

The grenade attack of 21st August

An analysis

NURUL ISLAM ANU

THE bomb blast in the Awami League meeting on the 21st August has shocked the sensibilities of the nation on an unprecedented scale. Ironically it occurred within seven days of the anniversary of the worst tragedy in the nation's history -- the assassination of the father of the nation the Bangabandhu. Cynics might find a pattern of history repeating with some of the debased characteristics of August 15th attempted to be repeated.

Condemnation poured from all around -- teachers, artists, civic leaders, political parties of all persuasions. Even the Jamaat did not spare their political partners -- castigating them for failure to maintain law and order. (A classical reaction from an opportunistic ally indicative of strategy they might follow to smear an expedient alliance).

International reaction was sharp and pointed. Collin Powell called to express President Bush's "deep shock" to appear consistent with America's anti-terror and anti-fundamentalist stance. Jack Straw preceded Powell with words of sympathy about repetition of a bomb attack -- the previous one nearly costing his envoy's life. UN Secretary General Kofe Anan, in his reaction symbolised the agony and sensitivity of the world body and the international community. A dejected European Union scornfully turned down the request of the Foreign Office to attend a meeting, apparently signifying its low credibility because of sad record of unfulfilled promises.

Is this ghastly spectacle of repeated bomb blast indicative of just the failure of an inalert and incompetent law enforcement machinery, or a deliberate indifference to the growth of a fascist and fanatic process to be used to annihilate a political enemy, or a deep rooted structural deficiency in the political establishment where politics is conducted in deliberate disregard of the core values of nationhood as a short

sighted and expedient strategy? These are serious questions to be answered and the happenings of 21st August makes it a compelling necessity, not to be shelved or bypassed.

Apprehensions have been expressed by different sections of the civil society about the danger of progressive erosion of the core values of the nationhood under expedient political patronage for years. These warnings have been perilously ignored branding them as partisan slogans by the propaganda machinery of the vested interests.

The bomb blast on the 21st August was indicative of the following:

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* It signified the pronounced presence of violence as a tool of political behaviour.

* It was a fascist manifestation of terror and intimidation as means to impose a fanatic minority's will on a society committed and dedicated to democratic values.

* It formally signalled the ominous announcement of the emergence of a fundamentalist militant political culture.

* It was a defiant announcement by a group of counter-revolutionaries challenging the fundamental goal of the War of Liberation to establish a political order where peaceful expression of dissent, and practice of each citizen's faith will be guaranteed by the Constitution.

* It represented a militant rejection of the faith where consensus and dissent will form the twin component of a rich democratic culture.

In short it amounted to an affront to

the very basis of our nationhood.

Why did it happen? Revolutions get derailed from their goals because post revolutionary evolutions are managed poorly. We had our sad experience of such derailment and abandonment of ideals. Post revolution management becomes appreciably complicated and challenging by the reemergence of the enemies of the revolution who did not want the revolution to be successful in the first place. They oppose the consolidation of the revolution because its consolidation poses a threat to their political survival. This dynamic has characterised the history of all revolutions.

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tions and we have been no exception to it. The counter-revolutionaries manipulate the smallest of mistakes by post-revolution political managers to strengthen their position. In that context maintenance of the fundamental balance of the nation against allurements of power becomes the biggest challenge.

The post 1975 political managers (mostly usurpers), in their obsessive search for allies to monopolise power, failed to command a critical insight and started the dangerous process of accommodating elements in their political platform who did not believe in the ideological basis of Bangladesh as a nation. An unprincipled and opportunistic assembly of political elements within this process, apparently secular and pro-liberation, only complicated the fixture and provided additional space for the counter-revolutionaries to manipulate the environment to advance their political

agenda.

The International patrons and benefactors of the counter-revolutionaries start injecting funds to patronise the consolidating network of the counter-revolutionaries because of geo-political and other ideological considerations. Counter-revolutionaries are traditionally very accommodating as tools, because their survival instincts drives them to be so. A vicious and dangerous cycle of political accommodation between the counter-revolutionaries and their opportunistic partners unleashes a process which destabilises the foundation of the republic. Exchange of

politicians, writers, poets, cultural groups etc. Awami League has been the most organised voice against the emergence of this communal and fundamentalist trend and Sheikh Hasina, as its leader the most conspicuous symbol of this resistance. She has been, even her worst critics would admit, the relentless, and fearless fighter of this twin enemy of communalism and fundamentalism with a tireless vigour and committed determination reminiscent of her late father's character as a fighter. So, eliminate Sheikh Hasina and the top echelon of her principal political support, and the caravan of fanaticism, communalism and militant fundamentalism is assured of its free and unhindered passage to its destination.

Ideal is like a baby -- to be held tight, endeared, nursed and protected against predatory raids. Held loose, it gets lost; and we are threatened with that loss.

Those to whom the wonderful ideals of our nationhood are endearing treasures, loved and respected, it is a historic call for them to combine and put up resistance. Safeguarding and protecting Bangladesh as a Nation is not a partisan issue and this must be clearly understood. There will be attempts to confuse, to divide and to divert. Eternal vigilance is what is called for.

Why can't members of all political persuasions, believing in the basic ideals of the nationhood, take a solemn vow to politically marginalise the communal and the fundamentalist forces? Pursuit of power does not have to be unprincipled to be gained -- it is achievable otherwise as a political goal.

There were enemies in 1952, there were armed and oppressive adversaries in 1969 -- we wrote a golden chapter of our history with blood and defeated them. We will do it again. Oh, God, help us.

Nurul Islam Anu is a former CSP and columnist

Political unrest may increase flood woes

I can still remember that during the flood of 1998, the BBC feared the starvation of 20 million people. But, the government tackled that situation very efficiently and not a single death was reported due to starvation. The government could do it because it had paid full attention to the issue. This year seems a bit different to me. A few hundred people have already died, suffering from mainly the water and excreta related diseases. The newspapers are reporting that the farmers are not getting agriculture inputs as has been promised by the government and fear that this may cause crop failure. Amid this situation, a group of terrorists have added fuel to the political fire. It needs to be extinguished immediately. Otherwise, the woes of millions of flood victims will only increase.

MD. FIROJ ALAM

A devastating flood has just passed over the country. Some of the people are yet to go back to their own home from the flood shelter. The signs of damage and wreckage are still fresh. The total financial loss according to the estimate of the government is \$700 crore. If the exchange rate of the dollar is Tk 60, the total loss will be Tk 42 thousand crore -- about 13 percent of our yearly gross domestic product. If we reject the government's controversial estimation, as it has been criticised as exaggeration, and accept CPD's estimation that has shown Tk 11-15 thousands crore, meaning nearly 5 percent of our annual domestic product has been eaten up by the recent flood. The estimation of losses shows that we have gone at least one year back in terms of economic progress.

Now this country demands some extra care of the government, NGOs, politicians, and other people to recover the losses. The flood affected people expect that other people including the government will be standing beside them to encourage them and to advise them so that they can get back their previous position. But the political situation indicates that the flood affected people will not get the needed attention this year as the government and other political parties are now busy with another disaster -- a political disaster which has been created by a group of terrorists on August 21 attacking the leaders of the main opposition party, that killed 20 including Ivy Rahman, the women affairs secretary of AL, and injured at least 200 including many central leaders of that party.

The disaster has started to be spread out all over the country. The people from every corner have risen up to protest the assassination bid on Sheikh Hasina and the other leaders of the AL. Meanwhile, three days of general strikes have been called by the opposition parties. The government has already been blamed and its resignation has been demanded by all parties in opposition. Pressure on the government is also coming from the diplomatic missions including UK, US, EU, and UN. Consequently, the government and its machinery has paid its full attention to stabilise the political situation rather than focusing on the flood.

NGOs, civil society, and the press and media are no longer in a position to concentrate on the flood issues. Before August 21, the flood related news dominated the media. Now it is the reverse. The political issue has occupied the press and media. The situation indicates that the present political situation is worse and more complex than the flood situation and will not pass away as quickly as the flood did. I am afraid that these political impasses will come as a curse like the natural disaster because they will affect the service delivery mechanisms which are needed to remain prompt and effective during and after the national

crisis like flood to provide the required services to the affected people.

As a part of relief work, recently we have paid an extensive visit to some of the remote villages in the Gaibandha district. As our focus was on water and sanitation issues, we selected oral dehydrating saline, water purification tablets, sanitary latrine, tube-well rehabilitation, soap, etc as our relief items. We found that the interest of the affected people for those items is very low. Rather, they are desperate for food. They want to put aside some food in their house to check the *monga* (famine-like situation that usually affect the people of the northern region of the country during the months of October and November each year). We have learnt that flood water stayed in these areas for about 15-20 days. In those days, the villagers had no earnings to feed their family members. They have either borrowed money from the local money lender at high interest rates, or indentured their labour at very cheap rates. Many of them have already sold their trees, poultry, and goats to purchase seedlings for Aman cultivation. Now they are almost empty and fearing that they will not be able to check the *monga* this year.

Raising the *monga* issue with the Upazila level officials of the government we understood that they are sure that *monga* will not affect those areas. The basis of their confidence is the availability of foodstuff in the shops and the surplus stock remaining with the government. The Prime Minister repeatedly assures the people not to be afraid of food scarcity because, as she is saying, there is adequate food in stock to feed the vulnerable flood affected people.

I do not distrust the government, but I want to tell the government that food deficiency was not the only cause of the Great Bengal famine in 1943-45 and the famine of 1974. The famous economist and Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen has proved that the lack of entitlement and imbalanced distribution of food were the causes of the famines that claimed millions of lives in this area. People lost the entitlement due to the loss of purchasing power because of crops failing for a few consecutive years immediately before the Great Bengal famine. The food distribution was hampered because of the bad governance of the then British regime.

For the famines in African countries like Ethiopia, Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, the bad governance of those countries is equally blamed as the natural disasters. Last year, despite having no disaster, many people in the northern districts of Kurigram, Nilphamari, Gaibandha, and Rangpur faced severe food scarcity. Some incidents of death due to the starvation have also been reported in the newspapers.

I do not know, without taking any extra measures, how the government's officials and the political leaders in power are confident that they will be able to check the food scarcity. The government will have to feed about 20

million people for the next few months. It is a mammoth task. There are many countries in the world that have a population less than 20 million. I wonder, in the absence of a good political environment, and without involvement of all political parties, NGOs, and civil society, whether it will be an impossible task for the government.

Visiting some of the badly affected villages, I could understand that there are gaps in the service delivery system of the governments. Many villagers informed me that they have got nothing from the government. The people of Gaibandha were lucky enough that they have got Begum Khaleda Zia, Beguma Rawshan Ershad, and Traeq Zia beside them. Despite that, many people have missed the assistance. If that is the picture of the service during political stability, who knows what is going to happen now?

I am afraid as to whether government knows the actual situation. At the onset of the flood, the field administration and leaders of the four party alliance tried to underestimate the magnitude of flood. Later, a controversial estimation of the flood damages was prepared by the government based on the report collected through the field administration. So there are a lot of reasons to suspect that either government is staying far from the actual situation or it is being manipulated knowingly. Neither one of the two is acceptable. There is a belief still in the people's mind that manipulation of information by the bureaucrats was one of the causes of the famine in 1974.

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Amid this situation, a group of terrorists have added fuel to the political fire. It needs to be extinguished immediately. Otherwise, the woes of millions of flood victims will only increase.

Md. Firoj Alam is a development activist.

Protesting while immigrant

NAEEM MOHAIEMEN

THE New York City neighbourhood church was filled with veteran protestors and curious first-timers, all interested in finding out more about upcoming protests at the Republican National Convention. The organisers start with a touch of humor: "And to our friends in plainclothes from the New York Police Department, welcome. We have nothing to hide." The few men sporting tucked-in shirts and buzz-cut hairdos shifted nervously. Shouldn't they pick better disguises? Whatever happened to Serpico? Anyway, this was a meeting to plan peaceful protest -- no one seemed worried about the police presence.

The meeting continued for hours, going through the various scenarios -- where to march, where the detours may be, the status of the Central Park permit, what radio station to listen to, and where to stock up on drinking water. Finally, the legal observers came on stage -- ready to give guidelines in case of any police action.

"First of all," intoned the speaker, "If you're a recent immigrant who is not a naturalised citizen yet, be very careful. Don't get arrested."

"Especially," she added, after a pause for emphasis, "If you look like you're Muslim."

Many Immigrants, Many Visas

Immigrants make up forty percent of New York City's population. Organisers expect that a lot of the city's immigrant population will be supporters, if not active participants, in the anti-RNC protests planned for this coming weekend. But it is these same immigrants who face legal restrictions on their right to engage in peaceful protest.

The status of immigrants can vary

The RNC is almost here. Will all New Yorkers be able to come out and peacefully protest? If they do, some will be risking more than just a few nights in jail; some will be risking deportation just to get their voices heard.

widely. Some are here on work or student visas; others have green cards and can apply for citizenship after five years with a green card. However, for certain immigrants the security check (post 9/11) can add several years to this process. All these types of immigrants have the legal right to protest and express political opinions in America -- but due to extensive and slow background checks and increased surveillance, these rights are effectively restricted for Muslim immigrants.

Minor Arrests Block Citizen-ship

If all goes well, the anti-RNC protests will be large, peaceful, and orderly. So why should immigrant protesters be worried about trouble? The reality is, as any of us attending protests in the last two years know, you can be arrested even if you don't "make trouble." During last year's controversial February 15 protests in New York against the war in Iraq, the police cordoned off entire city blocks, trapping protesters inside metal barriers. In this situation, even peaceful protestors can be arrested for "refusing to disperse."

Even a minimum charge of Disorderly Conduct is bad news for immigrants. If an immigrant is arrested for any reason, no matter how minor, it will affect his naturalization application. Even if the charges are dropped, the arrest alone is enough to sabotage citizenship. On the Citizenship (Naturalization) application, the applicant must answer the question: "Have you ever

been arrested?" The question does not ask for more details

-- what were you arrested for, were you convicted, etc? Being arrested for any reason, even if it is wrongful arrest, could result in a refusal of citizenship. The applicant could have to wait five years after the arrest to reapply. This could have a chilling effect on immigrants who wish to protest.

The Post-9/11 World

Cutbacks of civil liberties of immigrants have been in effect long before 9/11. New legislation passed by Congress after the Oklahoma bombing (even though the culprits there were not recent immigrants) instituted mandatory detention of immigrants with any criminal convictions, even minor convictions, and the mandatory detention of asylum seekers. The law also removed judicial review of Immigration judges.

After 9/11, more laws were enacted that affected immigrant rights, legalised by interim policy and regulations passed by the Department of Justice (and Homeland Security since March 2003). Attorney Sin Yen Ling of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund says, "The reason all this was not done through the Patriot Act is simple. When you pass a law, Congress has to vote on it. If you pass interim regulations, it's much easier. You can do it without any public scrutiny."

Among the interim regulations passed are the following, all of which have had a chilling effect on free speech in immigrant communities:

1. Material Witness/Special Interest Cases, under which approximately 5,000 Muslim men were detained and placed in secret detention. The Absconder Initiative listed individuals with outstanding deportation orders and placed them on the NCIC (National Crime Information Center) list.

2. Special registration: Citizens of 25 countries (all majority Muslim, except North Korea) were required to register with the INS. This programme has now been suspended in the face of public protest.

3. SEVIS (Student Exchange Visitor Information System): This tracks all foreign students in US and scrutinises them for potential terrorist threat.

4. Sealed Protective Order: This places gag orders on immigrants in removal proceedings, preventing them from

talking to anybody, including the press.

5. Voluntary Interviews: These target recent Muslim immigrants, initially conducted by the FBI, and later transferred to local agencies (such as NYPD's newly formed Counter Intelligence or Terrorism Task Force). These interviews were conducted after 9/11, during the initial invasion of Iraq, and again in July in conjunction with the Orange Alert.

6. A new requirement that hospitals have to collect information on immigrant status before providing Medicaid, and the expectation that police will now question people on immigrant status.

Of the approximately 5,000 Muslim men who were detained after 9/11, only three were charged with any crime, and only one was indicted. But if the intention was to silence dissent, the dragnet succeeded. Knowing that they can be arrested, interrogated, detained, deported or denied citizenship on the smallest of charges, immigrants are now fearful about participating in public protests, even if it is a protest to defend their own rights.

RNC in the Immigrant City

As the RNC arrives in New York this week, protest organisers will have to protect immigrants, especially Muslims, from harassment and racial profiling. Reports circulated this week that INS officers would accompany the NYPD to arrest locations. Since the NYPD does not have a policy of asking for immigration status, the presence of INS officers allows circumvention of this. One reason groups like NION (Not In Our Name) were pushing for a permit to march in Central Park was to ensure that protesters could march in open, legal spaces.

Activist Aimara Lin's grandparents were among the 100,000 Japanese-Americans incarcerated under Executive Order 9066 in 1940. Lin has been actively fighting for Muslim immigrant rights since 9/11. She recently linked the Central Park permit debate to the issue of immigrant protesters: "There are many reasons we pushed for a permit for Central Park, the largest open space in New York City. Immigrants have the right to come out and say what they have had to go through. The denial of the permit is a part of the overall rollback of everybody's rights. I think there are

still brave immigrants who will come out even if there is no permit, but there is a clear risk to them. We're doing everything we can to curtail this risk, at this time and in the future."

In spite of the barriers, immigrant rights advocates refuse to be intimidated. Bangladeshi-American civil rights attorney Chaumtoli Huq put it in context: "We should encourage each other to protest. Many immigrants come from countries where they have protested under worse conditions. Practical measures can be taken to ensure that recent immigrants stay clear of police and are paired with a US citizen. My experience with working class immigrant taxi drivers has always been positive with respect to protest."

Maya Sen is a recent South Asian immigrant and political activist. Although Maya is a legal immigrant on a work visa, she offered a cautious note. "If I was to get arrested, my status will be in jeopardy for sure, and I can't afford that. So it's a Catch 22 situation -- I want to protest, but the repressive climate will restrict my expression."

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Naeem Mohaiemen is New York correspondent for The Daily Star.

