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Victory at Phulbari



The general people of Phulbari were demanding some logical things, which are really essential for the locality, as well as the peace and welfare of the whole country. After a long agitation, it was proved once again that the people are the source of all power. Without the support of the masses, nobody can bring about any change. Hats off to those heroes who won the battle for our country and heartiest honour for those brave-hearts who didn't even hesitate to sacrifice their own lives for the welfare of people.

It was a victory of the people.
Shoaib M. Siddiqui, Dhanmondi, Dhaka

The government's decision to support the wishes of the local people to get the London-based Asia Energy out of Phulbari and not to allow open pit mining in the country is worth appreciating.

This means the government is listening to the grievances of its peoples and this is what is important. When the government listens more closely to what its own people are saying, then it can govern more effectively and steer the country to a better economic and political state. After all, people are the most vital component of what composes the government. They are the ones who directly know what's happening to them and what directly affects them.

It is in this context that the determined decision of local people here to have the coal mining operations closed down is equally worth celebrating.

This is a clear expression of a community decision which an empowered people wants--whether they were backed or not by other political and civic groups. (In the first place, everybody influences everybody and it is up for one to join in the influence of the other or not, based on his own free will.)

Empowerment has time and again been manifested by a number of hartals by Bangladeshis throughout the years. The people from different sectors- garment workers, teachers, students, indigenous peoples, other sectors, and the affected community itself - express their grievances and what they want. This venue for expression says that the parliament and the government's implementing and legislative bodies are not accommodative enough to listen and go for people-based solutions to the peoples' problems.

Need the people say more? They sacrificed and continue to sacrifice their very own lives to make the government understand and address their plight, poverty, low wages, landlessness, denial of human rights, neglect over basic services, etc. This state of street articulation has reached a staggering show of democratic expression of the peoples' political will to change systems in order to address their social, economic, and political needs.

On the occasion of the upcoming elections in 2007, what promising changes do we see for the suffering majority of Bangladeshi people- a great percentage of them being mired in poverty and not having access to land, skill, technology, resources, services, and the law?

Indigenous peoples, numbering some estimated 2 million spread out all over the hilly borders of Chittagong Hill Tracts and plains of northwest, northeast and southeast parts of the country, are slowly losing their remaining few parcels of land because of miserable poverty and land grabbing.

Their ignorance of the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1950 which saw earlier recognition in the early 1900s provides for the permission of the revenue officer before any transfer of their land in order to protect them from deceitful sales and transfer, has led them to sell their land without the required permission. Though ignorance of the law excuses no one, it is the responsibility of the government to let a great percentage of illiterate Adivasis know what the law means.

In the plains of the northwest because of losing lands, they resort to working as share croppers and daily farm workers earning as low as 40 taka a day. It is a question to ask what proper government intervention has been done to alleviate the plight of these Adivasis or making landlords give the farm worker just wages.

A separate Land Commission has constantly been demanded by the long neglected sectors of society but the government has long turned a blind ear to them. The long demand

for Constitutional recognition has also long been denied to these peoples referred to as "backward sections of society" in the Constitution.

The government so far has not initiated any promising step to accommodate indigenous peoples. What is wrong with the government, why it cannot accommodate and effectively address the problems of its own people? With the government's decision to get Asian Energy out of Phulbari, following a massive protest against the mining company, it is expected that other problems of the people will also be attended.

Gina Dizon
Adivasi Unnayan Songstha
Court Station More, Rajshahi

I fully endorse Sharier Khan's view that very inept handling of the matter has led to such an unfortunate situation. Mahmudur Rahman in a press meet termed the contract with AEC as anti-people and he even demanded punishment of the persons involved in the deal, irrespective of party affiliation. This meant that he even raised question about the sincerity of the previous BNP government. Sitting inside the glasshouse, he pelted stones which now has created such an unfortunate situation. The government without considering the consequences jumped into conclusion. Why Mr. Rahman did not keep track of what his committee was doing in Phulbari? Who are the people behind such incidents? If anyone tries to assess who are the beneficiaries of scandalous Barapukuria and Maddhyapara mining, the answer would be found. Bangladesh will have pay through its nose for the inappropriate mining technology of Barapukuria for years. And now if the government ultimately cancels AEC deal it will definitely have to face arbitration and lose, as the government had given guarantee. Open pit mining is the only answer if we like to mine at all. Relocation and rehabilitation have to be done in the best interest of the people. Whether or not the AEC is a competent company is a different issue. Bangladesh will turn into a hell for FDI if our mindset is not revolutionised.

The government may leave it for its successor, but what will happen to the image of the country? Leading a country's energy sector is not the same as innovating ceramics. For God's sake, do not create any further drama in the remaining period.
Saleque Sufi, Melbourne

On the recent Phulbari firing a writer in a local English daily reminded our (democratic?) government to "heal rather than kill" in resolving issues. The advice possibly falls on deaf ears and remains unread by blind eyes! This (despotic or democratic?) government though elected by votes operates in democracy's now demonic definition "of the family, by the family, for the family" to suite their needs! Their main interest is for the "deal". It has nothing to do with "heal"; while "kill" is an incidental step on the route to wealth from the deal. They tend to "kill" those who come in their way of lucrative deals and deal makers. Heal is never a part of their deal; if it diminishes their "deal margins"!

This unfortunate and blood thirsty unquenching desire for the spoils of the "deal" is the reason behind the number of killing sagas in various places in Bangladesh within the short span of a month or two! Usually local "tycoons", greedy "foreign investors" and the ever-present opposition are useful catchwords for passing the buck. The real gainers are shielded with big words and promises in speeches. Ordinary people remain "deaf, dumb and blind" to the deft manipulations of the experienced deal makers!

Given the unholy JP- BNP-JI nexus; the deal makers are already sure of the next election; the fangs of death have been bared. Sweet talks and long list of developments mask the dark deeds "where all is fair" in latching on to the spoils of "deals" totally ignoring the views from anyone.

With ballots assured by fair means or foul; bullets are flying around thick and fast. What we see is a diabolic version of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" from which we may possibly not wake up timely. Not only the quality, but also the very existence of life has reached an all time low! There is no silver lining visible in this dark cloud of gloom and doom!
One frightened citizen, On e-mail

High Court verdict

The recent Bangladesh High Court order stripping off the judicial powers of a lower court judge regarding a wrongful death sentence to an innocent man should be an eye opener verdict not only for Bangladesh but also for the entire world (The Daily Star, 30 August 2006). The court also ordered stern action against the police officer in charge of investigation. It is not just in Bangladesh but also in many parts of the world often people are awarded extreme harsh sentences for crimes, which they do not commit. In 1994 Sheikh Zulfiqar (alias Joy) Rahman, a Bangladeshi citizen living in Sweden, was given a life imprisonment for the alleged murder of an elderly lady. Death penalty does not exist in Sweden. During the trial Joy Rahman pleaded innocence, but in vain. No hard evidence was produced against him. The Swedish authority needed a guilty person and the brown coloured Joy Rahman who was assisting the lady in her household chores became a natural choice primarily because of racism highly prevalent in Sweden. During the trial the Swedish prosecutor hurled plenty of racist abuses towards the Bangladeshi culture. After languishing eight long years in the jail, the Supreme Court of Sweden finally found him not guilty. On several occasions in recent times, Joy Rahman has requested an apology from the Swedish government for causing him and his family members immense pain. But the Swedish government has turned a deaf ear to his request. Joy Rahman received a token financial compensation from the Swedish authority. But nothing can substitute the agony, sufferings and humiliation, which he had undergone as a prisoner. Unlike the Bangladeshi Court, the Swedish Supreme Court did not issue any strong orders for the judges at the lower court for awarding a life sentence to an innocent. Therefore it is expected that this verdict should not only resonate in Bangladesh but also in the entire world where probably many innocent persons like Shah Alam Babu

and Joy Rahman are languishing in jails.

Laila Ali
Uppsala, Sweden

Our leaders

Bangladesh is a small country with a large population. The country has limited resources for the people. But the aspiration of the people is very high. They do not like to make sacrifice for each other. The leaders are very selfish. Though they claim to be popular, but they don't have the qualities required to be popular in the real sense. The leaders lack sense of pride for the nation and its people. Most of the leaders, particularly those in power, are rich. They do not have any good feeling for the poor people.

They are hungry for more wealth and power. But they do not realise that the wealth that they possess has come from the pockets of the poor people or from the resources meant for the welfare of these poor people.

The political parties are envious of each other. The common people are not that foolish as the leaders think. The only problem is that the people of Bangladesh are peace-loving and low profile. The leaders know this very well. They know well that while the poor farmers are busy to till the soil, while the town people are busy working in the office, they can exploit them easily since they have the power. That is why the opposition political parties are also power hungry.

The political party in power is always busy playing tricks to swindle public money through corrupt practices and launching campaign for coming to power once again. They do not spare a single opportunity to antagonise the other political parties by deeds and speeches using abusive language. On the other hand, the opposition political parties go for strike and street anarchy. Both way the people are the sufferers, while the political parties are playing dirty political games.

The situation should not be like this.
Nur Miah
On e-mail

Election monitoring

The job of election monitoring must be done through neutral organisations. Of course, the monitoring would include:

- updating of voter list.
- Activities of caretaker govt. and president.
- Activities of CEC and the Election Commission.
- Congenial environment without threats from party cadres, godfathers to opposition candidates, voters and minority groups.
- Use of black money and terrorists (Islamic or non-Islamic) in buying candidates and voters.
- Role of district administrations, Police, BDR and Army before, on election day and during vote counting in and around polling booths till election results are made public.
- Role of CEC, chief of caretaker govt. and the president before, on election day and during vote counting till election results are announced.

Momtaz Jahan
On e-mail

Sanctity of TSC

We watch with great regret that the TSC is now infested with vulgar elements. I wrote a letter a few months back about their activities on the campus, which was published in some dailies.

The matter should be addressed in right earnest. Seminars can be arranged in the TSC auditorium ensuring participation of teachers and students from all the faculties. The seminars should highlight the expected code of conduct to be followed by the students on and around the campus and also outside the campus so that university students can regain their lost reputation. The speakers in the seminars should also give some open counselling on the general social-psychological problems any students might face in university life. If the authorities take prompt decisions on this matter, it will be a real service to the future of the nation.

Md Arif Sadeq
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Road to democracy



Bangladesh is a "democracy". Regrettably, our two main political parties are anything but democratic. How can our country perform as a normal democracy if the participants who are supposed to make it happen are not democratic themselves?

In this modern world, one cannot assume leadership just by virtue of his/her birth, it is something one has to earn.

Tareq Hossain
Nashville, TN, USA

Western policies and terrorism

Shahedul Anam Khan's editorial piece titled "Are western foreign policies responsible for global terrorism?" makes some very cogent points, but goes too far in placing the blame only on the West. No doubt America's war in Iraq was a foolish move, one that became more effective a tool for al-Qaeda recruitment than any VHS tape production Bin Laden's camp could have put out. That said, the "terror" that Islamic groups use as means of getting their way is something we, and other Muslim nations, must take responsibility for. The long history of Muslims in the middle east, Africa, and Asia alike, gives us many examples of Islamic governments and groups that used violence as a means of securing obedience from their subject population. We as Bangladeshis are familiar enough with that kind of policy implemented by student groups supported by our major Islamic political parties. From personal experience, one of my teachers in high school had his tendons cut by Shibir activists, as a punishment for supporting the BNP while working in an Islamic school. A cursory look into the behaviours of organisations like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or Hamas in Palestine shows similar behaviours, whereby death was the means by which groups punished those who dared to disagree with the fundamentalist interpretations of reality. We know of the persecution of the Ahmadiyya community in Bangladesh. There is no western interference, which explains or justifies the persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh, or of the indigenous people of Sudan.

All this is terrorism, although we failed to address such policies of terror and call them what they in fact are. We fail to confront it. The shift we see today is that same mindset, that same philosophy, using its energies to fight the West. That

is all international terrorism is. In dealing with it, the West finds itself having to recognize, and sometimes address, the rot that was allowed to root itself within Muslim communities. Let's not pretend it was all their invention.

Omar
On e-mail

"Are western foreign policies responsible for global terrorism?" --A response to Dr. Kim Howells," by Brig. Gen. Shahedul Anam Khan (August 31).

Brig Gen. Anam writes: "Mr. Howell so proudly announces his belief in democracy and its centrality in the existence of his country but cannot convince his country's greatest ally to accord the same benefits to others. That is why the Palestinians have to suffer both economically and physically for choosing, democratically, a party they feel would deliver their future to them. The US would have nothing to do with a government made up of terrorists, yet feels no compunction in arming a state to the teeth whose main strategy for achieving their own independence from the British was terrorist violence. All the talks by Mr. Howells of rejection of oppression sound hollow under these circumstances."

Brig. Gen. Anam may take a look at what Ghazi Hamad, spokesman for Hamas, recently wrote in the Palestinian newspaper Al Ayyam. He broke the taboo by calling the Palestinians to stop blaming Israel for all their ills, and look instead at their own failures. "Gaza is suffering under the yoke of anarchy and the swords of thugs," Ghazi Hamad wrote in a commentary on August 27.

Brig. Anam may also be reminded that democracy is not simply about winning the election. It is also about what you do after the election. Hitler was also elected democratically and Britain

and France negotiated with him on this basis, with disastrous consequence. Interestingly, Hitler also wanted to destroy the Jews. Hitler managed to work up a considerable number of his compatriots to a frenzy of homicidal fury against the Jews, even though the latter amounted to only one per cent of the German population. And the post-war Polish government did even better: that bungling and paranoid communist regime produced anti-Semitism without any Jews at all. Survivors of Poland's once thriving Jewish community had emigrated after the war. Even if the Hamas is able to destroy Israel, it will continue to blame Jews for its own failures. But clearly, people such as Ghazi Hamad, who live in Gaza, seem to have lost patience with such tactics.

In Lebanon, after a few days of euphoria over Hezbollah's "victory",

many prominent Shiite Lebanese leaders are speaking out against Hezbollah. Sayyed Ali Al-Amin, a prominent Shiite cleric, has broken years of silence to criticise Hezbollah for provoking the war, and has called for its disarmament. Mona Fayed, a prominent Shiite academic in Beirut, wrote an op-ed published in An Nahar a week earlier, where she asks "Who is a Shiite in Lebanon?" answering her own question she said "A Shiite is he who takes his instructions from Iran, terrorises fellow believers into silence, and leads the nation into catastrophe."

As for western foreign policies, foreign policies of all true democratic countries are guided by their national interests and not the interests of the ruling elites as in Iran.

Mahmood Elahi
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Kofi Annan's diplomacy

It is still reassuring that the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, now on a Middle East tour aiming at easing the tensions in the region and securing a fragile but complete ceasefire and an end to the Israeli blockade of Lebanon, has expressed optimism about the success of his mission, though the Israeli Prime-minister Olmert does not support the plan. Olmert, sufficiently tight cornered by domestic critics pressuring him to resign and without Ariel Sharon, the architect of new relations with Palestine, on scene, Olmert might be in a weak position to convince the anti-Muslim clergy the need to compromise with Lebanon. The Lebanese prime minister does not see any possibility of a just and comprehensive peace between both the countries, because Tel Aviv does not desire to lift the Lebanon blockade. Considering the tense situation prevailing in the Middle Eastern region and the reluctant attitude of the USA to play a real pro-active role to resolve the crisis following Israel's air-strikes, there is very little that the Secretary General, who otherwise does not play any constructive role in regional disputes other than engaging himself in shuttle diplomacy, owing to pressure from the USA, could achieve. When the UN has been effectively converted into a pro-USA forum to further the US national interest and the UNSC behaves like a tool to bring the world under the US control, the poor Secretary General can do very little to solve the Israel-Hezbollah crisis, unless, of course, the Pentagon begins to consider the world as comprising sovereign nations and not its puppet regimes.

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