

Death by thousand committees

NAEEM MOHAIEMEN

IN the end, this is what it takes to create an inquest. When a case of torture and murder involves an Adivasi activist it needs two months of sustained national outrage, a petition signed by hundreds, and many alert notices from groups



like Human Rights Watch to finally push the government to appoint a one-person committee to probe Choles Ritchil's death. How much headway the investigator can make, with limited resources and mandate, in investigating a volatile case, is still hazy.

We have seen many committees

in our times, they can unfortunately also be used to mothball controversy. A call to a lawyer friend unearthed at least three effective commissions in recent times: BGMEA investigation into Spectrum collapse, Shamsunnahar Hall attack commission (headed by Justice Tofazzel Islam), and Rubel killing commission

(headed by Justice Habibur Rahman Khan). The Rubel commission even came up with guidelines for cases involving arrest without warrant.

Unfortunately, kangaroo commissions outnumber effective ones. These are the commissions that never publish results (counting on public outrage to die down), or come out with "findings" that are surreal and ineffective. In the former category are commissions that investigated incidents like the abduction of Kalpana Chakma. In the latter are inquiries into massacres like the one at Logang (headed by Justice Sultan H Khan). Then there are commissions that come up with wishy-washy, non-conclusion conclusions. The August 21st AL rally bomb blast investigation concluded, via reports leaked to the press, that it "could be foreign involvement" (specific, substantial, and actionable!).

In the category of I-would-laugh-if-it-wasn't -so-tragic was the Justice Joinal Abedin commission during BNP tenure that probed Mymensingh cinema hall bomb blasts. Absurdly, it concluded that the culprit was Professor Muntasir Mamun of Dhaka University's History department. Apparently not satisfied with produc-

ing voluminous and authoritative works on the pre-history of Dhaka, the good professor had been dabbling in amateur bomb-confection. Now that's a truly inter-disciplinary scholar!

The spectre of commissions that produce no results, but give political cover and buy time, is of course not limited to South Asia -- they can be seen in many other times and places. Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa headed the commission that investigated a massacre in Peru, and in his subsequent essay "Death in the Andes" he seemed to take the side of the government against the Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) rebels, with inadequate acknowledgment of the abject poverty and discrimination that made rebellion an attractive option for the Peruvian Indians. To Llosa, socialism was an "incomprehensible abstraction" for Indians (although apparently "democracy" was not), therefore they were only being "used" by the rebels.

In North America, a famous example is the inquiry into the killing of four students during anti-Vietnam war protests on the Kent State campus. After 37 years of official cover-up, tape-recorded evidence of pre-meditated

killings by the National Guard (in collusion with Ohio governor James A. Rhodes) was finally released by the FBI in the face of a FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) case. From My Lai to Watergate, the turbulent 60s and 70s produced many such cases of cover-up and denial. But parallel to this history are also commissions that bravely exposed uncomfortable truths. Especially notable was the 1975-76 Church Committee hearings, which published 14 reports on US intelligence agencies and their alleged abuses, along with recommendations for reform, some of which were implemented.

Coming back to Bangladesh, consider for a moment the resources being put towards the Choles Ritchil case. We have a one-person committee, headed by retired judge Mohammed Rafiuddin, investigating a case where there may be difficulties finding evidence, where the family has not yet been allowed to file a case, where the body needs to be exhumed after decomposition, where one witness is hiding for fear of his life, and many other complications from passage of two months. Power always counts on short memories -- we will forget and move on. So many issues,

so little time. And short-sighted leadership sometimes thinks that closing ranks and "protecting our own" is more important than setting an example by investigating, following due process, and punishing the guilty.

But perhaps, against the odds, the retired judge will uncover the truth? Can we dare hope against history? And can we, in addition to hoping, also move towards more direct activist interventions. Citizens need to create pressure for more resources for inquiry commissions, and open hearings on all such investigations, so that the proceedings and final findings are always made public. The government must offer witness protection programs, and take evidence in camera to give confidence and safety to witnesses. Investigators who first looked into the case should volunteer to submit their testimonies as well. This is all part of a collective struggle. For better tomorrows.

For all our citizens.

Naeem Mohaimen is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

How the OIC can help development

By focusing on a small number of such trans-national development projects in areas of common interest the OIC and its member countries can develop the necessary science and technology base required achieving self-sufficiency and self reliance. Can the OIC and its member states rise to the challenge by burying their existing differences and building on their complementary strengths?

AHMED A. AZAD

BANGLADESH has been a member of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) since it was formed over two decades back. One of the major objectives of the OIC has been the economic development of its member states through collective initiatives. During its existence the OIC has set up the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) and Comstech (Standing Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation), but there has been very little capacity development of any note in any of the OIC countries.

It was, therefore, very timely and appropriate for our foreign affairs adviser, Dr. Ifthekar Ahmed Chowdhury, to remind his counterparts at the recent OIC Foreign Ministers meeting that the OIC needs to seriously focus on development activities, and modernise itself and its affiliated organisations, if it did not want to become irrelevant.

The majority of the member states of the OIC are clustered in two regions, one extending from

Indonesia to Morocco, the other being sub-Saharan Africa. This "OIC region" is the most underdeveloped part of the world in terms of both economic and technological development. The OIC-member countries account for 22 of the 37 countries that are classified as Least Developed Countries (LDC). This group unfortunately also includes Bangladesh.

One of the main sources of income for many LDCs, including Bangladesh, has been to use the LDC badge to seek unhindered market access of their products which are relatively cheap because of low cost of labour. These measures can only provide temporary relief but cannot lead to sustainable development in the absence of scientific proficiency and a prosperous economy.

Even within the developing world, it is alarming that not a single member country of the OIC is scientifically proficient in comparison to the rapidly advancing countries (India, China, Brazil) or the emerging economies of Asia (South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore).

Wealth and scientific advance-

ment are unevenly distributed within the OIC region. Some of the Middle East countries are wealthiest in the world in terms of oil and foreign currency reserves and yet they lack in scientific proficiency. They prefer to import technology and manpower rather than using their transient wealth to build their economy.

There are other countries in the region such as Bangladesh that, because of their lack of resources and infrastructure, are considered scientifically underdeveloped and yet have a small but highly trained manpower, some of whom continue to remain productive in their home countries despite their isolation and other difficult circumstances.

This has resulted in a very debilitating brain drain to the technologically advanced countries. Some governments of Islamic countries such as Pakistan, Turkey and Malaysia have started spending large amounts of money (outside the defence allocation) on development of science and technology, but they lack skilled manpower.

It therefore makes sense for the

countries of the OIC region to formulate common goals in areas of mutual interest and to pool some of their wealth, natural resources, scientific expertise, and major facilities to solve the pressing problems of the region, and to boost national development and sustainability.

Unfortunately there is a serious lack of common purpose and coordination in regards to research and development strategy at the government level, and this is where the OIC and institutions like the IDB, Comstech, Islamic Academy of Science (IAS), the Network of Academies of Sciences in Islamic Countries (NASIC), and national science academies of individual countries can play a very important catalytic and supportive role.

The above organisations could work with regional scientists and governments to develop agenda that are relevant to the OIC region and allow individual countries to drive their own needs while cooperating with one another as equal partners in regional development.

Other international organisations such as the Academy of Sciences of the Developing World (TWAS) and the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB) have also given a commitment that they would support the development of regional cooperation in scientific research and for the necessary transformation in research

culture.

One of the greatest obstacles to research productivity in the region is the lack of trained personnel and full time researchers. This deficiency can be overcome by greater emphasis on scientific and technical cooperation with more technological capable countries contributing significantly to the development of science in the less developed ones and the exchange of experts and research material.

Wealthy countries with rich resources, like some of those in the Middle East, must be persuaded that regional development and sustainability is critically dependent upon a strong science and technology platform, and it is in their own interest to support this initiative.

A very common tendency in all the underdeveloped countries of the OIC region is to try and compete with the rest of the world in all areas of research. This is neither practical nor sensible as with the limited resources, expertise and facilities they end up spreading themselves too thin and achieving nothing.

There must be regional focus on only a small number of priority areas where there is an existing strength and potential. I will give one specific example of how existing human and material resources can be marshalled for meeting the development objectives in an area of acute need.

Countries in the OIC region are

endowed with unique and rich flora and fauna, with 34 of the world's biodiversity hotspots, and a wealth of indigenous traditional knowledge that have often been the source of successful modern medicines. So why have the OIC member countries failed to explore their abundant biodiversity to develop and produce the new and essential drugs required for their own health care needs, and why have they failed to use this as a vehicle for the economic development of the region?

The simple answer is that, within the OIC member countries the scientific and technical base required for this initiative is grossly inadequate and there is lack of capacity, infrastructure and available funds.

The above difficulties can be overcome if OIC member countries are prepared to work together with adequate support from the OIC and other development organisations in the Islamic world.

By developing sensible regional health priorities of common interest, starting from a strong indigenous knowledge base, using existing natural resources, sharing multidisciplinary expertise and facilities, employing rational approaches to the discovery and optimisation of candidate drugs and taking advantage of the relatively low cost of labour.

It is feasible to establish a research-based drug development program in the region that can be less time con-

suming and much cheaper than similar operations carried out by multinational pharmaceutical companies in the North.

Besides the strong possibility of useful health care products, this initiative will also raise the science and technology base in the region, and lead to much needed research capacity development, with beneficial knock-on effects for many other areas of science. This will also help to reverse the brain drain by proper utilisation of talent and expertise within the OIC region.

This project will require excellence and sophistication in research that is rarely seen in the Islamic world today but achievable through cooperation and collaboration. What is required for success is the will to succeed and unity of purpose among the scientists and governments of the OIC countries.

By focusing on a small number of such trans-national development projects in areas of common interest the OIC and its member countries can develop the necessary science and technology base required achieving self-sufficiency and self reliance. Can the OIC and its member states rise to the challenge by burying their existing differences and building on their complementary strengths?

Ahmed A. Azad is TWAS Research Professor, Brac University.

The choice is ours

Without any form of a truly fundamental reform of the major parties and without a truly independent and powerful EC, it is hard not to feel a déjà vu revisiting us. We do have the potential to elevate ourselves to the position of a developing nation, provided the political leaders come out of their rude awakening and start rebuilding and reforming their party on a firm democratic footing.

S. I. ZAMAN

IS there anything fundamentally wrong with "minus two" politics? One can be forgiven for thinking that these leaders actually own these parties as their corporations. It is inconceivable how these two parties, seemingly progressive in nature, could be devoid of any senior member who could lead the party out of this internal crisis. The present leaders and their acolytes would vehemently deny any existence of such crisis.

The leaders are far too busy relishing the adulation of their retinues, and the acolytes are happy basking and profiting in a for-your-pleasure-madam culture. This quasi-feudal tradition of a "fiefdom" in the midst of a so-called democracy is an affront to the very notion of a civil society.

One doesn't question the authority of a feudal lord -- mere questioning is tantamount to dissent -- and this is why the parties cannot envisage a change of leadership, not because they lack any eligible contender but merely because this move to unseat the leader would be tantamount to a slur on the leader -- which might bring them to their fall.

Recently, the AL leader has

announced that she would step down even if just one of the AL Council members moves for no confidence. But let's not be naive -- she could never be voted out -- even if there are members who harbour any form of dissent, he or she would be dissuaded by other conniving members. The only way she steps down would be voluntarily. Had this been a truly civilized society, the two leaders would have resigned by now.

Both leaders have out-stayed their "sell-by date." It is clear that the two leaders have contributed less to the progress of democratic culture within their party and more to the erosion of democratic values. The brazen and unscrupulous malfeasance of the party top echelon overshadowed any form of democratic voice emanating from some of the lower echelon, who thus remained forever docile and willing partners, and thus depriving the nation of any semblance of headway towards a democratic culture.

The latest move by the BNP leader to install her brother among the party top echelon is yet another indication that "familo-crazy" is here to stay. This unilateral and undemocratic move by the party leader only helps to suggest an existence of a deep seated

oligarchic culture within the party -- and this very same leader was talking about democratic reform within the party?

The move is about as subtle as an elephant in an egg factor. Rest assured, this brother of her would soon be selected as the leader (i.e. the party chairperson) who would no doubt be a surrogate to the present BNP leader in her absence. What best qualification merits him a place in the party? His family ties of course! And we might soon see an analogous move by the AL leader. And there is pressure on CTG to hold the election earlier so that the parties can again have a field day with their ill-conceived agenda.

Nevertheless, the CTG has a job to finish before it leaves. The jobs are:

- Revamping the entire electoral system (preparing a genuine voter-list and introducing voter ID system), so that it stays totally independent and non-partisan.
- Bringing all the political and corporate graft to justice with clinical diligence.
- Cleaning up entire government and its agencies so that corruption would never be able to breed.
- Restructuring government and its



agencies so as to bring proper transparency and accountability in the system.

CTG has promised to complete these in 18 months (by the end of 2008). Whether or not it's feasible in such a short time is moot -- however, whether or not CTG can survive the onslaughts of stalling and tacit pressures from different interested quarters, that is germane. The pressures are:

- Repeated demand from the two leaders for an early election -- as though any make-shift election would solve the national crisis -- of course, earlier the better for them, because whichever party wins, it could have yet another chance to relish another five-year reign of unashamed plundering while the opposition keeps the nation hostage by repeated hartals and oborodhs.



- Repeated phony outrage from the leaders that this CTG is unconstitutional and that a delayed election is bad for democracy -- one would be forgiven for thinking that these leaders actually lose sleep at night over democracy!
- Events of simultaneous terrorist bombing around the country -- perhaps aided by some interested quarter to discredit the CTG.
- Price hike of daily commodities -- inevitable, but it does bite into pockets of average consumers.

Let us hope that CTG does not snap and succumb to the pressure. If they are determined to complete the job, then complete it must! Other wise, we will be back where we were before

1/11.

Without any form of a truly fundamental reform of the major parties and without a truly independent and powerful EC, it is hard not to feel a déjà vu revisiting us. We do have the potential to elevate ourselves to the position of a developing nation, provided the political leaders come out of their rude awakening and start rebuilding and reforming their party on a firm democratic footing.

Dr. S.I. Zaman is a university professor.

Alternative power

SADIQ RAHIM

MANY power generation companies in Bangladesh, including the foreign ones, now-a-days talk about installation of more new coal-based power plants for generation of electricity. They are also seeking a comprehensive coal policy from the government for extraction of coal and for its use in power generation.

But they should know that coal is a number one polluter of the environment and it produces huge carbon dioxide gas when used for electricity generation. In addition, in the developed countries, coal-based power generation is at present discouraged because of its adverse impact on the environment.

Therefore, I would like to bring this information to the notice of the government of Bangladesh and to the private power producers for their thinking whether they should go for coal-based power generation or adopt an alternative solution.

As Bangladesh is a third world, Least Developed Country (LDC), they might find it feasible for coal-based power production because of its low cost of production paradigm. But in the long run, it may cause alarm for the environment. Therefore, from this very moment, those concerned with electricity production should start working for alternatives to coal-based production.

Among the viable alternatives are solar power production, wind-based power production, bio-degradable plant-based power production, and ultimately nuclear-based power production.

However, only for the nuclear-based power production, Bangladesh can leave the option as a long term and futuristic one. Furthermore, for nuclear-based power production, Bangladesh should opt for a deal with overseas nuclear reactor producing companies who can install the facility in Bangladesh by their own proprietary technology and manpower.

Later, by imparting training to the locals, the foreign counterparts then can handover the project to the local authority. Nevertheless, the contracting foreign company must maintain their supervision of such plants for as long as possible period in the future. In this way, the reactor technology might be transferred to our country someday.

Regarding other generation option like solar power, Bangladesh has already started production in the rural areas. For wind based power generation, Bangladesh has not yet taken any measures or yet to adopt, install, or implement any such technology. Wind-based electricity generation, including installation of the turbines, is very costly if viewed in terms of the capacity or output that will be generated. However, Bangladesh might consider such venture with the help of the foreign contracting companies in the long run for mastering the technology.

Moreover, at present, many countries in the developed world are opting for bio-degradable plant-based power generation because of the high cost of diesel and petroleum based production. Here also, Bangladesh has not yet taken any major steps for producing electricity through bio-degradable method. These three later options of power productions are completely environment-friendly and the production method is a renewable energy-based production. Here the sources of renewable energies are sun, wind, and plants, the supplies of which are never ending.

As Bangladesh is facing acute power crisis, I suggest it should immediately start its endeavour towards generation of electricity through solar, wind and bio-degradable method, which are now proved to be completely environment friendly and renewable energy-based sources. As a result, it might help Bangladesh to produce electricity in large scale in the long run. It should turn back from the idea of coal-based power generation, which is not eco-friendly.

On the contrary, as an alternative use of coal, it can be exported to those poor countries around the world who cannot afford other costly means of power generation besides coal based generation followed by its extraction from the existing reserve in the country, which is a quality one. This in return will give Bangladesh an opportunity to earn some foreign currency to strengthen its economy.

Sadiq Rahim is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.