

Governance at stake



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APPALLINGLY true, the entire area stretching from Faridpur to Pabna to Rajshahi to Kushtia is admittedly close to bankruptcy in matters of law and order. Admittedly, neglect is often starkly visible in North Bengal. It is a collection of districts that even after 33 years of liberation of the country has not seen development or to speak more precisely, has not quite become a part of the national mainstream. Consequently, faced with appalling poverty the region witnesses frequent conflict, infighting, intra-party killing and now the rise of the outlaw namely Sarbahara and its counter offensive JMJJB, an outfit of militant extremist Islamic party. People living in this region has a real dilemma. Bereft of government protection, they are forced to deal with militants of any hue. At the same time, the government is playing hide and seek in either admitting the presence or curbing the sinister influence and operation of this extremist militant party in the whole

region. Apart from the repression, torture, and looting they are inflicting on the gullible people there are reports of raping of women by the cadres in this area. Most outrageous, they have so far killed eight people in the area including Badshah Mia, their latest victim allegedly an outlaw member in Nandigram, near Naogaon-Bogra border. It is hard not to be cynical about the phase that politics in the country is passing through. Government functionaries in the law enforcement cell have proved that

and other adjacent areas on the plea that the law enforcement machinery in Rajshahi has proved to be inefficient to curb the "Sarbahara" menace. Bangla Bhai, the leader of JMJJB (Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh), it is learnt, has been collecting "Zizya" type taxes from the people with total government connivance. As The Daily Star report goes, Bangla Bhai cadres, numbering about one lakh with 10,000 full time activists across the country, are now openly operating in

crime. The Matabbars arranged an arbitration called "Salish" which held the girl guilty of the crime because in their opinion, the girl enticed the boy to commit such a crime. The arbitration council headed by Fayezeuddin and a village Maulavi awarded 101 lashes to the victim girl that was inflicted on the girl by the rapist himself as per sentence proclaimed by the Fatwabaz council. When the aggrieved villagers expressed their

a man who is supposed to control crime in the area, and to give protection to the oppressed, it bespeaks an insensitive attitude. The present government's initiative to increase the perks and privileges of the police force is welcome but could the government inject sensibility and human values in those psychologically dead in the police force!

The chaotic situation or more eloquently described, the reign of terror in Bagmara, Atrai, Raninagar, Nandigram and Naogaon let loose by Bangla Bhai cadres on one hand and "Sarbahara" on the other magnified a terrifying truth: men driven by extremist ideas and actions are out there to set the civil society on fire. Primarily, Bangla Bhai cadres have created an unstable situation in the region rife with fear, panic, tension, anxiety and civil unrest. Political responsibility demands that the protagonists of these extreme militant groups be kept at bay through deployment of effective and committed police force. The self-styled Bangla Bhai, one may rightly say, is guilty of redefining the concept of Islam which ideologically stands for non-violence and love for all. Mentionably, Islam is the world's fastest growing religion. If the evil carnage and outrageous incidents we witness were typical of the faith, and Islam inspired and justified such violence, its growth and increasing presence of Muslims in Europe, the US, and other parts of the world would be a terrifying prospect. Fortunately, this is not the case.

Islam did not impose itself by the sword. In a statement in which the Arabic is extremely emphatic, the Holy Quran insists, "There is no coercion in matters of faith. (Sura 2: 256). In words quoted by Muhammad (SM), the Prophet of Islam, Allah tells all human beings, "O people we have formed you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another (Sura 49: 13) not to convert, subjugate, revile or slaughter but to reach out toward others with intelligence and understanding.

This has been one of the blackest weeks in recent times. The fragile peace that held North Bengal for years, even if development has not touched the region, has been shattered. Undoubtedly, the grisly killing of three alleged outlaw members and hanging one of the bodies upside down from a roadside tree at a place near Naogaon-Bogra border as projected in the print media, is a blot on the image of the government. The law enforcers should have anticipated the trouble and taken precaution. Civilised societies do not allow anger and vengeance to descend into barbarism. Without a shadow of doubt, the law enforcement machinery in North Bengal connived in the brutality and militancy that were brewing up there. What is ominous, the killers seemed to have a large measure of administrative sanction! The entire episode beginning from the day one (April 1) was a chilling symbol of the breakdown of social and religious values that we boast of.

There are other unlearned lessons from the recent happenings, like the need to book the policemen and the high-ups of the law enforcement machinery who fail to protect people and curb such violence. Not only have they never been punished but even the killers themselves usually melt unidentified and unpunished into ordinary lives as soon as violence abates. If in the past 33 years, we had been able to punish even a handful of negligent officials, and convict the provocateurs of violence, there would be less likelihood of us having to suffer this shame.

Beneath the veneer of our "democracy, tolerance and religious values" lies a dark, barbarous side that politicians find easy to bring to surface to serve their purpose. We need an introspection. We need for a start to ask the highest functionaries in the government why they find it so hard to control the so-called fanatics? People worry that this sort of ultra-religious activities by a group of people could erode much of the tolerance that Islam really espouses. At the same time moderates and liberals feel convulsed about the spectre that looms up with an organised effort by a section of people virtually turning the country into a militant theocracy.

To-day in most places of our country tolerant view and liberal attitude towards religion have given way to oppressive, illiberal and harsh measures, hitherto unknown in the earlier days. Devout Muslims are often shocked to hear that the name of their faith, which means submission to Allah can summon up such images of violence. Apart from the concern for lives and freedom that might be in jeopardy, moderates fear that this wave of fanaticism unleashed by extremist groups, maybe with an innate passion to fulfil a lust for power, might destabilise Muslim societies driving large armies of emigrants on the march for safety, peace and a tranquil environment. People in our country often forget that this region's mixed races with different faiths have to live together if they want to sustain a formidable growth rate.

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they are not only irresponsible and callous but indifferent to the repercussions that mobilisation of another militant group to quell the killing and looting of Sarbahara party might have on the morale of the police force and civil society at large in the long run. This must have sickened one to see that the state had revealed itself to be completely incapable of fighting the forces of violence and terrorism.

In some places of Rajshahi, the self-styled Bangla Bhai has assumed total administrative control of Bagmara, Atrai, Raninagar

some regions of Rajshahi with the tacit approval of the law enforcement agency.

As it appears, an ultra-Islamic revival and fervour far from the Islamic code of life as ordained in the Holy Quran and Hadith has almost seized a considerable part of the country. In absence of clear government policy and action in cracking down on the zealots creating an unstable situation in the society by issuing self-styled verdicts that suit their convenience, the state of affairs has taken a worsening turn.

Already reports of repression against women, torture for dowry to the extent of causing death of the wife and other forms of repression including rape, killing and shredding into pieces and trafficking in women published in the national dailies with each passing day have caused and continue to cause serious wounds in our psyche.

After Nurjahan in Sylhet in the early part of 1995, fatwa has taken more lives of teenage girls in different parts of the country. Newspaper report published in a Bangla daily on May 1 last, indicated that in the village Chandpur in the Pabna district, a 12-year old daughter of a day labourer studying in class VI was raped by Ahadul (22), the son of an influential person Abdul of the same village while the girl was preparing her lessons at her own house in the evening. Her father reported the matter to the village "Matabbars". The village Matabbars seemingly over zealous and 'overtly pious in their intention' restrained the girl's father from going to thana because lodging an FIR in the thana will tarnish the image of the village. They assured him of a fair trial and punishment of the perpetrator of the

resentment about such unfair and unjust trial the council revised their sentence and asked the father of the rapist to pay Tk. 5,000/= to the girl's father.

The local thana O.C. admitted that he had knowledge about the Fatwabaz arbitration council giving such sentences but couldn't take cognisance as none lodged any complaint in the thana. Strange and funny, the whole country would be ruled by hoodlums and self-styled fatwabaz people, but law enforcers would keep a safe distance from these zealots who are out to do immense harm to the faith and tarnish the image of the country!

Reports published in the Bangla daily "Prothom Alo" on May 15 last indicated that a teenage girl Morsheda, daughter of a day labourer and a student of Class IX in the Shamsuzzoha High School at Narayananj was raped by some hoodlum belonging to a wealthy and powerful family in the area. Morsheda's efforts to bring the rapist to justice failed because the influential quarters around the rapist's family stood in the way of the girl's father going to police station and forced upon a compromise solution by paying some money to the victim's father. Battered, humiliated and severely shocked, the distraught girl took her own life.

The matter did not end there. Scared at the consequence of the girl's committing suicide, the arbitration council got again active and had an FIR lodged in the thana by the girl's father about an unnatural death. The O.C. in this case also admitted that he has learnt about the rape incident but could not apprehend the accomplice who is now hiding as no complaint about rape has been lodged. Coming from

Democracy: Making a mockery of it?

A M M SHAHABUDDIN

WHAT our politicians, rather precisely, the leaders of our two major political parties, are doing to-day, is not only ridiculous, but also shameful. And they are doing all this in the name of democracy. They have made democracy a free-for-all game only to achieve selfish goals. If politics is considered as a 'game of wits,' then it must also be played, following its set rules and regulations and not in whimsical childish way of crying and scratching. But how to convince our ever quarrelling leaders?

The basic principle of democracy, to put it in the simplest possible lay-men's language, is that "your right or liberty to do anything and everything ends where my nose begins." If any body, for example, takes a bamboo pole and runs amuck along the crowded side-walk to demonstrate his democratic right to whirl it over his head, no matter whether it breaks others' heads, then it becomes a criminal act for breach of a common civil law. There, your right to whirl the pole ends where others' nose begins. The bottomline, therefore, is to strike a balance.

The classic and most time-honoured definition of democracy is "the government of the people, by the people and for the people." Although here 'people' is the centre piece of democracy, but certainly it does not represent the 'mob' or 'mobocracy' as often we indulge in losing all our sense of proportion. Hence democracy should not be mixed with mobocracy by certain self seeking leaders to consolidate their position, if necessary, at the cost of the country's image at home and abroad. It is said that politicians are very skillful jugglers. They know how to perform feats and tricks to bamboozle the people. As they say, "a politician is a person who can make waves and then make you (people) think that he is the only one who can save the (sinking) ship."

In this context, we may like to have a look at the recently washed out the big game of 'April 30' deadline. The AL leaders, particularly Mr Jalil, tried their best to implement their plan during the month of April with least corresponding success. The party's general secretary was so much enthusiastic about the impending fall of the government before the dead-line, as if he had obtained a magic-wand. But ultimately he couldn't prove that he was a successful magician, although he made a lot 'waves,' but all his efforts ended in smoke. He was although trumpeting his 'trump-card,' but to the bewildered people, the whole show appeared more as a 'trumpery' causing a big unnecessary damage to the image of the party.

The Daily Star Editor Mr Anam, in his signed front page commentary, titled "April's Fool: Jalil's dead-line fiasco..." (D.S. 3 May, 04), said, "Seldom has a party leader done so much damage to his party's credibility, with so few actions and in so short time." He also

reminded the AL leaders the basic difference between a demand for early elections and a forecast "to topple" an elected government through undemocratic means. Unfortunately both the major parties take the same stance with the change of their position without caring for the public opinion. The *summam bonum* of our politics, or political culture, is to destroy, create hatred, disharmony, rivalry and violence, and nothing else.

The time has now come for the people for a thorough heart-searching and stock-taking of our ruinous political culture. This is more attributable to two of our major political parties, led, accidentally, by two ladies who, frankly speaking, were thrust upon leadership by circumstances. However, both of them had acquired much experience and practical knowledge after several years in politics. Credit must be given where credit is due. But as ill luck would have it, both the leaders are surrounded by some wrong elements, wrong advisers, sycophants who create more problems for them than solve. The latest '30 April' deadline programme of AL that ended in a fiasco, is a case in point.

So the big question is: Where do we, the people, stand now and where we go from here? Do we find any silver lining in the midst of the dark clouds gathering around us? Do we find any flicker of light at the end of the dark tunnel? Perhaps yes, perhaps not. It all depends on the people to prove that we are not all unfit for democracy for which we have fought for several decades since our language movement of the fifties. Now what the political parties, particularly the two major ones, need urgently is new leadership imbued with the spirit of sacrifice and service, to take the country forward, discharging altogether the worn-out and hackneyed policy of destructive violence, creating hatred and rivalry. They should learn to call a spade, a spade and accept a defeat in the elections in a graceful manner, instead of weaving a 'conspiracy theory'. They will have to give up the shameful policy of "cutting one's own nose to foil somebody else's" journey." No more monkey-business in our politics. Look at the mother of Parliamentary democracy, Great Britain, and take lesson from them how they behave in a situation when a party is defeated, by acknowledging the defeat in the Parliament and extending all cooperation to the winning party to run the government. Even our next-door neighbour, India, has shown a shining example of how democracy works, how defeat is accepted and how power is transferred peacefully.

Let us, therefore, stop mud-slinging at each other and let us not turn this country into killing field by digging each other's grave in the name of fighting for democratic rights. Enough is enough. Let us call it a day, rather gracefully. Let there be an end to the old game of exposing ourselves to the world as a laughing-stock.

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