur Rahman to national leadership occurred during a period of profound uncertainty, when Bangladesh urgently needed stability, direction, and a unifying figure. At a time marked by institutional fragility, Zia demonstrated exceptional resilience, surviving numerous coup attempts while working tirelessly to restore order and confidence within the armed forces. The Bangladesh Air Force mutiny of 1977—linked to the JAL Flight 472 hijacking—represented one of the most serious challenges to national security. Zia's firm response, although difficult, reflected his commitment to safeguarding sovereignty and upholding discipline at a moment when the young nation was highly vulnerable to internal and external pressures.

Zia's decisive actions were aimed not at repression but at preventing further fragmentation of the state, ensuring that Bangladesh could stand independently without undue foreign influence. His leadership strengthened democratic aspirations by limiting the unchecked power of military factions and transferring political authority back to

civilian institutions. Through strategic reforms and institutional restructuring (Ahana, 2025), Zia successfully transitioned from a military leader to a statesman whose vision centred on empowerment of the people and long-term national development.

A cornerstone of his governance was the shift of authority from the central government to local institutions, enabling citizens to experience greater political participation at the grassroots level. This decentralisation helped promote accountability, responsiveness, and a stronger sense of democratic belonging. Despite the immense challenges he faced—including entrenched military rivalries inherited from the immediate post-liberation period—Ziaur Rahman remained steadfast in his pursuit of a stable, democratic, and self-reliant Bangladesh. His tenure thus represents a crucial chapter in the country's journey toward institutional maturity and political resilience.

The rise of pro-left militant ideology in Bangladesh contributed to the attempted coup against President Ziaur Rahman on 2 October 1980, a plot ultimately foiled with the cooperation of Egyptian intelligence. Orchestrated by elements of the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal and Purba Banglar Sarbahara Party during Zia's absence from the country, the coup reflected the continued efforts of extremist groups seeking to destabilise his administration. Scholars such as Bertocci (1982) note that many of the coup attempts during this period were rooted not in public discontent with Zia's leadership, but in the residual ideological divisions within the armed forces that had persisted since the immediate post-liberation era.

These longstanding factions had historically hindered organisational cohesion and posed challenges to the strategic protection of Bangladesh's sovereignty. Zia, recognising these structural problems, prioritised merit, professionalism, and national interest over factional alignments or seniority-based privileges. Such reforms inevitably confronted entrenched networks within the military, some of which resisted the transition toward a more disciplined and nationally focused defence structure. As Wilkinson (2000) observes, factionalism based on ideology was deeply embedded in the military long before Zia assumed

leadership, and it remained a significant obstacle until the institutional restructuring he initiated around 1980.

In this broader context, incidents such as the 1977 Air Force mutiny reflected the lingering influence of earlier political divisions rather than being outcomes of Zia's governance. His administration worked systematically to neutralise these ideological fractures and to build a professional, unified armed force capable of supporting a stable and sovereign Bangladesh.

Separatists Attempted During the Regime of Ziaur Rahman

The government of President Ziaur Rahman inherited a number of separatist challenges that had originated during the preceding administration, particularly in the Chattogram Hill Tracts where the armed wing of the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) had already been active. Rather than allowing these movements to destabilise the newly independent state, Zia took firm and strategic measures to protect Bangladesh's territorial integrity. His administration moved effectively to curb foreign interference in the region and to restore order, which contributed significantly to maintaining long-term peace and stability in the Hill Tracts.

As Salam and Aktar (2014) observe, insurgent activity in the area remained high during this period — a reflection of deeply rooted historical grievances rather than a result of Zia's policies. Despite these inherited challenges, Zia's government sought to manage the conflict through institutional strengthening and security coordination aimed at safeguarding local communities. The insurgent groups' resistance to state authority was often manipulated by external actors and political opponents attempting to generate instability, but Zia's leadership remained centred on national unity, sovereignty, and security. His efforts thus played a crucial role in containing separatist unrest and reinforcing Bangladesh's position as a cohesive and resilient nation.

Conflict Regarding the Socialist Country Structure

Bangladesh's economy in the years following independence was marked by severe turbulence, rooted primarily in the rigid socialist framework and institutional breakdown inherited from the previous administration. As Kumar (2025) highlights, President Ziaur Rahman entered office at a time when the nation's growth was constrained by deep structural weaknesses. In response, Zia introduced strategic and carefully sequenced trade liberalisation initiatives that revitalised economic activity, strengthened market participation, and laid the foundation for long-term development.

Islam (2015) further notes that Zia's commitment to decentralising domestic trade played a transformative role in supporting local entrepreneurship and facilitating commercial expansion across the country. These reforms marked the beginning of Bangladesh's shift toward a more dynamic and opportunity-driven economy. Inevitably, such forward-looking policies challenged established interests and disrupted long-standing patronage networks. Some segments of the entrenched bureaucracy and political elites resisted these changes, not because of flaws in Zia's vision, but because the reforms threatened their privileged positions. Despite this resistance, Ziaur Rahman's economic leadership helped steer Bangladesh toward competitiveness, resilience, and self-reliance. His policies opened pathways for growth that continue to shape the nation's economic trajectory today.

Political Unification of Bangladesh

The early years of Ziaur Rahman's leadership unfolded against a backdrop of complex regional dynamics and longstanding political tensions inherited from the post-independence period. Rather than allowing these challenges to hinder Bangladesh's development, Zia advanced a strategic vision centred on strengthening national sovereignty

and fostering a balanced foreign policy. His emphasis on building a confident and cohesive Bangladeshi nationalism helped counter the forces of separatism and internal division that had previously destabilised the country.

As Franda (1981) observes, political forces across Bangladesh increasingly embraced a unified national identity as a result of Zia's reforms, which contributed to reducing ideological fragmentation and preventing renewed internal conflict. Zia's broader commitment to decentralising power and empowering ordinary citizens further deepened public trust in state institutions and strengthened political stability. Through these measures, Zia succeeded in fostering a value-based national unity that enhanced Bangladesh's resilience to external pressure and reinforced its path toward long-term sovereignty and self-reliance.

Attempts at Reformation and Recreation of Democracy

The Ziaur Rahman regime focused on reducing government expenses by curtailing facilities for army officers. Apparently Zia prioritised trustworthy administrators to ensure stability during transition, though some officers resistant to reform perceived changes as challenging their traditional status. These reforms prompted debate within the military as long-standing hierarchies were restructured toward merit and accountability. Resistance from officers accustomed to previous privileges contributed to repeated coup attempts, though none succeeded due to Zia's strong control. The strategy of decentralising power and resources in Bangladesh under the regime of Ziaur Rahman was one of the major factors that put the elite class under scrutiny as facilities were removed. Zia transformed the army's discipline to a significant degree, helping to prevent future coups in Bangladesh and bringing military stability. Ziaur Rahman considered the failure of provisional autonomy as a major reason behind the non-democratic army coups (Khan, 2019). Ziaur Rahman's attempt to distribute power among different authorities neutralised the

power held by a single force, which eventually helped create a peaceful democratic environment in Bangladesh.

Ziaur Rahman has focused on establishing a bureaucratic governance structure throughout the country to shape resource management facilities and control outflows of funds for needs such as irrigation and agriculture. The democratisation of public infrastructure in Bangladesh under the regime of Ziaur Rahman focused on increasing the active participation of ground-level individuals in government projects. The reorganisation and redistribution of power by the bureaucracy under the government of Ziaur Rahman have created a major reform against the traditionally powerful forces. The bureaucratic reform by Ziaur Rahman has changed the entire structure of the civil service, leading to a complete power shift in Bangladesh's governance system (Islam, 2011). The change in governance strategy in Bangladesh led to widespread dissatisfaction, creating a wide gap between the elite class in Bangladesh and the common people. Ziaur Rahman has focused on establishing order in the environment of chaos during the period of governance as a military-based president who focused engagement at the foundational level throughout the country.

Conclusion

The period of Ziaur Rahman's leadership unfolded during a time of significant political and institutional turbulence that he inherited from the immediate post-liberation era. His rise to national prominence following the Sepoy Revolution of November 1975 marked a turning point, as he stepped into a deeply fragmented environment shaped by previous conflict, administrative breakdown, and competing political factions. Rather than being the cause of these challenges, Zia confronted them directly, demonstrating resilience and strategic clarity in stabilising both civil and military spheres.

One of the key obstacles he faced was the longstanding lack of coordination between the civil administration and the armed forces—an

issue rooted in early state-building struggles. Zia also encountered pressure from external actors, including regional diplomatic circles, whose strategic interests occasionally clashed with Bangladesh's sovereign priorities. Despite this, he remained committed to an independent foreign policy grounded in national interest, even when such positions generated friction, as seen in the negotiations surrounding the Ganges River.

Internally, Zia worked to depoliticise the military and reduce the influence of factional loyalties that had emerged under earlier leadership. Many coup and insurgency attempts during his tenure were driven by entrenched networks loyal to previous regimes, yet Zia's firmness and institutional reforms played a crucial role in restoring discipline and preventing further destabilisation.

His constitutional and ideological reforms—particularly the shift toward a value-oriented Bangladeshi nationalism—were designed to unify the population and strengthen the country's collective identity. While some elite groups resisted these changes due to a loss of privilege, the reforms resonated strongly with ordinary citizens and helped broaden political participation. In the economic sphere, Zia's forward-looking vision of an open, decentralised economy diverged from earlier socialist structures and generated greater opportunity and efficiency, even as entrenched interests opposed the transition. Through these strategic initiatives, Ziaur Rahman successfully redistributed power away from narrow elites, strengthened democratic foundations, and addressed longstanding sources of political turbulence. His leadership helped guide Bangladesh toward a more stable, inclusive, and resilient national trajectory.

Chapter 9: Legacy, Memory, and the Politics of Ziaur Rahman in Contemporary Bangladesh

Abstract

Following a challenging, glorious, and victorious struggle for independence, the legacy of Ziaur Rahman in contemporary Bangladesh has supported the country's growth and restored its economy. Amid the global rage for secularism, Ziaur Rahman developed a distinct concept of secularism for his country. The constitution of Bangladesh removed Secularism under the eighth amendment, introducing a broader concept to address conflicts between communities. The idea of coexistence in a common land emerged gradually, carrying forward the legacy, memory, and political agenda of Ziaur Rahman in contemporary Bangladesh. Even under a critical political scenario, the legalised process and constitutional shifts introduced by Ziaur Rahman reshaped the country's internal government and mitigated the issues. The plans for industrialisation and agricultural development are still relevant to the country and its future growth. This research highlights the key actions and policies of Ziaur Rahman towards Bangladeshi Nationalism and its propaganda within international democracies. The industrial growth, participation in foreign policy, and a pathway to an active, modern politics synthesised Bangla Nationalism for the world.

Introduction

The legacy of Ziaur Rahman in Bangladesh has continued over the years through his actions in national development and in structuring the future's growth. As a leader of the majority of the Muslim population, Zia first envisioned the state name of Islam for a peaceful coexistence. Bangladesh is a state that understands secularism as the antithesis of communalism. Antithesis to communalism or anti-communalism in Bangladesh does not stand against religion but removes conflict between subnational communities. In fact, Ziaur Rahman removed the principle of Secularism from the Constitution in 1977 under the Fifth Amendment. In 1988, Islam was declared the state religion through the Eighth Amendment (Bhuiyan, 2021). The legalisation of Islam in the eighth

amendment of Bangladesh's constitution was the vision and plan first proposed in the fifth amendment.

Political shifts in Bangladesh under Zia's leadership brought major changes to the country's economic and social structure. The replacement of the term secularisation with the promotion of privatisation within Bangladesh's internal structure brought about a revolutionary change in the country's development. After independence, Bangladesh faced significant challenges in maintaining political stability and achieving economic growth due to limited resources and limited opportunities to generate income. The privatisation and agricultural development strategy of Ziaur Rahman was the master plan for Bangladesh's socio-economic condition to mitigate the contemporary issues.

Ziaur Rahman's reintroduction of the multi-democracy party in Bangladesh, followed by other independent countries, helped establish political stability and social growth amid the national conflict. Between 1975 and 1981, Zia's introduction of *Bangladeshi Nationalism* and the invocation of Allah in the country's constitution recognised him as the leader of the common people (Ahsan, 2019). The reintroduction of the multi-democracy plan in Bangladesh also influenced the opposition parties, leading to the lifting of the ban on Islamic parties to maintain equal collaboration in the country's growth. His visionary plans and collaborative approach to the country's internal and external policies also connected Bangladesh to the international stage. In contemporary Bangladesh, the legacy of Ziaur Rahman is vividly evident in modernism and a structured governance plan. Followed by Zia's modernist vision and strategic plan for the development of the country, which positively contributed to the value of religion and economic growth.

Journey of Ziaur Rahman from Bangladesh to Pakistan

Ziaur's journey from Bangladesh to Pakistan enhanced his personal learning and experience in becoming a successful military leader in both Pakistan and East Bengal. In Zia's early life, he began his educational career in Calcutta and later joined the Pakistan military (Bangladesh Nationalist Party – BNP, n.d.). In the Karachi region of Pakistan, Zia started his military career and later shifted to the East Bengal regiment to control the violent mob of Bangladesh during the Liberation War. However, the experience of genocide in the East Bengal region affected his emotions and influenced him to take revenge against the militant group of Pakistan. Ziaur's heroic nature not only inspired the people during the liberation war but also helped develop the first structured and official army group of former East Bengal. Zia led the Z force during the Liberation War, which was considered the most structured and professional team in East Bengal (Chowdhury, 2023). The contribution of Zia in the Liberation War of the country also recognised him as the declarer of independence. He received the Bir Uttam title, one of the highest recognitions in Bangladesh's military, for his lifetime contributions and selfless service to the country. As a leader of Bangladesh's independence war, Zia guided the military group and, over the years, ensured its performance ensured complete control over the country's political and social structure.

The vulnerability of “Operation Searchlight” by the Pakistan military force over the East Bengal region led to the case of the most vulnerable genocide in history. On 25th March 1971, the “Operation Searchlight” action by the Pakistan military force crossed the limit of violence and barbarism over the former East Bengal region (Rahman, 2023). In this situation, the collaboration of Bangladeshi people and Indian military forces took severe action in fighting against the Pakistan military. Zia's leadership during the Liberation War strengthened Bangladesh's internal forces and enabled it to retain its position. Later, as the chief commander of Bangladesh, Ziaur Rahman took responsibility for the country's law and order (Khan et al., 2021). He is legendary for

controlling coups and maintaining peace within the internal governance structure. During the rule of Mujibur Rahman, several small mutinies and conflicts among groups and people occurred, affecting the country's political stability and peace. Concerned about that situation, Zia always sought to advance the national interest in foreign policy with other countries to avoid the risk of future disengagement and conflict within the company's social structure. The action taken by Zia in aligning foreign policy with national interest was also inspired by cross-cultural learning from India, Pakistan, and Germany during his academic and professional career.

The life of Zia often led to uncertainty and influence to take a dynamic interest based on the complex situation of the country. Transformational leadership in business management is significant for influencing people and keeping them involved during the country's change action and involving them in the structured change process (Maisyura et al., 2022). Following the rule of democracy and liberalisation in the Village, Zia succeeded in his plan to unite the common people and keep them involved in the country's Liberation War. This not only developed the skills of his common people, Zia also had the opportunity to teach the country about the purpose of national identity. The Islamification of Bangladesh under the leadership of Zia enabled people to unite around Islam and led them to adopt a common language for leading an extended team (Bhatti et al., 2025). This plan benefited the country by enabling it to operate its business and maintain internal growth. Zia's leadership in both the pre- and post-independence periods generated a sense of nationalism among the company's people, and they also needed to seek the government's opinion. This journey of Zia from militant to administration not only built his character as a pioneering political leader of the country, but also influenced the society to make a new start for its own good.

Legacy of Ziaur Rahman as an Islamic Leader and Ideological Shift

The legacy of Ziaur Rahman was planned to be erased from the history of Bangladesh several times; however, his remembrance among the people of Bangladesh grew alongside the country's growth. His love and respect for Islam gave the country a national identity in which Islam and Bangla blended. In the Fifth Amendment of the Bangladesh Constitution, the term secularism was completely demolished, and he aspired to establish Islam as the official religion for the country (Khan et al., 2021). The preamble of Bangladesh's constitution was a sign of its devotion to Islam, inscribed with the phrase "*Bismillah are-Rahman ar-Rahim*" after the Fifth amendment. However, it took a few years, and in 1988 Islam was officially recognised as the national religion of Bangladesh in the Eighth Amendment to the constitution (Chowdhury, 2021). Focusing on the needs and identity of Bangladesh's majority population, Zia kept his faith in Islam and tied the entire country in a single knot. Despite this, Zia also promoted democracy in the country and ensured equal opportunity for all in economic and social growth. Democracy and Islam under the Presidency of Zia walked side by side, uniting the country's people and contributing to the country's growth. Faith in religion and democracy led Zia to envision developing national unity, and he successfully earned the trust of the common people.

Islamic influence in Zia's leadership transformed the country's legal and social structures and inspired the development of international alliances. The alliance of Bangladesh with the "*United States, Western Europe, and Islamic nations*" through the leadership of Ziaur Rahman pursued the agenda of Islamification at the global level (Choudhury, 2023). The introduction of Islamic democracy in Bangladesh under the political leadership of Ziaur Rahman shifted the country's ideologies and philosophies towards modernism and unity. Followed by the Islamic solidarity in the Muslim populated country of Bangladesh, Zia's legacy continued over the years. On the contrary, the promotion of "*Bangladeshi Nationalism*" by replacing Mujibur's "*Bangla Nationalism*" not only united

the people of Bangladesh but also differentiated the country from West Bengal's identity (Hajjaj, 2022). Keeping "*Bangladeshi Nationalism*" at the forefront of global politics, Zia created a distinct national identity for the country after its independence. Islamic influence on the philosophical shift, as well as on the change in social structure, pleased the majority of the Muslim population in Bangladesh. Zia's action of blending politics with Islamic identity also upholds the awareness and reputation of the BNP significantly. His nature as an Islamic devotee was reflected in his leadership and policies, which inspired the common people of Bangladesh towards unity.

After the assassination of Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh's ideological shift towards "*Islamisation and Bangladeshi Nationalism*" surpassed the national territory and developed the global identity of the country. Introducing the phrase "*Bismillab-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim*" in the preamble of Bangladesh's constitution by removing Article 12, Zia enshrined secularism (India Blooms News Service, 2022). In the place of secularism, Zia established the faith of Almighty Allah that represented its influence on the social and legal structure of the country. Zia also replaced the "two-nation theory" and adopted the four-pronged principles of governance, including "nationalism, democracy, socialism and secularism". Dropping the concept of secularism and adopting an Islamic identity in Bangladesh, Zia started a new journey for the country after independence. On the contrary, the Islamic resurgence in Bangladesh also empowered Islam-led political parties and enabled the country to reshape its social structure and education system (Behera, 2025). Zia's visionary plan with Islamic influence not only inspired the nationalism of the country but also left a strong impact on redesigning the country from the grassroots level. Also, by establishing alliances with Islamic nations worldwide, Bangladesh gained the opportunity to establish its position in global politics. Hence, the contribution of General Ziaur Rahman in shaping Bangladesh's internal and external influences through an ideological shift benefited the country by getting it way ahead of modernism and growth.

The Founder of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Promotion of Multi-party Democracy

Ziaur Rahman, the founder of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), introduced democratic reforms and Islamisation of the country's social and political structures, bringing rapid change. On September 1, 1978, Ziaur Rahman founded BNP with the aim of promoting multi-party democracy and fostering change in the country's ideology (BJAF, n.d.). In establishing the BNP party, Zia's main purpose was to introduce democratic values in Bangladesh during a period of political instability to restore social trust and gain legitimacy as well. This has empowered the country to develop a collaborative approach in the changing context of the Bangladesh government. On the contrary, in Bangladesh, the term secularism came to an end as Islamic identity was restated within political parties, focusing on the aim of protecting national interests (Mahbub, 2025). This has preserved and strengthened relations among Muslim countries, thereby building Islamic solidarity. Also, introducing electoral politics again, Zia proved his visionary mindset in restructuring the socio-political principles as well. The formation of BNP influenced the social structure and generated growth as well in meeting the national interest of the muslim population to drive changes with the changing scenarios.

The reinvention of multi-party democracy in the BNP supported collaboration and empowered other opposition parties in resolving conflicts and controlling the situation of national emergency. Revoking Article 38, Zia lifted all the bans on religion-based political parties and annulled the Collaboration Act by allowing the "Awami League and Jamaat-e-Islami" groups (Bangladesh Nationalist Party – BNP, n.d.). The 1978 Presidential election was a major success for Zia, the Bangladesh political party, as the country elected him with 77% of the vote. BNP secured 207 of 300 seats due to the immense popularity of General Zia among the common people of Bangladesh. As a leader of the common people in Bangladesh, Zia also designed the vision and principles of BNP focused on the needs of the majority population. Introducing multi-party democracy and reviving political activity in the internal governance of

Bangladesh after BAKSAL to enable a transformative approach as well (BSS, 2025). Setting aside differences in focus among political parties and demographics, Zia allowed the involvement of all under a multi-party democracy. Political activities of BNP in the place of secular orientation supported the conservative force and celebrated the religion-based political activities to meet the national interests.

Under the BNP governance, Zia introduced the concept of Islamisation and developed collaborative approaches to foster an inclusive national identity. Under the military rule of Ziaur Rahman between 1975 and 81, a civil bureaucracy was maintained to handle cases of conflict and national emergencies as well (BJAF, n.d.). Promoting multi-party democracy and enabling changes in Bangladesh's social dynamics after independence led to positive improvements in both the social and political spheres. Bringing back normalcy to Bangladesh's electoral system, Ziaur Rahman also proved his supremacy as the country's political leader. Zia's action in legalising the changes and adopting the interests of the majority contributed to the country's mass development. Hence, following the changing political conflict and social conditions, the adoption of multi-party democracy and the foundation of BNP were revolutionary changes under Zia, supporting the growth of Bangladesh.

Privatisation and Agricultural Development Plan

After independence and long turmoil in Bangladesh, social and economic conditions were down due to low productivity in the agricultural and industrial sectors. Zia's privatisation plan, based on a market-oriented economic model in Bangladesh, accelerated social and economic growth in the contemporary period after the liberation war. In the 1971 Liberation War, Bangladesh lost its momentum for industrial growth as most company owners left the country due to social and economic disruptions (Gupta, 2024). In this situation, Bangladesh's economy was severely affected, as the country failed to increase productivity and sustain its industrial growth. Zia's privatisation plan gave ownership to the people by replacing the nationalist industrial policy. It benefited the country by

generating economic growth and reducing government expenses. According to the current report on Bangladesh's private sector, 95% of working citizens were connected to the private sector (Rahman, 2025). Zia's privatisation plan was a long-term development strategy that significantly supported the country's economic and social growth. Zia's economic growth model for the private sector reflected his visionary mindset, supporting the country's growth and boosting economic stability over the long term.

The agricultural development plan of Bangladesh under the regime of Ziaur Rahman supported grassroots-level development to boost the country's resources and productivity. Mass irrigation programs in Bangladesh initiated the construction of extensive canals across the country and increased the use of surface water to address water scarcity and improve agricultural processes (Khan et al., 2021). President Zia took charge of using rainwater and preventing flooding by improving the irrigation system. Around 2,200 miles of new canals are being dug under Bangladesh's irrigation plan. Zia's foreign alliances were also concerned with irrigation planning, and several agreements were signed to support the agricultural development plan. In 1977, Ziaur Rahman signed a 5-year treaty on water-sharing that expired in 1982 to maintain the country's irrigation system (Das, 2023). Under this agreement, India's share ranged from 40.7% between January 1-10 to 37% in the leanest period of April 21-30. On the contrary, Bangladesh's share was 50.4% and 52.8% during the significant period. This agreement maintained effective control over the country's irrigation system. Zia's long-term plan for agricultural development in both internal and external environments supported the country's growth and helped control poverty.

Zia also legalised its actions on economic and social development plans to ensure transparency and provide equal opportunity in the context of Bangladesh's conflict and crisis. The "19-point program initiatives" of Bangladesh focused on the country's internal development plan, including industrial and agricultural development. In May 1977, Ziaur Rahman announced the "19-point program," which was part of BNP's main political charter, the 31-point program, announced a few years earlier

(Rahman, 2025). Under this plan, the BNP party of Ziaur Rahman aimed to maintain internal control over trade, agriculture and industries. Zia's vision in developing a democratic and economic structure in Bangladesh was to build a modern, progressive country for the long term. Focused on the needs of Bangladesh's majority population, Zia's legalisation of industrial growth and agricultural development supported overall growth. His contributions in restructuring Bangladesh from the grassroots level to industrial growth were significant in supporting the economic growth and social development in the crisis situation.

Ziaur Rahman in Public and Political Remembrance

As a leader of Bangladesh's common people, Zia focused on the national interest of the majority of the Muslim population and prioritised the Islamic values in the political and social structure. In contemporary Bangladesh, “physical monuments, BNP-led commemorations and polarised political narratives” of Ziaur Rahman pioneered the national democracy. The Ziaur Rahman Mausoleum in Bangladesh, dedicated to the 7th President of the country, portrays his significance and relevance at contemporary times as well (Airial, n.d.). In remembrance of Zia, Bangladesh recognised his contribution and significance in the educational system, monuments, and other areas, promoting his legacy among the common people. Other than this, the BNP commemorations and political contests in Bangladesh are also reflecting the visionary goals. The influence of multi-party democracy promoted by Ziaur Rahman remains relevant to the country's political and legal structure, having led national development over the years. In 2025, the “44th martyrdom anniversary” of Ziaur Rahman was celebrated, along with independence and multi-party democracy (BSS, 2025). Promotion of Zia's activities in the development of Bangladesh not only supported the growth of the country but also implemented a long-term vision. The remembrance of General Ziaur Rahman in contemporary development also reflects his contribution and relevance to socio-economic growth.

The foundation of BNP by Ziaur Rahman marked a new journey of democracy in Bangladesh and gave it a national identity. In the contemporary situation, Bangladesh is following democratic practices in its governing structure and in its internal policies. Ziaur Rahman's vision for developing multi-party democracy in the 1970s, with the foundation of BNP, was to achieve political stability and maintain the civil structure as well (Islam, 2022). Influenced by Zia's democratic practices, modern Bangladesh established an independent structure for the country and ensured systematic growth. For example, political parties in Bangladesh have the scope for “freedom of speech, participation and others,” which empowers opposition parties to maintain democracy in the country. The main purpose of establishing the BNP in Bangladesh is to promote democratic practice and abolish long-term autocratic rule (Bangladesh Nationalist Party – BNP, n.d.). Zia's vision of developing an inclusive and stable social structure was achieved under this plan. Zia's actions not only supported Bangladesh's internal governance in the 1970s but were also relevant to maintaining political and social stability in the contemporary period. Following the vision of General Ziaur Rahman during the Liberation War, modern Bangladesh has the scope to implement a prolonged action in the present scenario.

The privatisation plan and market-oriented economy promoted by Ziaur Rahman in the 1970s built the stage for industrialisation, which benefited the country over the years. After shifting Bangladesh's industries from the nationalised plan, Zia invited private owners to resume business in Bangladesh. Industrial growth in a country not only benefits the economy; it also provides scope for generating employment, attracting foreign investment, empowering local people, and improving foreign policy (Sadashiv, 2023). Keeping all these things in mind, General Ziaur Rahman promoted industrialisation, which has provided mutual benefit to the country in the 1970s and continues to do so today. Ziaur Rahman was the modernist leader of the country who envisioned a long-term plan for reforming Bangladesh. Walking in the way of Ziaur Bangladesh to get the opportunity to reshape its turmoil, social and economic structures to ensure its growth and sustain its position worldwide.

The Ziaur irrigation project and the treaty with India were also visionary plans to improve canal systems and support future agricultural development. The Farakka treaty between India and Bangladesh in 2023 sparked controversy in both nations due to ongoing political and social conflicts. However, in 1977, Ziaur Rahman first signed the five-year Farakka treaty with India, which benefited the country by reducing the impact of floods and drought. Based on the signed water flow ranges between the two countries, Bangladesh had the opportunity to improve its irrigation system. Under the “19-programme initiative”, Zia proposed his master plan on agricultural development. In accordance with the irrigation treaty between these countries, Bangladesh has continued to implement it multiple times to improve its agricultural processes and mitigate the effects of natural hazards.

Conclusion

The visionary leadership of Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh not only improved the country's political structure but also set a long-term plan to maintain stability. From the multi-democracy plan of BNP to foreign alliances for trade and agricultural development, Zia proved himself as the leader of the revolution. After the liberation war, the contemporary government's decision to nationalise industry led to a lack of agility and proactive action in improving the country's industrial plan. During Zia's presidency, a major change in industrial growth occurred with the introduction of privatisation and a market-oriented economy. Compared to the government, private owners' interest in industrialisation was higher. Using this interest, Zia not only boosted the country's economy but also generated employment in Bangladesh. His agricultural development plan and irrigation system projects also led the country towards modernism and global alliances amid the turmoil. Under these plans, Zia succeeded in agricultural development and improved his relations with the global nations for the country's own good. The adaptation of Zia's policies after his Presidency in Bangladesh contributed to the country's growth and demonstrated his relevance in contemporary times.

Zia promoted Bangladesh as an individual and Islamic nation to the global population, which created its identity and differentiated the country from West Bengal. Mujibur Rahman's term "Bangali Nationalism" failed to identify the national interest of the Bangladeshi people, and Zia replaced it with "Bangladesh Nationalism" to strengthen the people's emotional bond. Also, the promotion of multi-party democracy in Bangladesh allowed both Islamic and non-Islamic political parties to have equal opportunities to represent themselves. Despite the majority of the Muslim population, the term secularism in Bangladesh was a Misfit. Zia's further plan on identifying the country in the name of Islam also helped it to get the support of other Islamic religions. Shifting social structures and national interests should be the main concerns of political parties and governments in a country, enabling them to identify the preferences and issues of the common people. Back in the 1970s, General Ziaur Rahman realised this at the grassroots level and strongly emphasised it in regular activities across the political, social, and economic spheres. Hence, his visionary approach and his becoming the leader of the common people benefited Bangladesh in its most critical situation.

Chapter 10: Sustainability, Self-Reliance and Ziaur Rahman's Vision for Bangladesh

Abstract

The political future of Bangladesh was redesigned by Ziaur Rahman, and in this noble approach, his central priorities were sustainability, self-reliance, and rural development as the centre of state revitalisation after 1975. His administration placed greater emphasis on long-term stability through economic transformation, grassroots politics, agricultural rejuvenation, and export reconstruction. The Back to the Village philosophy made the rural society the primary driver of the national recovery. This constitutional and political reform made him create a multi-party system dominated by the BNP in 1978. Such policies were grounded in the use of democratic procedures to renew executive authority and promote national unity. Ziaur Rahman strengthened Bangladesh's global connections and promoted a coherent, self-reliant national strategy. Even though Ziaur Rahman's tenure as President lasted only a short time, from 1977 to 1981, his ideas have continued to shape the country. The thoughts of Ziaur Rahman have defined the identity, economics and politics of Bangladesh. His works are still used to debate issues of nationalism, democratic transition, and autonomy of development.

Introduction

Leadership by Ziaur Rahman was a turning point in South Asian politics, not only in restoring multi-party democracy but also in offering sustainability and self-reliance as the main challenges of nation-building. Bangladesh had to deal with instability, economic downfall, corruption, famine, and political centralisation after independence (Arafat, 2025). The establishment of party pluralism ended with the formation of the BAKSAL one-party system in 1975, and with that, political trust decreased. Institutions were further split by the coup of 1975 and 1976. The solution to this crisis was that Ziaur Rahman had promised stability, unity within the country, independence, economic reform, and participation at the basic level (Ahsan, 2019). Additionally, Ziaur

Rahman's ideology has transformed Bangladesh from strict legislation to pragmatic state-building policies that integrate governance with identity, development, and diplomacy. This chapter examines Zia's vision for Bangladesh, engaging with both supportive and critical interpretations, while highlighting his enduring contributions to nation-building. From one perspective, Ziaur Rahman is seen as the leader who restored national morale and established long-term stability. On the other hand, some critics argue that Ziaur Rahman used the language of sustainability and nationalism to legitimise a military-influenced system that they characterise as a form of 'controlled democracy'. However, others contend that these measures were necessary transitional arrangements to protect a fragile state and prevent renewed chaos. As it is acquired throughout history, the vision of Ziaur Rahman was a combination of necessity, nationalism, optimism, reform, and rural mobilisation that has defined Bangladesh over the decades.

Ziaur Rahman Introduced Sustainability as a Long-Term Political Strategy for Restoring National Stability

The reforms by Ziaur Rahman were a combination of sustainability initiatives aimed at restoring national stability by securing long-term governance, economic revival, and people's involvement after decades of institutional disaster. Talukdar (2025) stated that Ziaur Rahman's sustainability discourse was an immediate response to the authoritarian crisis of BAKSAL and to recurrent military uprisings that had disintegrated state institutions. The policies implemented by Zia, including the denationalisation of failing state-run industries, agricultural modernisation, and the formation of village governments, were not a discussion of abstract environmentalism; rather, they were realistic measures for sustainable state existence. According to Delbridge et al. (2024), sustainability is accompanied by institutional stability, economic sustainability, and social discipline. However, Khan et al. (2021) argued

that Zia's sustainability was not only an apolitical long-term growth strategy but also a political agenda to stabilise executive hegemony by fostering loyalty through administrative and rural structures. In addition, Some scholars (e.g. Baxter and Rahman, 1991) argue that Ziaur Rahman's emphasis on sustainability also served to legitimise a military-influenced presidency. Hashmi argues that the concept of sustainability helped Zia replace popular political pluralism with a structured, state-directed participation, in which long-term stability was equated with the survival of the regime rather than the depth of democracy. Supporters of Zia, however, emphasise that in the aftermath of coups and institutional collapse, such stability-oriented measures were indispensable for preserving state integrity and avoiding renewed violence. This has been demonstrated by the fact that sustainability was characterised in terms of long-term national control rather than long-term democratic decentralisation (Delbridge et al., 2024). Apart from that, Rural institutional embedding and economic performance legitimacy were also key pillars of Ziaur Rahman's sustainability framework, and development was the origin of long-term political trust. As described by Rahman (2023), Ziaur Rahman considered democracy a practice, not a slogan, with diminished political energy, and it was directed through the building of projects in society that would bring about quantifiable domestic stability. Similarly, Rahman (2024) stated that, to be sustainable in the era of Ziaur Rahman, was to invest in long-term agricultural infrastructure, rural employment, irrigation, and food self-sufficiency. Zia has made considerable improvements in Bangladesh's agriculture sector, and increased food production has restored the quality of life for common citizens. Additionally, proactive government measures within the country would not make the nation rely on crisis-induced foreign food diplomacy. There was a significant increase in cereal production under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman in Bangladesh, rising from 11 million tons to more than 14.5 million tons by the end of 1980 (Office of the Historian, 1978). However, there was progress in agriculture; though the benefits of sustainability were not evenly distributed, as rural elites, who monopolised land, credit, cooperatives, and village institutions, dominated it. Critics argue that, during Ziaur Rahman's leadership, the benefits of sustainability

were not fully socially equitable, as local power networks often managed long-term institutions in ways that bypassed the poorest rural groups. However, supporters counter that, compared to the immediate post-independence period, Zia's reforms still expanded opportunities and state presence in many previously neglected areas.

Delbridge et al. (2024) also stated that these elections and village governmental reforms were ineffective, as they lacked constitutional permanence and strong legal checks and balances, and that sustainability existed without institutional accountability, and democratic permanence existed without legal and constitutional checks and balances. In that way, critics therefore argue that, while sustainability brought about order in the short term, it did not fully resolve longer-term democratic vulnerabilities. Yet from a pragmatic perspective, Zia's reforms laid essential groundwork on which later democratic institutions could be built. In summary, Ziaur Rahman's policies were clearly designed as long-term stabilisation measures for Bangladesh. While scholars debate whether these reforms strengthened the state more than they deepened democracy, there is broad recognition that they prevented institutional collapse and created a platform for future democratic development.

The Vision of Ziaur Rahman in Self-Reliance Emerged as a Nation-Building Ideology to Reduce Foreign Diplomacy

During the rule of President Ziaur Rahman, the idea of self-reliance was advanced as a nation-building concept to address Bangladesh's heavy reliance on a particular foreign bloc. International orientation changed to a multi-vector realist approach with domestic capability at its core. According to Britannica Editors (n.d.), Zia turned to self-reliance as a corrective at the national level, a response to the dependency logic the country had inherited during the first post-Liberation years. During the liberation war, Bangladesh depended on India for restoring political security, the Soviet Union for ideological legitimacy, and foreign food

assistance for economic survival. In this context, self-reliance implied diplomatic equilibrium and, at the same time, enlisted all powers in an expedient manner. Zia institutionalised external self-reliance by joining the OIC, restoring relations and reopening Western economic lines, particularly with the IMF and the World Bank. It was the ideology of *realpolitik*. According to Basit and Islam (2025), Ziaur Rahman has restructured the state in such a way that he has increased the democratic power of the small states by maximising the diplomatic power. Nevertheless, China-Bangladesh trade and military assistance began to rise steadily to finance artillery and aircraft purchases, infrastructure projects, and the transfer of agricultural machinery during the time of Ziaur Rahman. Therefore, dynamic trading with other nations has enhanced the domestic defence capability, which is one of the dimensions of self-sufficiency.

Ziaur Rahman's self-reliance ideology also assumed a domestic institutional form, encompassing economic reforms, agricultural modernisation, rural credit extension, administrative rigour, investor incentives, and export diversification. Conversational talks on the jute and garment sector revival with Korea, Hong Kong, small-scale investors, and producers. Khan et al. (2021) have argued that self-reliance was not an isolationist policy; however, it was an ideology that strengthened itself internally, as seen in policies such as denationalisation, incentives to privatise investment, the creation of BOI, and jute export bonuses that encouraged the sustainability of exports based in Bangladesh, as well as rural infrastructure. Khan et al. (2021) noted that these actions boosted Bangladesh's output potential, stabilised forex flows, formed a domestic coalition for long-term institutional sustainability, and rejuvenated villages as political stakeholders. Contrasting this economic optimism, Rahman (2023) claimed that Zia's evocation of self-reliance only strengthened rural elites, private industrialists, former bureaucrats, and the controlled executive administration, yet failed to sufficiently disperse power across the country toward economic independence. However, this interpretation is disputed by those who argue that Zia's focus on private initiative and rural entrepreneurship broadened opportunities beyond the old state-

centric model and reduced dependence on foreign actors. Therefore, Ziaur Rahman's self-reliance was essentially a practical nation-building ideology that shifted Bangladesh from a rigid, strict governance structure to a diplomatic balancing act of autonomy. Ziaur Rahman's dynamic actions have shaped the long-term political identity around domestic systems.

The Rural Reforms Under Ziaur Rahman Aimed to Develop Sustainable Village-Level Governance Through Decentralisation

Rural reforms implemented by President Ziaur Rahman in Bangladesh in the late 1970s and early 1980s were among the most ambitious efforts to reorganise local governance following independence. Having developed in an era characterised by political instability, economic stagnation, and limited administrative penetration in rural areas, Zia sought legitimacy by shifting the national development orientation toward the rural majority (Ahmed et al. 2025). It has been noted that his policies of decentralisation, especially the establishment of Gram Sarkar (village government) and the rejuvenation of cooperatives, were reforms of the administrative system (Rahman, 2024). Additionally, they attributed this to a development policy based on participation and grassroots development that could foster self-reliance.

The philosophy of rural reform as advocated by Zia was based on the observation that centralised bureaucracies had not been able to bring about development where it was most needed. For example, by the mid-1970s, the population had little confidence in state institutions, and the state, too, was unable to control development programs beyond district headquarters. It was seen that decentralisation had two roles. The primary goal was to boost the financial efficiency of the rural economy, and the secondary one was to provide a foundation of political support to the rural population (Rahman, 2024). This was especially for that historically marginalised community. Zia's insistence that development should start at

the village level indicated that the country was moving away from the urban-centric policies of earlier regimes.

These reforms were centred on the Gram Sarkar system as it was not a constitutionally enshrined institution (Rahman, 2024). This was even with the purpose of serving as a micro-level governance unit to mobilise village inhabitants for community development, micro-modernisation of agriculture, and the resolution of local disputes. The village committees were sampled, including elected and nominated representatives tasked with determining the needs of the villages, communicating with the Union Parishads, and fostering collective development. To institutionalise participatory planning, which was uncommon in South Asian governance at the time, Zia sought to give villagers the power to plan and execute development priorities (Khani, 2021).

Other reforms under the decentralisation strategy included operational reforms within the Union Parishads, which were given greater responsibility for mobilising resources, undertaking rural works, and coordinating state services. For instance, as Rahman (2024) noted, Zia initiated the direct election of chairpersons and enhanced their financial autonomy by granting them greater access to rural development funds. In addition, the revival of rural cooperatives was also made as a source of credit provision, agricultural mechanisation and collective marketing. Through the application of these cooperatives as part of the Village Defence Party (VDP) construction, economic growth and social discipline were enhanced (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). The emergence of community-based government, driven by political demands for stability and loyalty, was thus achieved under Zia.

Financially, it was observed that Zia's decentralisation activities went hand in hand with other general liberalisation policies. Policies such as the deregulation of the agricultural market, the promotion of micro-credit activities, and the promotion of private entrepreneurship in rural communities aided the financial betterment of marginalised communities. Decentralisation of planning enabled the villages to pursue new market incentives, particularly in high-yield rice production, fisheries, and small-

scale rural industries. On the other hand, the interaction between local governance units and rural development was made possible by the synergy between local governance units and economic liberalisation (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.).

Politically, though, there were two implications in the rural reforms brought by Zia. As they increased local participation, they also helped unify his regime in the rural power base. The integration of VDPs and local leaders into networks aligned with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) also helped consolidate rural support for the government and link local development more closely with national policy priorities (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). On the other hand, Kumar (2025) contends that, despite its participatory design, the system was used to secure rural support for the government and weaken opposition parties, especially the Awami League. Yet even critics acknowledge that these institutions enhanced administrative presence in villages and improved coordination of development programmes.

The decentralisation model had several limitations regarding sustainability. One, its reliance on central political goodwill rendered its long-term continuity weak following the assassination of Zia in 1981 (Kumar, 2025). It was observed that the Gram Sarkar system was subsequently changed or replaced by various governments, creating institutional discontinuity. On the other hand, the implementation was not even consistent across different areas of the country, resulting in differences in effectiveness, with better-organised villages benefiting over disadvantaged ones. In spite of these obstacles, some elements, such as participatory planning, cooperative mobilisation, and village-level committees, would form the basis for subsequent decentralisation in Bangladesh.

Ziaur Rahman's Attributes Towards National Security to Ensure Regime Loyalty

The accession of Ziaur Rahman to power came at a time when Bangladesh was most unstable in terms of political killings, mutinies and ideological division in the military. As president and a military officer, Zia realised that national security could not be part of the regime's security. For this reason, his course of action was not merely a standard defence streamlining but an all-round strategy. According to Arafat (2025), Zia's range of actions included military realignment, ideological reorientation, intelligence empowerment, and political inclusivity to entrench loyalty amongst major state organs, especially the military. On the other hand, the military's role in maintaining state stability was one of Zia's most notable qualities (Kumar, 2025). The danger of factionalism in the armed forces, revealed by successive coups during the 1975 to 1977 period, was recognised by Zia, who implemented far-reaching reforms (Arafat, 2025). This was for the depoliticisation, professionalisation and recalibration of military loyalty. It was seen that he restructured command, changed officers frequently to avoid factional groupings, and advanced officers according to their merit and political ideology. This was to be in line with his concept of nationalist Bangladesh, founded on the pillars of sovereignty, discipline and moderate conservatism. Thus, through the dispensation of promotions and the most important appointments, Zia was able to bring together a group of officers who believed that the stability of the regime was part of national security.

Zia also expanded the military's role into other functional areas beyond defence. According to Khan et al. (2021), the armed forces were engaged in rural development initiatives under the mandate of nation-building to boost the military's public legitimacy. Additionally, such a measure brought the institution's interests into the regime's developmental agenda. It was noted that this combination of developmental duties, such as infrastructure construction, agricultural extension work, and disaster management, enabled a symbiotic relationship between the state and the military. Because of this combination, the communities increased their

loyalty to Zia. The military proved not only a guardian of sovereignty but also a shareholder in national development.

Another notable feature of Zia's national security strategy was his increase in intelligence capabilities. He consolidated the National Security Intelligence (NSI) and the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) (Grokikipedia, 2025). With Zia's aid, these platforms expanded their surveillance tactics against dissenting activities on the military and civil fronts. His interest in anticipatory intelligence, the ability to see potential threats before they became factual, enabled him to pre-empt coup attempts and maintain close control over political figures. Whilst these intelligence reforms have been criticised for fostering tendencies towards authoritarianism, they were key in stabilising a state grappling with decades of political instability.

Zia's foreign policy was also based on his national security priorities. He diversified Bangladesh's global relationships, making it less dependent on India and creating links with China, Pakistan, the US, and Middle Eastern countries (Khani, 2021). With such alignment of the strategy, there was an increase in the military's access to training, equipment, and international support, thereby improving defence capabilities. Such a form of power equality aimed at securing regional interests and placing Bangladesh within a larger geopolitical system. Thus, it helped Zia reduce vulnerability to external security risks and create the image of independent sovereignty, which was immensely popular with the military elite.

He legalised political parties, expanded electoral participation, and helped establish the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). This half-opening played two important security roles: it reduced resentment among the people because some political freedom was allowed. On the other hand, it also meant that nascent political elites were absorbed into a regime-serving system. The ideological representations of the national identity also increased regime loyalty. Instead of focusing on linguistic identity (Bengali nationalism), he emphasised Bangladeshi nationalism and stressed territorial sovereignty

rooted in the Islamic cultural background (Grokopedia, 2025). This ideological repositioning was seen as extremely strong by the military and conservative sections of society, as it offered a barrier against left-wing rebels and external influence.

Religious and Cultural Diplomacy by Ziaur Rahman to Ensure a Sustainable National Identity in Bangladesh

The presidency of Ziaur Rahman from 1977 to 1981 was a turning point in Bangladesh's nation-building (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). After several years of political turmoil, ideological rivalry, and the enduring impact of the Liberation War, Zia realised that to ensure long-term cohesion, national identity had to be consolidated and redefined (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). His policy was focused on religious and cultural diplomacy, meaning the combination of internal cultural rebuilding and external diplomacy. Because of this directional approach, Das et al. (2022) noted that Zia sought to express a national identity grounded in cultural authenticity, Islamic heritage, and geopolitical autonomy.

Domestically, Zia sought to define Bangladesh's identity, in contrast to the largely secular, linguistic nationalism that prevailed immediately after independence. The political leadership after 1971 had placed national identity on the Bengali linguistic heritage (Ahmed et al. 2025). With the inclusion of such political leadership, Zia had constructed a regime that culturally fit with Indian West Bengal. Although this strategy was in line with the spirit of the liberation struggle, little room was left to embrace the Islamic cultural heritage of most people. Zia saw this division as a political weakness and also a barrier to mass integration. It was his vision of nationalism in Bangladesh, which, through calculated recalibration, focused on territorial independence, Islamic cultural origins, and local rural customs (Das et al., 2022). Zia tried to create a more inclusive and assertive identity model that was resistant to foreign cultural

onslaught and domestic ideological disintegration (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, n.d.). This was done by focusing less on the ethnic-linguistic approach to national identification and more on the territorial-cultural one.

Religiously, Zia came with a series of changes in the constitution that defined Bangladesh as an Islamic state, although it was officially non-theocratic. It was noted to include the tenets of absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah, and the advocacy of Islamic unity (Kumar, 2025). Zia redefined religion as the source of moral unity of the nation, without the institutionalisation of an Islamic state (Kumar, 2025). He also revived the religious observances of the institutions, promoted the study of Islam in educational settings, and supported community projects of the mosques. Hence, Islam is a leading cultural prominence in the life of the nation in Bangladesh.

Outside, Zia used Islamic diplomacy to expand Bangladesh's international support base (Das et al., 2022). It was of grave importance that they understood that the early post-independence days were marked by Indian influence. On the other hand, there was little access to the world in which Zia attempted to shift the foreign policy towards the Muslim world and the Global South. This change was reflected in Bangladesh's active involvement in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (Ali and Sultan, 2023). With the aid of OCI, Zia had been involved in improving bilateral ties with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Libya, Pakistan, and other Muslim-majority nations (Ali and Sultan, 2023). On the other hand, by promoting organisations like the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, Zia drew attention to the hybrid identity of Bangladesh, a combination of Islamic tradition, the Bengali language, and the agrarian culture of the countryside. Thus, these methods were intended to achieve better economic aid, labour export, and political credibility.

Conclusion

Thus, the religious and cultural diplomacy of Ziaur Rahman was revolutionary in reorganising Bangladesh's national identity. This was due to the fact that the methods were confronted with political instability, ideological rivalry, and the unfulfilled mission of nation-building. By redefining identity through the prism of Bangladeshi nationalism, Zia aimed to construct a single narrative. This was not only based on the linguistic heritage but also a more comprehensive synthesis of the concept of territorial sovereignty, the values of the Islamic tradition, and conventional traditions. In this manner, he could fill the chasm between the post-liberation leadership and the cultural and religious feelings of the country's rural majority.

As noted in the study, by amendments to the constitution, moderated religious symbolism, and by developing the renewal of mosque-based community activities, Zia accentuated Islam as a cultural and moral source. He did not treat religion as a political ideology, thereby avoiding the traps of hardline religious nationalism. On the other hand, his cultural politics brought back folk arts, rural lifestyles, and national identifiers of indigenous people, reinforcing an entirely Bangladeshi cultural awareness unlike that of neighbouring India. Thus, this domestic unification was followed by an external re-orientation of foreign policy that made Bangladesh even more interconnected with the Muslim world. Additionally, it opened more economic opportunities through labour migration and entangled the country in even greater Islamic and Global South structures.

Although critics have claimed that aspects of Zia's reforms facilitated the subsequent politicisation of religion, he pursued his agenda in a relatively moderate manner. This was highly based on the practical requirements of a weak state to unite and gain independence. Finally, the religious and cultural diplomacy of Ziaur Rahman laid the foundation for a sustainable national identity that continues to shape Bangladesh's socio-political life. Through a balance among faith, culture, and territorial nationalism, Zia gave the country a long-term ideological foundation that

enhanced national harmony. He also played a vital role in reestablishing Bangladesh's position in the region and the global arena.

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