

Crafting image in an age of electronic globalisation

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Resignation of DG a rare step in the right direction

The health ministry and health directorate still require radical reforms

OVER the past two weeks, the rift between the health ministry and the health directorate over Regent Hospital, which has been at the centre of the Covid-19 testing scam, has dominated headlines. In the midst of the ministry and the DGHS shifting blame onto each other and attempting to evade responsibility regarding the authorisation of Regent as a dedicated Covid-19 hospital (despite its expired license), the resignation of Prof Abul Kalam Azad, the director general of the DGHS, is a step in the right direction. It is a rare instance to see an official quitting in the face of criticism, although his official resignation letter cited health grounds for stepping down.

However, the investigations into the scandals that have plagued the health sector in recent months cannot come to a stop simply because the DG has stepped down. The revelations of Regent Hospital issuing fake Covid-19 certificates and embezzling government funds, or that of JKG Health Care which conducted coronavirus tests in exchange for money without any trade license or permission to do so, are only the tip of the iceberg.

Over the past few weeks, various reports in this paper have revealed the ineptitude of our health authorities in dealing with the pandemic, as well as the overall mismanagement and corruption plaguing our health sector—fake N95 masks being provided to medical personnel at BSMMU; unauthorised Covid-19 tests and forged reports from other institutions; more than five lakh Covid-19 testing kits lying in the warehouses of several companies in the capital instead of being delivered to testing centres; contractors who had misappropriated over Tk 100 crore from various government medical colleges and hospitals being blacklisted only recently, despite being under investigation for a much longer period; and the almost unbelievable statistics showing that two-thirds of the country's private clinics and diagnostic centres are operating without valid licences since 2018.

All of these reports show that arresting those responsible after certain crimes are exposed, or stepping down as a show of accountability, are not enough to deal with these problems. The bureaucratic deadweight at the heart of the health ministry and health directorate, not to mention the corruption, mismanagement and inefficiencies, require radical reforms. Going after a few individuals and officials, without dismantling the system that enables and sustains them, will never uproot corruption and mismanagement from the health sector.

Prolonged floods will prolong people's miseries

Affected people need immediate relief and shelter

WE are worried to learn that this year's flood is likely to continue till mid-August which may eventually worsen the sufferings of more than 25 lakh people in the affected districts. Already more than a third of the country has been affected by severe flooding. Experts fear that this flood is going to be one of the worst the country has experienced in recent memory as it may outlast the 1998 flood. According to the Department of Disaster Management, since June 26, floods have claimed 24 lives, damaged thousands of houses, crops, roads and embankments in at least 90 upazilas of the 24 affected districts.

Flood-hit people in northern and north-western regions have been going through immense sufferings for lack of adequate supply of food, pure drinking water and shelter. Waterborne diseases have become a major concern in the affected areas while flood shelters were submerged in many areas forcing people to take shelter under the open sky. In many severely affected remote areas, there is no flood shelter and the government's relief assistance does not also reach there. Absence of toilet and sanitation facilities has become a big issue for women. This flood has also come as a big blow for the country's food production as, according to our report, crops worth nearly Tk 350 crore have already been damaged.

Under the circumstances, the government should take immediate measures to reduce the sufferings of the flood-hit people by building more flood shelters, providing them with pure drinking water and food, and ensuring healthcare services in the shelters and affected areas. Special care needs to be taken for the children so they do not get infected with waterborne diseases. Also, plans should be in place to provide the farmers with seedlings immediately after the floodwater recedes and to compensate them for the crop loss. All the government agencies concerned need to work together to lessen people's sufferings and better manage the overall flood situation.

RECENTLY, quite a number of reports have been published in both national and foreign media outlets about how two healthcare providers in Bangladesh issued fake Covid-19 certificates. Obviously, the negative coverage has tarnished the image of our nation abroad. We have had reports that the foreign minister had chaired a high-level, inter-ministerial meeting to discuss the immediate ramifications of these acts on our expatriate workers who are now staying abroad or planning to go back there after a few months of being in Bangladesh. The foreign ministry has also sent a letter to the Prime Minister's Office urging action in this regard so that those returning or planning to return to their work abroad can do so with authentic Covid-19 negative certificates.

Except for some isolated events, the last two decades moved mostly in a positive direction as far as the image of our nation is concerned. One may recall that during the post-war years, a smear campaign was unleashed by Kissinger, the then US foreign secretary, who could not reconcile with the defeat of his geopolitical vision in Asia. But Bangladesh, particularly since the 1990s, started turning around from a poverty-stricken country to a dynamic, rapidly growing one, acclaimed far and wide.

In the 1990s, as a regular newspaper reader in the US when I was a graduate student, I used to come across references of Bangladesh in the print media there. Out of curiosity, I started keeping a log of such references. Within a few years, the number crossed several hundred. After a quick analysis, I found around two-thirds of those references as negative, while one-third presented Bangladesh in a positive light.

Three issues then were highlighted as positive developments in Bangladesh: a) success in population control in a low-income country, which invalidated the Western concept of demographic transition that family size depends on income level; b) the microcredit system spearheaded by Dr Yunus' Grameen Bank in a country with huge poverty that also innovated some social engineering to provide people relief from extreme poverty. Finally, the resilience of the Bangladeshi people who, despite

being badly battered by recurring climate disasters, can build back quickly. This trait of Bangladeshis earned commendation from the US press.

Now about two decades later, the basket of such positives has grown much bigger. Quite a number of our achievements in social and economic sectors are highly acclaimed the world over, touting Bangladesh as the newly emerging tiger in Asia. Our disaster management model, highlighted recently (after Amphan) in a column of The Guardian written by no other than Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, is emulated by many countries, both developed and developing. Bangladesh now

Image Theory. Economist Kenneth Boulding defined image as what we think the world is like—not what it is really like. So, we act the way the world appears to us, not necessarily the way it actually is.

This mutual reading of nations is important in the international system. The terms "image" and "perception" are sometimes used interchangeably, but perception can be interpreted as wider than image, which can be viewed as the product of perception. The image theorists argue that the consciousness of shared events and experiences in a nation is of vital importance. Our fight for independence against Pakistan, constantly remembered through ritual

and how easily the state can realise its goal. Thus a desired image can often be of greater value than a significant increase in military and economic power. We may recall that colonial powers used to try to change their "imperialist" image into a "spreader of civilisation" image. The institutions like the British Council, the Goethe Institut, the Confucius Institute, student scholarships/fellowships and different exchange programmes are all meant for building positive images of the countries concerned.

However, until recently, the postures from top leaders and decision makers played the leading role in crafting the desired image. Now in the age of electronic globalisation, the postures of the masses are becoming more effective. Public diplomacy and people-to-people interactions are proving to be efficient tools in shaping the desired image. With rapid development of internet-based social networks, domestic developments and governance process are electronically transmitted in split seconds beyond borders, bypassing the official sources of information and communication. So, the difference between image and reality is getting more and more blurred. Obviously, image building is no more the responsibility or exclusive preserve of diplomats. I will argue that our diplomats are rather *aide de camp*—the camp being the whole of Bangladesh, where the behaviour of each individual, each leader and each institution, both within and without, matters, where astute diplomats actually serve as spokespersons on behalf of Bangladesh.

Against this backdrop, the behaviour of those unscrupulous caregivers—JKG or Regent Hospital—does not augur well for the country. The news of these negative developments spread like wild fire. The health minister's response to the question of his presence in an agreement-signing ceremony between his ministry and Regent does not add to our cherished image. Such indifferent responses from a minister in addressing a mortal threat like Covid-19 cannot be swept under the rug. A wired world makes no difference between an ostrich and a whistleblower.

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Surrounded by RAB officials, Regent Hospital owner Md Shahed, in blue vest, is being taken to the RAB Headquarters after he was flown back to Dhaka on July 15, 2020.

FILE PHOTO:
COLLECTED

sends the highest number of peacekeepers in the world. The huge sacrifices—social, economic and environmental—that accompanied the sheltering of a million Rohingya refugees earned great accolades for the country. Also Bangladesh, being one of the countries that are most vulnerable to increasing climate impacts, is turning itself as a model of adaptation and learning for the world. This is being observed and commended globally.

Let me raise two pertinent questions here: why does the "image" of a nation really matter? How is it crafted in this age of electronic globalisation? There is a body of knowledge in International Relations called

observances and the historical memory of people, is such a great shared event that gives constant inspiration for our march forward. Likewise, the US Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address crystallise the national image in a form that is transmitted across generations. The historic 7th March speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1971, declared as a global knowledge heritage by the UNESCO, will be passed on to generations.

Thus, images are paramount in diplomacy, as they justify a nation's desired reaction or treatment toward another nation. Obviously, a positive image of a state is a major factor in determining whether

China's Self-Defeating Uyghur Policy

ALI AHMED ZIAUDDIN

IN recent times, the entire western mainstream media and their affiliated outlets have regularly reported China's alleged ill-treatment of the Muslim Uyghurs. Having previously extended their support for Afghan, Iraq and other destructive policies of the US, the credibility of the media lies tattered. They portray countries they consider enemies in a negative light, and manipulate opinion to build consent for wars. So it's hard to trust their reports. But China itself has said it holds an indefinite number of Uyghurs in training camps. I wonder why?

The existence of such camps was reported during the Cultural Revolution. These were called correctional facilities and served the purpose of reeducation to reintegrate the enemies of the revolution. The great French Revolution massacred more than a hundred thousand people, as did Stalin. The English and American civil wars were no less bloody. The Uyghurs have not been dispatched to that fate but are segregated for reeducation. Are they enemies of the Chinese revolution? How so? Have they threatened the Chinese state in any way? If so, how? As reported by the Chinese press, these camps are providing "technical skills" for the Uyghurs, especially their youth to help them seek jobs in other parts of China. The second intent is to keep the Islamic extremist returnees from Taliban/ISIS battlefields. Both intents are understandable. Yet, there is something that doesn't quite add up. Ambiguous explanations from the authorities sow seeds of mistrust.

There are no such camps for the larger Han community, and if an entire ethnic community, no matter how big or small, is suspected of Islamic extremism because they are Muslims by faith, it's no different from the racist Islamophobia of the west. Or does it stem from the usual hostility of communists against religion? If so, it's more like Stalinist purges than "socialism with Chinese characteristic". Either way, it's indefensible. It's true that earlier Uyghurs had collaborated with the hated Mongol and Manchu invaders centuries ago (*China, A History*, John Keay), but if the Han people still harbour that grudge against their descendants, it's simply inexcusable and also inhuman.

Yes, there are elements in Muslim societies exposed to the Wahabi/Salafi extremism but to treat an entire ethnic people with suspicion is a sure recipe for alienation. It's the last thing expected of a communist party. For long, the socialists/communists were accused of all sorts of sin under the sun, but not racism. The mechanistic praxis of Marx's theory led many communist parties astray. Marxism isn't a religion; rather it's a scientific methodology that can and needs to evolve in view of century-old experiments across the world. Or else, it may become a dogma and like other dogmas will cease to have practical applications and eventually fade away. Marx's early views on religion, which he didn't seem to have changed, may draw

some light on this issue. It offers a deeper perspective. Perhaps one of the key reasons for the failure of most of the subsequent communist movements, including the Bolsheviks, was their unwillingness to discern religion in this light.

Marx was aware of the historic role of religion in the evolution of civilisation. His frequently quoted "religion is the opium of the masses" is repeatedly referred out of context. The preceding sentence—"religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and soul of soulless conditions" (1844 journal *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*)—is hardly cited. Faith was a solace to the Hebrew slaves in Egypt just as Christianity was to the downtrodden of the Roman Empire. German peasants held on to the Protestant faith in their struggle against the oppressive feudal order, as did the Chinese peasantry for centuries by taking refuge in various folk religions outside the official/structured ones

developed far more relevant civil and criminal laws replacing most of the religious ones that were related to governance. Third, in early times religion and state were inseparable. But modernity has in most cases separated them. The revolution has freed China from these two areas of religious control. If any faith-based community, whether Muslim, Confucian, Buddhist or Christian, intrudes in the state's handling of these two areas of religion, the state reserves the right to intervene, but it cannot trample the spiritual quest or the cultural practices emanating from them.

All faiths bequeathed many cultural attributes to each society. Though they have religious roots, they are, however, celebrated more as culture. A vast majority of Europeans have long ceased to go to Church to pray but that doesn't stop them from celebrating Christmas. The Chinese New Year celebration, at least in part, honours the heavenly Jade Emperor. Similarly, all



A Chinese police officer takes his position by the road near what is officially called a vocational education centre in Yining in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, China, on September 4, 2018.

FILE PHOTO:
REUTERS

although they had elements of all (*History of Religion*, Sergei Tokarev). All other religions played a similar role at the early stages of their evolution.

They played three distinct roles blended into one. Since humans began to think, the mysteries of creation made them curious. Religion provided answers to that spiritual quest; so long as it remains a mystery, the thirst to explore cannot be quenched. It may be counterproductive to use force to try to stamp it out. The Bolsheviks tried and failed, as did most other communist parties. Such experiences left a negative legacy. This could and should be an empirical lesson for the present and future practitioners of a scientific methodology. The best policy would be to leave it alone.

The second role of religion was to support governance. Every religion presented laws to govern the society where it originated or had influence. Initially, they were mostly egalitarian, but once religions gained political power, by whatever means, the moral content gave way to decadence. Eventually, it became a handy tool of the status quo. Over time mankind has

other faith-based communities have their religio-cultural practices. If these do not interfere with the secular administration of the Chinese state, they should be celebrated and not stamped out.

But if the suspicion about the Uyghurs is influenced by Islamophobia, it's far more baffling. In brief, it's a derivative of orientalism, a European school of thought. It degrades all Afro-Asian people and their religio-cultural practices as uncivilised. To put it bluntly, they are considered lesser humans, needing patronisation or reform, but never treated as equals. This was at the heart of the colonial project. It dehumanised the colonial people and took away their dignity. Racism is a logical sequence of that outlook. All the colonies and a great number of people across the world still suffer immensely under its aegis. CCP and other communist or nationalist parties fought steadily against this curse and presumably defeated it for good via successful revolutions. But has it recently crept back into CCP's lexicon somehow? No nation is free of the disease of majoritarian chauvinism. Some deny it and ask the ethnic

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or other minorities in their societies to assimilate, some hide it with tact while some take pride in it, yet some try to get over it. China's friends would like to see it in the last group. A communist party is supposed to pursue the most advanced consciousness of its time free from all regressive socio-cultural prejudices.

China is a beacon of hope for the entire developing world. The CCP has lifted more than a billion people out of poverty in 70 years. It took the developed nations 200 years to do the same for far fewer numbers—that too by colonial plunder, massacring the natives, and slavery. The BRI Initiative is now helping others to develop. But these remarkable achievements might suffer immeasurably if key but delicate policy matters are not handled with care among which religion is one. The indescribable tragedy will be if CCP suffers the Bolshevik fate—not only for China but for the world in general and the developing world in particular. A multipolar world is in the interest of all concerned except the imperial centre and its partners. To avoid that fate, the CCP needs to introspect. Without regular debates on theory and practice among the rank and file, any communist party will run the risk of becoming fossilised. And hopefully, CCP doesn't intend to recreate a modern-day Middle Kingdom.

The US and its allies are bent on noosing China because it has upturned their long-held total control over the world. And to face that challenge, China needs to solve avoidable frictions at home and abroad, especially in its vicinity. Humane treatment of the Uyghurs and all other minorities will surely enhance China's influence. Improving its relation with India and ASEAN states is imperative. Building trust and solidarity across Asia, Africa, and Latin America may keep them from joining the US-led imperial forces in any possible future conflict.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Discard waste properly

A few days ago, I was very surprised to see my friend, a university student, throwing waste through the window. I warned him about what he was doing only to realise that he actually does not care. It is common for many educated people to throw waste like plastic bags, and bottles on the street. At the end of the day, these discarded materials cause various problems like clogging of the sewerage especially during the monsoon, amongst others.

It's a shame that educated people remain unaware of the seriousness of this issue. How can we then expect the uneducated people to abide by the rules? I believe the government needs to take some strict measures to curb the irresponsible discarding of waste materials. It should be considered a crime and those who commit it must be punished or fined. There is no other way.

Tanbin Khan, by email