

How do we stop these copycat rapists?

Ending the culture of impunity of rapists is the first step

WE are horrified and outraged that only days after the horrendous gang rape of a woman in Noakhali, which the perpetrators filmed and later released the video on social media, sparking nationwide protests, two more incidents of eerily similar nature have taken place, and again in the same district.

On October 9, a pregnant woman was raped in Senbag (Noakhali) when her husband, a microbus driver, had gone out on duty. The main accused is the brother of the microbus owner and he, along with 10-12 of his cohorts, went to the woman’s home, raped her while his friends videotaped the incident, threatening to expose her on social media if she told anyone. When she went to the Upazila Parishad chairman, he said he would help get her justice. Later when reporters asked him, he said he had told her to seek help from the police. Finally, after the rape survivor filed a case, the police on Wednesday arrested four of the five accused in the case though the main accused was missing at the time.

The second incident occurred in Chatkhil (Noakhali), in which a woman whose husband works overseas was raped at gunpoint by a man who had links with the local Jubo League unit. The accused was arrested, and according to police, there are several cases against this man related to various crimes.

The implications of these rapes are frightening. Despite the vociferous protests against the first Noakhali rape (and other rapes), despite the government reacting so swiftly and announcing the death penalty for all rapes, we find that copycat rapes have occurred in the same district. The idea of videotaping the rape and releasing the clip on social media has become a new dimension of terror adding to the trauma, and nothing—not even the fear of a death sentence—is deterring it.

So what will deter these rapists? As this paper, echoing the voices of rights activists, has harped on—the first step is to end the culture of impunity of rapists through stern actions from the government. No one linked in any way to the ruling party or the administration should be shielded if they commit a crime, with a special emphasis on a crime like rape. This includes the police, local administration, local political leaders or influential individuals of the community. We are relieved that in the two cases mentioned, the police have acted swiftly and arrested some of the rapists. We hope the main accused will also be apprehended with due diligence.

But the arrest of rapists is just one step in the fight against sexual violence. The investigations must be thorough, fair and not be marred by any influence or money. The victims must be treated with extreme compassion and dignity by the legal system and the medical team that treats them and gathers evidence of rape. Protection of the victims and witnesses must be ensured. The rapists must be punished according to law and the news of their punishment should be made public. Reforms in laws about sexual violence must be initiated. While society is to be blamed for its role in shaming the rape victims instead of the rapists, the government must send out a strong message that rapists and criminals will be dealt with severely regardless of their affiliation with the ruling party and other influential groups.

How will BRTA ensure road safety when it can barely function?

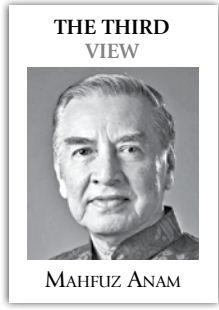
Govt must take responsibility for BRTA's woeful inadequacies

OCTOBER 22 was the National Road Safety Day and we cannot help but wonder how road safety can be ensured when the country has only 109 motor vehicle inspectors to check and give fitness clearances to the lakhs of vehicles that need inspection. Last year, these handful of inspectors gave fitness clearances to some 7.5 lakh vehicles—an inhuman task for sure. If that was not bad enough, they had to give most of the clearances manually, as the BRTA has only one digital machine for the tests.

It is nearly impossible to check the fitness of vehicles without digital machines—especially the workings of key features like headlights, brakes, and speed capabilities—and checking vehicles manually greatly compromises safety, according to experts. To add to that, none of the BRTA offices around the country have any permanent and dedicated venues to arrange driving tests. Which means, they have to hire venues for free or use classrooms and playgrounds of educational institutions. How have things come to this? After so many years since the BRTA was established, how does the organisation lack the most basic elements required for it to function, let alone function effectively? And how, then, is it supposed to ensure road safety?

The amount of apathy and lethargy with which the government has worked to equip the BRTA to handle important tasks such as granting fitness licences for vehicles and licences to drivers is shocking! No wonder we have hundreds of vehicles playing the road that actually belong in the scrapyard. No wonder we have drivers who have no business driving any vehicle whatsoever without getting much more extensive training.

We have repeatedly asked the government to extend the capacity of the BRTA in these columns over the years. And it is disappointing to know that in the last 8 years, the BRTA only managed to recruit a total of 19 people, and among them only one vehicle inspector. If things continue down this path, we are afraid that road safety will never be ensured, and thousands of people will continue to lose their lives or limbs through road accidents as a result. However, these road accidents would be completely avoidable if the government would just make the BRTA more effective.



as a “basket case” and thought of as a permanent drag by the international community—and one that has had humungous development challenges from its very inception—to come as far as we have is, by all standards, a remarkable achievement. The latest IMF’s World Economic Outlook puts us ahead of India in terms of per capita GDP by the end of the year. Obviously, this further strengthens our credentials as achievers.

But how is our coming of age to be measured? Is it just by per capita income or GDP figures or such indices? There are many other such numbers that show us in a favourable light. They are all very important and we are proud of those achievements. But what about some other signs of development—decent and safe roads, clean air, a dependable public transport system, safe water supply, reliable public healthcare, public education measured not by quantity but quality, and most importantly, safety for women? What about freedom of speech, right to dissent and right to assemble peacefully? What about the way we treat the individual human being who has been reduced to a mere statistic? For example, we lustily wait for money from our expatriate workers and yet unjustly, and some would say illegally, imprison them when they return having lost everything, not to mention the sufferings we put them through when things go wrong. Have we advanced in these areas as we have done in others?

Permit me to focus on something very specific. A sight that I find particularly offensive and demeaning as a citizen of a free and independent country is that of the police routinely attacking groups of demonstrators with batons as if they are nothing more than an aggregate of flesh and bones to be beaten, injured, maimed and brutalised in every possible way, without the slightest acknowledgement that they are citizens of an independent country with specific legal rights and entitled to minimum dignity and respect. The footage we see on television and photographs that we regularly publish of these incidents in this newspaper and others make me feel as if we are still in the colonial era when white Saheb-run police would swoop down on the brown natives, breaking their bones, because they had the temerity to “demand”. How dare they! Twice freed—once from the British and



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The opinion polls are hinting at a Democratic win, with persistent leads in polls in the swing states too. In Pennsylvania, a key state taken by the Republicans in 2016, Donald Trump’s numbers are reported to be sliding back further, giving Joe Biden a 7-point lead.

With about two weeks remaining before the election, these figures can change further, and one should not be surprised if the end game turns out to be different and nasty.

There have been persistent claims by President Donald Trump (without any evidence) of past rigging in postal ballots. This, some argue, is his way of preparing the ground for such action by his own party. The recent appearance of “illegal” and unofficial ballot boxes in churches and Republican offices in California to collect ballot papers hints at vote rigging. But it is difficult to imagine vote rigging and election-related violence in a country like the USA with its strong institutions, democracy, and rule of law. But recent events and the possibility of Trump using newly raised special forces to tame “violence” do not exclude such possibilities.

The demonstrations after the death of George Floyd and their suppression in the hands of police can be an indication of how nasty things may turn out to be. The stakes in the case of a presidential election are much higher, and in the event of any anomaly with the voting process, the scale of protest can be high.

Trump’s survival in his roller coaster

Why do our protesters get beaten up?

‘Development’ must also be of values

then from the Pakistanis—we still have not accepted the fact that every citizen has the right to inquire, question, demand and, when necessary, protest. We decry the colonial attitude in so many things but when it comes to treating a demonstration, the old colonial way of police brutality is still the norm—a police whose salary, uniform, every perk, and even the baton they beat us with are paid for by our tax money.

This is such an irony. The protest culture was almost a tradition for us, and it is rooted in our anti-colonial, anti-Pakistan and anti-military dictatorship struggles. Today’s democracy—whatever is left of it—is the direct result of the anti-autocracy movement against the Ershad regime. Yet this tradition now lies in tatters, partly due to misuse but more so because of the present anti-democratic attitude and the

independence. Are we going to enter it with this medieval attitude towards dissent? We have been independent for nearly half a century—no foreign ruler to extract our riches, no “superior race” to make us feel inferior and distort our values, no external master to rob us of our dignity, no hidden hands to divide and rule us. Why then have we not been able to introduce a minimum level of civility and decency in handling demonstrations where our people can be guaranteed a minimum level of respect?

Recently, a group of left-leaning students and civil society members organised a “Long March” from Dhaka to Noakhali to protest against the growing incidents of violence against women. On their way, at Feni, they were attacked and the buses that were carrying them were vandalised by AL activists with the police either quickly following suit or watching the mayhem

under police attack. In 2018, a student’s demonstration against the quota system in government jobs faced police brutality, this time joined by the AL goons. Then school students, triggered into agitation by the sudden death of two fellow students under the wheels of a recklessly driven bus, spontaneously started the “Road Safety” movement. It was allowed for the first few days, and when the government saw it gathering momentum, it unleashed the police and party thugs against young students. Last year, a simple demonstration by jute workers demanding their arrears was attacked by the law enforcers. This year, state jute mill workers came under heavy police attack while they were demonstrating for their separation payments.

It is clear from the above instances—and there are numerous others that we



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PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

resultant suppressive measures adopted. I will be the first one to admit that on some occasions these civic movements turned violent and did result in destruction of properties and loss of lives. However, by and large, our tradition of mass demonstration has been peaceful, and on the occasions that it turned violent, it was more due to police action and the presence of police agents and saboteurs within.

The saddest aspect of our present protest culture is the near-destruction of our student politics, which is among our most glorious heritage. What happened to it, and why, is a subject for another day.

As long as we are peaceful, we are within our constitutional rights to hold protests. Why then is there so much brutality towards the demonstrators? Next year, we will celebrate the 50 years of our

from a distance. The protesters were subsequently able to reach Noakhali and complete their programme without any further incident.

This attack on protesters was not an isolated event. The agitation for workers’ safety rights following the infamous Rana Plaza incident was attacked by the police in 2013. In the following year, a protest against the coal mine in Barapukuria ended in police violence. In 2015, a demonstration by private university students against VAT on their tuition fees was set upon by the police, and many homes were raided and a number of students arrested. Many are still entangled in court cases even after several years have passed. In the same year, a protest against the Rampal coal power plant titled “Road March to Save the Sundarbans” came

did not cite due to space constraints—that the spontaneous agitations of general students later joined by the public at large all ended up under police baton, resulting in serious injuries, court cases, and arrests. Generally, the demonstrators are looked upon as enemies and, as such, have to be crushed and done so with brute force. Today, people are not only NOT allowed to protest but they are also treated with insult, humiliation and violence.

Tolerance of dissent is the primary cause of such brutal treatment of agitations. It could also come from fear... fear that if demonstrations are not nipped in the bud, they may grow into serious threats to the regime. The history of such fears is that they are often self-fulfilling.

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The end game of Trump politicking



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business career with reported failures and his massive “outstanding loans”, both to local and foreign financial institutions, testify to his dark business instincts and skills. His navigation through the maze of tax laws, having paid only USD 750 in 2016 and 2017 each, and not disclosing the tax returns during the pre-2016 election process reflect his “skills and smartness”.

Trump has indeed whipped up extreme emotions among the American people as well as among many around the world. He



US President Donald Trump.

PHOTO: REUTERS

is seen as an egoistic, self-serving person, a tax dodger, five times draft evader, and a sexist with very low respect for women. But he is also praised as smart and intelligent. Trump has “saved the United States”, says former Trump adviser Steve Bannon. He’s one of the “smartest, cleverest and most successful” presidents, says Fox’s Jeanine Pirro. But he was also labelled “dumb and racist” by comedian Seth Meyers, and is guilty of “rampant corruption,” according to commentators on MSNBC.

Caroline Giuliani, daughter of New York’s ex-mayor Rudy Giuliani, wrote in an op-ed in Vanity Fair that Trump’s policies are breaking families apart and that if being the daughter of a polarising mayor has taught her anything, “it is that corruption starts with ‘yes-men’ and women, the cronies who create an echo

chamber of lies and subservience.”

Trump created a lots of chaos this year, starting with the handling of Covid-19 and then peaceful protests of the “Black Lives Matter” movement. And in the process, America started counting deaths, around 230,000 by now. The Covid-19 death toll in the USA is expected to increase by another 160-170 thousand by February next year. Trump’s show of force against the peaceful protests of George Floyd’s killing also instigated violence.

the far right and white supremacist groups, and whip up their sentiments against immigration, the Chinese for giving Covid-19 to the USA and for taking their jobs (through unfair trade practices). He refused to condemn the white supremacists, only managing to say “stand back and stand by” when repeatedly pushed by the moderator Chris Wallace during the first presidential debate. He expects his call to “Make America Great Again” will again reverberate through American heartlands and the swing states. He engaged in orchestrating misinformation. Mary McCord, a former federal prosecutor and now a Georgetown law professor, noted that Donald Trump has become “the greatest threat to our democracy”.

The third and most damaging strategy has been to systematically undermine the neutrality of the judiciary through the nomination of Republican-favoured judges, sponsored by the shadowy right-wing networks, and eventually the nomination of Amy Barret to the Supreme Court. The composition of the nine-panel judge with a 6:3 ratio favourable to the conservatives can be of much comfort to the Republicans.

The Republican strategy to tinker with the judiciary also included the elimination of the system of civil judiciary, which is protected by law against any corruption. In the confirmation hearing, Sheldon Whitehouse, a Democratic senator, revealed how dark money was playing a role in putting people of influence in right places in the judiciary of America.

Violence can break out between armed right-wing groups and the moderates in case the election results do not go in favour of Donald Trump. He has asked his supporters to “protect” polling centres for him. And in case of “contentious claims on results and election frauds”, the Republicans can expect to get a favourable hearing in the Supreme Court.

The end game of Trump politicking may not succeed in putting him back in the presidential seat, but he is not going to go out without a fight.

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