

The Daily Star

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Highly Condemnable

PRE-hartal bomb blasts by unidentified quarters snuffing out constable Farhad's life and inflicting different degrees of injury upon ten others including seven cops represent a new facet of violence targeted at policemen. Earlier, it was during a hartal and not on the day preceding it that a policeman had been wounded, so badly that he eventually succumbed to his injuries. Infliction of injuries on policemen when a hartal is in progress is something we are getting familiar with; but this is for the first time that a mayhem has been deliberately committed on them just before the day of hartal.

There is a horrific set of messages that we must be prepared to absorb from the mind-boggling incident in order that we can take guard against such an eventuality in the future. While being focused on policemen falling prey to dastardly acts of violence by cowardly and irresponsible quarters we cannot lose sight of the highly reactionary excesses the inmates of the Mirpur police barrack committed by going berserk in a hundreds-strong procession through the streets and damaging cars they came by as if they were a pack of youngsters on an overkill. Even allowing for their shock and resentment over the lethal attack on policemen as a perfectly natural expression of human emotion under the circumstances we wonder how those initially sombre feelings at Mirpur police barrack could aggravate into that extremely unruly behaviour unbecoming of the members of a supposedly disciplined force.

We find no words adequate enough to condemn the dastardly bomb attack on policemen detailed for prevention of violence as a standard law enforcement practice. Similarly, we decry the no-holds-barred violent police outburst, especially when it is reflective of a new ominous trend of intolerance set by the lawmen. It also comes as meaningless shadow-boxing when the perpetrators could not be identified by the policemen themselves, let alone onlookers.

The bombing itself was totally unprovoked in that the policemen were not chasing or baton-charging anybody but merely moving towards a lorry to get on it after a Chhatra Dal procession had visibly terminated at Golap Shah Mazar with the cops some distance away near the zero-point. It was most probably a pre-meditated act performed at the instance of person or persons calling the shots from behind. The incident cannot but give rise to some speculative theories about who could have been behind it and with what motives. Normally, in such things, the attribution goes against pro-hartal forces; but in point of fact, the JCD procession having had its back to the police posse was not evidently eye-balling each other.

Some planted people most probably did it, and depending upon who they were assigned by, the motives, of course, were different. Whatever the motivating factor behind the bomb blasts it is the opposition's relationship with the police that seems to have been affected. In the worst case scenario one may not rule out the possibility of some people trying to foment discord and destabilisation to angle in troubled waters. We would, therefore, like to see an investigation promptly ordered into the whole affair to ferret out the frontman culprit and then work our way into those who masterminded it. No half-way house can do here.

Friday Mailbox

Kashmir full circle

Sir, It is encouraging to note that the western powers have decided to take active and keen interest in resolving the half-century-old Kashmir dispute. The despatch of a US General to Islamabad and New Delhi (in addition to diplomatic overtures) has sent the Pakistani PM rushing to Beijing.

Beijing's options are limited, but China is also interested in having a slice of the South Asian market of one billion people, once it is made seamless from the trade point of view, including cross-border commerce, so long confined into water-tight compartments, despite SAARC, SAPTA, Farakka and what not.

Both Islamabad and New Delhi have been neutralised by the big powers as far as political leverages are concerned; and the caretaker government in India may be feeling rather helpless on how to contain the situation (Pakistan is practically bankrupt). One aspect of the situation is clear: the Kashmir problem cannot continue for decades to come; the western have decided to see to it.

Perhaps we are going to see a new configuration in the SAARC region in the near future. Change is a sign of progress; the very basis of life. The coming changes will affect Bangladesh, however indirectly. It is prudent to be in tune with the changing times.

A Husnain
Dhaka

The sensitivity of history

Sir, Are we hypersensitive to current history? The history of Bangladesh since 1971 has not yet been compiled independently to serve as an official source, due to historical incidents of political sensitivity, influenced by the successive regimes in one way or the other.

Many participating groups and personalities are still active, and due to changing or rotating regimes, it is not possible to settle down with the drafting of the version acceptable to one and all, for the future generations; because facts are neutral, and do not take sides, but the interpretation of which do take sides. The severe bipolarisation in politics today does not bode well for the nation. It can only be hoped that it is a passing phase.

The status quo of masterly inactivity continue to halt us. Stalemates are not situations of achievement. How do we proceed and push the project forward towards completion? There are clashes in conflicts of interest, because both the head and the heart come in when dealing with contemporary issues. Public platforms to sort out the issue are leading us nowhere. What to do?

An encyclopedia of Bangladesh is also coming up with substantial portions focused on the political history of Bangladesh. Who are vetting these contributions, guaranteeing continuity when other regimes come into power? The text-book versions for the schools should be acceptable by now. The latest position needs confirmation from authoritative sources.

History is not a passive issue, and the writing of it cannot be postponed for indefinite periods. This is a gentle reminder to the players to come to the fore and place their

points before the public, for amicable consensus.

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka

Daily allowance of MPs

Sir, We, the general people, strongly feel and believe that when it is a question of public money, its receipt and expenditure must have accountability and transparency — no matter how big or small the amount is and whether the person concerned is a VVIP or an ordinary citizen.

We are of the opinion that our respectable MPs must draw their daily allowance after proper record of his/her attendance in the Jatiya Sangsad. In case of their monthly remuneration it is a separate matter as it does not require any record of attendance.

We totally agree with our PM Sheikh Hasina when she says that it is unethical for an MP to receive daily allowance without attending JS sessions.

We are however surprised why did not the PM admit at the same time that it was unethical for her and her party MPs (while in opposition) to receive remuneration and allowance for 18 months without attending a single sitting in the House when they boycotted the fifth Jatiya Sangsad.

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Is it the 'education' stupid?

Sir, Dr Jaffor Ullah's 'In Search of Leadership' (DS-June 25) and our ongoing JS session have raised questions in my mind (between conscience and common sense) about our style of democracy.

In our democracy, any prospective candidate for JS seat requires no specific minimum educational qualification to contest a poll. Even his/her name as a voter in the voter's list, in the contesting constituency, is not also mandatory. That's why, anyone can contest for seats in more than one constituencies and can retain one in any constituency where he/she won (not a voter of that). So a legislator whether he/she is half-educated or one-fourth educated as mentioned by Dr Wazed Mia is a paradox.

Moreover, it is seen that few are over-qualified than the most. Naturally, they have broader outlook as such, others having myopic vision, fail to comprehend witty remarks/analogy/comparison cited by their elite colleagues in the House or outside. Generally, a butcher won't understand the angle of dissection of a surgical specialist. Similarly, Doctor of Literature would unlikely to comprehend the analogy cited by a Doctor (physician). Since, education of our leaders to educate us, is the bone of contention in and outside the House, then instead of barking up a wrong tree, the House should amend the Constitution to fix the level of educational qualification and other eligibility needed of JS seat candidature, to iron out all differences.

AR Choudhury
Uttara-Dhaka

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Will Bangladesh Become a "Pivotal State" by the Year 2020?

by Khurshid Hamid

When China will replace the erstwhile Soviet Union as the other superpower in a bipolar world, the geostrategic theatre will have come closer home, and Bangladesh's strategic importance will have increased manifold. She may even metamorphose into a geopolitical prima donna to be ardently wooed by the higher gods of the pantheon.

"Pivotal states" can mean two quite different things. First there are the pivots that move up and down, and whose plunging can make other countries plunge. *Exempli gratia*, the collapse of Mexico's finances rattled all of the Americas, and corruption and political blindness in Indonesia have enveloped most of South-East Asia in political smog.

But it is the second sort of pivot that matters more, the kind that moves from side to side. The authors identify both India and Pakistan in South Asia in this different category because, in addition to the subsidence-effect they share with the piston pivots, they can also change the pattern of geopolitics by shifting their allegiance: by choosing to side with one big power against another, or just standing idly by when help is needed. Mexico tucked away in the Americas or even relatively remote Indonesia would generate nothing so geopolitically pattern-changing, and may safely be assigned to lesser gods.

Bangladesh as usual is not discussed in the book either studiously or through oversight and is left completely out in the cold. I feel the learned authors sadly mistake. For the trouble is that, to work out which the truly pivotal states are, it is necessary to recognize what big powers they may be pivoting between. In this signing-off year of the shaken millennium (in the view of Pope Gregory's bloomer with the date of birth of Jesus Christ mankind has stealthily crept into the new millennium four years ago), it is becoming

abundantly clear which will be the two macho superpowers indulging in braggadocio nuclear gun-slinging stand-offs in the high noon of a new-fangled cold war twenty years from now.

The United States is for the nonce the only really global power, and being the unchallenged "champion" in the block is engaging in sundry scuffles round the globe, some morally justified. It will be with almost juggernaut certainty that she will be joined in about two decades by China, whose need for energy and food will turn her foreign-policy and military eyes, no longer directed mainly at her Pacific periphery, westward to central Asia and maybe northward to Russia as well. Japan, on whom I had placed my bets about a decade ago, has fallen by the wayside, but may yet make a perilous bid for a distinct superpowerdom of her own. Europe, despite her intended union, is likely to remain a collection of separate states, most probably allied to America. Russia is unlikely to be a serious contender for some time.

If the above is roughly the big-power pattern of the 2020s, it inexorably points to the premise that the United States' and Europe's geopolitical activities and derring-do will hone in on China and the surrounding regions, particularly South Asia in view of a weak Russia on the north. In the event there will be categorical imperative need for the list of pivotal states to be both sharpened and lengthened. After all it is an eternal geopolitical axiom that where you sit in the world de-

cides, to no small extent, how much impact you have on it.

India catapults right to the top for she would provide the only viable and valuable counterweight to the emerging superpowerdom of China. She is big in her population, her politics, her democracy, her economics, her culture, her technology and her military. India's own big power yearnings and ambitions will continue to remain in timeless and boundless contradiction with those of China. The United States' and Europe's top priority in the coming years will be not only to cajole India into working more closely with the West but also to draw her into some sort of strategic partnership. India's democracy is likely to right itself from its present temporary wobble. I am almost tempted to succumb to the conspiracy-theory sirens that whisper that the United States actively connived with and illicitly pushed India to go more credibly nuclear about a year ago. For after all her atomic tests were primarily directed at the perceived threat from China, and despite the media hype not at Pakistan. And it is certainly in the United States' interest in the long term to have a nuclear counterbalance to China in the region.

Pakistan has been cited as an alternative pivot, if Turkey goes under, to be a useful ally of the West in coping with the turbulence of the Muslim world and to keep Muslim, energy-rich Central Asia open to the West. But Pakistan's now almost forty years of hobnobbing and intimacy with China renders her an unlikely candidate

for being a reliable Western pivot against superpower China. Furthermore, given Pakistan's Taliban predilection of going wildly Islamist, her slither towards being foolishly military-authoritarian, thus regressing from becoming a civil society, she becomes an unstable partner for the West to embrace, much less to share a conjugal bed with.

And herein Bangladesh enters into the picture as a coy lover. Please bear in mind that in some circumstances apparently non-pivotal states can suddenly become pivotal ones. Bangladesh ranks third in South Asia in terms of the critical mass of population and economic power to wage warfare. Bangladesh is inevitably moving closer to India, for the creation of an interdependence matrix of economic and commercial relations through substantially increased cooperation is a *sine qua non* for her security against her overweening neighbour.

The United States and the West should prudently envisage a second counterweight to superpower China conveniently located in her backyard. Bangladesh admirably fits the bill. It would of course stand the traditional friendly relations and goodwill between Bangladesh and China on its head, but in a geopolitical waltz it is historical to be promiscuous in changing partners. Given the space Bangladesh will have to shuffle and manoeuvre between the two reigning superpowers, the West's dire alternative scenario would be to see Bangladesh nestling up under

China's wings.

During the last Cold War Bangladesh was located far, far away from the main theatres of conflicting interests of the West and the Soviet Union. She was of no strategic worth to the West at all, and their interest in Bangladesh in view of her desperate poverty was confined to handing out humanitarian aid. The erstwhile Soviet Union as the other superpower in a bipolar world, the geostrategic theatre will have come closer home, and Bangladesh's strategic importance will have increased manifold. She may even metamorphose into a geopolitical *prima donna* to be ardently wooed by the higher gods of the pantheon.

Bangladesh will, of course, have to slog to become a credible future pivot. Just as Oliver Cromwell aimed to bring about the kingdom of God on earth and founded the British Empire, so our once and future Prime Ministers should they embrace a coherent democracy and good governance, transparent, corruption sanitized, law and order imbued, and people's welfare oriented, Bangladesh will clamber up to a pivotal state status in time. On the other hand, just as John Bunyan wanted the millennium and got only the novel, so our and future Prime Ministers should they succumb to authoritarianism and sycophancy, political obscurantism, graft, thuggery, and marginalization of the people, Bangladesh may sadly come a cropper.

It has been said that some countries are born pivotal, some achieve it, and some with luck have pivotality thrust upon them. Bangladesh, into a quarter century of the new millennium with the fast-changing geopolitical scenario, if she plays her cards right and with good fortune, will incorporate all the three foregoing elements, thereby giving her impeccable foundations as well as credentials, into her becoming a sustainable pivotal state that matters much in the community of nations.

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Driving the Political Automobile

by AMM Aabad

OUR politics is in an interesting state. Let us hope there will be no miscarriage — of the baby, or of justice to the innocent voters. On the other hand, any issue can quickly change into another issue, as frequently observed. Our national labour is only labouring, and not producing any fruit. Our soles have to be resoled, thanks to the national pastime of walking on the streets in procession; and our souls need some moral detergent to remove the black spots on man's inhumanity to man. We have to become super white in intent, deed, and action. The market is not in tune with the demand.

Our politics is like an automobile. Something wrong with the gears? We seem to be very fond of the reverse gear — going back into history, instead of creating history forward and onward. We can hardly use the fourth gear for long periods.

Short of national highways, may be, but more likely its the lack of highway sign boards to destinations unknown.

Most of the time the second or third gear is in use, due to political jam, and lack of traffic policing at the national level. Political policing can only be self-imposed — it is a DIY (do-it-yourself) game. We need local assembly of the kit in large number.

The brakes are over-used, producing heating effect; and the teeth of the tyre worn out quickly, with loss of road grip. There are nails on our dirty roads, causing frequent tyre punctures. The tyre pressures are never right, exhibiting the symptoms of under or over-inflation. Breakdowns on the road are frequent due to lack of political maintenance (out of practice). The system loss in as much as more fuel (energy) is used. This results from bad timing. The spark plugs work, but the timing is out. Knocking

and black smoke can be noticed. We need political leadership for the leaders with silver spoons in the mouth.

Since the roads are in bad condition, the political shock-absorber need replacement at quicker intervals. Therefore our politicians are too sensitive to shocks, which of course occur frequently on our bad roads of political culture. The shock absorbers come in three types: oil, gas, and spring. Oil leaks, gas evaporates, and the spring loses springiness. Better not to use shock absorbers for sometime — get used to the jerking.

Environmentally speaking, since the vehicle is air-conditioned, the riders have no idea of the air outside, which the *janata* breathe. The glasses are, tinted, adding to the illusion or delusion, resulting in communication gap between the top and the bottom levels. The horns (of leadership) are blaring all the time (like our buses and trucks), but we do not

mind, as we have developed cultural deafness. Very few citizens bother that 'empty drums sound much'.

The rearview mirror is missing, or is tilted or ignored; hence it is easier to concentrate on the ambitions ahead. The turning indicator lights are not working; therefore those who follow have to be alert. Bumping is common; the milder form is known as 'kissing'.

The political vehicle is always over-loaded, reducing the life span. Periodical overhauling is neglected, lowering the performance and increasing the maintenance budget (including rent-seeking). Wheel alignment is never carried out, as it is never suspected, so the party vehicle drags on one side. No attempts are made to eradicate the bad driving habits. Due to half clutching, the clutch plate is worn out and needs earlier replacement (more power through better

clutching, not clutching for power).

Some points about the driving standard. The steering is erratic — the destination takes longer to reach. The body of the driver is too close to the steering wheel (clinging tendency); the arms should be less crooked and the wheel kept at arm's length. Driving with one hand on the steering wheel is not recommended, and the other hand should not be used for waving to the crowd.

The accelerate-and-brake driving takes its toll on the party vehicle, the passengers, and the driver; not to speak of the rising blood pressure of the other users of the road. Proper braking distance is not maintained, resulting in frequent skidishes and political 'kisses', which result in the display of fiery passion by the two stranger parties, for reasons entirely unromantic.

One slogan is not popular in this country: 'Make peace, not war.'

OPINION

An Appeal to Our Conscience

Dr. A.H. Jaffor Ullah

I have always been an optimist all my life. I tend to see the glass half full rather than half empty. I am sure there are hundreds and thousands of people originating from Bangladesh and now living in far flung places all over the world also hold similar faith in Bangladesh. We all would like to see our motherland come out of the rut and move in stride with the rest of the world shoulder to shoulder heading for better days. I do understand that this a far cry from the existing condition back home. There are other choices, of course. However, they are not palatable to our taste and temperament.

Why am I now in a state of vexation? Just last week Bangladesh government had decided to place an order for eight Mig-29s warplanes from Russia. The price tag for the Mig-29s is placed at \$115 million by the government. But another write-up in *The Daily Star* of July 5, this time from the Air Force, placed the price around \$122 million. Take any of the figures — \$115 million or \$122 million — and you will see this is too high a sum for a disadvantaged country like Bangladesh to spend for modernizing her weaponry.

Just think for a moment. Does Bangladesh really need those warplanes? Please consider the fact that the price for those Mig planes alone will drain 10 per cent of the total budget of Bangladesh. Do you know that a peace-loving country of ours spends about 15 per cent of its annual budget in defense? Whereas, the education sector receives about 24 per cent. Most of us who are now living a luxurious life in the West are the beneficiary of the education money our poor country had placed year-in-year-out. The country is producing quite a few graduates every year in the field of arts, science, medicine, engineering, agriculture, veterinary medicine, and a host of other disciplines. The return from the investment in educational area is palpable.

One can see it, count it, and perceive it. But, how about Bangladesh's investment in defense related matters? Yes, the nation is employing a good number of our youths. But for what purpose? What is the impact the military, air force, and the navy are making to make the country self-reliant in agriculture, energy extraction, communication, flood relief, and a myriad of other fields?

When Bangladesh came into existence in mid-December 1971 after a brutal nine-month period of subjugation, wanton killing, and savagery by Pakistani soldiers, we all heard in the news that the new country will be modeled after Switzerland. Even Sheikh Mujib when he came to London from Multan prison in early 1972 said the same thing. As a citizen of the nascent republic, we were very proud to hear such lofty ideals emanating from the leaders of the newly founded democracy. We also thought the country would regularize the freedom fighters to make them the valiant soldiers of the new republic. However, things started to move in other direction when most of the Bengali army, air force, and navy men were repatriated from Pakistan.

What a pity that in a short time Bangladesh was re-militarized albeit with soldiers trained by former West Pakistani. Sheikh Mujib really blundered this time. The better approach would have been the attrition and force retirement of the old hands. Since Bangladesh was liberated with the aid of a friendly force next door, there were no reasons, whatsoever, for the nascent republic to go in full force and reinforce the army, air force, and navy with the soldiers, air men, sailors trained by Pakistanis. We shook our head with utter disbelief knowing that the leadership fed us a misleading story to let the world know in January 1972 that Bangladesh would be the 'Switzerland of the East.' So much for the misinformation and bogus claim!

Once the returnee from Pakistani barracks and canton-

ment took control of the defense, Dhaka, things were moving fast in favor of military. The military knew well that Sheikh Mujib never did trust them wholeheartedly. Therefore, they connived to remove him from this mortal world. After that, the country was in the iron grip of two generals for about 15 long years. Any decent human being would consider that a long time under the evil influence of army garrison, anyway. As things were progressing well in favor of military, the militarization of Bangladesh started in earnest, as early as 1976. The budget for military started climbing year after year. Roads inside the cantonment were paved (not with gold this time); stadiums erected all in the name of "development." While the fate of defense community flourished at the expense of ordinary civilians, the poor became poorer. You may have guessed it right; there were no lobbies for the poor or indigent in Bangladesh and this is true till this day.

The leaderships of Bangladesh's army, air force, and navy were all trained by Pakistani defense academy in the 60s. They were taught quite bluntly that Hindu India is our enemy, if not for other things, for religion alone. A twenty-eight year period has gone by since the creation of Bangladesh, but I still hear in the statement of Bangladesh's defense leaders that we should not trust our next door neighbor. This is a pure legacy of Punjabi dominated Pakistani military. The two generals who ruled Bangladesh with iron grip also promoted this notion and they surely did everything in their power to take the country closer to Islamic bloc hoping we would be purer than we were before.

Thus, it comes as no surprise that when retired Air-Vice Marshall Muntaz Uddin Ahmed wrote a rejoinder on July 2 in *Daily Star*, he obliquely hinted that Bangladesh has to worry about our next door neighbor. As long as, top brass of

Bangladesh military, air force, and navy harbor an innate distrust for our giant neighbor, the arm merchants of the world will do a thriving business with Bangladesh government. Of course, the poor and the landless peasants will suffer for the follies of a few. And poverty alleviation will remain a catch phrase for the elite and NGOs operating out of Dhaka. There will be, of course, a cavalcade of symposia in Jadu Ghar (Museum) Auditorium throughout the year with all the trappings of power attending the conferences to remove poverty from this land. They simply will make speeches for each other. And the fate of the common people will remain the same, as before, if not worse.

The recent purchase of eighty shiny Mig warplanes simply reinforced my cynical view that the powerful ones in Bangladesh are jealously guarding their self-interest here. Might you ask, how? Well, let me try to answer this as briefly as I could. The ruling politicians need the backing of defense establishment that was politicized very badly by two generals who ruled the nation from 1975 through 1991. The defense departments will siphon the valuable foreign currency year-in-year-out to buy weaponry from their shopping lists. So, the politicians will support the whims of the military, airforce because they all think that it is a small price to pay to govern Bangladesh. Therefore, between politicians and defense establishment they have Bangladesh pretty much wrapped up in their tiny finger. The less powerful common people always ends up getting the raw end of the deal.

I appeal to the conscious of our educated people to start a vigorous debate justifying whether a country as Bangladesh needs defense capabilities to rule. If everyone are asking for, if everyone else in the nation, why can't they make do with less? Our next door neighbor, India, has agreed to the political boundary

of Bangladesh since 1971. For heaven's sake, isn't India the first nation to recognize the sovereign Bangladesh? Even during 1965 war with Pakistan India never dropped a single bomb or sent one single army to East Pakistan, even though, quite a few sorties were made from old Teigaon Air Port to escalate the war to the eastern wing. The bottom line is, if we have trusted India all through 1971, then, why cannot we trust her now. What has really changed now? For one thing Bangladesh has certainly moved away from the principle of secularism. In addition, taking the country to the path of Islam at the expense of secularism won't help Bangladesh glue a bond with India. On top of it, buying eight new shiny Mig-29s warplanes from Russia certainly gives a wrong signal to India. The geopolitical reality tells us that India will be there tomorrow as it was yesterday and is today. The best recourse for Bangladesh, in my opinion, would be to face the hard reality and not go in the path of militarization. The money saved could be ploughed back to the economy to do wondrous things like infrastructure and human capital development.

Believe it or not, in the next millennium, a different kind of war will be fought all over the world. It will be a silent war. No warplanes, tanks, or surface-to-air missiles will be used to win this war. The battle turf will be the economy. The country with a civil society and good workforce will handily beat the country with uncivil society accompanying unskilled laborers. Therefore, two things paramount for Bangladesh would be to: 1. Turn our corrupt and uncivil society to an honest and civil society; 2. Improve the skill of our people through education and training.

Is this too much to ask for?

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