

More arrests

Legal process should get under way

THE arrests of a number of powerful individuals in the latest phase of the government's crackdown on corruption is indicative of its determination to get to the bottom of the malaise afflicting the country. The erosion of morals that has occurred in the recent past is a fact that surely must be dealt with sternly by the authorities. So far, the caretaker administration has sent out all the right signals about the paramount national need to combat corruption through bringing its perpetrators, high as well as low, to justice. The current drive may in so many words be referred to as a reflection of the national will so very necessary to purge society of the evils that have marred its onward progress.

The detention of such individuals as Tarique Rahman, Khandakar Mosharraf Hossain and ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury demonstrates the truth that in Bangladesh today, no seemingly powerful individual is immune to the rule of law, particularly if there are allegations of wrongdoing pending against him or her. The concerted action taken by the joint forces on Wednesday night was therefore only to be expected. It had never been a matter of if but one of when some more powerful people would be hauled up before the law and expected to answer to the charges laid at their door. In a sense, therefore, the government's action re-emphasises its tenacity about tackling those who have or may have contributed to the political and social mess we as a nation have been going through in recent times. What has patently been happening in the matter of the detention of important individuals is that there is today a full-scale drive against those who are perceived to have abused power. As a matter of fact, the moves against corruption ought to be seen, for all the right reasons, as a purposeful drive to roll back the abuse and misuse of power we have had the misfortune to experience thus far.

The country expects the drive against corruption to go on, largely because its sights are today focused on general elections that will no more be hostage to or dependent on the attitudes which have given politics a bad name. At the same time, it will look forward, now that a good number of individuals have been netted as part of the anti-corruption drive, to an initiation of legal proceedings that will uphold the highest standards of justice. In other words, the trials of those detained should commence reasonably soon as a first step towards enabling the country to move on.

The issue is women's empowerment

It still has a long way to go

INTERNATIONAL Women's Day was observed in Bangladesh on 8 March with the expected fervour by women rights activists and various social and UN organizations. The occasion once again gave the opportunity to highlight untold physical and mental abuse and socio-economic discrimination women are subjected to in the country. In a social setting where social and political leadership, family decision making power and tools for economic activities remain predominantly in the hands of men, women get little or no opportunity to come forward to prove their mettle. They continue to face financial and attitudinal obstacles in taking initiatives to undertake income generating or social building activities. According to the dictate of the male dominated society, most of them remain within the bounds of familial work such as bearing and raising children and taking care of household works.

The incidences of physical violence on women are still as rampant today as it was decades ago. Media is replete with horrendous news of women dying or going to hospitals following dowry related violence, rape or acid throwing by criminals. The actual statistics would only point a grim finger at the large number of such victims waiting for justice to be delivered to lessen their pain.

Besides falling prey to physical violence, women are also being discriminated in family as well as society in many other ways because of their vulnerable position. A girl child is the first choice to be withdrawn from school before completing her primary education to help in works like raising younger siblings or cooking food. Child marriage remains a social malady in the rural areas where a girl has no voice in such matters.

It is ironic that even though there exists various laws to protect women from such destiny, we are yet to see their stern implementation to strike fear in the minds of the perpetrators. It is unfortunate that in many cases, for mysterious reasons, relevant police officials often prepare a weak first information report (FIR), and as a result of which the perpetrators get away through the legal loopholes. There must not be any hesitation in awarding the highest punishment to those who torture and kill women.

We feel the authorities concerned have to take immediate steps to ensure that the relevant departments implement the existing laws to end violence on women and they also work towards removing discrimination against women in society through raising awareness.

The rise and fall of Tarique Rahman



ZAFAR SOBHAN

"Khaleda Zia is our leader
Ziaur Rahman is our philosophy
Tarique Rahman is our future"

THIS particular gem that has been ubiquitous on walls in the capital Dhaka for the past five years encapsulates perfectly the cult of personality that had been created around the person of Tarique Rahman and gave us a strong indication of where Bangladesh was heading had the January 22 election been permitted to go forward as scheduled.

Had the one-sided election been consummated, we would have been looking down the barrel of the Tarique Rahman raj. The last five years he has grown steadily in power and influence as the joint secretary general of the ruling BNP, recently promoted to "senior" joint secretary general, lest there remain any confusion as to who really ran the party, and, by default, the country.

Tarique Rahman's rise and consolidation of power has been a stealthy and, in many ways, ingenuous process. The cult of personality which was skillfully developed despite his lack of any discernible charisma or acuity or any of the other qualities one would expect to see in a leader (in this he is not unique, see e.g., Bush, George W.) was just one part of the process.

In these days of rent-a-crowds, stage-managed public appearances, and embedded journalism it is not difficult to create an aura of leadership and popularity around a presentable-looking young man, especially if he happens to be the eldest son of a respected ex-president and freedom fighter, especially in a country where, regrettably, too many people are all too happy to ignore simple things such as truth and consistency when it comes to their political self-interest and pledging their allegiance (indeed, one could argue that the entire BNP was established on this foundational principle), especially in a country so starved of good leadership that the impressionable and opportunistic are eager to latch on to any new thing.

Hand in hand with the cult of personality went the slow-motion take-over of the party (the senior partner in the coalition ruling the country, mind you) apparatus, placing Tarique loyalists and sycophants in every nook and corner, even to the extent of squeezing out long time party-men who refused to bow down before the brash, new dispensation.

Matters came to a head last August 26, when the young Turk's of the party's national executive committee took serious exception to some of the party's senior lead-

ers and demanded their immediate expulsion from the party for having the temerity to criticise Tarique. Ruhul Quddus Talukder Dulu, deputy minister for land and a close associate (incidentally, now also in jail) went so far as to state: "BNP means Zia Family. He or she should be expelled from the party who will speak against this family."

Indeed, it was precisely this tendency that resulted in BNP founder members Dr. Badruddoza Chowdhury and then Oli Ahmed as well as a host of others being essentially forced out of the BNP and into first the BDB and then the LDP. The only reason there wasn't a more pronounced exodus was a well-founded fear of retribution and the combination of cringing sycophancy and grasping opportunism that marks Bangladeshi politics.

The hallmark of Tarique's ascendancy and the closest we can come to in terms of an approximation of his vision for the country was the systematic centralisation of all crime and corruption: from the grandest of grand larcenies to the pettiest of petty larcenies, the idea was that nothing would escape the net of his influence.

Be it transporting a truck-load of vegetables from the north to Dhaka or selling those same vegetables in the market-place at Karwan Bazar, no transaction was too small to escape the attention of Tarique's

coterie. The taxes or "tolls" that small traders transporters had to pay that eventually found their way to Hawa Bhaban make the NBR look like a charitable foundation.

The system in place for collection of tolls was fully computerized (though, no doubt, those computers are now to be found at the bottom of the Buriganga) and so sophisticated that one wonders whether Tarique and his coterie might not have been able to achieve something for the nation if they had had even the slightest inclination towards the common good instead of concentrating so single-mindedly on looting the country and establishing their reign of terror throughout the land.

From the power sector to the import trade, there was no corner of the economy that did not fall under his shadow and that his all-encompassing reach did not touch.

Until January 11, Tarique Rahman was the most powerful person in the country, indeed he was the most powerful behind the scenes power broker Bangladesh has ever seen. Considering that he was neither a member of parliament nor held any executive position, his reach tells us all we need to know about the sorry state of Bangladeshi politics.

And had January 11 not happened, Tarique's reach would only have gotten more suffocating, his

foot-print heavier. Had the four-party alliance returned to power, nothing could have stood in his way, he would have ascended from crown prince to king. Bangladesh would have been turned into a nasty police state where nothing would have moved without his consent, no dissent, no rule of law, no opposition, no opposition, absolute power.

Tarique was selling himself, inside the country and out, as Bangladesh's Mahathir Mohamad, although any resemblance between the two is purely imaginary. Our foreign friends were willing to hold their nose and tolerate him, thinking, perhaps, that here was a man they could do business with and who would be ruthless enough to be able to deliver to them the wealth he did not loot for himself. Some countries have always had a soft spot for pliable third world despots.

When the days after the first spate of arrests began to pass without his arrest, concern began to mount that he was not being taken in. No list of the criminal and corrupt would be complete without his name at the top.

On the one hand, we were told, in whispers, to wait, to be patient, the authorities were preparing an air-tight case. Mamun was singing like a canary, the noose was tightening, they would go for Tarique when the time was right.

On the other hand, we heard of army units remaining loyal to him, we heard of the authorities setting out to arrest him and then pulling back three times, we heard of desperate back-room deals to keep him and the rest of his coterie out of jail.

Everyone knew: as long as Tarique Rahman remained at large, his poisonous coterie remained alive and able, potentially, to regroup and turn things

around.

Now he is in jail. Others were swept up with him in another dramatic midnight raid. Some, doubtless, deserving, but others, again, of doubtful criminality. Still, "balance" has to be maintained at all times, I suppose.

But the message has been sent. Tarique's goons who have terrorised their localities with impunity for the past five years will now run for cover. He can't protect them any more, and now that he is behind bars, the house of cards that he and his coterie built up will start to tumble.

Perhaps I am speaking too soon and he can conjure up a resurrection from his jail cell, but this seems unlikely. The authorities know how fateful a step it is putting him in jail. He hasn't been incarcerated only to be sprung on a technicality to wreak vengeance on those who put him there.

I do not know where things will go from here, for good or for bad, but the five-year stranglehold Tarique and his associates had over the country, that they considered their birthright and personal fiefdom, had to be ended. Our long national nightmare is finally over.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

STRAIGHT TALK

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others who supported him, others who were likeminded and needed his support as much as he needed support from them.

In fact, the support system is what makes a good society, and the definition of a good society is that the collective body collectively works to enhance the collective well-being. When an editor said on TV that one of the individuals arrested by the joint forces was a "nice boy," that support system gets sliced up.

That is when one media mogul comes to the rescue of another without consideration for the remaining society. Then it becomes a brotherhood of some sort, the same brotherhood that prompted well-wishers to protect a controversial judge who is their "nice boy."

The question is, how could we not catch him even after his mischievousness was revealed? How could he still remain on the job if what was said before proved right in the end? Who covered up for him? It must have been an organized thing, a brotherhood of crooks, instead of one man doing it alone.

Everything worked for him because of the party. The vice-chancellor of the university, the chief justice, the law minister, the education minister, and the rest of the government machinery lined up so that a deceptive man could successfully pull a fast one on the country.

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Perhaps the time has come to deal at once with the retailer and the wholesaler. I think the law needs to enter the Freudian density, and punish the criminal along with those who create the enabling environment for him.

If Fayzee could make it for so long, it was because there were

High Court judge in the midst of stiff competition.

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