

The Daily Star

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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 phenisidyl 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 phenisidyl 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 phenisidyl 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.

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 people's rights, particularly those of the minority whose votes failed to elect enough representatives to constitute the government. The government elected by the

If dictators strangulate 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.

This overarching power may be exercised not for survival but for self-aggrandizement.

Experiences in most democratic countries, particularly in fledgling ones, show that the executive branch has almost a natural predilection (genetic pre-disposition) to overwhelm the other organs of the state through a continuous policy of attrition. Since the executive branch is formidably equipped with laws, regulations, manpower and fund the slow but

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-

cerned, 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 scrap 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

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 reneged nor implemented. It is simply made to remain in a limbo.

Some of the shortcoming 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 every where 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 strangulate 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



steady onslaught against other branches of state can easily lead to total or near total subjugation of the latter. Only firm believers in democracy and 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 execu-

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Please Don't Take National Secrets to Your Grave

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?

secrets to grave? John Dryden was amused to caution 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?

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 ineffect-

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

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

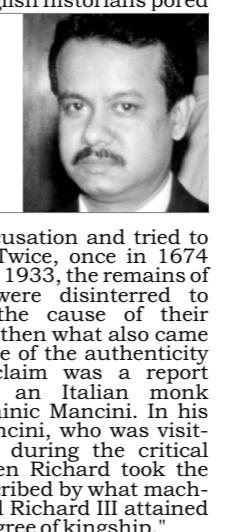
destroyed all records. Thus the fear of embarrassment can create a desperate urge to suppress, if not eliminate, truth. And, for that matter all political repression is rooted in that impulse of suppression. The Pakistan army cracked down in 1971, because they had grown uncomfortable with the political 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 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 farce. Why was the Father of the 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, 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

CROSSTALK

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan



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 Raian 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

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 from 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 storm troopers broke into his newspaper office and

Putin's One Year in Office

by A M M Shahbuddin

AS they say, scratch a Russian and you find a Tartar. So President Vladimir Putin, after scratching, wittingly or willy-nilly has come across a rebel Tartar to face him straight in his eyes. The Tartar has appeared on the scene in the Putin-ruled Russia to tell the sordid tale that may sound to many like Tartaris. The picture that he had drawn about the present-day Russia is simply abominable. The 'rebel' Tartar is no other a person than a governor of the central Chuvashia region of Russia, Nikolai Fyodorov, a dissident governor of one of Russia's 89 regions and republics. Fyodorov has recently launched a bitter attack on the 'achievements' of Putin's one-year rule, alleging that he was driving Russia back to the 'darkest days' of Bolshevik rule of Stalin-era of 1950s or '30s.

It was a real Tartarian attack on all-powerful Russian President, perhaps, for the first time. Since he was brought in by his distant well-wishers to lead Russia to its bright destination, after inheriting falling sick-man of Moscow, Boris Yeltsin's 'mane' as both acting president and prime minister. At that time he was in an enviable position in Russia (at least, it was made to appear like that) that there was no one worthy enough to share power with him. So Putin was wearing then two hats at the same time.

A Wrong Anthem?

Fyodorov attacked Putin, practically on all fronts, saying that during last one year or so the people had got a more 'bureaucratic Russia,' "strongly centralised Bolshevik Russia" instead of "democratic Russia." The rebel governor also took a serious exception to the adoption by Putin the Soviet regime's national anthem as Russia's national anthem. He had the guts to show Putin his muscle when he, as the only member in the 178-member Upper Chamber of the Russian Parliament (Duma) 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 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 administrations on the plea that those were contradictory to Federal laws. But this move by he 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

'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 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 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 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

inter alia, said: "Putin's primary source of popularity 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 getting louder, coming from Chechnya and Daghestan 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.