

The truth, twisting in the wind

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NAEEM MOHAIEMEN

MAJOR General Manzoor has been on my mind lately. The Manzoor of the morning of May 30, 1981. The man whose team assaulted Chittagong Circuit House with rocket launchers, made Ziaur Rahman's body *jahjira* with bullets, in pursuit of another bloody coup. But also, the Manzoor of June 1, hiding in the tea garden coolie quarters, watching his rebellion fail as troops defected and crossed over into Suvapur, all his plans of starving Dhaka into submission falling apart.

What were the last thoughts that went through his head as he was dragged blindfolded into that army jeep? Regret? Fear? Shame? Or did he think, I didn't do this alone...I need to name names...

I remember hearing on the radio that Manzoor was captured. It seemed only moments later that another announcer said he was dead. How, when, why? The conventional narrative was that a

group of angry troops surrounded the jeep and dragged him out -- "*khunike payyachi!*" Later he was found face-down in a drain, with a gaping hole in the back of his head. No sign of the mob.

The thing that sticks in my throat is the post-mortem report, signed by Lt. Col. A. Z. Tufail Ahmed (re-produced in Mascarenhas' book) -- "a big gaping hole 4"x2" from a shot to the head and "no other injury on the body." A smooth one-bullet execution, and not a single *achor* on his body -- by an angry mob? No, somehow, something about it never seemed right.

No tears for Manzoor. But weep for the truth. Our history is littered with dead men -- Khalid Musharraf, Abu Taher, Mohammad Abul Manzoor -- always taking uncomfortable stories to the grave.

From 1972 onwards, this country was rocked by intrigue, agitation, and violence. Somehow we muddled through, and here we are, still standing, still *shadhin*. But who did what, who knew what, and who

kept silent and watched? We don't even know what we don't know.

You're too skeptical, said a friend. Maybe the truth is exactly what we know. The public narrative is the only narrative. Maybe so, but at every wrenching historical turn, the people who planned intrigue always seem to conveniently die before they can name their partners. And when you read books about that period, every eyewitness is dead, or out of the country, or someone who has incentive to exaggerate or downplay his own role.

Manzoor has been on my mind again because of the JMB verdicts. After exhausting all legal channels, their request for clemency has now been turned down by President Iajuddin. The JMB convicts have repeatedly said they want to talk to the media and name their patrons, but Law Adviser Mainul Hossain said that won't be allowed, because there's no precedent.

If nothing else changes, they will hang by April, and I bet there won't



be outraged reactions from rights activists (the same people who were shocked by the Saddam snuff video). Personally, I've always opposed the death penalty -- it does nothing for justice but everything for our bloodlust and revenge mentality. But that's not even where I'm coming from today, I want these men to be spared, because we need to get to the whole truth.

Let's just spell it out. Do we really believe that a fantastically well-coordinated, accurately planned, micro-second timed, nationwide bombing campaign in 64 districts was pulled off by this

small group of "radical Islamist" cells? Do we really believe that the government, after denying the existence of militant groups for so long, suddenly transformed into an ultra-efficient Swat team that managed to scoop up the entire militant ring, as soon as international pressure became a bit too much?

All that chatter about the new breed of suicide bombers, ready to blow themselves up to establish khilafat, and suddenly they all surrendered? How come none of those *bagha bomaroos* blew themselves up when the police sur-

rounded them? The government was so sure that things would go according to plan, a three-ring circus of TV cameras was even invited along to capture every moment of Bangla Bhai's capture. And thrilled by "breaking news" coverage, we forgot to ask any hard questions.

Like, where are the real puppetmasters?

The JMB captures are super-convenient for all concerned. Attacks on cultural functions? Machete attacks on Humayun Azad and Shamsur Rahman? Mysterious Chittagong arms drop? Forget all that. We've got JMB, all is well. An all-purpose monster under the bed, the solution is also child-like simplicity -- hang 'em high, and we can have *shonar Bangla* back.

In a country where bureaucracy moves at molasses pace, and cases can hang in court for years, why did the JMB case get such speedy treatment? Why the mad rush to hang them before the caretaker government took office? After a BNP MP's explosive allegation of links between JMB and high-ups in BNP, and press reporting of the same, Advocate Z.I. Khan Panna filed a Public Interest Litigation (WP No. 8621 of 2005), asking that investigations regarding the bomb attacks also take into account such allegations.

After the High Court gave a

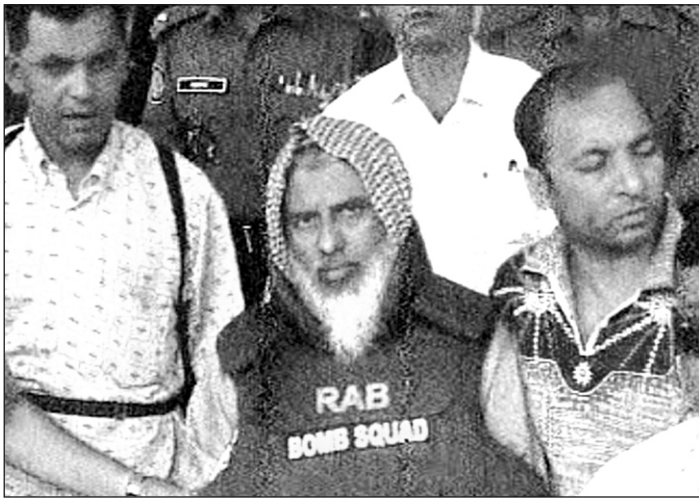
positive direction to the police and others to extend the range of investigation, the former Attorney General A.J. Mohammad Ali, on behalf of the 4-Party Alliance, appealed and got a stay order from the Appellate Division. What are they all so afraid of? And whatever happened to FBI, Singapore, Interpol, and Scotland Yard investigation reports, results of searches and seizures, information gathered by investigating officers, sources of supply of weapons, financing source investigations, etc. None of those were ever made public.

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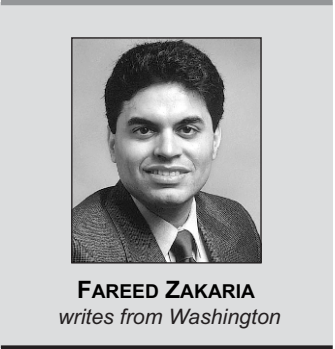
There is still time for this CTG to commute the sentences to life imprisonment, make public all documents from investigations to date, and continue interrogating them, through neutral, non-partisan investigation officers -- until we get to the whole truth.

Maybe some people are lusting to see bearded faces turn black and blue, tongues bulging out, twisting in the wind. *Mar shala gulo ke*. The truth would be the real casualty. Once again, *chuno putis* would die, while puppetmasters roam free.

Naem Mohaiemen does film/art/text interventions in Dhaka and New York.



The sky isn't falling in China



FAREED ZAKARIA writes from Washington

FOR some years economists and analysts have been wondering what it would take to scare financial markets. Wars, coups, soaring commodity prices, increased energy costs, unwinding housing markets -- nothing seemed to do it.

Last week we got one answer: China. The sharp plunge in the Shanghai stock market caused jitters around the world. But while the reaction pointed to the increased importance of China in global economics, it also highlighted the confusion and misunderstanding that surround the Middle Kingdom.

When a market has gone up 150 percent since 2006, as Shanghai's had, one doesn't need to search for grand explanations to recognize that it's bound to retreat at some point. More important, there is little linking the Shanghai stock market with the overall Chinese economy.

It simply doesn't play the role that the stock market does in the United States or Britain. Most Chinese companies raise money through banks, not equities. Indeed, for the past 10 years, Chinese stocks have gone down while the economy has

boomed. And yet, the day after the market fell, we saw yet again all the same warnings about the hollowness of the Chinese system, the perils it faces and the imminent possibilities of its collapse.

It might be time to admit that we really don't understand China. The country simply does not conform to our most basic beliefs about what makes nations grow. Hernando de Soto, the Peruvian scholar, has argued persuasively that clear and strong property rights are the prerequisite for economic growth. Except that China, the fastest-growing country in human history, has an extremely unclear and weak system of property rights.

Alan Greenspan has argued that the rule of law is the linchpin of market economics. Except that China has a patchy set of laws, unevenly enforced. The Washington Consensus that the World Bank and the IMF have peddled across the globe claims that if currencies don't float freely, they will produce huge distortions in the economy. China has declined that advice and yet prospers. So, instead of learning from facts and revising theory, we assume that the facts are wrong, that China is one grand charade.

This paradox is even greater in the political realm. Scholars examine China's political system -- a Leninist party that maintains a total monopoly on power -- and they are sure that it is crumbling.

Yet the regime has defied predictions of its collapse for 25 years. We're sure that the Chinese people must hate their government, except that the only polls we have suggest

exactly the opposite. Surveys conducted in the late 1990s by the scholar Jie Chien showed 80 percent support for the political system.

Last year's Pew Survey on Global Attitudes has a little-noticed question: "Are you satisfied with the state of your nation?" Less than 30 percent of Americans said they were. China topped the list, with 81 percent of those surveyed answering "yes."

Perhaps people lie to pollsters in China, but these numbers are consistent in several polls, and people in China do regularly express their opposition to corruption, environmental degradation and other specific policies.

Citizens' feelings about their governments are made up of a complex mix of cultural, historical and emotional attitudes. Americans, by and large, don't understand this because the basis of American nationalism is ideology.

We believe that regimes with bad ideologies must be deeply unpopular. So we assume that the Iranian mullahs have no support in their society, that Vladimir Putin is viewed by his people as a dictatorial thug, and that Saddam Hussein must have been reviled even by his Sunni brethren in Iraq.

Books proliferate about the fragility and weakness of the Beijing government -- and the critiques are often extremely intelligent. But considering the massive challenges that it has faced, the regime has handled them quite skillfully year after year -- though sometimes with a brutal edge.

At every juncture, it's been able to tackle some seemingly overwhelming problems, postpone others and

dodge bullets. Chinese leaders have managed the migration of 200 million peasants into cities, and the mass unemployment caused by shutting down state-owned factories.

They've periodically slowed the economy to stop its overheating. They've planned for the largest and fastest urbanization in history, and controlled the social discontent bred by such headlong growth. None of their moves has been perfect, but compared with any other country in the world, China has managed its problems well.

Is it so difficult to understand why the Chinese people might be satisfied with their current situation? Over the past century the country has gone through chaotic turmoil almost every decade -- the collapse of the monarchy, warring states, the Japanese invasion, civil war, the communist takeover, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution.

But in the past 30 years, China has enjoyed stability, as well as the fastest growth rate of any country ever. Some 350 million people have been lifted out of extreme poverty. The country has a new, sparkling image across the world. If you were Chinese, you might take some pride in that too.

Fareed Zakaria is editor of Newsweek.

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Withdraw reservation from CEDAW

SHAMIMA PERVIN

ON this International Women's Day, the best contribution the present caretaker government could make towards women's empowerment would be withdrawal of reservation from CEDAW.

The women's movement of Bangladesh feels that these reservations infringe upon the protection and promotion of their rights. They are also advocating and mobilizing men and women to push for implementation of CEDAW provisions in domestic legislation. Will the government come forward in the same spirit as these men & women have?

The Convention provides the basis for realizing equality between women and men through ensuring women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in, public and political life. On the 6th of November 1984, Bangladesh ratified CEDAW, with reservations on Articles 2, 13.1(a), 16.1(c) and (f) on the basis of religious sentiments.

In 1997, the government withdrew its reservation from articles 13 (a) and 16.1 (f). Since then, there was no further move to withdraw the rest. In this context, the possibility of enacting/amendment of laws in conformity with CEDAW may be a far cry.

Why were all the governments reluctant to withdraw these reservations? What threat/state conspiracy lies in these articles? The article number 2 is for adoption of measures to prohibit discrimination against women, and 16.1(c) pronounces the same rights and

responsibilities of men and women during marriage and at its dissolution. Article 2 and 16 are considered the core provisions of CEDAW. Without withdrawal of these reservations, ratification of the convention is meaningless.

From a constitutional perspective, there is no reason to stick with these reservations as they promote discrimination. Also assurance of women's equality has coexisted with the Shariah Laws in the Constitution.

Even religious practices and views are not monolithic. As we observe across the globe, the majority of people practice religion to serve spiritual purposes. Only a few use religion to fulfill their political motives and interest to rule over, dominate and exploit people, specially women.

This group has used, and is using, religion for centuries to subordinate women and promote values, norms, laws and policies against them. Conversely, spiritual viewers have an egalitarian perspective about people and women. They consider that men and women are spiritual equals to Allah/God/Bhagban. This dominant group has no problem in withdrawing the said reservations.

The Islamic marriage is considered a civil agreement between the two parties, rather than a social ritual. As a party, women cannot be forced to marry anyone without their consent. So, their right to dissolution of marriage should also be recognized.

In Bangladesh, the concerned

bride's family seeks the husband's consent to give divorce right during marriage registration. The husband could give consent to the wife's right to divorce.

This is a wonderful clause, which a woman could use to get rid of her unsuccessful marriage without complicated court procedures. On the other hand, this approval process also proves that women's destiny is controlled by men. Women cannot exercise the same rights and responsibilities as men.

Why should reservation in favour of discrimination not be considered as a shame? Illegal? Is it not contradictory with the government's policies and programmes to achieve millennium development goals. The third goal of MDG is achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment.

However, it is well understood that gender equality is a prerequisite for achieving other goals. The PRSP document was prepared in conformity with MDG. Conversely, the previous government changed the National Women Policy, which was prepared in line with CEDAW and Beijing Platform for Action.

Later versions of women policy deliberately replaced words and meanings related to equality and women's decision making, specially at the highest forums. This is an appropriate time for the government to remove all these contradictions and withdraw the reservations.

I am not sure whether this interim government can act in withdrawing Bangladesh's reservation from CEDAW, because of

limitation of their power. However, common people like us, who have not studied politics or types or role of government, are not aware of the boundaries of their authority.

We welcome those moves which are beneficial to the country and its people. We greeted the government's moves to sign the UN anti-corruption treaty, take action against corrupt politicians, restore law and order, and stabilize the market. Also, being an activist, I would like to plead, create pressure, and advocate to each and every government to withdraw the illogical and unethical reservations to ensure the protection of women's rights.

Establishing gender equality is a process, a long journey, which can be initiated through withdrawal of the existing reservations from CEDAW. This will take us one step forward by supporting cultural change towards recognizing women as human beings, and creating an obligation for the government for making gender-friendly law reforms.

The government must understand that gender equality is not a threat, rather it is intrinsically important for good governance and sustainable development.

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International Women's Day
Salma grooms her own garden

PARVEZ BABUL

SALMA (33) can practice her due rights now, and has become an influential woman in her community in Zoinkathi village in Patuakhali. She has become the key to ensuring food security for her family.

Through homestead food production, which is supported by Helen Keller International, Salma cultivates more than 20 varieties of year-round vegetables in her homestead model farm, and rears poultry too. Some of the varieties of vegetables at her garden are: *pui shak*, *kolmi shak*, *palong shak*, tomato, carrot, all rich sources of vitamin A that helps to keep her and her family healthy.

Salma and her family members consume vegetables in every meal everyday, which is why they are healthy now, and know that vegetables prevent malnutrition and many diseases because they do not get sick as often as they did before.

The local people buy seedlings from Salma for their own homestead vegetable gardens, and the money helps Salma meet her household expenses and her children's school fees.

Salma motivates her neighbors, community people, as well as her relatives, to follow her and benefit through homestead food production. She dreams of educating her daughter Ankhi (3) like her sons,

Though Salma is illiterate, and can only sign her name, she is still a role model by being a teacher for nutrition education through the homestead food production program. Because she is promoting good eating habits to prevent vitamin A and iron deficiency in her community, even the union council chairman and the local people publicly appreciate Salma.



Salma is taking care of her vegetable garden.

PHOTO: HELEN KELLER INTERNATIONAL

and is determined not to agree to an early marriage for her.

She is aware of the negative impact of early marriage, especially of girls, as she was a victim herself because of her family's poverty. Salma has learnt also about the special nutritional needs of growing

girls, pregnant women, lactating mothers and other members of her family.

I talk to her about International Women's Day, and she remarks while watering her garden: "Poor women should get the opportunity to earn money like me. Because

earning makes them self-reliant and able to make decisions, and helps prevent violence against them."

Salma recalls the days before her involvement in homestead food production, when she had no alternative but to take low quality foods only once or twice a day because

there was not enough for her.

She talks of her days of sorrow and hardship but quickly smiles, realizing her success with homestead food production. She is now the main decision-maker of her household, and even her husband and mother-in-law ask her advice on whom to vote for in national elections!

Salma's husband, Enayet, earns some money working as a day labourer, but Salma earns more than her husband, with a minimum of 2000 taka per month, through selling vegetables and seedlings from her garden.

When talking to her husband Enayet, he smiled with joy and said, "I am proud of my wife Salma, and happy to honour the decisions she takes for the sake of our family. I was unaware before, but now I realize that my wife has the same rights like me."

Salma is planning to make a big poultry farm and buy a television, and land to build living rooms with her savings. Rezaul Karim, Technical Officer (Horticulture) of Helen Keller International (HKI) Bangladesh, who supervises this program said: "Salma got free training from Helen Keller International on year-round vegetable cultivation, how to prepare and use organic fertilizer and on poultry rearing. She established her village model farm at the household with our technical assistance under the *Jibon O Jibika*

project. Like other members of our program -- we provided Salma free seeds of vegetables and 20 ducks to rear. Salma worked in her garden side by side with household tasks and, thus, has been able to become an exceptionally self-reliant and empowered woman. So, I am impressed working with her as well as other members of our project," concluded Rezaul.

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Listening to Salma's success story, I appreciate her optimism and see her as an ideal character and motivator who represents the poor disadvantaged women in Bangladesh. Like Salma, many women and mothers greatly contribute to building healthy families, and guide us to reach the goal of preventing malnutrition and uprooting poverty (also "to send poverty to the museum" as stated by Dr. Muhammad Yunus).

In a recently published bulletin (No. 4, 2006), Helen Keller International (HKI) highlighted that the prevalence of malnutrition in rural Bangladesh is among the highest in the world. 46

percent of children under five years of age were underweight, and 36 percent of mothers were chronically energy deficient. Micro-nutrient deficiencies affect more than 50 percent of children and women of reproductive age (According to HKI's survey in 2005).

The findings of the Homestead Food Production Program have demonstrated that integrating poultry-rearing with homestead gardening has additional benefits beyond enhancing the production and consumption of nutritious foods.

Homestead Food Production helps communities establish home-stead gardens and to cultivate fruits and vegetables rich in vitamin A and other micronutrients. Eggs, poultry and other animal foods, which support the body's ability to utilize micronutrients, are also integrated into the program.

Families become stronger and healthier through better nutrition. Households practicing improved gardening yield surplus food that is often sold for additional income, enabling families to access health care, education and savings.

Additional income gave them better access to high quality animal foods, and provided opportunities for them to save money for other expenses, including education for their children. The document clarified that women's decision-making on household expenditure positively influences the nutritional

status of their children, which contributes to the reduction of malnutrition among both women and children.

So, given the positive impact of the Homestead Food Production Program on improving the nutritional status of women and children in Bangladesh, as well as reducing poverty, this program should be expanded and scaled up for vulnerable households.

"Investments in homestead food production have proven to give huge returns to support and empower the most valuable resource in Bangladesh -- women who work tirelessly for their families -- no greater return can be guaranteed than investing in women," concluded Chantell Witten, Country Director of Helen Keller International, Bangladesh.

On the way back to Dhaka from Salma's home, an appropriate quote of the great Helen Keller reminded me of Salma's winning against the odds: "Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement. Nothing can be done without hope and confidence." I wish that this was true for all the poor, the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, especially children, girls, and women in our country and around the world.

Parvez Babul is Information and Advocacy Officer of Helen Keller International, Bangladesh.