

# NAEEM MOHAIEMEN

## TWO MEETINGS AND A FUNERAL

In Naeem Mohaiemen's three-channel film *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (2017), a few familiar faces crop up. For instance, Fidel Castro announces Yasser Arafat will be taking over the podium, having been "appointed to speak for all liberation movements." Some of the other characters are not as recognizable, such as Samia Zennadi, an Algiers-based archaeologist and editor; Zonayed Saki, a Bangladeshi publisher and leftist candidate for the 2015 mayoral elections of Dhaka; or Vijay Prashad, the Indian Marxist historian who facilitates interlocution for the better part of the film. The credits roll after the 85-minute-long presentation, and it is not until we are able to see the full roster of characters that we realize Mohaiemen himself has featured in his film.

What binds these figures together is their involvement or retrospective engagement with the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)—an alternative alliance in the developing world that was separate from the American and Soviet spheres of influence, founded by Egypt, Ghana, India, Indonesia and Yugoslavia in 1956. *Two Meetings and a Funeral* emphasizes a moment of quickening in NAM politics, namely its fourth summit in Algiers in 1973. The epilogue not only names the individuals featured in the footage who took part in this summit; it also reveals these figures' respective political struggles beyond this timeframe, including cases where various heads of state gave up their shared dreams of establishing left-leaning utopias and became autocrats. It is significant that the course history has taken is not introduced until the very end: the mostly unnamed characters, both of present time and those visible only via archival footage, emerge as a set of figures whose relationship with the making of history remains ambivalent and open to reinterpretation.

In an interview with the international program assistant director at New York's Museum of Modern Art, Sarah Lookofsky, the artist asserts that in his practice he "didn't set out to write a history of failure, left or otherwise." And yet, we repeatedly see plans fall apart and figures come short of success in the film, beginning with Singaporean minister of foreign affairs Sinnathamby Rajaratnam singling out equipment breakdowns in the Palace of Nations in Algiers as a sign of Non-Aligned countries' dependence on the world's "Big Powers." In a separate sequence, Vijay Prashad speculates that La Coupole, a dilapidated sports complex, also in Algiers, designed by Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer, will resemble Mayan ruins in 50 years. In the last third of the film, a bustling trade fair at the Bangabandhu International Convention Center in Dhaka, originally built to host a NAM summit in 1990 that did not take place and twice rebranded after



that, discloses the extent of the erasure of memory which takes place. Against the ominously soaring and falling pulse of Qasim Naqvi's synthesizer-heavy soundtrack, the surfacing of failure as the film's most dominant motif creates a vacuum for critical retrospection—a space without nostalgia or heroism—setting the stage for present-day discussions of NAM's relevance and impact.

By anchoring his work with extended shots of entirely repurposed or largely empty architectural relics of Third Worldism, Mohaiemen shows his viewers the physical remnants of NAM's evaporated utopian aspirations, suggesting that these monuments are key sites for the tracing of a historical continuum that is rife with ruptures. This desire for groundedness is embodied in what is perhaps the film's most poetic sequence: 59 minutes in, as the third and final chapter begins, a man in a blue shirt measures the distance between the camera and crookedly hung, framed photographs documenting Bangladesh's diplomatic missions to the NAM summits. With this action, he quietly (and figuratively) accounts for the disparity between the euphoric moment of Bangladesh's post-Independence debut in the international arena and the state of the nation today. Amateur installers then carefully shuffle these photographs in various configurations. Yet, without the aid of a level, the pictures are askew—in the absence of a collective memory around NAM, the ground is still shifting, as we re-examine and remake our histories.

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