

## Flaming Face of Terrorism

THE series of violent incidents at the Bashpottli slum near the Moghbazar level-crossing in the city on Wednesday could very well lead one into believing that we still live in a medieval society. Two rival groups of terrorists clashed throughout the day over control of the slum before one of them set it ablaze with a bomb. In a flash, more than two thousand makeshift houses burnt to ashes and thousands of people lost everything they had. Police played their all-too-familiar role of indifferent onlookers.

Just before the outbreak of fire three platoons of them had cordoned off the slum in an apparent anticipation of trouble reportedly at that notorious den for phensidyl trade. While the terrorists slipped through the police fingers it is the slum-dwellers who couldn't go beyond the cordon and retrieve their property and belongings from the infernal blaze. Infuriatingly still, they wanted to give an impression that the fire was accidental and the terrorists had nothing to do with it. The officer-in-charge of Tejgaon Police Station, in fact, told the Daily Prothom Alo that in presence of police it was not possible for the terrorists to set the slum afire. And as a knee-jerk reaction to the daylong clashes between rival groups of hoodlums, the police made no mistake in arresting four persons on suspicion.

As we understand the hostility between the two groups of terrorists over control of the Bashpottli slum-based trade in phensidyl and other narcotic substances dates a long time back. It's more like a tale of two feudal lords, one eager to take over other's dominion. The tension had really heightened over the last few days and apprehension of a showdown between the two groups had been in the air for quite some time. However, as it seems, police and its intelligence wings had been blissfully ignorant about both the phensidyl trade and the brewing rivalry. If that were the case, we are afraid that we have entrusted the wrong people with the responsibility of ensuring our safety and security.

There can be another interpretation of police's apparent non-chalance towards the goings-on at the Bashpottli slum on Wednesday, which, if true, would be no less disconcerting. Reportedly, two factions of a front organisation of the ruling party were behind the daylong clashes and one of them exploded the bomb that caused the fire. A good enough reason for the police to look the other way, isn't it?

**Tuesday's mayhem heightens our concern not only at the steep downslide in the law and order situation, but also at the increasing involvement of terrorist elements under political banner in the criminal incidents. Overall, the incident bore another testimony to declining state of governance.**

Such acts of terrorism tell on the capability and credibility of the government of the day to ensure rule of law in the country. In the election year, the effect is only multiplied. We would ask the home ministry to probe the skirmishes at the Bashpottli slum and put in the dock the perpetrators as soon as possible.

DEMOCRACY cannot be taken for granted. It is only a few steps away from autocracy and even vintage dictatorship. This is because democracy is not what it proclaims to be by appearance. It can alternate between Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde like incarnations. What is more, Mr. Hyde may refuse to put on the mien and mantle of Dr. Jekyll and become irreversible. The Picture of Dorian Gray with the image of slow but inexorable slide towards degeneration is a more appropriate comparison.

Democracy nurtures within itself the seeds of its own dissipation. The seeds sprout under the guidance of those purported to be the practitioners of democracy and are given approval by the silent acquiescence of the public at large. The steps to undermine democracy from within take place insidiously. These can be more lethal than overt aggression by the known enemies of open society as pointed out by Karl Popper. The various means of this slow but steady onslaught to erode the democratic ethos and to cripple the basic institutions are now well known in countries where democracy was phlegmatic at birth and is fledgling to survive. The sinister process set in motion need to be highlighted again and again to convince the errant or complacent practitioners of democracy about the pernicious effects of perverting the democratic culture for short-term success. As always, the public, too, need to be reminded that eternal vigilance is the price of freedom. In addition, being assertive of their rights may be helpful.

The rotting of democracy from within is initiated knowingly or unknowingly by the executive branch popularly known as the government. The rot sets in through various acts of omission and commission. The first casualty may be the people's rights, particularly those of the minority whose votes failed to elect enough representatives to constitute the government. The government elected by the majority can be exclusionary with its agenda, feeling obliged to pro-

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Experiences in most democratic countries, particularly in fledgling ones, show that the executive branch has almost a natural predilection (genetic predisposition?) to overwhelm the other organs of the state through a continuous policy of attrition. Since the executive branch is fearfully equipped with laws, regulations, manpower and fund the slow but steady onslaught against other branches of state can easily lead to total or near total subjugation of the latter.

The executive branch may spell deprivation for the people as a whole if there is a hiatus or permanent disconnect between the electorate and the elected government after the election. Over-centralization results in decision-making that lacks transparency, accountability and participation in decision-making at levels below the national government. Democratically elected governments detached from the grassroots thus degenerate into rule by the oligarchic few. The monolithic power exercised by the executive branch from their cloistered bastion spreads its tentacles into every nook and cranny eventually straddling the whole society. One of the concomitant results is the stifling of intellectual pluralism and public debate even within the ruling party. Institutions capable of guaranteeing safeguards against such stranglehold like press, civil society etc. may be silenced by the government through dispensation of favour or use of threat.

Most democracies have separation of powers among the organs of the state and may earmark a substantive role for local government to establish balance among the various locus (organs, institutions) of power. But these constitutional and conventional measures to restrain the use of excessive and corrosive power by the executive branch may be rendered ineffective, even subverted, by a ruthless and overweening executive branch. Government

only firm believers in democracy are champions of its values within the executive branch (government) can check the temptation of the tantalizing rewards of absolute power. Not many democrats in the developing countries can claim to have acquitted themselves satisfactorily on the basis of this crucible. Bangladesh is no exception to this dismal record. The ways and means of the strangulating democracy from within is briefly discussed below.

In legislature the majority party constituting the government rules by virtue of its number of legislators. The elected representatives being in thrall to the party do not decide what to say in the legislature and how to cast their votes. The executive branch decides these matters through the party whip. As a result, criticisms of the executive branch by the legislators of the ruling party are few and far between, if any. In

the opposition boycotts the sessions for one reason or another dullness and ennui settles on the house eerily. Thus legislature may be reduced to an arena for make-believe game of representative democracy and legislative accountability with torpor and frustration hanging heavy in the air.

So far law making is concerned, even under the best of democratic circumstances the initiative for introduction and

piloting of bills rests almost exclusively with the executive branch (ministries of the government). During the discussion on bills while the opposition members manage to scrape together a few comments and criticisms, those of the ruling party tamedly follow the guidance of the concerned ministry and the whip. At the time of voting no abstention or negative voting by the legislators of the government party is allowed under strict party discipline. Acrimonious discussions along party lines, rather than informed deliberation on the merit of the bill introduced, make a mockery of legislative scrutiny and approval. Through all the maneuverings and manipulation of the executive branch the legislature is virtually subordinated to its desires and plans. Thus in a perverse way the accountability of the executive branch to the legislature is reversed removing an important check on the former. This is a common experience

in most democracies. As interpreter of the constitution the highest court may declare some laws passed or decisions taken by the government as null and void. In both instances the executive government may feel embarrassed or irked. Allied to these feelings is a sense of loss of power. A power conscious and excessively sensitive executive branch (government) may take legal and administrative steps to trim the wings of an assertive judiciary. Taking advantage of legal provisions made for separation of powers by appointment of judges in the highest court on the basis of political correctness. By controlling budgetary funds and other facilities required by the courts the government can exert some indirect influence over the judiciary. A truncated judiciary with a branch and cadre of judicial officers directly under the administrative control of the government helps in tightening the noose over judiciary further. Commitment made for separation of judiciary from the executive is neither renege nor implemented. It is simply made to remain in limbo.

Some of the shortcomings of representative democracy and isolation of national government that become apparent after the election can be overcome significantly through local government system. Decentralization and devolution can ensure power sharing between the national and the local level elected bodies providing scope for grassroots participation. Though Constitution may provide for such a decentralized polity attuned to democracy the executive branch may be ambivalent to this because of its loath to share power. Through various means, legal and administrative, it may render the local government system

ineffective or make it subservient to its ways. A potent source of strengthening representative democracy thus remains untapped because of deliberate neglect by the executive branch.

To sum up, the executive branch (the government) of the state almost everywhere is congenitally pre-disposed to the extension of its own power by encroaching into the spheres of other organs and with refusal to share its power through decentralization. Both of these acts of commission and omission deal deadly blows to the edifice of democracy making it crumble or totter on the brink of collapse. This happens in spite of the explicit provision of separation of powers in the constitution and requirement to promote local government. This self-aggrandizing attitude of the executive branch can be seen at work more often in countries with fledgling democracies. Bangladesh under various regimes have experienced this, more or less.

If dictators strangle democracy to death with brute force, democracy is put through euthanasia by the cold insensitive hands of democrats in charge of the executive branch. It is time to retrieve democracy from the fatal embrace of the government. The prescriptions for this are very simple: allow separation of powers and decentralization to be firmly entrenched. Who will bell the cat? Well, the cat itself. So far governments in Bangladesh have not been very supportive of democratic culture. That does not mean that government cannot realize its mistake and mend ways to democratize democracy. The alternative is written on the wall. If democracy is a traveller in search of a home, one can also join Bob Dylan and sing along, "the answer my friend is blowing in the wind".

## IN MY VIEW

Hasnat Abdul Hye



## Please Don't Take National Secrets to Your Grave

HE was the commander of a force many years ago, but the memory of a violent coup d'etat is still fresh in his mind. If he puts together everything he knows about that coup, it will be enough to write an explosive book. But he is not sure if he should write that book, because it might, he is afraid, create tremors and embarrass a good number of people. In so much as his shriveled face and sagging muscles indicate the drag down of vanishing times, he is still wavering whether or not to write what he knows.

Should the former commander, who has been a witness to one of this country's fateful political upheavals, write that book or

should he take his secrets to grave? John Dryden was amused to comment that the "best edged tools, which must be kept from children and from fools. Although many of his countrymen wouldn't come under either category, why does this commander want to keep his secrets from everybody else? Is it fair to protect just a few men while the rest of the country seethes in the quandary of unreconciled truth?

Even more important is to ask how does a nation heal the apoptosis of history if nobody wants to write it? What happens to history when large chunks of it are missing in action? The Americans are uncomfortable with the murder of JFK after nearly three decades, because it remains one of the unresolved mysteries of their history. What about Jimmy Hoffa, the formidable boss of AFL-CIO who was also a terrible foe of the Kennedys? After being released from jail, one of the most feared men of his time in USA simply vanished into the thin air, never to be seen again.

Likewise, there are many blanks in history, which are waiting to be filled. For example, did Jesus die on the cross? Who invented printing machine-Johann Gutenberg or his partner Johann Fust? Who had first sex and won? Did Mary Queen of Scots, murder her husband Henry Stuart, the earl of Darnley? Was Mozart poisoned? Did Hitler murder his niece Geli Raubal? Each of these mysteries

persisted because there is no conclusive evidence of what had actually happened.

Hence, a secret is when the conclusive evidence of an incident or happening is concealed for the right or wrong reason.

else would mankind search for the Holy Grail or Noah's Ark? Why else would the dead be raised from grave to corroborate the hypothesis of living men? Richard III was accused by Sir Thomas More of slaying the two

sons of his elder brother Edward IV. For centuries, the English historians pored over the accusation and tried to confirm it. Twice, once in 1674 and again in 1933, the remains of two boys were disinterred to determine the cause of their deaths. But then what also came to the rescue of the authenticity of More's claim was a report written by an Italian monk named Dominic Mancini. In his writing, Mancini, who was visiting London during the critical months when Richard took the throne, described by what machinations had Richard III attained "the high degree of kingship."

Secrets are facts folded in the layers of fiction. At times, it is necessary to escape in these layers when facts are stranger than fiction. When Fritz Gerlich, a well-known anti-Nazi editor, had been planning to publish a

major expose on why he thought Hitler could have killed his own niece. Nazi spies tracked him into his newspaper office and destroyed all records. Thus the fear of embarrassment can create a desperate urge to suppress, if not eliminate, truth. And, for that matter all political repression is rooted in that impulse of suppression. The Pakistan army cracked down in 1971, because they had grown uncomfortable with the political movements, which reflected on their oppression of the people of East Pakistan. In earlier times, the father-in-law of a soothsayer named Khona had ordered to have tongues cut off so that she couldn't speak out prophecies, which proved right.

Suppressions and distortions are escape routes when history cannot be tolerated. Such intolerance has already created a terrible mess of our history, where truth walks a thin line between tragedy and travesty. Why was the Father of this nation killed? The murder of the four leaders in jail, the series of military coups which rocked the political landscape for a decade, and the killings of Generals Zia and Manzoor have all remained as riddles. In the '80s and '90s, there was a spate of complaints of a new ailment in the United States of America. Suddenly, men and women started to remember that they had been sexually abused when they were children. Repressed Memory Syndrome was what the ailment was called, when the clogged up memories of

long forgotten past start to pour like a flush toilet.

The commander of my story is a God-fearing man, who believes in the life after death and in the Day of Judgement. In other words, he believes that life flows from one side of the grave to another uninterrupted by the silence of death. Will he still remember on the other side of the grave what he knows about that fateful coup on this side of it? Will he feel guilty or glad for not having disclosed one of the greatest secrets of his nation?

We don't know. But future generations will feel cheated and abused when they learn that the commander took to his grave what was useful information for them. May be they will never know what it was. May be they will not like it if they ever know what the commander had known. Then, it's not the quality of information but information itself, which pieces together history. In killing the prince, Richard II was following a well-established precedent. Edward II was murdered on the orders of his wife, who took over in the name of her son Edward III. Richard II was starved to death by Henry IV and Henry VI was killed on the orders of Edward IV. Yet, Richard II remained a target of many attacks as historians struggled to repair a lost episode of history. History is what Gibbon defined as "a little more than a register of crimes, sorrows and misfortunes". If crimes have been committed in the past, we have already suffered a great deal of sorrows. It will be a misfortune indeed if we never get to know how it all had happened. Will the commander please seriously think about writing your book?

## Friday Mailbox

### Protest in Supreme Court

Sir, I was stunned to see the pictures of street-like agitation in the corridors of the Supreme Court. I strongly condemn the conduct of the lawyers who participated in this heinous activity.

If this section of lawyers had a grievance about the recent appointment of two judges of the High Court Division to the Appellate Division, they should have called a meeting of their Association where, after discussion, an appropriate resolution could have been adopted. There was no constitutional irregularity but there was certainly the question of propriety. It appears that the Chief Justice, when requested sent a list of four senior-most judges of the High Court. The Prime Minister selected two out of the list, one the second senior-most and the other, the junior-most.

Without defiling the sanctity of the Supreme Court, the concerned lawyers should have agitated for the immediate separation of the judiciary from the executive. Morally, the BNP element has no right to protest.

The BNP government under Khaleda Zia had appointed, without consulting the Chief Justice, as there was no constitutional obligation to do so at the time, nine judges to the High Court Division, two of whom were accused in criminal cases. The then Chief Justice, our present President refused to administer the oath of office to the judges until the two in question were removed. The Awami League Government, on the other hand, had been consulting the Chief Justice about these appointments.

All this can be avoided if there is a constitutional amendment by which, in place of the Prime Minister, the Supreme Judicial Council comprising the Chief Justice and the two senior-most judges of the Appellate Division would nominate to the President, judges for appointment to the two Divisions. If the present government brings a bill in the parliament along the above lines, will the BNP join Parliament to ensure the necessary two-thirds majority?

Ali Ahmed  
Mirpur, Dhaka

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Sir, Reference the appointment of the two HC judges to the appellate division, it is quite sad that the appointment of judges nowadays is politically motivated. What is very surprising is that Justice Rabbani was next in line after Justice KM Hasan, which meant that Justice Rabbani would have gone to the Appellate division anyway, after Justice Hasan. I fail to understand the reason for denying a learned Judge like Justice Hasan to be a Supreme Court Judge.

Nevertheless, it is surprising the way some of the lawyers acted. This is unheard of. We are talking about the Judges of the Supreme Court of the country. Fortunately, we have some cool-headed people like Bariater Ishtiaq Ahmed and Dr. Kamal Hossain, who intervened and tried to sort out the issue.

Ariful Islam  
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The Editor reserves the right to decide which letters should be published

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### The President and PSA

Sir, A report published under the heading 'President tells JS, criminal activities declining since enactment of PSA', (The Daily Star, January 12) has deeply dismayed us. According to this report, President Shahabuddin Ahmed has observed that criminal activities such as terrorism, vandalism and arson have started declining since the Public Safety Act came into force. The president also lauded the government's steps in curbing terrorism and its success in restoring peace in the southwestern region through a special drive.

We are taken a back by the President's speech and do not know what to say. How can it be possible that the President does not know the real condition of the country? People are passing their days in great fear and anxiety as all sorts of criminal activities are rising alarmingly. The PSA has not helped to improve the situation. It has rather worsened it as innocent persons are being harassed in the name of the Public Safety Act. As the President of Bangladesh, he has a sacred duty to see to the welfare of the people, and we hope and trust that the Honourable President will not remain aloof but will use his influence to alleviate people's sufferings.

### Arsenic Disaster

Sir, Reference to your editorial "Responding to the Arsenic Threat", (The Daily Star, January 18, 2001) you posed the question, "Why are we waiting for a disaster to strike before we act?" The disaster has struck. Arsenic poisoning was declared a national emergency at an international conference of the World Health Organization, and the Governments of India and Bangladesh, in April/May of 1997 in Delhi. As per GoB information, contamination has been found in 59 of 61 districts, and unofficial records indicate the two districts have also since fallen in the contaminated list. According to the GoB supported British Geological Survey report of 1999, conservative figures estimate as many as 24 million people are drinking arsenic contaminated water, with another 80 or more million at risk. This information can be confirmed by BAMWSP and/or the World Bank

Without rapid action, arsenic will not only be a major development issue for Bangladesh, in years to come it may become the only issue of development, exacting staggering costs for mitigation, water supply, healthcare, lost productivity, and human suffering.

The urgent need of the moment for those already affected is a unified and clear guideline, validated by experts, on what to do. This information must be accessible to all affected or concerned; specifically the scores of villages where most wells have been found contaminated and painted red. Will The Daily Star, and other newspapers, kindly ask the experts and publish a comprehensive, non-sensational guideline on workable solutions to the arsenic problem.

Kazi M. Qais  
Dhaka

refused to stand up to show respect to the newly adopted anthem. (Is it the beginning of the end or the vice-versa?) He expressed the hope that although he was alone to show his resentment against the anthem, "It wouldn't be long before others would rally to his cause." The stand taken by the rebel governor is likely to create new waves of dissatisfaction among the already confused and bewildered Russian people. "As you sow, so you reap," so goes the saying. And the seeds of discord and discontent had already been sown by Putin himself.

What sort of democracy is working in Russia and what economic reforms are being implemented there under the dictates of IMF and World Bank are an open secret. The West, particularly America, might be carrying Putin on its shoulders to project him as a great democratic and reformist. But the Russian people, suffering from abject poverty, despondency, frustration and sense of humiliation remembering their good old days, now living with acute shortage of food, shelter and clothes, cannot be fooled for long.

**Putin Creating Troubles for Himself**  
In fact, Putin hit his hands in the hornet's nest immediately after coming to power as president when he had dismissed authorities of two of the regional administration, on the plea that those were contradictory to Federal laws. But this move by him was considered by many as going against Russia's constitution which, according to them, specifically states that "Presidential representatives cannot govern democratically elected regional leaders." Within two days of this action of Putin, he went further ahead to consolidate his Federal power by issuing an order dividing Russia into seven districts in order to bring the powerful regional leaders under Federal

control. So Putin had already sown the seeds of conflict between his Federal authority and the regional authorities who were rather more eager to protect their regional authority. Thus Putin has not only started digging his own grave but has also hastening an impending disintegration of Russia itself as it had happened with former Soviet Union more than a decade ago under Michael Gorbachev, creating a number of independent states, of which Russia is one. Perhaps the 'half-finished' national task, initiated by Gorbachev, is now being given a 'finisher's touch' by Putin, with the blessing of his mentors.

**How Putin Came to Political Limelight**  
In this context, a host of questions have been raised both at home and abroad. Who is Putin, after all? How he came to political limelight of Russia? How many Russians knew him before he was 'thrown up' on the Russian throne vacated by Boris Yeltsin? The West knew well that the days of that sick man were numbered. So they were desperately searching for a suitable replacement to fit in their strategy. Ultimately, they found their blue-eyed boy in Vladimir Putin, a former KG B spy and later Chief of the successor agency, FSB, Internal Security Service.

How Putin was selected to head the Russian government is an old story. It can, however, be recalled that at first he was picked up by Yeltsin (may be at somebody's nodding) as his Prime Minister. That is when he had his first test and taste of political light and life. It was more or less his grooming period for his next jump. Then appeared on the political scene of Russia former Secretary of State, Albert Clinton Administration. Alright! To make the final selection. Meanwhile, Putin got another 'lift' to become Acting President with the sudden decision of Yeltsin on the eve of the new year, 2000, to

resign. This mid-term period was a great boom for Putin to show his mettle as former spy master and a 'judo' master (he holds a black-belt) in the killing fields of Chechnya that won applause for him and ultimately became an asset for him. So it was not all surprising that when Albright held a series of interviews in Moscow of a 'string of probable' to succeed Yeltsin, it was clear that America was heavily involved in Russia's affairs. It became clearer and louder when former CIA Chief Turner, in TV interview at that time, said, in reply to a question, that America was already involved in it. And the process ended in a favour of no other person than Putin. (Even experienced politicians and former Prime Ministers, like Chernomyrdin and Primakov, failed before him).

**Chechnya Campaign, a Disaster?**  
The rebel governor has been highly critical of Putin's Chechnya operation, which, according to him, was a disaster. He said: "The war in Chechnya is hopeless with no end in sight. It is also criminal because it is partly a civil war. But the tragedy (or comedy?) is that Putin began his political life, first as Prime Minister, then Acting President, finally as a full-fledged President, with people's vote, using Chechnya as a trump card. Starting with a very poor rating of only two per cent, Putin, as a master player, knew well where to put his hands. He mounted the harshest brutal action, air and ground against the Chechen rebels or freedom fighters to annihilate them like rats, as he used to call them; in order to gain extra mileage over his rivals in Presidential election, by raising the mercury of his popularity as a national war hero in Chechnya. The New York Times, in an editorial titled, the KGB President, commenting on Putin's election as President, inter alia, said: "Putin's primary source of popu-

larity is the brutal military assault on Chechnya." Perhaps Putin would like to keep Chechnya as a boiling pot for proper use whenever any emergency arises.

**The Soviet Way?**  
By provoking Russia's 89 regions and republics through division of Russia into seven districts, to further tighten Federal control over them, Putin has invited troubles not only for himself, but for Russia also. His autocratic action is considered by many as going against the Russian constitution which it is said to have specifically provided that as Presidential representatives cannot govern over the democratically elected regional leaders. How far Putin will be able to consolidate his Federal authority over the 89 regions and republics at the cost of autonomy only time will show. But the omen is not good. Some Kremlin watches and political analysts had already predicted a shocking break-up of the Republic of Russia into several independent states. The danger signals are already flashing loud and clear from Chechnya and Dagestan for those who want to get forewarned by the rumbling sounds. Putin's friends, philosophers and guides may be all praise for him as a successful reformist and democrat, but certainly, they also know that Putin has been put on the right track to do the right job at the right time. So the show will go on till Putin is considered as capable to do his assignment. When Gorbachev and Yeltsin had to say goodbye as spent-up forces, will Putin be able to live a longer political life than his predecessors could do?

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