

Death of a statesman

KAZI K. ASHRAF

MR. S.A.M.S. Kibria was not a very good man, he was in fact a very fine statesman. And in our current political climate of demagoguery and chicanery, that is rare. That "he was a very good man," as described by some of his colleagues may sound alright for people groping with words to describe a rare human being, but it sounds particularly meaningless.

If a statesman is "one versed in the principles and art of government," as the Webster's will tell you, and "one who exercises leadership wisely and without narrow partisanship in the general interest," then one would be really hard-pressed to discover that in the alleys of our political life today. I did not know Mr. Kibria personally, I am not in any political circuit, but I have read some of Mr. Kibria's meticulous articles, admired his broad commitment to the Bengali nation, noticed him bear himself with dignity and perform his last state role as a finance minister with a fair amount of success. In short, he represented his country well. In what other way would you describe a statesman?

Well, certainly every death diminishes me, as we are reminded, but the death of Mr. Kibria diminishes my spirit, and the faith in where the country is going no matter what press releases and ministerial pronouncements are spewed out. The violent death of a statesman is a sure blemish on any state. As I try to brace myself for another splinter-ridden news from Bangladesh, I realize how vicious and ruthless the national climate has become in a short time. Moderate? Peace-loving? Please, I can't bear to hear those nursery-rhyme characterizations again. We are all noticing how the Bangladesh we know is stealthily being moderated away from us while the peace-keepers of the country are brandishing their inhuman fury on helpless protesters on the streets of Dhaka.

Whether the New York Times writer was factually correct or not, whether the bomb blasts are happening for a long time, whether virulent militant activities are just a localized affair -- all are questions that camouflage more than reveal what is possibly a clear and present danger to the fabric of the nation. Proof? The bloodied body of the former finance minister of the country lying in the twilight of a mofussil town.

What is sadder is not the unprecedented heavy-handedness of the authority, nor the predictable reactions of the opposition, but commentators, professional and armchair, spawning mystifying facts by the third day of Mr. Kibria's death. And it is now 40 days since the tragedy. I do not believe that Mr. Kibria's death, as described rather facetiously, comes out of a political "conflict" -- it is far too systematic for that.

A "typical" political conflict suggests an equilateral position between two parties which one hopes could be diffused through dialogue and discussion. What is happening now is bloodbath in slow motion. And, it is one-sided and executed meticulously. What can a debate do here? I also do not agree to the naive declaration that all bomb attacks are the same and that they have been going on for a long time. Many people don't miss a beat in reminding us of attacks in the past going all the way back to, I suppose, 1971. If one does not see a qualitative and strategic difference to the recent attacks, and not just the murderous upgrading from "potka" and country bomb to grenades, then the seeming egalitarianism of those information is questionable.

It should be very obvious by now, if one subscribes to a secular, democratic polity as the basis of Bangladesh, and to the truly syncretistic, liberal culture of Bengal, who and what are the determined targets of this strategy, and what their objectives are. In the half-baked nationalist concern to maintain our "image" as moderate,



we are not noticing that things might have slipped way quite far from the innocence of image and something virulent has lodged into the body of the nation.

All these mystifications just maintain a veil on the unsettling nature of the situation now, and which is clearly very different than

the country has ever witnessed before. While armchair analysts from Princeton to Palo Alto quibble over the veracity and intentionality of a *New York Times Magazine* article, while editorial commentators pontificate on the pains of hartal, while pained nationalists whimper about the sullied image of the nation, lethal balls drop one after another in merciless rhythm. What can be expected when extra-judicial killings have become the norm of the land, and perfectly educated souls applaud that without flinching an eyelid. Why not sit back and enjoy dinner and television at home while the splintered body of the former finance minister joins ranks

with other bodies in our glorious history of political assassinations. There is much to be said about our selective outrage.

As journalists are targeted for attacks, as different minorities are persecuted, as cinema halls and jatra venues are bombed, as non-governmental organizations are terrorized, as militants roam around in full glory, we have only one question as voters: whatever happened to the election mandate of law and order? Nabbing a few criminals by smartly-attired policemen does not detract us from the increasing realization that something is terribly wrong.

In fact nobody has any idea what is going on out there and what kind of damage is being wreaked. Among the various spinning of truths, one thing is certain: the government which is mandated to safeguard its citizens has shown some deadly ineffectiveness in dealing with it while it busies itself in punishing the opposition in ways that are reminiscent of past South American governments and their excesses.

One cannot keep on blaming the opposition or some phantom conspirators endlessly. The buck cannot be pushed back. If the authority smells conspiracy, it is its job to unravel the mystery with evidence, and not unleash fury on a sitting duck. The opposition may say things emotionally and even irresponsibly, and for that it should be taken to task in the proper way, but the government belongs to all the people and as such they have a different responsibility. The onus in this case is fully on the government.

The matter is more than about normal law and order. It is about the life and soul of the nation, the nation as we know it. Who is going to assure us that it is not slipping away from us? How can we be certain that the fabulous moderation is not sliding into a militant nightmare? Whether the *New York Times* writer was factually correct or not, whether the bomb blasts are happening for a long time, whether virulent militant activities are just a localized affair -- all are questions that camouflage more than reveal what is possibly a clear and present danger to the fabric of the nation. Proof? The bloodied body of the former finance minister of the country lying in the twilight of a mofussil town.

Kazi K. Ashraf teaches architecture at the University of Hawaii in Honolulu.

The person I knew from a distance

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

I am not the best person to write a eulogy on Shah AMS Kibria, the person I never knew, nor did I ever have the good fortune to meet with. However, I did know of him a lot especially over the last decade through his writings in the dailies and weeklies. I first heard of him in the first week of August in 1971 sitting in a *Muktibahini* camp, probably over the BBC radio which gave the breaking news that a group of high ranking Bengali diplomats in Washington has declared their allegiance to the provisional Government of Bangladesh. Even after so many years I vividly remember the names of each and every of them and Mr. Kibria's name was in the forefront of that list.

In the mean time, a lot of water had flowed down the Ganges and when our children began to wonder if really there was a war in 1971 and if it was so who was our enemy, I read an interview of Mr. Kibria, while he was the Executive Director of ESCAP, published in the weekly *Bichitra*, in which he expressed his deep frustration with the happenings in his beloved country, especially the way the virtues that formed the cornerstone of our struggle for liberation have been abandoned. I read his interview with an engrossed interest and was able to identify myself absolutely with his anguish about our shattered dreams. Since he was a bureaucrat, I presumed that that he must have been a brilliant student, but until then I did not know that he stood first in the CSS exam, a rare feat by a Bengalee in that era and that he opted for the Foreign Service instead of the Civil Service, traditionally a much sought after career for a bureaucrat.

After returning back to Bangladesh when he joined an opposition political party, my respect for him even grew deeper since most of our talented individuals of our nation are alleged to be either escapist, indifferent or prefer to remain 'neutral' to give lip service or compromise with their conscience for immediate materialistic return. I am in no position to evaluate his performance as the Finance Minister of the last government. However, if price stability is an index of performance, he would have gotten an A plus. Unlike most of our politicians at the helm of power, members of the public like me did not know anything about his siblings since they were not there to demand ransom from the contractors

or collecting tolls in the territories 'under' their jurisdiction'.

Over the years, I read many of his writings mostly about contemporary politics and in most cases I found an absolute reflection of my own thoughts in them. Whatever laurels Mr. Kibria was bestowed with and whatever position he occupied in his illustrious career was solely on his own merit; it was never because some one was pleased with him to appoint him to any coveted position.

Like millions of my fellow distressed compatriots, I was dumb-founded with the brutal act. We do not know, and probably will never know the specific perpetrators of the heinous crime that took the life of this gifted man. Our soil did not give birth to too many sons of Kibria's breed, not only in talents, but in convictions on the virtues that form the cornerstones of any modern state. He was obviously guilty of nurturing and preaching those convictions in current Bangladesh! It is distressing enough to see that these brutal acts, one after another over the years, are only directed to secular institutions and personalities. Since none of these acts was ever directed to the

leaders or adherents of any components of the ruling coalition, these tend to bears testimony to motive and broad identity of perpetrators.

SAMS Kibria has diligently served the nation; he has made us proud in the international arena. A true Bengali and patriot in its real sense, he once made us utterly proud some half a century ago by securing the top most spot in the CSS exam, albeit our present generation has no perception of what that pride meant in those days. His deep torment for the betterment of his motherland brought him to the arena where he never belonged. His violent end only added an extra tenet in favour of proving the hypothesis of a failed state. Ironically, his joining politics was primarily aimed at aligning his own effort in the brake of sliding his beloved country into that fait accompli.

Dr. Mozammel H. Khan is Professor and Head of Mechanical Engineering and Quality Engineering Departments of Sheridan Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning, Oakville, Ontario, Canada.

