

‘Real Journalists Act as Agents of People, Not Power’

Interview with John Pilger

By [John Pilger](#) and [Eresh Omar Jamal](#)

Global Research, January 17, 2019

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

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John Pilger, as foreign correspondent, covered Bangladesh’s Liberation War. His front-page report ‘Death of a Nation’ alerted the world to the life-and-death struggle of the Bengali people. He has been a war correspondent, author and documentary filmmaker who has won British journalism’s highest award twice.

For his documentary films, he has won an American Television Academy Award, an Emmy, and a British Academy Award given by the British Academy of Television Arts. He has received the United Nations Association Peace Prize and Gold Medal. His 1979 documentary, Cambodia Year Zero, is ranked by the British Film Institute as one of the 10 most important documentaries of the 20th century. He is the author of numerous best-selling books, including Heroes, A Secret Country, The New Rulers of the World, and Hidden Agendas. In an exclusive (electronic) interview with Eresh Omar Jamal of The Daily Star, Pilger talks about his coverage of Bangladesh’s Liberation War, the state of journalism today, and the current political shifts happening in the West.

Eresh Omar Jamal: In an article for *The Guardian* in 2008, you wrote that when you came to cover Bangladesh’s Liberation War in 1971, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s wife Sheikh Fazilatunnesa Mujib had asked you, “Why have you come when even crows are afraid to fly over our house?” But you didn’t write your answer. Can you share what it was?

John Pilger: I had spent much of 1971 based in Calcutta reporting on the seven million refugees coming from what was then East Pakistan. Their journey was along what we reporters called a “corridor of pain”. The previous year, I had witnessed the devastation caused by the great tidal wave that engulfed the unprotected Bay of Bengal. What had struck me was the lack of real concern by the government in Islamabad, which sent the army to impose martial law on the people of East Bengal.



Clockwise from top left; Martyred Intellectuals Memorial, Bangladesh Forces howitzer, Surrender of Pakistan to Indian and Bangladesh forces,^[1] the PNS Ghazi. (Source: CC BY-SA 3.0)

This was a dangerous corner of the world for ordinary people and dissenters from the colonial power that touched all their lives; it was also an inspirational place where, it was clear to me, a free Bangladesh was struggling to be born.

I like Bengali people; I admired their resilience and warmth and wit. In the summer of 1971, a young idealistic lawyer, Moudud Ahmed (who later rose to high office in Bangladesh), led me at night across the Radcliffe Line that divided India from East Pakistan. We marched behind an armed guide bearing a green and red Bangladeshi flag and we listened to people's moving accounts of Pakistani atrocities and saw their destroyed villages.

My subsequent report in the London Daily Mirror and my colleague Eric Piper's photographs provided substantial evidence that the Islamabad government was waging genocidal war in Bengal.

EOJ: Can you give an overall picture of what you saw happening in Bangladesh in 1971, and later when you came back to cover the Bangladesh famine of 1974?

JP: As we went from village to village, waiting for jet fighters to pass, the evidence was stark. Where there had been Hindu communities whose ethnic place in Muslim East Bengal had been delicately but peacefully maintained since Partition, there were now deserted ruins. Whenever the Punjabis attacked, it was the same pattern of massacre of Bengalis, Muslims and Hindus alike. In one village, people had been buried alive in mud. Now and then, in the midst of this misery, I heard the defiant words: "*Joi Bangla!*"

The years that followed liberation were extremely difficult. Bangladesh had been laid bare

by war and the wilful denial of resources. I filmed the human consequence of a famine that ravaged the countryside and my reports asked why.

In Washington, Henry Kissinger, then President Nixon's powerful Secretary of State, regarded Bangladesh as a "basket case", which was an extreme ideological position that divided the world into "successful" and "failed states". Remember the US then controlled most of the world's food trade. To Washington, "failed states" were expendable, or places to dump surpluses; food shipments were used as a political weapon, literally to "zap" governments the US administration did not like.

Those countries that tried to assert their independence—for example, by voting against or abstaining from US motions in the UN—were denied food shipments and international agency support. The dilemmas faced by a new and troubled state such as Bangladesh were innumerable. I met Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and he wondered aloud whether or not democracy could survive in these conditions. Certainly, the recent election says it has not survived. The stuffing of ballot boxes and the deployment of armed thugs, and the brutal intimidation of opposition candidates, shame the liberation struggles and those who died in those epic times.

EOJ: Besides Bangladesh's Liberation War, you have also covered wars in Vietnam, Cambodia and Nigeria. What roles can journalists and the media fulfil to help people who suffer because of wars?

JP: Journalists can help people by telling the truth, or by as much truth as they can find, and acting not as agents of governments, of power, but of people. That is real journalism. The rest is specious and false.

EOJ: You have been a journalist now for many decades. How has journalism changed during this time in your view?

JP: When I began as a journalist, especially as a foreign correspondent, the press in the UK was conservative and owned by powerful establishment forces, as it is now. But the difference compared to today is that there were spaces for independent journalism that dissented from the received wisdom of authority. That space has now all but closed and independent journalists have gone to the internet, or to a metaphoric underground. Bangladesh has a rich tradition of independent journalism; be sure you protect it.

EOJ: What are some of the biggest challenges and problems that currently exist within this profession, and what do you see as being the best solutions to them?

JP: The single biggest challenge is rescuing journalism from its deferential role as the stenographer of great power. The United States has constitutionally the freest press on earth, yet in practice it has a media obsequious to the formulas and deceptions of power. That is why the US was effectively given media approval to invade Iraq, and Libya, and Syria and dozens of other countries.

EOJ: For many years you have been a great supporter of Julian Assange and WikiLeaks. How do you see them fitting into the current global media framework?



JP: WikiLeaks is possibly the most exciting development in journalism in my lifetime. As an investigative journalist, I have often had to rely on the courageous, principled acts of whistle-blowers. The truth about the Vietnam War was told when Daniel Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers. The truth about Iraq and Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia and many other flashpoints was told when WikiLeaks published the revelations of whistle-blowers.

When you consider that 100 percent of WikiLeaks leaks are authentic and accurate, you can understand the impact, as well as the fury generated among secretive powerful forces. Julian Assange is a political refugee in London for one reason only: WikiLeaks told the truth about the greatest crimes of the 21st century. He is not forgiven for that, and he should be supported by journalists and by people everywhere.

EOJ: Why do you think populism in America and Europe is on the rise all of a sudden?

JP: "Populism" is a pejorative media term. What we are seeing is a popular class revolt; people are fed up with the poverty, collapse in employment rights and insecurity that are engulfing their lives, caused by the extreme economic policies of their governments.

There are other contributing reasons, of course, but basically ordinary people in the West—especially the US, Britain, France, Greece and Italy—are seeing their precious gains fading away. That’s why the “Yellow Vests” in France have such widespread support. Also, a stampede of refugees from countries devastated by Western rapacious policies—such as Libya and Syria—have provided the scapegoats.

EOJ: Why do you think the liberal forces in those countries are being replaced by what are being described as elements of the far-right?

JP: Liberal forces are often to blame for the conditions that have given rise to the far-right. They have enabled the divisiveness. In the US, the Democratic Party has long betrayed ordinary people, whom Hillary Clinton abused as “deplorables”. Liberals in the West today are often class-obsessed behind a veneer of so-called “identity politics”. Ordinary people are waking up to that, or at least they are trying to.

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