



A Second Coming: The Specular and the Spectacular 50 Years On¹

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The clocks were ticking away, the countdown had begun. Digital clocks high and bright enough for maximum visibility hung from office buildings, schools, and shops. Dhaka was one of twelve city corporations spread over fifty districts where they had been installed since early 2020. The clocks would go on until 17 March, the birth centennial of *jatir pita*, "The Father of the Nation", Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. They stopped at the precise moment when all values—day, hour, minute, and second—turned zero. There it was, the moment of origin; of Mujib, for sure, but also of Bangladesh. A birth foretold, as it were.

Birth (and death, too, as we shall see) has been a powerful motif in politics in Bangladesh in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Chronologies collided in felicitous ways; the country geared up for unforeseen pomp and circumstance. *Bangabandhu* (Friend of Bengal), an epithet once popularly mandated and decades later officially dictated, was the centre of the celebrations in a polity inching towards another significant temporal marker—the fiftieth year of its independence. 2020 was (officially) *Mujib Borsho*, the Mujib Year; 2021 marked the historic half century of Bangladesh that still considered itself young around its bigger, older, venerable neighbours. With international guests invited, shows, concerts,



and fireworks scheduled, and Mujib's return to the newly liberated country re-staged in real time, the anniversary was to be a no-holds-barred performance. By March 2020, the fortuitous alignment of events was interrupted by a contingency nobody had seen coming: the Covid-19 pandemic.

Earlier, the government of Bangladesh with Sheikh Hasina at the helm commissioned a repertoire of images and events that focused squarely on Bangabandhu. Hasina is one of the two surviving members of Mujib's immediate family. This was the culmination of the kind of compulsive monumentalisation that has been the trademark of the Awami League government that was in power between 1996-2001 and again, from 2009 onward. The images were super-imposed on a capital city already plastered with icons and slogans, ever-shifting but oddly permanent too in their ubiquity (Hoek 2016; Kuttig 2020). There were banners, hoardings, and posters. Video clips of archival value played on loops. Clocks, LED signage, and QR codes added depth and digital sheen to the two-dimensionality of paint and paper and the relatively recent addition of polyvinyl chloride (PVC). Large, cardboard cut-outs of the leader, some with family members and others with foreign dignitaries were put up at important street corners. Children's art competitions had Bangabandhu as their muse while the Dhaka Art Summit, a biannual festival with international entries, held a separate exhibit on him. His words adorned the walls of important buildings ordinarily beyond the reach of political graffiti artists and film *posterwallahs* (Hoek 2016). Together, they connected the dots in a national storyline carefully vetted by relevant authorities, most directly, the National Implementation Committee for Celebrating Mujib100.²

The spectacular adulation of founding figures makes up a specific political aesthetic. The postcolonial scene, in particular, is crowded with figures who are compulsively monumentalised, by which I mean the actual monuments for sure, but also the rhetoric of the monument. I am thinking specifically with Rafael Sánchez's formulation, 'monumental governmentality' (2016). The term connotes, at one level, the monumentalised appearance with which Simón Bolívar has reached posterity in Venezuela; at another level, it points to the self-representation of the Venezuelan political leaders who monumentalise themselves as the putatively changeless 'general will' of the nation's heterogeneous, mobile, and delocalised populations (Sánchez 2016: 4). Closer to home, Kajri Jain has described the compulsion to memorialise in post-liberalisation India by Dalit and Hindu political groups as a 'mute but monumental battle'. This war of monuments and statues



proliferates at an ever-increasing scale; they compete to assert their presence in an image-saturated visual landscape (Jain 2014).

They do so primarily via heroic iconography. Memorialisation of reformers and revolutionaries, from Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Navaro-Yashin 2002), Símon Bólvivar (Sánchez 2016), and Suharto (Strassler 2009) to Vladimir Lenin (Yurchak 2015), Mahatma Gandhi (Alter 2000) and Kumari Mayawati (Jain 2014), almost always privileges corporeality. The iconography may be neatly regimented, but its scale, scope, and obsession with details highlight a semiotic excess that can take multiple forms, some more creative, costly, and spectacular than others. They rely mostly on the iconic recognisability of the figures in question (Mazzarella 2010). Facial features, including hairstyle and wrinkles, accessories, such as eyeglasses, pipes, or handbags, and articles of clothing, think Gandhi's loincloth or the *Mao* suit, are isolated for recognition and reproduction and continue to serve as fetishes. They work through mobilising the mimetic effect (Taussig 1992).

In this essay, I take the centennial as a background and a point of entry in order to uncover the link between mimicry and sovereign violence. I do so by looking closely into Mujib's monumentalised reproducibility. Mimesis, as we know, revolves around questions of imitation, repetition, and expression. For René Girard, who has located mimesis at the core of identification, all conflict originates in imitation because the nature of mimetic desire is always based on rivalry and hence potentially violent (Girard 1979). Violence does not stem from scarcity, but is created by the mimetic entanglements of self and Other.

For Michael Taussig, as with Walter Benjamin much earlier (1978), the mimetic faculty implies an undecided space between the role of sensuous and non-sensuous similarity in human experience and cultural systems (Taussig 1992). Against the representational primacy of language and rationality, Taussig insists on the significance of symbols; symbols matter, and point to the human capacity for image-based sensuous communication that provides other means of apprehending and acting upon the world (Mowbray 2020; Taussig 1992). As suggestion-imitation, mimesis helps account for the non-rational and the affective dimension of political life (Gibbs 2008).

The approach to mimesis that is the most compelling for my argument is two-fold: first, it is the ability of the copy to assume the aura of the original; second, and by the same token, the generative potential of imitation in transforming the "original". If the double articulation implied in mimesis already underscores an excess, then mimetic excess is staged

where the object world and the visual copy merge. Through sensuous fidelity, the replica can acquire the power of the represented (Taussig 1992), and vice versa. This is the kind of 'sympathetic magic' whose traces are found in populist iconography, that fecund space of spectacular reproductions and 'excessive gestures and glorious gratuitousness' (Mazzarella, Santner & Schuster 2019).

**School students wearing "Mujib" masks
to welcome the Minister of Education.³**



মন্ত্রীকে স্বাগত বগুড়া পুলিশ লাইন্স স্কুল অ্যান্ড কলেজের নবনির্মিত বঙ্গবন্ধু একাডেমিক ভবনের উদ্বোধন করেন শিক্ষামন্ত্রী দীপু মনি। সেখানে বঙ্গবন্ধুর প্রতিকৃতির মুখোশ পরে শিক্ষার্থীরা মন্ত্রীকে স্বাগত জানায়। গতকাল সকালে প্রতিষ্ঠানের মাঠে। ছবি : সোয়েল রানা

Figure 1, source: Prothom Alo. Photo, 29 February 2020. Photograph by Sohel Rana.

Indeed, I sensed something akin to this in the trove of imagery from Bangladesh. Seemingly infinitely reproducible (see Figure 1), this repertoire of signs around the figure of Mujib allowed me to contemplate what I call the "monumentalised reproducibility" of sovereign power that shapes the cultures of many contemporary democracies. Bangladesh is no exception. If anything, it is a particularly generative "fieldsite" precisely because of the significant temporal threshold(s) at which it has found itself at the time of writing this essay and the *pater familias* who was at the centre of it all. Drawn, painted, printed, copied, scanned, and on one instance, conjured as a hologram, Mujib's reproducibility, though predictably gratuitous, also invokes the generative potential of political mimicry. It offers a rare



vantage point from which to understand Bangladeshi public culture that came into sharp focus with the condensation of corporeal and symbolic energies around the replication of Bangabandhu's likeness.

Against this background, I focus more narrowly on a particular site of cultural production, the English-language novel, *The black coat* by Neamat Imam (2013). It pivots on the theme of mimesis. Imam is a Bangladeshi author living in Canada who pens a sharp critique of the late Mujib era (1974-75). The book ends sometime after the August night when Mujib and the rest of his family were assassinated by a politically ambitious military faction. With the two main characters' mimicry (deliberate and accidental) of Mujib in the foreground, the dystopic novel lingers on the struggles of a young nation ravished by a famine that cost 1.5 million lives. The mass suffering was ignored, mismanaged, or publicly denied in the early days of nationalist arrogance. The erasure, the narrative suggests, went hand in hand with and was enabled by the veneration of the supreme leader whose image was imprinted in people's minds as his words echoed in their ears. As a local party leader boasts in the novel:

We have arranged twelve hundred exhibitions and forty-two thousand discussion programmes across the nation, all to be executed in the next twelve months. For our seventy million people we have printed a mass of three hundred and fifty million leaflets so that each person receives five copies [...] We want every individual in this country to enquire about Sheikh Mujib when they wake up in the morning [...]. (ibid.: 121)

This sensory excess, at least at face value, was resonant of the Dhaka of early 2020.

I find the novel limited in its critical and artistic possibilities. Its blunt disdain for the early leadership of the Awami League lacks necessary nuance or a radical humour worthy of the absurdist tenor of the plot. The narrative style alternates between comedy noir and documentary objectivity, the latter mostly used when portraying the mass suffering that pushes its protagonists to the brink of folly. It has received backlash from a loyal coterie of critics at home whose readings were predictably not based on any consideration of artistic merit. My reason for thinking with and about the novel, however, is not literary. Assessing truth claims that generally abound in this and other works of historical fiction is not the aim of this discussion, which is to ponder the generative powers of mimesis. Its outcome can never be settled at the outset; there always remains the possibility of altering that which is being mimicked. Indeed, the novel's



central trope of impersonation leading to madness and murder gestures at the very potency of the copy of the sovereign. This too is politics, but a decidedly uncertain and potentially violent one. As a tragicomedy, the novel brings attention to the specular and the spectacular that have defined Bangladeshi politics fifty years on by revealing the power of mimesis as simultaneously constituting and questioning sovereignty itself.

I. No ordinary logo

The official logo of *Mujib Borsho* was pervasive (Figure 2). It appeared on lit-up LED screens and sat atop the digital clocks. It was present at government events and was a masthead on official correspondence. It was, for all intents and purposes, a national seal. Fixed in its formal properties, the logo signified iconicity and authority. It was a detachable image found on storefronts, the median strips dividing up traffic-clogged roads, the stalls at the annual book and trade fairs, establishments like banks, hospitals, and universities, and the corners of television screens no matter which local channel was on (Figure 3). The logo also came with detailed instructions about its proper use listed on <https://mujib100.gov.bd/>.

All this was in addition to the paper bills, postal stamps, and public offices that have featured his portrait for years now. Mujib's likeness has become a political brand, an insignia of loyalty and a receptacle of cultural and political capital. Under the current political order (and others that came before it), this is currency that is exchangeable for direct political patronage. For the year leading up to the 50th anniversary, the realist sketch of Mujib's tilted head, side glance, beatific smile, and the glimpse of the famous black coat looked over a nation from every corner like a veritable totem. The tagline on the mujib100 website, *In Your Immortal Spirit, Forever May We Rise*, may very well be an ode to this auratic gaze.



The *Mujib Borsho* logo.



Figure 2, source: <https://mujib100.gov.bd/>.

**The *Mujib Borsho* logo near "Raju Memorial Sculpture",
University of Dhaka.**



Figure 3, source: photo by author.



In early March 2020, I found myself in front of the national museum and the public library in Dhaka. As one of the entrances to the University of Dhaka campus, this part of the city corner has long been politically and visually significant (Chowdhury 2019). The metro rail construction has left the relatively green university campus irreversibly scathed but has not deterred the authorities from making the most of the visibility that Shahbag ensured in physical and symbolic terms. It is a short distance from the busy roundabout—*Shahbag Mor*—where buses, rickshaws and private cars crosscut the city in large numbers. The billboards and banners form the field of vision of the pedestrians picking up speed to get on a moving bus while the slogans reach the auto-rickshaws and cars over the din of idling engines and unremitting horns.

It was exactly four days and eight hours before the centenary, when the countdown clock reminded me in bold green as I paused to take a photo (Figure 4). Several policemen were guarding the installations in the middle of the day. One of them spat right near my feet seemingly unaware that such banality could unleash terror in pandemic times. His nonchalance was partly explainable by the fact that the city was not yet under any Covid-19 emergency measures despite known cases starting in March. The corona virus was already a full-blown global threat. Yet, there was an implicit consensus among many people I spoke to that any emergency measures to restrict normal life before 17 March were unthinkable. It was an open secret that Bangabandhu's birth was to be a celebration, and the festivities, though muted, would go ahead as scheduled.⁴

**A digital clock and decorative plaques
in front of the National Museum, Dhaka.**



Figure 4, source: photo by author.



And so they did. Bright, colourful lamps and chili pepper bulbs generously decorated main roads and high-rises, expensive fireworks lit up the sky above the parliament building, and a cultural function was simultaneously telecast on all state and private television channels. Thousands flocked to *Manik Mia Avenue*, the widest and longest of Dhaka's roads, to enjoy an unobstructed view of the fireworks. The hours-long television programme took place on the premises of Suhrawardy Udyan (*Race Course Maidan* in 1971) where nearly 50 years ago the Pakistan army had surrendered to the Bangladesh-India joint forces and where Bangabandhu addressed his fellow citizens upon his return in 1972. The current Prime Minister and her sister, Sheikh Rehana, participated in what was originally planned as a live event. The latter joined in the chorus of nationally renowned singers on stage and the Prime Minister recited a poem written by her sister in memory of their father. The Indian and Bhutanese Prime Ministers, the President of Nepal, and Secretary Generals of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the United Nations sent felicitations in video messages. Bangladesh went under lockdown to manage the pandemic within less than a week of the celebrations.

In the political iconographic culture since independence, Mujib imagery has been recursive in nature. Post-1975 Bangladesh saw severe repression of public displays around Sheikh Mujib's likeness. Sheikh Hasina, who was in Germany at the time of the assassination, only returned to Bangladesh in 1981. Well into that decade and through the early 1990s, during the regimes of military dictators and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (Awami League's main political rival), Sheikh Mujib was an absence-presence outside of the party-political realm of the Awami League. His images and words were censored. *Joy bangla*, the clarion call to Bengali nationalism which is also the slogan of the Awami League, was marked; it went missing from various realist representations of the war of independence even at the cost of historical accuracy. 15 August 1975, the day of Mujib's killing, was introduced as national mourning day in 1996 when Sheikh Hasina became prime minister for the first time. In text books and national folklore, Mujib was pitched as a figurehead of Bengali self-determination, who had led the independence struggle (the 7 March speech has appeared prominently in school text books, for example), but a close check on the reproduction of his image kept him safely ensconced in the past, deified but in safe distance from realpolitik.



All this has been upended since the Awami League formed a majority government, which, in 2011, amended the Constitution acknowledging Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the "Father of the Nation". The *Fifteenth Amendment Act, 2011, Section 5* further added that

the Portrait of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman shall be preserved and displayed at the offices of the President, the Prime Minister, the Speaker and the Chief Justice and in head and branch offices of all government and semi-government offices, autonomous bodies, statutory public authorities, government and non-government educational institutions, embassies and missions of Bangladesh abroad.⁵

Since 2019, the High Court has also ordered the display of the portrait of the founding president in courtrooms throughout the country and the session room of the national parliament. Section 21 of the controversial Digital Security Act also leaves provisions for punishing anyone spreading or instigating negative propaganda against the liberation war or the Father of the Nation using digital devices. The penalty can run up to 14 years in jail and/or a fine of up to taka ten million (about \$120,000) (Mahmud 2018).

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The force of the image cannot be overestimated. Indeed, every important political moment in Bangladesh, and the decades leading up to its creation, is known for and by images. There is Rashid Talukder's striking photo of a lungi-clad boy with a raised arm at the head of an anti-Ayub Khan procession in 1969. It shares similar iconic stature as the photo of Noor Hossain during the students' movement against the Lieutenant General H. M. Ershad in 1987. Pavel Rahman photographed Hossain who had joined the protests to dethrone the dictator. Shirtless and defiant, the 26-year-old Awami League activist let his bare body speak out: 'Down with Authoritarianism, Let Democracy Be Free' (*swairotontro nipat jaak/ gonotontro mukti paak*). The two lines rhymed and adorned his chest and back, respectively, in bold white.⁶ The anonymous boy and Hossain were both killed by state forces shortly after being photographed, two decades apart.

The nine months of the war in between generated a number of memorable images including photographs, posters, cartoons, and art. Decades later, in 2011, the violence of the India-Bangladesh border has been immortalised by the photo of the 15-year-old Felani Khatun, or rather her corpse, which hung from the fence separating the neighbouring countries. The Border Security Forces on the Indian side shot her when she was crossing over the barbed wire barrier. And, photographer-activist



Taslima Akhter's internationally recognised photograph, 'Final Embrace', that she took inside the pitch-dark debris of the collapsed garment factory in Savar in 2013 is still the most sublime (Burke 2013) reminder of the terror of industrial labour.

But popular iconography is not always momentous. It is familiar, it is everywhere, and by virtue of being everywhere, it is also frequently hidden in plain sight. Lotte Hoek (2016) has likened this phenomenon to an 'urban wallpaper', a moving backdrop, as it were, of the technicolour and transient lives of film posters in Dhaka. The city wall is a medium for making cinema public by means of film posters. But it is also more than a mere site of publicity. The city comes to be infused with cinema through its walls. As a medium, this 'extra-cinematic space' is far from inert, passive and transparent. The posters, and the walls by extension, enable a mode of viewing that allows even those not really "looking"—a bored wandering eye or a disavowed interest—to be addressed by cinema and thereby being constituted as its public. Even apathy suggests a form of uptake.

Hoek also rightly adds that 'not all walls are walls'; that is, not all walls are open to being surfaces for film posters. Similarly, not all posters and icons mediate or demand similar kind of looking as film imagery. Political iconography partakes of a related but different value-system in the vernacular visual culture. On the mediating power of political posters, Julian Kuttig argues that they are the most visible and pervasive material and visual articulation of local party politics (Kuttig 2020). They have become graphic artefacts of the articulation of 'political everydayness' that constructs inter-party relations, structures intra-party dynamics, and produces political order (ibid.: 4).

Entire public structures like buildings, monuments and footbridges can become media for this material form of political performance. Publishing posters takes time, money, dedication, and is therefore a political act that gets rewarded in the party hierarchy. One of Kuttig's interlocutors says it well: 'Putting posters on is a mind game' (ibid.: 12). More posters equal more power, at least to the lay, public eye. To be sure, this genre of poster politics builds on existing political aesthetics and maintains genealogical connections to political events of the past, most notably the 1952 language movement and the 1971 war of independence, a phenomenon Kuttig describes as imitating the visual vocabulary of the past. Over time, I argue, artistic representation has made way for a genre of photorealism, the kind Kuttig studies ethnographically. Whether it was the famous artist Kamrul Hasan's sketch of the Pakistani military general Yahya Khan or Hasan's bold



satiric representation of dictator H. M. Ershad, political posters habitually received the attention of well-known artists and satirists.

In recent years, expansive surveillance of popular protest culture has shrunk the space of critique, satirical or no, producing visual artifacts that are more advertisement than clever political intervention. Sheikh Mujib's posters in particular have been central to an almost 'cult-like worship' of leadership that has turned the narrative of his martyrdom into the core of Awami League's ideological identity (ibid.: 15). Despite his indispensability, Mujib is not the only figure on display, though he does get top billing. The portraits of local leaders are central to the design of the posters which also visually narrate the politician's patronage networks and establish personal visibility (Figure 5). The performative effects of these images, some everyday and taken-for-granted, some spectacular and demanding curious attention, have had a cumulative effect in the way images work in Bangladeshi public life. 2020 has been witness to an obsessive visual canonisation whose origins lie in this long-standing relationship between different forms of political image-making in Bangladesh.

A 5-storey-high billboard celebrating the birth centennial sponsored by a local politician. Near Road. 32, Dhanmondi (Mujib's residence until his assassination in 1975), Dhaka.



Figure 5, source: photo by author.



II. The mimetic excess in *The black coat*

Wearing that coat, he [Sheikh Mujib] could easily stand beside Gandhi, Castro, Mao Tse Tung, or any other world leader of that stature. Nations of the world first saw it when he spoke at the UN General Assembly. Some called it an opportunity to spread his rebellious image abroad, to internationalize his call for independence for all suppressed people of the world. A few weeks after the assembly, a front-page picture in a Bengali newspaper showed a farmer in rural Bolivia cultivating his land wearing a Mujib coat [...] He looked whitish. That difference was lost under the charm of the Mujib coat. *The coat had the power to make all men look the same*—strong and unafraid in the quest for freedom [...] "From Bangladesh to the world—a style to admire". (Imam 2013: 42, emphasis added)

As leader of newly independent Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman spoke at the 29th session of the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September 1974. This was the same year Pakistan had officially recognised the sovereignty of its former eastern half. He wore the coat and gave his speech in Bangla, a first at the UN. 'Remember Presidents,' he said, 'my Bengalis can endure sufferings but will not die. In the challenge to survive, the will of my people is my greatest strength'⁷. For a Bengali nation at the cusp of independence, Mujib's coat had stood for a fiery brand of postcolonial, nationalist, and for a brief period, socialist vision.

There have been comparable cases of vernacular sartorial statements in the region. Mohandas K. Gandhi immediately comes to mind, whose corporeal austerity reflected the moral power of *brahmacharya* or renunciation. The evolution of what Gandhi wore over the decades, in South Africa as a practicing lawyer and later in India as a nationalist leader, reveals much about his ability to suture a unique bodily aesthetic amid an otherwise fiercely creative and contested sartorial field peopled by stalwarts such as Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Tagore, Ambedkar, and Nehru among others (cf. Prasad 2014). The loincloth, for Gandhi, has been a powerful index of an inner spiritual life. There is also the *Nehru* jacket named after India's first prime minister. It is similar to both the *Mujib* coat and the *Mao* suit but has enjoyed a style quotient that has more or less overcome ideological and cultural barriers. By the time of the UN address, however, Mujib's black coat had already become a party emblem. It remains so fifty years on. Imam's novel's titular reference is a nod to its nature both as an insignia of



the sovereign and a uniform. The coat branded Sheikh Mujib, and indexically, the Awami League, which he steered until his death in 1975.⁸

If the coat, as a character in the novel claims, *has the power to make all men look the same*, the flattening of distinction only goes on to amplify the value of the brand. The reason, I believe, is the mimetic effect, or the generative power of mimicry that I discussed at the beginning. Mimicry is the running theme in *The black coat*, where, noticeably, the Prime Minister appears long after the reader gets to know his imitator(s), almost halfway into the 240-page book. The copy comes before the original and sets the stage for a kind of mimetic excess that defines the rest of the novel. It starts with the protagonist-narrator, Khaleque Biswas. He used to be a staff writer for a weekly but lost his job after independence due, in part, to his nagging conscience. He wanted to be sincere in his reporting. The unappetising details of hunger, corruption, and the failure of leadership, not surprisingly, did not sell papers. Nor was it particularly prudent at the time to be critical of the political elite.

In the meantime, Biswas had committed to helping out a young man, Nur Hussain. Hussain arrived in Dhaka straight from his village hoping to land a job. With no practical skills to speak of and as one of the numerous jobless youths in the capital, he failed to find employment. Over time, he became a sort of a caretaker-companion of Biswas, who rationalised the unequal arrangement: 'If enslaving him protected his existence, I should happily go for it', (ibid.: 20). Hussain cooked, cleaned, and seemed content with sleeping in the storage area in their tiny flat. Day by day he was becoming the most valued companion (ibid.: 30), thereby forging a master-slave bond whose unfolding, like all dialectical relationship, was premised on a mimetic form of recognition.

In their quiet apartment, Hussain's repeated reminiscences of rural life somehow always stalled at the bamboo bridge that gave in annually in the river current. The banality was interrupted the day Biswas heard his habitually reticent companion recite a few lines from Mujib's famous 7 March speech: *Ebarer sangram, muktir sangram* [...] 'This is the struggle for freedom.' Disheartened and confused by the rapidly degenerating political scene, Biswas often went back to his tape player for the original words to excavate new meaning; Hussain, presumably, was an active overhearer:

I played it in the morning and at night. I played it whenever I could not decide what else to do. I listened to it loudly, quietly, and spoke along with it so that the words could not cheat me and I felt them in



my heart. I pressed the auto-reverse button. The speech ended and began again only to end and begin again. (ibid.: 30)

One evening, after a rambling walk that brought them to *Shaheed Minar*,⁹ Hussain started reciting the speech, seemingly to cheer up Biswas. Embarrassed at first by the public scene, Biswas soon picked up on the uncanny vocal resonances between Hussain and the original orator. Like Mujib's, his voice held an extraordinary power that Biswas felt under his skin. Rickshaw-*wallahs* slowed down paddling, slum children nearby looked up, pedestrians paused, and shopkeepers pushed their heads through store windows to get a good look. Hussain ended with Mujib's trademark, *joy bangla*. The crowd shouted back. Coins piled up at Hussain's feet. Strangers begged him to talk about the war and the future of their country; they implored him to protect their motherland. Hussain had *become* Mujib, at least during that impromptu act of ventriloquism for those who only got to admire their leader from a distance.

It soon dawned on Biswas that the similarities went well beyond the voice. The recognition of this "sensuous fidelity" and its eventual commodification would resolve much of his financial precarity. It helped that Hussain was an audio-kinesthetic learner. He learned the speech in no time but needed more practice to master the nuances, i.e., Mujib's 'many voices'—'one of them was sympathetic, one was analytical, one a rebel, and one a villager who spoke in a local dialect' (ibid.: 37). The two collectively laboured to produce the immaterial stuff, 'the sublime substance of sovereignty' (Mazzarella, Santner & Schuster 2019). When it came to the rest, the hairstyle posed the first challenge. The barber had no idea what Mujib's hair was like. Did he even have a style? When he looked at Sheikh Mujib, he only saw his own reflection, a specularity that happened to every citizen in the country. Ultimately, the coat, the glasses, the hair, the moustache, and the pipe, all fell 'in a purposeful combination, ready to function and serve' (ibid.: 48).

Hussain turned out to be an incredible mimic but he still needed guidance. He had to be reminded that he must not speak like Sheikh Mujib *because he was Sheikh Mujib* (ibid.: 51, emphasis added). He was not allowed to eat in public or go to the market in the black coat lest the sanctity of the persona was compromised by the ordinariness of it all by overstepping the tightly controlled parameters of its reproduction. With the help of a fake Sheikh Mujib, Biswas got into the business of cashing in on a nostalgia rather than a fantasy: 'I was convincing them the future was behind us; it had frozen the moment Sheikh Mujib opened his mouth in



1971; now we must live in the past forever; we must rot there year after year after year' (ibid.: 55).

He wrote a long exposition on Hussain's by-then regular acts for his old paper concluding that a fake Sheikh Mujib was an indication of a larger political malady; 'that the number of fake Sheikh Mujibs would rise if the real Sheikh Mujib failed to act and prove his worth' (ibid.: 58). The demand for the fake was a symptom of the times, Biswas believed. It was the lack in the original that stoked the desire for the counterfeit. The piece eventually saw the light of day but as a short column that praised Hussain for the originality of his act; it was proof, the editor had decided, of how solemnly the people of Bangladesh had taken Mujib into their hearts. Imitation was the best form of flattery after all. He hoped that, sooner or later, all Bangladeshis would become Sheikh Mujibs.

The write-up had an unintended consequence. It caught the attention of those higher up in the party. One such Awami League bigwig, Moina Mia, invited Hussain to do the opening act to his political rallies. He was willing to pay well but the duo needed to up the ante. First, Hussain's fading coat had to go because what ultimately mattered were the little things. The sovereign, much like God, was in the details. '[W]earing a coat, keeping shoes shiny, hanging the portrait of Sheikh Mujib in a spotless and expensive mahogany frame, choosing an effective typographic style for banners, choosing images with warm colours for the posters,' were indispensable for that crucial first impression (ibid.: 7).

Nobody would bother to read what was written in the hearts of those wearing the coat. *They might be real supporters, but if they were not it did not matter.* Abdul Ali could look like a monkey in that coat, or a crow without a tail, but to Moina Mia he would still be a loyal colleague, a valuable fighter for Sheikh Mujib, an indispensable element of his pageantry. (ibid.: 93, emphasis added)

'The monkey in the coat', 'the crow without a tail'—these are fecund metaphors reminiscent of the figure of the mimic man, that ridiculed outcome of a flawed colonial mimesis (Bhabha 1997). Mimicry is at once repetition and menace. This is the most apparent in colonial imitation, when, for instance, indigenous art-turned-commodity forms mimic the signs of the coloniser's culture (Taussig 1992) or the 'not quite, not yet' products of colonial mimicry in their very incompleteness (*anglicised* but never English) challenge the strategies of dominant power and knowledge (Bhabha 1997). The coat established loyalty but it also made it sufficiently clear that those who wore them were mere imitators. It was this partiality



that made them dangerous too, a threat that was not pre-empted by either Moina Mia or for that matter, Khaleque Biswas. Until, of course, Hussain strayed from the script.

Before all that, he came face to face with the one he had been imitating all along. It is unclear from the text how Hussain felt about his own participation in the theatrical mime. Quiet, withdrawn, uninterested, he had remained a mystery even to Biswas. Hussain was the village boy who was oblivious to the fact that Tagore's *Amar Sonar Bangla* (My Golden Bengal) was the national anthem of the new country. That was why the sudden outburst at Shaheed Minar was a shock and a revelation, which also began their trade in political mimicry and ultimately brought them face to face with the Prime Minister.

Sheikh Mujib had heard of Nur Hussain's act and wanted to meet him in person. When they met the Prime Minister, he had already been impersonated. The reader finds him anxiously awaiting the arrival of his double. He embraced all three of them, Biswas, Moina Mia, and Hussain, but addressed the latter as 'my brother'. While Hussain, despite repeated instructions from Biswas, seemed lost in the august company, Biswas himself had a change of heart. All of Biswas's scepticism about the ability or intention of the PM to handle the challenges of independence started to appear exaggerated:

He was tall; I guess taller than ninety-nine per cent of Bangladeshis. I felt if lightning struck right now, he would receive it first and deflect it from us. He would create a second Noah's Ark, Mujib's Ark, to protect us from floods, and would bear our guilt and accept our punishment on his shoulders. If I had not come to see him, I would have lived my entire life harbouring the wrong impression [...] They could write books and articles about his politics; they could emphasize his heroism, put him in a historical perspective; but they would not be able to portray the real man sitting before me. (ibid.: 104).

Despite devising a money-making scheme premised on imitation, Biswas also came to realise that no representation was adequate to the man before him. Hussain's inability to feel the same, revealed by his curt answers and absent-minded cracking of knuckles, baffled him. '*Nura, come home tonight; I am going to drink your blood,*' he muttered to himself in anger. But at the time of leaving, it was Nur Hussain who got the special goodbye from the leader, who kept him in his embrace a tad longer and called him 'brother' one last time.



At this point things began to unravel, at least for the characters in the novel. The dialectical relationship between Biswas and Hussain was sundered by the introduction of the third, the Prime Minister, whom both of them had been imitating, deliberately but also unwittingly. What unfolds is a mimetic excess. Biswas started wearing his Mujib coat and spent more time with Moina Mia waxing on about his nationalism and love for the leader. It was Sheikh Mujib who now wanted Hussain to accompany him to his rallies and speeches. It was no ordinary deal, but one with the most powerful man in the country. Biswas agreed to the shockingly lucrative offer made via Moina Mia.

Thus I sold Nur Hossain once again. First I sold him to the people on the street for their coins. Then I sold him to Moina Mia for his campaign. Now I sold him to Sheikh Mujib [...] The only difference was he could speak to a different, and a larger, audience now [...] It would be one paragraph of the 7 March speech or a few more paragraphs from it, which would be edited and supplied to us beforehand so that Nur Hussain had enough time to memorize it [...] They would have a particular message for the nation and it must be articulated religiously. (ibid.: 123)

Biswas's awe at Sheikh Mujib may have been transient but his greed kept him at it. The Awami League, for him, was already a dying party. If 1971 had been its best year, by 1974, its collarbones were protruding and its soul had disappeared. And yet, despite being an ordinary man, he could despise Moina Mia, Nur Hussain, or Mujib, for that matter, but none could do anything about it because they were all extraordinary and indispensable to each other. The original needed the mimic as much as the latter needed a model to imitate and a product to sell. 'We seemed to have become bound by an intricate relationship; something I never thought was possible but was now a stark reality [...] We were all fallible and delusional, we were all manipulating in our own spheres of influence.' (ibid.: 130)

This was also when Nur Hussain started giving his possessions away. The city was full of hungry faces of refugees, beggars, and unemployed young men just like Hussain when he had arrived at Biswas's doorstep. Everything was on sale in a famine—blood, organs, bones, babies, virginity, honesty. The first to go was the new pair of shoes Biswas had bought him. Even they had more market value than the newly minted Constitution. Soon went the Mujib coat and the *punjabi* (tunic) he wore under it, both integral to his act. Biswas saw him wash the items, wrap them in paper, and hand them to an old refugee, who immediately sat at the street corner to sell them. Within minutes the old man ran to the nearby grocery store with the money. Not



unlike 'Marx's coat', Mujib's black coat became a literal fetish at the moment it was turned into exchange value. Peter Stallybrass' brilliant reading of fetishism in Marx's work in which he traces the actual coat of Marx that was pawned and re-pawned to make ends meet brings home not just the enduring poverty that afflicted Marx's life but the genius of the man who had identified precisely the *problématique* that his own coat would go on to symbolise, i.e., the fetish character of the commodity (Stallybrass 1998).

Another day, while secretly following Hussain, Biswas ended up at the Shaheed Minar, the original site of Hussain's debut as a mimic. It was a return—a second coming—to the place of origin where there was only the counterfeit (Morris 2000). This time, the memorial seemed ghostly and was crowded by many more refugees. Biswas had an uneasy feeling as if a wanton destruction was heading their way. That's when Hussain began; he started with *joy bangla* and a few well-worn sentences that he had uttered many times before. And finally, in his most memorable tone of the 7 March speech, he said:

Today I can tell you that there is no hope in the words that I have spoken for so long, that they were words unconnected to our lives, to our dreams, our future [...] We have won our luck in the victory of 1971. We have written our claim on hope forever by winning freedom. This is the mistake of one person and one person alone. I have struggled with myself hard but today I can tell you the truth; Sheikh Mujib has become a monster, and as I speak of my emptiness here, he is coming for you. (ibid.: 177)

As the story unfolds, it becomes increasingly difficult to tell who mimics whom, which I believe is partly due to the shifting figure of Sheikh Mujib and the curious ways in which it appears and reappears in the novel and in the lives of its characters. In his generosity, the desire to help those in need, and the uncanny sensuous similarities, Nur Hussain increasingly became the Mujib of the 7 March speech. Poor people started waiting for him on the streets to bring them food and things to sell. The altruism brought him closer to the persona that had once made Mujib the indisputable champion of Bengal, Bangabandhu. One could surely argue that the counterfeit had taken on the aura of the original. The "common man" as the copy embodied the integrity that the politician had lost.

Contrary to this, the monstrosity that he saw unfolding around him, not least in the figure of the leader, was now personified in Khaleque Biswas, the traitor who sold a product on which he himself placed zero faith. Biswas



tried to reason with him about Mujib's character, but nothing seemed to work. In the meantime, the news of Hussain's botched if truthful speech reached Moina Mia, who blamed Biswas. How could he not see that Hussain was straying? Giving away a Mujib coat to a destitute was to insult the coat and the man behind it. Why had he not recognised after all these years that Hussain actually hated Mujib? More important, condemnation, unlike veneration, needed to be sowed and nurtured. Where else would Hussain get the idea to rebel in the first place if not from Biswas?

The allegation of blasphemy drove Biswas to murderous rage that bordered on madness, a condition he recognised himself. Moina Mia hinted at the extreme measure that was necessary in order to silence Hussain's indomitable voice. The fear was not without basis; no matter where Hussain would end up, he would spread the message of defiance. The truth of the failure of a political promise would remain uncontainable while Hussain was still around. Biswas decided to enslave his companion, literally, as if to vindicate the thought he first had when Hussain entered his household: 'If enslaving him protected his existence, I should happily go for it.' (ibid.: 205) Only this time, he needed to protect himself too, not from Moina Mia alone but his posse of Special Forces that always stood guard during their many conversations.

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He sedated Hussain, tied his feet, and locked him up in the adjacent room all the while reflecting on their collective mania. 'Had Sheikh Mujib scripted this too?' (ibid.: 205). He fed him, although not enough so he could overpower him. Hussain started to look ferocious, repulsive, ghost-like. Biswas offered a truce. He apologised and promised it would not happen again, but Hussain went ahead anyway; he called Biswas by *that name*: 'Look at that little Sheikh Mujib' he said, whisperingly. 'Victory to you little, rejuvenated Sheikh Mujib. Long live, little, rejuvenated, indomitable Sheikh Mujib. May you be happy, little, rejuvenated, indomitable, indefatigable Sheikh Mujib.' (ibid.: 224)

Biswas felt like the whole world could hear him. 'I would have to suffocate myself a thousand times because once upon a time one Nur Hussain had called me Sheikh Mujib at the height of his delusion' (ibid.: 227). For generations, they would tell the story with disapproval if not hatred. He would never be able to separate his life from the lives of those who now lay lifeless. Nor would he be able to wash away the leader's sin from his own conscience. No other name could be more offensive. And, that was why the mouth that called him names, or rather, by *that name*, needed to be silenced. He started to hit Hussain's face with a shovel. 'It was the



lips, the teeth and the tongue behind the teeth that spitted out [sic] that name at me'. 'You have betrayed us', 'You have betrayed us,' were Hussain's final words at his master/leader/murderer (ibid.: 227).

Hussain, it would seem, became the scapegoat in Girard's tripartite scheme of mimetic violence. One could venture an explanation of the violence by drawing on what Girard calls the "scapegoat effect". It is the process through which two or more people are reconciled at the expense of a third party who appears guilty or responsible for whatever ails, disturbs or frightens the scapegoats. The scapegoat is perceived as subversive of the communal order and is therefore annihilated. The structural rivalry between brothers is produced as a result of the convergence of desire on the one object (Gibbs 2008; Girard 1979). Violence is not originary; it is a product of mimetic rivalry. The scapegoat was the "Mujib" who was more real than the original. Biswas and the sovereign aimed to reconcile through the sacrifice of Hussain, a sacrifice necessary to sustain a disenchanted authority.

Except, in the case of Hussain and Biswas, the result was not reconciliation, but rather its opposite. While mimicking Sheikh Mujib, albeit unbeknownst to himself, Biswas finally saw the cruelty in himself and by extension, in the leader. It was by admitting to guilt for the dead—Nur Hussain of course, but also millions of others who perished in the famine—that would help rest his conscience. Standing at the gate of a train station, Biswas anticipated the final moment when he would stop anxiously thinking about his salvation: 'I must remember my cruelty as long as possible and as honestly as possible [...] I do not want to win any more, especially by defeating part of myself again and again' (ibid.: 239). In a mimetic *coup de grâce*, in destroying Nur Hussain, he also destroyed himself.

III. An image war

Less than half a mile from *Shahbag Mor*, a mile or so from Shaheed Minar, and right at the centre of the university campus is *Raju Memorial Sculpture* (See Figure 3). It was completed in 1997 to mark the death of student activist, Raju, who had been caught in a crossfire during political terror (*santras*) on the university campus. At the foot of the statue that stands on a traffic island, a make-shift shack of plastic tarp, bamboo, and tin was covered with hand-written signs of protest—*Stop Border Killings! Modi is Not Welcome!* Some of them were in Bangla and delivered the same message to the Bangladeshi state that has continued to show lenience if not indifference towards the systemic killing of its citizens at the India-



Bangladesh border. The number of deaths by Indian Border Security Forces (BSF) has been staggering. 25 Bangladeshi nationals were killed in the first six months of 2020 alone. More than 1100 fatalities occurred over a decade¹⁰, almost thrice as many as the official government number. No BSF member was ever prosecuted in relation to the killings.

Outside the shack, hanging from the railing of the traffic island, were photos of mourning and murder from the border. An activist body, *Kantataar* (barbed wire), organised the exhibition featuring the work of photographer Parvez Ahmed Roni and dedicated it to Felani Khatun who was killed on 7 January 2011 (Figure 6). Felani's photo has become the most urgent visual reminder of the cruelty that takes place far away from the capital city with unnerving regularity. From 25 January 2020, Nasir Abdullah, a student of Marketing at the University of Dhaka began a sit-in at the same spot for forty consecutive days. He was going to end his protest, along with the exhibition, on 17 March, the day of Mujib's birth. Birth *and* death, as I said at the outset, were jostling for space as the dominant motif in national politics fifty years on.

The protest messages at the exhibition against border killing.

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Figure 6, source: photo by author.



When I met Abdullah under the temporary shed, he was showing me names from his notebook. They were people who had stopped by to ask him about his unique, solitary protest—curious onlookers, crowds coming out of the national book fair nearby, and students, activists, and academics such as myself. His aim was to raise awareness about border killings and the clearly unfair terms of exchange between the two countries. Historically, the Awami League has been known for nurturing warm relations with Bangladesh's most powerful and intimate neighbour and for going out of its way to accommodate India's demands. Unsurprisingly, Abdullah was already getting veiled warnings from the university authorities to wrap up his act. It was not good for the "image" of the country, they said, drawing on a well-worn political vocabulary. This meaning of image (*bhabmurti*) connotes reputation rather than likeness. Abdullah's poster that addressed Modi was in bold opposition to the red-carpet welcome that the high-profile guest was sure to receive had he attended the *Mujib Borsho* festivities. Popular political grievances against India's regional hegemony were neither officially welcome, nor quietly tolerated. Through his weeks-long protest at the statue that had been erected as a message against terrorism, Abdullah was making an audacious statement about state terror, albeit at the cost of personal comfort and safety.

In Bangladesh, "image" as statue or monument (*murti*) and "image" as reputation or recognition (*bhabmurti*) seem to be perpetually entangled in a 'mute but monumental battle', as Kajri Jain puts it in a separate context (Jain 2014). Some images elevate a particular national profile, such as the 26-foot-statue of the Father of the Nation that was being planned during the writing of this essay. It would be installed at Suhrawardy Udyan, the place of Bangabandhu's "second coming" (the first stop on his return from Pakistani prison) and the very site where he was baptised as such. The Minister of Liberation War Affairs whose ministry would sponsor the statue pointed out in November 2020: 'These sculptures are part of our culture' (The Daily Star 2020). Surely not all would agree. The Minister's comments, in fact, followed those of Junaid Babunagari, the Chief of Hefazat-e-Islam, an organisation of *qawmi* madrasas (largely private Muslim schools) that has become politically relevant in the past decade or more (Ruud 2020).

The drama around placing the statue of Themis (the Greek goddess of justice) at the High Court premises in 2017 had made this abundantly clear (Chowdhury 2019) as have multiple controversies over the years around Hindu and Buddhist iconography as well as the realist replicas of *bauls* (performers of Bengali mysticism) and other figures of indigenous cultural



resonance. Multiple Islamic cultural-political groups continue to rally against anthropomorphic statues premised on a form of mimesis that both reifies and deifies the body. Babunagari was clear on this: 'Statues are against Sharia, no matter whose statue it is [...] But I swear by Allah, if someone erects a statue, even of my father, I will be the first person to pull it down. I will pull down statues no matter which party erects them'¹¹.

Within days, two 14-year-old madrasa students were arrested after an incomplete, larger-than-life replica of Bangabandhu was vandalised in Kushtia in the southwest in the middle of the night. The CC-TV camera caught the boys defacing Mujib's statue and breaking off his left arm while two of their teachers stood guard. Rehashing a stale opposition of modern versus medieval, pro-Awami League groups and cultural figures issued strong statements for upholding the tenet of secularism formative of Bangladeshi democracy while voicing direct threats of retaliation should such blatant disregard for the Father of the Nation to continue. Babunagari and the joint secretary of Hefazat-e-Islam both have been booked for sedition in a case filed by *Muktijuddho Moncho*, a pro-government organisation made up of the descendants of freedom fighters.

As always with similar showdowns of power, the reverence and repulsion around monumentalisation are as much about faith as they are about well-rehearsed and carefully timed rites of political negotiation that thrive on the spectacular. They pit seemingly centrifugal forces against one another and in doing so, domesticate a complex narrative that is as old as the nation itself (also see Ruud 2020). Mimesis, violence, and a failed promise of a democratic coming-of-age lie at the core of that narrative. The brother of (the other) Noor Hussain, whose death during the anti-Ershad protests in 1987 was the beginning of the end of the dictatorship, pointed to something akin to this in 2020. Bangladesh had briefly enjoyed democracy 'in its full flourish.' Ikram Hossain said, 'like a bright full moon in the night sky'¹². 'Where is that democracy now?'—he asked thirty years since the fall of authoritarianism that his brother had demanded with his body and fifty years since independence.

These entanglements, of birth and death, hope and haunting, had become uniquely visible during the time of the centennial of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the anniversary of the nation for which he had accepted privation, imprisonment, and ultimately, martyrdom. This official reading of Mujib has often come against its detractors in the form of fictional accounts (e.g. *The black coat*) or protests such as Nasir Abdullah's. Both have become rare as an expansive network of surveillance and a culture of



direct retaliation forecloses the possibility of counter-narratives. Still, the compulsion to mimic via statues, photographs, works of art, or re-enactment ceremonies carries within it an ambivalent and generative politics. In every act of mimesis there is both a promise and a menace, but never complete mastery. Modern sovereign power manages this uncertainty, at times with great success, through the specular and the spectacular, or what I have called in this essay, monumentalised reproducibility.

Endnotes

¹ I want to thank the editor, Farhan S. Karim for the invitation to write. His insistence and patience have seen this through. I am in debt to William Mazzarella, Francis Cody, and Nazmul Sultan for their insightful correctives, many of which I could not incorporate for a lack of time and space. Lotte Hoek had gifted me the novel I discuss here many moons ago. So, thank you! Mohaymen Layes offered company and conversation during an unsettling time in Dhaka for which I am grateful. I drafted the article in the relative safety and quiet of Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. I am deeply appreciative of this opportunity at a time when we have lost so much as a collective.

² <https://mujib100.gov.bd/> Developed and Operated by the Office of the National Implementation Committee. Powered by ICT Division and Bangabandhu Memorial Trust [retrieved 19.11.20].

³ Newspapers later reported that the Prime Minister chastised the Minister of Education, Dipu Moni for participating in this unusual form of celebration held on 29 February 2020. Although this was the only known event where masks of Mujib were on display, the mask of Narendra Modi in India has been far more common. It was designed by Manish Bhardia, Modi's graphic designer, and is strangely similar to the one in Figure 1. Unlike the common use of masks as a tool for lampooning, the Modi masks were held with reverence (Mukherji 2013). Through the masks, his presence was literally multiplied and his megalomania acquired a public dimension and sanction (ibid.: 205).

⁴ A few days before 17 March and following the positive diagnosis of three Covid-19 cases, the Prime Minister was cited as saying that the health of her people was more important than the celebration and ordered to scale it down. Indian PM Narendra Modi cancelled his visit, a decision that was largely seen as a 'blessing in disguise' in light of the *Citizenship Amendment Act* and *National Register of Citizens* in India. Both have strained the relationship between the two countries that share a rare geographic and diplomatic intimacy (Al Jazeera 2020). By the time this essay went into print, Narendra Modi was expected to attend the 50th Independence Day celebrations on 26 March 2021.

⁵ <http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/act-367/section-24552.html> [retrieved 19.11.20].

⁶ Noor Hossain and the image that helped bring down a dictator. 2020. *BBC News*, 6 Dec., <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55177686> [retrieved 09.12.20].

⁷ <https://mujib100.gov.bd/pags/mujib/speeches.html> [retrieved 17.10.20].

⁸ The other political figure whose corporeal aesthetic boldly reflected his politics is Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani. The leader of the *majlum* or the downtrodden and a *pir* (Muslim spiritual figure), Bhasani had founded the Awami Muslim League in 1949 (which later became the Awami League) and spoke on behalf of the vast peasantry of East Pakistan against imperialism, feudalism, and class exploitation. Bhasani's signature *lungi* and skull cap make up the everyday attire of the Muslim subaltern whom he had identified with and represented through his politics.

⁹ The memorial dedicated to the martyrs of the language movement of 1952 and a popular site for political and cultural congregations.



¹⁰ <http://odhikar.org/statistics/statistics-on-violations-in-the-border-area/> [retrieved 18.11.20].

¹¹ Bangladesh radical Islamist leader threatens to pull down statues. 2020. *bdnews24.com*, 28 Nov., <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2020/11/28/bangladesh-radical-islamist-leader-threatens-to-pull-down-statues> [retrieved 07.12.20].

¹² cf. endnote 5.

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