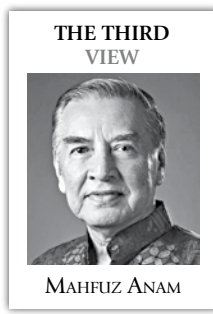


# PM's 'martial law' comment reflects people's deeply held belief



THE THIRD VIEW

**T**HE blunt statement on September 7 of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in a virtual meeting with the Armed Forces Selection Board—that “we should exclude Martial Law from military lexicon”—was both surprising and refreshing. The surprise was its timing and the freshness was that of the content. The PM minced no words in stating that our military should remove the words “martial law” from its vocabulary. What she meant was that not only should such things never happen again, but the very thought of it should be banished from our military’s mind. That is because, as she rightly pointed out, military rules of the past did not do our country and its people any good, nor did they do any good to people anywhere in the world. In spite of that record, military coups did occur all through history with the most recent examples being Thailand and Egypt, both proving to be unsuccessful and unpopular. From the side of the armed forces, coups proved to be disastrous as well—making them corrupt, inefficient, arrogant and disdainful of the “bloody civilians”, resulting in the creation of a wall of mistrust and suspicion between the armed forces and the people.

The PM may have familial reasons for her views on military rule, but her thoughts fully reflect the views of the public based on their own experiences of seeing the destruction of democracy and all the institutions of accountability and transparency. It is our deeply held belief that even an elected government of innumerable weaknesses is preferable to a military dictatorship of umpteenth virtues.

Of the many bad things that Pakistan left us with, the legacy of military coups is perhaps the worst. Never would Bangladeshi officers stage a coup, let alone kill the Father of the Nation, if not for their Pakistani training—though, sadly, many of them took part in our Liberation War.

My most heartrending memory of the first military takeover by General Ayub Khan in 1958 was when the police, aided by the military, came to arrest my father, Abul Mansur Ahmad, within days of the coup. Life after that was basically waiting for visitation days, meeting at the Dhaka Central Jail gate, and waiting for when he would be brought to the court. We would wait from early morning, while the prisoners would be brought anytime between 9 and 11 am and kept on the court premises till after the completion of hearing. This would give us almost the whole day to spend with our father who, in addition to giving us time, would be busy with lawyers, Awami League leaders and many others who would come to see him. I still remember his face, always smiling and looking confident and self-assured, never harbouring a doubt as to what he was doing or what he ought to do. His sense of humour never deserted him even for a moment.

Gen. Ayub’s military rule, with active support from the Western powers in general and the US in particular, continued for 10 years, followed by the takeover by Gen. Yahya Khan that ended with the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. So our youth, especially the Dhaka University days, passed mostly in demonstrating and shouting anti-Ayub slogans and fighting with the police on different occasions as students continued their movement to topple the military regime. It was during these days of student activism—and due to my association

with Chhatra Union and my gradual understanding of why my father was in jail and the causes he was fighting for—that I became conscious of the harms that military regimes were doing to democracy and rule of law in Pakistan in general, and to education, language, culture, history and the economy of East Pakistan in particular. Hence my heart, like that of the millions of young freedom fighters, was filled with hatred for any form of military intervention in civilian life. Later, I was inspired to see the participation of many army officers and soldiers in our Liberation War, and the role played by our sector commanders, which helped to restore in me an element of respect for them. Simultaneously, as freedom fighters, we were inspired by our dreams of democracy, economic justice, cultural regeneration and independence for the Bengalis in eastern Bengal.

But our dreams were shattered and our hearts filled with further hatred

and rewarding military dictators with huge arms and economic aid over long periods of time. Here, Pakistan’s case needs to be reiterated as, in 1958, it was one of the earliest examples of US operation in South East Asia that later encouraged military takeovers in other countries in the name of containing communism. In the case of Pakistan, the military destroyed any chance of democracy in that newly born country, and greatly contributed to the rise in disparity between West and East Pakistan that helped to further convince the latter that independence was the only way for their ultimate salvation.

What triggered the PM’s comments at this moment is an open question, but reiterating such views is good for every occasion. We should keep on repeating ad infinitum that the military is for defence, not for governance. Our military today embodies an institution that has come a long way from the days

of South Korea. The military ruled this country for decades during which it remained a second-grade economic power. Its miraculous rise to economic super-power status can directly be linked to the rise of democracy and the total retreat of the military from political power. And this happened while its northern neighbour continues to threaten its very existence. Today, South Korea is also a model for other countries in terms of dealing with Covid-19, far outshining the US with whose support and technology it began its democratic journey.

There was a time—which, alas, is no more—when this writer used to be invited to speak to mid-ranking and senior army officials, mostly from here but some from foreign countries, during seminars at NDC and Staff College. The topic was always on how to improve civil-military relations. Army officers who were in attendance all seemed to have a healthy respect

*If we are to really heed Sheikh Hasina’s call, and we think we should and must, we must remove all reasons and causes for the military’s involvement in civilian life. We must stop using them for political purposes, especially suppressing the opposition and shutting down dissenting views.*



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina addressing the Armed Forces Selection Board Meeting 2020 from her official Gono Bhaban residence through video conference, on September 7, 2020.

PHOTO: PID

for the military when, in the soil of independent Bangladesh, a section of the armed forces killed our leader, the Father of the Nation, the founder of our new state and fountainhead of our inspiration, as well as many members of his family, not even sparing his 10-year-old son Russell. The brutality of the act was unprecedented, its consequences devastating and long-lasting.

This followed the 18 military coups, as mentioned by the PM in her speech, which occurred during Gen. Ziaur Rahman’s time. Then came the uprising against Gen. Zia himself, resulting in his death and takeover by Gen. Ershad, whose government later took a quasi-civilian form and lasted till the end of 1990.

The last 30 years of uninterrupted civilian rule—save the two-year interregnum of 2007-2008—brought about enormous economic and social growth in its short and chequered history proving, once again, the superiority of democracy as a political system over military dictatorships.

However, to put the coup practice into context, as the Cold War became “hotter”, military coups became rather fashionable globally with the US government, especially the CIA, promoting it as a means of toppling non-aligned, left-leaning and communist regimes everywhere,

of Bangabandhu’s murder and those of Zia and Ershad. Today, it is a highly professional force, far more committed to democracy than ever before. It is well-disciplined and efficient and its patriotism is something to be proud of.

Yet the truth is, except to praise it, we really cannot say much publicly about the armed forces. What the PM said, and we thank her for it, only the PM could have. God forbid if anyone else, however respected and loved, had said the same thing. It is an open question what would have happened to a newspaper and its editor if they expressed such an opinion. There is practically no coverage of our armed forces in the national media except for what the ISPR (Inter-Services Public Relations) dishes out. Is this good for the military? Should they remain totally out of the public purview? And why? These are not new questions nor are they being asked only in Bangladesh. They have been asked before and in every country of the world. In every democratically run country, they found ways of keeping the military under public scrutiny while protecting all their essential military secrets. There is a lot to learn from these countries and how each of them have found different ways to address these common questions.

In my view, the country that provides the most interesting insights

for freedom of expression and freedom of the media. They gave me the impression that they would be open to responsible media coverage of their institution. After each session, I would return to my job hoping that things would change. However, the reality was fundamentally different. No coverage of army matters, however insignificant or benign, is allowed. There was an incident when a reporter of this paper did a story on unplanned tree felling in one of the special army residential areas called DOHS. When we contacted the relevant body for their comments, as is our practice, we were asked not to do the story. “How does it concern you?” was the question asked. Our reporter was reprimanded over phone and asked why, even after a definite NO, we published it. He was told not to enter any cantonment area in the future. This reaction was triggered by a story on tree felling in a DOHS, not even within a so-called “restricted area”.

This needs to change, more for the good of the armed forces than anything else.

It is undeniable that after the rise of terrorism as a global phenomenon, the role of the armed forces, especially of their intelligence branches, has expanded enormously. Now, spying on one’s own population is an integral part of their work which includes spying on the media and strictly monitoring

what it is writing and telecasting. In many cases, it involves creating their own information network keeping journalists on the payroll, which eventually ends up destroying credible journalism. It would be foolish on our part to say that while it is happening in many other countries, it is not happening here.

If we are to really heed Sheikh Hasina’s call, and we think we should and must, we must remove all reasons and causes for the military’s involvement in civilian life. We must stop using them for political purposes, especially suppressing the opposition and shutting down dissenting views. We must remember that if we are to really eliminate terrorism and remove the causes of extremism, then all misunderstanding and suspicion between the state apparatus and the public must be removed. And for that to happen, we must make a paradigm shift and think out of the box to improve civil-military relations.

Let me end with an anecdote. As a freedom fighter, I was based in Agartala. For a specific task dealing with mobilising Indian Muslim support for our Liberation War, I was asked to travel to Calcutta (now Kolkata) by plane. Because overflights were closed, my flight from Agartala to Kolkata was coming over the “chicken neck” via Gauhati. As a transit passenger, I was allowed to deplane but remain in the tarmac. When it was time to re-board, I suddenly saw a military vehicle bringing in two Major General level officers (I found out later), who quickly boarded the plane followed by a few of us who were on transit. Inside the cabin, I saw the two officers standing on the side. As I sat down, I saw them asking passengers about vacant seats for themselves as seat numbering was not yet computerised. I could never imagine a scene in my country, which was still Pakistan, where a Major General would wait for other passengers to sit and ask about vacant seats and then sit. Normally, the seats would have been reserved and there would have been several designated officials who would clear the way, and after they would have taken their seats, we “the bloody civilians” would have been allowed.

After 49 years, I still vividly remember that scene and the message that incident bore for me about the civil-military relations in a democracy—rights, dignity and mutual respect.

*Postscript: I would not be surprised if this piece itself is subjected to different interpretations and questions are raised as to what this writer’s motive could be behind writing this. Nothing but patriotism.*

Mahfuz Anam is Editor and Publisher, The Daily Star.

**ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY**

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001  
**World Trade Center and Pentagon attacked by terrorists**

On this day in 2001, 19 militants associated with the terrorist group al-Qaeda hijacked four planes in the United States, crashing three into buildings (the fourth crashed in Pennsylvania) and killing some 3,000 people.

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Thin-layered mineral
- 5 Kid’s summer getaway
- 9 Tycoon
- 10 In the know
- 12 Antilles resort
- 13 Produce
- 14 Salad makeup
- 16 Casserole bit
- 17 Feel the absence of
- 18 Mountain ranges
- 21 Braying beast
- 22 Market events
- 23 Verse writers
- 24 Bartlett’s collection
- 26 Member of the

**DOWN**

- 1 Declaration signer Robert
- 2 “If you say so”
- 3 Dice, essentially
- 4 Astronaut Shepard
- 5 Hailed vehicle
- 6 Really impress

**force**

- 29 “Emma” author
- 30 Factual
- 31 Director Spike
- 32 Glosses
- 34 Bike part
- 37 Precise
- 38 Purposely ignores
- 39 Billing info
- 40 Went fast
- 41 Wallet bills

- 7 Raucous bird
- 8 Spruces up
- 9 Molten rock
- 11 Greek vowels
- 15 Threater fixtures
- 19 Toppers
- 20 TV spots
- 22 Carry
- 23 Poker prize
- 24 New York borough
- 25 Depleted
- 26 Dream up
- 27 Pound parts
- 28 Annoying ones
- 29 Swiss peaks
- 30 Dallas native
- 33 Valiant one
- 35 Presidential nickname
- 36 Hallucinatory drug

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- PP fabric sheet making machine - 1 set
- Flexo printing machine - 4 sets
- Bag making machine - 4 sets
- Handle and other machines - 7 sets
- Sewing machines - 11 sets

Last date for machine inspection is September 20, 2020

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