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FOUNDER EDITOR
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The homeless are shivering on the footpaths

The city corporations and citizens must act fast

THE picture published in this paper yesterday of a mother and child sleeping on the street with no warm blankets or warm clothes to shield them from the winter cold says it all. People who do not have a roof over their heads have no option but to be at the mercy of the weather changes—be it rain or storm or the chilly winds of the winter. But why must we see such scenes that tell a story of extreme privation and neglect? As a cold wave is predicted to set in by next week all over the country, we urge the government to take measures to alleviate people’s suffering. In normal times both the government, non-government organisations and private citizens make efforts to distribute warm clothes and blankets. The pandemic seems to have delayed these efforts.

As temperatures are predicted to drop to 10 degrees and lower in many parts of Bangladesh, there is an urgent need to mobilise resources to buy and collect warm clothes and blankets and distribute them quickly to those in need. This applies to both the cities and villages where there are people who are so poor that they cannot afford to buy a warm blanket or clothes to protect them from the elements. Children and the elderly are the most vulnerable and can easily contract respiratory diseases. This includes Covid-19 infections that have already started to rise as expected in the colder season.

We appeal to the two city corporations to immediately start distributing blankets and warm clothes first to those who live on the streets. Here the wealthier sections of society must donate generously with cash or kind to reliable charitable organisations and groups who are engaged in distributing these items. Many can take their own initiative and do this on their own. As a society we cannot stay indifferent to the acute suffering of those who are less privileged especially during times of crisis. While we stay warm and well fed in our cosy homes let us play our part as conscious citizens to help those who are hungry and shivering on the streets of our cities.

Aminbazar landfill grappling with solid waste management

Address the manpower and equipment crisis urgently

A report published in *The Daily Star* yesterday revealed that Aminbazar landfill on the outskirts of the city is short-staffed, ill-equipped and has been struggling to manage solid waste since long. According to Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) officials, the landfill is running with less than 20 percent of the required staff. Although a recycling plant, a leachate collection pond as well as a treatment plant were supposed to be in the landfill, according to its original design, those were either not built or utilised in all these years. There is also a shortage of heavy equipment to give the daily soil covering on the waste.

While the three crucial posts of waste management supervisors are vacant, there are also no mechanical or civil engineers or waste management professionals at the site. Only 19 people are managing over 3,000 tonnes of solid waste generated daily in the landfill from the DNCC areas. The leachate collection pond and treatment plant were non-functional till 2018, while the recycling plant still exists on paper only. Since there is no manpower for waste segregation and recycling, the landfill authorities allow in hundreds of waste pickers to collect recyclable materials from the dumped garbage. The equipment shortage is another issue that is making the work difficult for its staff—out of the six excavators, eight chain dozers, two-wheel dozers and one payload loader at the landfill, only the payload loader is functional at present. It is really surprising how all this equipment can become non-functional within just five years of the purchase.

In order to keep the landfill properly functional, recruitment of necessary manpower is crucial. The heavy machinery that is lying idle should also be repaired immediately. As both the Aminbazar and Matuail landfills’ capacity will exhaust within a very short time, the authorities should make a proper plan to manage the city’s waste in a sustainable way. Acquiring more land to expand the landfills does not seem like a good idea in this land-scarce city. While setting up power plants in the landfills seems like a good idea, it will not solve all the problems regarding waste management. The city authorities must overhaul the entire waste management system, from collection and segregation to recycling and treatment, to manage Dhaka’s waste management problem.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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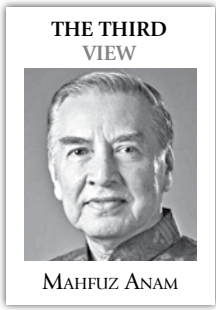
Addressing the challenges of vaccination

Countries are now openly engaged in competition to approve the Covid-19 vaccine. This may compromise the effectiveness of the vaccine. Tackling misinformation and disinformation and ensuring security related to vaccine development has not been addressed much. Safety precautions and maintaining hygiene while injecting vaccines also need to be discussed.

Public support for vaccines in general is already an issue. Trust in other lifesaving vaccines will be eroded further if a Covid-19 vaccine does not work well.

Yes, we are all increasingly longing for an end to the outbreak. But a safe vaccine, effective for all those at risk, is worth the wait.

Iftekhar Ahmed Sakib, Dhaka



THE THIRD VIEW
MAHFUZ ANAM

termed as the victory of the people over the military did not receive any public attention. Is this inattention a statement of what democracy has now come to mean for us? A distant dream? Otherwise why such indifference?

I am of course referring to December 6, the day General Ershad fell from power in 1991 opening the door for our transition from dictatorship to democracy which has thankfully survived, but just, and terribly bruised. To repeat what I have recently written, it is Covid infected, with severely affected lungs and cannot breathe.

There are two very important reasons why the fall of General Ershad should never be forgotten or its significance underestimated. First, the grand unity of people and the political parties that caused his fall and, second, the system that was torn down along with him, a system that would have permanently brought the military into the governance process of Bangladesh.

Dislodging a military government through peaceful mass demonstration is one of the most significant achievements in our march towards restoration and strengthening of democracy. It proved that when people are united and when all opposition political parties come together they can dislodge a well-entrenched military backed government that ran the country since March, 1982. Usually military governments are replaced by another or changed through some revolutionary upsurge. But for the military to surrender to the majesty of public opinion expressed through mass agitation sans violence is without too many precedents. (To note on the side, it was because of his peaceful surrender to “people’s will” that General Ershad survived to continue in politics for nearly three decades and was to later become the “kingmaker” as the rivalry and bickering between our two major parties created the opening for him and his party to play that role).

The unity of the political forces—bringing together every colour and shade—created an indomitable “people’s force” that left no alternative to Ershad’s prime backer—the armed forces—to abandon him, triggering the final eruption of an earthquake that had been simmering beneath the surface over the past several years. The message to the military leadership of the present and the future, not only in Bangladesh but perhaps the world over, was not to cross the line and to remain duty bound to perform its constitutional task and not go beyond. Our armed forces heeded that lesson and they are so much the better for it now, a fully professional army earning us laurels through their peacekeeping work.

What was the system of governance that General Ershad’s coup and his administration represented? Simply put, the legitimisation of the military’s involvement in running the country and setting up of a permanent mechanism, through constitutional amendment, for the army’s participation in government. His proposal, he said was to solve the

“deep seated politico-military problem” and to ensure that “coups and killings do not take place a year, 10 years later or ever again.” What a wonderful idea, to prevent future coups General Ershad was suggesting a permanent coup! His formula was to make the political forces subservient to the military elite or at best put them on an equal footing so that the military and the civilian government could run the country together. This would have permanently politicised the military fighting force for which the taxpayers are ungrudgingly and relentlessly paying.

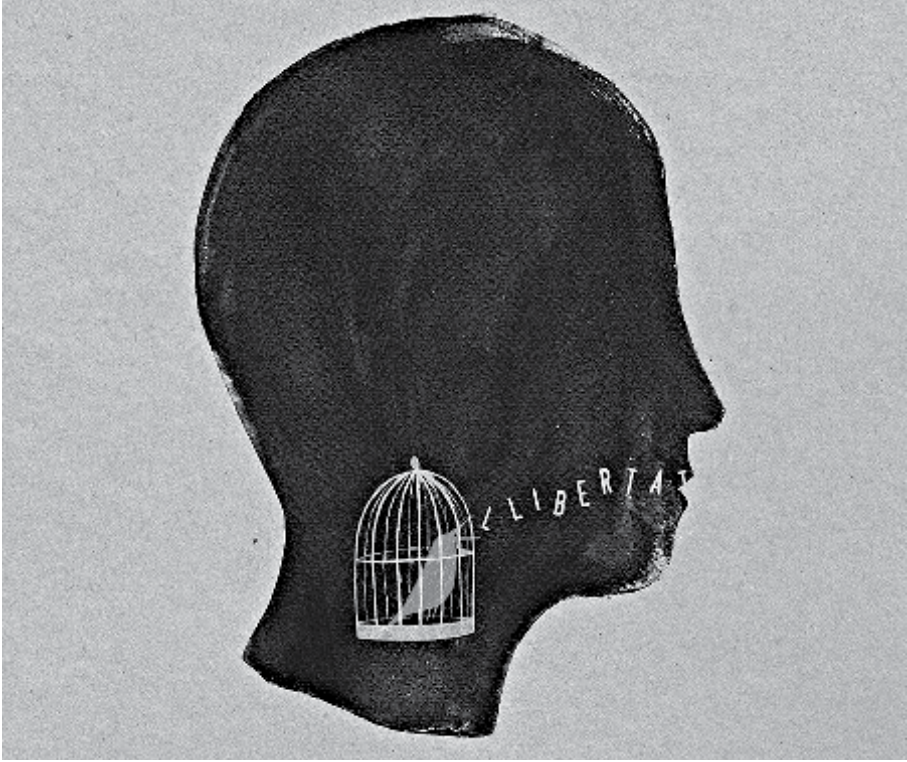
It was this idea of perverting democracy and the plan to permanently destroy the notion of “sovereignty of the people” that was defeated when General Ershad was toppled. And there lies the significance of his fall and the importance of commemorating that event.

When discussing the Ershad period people focus on his corruption and personal life. The real significance of his regime was that he wanted to create a permanent place for the military in running the country. It was rumoured

were former military officers. (see “The Shahabuddin Interregnum” by Muhammad A Hakim, 1993). All his early cabinets had an overwhelming majority of army officers.

But today’s question is not to ask what Ershad’s 9-year rule did to us, but to ask what did we do with such a glorious victory of the people, of the political parties and of DEMOCRACY that his fall symbolised? What did the democratically elected governments that followed Ershad’s fall do? Did we get rid of corruption, abuse of power, cronyism, destruction of institutions, personal chicanery and mal-governance for which his regime was relentlessly condemned and ultimately toppled?

One of the most virulent objections to Ershad’s rule was corruption. Business leaders and entrepreneurs who were in business then and continue today smile when asked to compare and say without hesitation that the former corrupts were mere kids compared to the seasoned corrupts of today. The amounts involved sound like “peanuts” when we publish stories of drivers and clerks of ministries



that he even sent delegations to Turkey and especially to Suharto’s Indonesia to learn first-hand about how to incorporate the armed forces structurally into the governance process.

When he ultimately gave up all his pretensions and removed President Sattar and took over power in March 1982, it was within four months of Sattar winning an election held in November the year before. None of the excuses that the military usually uses to take power—social unrest, economic crisis and political instability—existed at that time to remotely justify General Ershad’s move except perhaps his own ambition and those of many other senior army officers having gotten used to power, glory and wealth during General Zia’s regime, the man who really started the process of militarisation of the administration.

Both to appease his base—the army—and also to quell the unrest within, Ershad began a massive project of infiltrating the administration with army personnel in ministries like defence, establishment, home and foreign affairs. In 1987 about 1,500 army personnel were appointed in government services. At one point 53 out of 64 SPs in districts

owning thousands of crores. Doesn’t it tell the whole story? Imagine what we would have learnt if the “big fish” came under the purview of the law. The billions of dollars that are syphoned out of the country each year narrate a story of their own.

About moral degradation, the “Papias” and the casino owners say it all. The widespread use of drugs and the yaba epidemic, which could not have occurred and continued for so long and in such a widespread manner without support of the institutions concerned, add further to the narrative.

About “rights and freedoms” a military or quasi military government can never look better than an elected one but the existence of laws like the Digital Security Act (DSA) point to a different reality. Seldom has a law as repressive, as reprehensible and as “rights destroying” as the DSA existed under a democratic dispensation. Compared to past black laws, DSA’s all-encompassing formulation, the vagueness of the articles, enormity of power to punish makes it an ever present instrument of fear and hatred. Its widespread use enabled by digital technology that gives it a reach and

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an instant presence never before enjoyed by any other law, makes it the most dreaded and despised enemy of private life and public rights. History may judge this regime harshly simply because of this one law, overshadowing some of its most brilliant successes that it can legitimately lay claim to.

And there are plenty of successes to write about. Development is this government’s brightest star deserving the highest of accolades there is. The transition from a “Basket case” to “basket full of prospects” is one of immense significance. It has given us a sense of performance based self-confidence which is crucially needed for any country to move forward. The fact that we have moved from LDC to middle income country as judged by the UN and from LDC to lower middle income country according to the World bank and are poised to move to the next echelon is an achievement of tremendous significance and for which this government and Sheikh Hasina personally deserves a lot of kudos. However, the sobering thought that our rich-poor gap is rising at an alarming rate and that itself can upset our other achievements through social unrest should not be too far from our minds.

However, it is in democracy building that our deficit is most disturbing. People’s will, people’s opinions, people’s participation in decision making, people’s rights, people’s freedoms—everything to do with the people is what democracy is all about. Where is the “people” in today’s Bangladesh? Where is the connection between the people and the government? How does the government know what people want, are thinking, what they are happy or unhappy about? Where is the communication? Will it only be through intelligence reports or party narratives? If those who speak, those who listen and those who applaud are from the same ilk then some serious self-examination is called for. Where is the independent voice and what importance is it given? However well-meaning a government is, it is bound to get disconnected unless independent and credible channels of communication are not only kept open and not termed as “enemies”, but are sought, supported, welcomed and seen as an essential part of a good governance process.

Let’s not give Ershad the pleasure of the last laugh. Please.

Mahfuz Anam is Editor and publisher, *The Daily Star*.

What the story of Kaavan tells us



IN OTHER WORDS
AMITAVA KAR

start a new life. It was the culmination of years of campaigning for his transfer by the animal rights group Free the Wild.

Kaavan was gifted to Pakistan by the government of Sri Lanka in 1985 when he was 1. For more than 30 years, he was kept in shackles in poor conditions in an Islamabad zoo. After the death of his



Kaavan has spent nearly a decade alone.

PHOTO: REUTERS

companion Saheli in 2012, he developed multiple physical and psychological issues.

In a landmark verdict earlier this year, Athar Minallah, the Chief Justice of Islamabad High Court observed that Kaavan had been treated harshly which caused him unimaginable pain and suffering. His anguish must come to an end by relocating him to a proper elephant sanctuary, in or outside Pakistan, the verdict held. Like humans, animals have natural rights which must be recognised, the judgment added, and

that it is a right of each animal, a living being, to live in an environment that has been contemplated by nature.

Iconic American singer Cher, the founder of Free the Wild, arrived a day earlier to see Kaavan off and thank the government. Animal welfare group Four Paws International had been deployed to move him. When the crew tried to coax the five and a half ton animal into the giant airplane, he got agitated, as he was unaccustomed to close human contact. Amir Khalil, the group’s celebrated Egyptian veterinarian, started singing

Frank Sinatra’s classic melody “My Way”, which apparently calmed the elephant. Before taking off, Cher serenaded Kaavan with “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes.”

Why would people go to such great lengths to rescue an animal during a pandemic? So what if he had been suffering? So are humans.

There is, indeed, much to celebrate in this story. It is a story of human tenderness out of the blue which is no less powerful than the stories of death, destruction, and savagery. Have we grown so inured to think the worst of experience constitutes our lives, that evidence of the best of experience is an outlier and thus unworthy of our attention?

It would be naïve to regard the dark caves of the world as an aberration. We know better than that. We have seen too much. Yet, we can recognise the thrilling beauty in this world too, when we see it, and cherish it, and spend time with it. It is not to say that everyone could act the same way. But everyone feels the possibility in themselves. That is the abiding wonder of this story. The news is just what is happening. We, too, can be happening. These are our lives. Should we not attempt to control them? Must we not assert and discover these moments of human sublimity by which we know life, too?

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