

Power and influence cannot save rapists

Our leaders must send this message out loud and clear!



ON the first day of this month, a class 4 student of a madrasa in Teknaf was forced into a classroom by one of her teachers and raped. The child managed to go home to her mother, but fainted from blood loss right after, and is still receiving treatment at hospital. The accused teacher was arrested on the same night.

On September 30, six rapists entered a house in Savar and gang raped a housewife. According to the rape survivor, one of these men had been stalking her for some time before the attack occurred. So far, three out of the six rapists have been arrested.

On September 29, a 22-year-old domestic worker from Cumilla was taken by her employer to a Dhaka residence, where she was allegedly raped by a member of the ruling party's student wing. While her employer discussed the payment for "selling" her body to this man (she was apparently bargaining for Tk 10,000), the rape survivor escaped and filed a case at Mirpur police station, after which both of the accused were arrested.

One could go on and on, but even a cursory glance at media reports makes one thing extremely clear—sexual violence against women is an everyday occurrence in Bangladesh, and these are only the reported incidents. According to Ain O Salish Kendra, 975 cases of rape have been reported so far this year, with 208 of them being gang rapes.

Of these, the gang rape of a woman in a hostel of Murari Chand (MC) College in Sylhet, while her husband was kept hostage, has been at the centre of a media storm since the attack occurred on September 25. The reason behind the continued focus on this specific case is not just the gruesome

and abhorrent nature of the crime, but the identity of the perpetrators—all of the accused are alleged to be activists of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL).

Media reports have now shed plenty of light on the activities of the accused and how they used the hostel as their "den", despite only one of the suspects being a student of the college and a legal resident of the hostel. Weapons have been recovered from one of the rooms, and reports have emerged of College and hostel authorities who turned a blind eye to these anti-social activities. Present and former BCL leaders and activists have testified to a split between the two main factions of BCL in the area, leading to a steady stream of clashes and a shift towards thuggery in certain groups. One local BCL activist, under the condition of anonymity, told reporters that, "the group [accused of raping] often engaged in extortion and harassed women on campus."

This perhaps strikes at the very core of the epidemic of sexual violence that has spread across our nation—it is high time we stop ignoring the fact that these hundreds of cases are often perpetrated by those who are able to act with impunity, confident of escaping the consequences of their actions either because of their own "power", or their proximity to those who have it. If you can brazenly continue to sexually harass women on a college campus and get away with it, what is stopping you from taking it further and raping them? If you have "powerful" friends who will help cover up your tracks—as was the case of the UP chairman in Mahalchhari upazila in Khagrachhari, who prevented an underage indigenous rape survivor's family from taking legal action, took the law into his own hands and fined the rapist a measly Tk 10,000 instead for violating a child—then what is stopping you from repeating these violent acts? If you're confident that you are strong and your victim is "weak", not just physically but in terms of economic and social capital; and that

the authorities in charge of maintaining the rule of law are either complacent or suggestible, then what is the limit to the laws you think you are allowed to break? And finally, once you figure out the laws of the land do not apply to you and you can abuse your power in the most monstrous of ways—by violating another human being's body without facing any consequences—then who will answer for creating monsters

activists from across the country have made public statements condemning violence against women.

However, as well-meaning as these condemnations may be, they are not enough. If women in this country are to be convinced that this show of support is more than just knee-jerk reactions, BCL units across the country should investigate every one of their own members and activists who have



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like you?

The current status of the MC College rape investigation shows that a little political will goes a long way. Let us not forget that it was a former organising secretary of BCL's Sylhet unit who eventually came to the couple's rescue and alerted the police to the crime that had occurred. The home minister vowed that none of those involved in the rape "will be spared" and despite initial hiccups in arresting the perpetrators—which included allegations that a certain group of local leaders were trying to help them evade the police—all are now in custody. Local ruling party leaders have conveniently distanced themselves from these men, and BCL leaders and

such allegations against them. We must remember that in a society as conservative as ours, it is no easy feat for women to come forward with their stories of abuse. The case of 19 year old Nusrat Jahan Rafi, who was burned to death after speaking out against her abuser, shows just how vulnerable even the strongest survivors can be.

An extremely grim silver lining (if we can call it that) to this hideous status quo is that more of these crimes are now being reported to the police and more importantly, steps are being taken by the security forces to arrest the culprits. However, that does not change the fact that conviction rates are shamefully low—only three percent of cases relating to violence

against women and children result in a conviction, according to a 2019 report by the Women and Children Repression Prevention tribunal from five districts.

If the statistics from the aforementioned report are anything to go by now, that means that at most, only 30 of this year's 975 rape survivors (so far) will get justice for being on the receiving end of the worst kind of violence. Will the survivor of the gang at MC College be one of these "fortunate" 30? Will the handling of this case set a precedent for all those responsible for ensuring justice for rape survivors? And most importantly, will the authorities send a loud and clear message to all potential rapists across the country on how no amount of power can ever allow abuse and misuse to this extent?

Bangladesh is a country that was borne out of horrific sexual violence perpetrated by the Pakistani military forces. Yet Bangladesh's response to this violence was one of the most profound moments of humanity in our national history—these women were acknowledged as *Birangana* and later as freedom fighters, and when Bangabandhu found that many of the survivors of sexual violence were being cast out by their neighbours and families, he famously said, "Put down my name as their father's name if anyone asks after their family background, and write their address as Dhanmondi 32. How will I ever repay the sacrifices that my daughters have made during the Liberation War?"

The Father of the Nation treated rape survivors with the honour and dignity they deserved. It doesn't matter how quickly we become a middle-income nation or how high our remittances and export earnings are—we will never be the country he dreamed of if sexual violence continues to be an everyday occurrence in Bangladesh.

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The grave implications of another Trump presidency

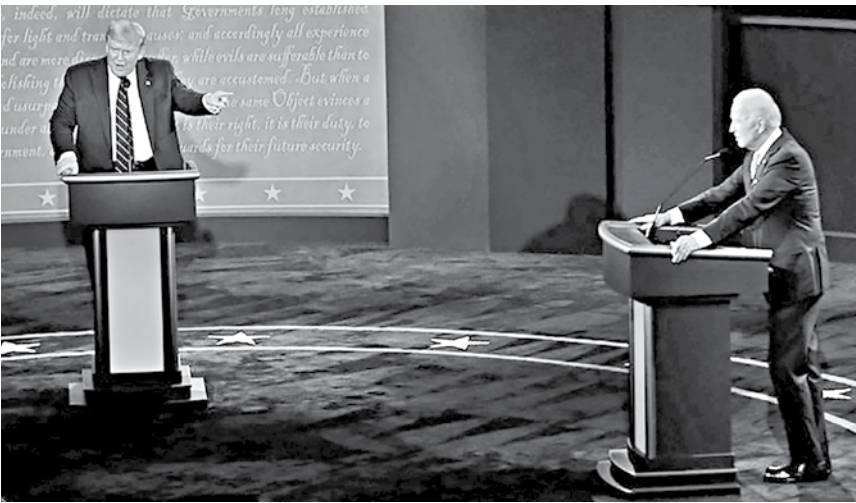
ABDUL HANNAN

IF the recently concluded presidential debate is of any indication, the consequences of electing president Trump for a second term is a foregone conclusion—an irreparable damage to democracy. Trump was predictably belligerent and combative, interrupting Joe Biden time after time, despite the appeals of moderator Chris Wallace for restraint. He was more interested in mud-slinging Joe Biden's son Hunter Biden, than he was answering questions on national issues like healthcare, economy and the ravages of the coronavirus. He refused to pledge that he will accept the election result even if he lost. He spoke of unfounded vote rigging and fraud by mail-in-voting.

It is not mail-in-voting but Trump himself who is a threat to a free and fair election. The debate foreshadows consequences of his win—a repeat performance of his first term with more vengeance.

His domestic policy was an unmitigated disaster, scarred by his flip-flopping and meddling in administrative rules and regulations, democratic practices and conventions. He destroyed and dismantled democratic institutions riding roughshod with the congress, judiciary and the media. He subverted democracy by running the administration using his presidential executive orders and side-lining congress and abridging the constitution.

Under Trump, the White House has been mired in chaos. He treated the White House as a revolving door for constant arrivals and quick and disgraceful exits of his advisors and



US President Donald Trump and Democratic Presidential candidate Joe Biden during the first presidential debate in Cleveland, Ohio, September 29, 2020.

PHOTO: AFP

top administrators. He did away with his communications staff, Sean Spicer, Sarah Sanders and Anthony Scaramucci in quick succession. The list of the fallen, fired or resigned is long and never ending, exceeding 37 including heavyweights like Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defence James Mattis, National Security advisors HR McMaster, John Bolton and Michael Flynn, Chief of Staff John Kelly, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, strategist Steve Bannon, et al. Bob Woodward in his book "Rage" Quotes James Mattis as having described Trump as "dangerous" and "unfit".

The economy under Trump is in tatters because of his inept handling of the coronavirus crisis. Twenty million people have been thrown out of employment, homes and are without food on the table. Two hundred

thousand manufacturing jobs have been wiped out, the stock market is in a state of constant turmoil, shocks and shudders. Tax cuts were only for the rich and wealthy, trade deficit is at an all-time high, budget deficit has reached three trillion dollars. Economic growth is not about data only but about people at the end of the day.

Trump's foreign policy (if any), inconsistent and lopsided as it was, based on his instincts and impulses rather than strategy or principles, was a fiasco. His brand of "unilateralism, his mantra of "America first" denouncing multilateralism, shredded America's international relations. His extreme protectionist policy sent shockwaves towards America's trading partners. He alienated America's traditional allies in the west when he imposed tariffs on USD 7.5 billion worth of EU goods,

showed contempt for NATO and made disparaging remarks about French President Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. He pulled out of the Paris Climate Change Agreement. Yet, the climate crisis in America continues to worsen. Hurricanes and rising temperatures are more frequent than ever. The west coast is in flames. He abandoned the Iran Nuclear deal, clinched by five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany and EU. He withdrew disdainfully from the World Health Organization, UNESCO, UNFPA and UN Human Rights Council. He downsized the State Department.

There is increasing international concern over Trump's Iran and China obsession, which may turn into a major military confrontation, even a nuclear war, wittingly or unwittingly. His three meetings with Supreme Leader of North Korea, Kim Jong-Un, failed and was motivated more by his political ambition—to add to his credentials as an achiever in peace-making, rather than by larger national interests.

Trump muzzled the press. He scoffed at the media as being the "enemy of the people", claiming that they and others were dishing out what he described as "fake news, hoax and witch hunts". He only valued "alternative facts". Many claim Trump is a compulsive liar. His own elder sister, Maryanne Trump, a retired federal judge, said that he lies. His niece Mary Trump in her book "Too much and never enough" said that he cheated on his college admission tests. Former secretary of state Colin Powell said that he lies all the time. He lied to people when he played down the severity of the threat of the coronavirus, describing it as just like any other

flu which will disappear soon. He continued to hold campaign rallies without precautionary measures. The result is the needless loss of more than 200,000 American lives, the highest anywhere. He abdicated his leadership when it was most needed.

Despite his bizarre and dismal record, chances of Trump succeeding cannot be underestimated because of his mastery and skill over electioneering strategy and craftsmanship. His propaganda offensive is his base. Also, Trump's campaign slogan "Make America great again" appeals to extreme nationalists who have racial and anti-immigrant bias. Besides, the flawed policy of electing American presidents through the electoral college system, rather than the universally accepted popular votes, may be a determining factor in his favour—as happened in the 2016 election.

Joe Biden's campaign, in stark contrast to Trump's, is timid and faltering as he is strictly adhering to health rules by wearing masks and social distancing and addressing his audiences through virtual media. Besides, he is no match for Trump in disseminating disinformation.

Yet, Americans would be playing a risky game if they choose to elect President Trump for a second term with his proven track record of being incompetent and disruptive, unprincipled and intemperate. But Americans deserve better. They deserve reincarnation of the values of honesty and integrity, truth and justice, decency, dignity and honour in the high office of the hallowed majesty of American Presidency.

Abdul Hannan is a former diplomat.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



OCTOBER 4, 1957
Sputnik 1 launched by USSR

On this day in 1957 the Soviet Union launched Sputnik 1, the first artificial satellite, which orbited Earth until 1958, inaugurated the space age, and heightened Cold War competition between the USSR and the US.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Messing on TV

6 Winter gliders

11 Franc replacers

12 True

13 Small nails

14 "Hello" singer

15 Gun, as a motor

16 Parsons of film

18 Mamie's mate

19 Young one

20 Put away

21 Joined the choir

23 Yertle's creator

25 Long, long time

27 Hosp. workers

28 Feel faint

30 Gloss targets

33 Despondent

34 Brick carrier

36 Wee bite

37 Magnetite, e.g.

39 "Golly!"

40 Razor sharpener

41 Site

43 Señor's squiggle

44 Seeped

45 Passover feast

46 Swamp hoppers

7 Ore source

8 Aldous Huxley novel

9 Cowboys' home

10 Winter weather

17 Urgent call

22 Sticky stuff

24 Online address

26 Bad racetrack choice

28 Raid

29 Neither follower

31 Like quilts

32 Goes 80

33 Rosters

35 Train stop

38 Network junction

42 John, in Jersey

DOWN

1 Wreckage

2 Cry of discovery

3 Aldous Huxley novel

4 Retina part

5 Useful skill

6 Like louvers

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

B	E	A	D			P	A	U	S	E
R	U	B	E			F	O	S	S	I
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BEEBLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT