

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor : Late S.M. Ali

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Flaming Face of Terrorism

THE series of violent incidents at the Bashpotti 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 Bashpotti 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 Bashpotti 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 downside 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 Bashpotti slum and put in the dock the perpetrators as soon as possible.

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 Appellant 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 seminar-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 seminar 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

II

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 Bariarri Ishiaq Ahmed and Dr. Kamal Hossain, who intervened and tried to sort out the issue.

Ariful Islam SOAS, University Of London, London, UK

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 by a 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 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 is a potential waiting to happen. In the large majority of weak democracies it does with an inevitability that has no element of surprise. In this scenario balance is restored only when power changes hands. In this play of dice and musical chair the basic attribute of democracy i.e. government of the people, is seriously tainted and made illusory.

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 grassroot thus degenerate into rule by the oligarchic few. The monolithic power exercised by the executive branch from their cloistered battlements spreads its tentacles into every nook and cranny eventually straddling the whole society. One of the concomitant result 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 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 tamely 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

actually happened.

Hence, a secret is when the conclusive evidence of an incident or happening is concealed for the right or wrong reason. The daughter of one of the leaders killed in Dhaka Jail in 1975

claims that her father was writing a diary in his cell. The diary had fallen in the hands of another politician after his death, and it was not found again. One wouldn't be able to tell what had gone into that diary but the perception lingers that if it was found it could open the doors of many secrets. In the same manner, a chief of the armed forces was said to have had written his memoirs, which was going to be published after his death. Nothing came of that as well. We all know that the disappearance of a film director named Zahir Raihan is still shrouded in mystery.

Why is it important to find the missing links of history? Because it torments the soul of mankind just like the ghost of a severed limb haunts an amputee. Why 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?

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 up and wanted to be 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 Khwaja had ordered to have her tongue 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 Manzur 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, many 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 ago would start to pour like a flood 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 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 princes, 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?

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 getting louder, coming 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?

The writer is a retired UN official.

Democratizing Democracy

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 of power to be firmly entrenched. Who will bell the cat? Well, the cat itself.

looks upon the judiciary as a threat based on the fact that courts sometimes give judgments to the dislike of the government. As interpreter of the constitution of the country 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. Takeaway of the legal provision nominations are made for 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 a limbo.

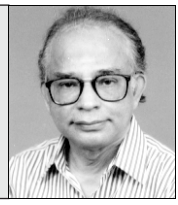
Some of the shortcomings of representative democracy and isolation of national government that become apparent after the election can be overcome significantly through local government system. Decentralization and devolution can ensure power sharing between the national and the local level elected bodies 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

the opposition party(s) members is marred by limited time and shouting down by the treasury bench members. If 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 con-

IN MY VIEW

Hasnat Abdul Hye



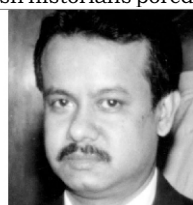
steady onslaught against other branches of state can easily lead to total or near total subjugation of the latter. Only firm believers in democratic principles and its values within the executive branch (government) can check the temptation of the tantalizing rewards of absolute power. Not many democrats 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 execu-

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CROSSTALK

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan



under 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 book on Hitler on why he thought Hitler could have killed his own niece, Nazi storm troopers broke into his newspaper office and

claims that her father was writing a diary in his cell. The diary had fallen in the hands of another politician after his death, and it was not found again. One wouldn't be able to tell what had gone into that diary but the perception lingers that if it was found it could open the doors of many secrets. In the same manner, a chief of the armed forces was said to have had written his memoirs, which was going to be published after his death. Nothing came of that as well. We all know that the disappearance of a film director named Zahir Raihan is still shrouded in mystery.

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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'état 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 had 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 anxious to ensure that secrets were 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 apotheosis 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, machinist Johann Gutenberg or his partner Johannes Fust who had sued him 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 Raubach? And the seeds of discord and discontentment 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 put 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 political grave but also is 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 'finishing touch' by Putin, with the blessing of his mentors.

How Putin Came to Political Limelight

In this context, a host of questions has 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, under Clinton Administration, Albright 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 'rude' 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 at 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's 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 poor popularity 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,