Mujibur Rahman: A Recollection

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When I was a teen-ager, my best friend had grandparents living some 300 miles away in New York City. He told me they were “communists” and were very different from other people. I was very excited to be able to hitch-hike with my friend to New York and meet his grandparents, which we did when we were 16 years old. I met two highly educated people living on a fourth floor walk-up on the lower east side of the city who were entirely different than anyone I had ever known.

They lived modestly, and had not used their intelligence and education to make themselves wealthy. They were intellectuals and social activists, deeply aware of political and social issues in our country and worldwide, and their house was an open house for similar people, concerned, politically active citizens, who would gather regularly to discuss issues and coordinate political activities. I was deeply impressed by these public citizens of the world, committed and concerned with the welfare of humanity and other people. They were mature and loving persons who attracted others, and became a center for a loving and transformative energy.

Many years went by before I met another couple who approximated this ideal of socially engaged public intellectuals. It was not until late December 2000 to January 2001 that I was a guest of Mujibur and Bulbul in Dhaka and saw their home, on a third floor walkup in downtown Dhaka, as a gathering place for social thinkers and activists concerned with the future and the common good of society. I was deeply impressed and honored to be associated with them and our common work for a better world.

I first met Mujibur at the 4th session of the Provisional World Parliament in Barcelona, Spain, in 1996 and again in Denver, Colorado, in the U.S. the following year at an international gathering there of supporters of the Earth Constitution. He had already been involved with supporting the Earth Constitution long before I knew about this movement.

Among those from around the world who were present at the meetings in Colorado, Mujibur and I were both outspoken socialists. We each spoke from a deep insight into the suffering of the ordinary person whose lives, in most of the world, struggle within the constraints of an involuntary and painful poverty. We understood that this poverty is unnecessary in a properly democratic world within which economics is organized for the common good rather than the enrichment of a few at the expense of the many. After the meetings, on our way back to the hotel, I said to him that I thought we had a common understanding of the need for a compassionate society, which we both understood as democratic socialism. He generously invited me to come to Bangladesh at my first opportunity.

In October of 1999, Mujibur visited Radford University, where I teach, for the first time. I hosted him as a guest speaker and as one of the participants for a World Peace Week Program that I organized. He spoke in my classes as well as in the lectures about world peace that were open to the public. His passion and honesty came through to the students and others in attendance. During this time, he was my constant companion, at meals and throughout the program. It was a pleasure to be his friend.
On my first visit to Bangladesh in December 2000-January 2001, as the guest of Mujibur, I began to understand a fraction of the experience from which Mujibur spoke concerning poverty and the need for human liberation under a united, democratic world system. I saw the poverty that many people of Dhaka lived in and with daily. Mujibur had kindly arranged for his brother, who was a socialist and a social worker in the slums of Dhaka, to give me a tour of some slums. I encountered the advanced social consciousness of Mujibur’s brother who, before taking me anywhere, asked me why I wanted to see the slums.

He was not going to guide me unless I convinced him that my motives were in solidarity with the poor and were concerned with transforming their condition and that of our unjust world disorder. I convinced him, and he took me to see three categories of slum that he called permanent, semi-permanent, and temporary. My experience and my world expanded greatly that day. I knew that Mujibur would be a wonderful teacher for my desire to learn about the deep problems and difficulties faced by people everywhere in the third world. Thanks to him, Bangladesh was to become a microcosm for me to learn about the world.

From that time on, I came to Bangladesh every chance I could. Mujibur understood that I wanted him to organize my educational experiences in Bangladesh, and to provide me with opportunities to promote the Earth Constitution among leaders and groups. I became Secretary-General of the World Constitution and Parliament Association (WCPA) in 2003, and, because of this responsibility, the need to have me deeply educated about the conditions of our planet became all the more important. Mujibur made Bangladesh into my school.

I learned about the 1971 revolution and his role in it, and he took me to the monuments of the revolution in Dhaka as well as the Museum of the Revolution. I met with leaders of Queen’s University, and learned of his role as Advisor to Queen’s University, and as Director of World University, and as editor of a progressive journal in Bangladesh. I met with the Bangladesh Peace Council, and with progressive judges and politicians.

He also took me to meet and learn about the Boat People, and their immense difficulties connected with not having a legal address, of poverty, of educating their children, and of social ostracism. I learned about the tens of thousands of people driving bicycle rickshaws, about the street children collecting trash in downtown Dhaka, and about the families living in tents along the walls of the huge compound owned by a Bangladesh government minister not far from Mujibur’s apartment.

I learned about the Youth Movement in Bangladesh and its progressive values, and Mahbubul Islam’s prominent role in this. I met with progressive justices, professors, peace leaders, environmentalists, and doctors, and was given tours of their facilities and learned about their work for the common good, on behalf of the environment, or healthcare, or a future for young people, or strengthening democracy, or ending poverty. I participated in many meetings at Mujibur’s house, a gathering place for progressives, activists, intellectuals, and for his many friends. Mujibur even arranged for us to attend a wedding celebration for the daughter of a leader in the Communist Party, where I learned some things about the significance of Islamic traditions and culture in Bangladesh.

Twice during these years Mujibur took me to the south around Chittagong to see the agricultural projects going on there led by Sarwar Kamal. We visited a poor fishing village and spoke with them about the disappearing fish supply. We saw giant earth moving machines carving up the coastline to make room for a commercial shrimp farm. Mujibur, with the help of
other WCPA members, made Bangladesh into my college for global education. I felt so
privileged and honored to have his friendship. Several times, he and Bubul hosted me in their
tiny apartment, which I understood must have involved serious rearrangement to
accommodate yet another person.

On subsequent visits to Bangladesh, Mujibur, with the help of his many contacts with social
activists, took me by boat to a rural village that was an island during the rainy season. I met
with the leaders and some of the families in the village. We visited the village where he grew
up, and I was taken to Sylet in the north to meet with teachers, lawyers, and social action
groups, and then again to universities and more rural villages, such as the village of his friend,
Mintu. Mujibur understood that promoting the Earth Constitution is inseparable from ever
more-deeply understanding the immense problems that we face on this Earth.

Mujibur was a world traveler on behalf of global peace with justice. He subsequently
visited me in the United States and participated in such events as the 9th session of the
Provisional World Parliament in Tripoli, Libya. He understood world solidarity and the
significance of uniting the Earth under a single democratic constitution. He became a Vice-
President of the World Constitution and Parliament Association and a member of its Executive
Council.

During his long illness over the past couple of years, during which time he and Bubul spent
a great deal of time in an advanced medical complex near Chennai, India, we were in constant
contact by telephone. Even while he was away from Bangladesh at the medical complex, he
was clearly deeply involved in planning and organizing my visits to Bangladesh, so strong was
his friendship and concern to satisfy my desire for education and promotion of the Constitution
in Bangladesh. He remained a leader of WCPA in Bangladesh by telephone even while fighting
for his life against the illness in India. With the help of Mahbubul and others, he guided a
Bengali translation of the Earth Constitution to completion, which was happily announced at
the 11th session of the Parliament in Nainital, India.

The last time I saw Mujibur was during June 2011 when I visited Dhaka for two days. We
both understood that this was our last chance to be together. In spite of the sadness and
warmth of this occasion, Mujibur, Mahbubul, and the WCPA leaders there had arranged a
couple of important meetings for me, including a WCPA meeting with ten of our local members
at the apartment of Mujibur and Bulbul. Mujibur and I had known and loved one another all
these years, since our first meetings in the late 1990s. I have experienced the deaths so many
wonderful friends and visionaries, but this was the hardest one for me.

His spirit and memory will live on with all those who knew and loved him. Mujibur Rahman
to me was an extraordinary human being—a person of great integrity, compassion, and
commitment to our common human project of creating a decent and just world for everyone
on the planet. His memory should inspire us all. In his honor, we must continue our work for a
transformed future— for Bangladesh, and for human beings living everywhere on our precious
planet Earth.