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The World: Great Man or Rabble-Rouser?

THE history of the Indian subcontinent for the past half-century has been dominated by leaders who were as controversial as they were charismatic: Mahatma Gandhi, Mohammed AH Jinnah, Jawaharlal Nehru. Another name now seems likely to join that list: Sheik Mujibur ("Mujib") Rahman, the President of Bangladesh. To his critics, Mujib is a vituperative, untrustworthy rabble-rouser. To most of the people of his new nation, he is a patriot-hero whose imprisonment by West Pakistan has only enhanced his appeal. "He was a great man before," says one Bangladesh official, "but those bastards have made him even greater."

Even his detractors concede that Mujib has the personal qualifications to become an extremely effective popular leader. He is gregarious, highly emotional and remarkably attuned to the needs and moods of his supporters. He has an uncanny ability to remember names and faces. Mujib is also a spellbinding orator with a simplistic message and a pungent, fervent style.

It is not yet clear whether Mujib is more profound than his stirring rhetoric. His political success so far is due largely to his ability to marshal public opinion in East Bengal by blaming all of its troubles on its former rulers in West Pakistan. He has a tendency to make extravagant promises, and to oversimplify complex economic and agricultural problems. "My brothers," he once told a gathering of East Pakistani jute farmers, "do you know that the streets of Karachi are paved with gold, and that it is done with your money earned from exporting jute?"

Mujib's supporters insist that he has shown a capacity for growth. He was born 51 years ago, one of six children of a middle-class family that lived on a farm in Tongipara, a village about 60 miles southwest of Dacca. At ten, Mujib displayed the first signs of a social conscience by distributing rice from the family supplies to tenant farmers who helped work the property. "They were hungry, and we have all these things," the boy explained to his irate father, an official of the local district court.

As a youth, Mujib developed a strong antipathy to British rule. While a seventh-grader, he was jailed for six days for agitating in favor of India's independence. A long bout with beriberi left his eyes weakened, and Mujib belatedly finished high school when he was 22.

After earning a B.A. in history and political science at Calcutta's Islamia College—where he developed a taste for the writings of Bernard Shaw and Indian Poet Rabindranath Tagore—Mujib enrolled as a law student at Dacca University. He supported a strike by the university's menial workers, and quickly found himself in jail once again. He indignantly rejected an offer to be set free on bail. "I did not come to the university to bow my head to injustice," he said grandly. When he got out of jail, Mujib discovered that he had been expelled from the university. He promptly set out on a turbulent political career and spent 10½ of the next 23 years behind bars. "Prison is my other home," he once shrugged.

Between jail terms, Mujib helped found the progressive Awami (People's) League of East Pakistan, and in 1954 briefly served as the provincial minister in charge of industry and fighting corruption. Mujib had long been disillusioned by the exploitation of poorer East Pakistan by the more dominant western half of the divided nation. He was further disenchanted by the 1965 war with India. Like many other Bengalis, he was appalled to discover that the West Pakistanis had left the country's eastern sector virtually undefended. The next year, Mujib propounded his now famous six points, which demanded domestic autonomy for East Pakistan within a confederation with the West. Field Marshal Mohammed Ayub Khan rejected the demands as a secessionist conspiracy, and had Mujib and other Awami League officials arrested and taken to West Pakistan. When Mujib was released for lack of evidence in 1969, more than 1,000,000 people turned out to greet him at a homecoming rally at Dacca's Race Course. By then East and West Pakistan already were drifting toward the course that led to Mujib's imprisonment in West Pakistan—and to last month's war.

As was customary in East Bengali villages, Mujib was pledged to his wife in an arranged marriage when she was three and he 14. They have five children ranging from a 6-year-old son to a 25-year-old married daughter, who recently gave birth to a boy. Soon after his return to Bangladesh, Mujib will get his first look at the new grandchild, whose name, Joi, was taken from the new country's wartime rallying cry, Joi Bangla! —Victory to Bengal!