

## July 2024, Osman Hadi and Khaleda Zia

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07 January, 2026



*A graffito on a wall in Dhaka. | Sony Ramani*

THE title of this essay refers to a popular movement, an emerging politician-activist and a seasoned politician who served as prime minister thrice. I have put them in that order due to an inherent relationship between them which I shall explain later.

The two deaths that I am discussing are of different nature. Sharif Osman Hadi met an unnatural death from a fatal gunshot by an affiliate of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League. He sustained the bullet injury on December 12, 2025, and breathed his last on December 18, 2025, while undergoing treatment in Singapore. Begum Khaleda Zia died a natural death in Dhaka on December 30, 2025. However, her death is attributed to diseases that developed during her near-solitary, egregious incarceration — from February 8, 2018 to March 25, 2020 — in an abandoned jail in Dhaka. To the utter disbelief of the people of

Bangladesh, Hasina abused her power to imprison Khaleda Zia on trumped-up charges with little foundation or fact whatsoever.

Osman Hadi and Khaleda Zia were decades apart in age but united in their opposition to Hasina's mafia-style fascism. In turn, the people of Bangladesh were united in their sorrow and outrage over how the former was murdered and the latter mistreated and psychologically abused by Hasina-led Awami League. However, there was joy in people's sorrow, as they were able to come together to pray for the departed souls of the man and the woman. The record-setting large gatherings of Osman Hadi's and Khaleda Zia's janaza (funeral prayers) provided a catharsis for those who grieved over their deaths.

Now let's consider the innumerable victims of enforced disappearance who had died unrecorded deaths in undisclosed locations on Hasina's watch. Their bereaved family members never found the remains of their loved ones. There was no janaza, no public mourning, no collective grieving, no closure.... Parents, children, siblings and other relatives of the disappeared went from pillar to post for information, or in search of their dead bodies. They were snubbed and chided — and intimidated, insulted and gagged — by the police and other forces of the then government. The judges were deaf to their pleas and were busy complying with the wishes of those in power. All these resonated with the practices of enforced disappearance in Kashmir and other sites of state-sanctioned violence.

There were also known deaths at the hands of the Hasina regime. But bereaved family members or the public were not allowed to freely observe janaza for the deceased. The Hasina government denied people the right to pay their last respects to them. For example, people were denied the opportunity to come together in a spirit of unity and mutual respect to observe the janaza of Abu Sayeed, Mugdho, Shahriar, Yasin and well over a thousand other July 2024 martyrs who laid down their lives to liberate Bangladesh from the grip of Hasina's cannibalistic misrule. Many of these broad-daylight murders would have drawn hundreds of thousands of people together to participate in janaza. But the victims of Hasina's bloodthirsty ego were imprisoned both in life and death — they were buried in the presence and under the supervision of those who were complicit in their murders.

One unforgettable death during the Hasina regime was that of Maulana Delwar Hossain Sayeedi. He died on August 14, 2023 — roughly a year before the fall and cowardly flight of Hasina. Although he had a political

identity, all will agree that, like Khaleda Zia, Maulana Sayeedi had a fan base across the country that transcended political differences. His death could have been another momentous occasion for the city of Dhaka to witness another historic janaza worthy of remembering. Hasina didn't allow that to happen, as she had a particular aversion to any spectacle of unity among those who she didn't consider her political kin. Maulana Sayeedi died in police custody in Dhaka — a death not free from suspicion of foul play in some accounts — and was buried under police surveillance in Pirojpur.

Let's speculate some shocking hypotheses. If Osman Hadi had been killed and Khaleda Zia died during Hasina's rule, Hasina would have left no stone unturned to make sure that no janaza was held in a place like Manik Mia Avenue in front of the national parliament. Osman Hadi's dead body would have been escorted by the police to a remote village in the district of Jhalakathi. His janaza would have taken place in front of a rural masjid, and the number of attendees would have been determined in advance by the Hasina administration. He would have been buried in what Thomas Gray calls a 'neglected spot' ('Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,' 1751). No cemetery in Dhaka would have been his final resting place, let alone next to the grave of our national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam at Dhaka University.

Again, had Khaleda Zia died while Hasina was in power, the latter would have used all available security personnel to make sure that no janaza was held around the parliament building. The remains of the most popular prime minister of Bangladesh would have been transferred to Bogura. Her janaza and burial would have been under a heavy police presence, and her grave would have been at a cemetery in the locality. What is more, after having the dead body of Khaleda Zia buried in Bogura, Hasina would have started the process of transferring the decades-old remains of Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman to where his wife would have been 'laid to rest.'

Media outlets would have covered the news of Khaleda's death in a way comparable to the reporting of Maulana Sayeedi's passing. Pages after pages would have been used to dwell on Khaleda Zia's corruption allegations. Many international news agencies would have reported her death in a way that is in line with the official position of the Hasina government. Diplomats from near and far would not have been flying to Dhaka in droves with condolence messages from their heads of states. A few foreign missions in Dhaka would have written notes in the condolence book of Khaleda Zia, but with extreme caution.

The worst of all is that Khaleda Zia would have died a lonely death. Her only surviving son — who couldn't be next to her during her most difficult days — would have remained in exile unable to attend or kiss his mother on her deathbed. Had he dared to participate in her janaza or to place her dead body in the grave, he would have been arrested upon his arrival at Dhaka airport and made to face the law that Hasina had set out for him.

It is a gift of the July 2024 revolution that none of the above and other nightmares have come to pass. Without the July revolution, by this time many would have given up any hope of bringing Hasina's autocracy to an end; different political groups that are carrying out their activities freely would have been trapped in the frustrating cul-de-sac where they were during the Hasina regime; and everyday Bangladeshis would have been objects of pity by conscientious people around the world.

In post-July 2024 Bangladesh, we have two choices. We can remember the selflessness and sacrifice of our July 2024 warriors — who lost their lives and limbs for freedom and justice — and work hard to realise their dreams. Or, we can be ungrateful to them and forgetful of who (within the country and beyond) were responsible for Khaleda Zia's woes. Even though historical precedence is slanted towards the latter, the unity that the people of Bangladesh demonstrated during the funeral of Osman Hadi and Khaleda Zia gives us hope that they will never open the door for fascism and tyranny to return to Bangladesh again.

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