

Home Minister Should Intervene

The twin incidents of violation at Maneshwar Road in the old city, in our view, bear an ominous message — criminals do not give a damn about the law of the land, so regular citizens should think twice before seeking justice. FIR on the 16-year-old Monica's misfortune led to arrest of two culprits but, unfortunately, it also invited the wrath of the wrong-doers. Within 24 hours, Monica's 14-year-old cousin met with similar fate.

It often happens in our country that victims of rape prefer not to file reports with the police to keep the traumatic episode of their lives from public glare. At times, they don't even take their families into confidence. They opt for social certitude instead of trial and punishment for the criminals. But Monica was not one of them. She wanted to put her faith in the system. She hoped police would not only bring the criminals to trial but also provide protection for her family. Her belief and hope were brutally belied.

Once again the efficiency of our system has been put to test. Once again the credibility of the law-enforcers has been put on the line. We hope the authorities concerned would act and act fast. The criminals would have to be tracked down, arrested, tried and punished. They have not only committed crimes but also challenged the system. We solicit the Home Minister's immediate intervention to make sure that the victims' cry for justice does not go unheard. We demand exemplary punishment for the criminals. Justice done today will work as clear warning against wrong-doers tomorrow. The system will get to work with no one gloating he can be above the law.

The incidents also point to our submission to the reign of wrong-doers. That Monica's cousin was raped in broad daylight on the ground floor of a factory on a working day only reveals our selfish indifference. Shame on those who watched the miscreants drag a young girl off the road into a nearby factory and rape her. What about the workers and the management of the factory itself? They are no less criminal than the ones who ruined the lives of the hapless girls. Instead of abetting in such crimes, we should start helping the law-enforcers by fighting them wherever they occur.

Monica and her cousin felt they were safe indoors in the evening and outdoors in the afternoon. They believed in the police and in their fellow people. We expect an end to belied beliefs. We want young girls like Monica and her cousin to believe they are safe out in the street and at home, even if they are alone, because the system ensures their safety.

Incentive Scheme Row

The incentive scheme for dock workers which the government latches on to as the 'Eureka' to the problems of Chittagong port has itself run into trouble. Why? Because the port ministry in an apparent anxiety to take all the credit for the troubleshooting turned a blind eye to the port users forgetting that it is the latter who have to pay for the incentives. This looks like a classic example of how-a-thing-is-done becoming more important by default than what is materially sought to be done.

The government was perfectly right in thinking that by incentivising the dock workers the loading and unloading operations at the port could be helped to reach levels of efficiency required under conditions of severe pressure exerted on it by the recent floods. But the port ministry or the government for that matter is obviously wrong in having presented the incentives scheme for dock workers as a *fait accompli* to the port users. If the latter have not overstated their complaint then it appears that they were served with only a two-day notice to study the draft formula involving 25 per cent enhancement in salary payment as incentive to the dock workers. This is flawed, but more so is the fact that the port users were not consulted on the issue *a priori*. Furthermore, it came upon them as a settled bi-lateral deal primarily struck between the government and the leaders among the private dock workers. In all fairness to the would-be paymaster — the port users forum in this case — the deal should have been a tripartite one.

At any rate, the port users forum's threat to create a stalemate at the port on this issue must be regarded as an unacceptable over-reaction on their part. The government needs to draw them in to a fresh dialogue to hammer out a compromise formula that could eventually boost private sector participation in port operations. It should be possible to relate the incentive to computed 'performance'.

Returnees Extorted!

Returnees from the war-torn Iraq and Kuwait of 1990 face a new ordeal in the form of extortion, at the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training as they queue up to receive compensation from the United Nations. They had to return home leaving behind all their possessions and stepping into an uncertain future in Bangladesh. They have been waiting for eight long years to be partially compensated by the United Nations. The amount is modest for the 13,524 Bangladeshi Gulf War returnees but it could help heal the wounds of the sufferers to some extent. But at the BMET they were subjected to a new kind of harassment allegedly by the DG and his staff. The Daily Star staffer witnessed the 'push sale' of a book purportedly written by the DG and sold at more than 250 per cent higher price than the jacket value. As if this was not enough of an ordeal for the returnees, they were even made to pay more than one thousand five hundred taka each to the so-called Kuwait-Iraq Repatriated Bangladeshi Association (KIRBA) for a certificate which is not an official requirement for receiving the compensation. The place has been infested with touts to further compound the miseries of the returnees.

It appears that we cannot do a simple thing properly. Why should these people be thrown into additional adversity after eight years of waiting? We urge the ministry concerned to take a hard look into the allegations and inspect the books of the KIRBA. We strongly recommend that the wrongdoers be punished according to the law of the land.

Political Turncoats: Tales of Hopes and Pathos

Clean and gentle politics is fast being relegated to history as something practised in the past. This particular incident, irrespective of its being a case of hijacking or a case of frustrated expectation, raise the ugly heads of muscle power and greed. It heralds a continuing unhappy future for democracy in our country. The nation must work for a remedy and find a solution to this unfortunate problem.

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Thirdly, the involvement of the DGFI, a highly active component of our respected Armed Forces, in the matter of political persuasion and even more in favour of a political party is a highly unfortunate element of the allegations made by the BNP leader, whose support in the forthcoming Mayoral election was courted by the ruling party as trophy. The ISSB has denied DGFI's involvement in the matter. Yet, whatever may have happened in the past, for a democratically elected government such an allegation is preposterous and must be shunned.

The matter being highly sensitive, some opined only the parliament as the supreme legislative body would be the most appropriate forum to take a decision as to whether to discuss this matter at all and, if so, the manner in which to do it. It is the fervent wish of all democratic minded citizens that such allegations must not tarnish the impartial and noble image of our Armed Forces.

The question remains, however, how long will Khaleque have to remain in hiding and for how long he will remain safe after he comes out of his hiding. This is a question posed not only by members of Khaleque's family but also by the civil society.

form an independent Bangladesh.

The above illustrate some of the numerous instances from history where switching from one group of individuals, mostly political activists, to another took place due primarily to a real change in perceptions and circumstances. This manifested a healthy and logical evolution or transformation of principles and commitments. There has, indeed, been the other ignoble category of people who took similar action but for different reasons. Their motivation was generally characterised by an urge to satisfy their own narrow personal interests. Unfortunately, Bangladesh has been witnessing many more of these cases of turncoats of unprincipled political opportunism.

One such incident came to the fore a few days ago. Joint Convenor of the Dhaka City BNP, S A Khaleque, created a sensation by joining the Awami League in the morning in front of the Prime Minister only to rescind his action before Leader of the Opposition a few hours later by saying he had been hijacked and made to declare his allegiance to the Awami League under duress. He said that photographic session with the Prime Minister was made against his will. This created a great furor as well as claims and counter-claims

from both the political parties. To add insult to injury, Khaleque made a serious allegation that DGFI officials had been working for his defection for months and were instrumental to the process leading to his presentation to the Prime Minister for confirmation. After all that, he has remained in hiding for evading, according to members of his family, wrath from certain quarters and to ensure his personal security.

Speculation was rife about

Daily Star discerned some elements of this episode worthy of serious pondering by conscious citizens. To follow the thread of his thoughts and going beyond, one cannot help but to become pensive and sad about the existing democratic polity in our country. Let us analyse.

Firstly, one is well aware that to change parties by political leaders and workers is a common phenomenon and should be accepted as such.

Even the efforts to persuade

the ruling party's efforts of sticking out carpet policy.

The defection of three BNP UP

chairmen on the eve of Pabna-2

by election to the parliament, during the stay of two influential Ministers in the area, makes a pointer in that direction.

The dramatic episode involving S A Khaleque also appears to be a sequel to the Awami League's past mode of action necessitated by the advent of a Mayoral election.

BNP claims that if Khaleque had really joined the Awami League of his own volition, he had no plausible reason to return to the BNP's fold in the first available opportunity.

On the other hand, they contend, it becomes logical that he would promptly go back to his own party, if he had really been hijacked earlier by the ruling party and was forced to take action against his will.

Secondly, this incident only

reconfirms the degenerated policy and actions pursued by some of our politicians.

They are devoid of principles and ideals to which our old and traditional political leaders were committed.

Politics and election to any office, be it in parliament, union parishad and upazila,

are now, in most cases, a factor of money and muscle power.

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ally loyal to.

Second, the role of our electorate.

In any democracy the ultimate sovereignty lies with the people.

A conscious, aware and vigilant electorate is, thus,

crucial to good governance.

Enormity of the importance of selection and election of the right candidates are so important that developed democracies have permanent bodies

which continuously find ways and means to make the representation as effective as possible.

Various mechanisms are provided to the electorate so that it can not only select the right candidates but also keep its representatives on their toes.

Media, political parties, government machineries constantly feed information to keep the electorate educated and alert.

Mechanisms like recall, initiative, etc effectively put a check on a legislator's performance once he is elected for five years.

We need such mechanisms so that our electorate

and the people who are hankering only after naked power and nothing else.

Third, the role of the Election Commission. Its role in

making representation effective is crucial.

It is the task of the EC to make sure that candidates contesting the election are following the rules and regulations of the EC.

But do they really follow them? We are all aware of the importance of

muslemen and money factor in our electioneering process.

And how even in free and fair elections results can be manipulated by pumping black money in the face of blatant violation of EC's ceiling on expenditure.

Some of the constituencies have fallen prey to the muslemen and black money to such an extent that they can be compared to the long gone rotten boroughs of United Kingdom. EC needs to look into these matters and take appropriate measures like redrawing the constituency boundaries, if needed.

The fact of the matter is as long as free and fair elections are subtly manipulated, people of the lie

would continue to flourish.

And no democracy can be made operative with people without integrity and moral character at the helm of a country's affairs.

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activities of the state, government and the political parties together have undeniable faith in the working of a democratic system. So when the chips are down it is the quality of the people, which matters. It is the people, who can operate and make any system, be it parliamentary democracy or presidential one, work. It is the quality of human materials that counts, especially at the leadership level.

But it is with deep pathos, disappointment and anger that we have to point out that the malaise, the rot and the kind of politics that have afflicted our polity strangely stem from this highest level; the level that is supposed to give us direction. Instill values and mode of behaviour that democracy demands. We make these comments from the sad experience we have had from our twenty-seven years of political history as an independent nation. We note with regret and disappointment that our history of political development has been shrouded with unbounded skepticism, frustration, and at times anger. We are simply at a loss not knowing what our political elites are up to.

I suppose the people at the helms of the affairs of the state do not realise or they don't want to realise how frustrated and angry we feel at the kind of politics practised by them. It seems that they somehow feel that constituting a parliament through a free and fair election is an end in itself. And the process would manifest, as if through magic, on its own. Although it is admitted that such a phenomenon (i.e. constituting the parliament etc.) is the very essence and foundation of democracy on which the democratic structures are built but genuine flourishing of the process requires more than just the formal institutions. Functional democracies need functional institutions, and that demand a democratic political culture, which can be nurtured only through the behavioural patterns of our political elite. It demands that intentions and

we are not surprised by his behaviour. Mahfuz Anam in his commentary (The Daily Star, December 27, 1998) has eloquently analysed what can be expected from people like him. But we are indeed surprised by the actions of our political parties, especially the ruling one.

What is alarming is that, among our political elite there are plenty like S A Khaleque. They are instilling a culture definitely detrimental to the concept of democracy. And what is even more painful is that we are getting used to it. Let me give you an example. The other day at Banga Bhaban I met an acquaintance after a long interval. He is a reputed politician and is regarded with high esteem. Despite his reputation, somewhat unconsciously, I asked him about his present political affiliations. It was a slip and I bit my tongue. My mother always told me not to open my mouth until I said something pleasant. This was contrary to her advice. But I guess I did ask him that embarrassing question (and I apologise) simply because our political culture permitted me to do so. Deep in our heart there seems to be a tacit acceptance of this political opportunism on the part of our legislators. This is where the danger lies. Acceptance gives legitimacy of such behaviour, which eventually evolves into norms. We begin to accept legislators who don't have the sense of being part of a nation's history. The driving force, thus, becomes only naked desire for power.

Now the vital question is why and how people who frequently change their political colour continue to flourish in our political system. Though there are a number of factors, I

would mention three. First, the prevailing nature of party-politics in Bangladesh. There is impressive literature on the subject. What can be summed up from the existing literature is that our political parties don't behave like their counterparts in the established democracies. The main task of the political parties is to broaden their base by aggregating the interests and demands of the electorate so that they win the election. No such attempts are discernible from either BNP or AL. There have not been any major change in the structure of these major parties although such measures are needed. We need not go too far to observe how the parties constantly make structural changes in order to inject vitality into the party and woo the electorate. In neighbouring India Mrs. Sonia Gandhi has done so within the Congress so that party base can be broadened. In the recently held Congress Working Committee meeting the party stalwarts bowed to her wishes to reserve 33% for women and 20% for the Schedule Caste at all tiers of the party structure including the Working Committee — the highest decision-making body. Once the party base is broadened and interests of the electorate are aggregated only the people with real ties with the constituents have a chance to win the election. But our political parties have failed to create such millionaire. Instead they want to co-opt people who can manage to get elected through any means.

It is unfortunate that both the major parties instead of dumping people like S A. Khaleque and others are, on the contrary, entered into a tug-of-words so as to prove which party is he re-

ally loyal to.

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