

## **Death of Khaleda Zia and its Significant Implications**

**Major General Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd)**

### **Introduction**

Begum Khaleda Zia passed away at 0600 hours on 30 Dec 2025 at Dhaka's Evercare Hospital, where she had been admitted since 23 Nov. She had been ailing for some time and had been on a ventilator due to advanced cirrhosis of the liver, arthritis, diabetes, chest, and heart problems. She was 80 years old. During her final days, Bangladesh's interim leader Muhammad Yunus called the nation to pray for her, calling her a "Source of utmost inspiration for the nation".<sup>1</sup>

Begum Zia was married to General Ziaur Rahman, who was assassinated during a 1981 coup while he was serving as the President of Bangladesh. After his death, she helped in building a mass movement against General Hussain Muhammad Ershad, the military dictator, who was finally ousted in 1990.<sup>2</sup>

She won her first term in 1991, becoming the first woman Prime Minister of Bangladesh. Her opponent in that election, and several since, was Sheikh Hasina. Khaleda Zia faces criticism over an early 1996 election in which her party won 278 of the 300 parliamentary seats during a wide boycott by other leading parties, including Hasina's Awami League, which demanded an election-time caretaker government. As a result, her government lasted only for 12 days before a nonpartisan caretaker government was installed and the new election was held in Jun that year.<sup>3</sup>

Khaleda returned to power in 2001 in a government shared with the country's main Islamist party, Jamaat-e-Islami, which had a dark past involving Bangladesh's Liberation War.<sup>4</sup>

Though Khaleda Zia had been out of power since 2006 and had spent several years in jail or under house-arrest on account of corruption charges, for which she had been acquitted by the Supreme Court in Jan this year<sup>5</sup>, she and her Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) continued to command much support.

Her son and the acting Chairman of the BNP, Tarique Rahman, known as 'The Dark Prince', returned to the country on 25 Dec from nearly 17 years in self-exile in London and is widely seen as a strong candidate to become the Prime Minister of Bangladesh in the national elections, which are due in Feb 2026.<sup>6</sup>

Zia will be buried with state honours beside the grave of her husband, former President Ziaur Rahman, at Zia Udyan near Chandrima Udyan in Dhaka, on 31 Dec. External Affairs Minister of India, Dr S Jaishankar, will represent the Government and people of India at the funeral.

### **Rise to Power and Legacy**

General Ziaur Rahman's death on 30 May 1981 plunged Bangladesh into deep uncertainty. Although Khaleda had not been politically active during her husband's presidency, senior BNP leaders saw her as the only figure who could unify the party's competing factions and preserve his legacy.

After Rahman's death, his Vice President Abdus Sattar became acting President and later won an election. But within months, the Army Chief, General Ershad, seized power in a bloodless coup in March 1982, imposing martial law.<sup>7</sup> It was in this volatile context, with the military back in control and political parties fighting for survival, that Khaleda began her ascent, eventually emerging as a central civilian figure challenging hardliner rule.

Khaleda joined the BNP as a general member in Jan 1982, became its Vice Chair in 1983, and was elected the Chairperson in Aug 1984. In the decades that followed, she won three elections. She governed more as a pragmatist than a visionary, aware that democracy rests on institutions. Her first term reset the constitutional balance, restoring parliamentary authority through the 12<sup>th</sup> Amendment and reducing the concentration of power in the executive.

Economically, she focused on export-led growth, foreign investment, labour migration, and the expansion of the garment industry. Among her most consequential policies was a nationwide stipend programme for girls' secondary education.<sup>8</sup>

After Sheikh Hasina consolidated power in 2014 and ruled the country for more than 10 years, Khaleda Zia found herself side-lined, imprisoned, and politically constrained. She maintained that the corruption charges brought against her in 2018 were driven by political vendetta rather than justice.

Her fortunes shifted following the student-led uprising in 2024 that brought an abrupt end to Hasina's rule. Zia was released from detention later that year, and in Jan 2025, Bangladesh's Supreme Court cleared her of the final remaining corruption case, effectively restoring her eligibility to contest national elections.

Her public life unfolded alongside personal setbacks, as her elder son, Tarique Rahman, went into exile in 2008 after being arrested for corruption, while her younger son, Arafat Rahman Koko, died of cardiac arrest in 2015 while living in Malaysia.<sup>9</sup>

While she fought for democracy against authoritarianism and it was during her premiership that Bangladesh transitioned into a parliamentary democracy, she was also a polarising figure. Her uncompromising style while in opposition, leading election boycotts and prolonged street movements combined with recurring allegations of corruption while she was in power, inspired intense loyalty among supporters and equal distrust among her critics.

Mohiuddin Ahmed, a political analyst, states, "In the true sense, she was the first Prime Minister of independent Bangladesh to be elected under a neutral government. No one can take this achievement away from her".<sup>10</sup>

In the preface to the book *Begum Khaleda Zia: Her Life and Her Story*, Mahfuz Ullah wrote, "She established her own distinct political position at a time when male-dominated society exercised absolute dominance".<sup>11</sup>

Undoubtedly, she was a dominant figure for decades in Bangladesh's turbulent power struggles. She was also witness to the re-emergence of political uncertainty and demise of democracy in Bangladesh.

### **Return of the Dark Prince**

Her son, Tarique Rahman, who had been living in self-imposed exile, returned to Bangladesh with his wife Dr Zubaida Rahaman and daughter Zaima on Christmas to contest the upcoming elections and to be at the bedside of his mother.

The 'Dark Prince', as his detractors have often claimed, was the *de facto* boss from 2001 to 2006, when a coalition led by the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladeshi was in power.

Rahman returned to an ecstatic welcome from lakhs of supporters, many of whom walked long distances, some overnight, to line the streets of Dhaka, waving flags and chanting slogans to support the 'Prince'. And he returned with the echoes of American civil rights activist Martin Luther King's speech.<sup>12</sup> "Like him, I want to say, I have a plan for Bangladesh", Rahman said while kick starting the BNP's campaign for the general election, due in Feb 2026.

The BNP has been preparing for a return to power, and party leaders have indicated that if the party wins the upcoming election, Rahman, who filed his nomination papers from Dhaka-17 on 29 Dec, is expected to take on national leadership and become the Prime Minister.

His opposition, however, will be from people who have become disenchanted with entrenched political dynasties. If BNP wins the restraint on them, there is likely to be another uprising.

### **Implications for India**

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed grief over Zia's death. In a post on X, he noted Zia's important contributions towards the development of Bangladesh, as well as India-Bangladesh relations as the first woman Prime Minister of Bangladesh. "I recall my warm meeting with her in Dhaka in 2015. We hope that her vision and legacy will continue to guide our partnership. May her soul rest in peace", he wrote.<sup>13</sup>

However, Khaleda Zia opposed overland transit and connectivity links with India, both as the Prime Minister and as the Leader of the Opposition, a post she held twice from 1996 to 2014. A 2014 report by Bangladeshi newspaper Dhaka Tribune, quoted her as saying transit permission must be balanced by the signing of the Teesta water accord.<sup>14</sup> She also opposed renewal of the 1972 Indo-Bangladesh Friendship Treaty,

which many saw as strategically important from a military perspective, arguing, again, it had 'Shackled' her country.

There were also multiple issues, including support for separatist groups such as United Liberation Front of Asom and National Socialist Council of Nagalim, who she referred to as 'Freedom Fighters'.<sup>15</sup> However, post-2012, after a visit to Delhi to meet then-Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, she took a pledge that future BNP governments would act against terrorist groups operating from Bangladeshi soil to attack Indian targets.

Prime Minister Modi met Begum Zia in Dhaka in Jun 2015 during his visit to Bangladesh. Khaleda Zia was then the Leader of the Opposition. The meeting underlined BNP's intent to engage with Delhi and India's desire to broaden ties with Dhaka beyond Sheikh Hasina.

However, given the present state of turmoil in Bangladesh and the anti- India rhetoric that has been building up, it remains to be seen how relations will evolve in case the BNP comes to power being spurred on by a sympathy factor. However, there remains a question mark as the youth are looking for a change beyond the traditional parties.

Unfortunately, Bangladesh is stirring a vicious cauldron of hate towards India and is also targeting its own minorities, while it is simultaneously courting China and Pakistan. Given this complicated scenario and the fact that the Awami League will not participate in the elections, out of the possibilities of the BNP, Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, and National Citizens Party, the BNP seems to be the most likely party to repair the ties with India. Muhammed Yunus and his supporters have so far not endeared themselves to the masses.

India has consistently extended goodwill gestures to the government in Dhaka, but the new government will need to take steps to protect the minorities and respect Indian security concerns.

## **Conclusion**

News of Khaleda Zia's death quickly spread across the nation, prompting an outpouring of tributes and reflection on her legacy. Chief Adviser of the interim government of Bangladesh, Muhammad Yunus, expressed deep sorrow over her death and said the "Country has lost an experienced and proven stateswoman". He lauded her leadership, saying, "Through her uncompromising leadership, the nation was repeatedly freed from undemocratic conditions and inspired to regain liberty".<sup>16</sup>

President Mohammed Shahabuddin said, "The death of Begum Khaleda Zia has caused irreparable loss to the nation".<sup>17</sup>

In a condolence message posted on X by the Awami League, Sheikh Hasina expressed her deepest condolences and said Khaleda Zia will be remembered "For her role in the struggle to establish democracy" and that "Her contributions to the nation were significant".<sup>18</sup>

Zia's son Tarique Rahman stated that "Throughout her life, she stood firm against autocracy, fascism, and domination, leading the struggle for freedom, sovereignty, and the restoration of democracy". He wrote that "Her resilience was not loud, but it was unbreakable".<sup>19</sup>

For Bangladesh, the Feb elections are crucial as they mark a democratic reset. However, the elections are now going to be held in the absence of the two Begums, who have influenced and dominated its electoral politics over the past few decades. Their absence is certain to reshape the political contest.

Zia's death undoubtedly marks the end of an era in Bangladeshi politics and is expected to have significant political implications. She leaves behind a legacy inseparable from Bangladesh's political identity.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> Kelly Ng and Mir Sabbir, "Bangladesh's first female prime minister Khaleda Zia dies aged 80", *BBC*, 30 Dec 2025, accessed 30 Dec 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cm2v256vdkyo>

<sup>2</sup> Shafquat Rabbee, "General Ershad: The deposed dictator who became kingmaker", *Al Jazeera*, 18 Jul 2019, accessed 30 Dec 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/7/18/general-ershad-the-deposed-dictator-who-became-kingmaker>

<sup>3</sup> Mohiuddin Alamgir, "The night she won, and the legacy that followed", *The Daily Star*, 31 Dec 2025, accessed 31 Dec 2025, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/politics/news/the-night-she-won-and-the-legacy-followed-4069281>

<sup>4</sup> "Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh: Past, Present and Future", *European Foundation for South Asian Studies (EFSAS)*, Amsterdam, Mar 2017, accessed 31 Dec 2025, <https://www.efsas.org/publications/study-papers/jamaat-e-islami-in-bangladesh-past,-present-and-future/>

<sup>5</sup> News Agencies, "Bangladesh top court acquits ex-PM Khaleda Zia in corruption case", *Al Jazeera*, 15 Jan 2025, accessed 30 Dec 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/15/bangladesh-top-court-acquits-ex-pm-khaleda-zia-in-corruption-case>

<sup>6</sup> Kallol Bhattacharjee, "Tarique Rahman: The 'prince' who came in from the cold", *The Hindu*, 28 Dec 2025, accessed 30 Dec 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/the-hindu-profile-on-tarique-rahman/article70444146.ece>

<sup>7</sup> Ajoy Bose, "From the archive, 25 March 1982: Martial law after coup in Bangladesh", *The Guardian*, 25 Mar 2010, accessed 30 Dec 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2010/jun/23/archive-martial-law-coup-bangladesh>

<sup>8</sup> Zarin Tasnim, "Khaleda Zia's far-reaching contributions to Bangladesh's education sector", *The Business Standard*, 30 Dec 2025, accessed 31 Dec 2025, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/khaleda-zias-far-reaching-contributions-bangladeshs-education-sector-1322616>

<sup>9</sup> Sandipan Sharma, "Khaleda Zia: A life that mirrored Bangladesh's tragedy", *India Today*, 30 Dec 2025, accessed 31 Dec 2025, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/khaleda-zia-a-life-that-mirrored-bangladeshs-tragedy-2843816-2025-12-30>

<sup>10</sup> Mohiuddin Ahmad, "Khaleda Zia laid the foundation for women's leadership in Bangladesh: Mohiuddin Ahmad" (Video), *The Business Standard*, 30 Dec 2025, accessed 31 Dec 2025, <https://www.tbsnews.net/videos/tbs-programs/khaleda-zia-laid-foundation-womens-leadership-bangladesh-mohiuddin-ahmad-1322831>

<sup>11</sup> Mahfuz Ullah, *Begum Khaleda Zia: Her Life, Her Story*, (Bangladesh: Universal Academy, 2018)

<sup>12</sup> Al Jazeera and News Agencies, "Bangladesh PM hopeful Tarique Rahman returns after 17 years in exile", *Al Jazeera*, 25 Dec 2025, accessed 30 Dec 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/12/25/bangladesh-opposition-leader-tarique-rahman-returns-after-17-years-in-exile>

---

<sup>13</sup> Narendra Modi, post on X, 30 Dec 2025, <https://x.com/narendramodi/status/2005855695787507912>

<sup>14</sup> Mohammad Al-Masum Molla, "Khaleda: No transit for India until Teesta treaty signed", *Dhaka Tribune*, 09 Mar 2014, accessed 31 Dec 2025, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/politics/56620/khaleda-no-transit-for-india-until-teesta-treaty>

<sup>15</sup> The Week News Desk, "Khaleda Zia's controversial legacy with Indian militants: From ULFA shelters to arms hauls", *The Week*, 30 Dec 2025, accessed 31 Dec 2025, <https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2025/12/30/khaleda-zia-s-controversial-legacy-with-indian-militants-from-ulfa-shelters-to-arms-hauls.html>

<sup>16</sup> PTI, "Bangladesh lost a 'great guardian', says Yunus as he mourns Khaleda Zia's death", *The New Indian Express*, 30 Dec 2025, accessed 31 Dec 2025, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2025/Dec/30/bangladesh-lost-a-great-guardian-says-yunus-as-he-mourns-khaleda-zias-death>

<sup>17</sup> Tribune Report, "President Shahabuddin mourns Khaleda Zia's death", *Dhaka Tribune*, 30 Dec 2025, accessed 31 Dec 2025, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/politics/399862/president-shahabuddin-mourns-khaleda-zia-s-death>

<sup>18</sup> PTI, 'A profound loss': Hasina pays tribute to Zia", *The Hindu*, 30 Dec 2025, accessed 31 Dec 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/profound-loss-hasina-pays-tribute-to-zia/article70452179.ece>

<sup>19</sup> ANI, "'Mother Of Bangladesh': Son Tarique Rahman's Poignant Tribute To Khaleda Zia", *NDTV*, 30 Dec 2025, accessed 31 Dec 2025, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/mother-of-bangladesh-son-tarique-rahmans-poignant-tribute-to-khaleda-zia-10094348>

**Major General Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd)** is a Distinguished Fellow at the USI of India. Commissioned in 1981 into the 18 Cavalry, he has held various important command and Staff appointments including command of an Armored Division.

**Article uploaded** on 31-12-2025

**Disclaimer:** The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the organization that he/she belongs to or of the USI of India.