

Be circumspect while making comment

No point confusing people

ACCORDING to Mainul Hosein, the politicians accused of corruption, many of whom are in jail, are playing a game to "put the government in trouble" and make it fail in its mission. So, are we to understand that the present government, backed by the armed forces, is so weak, so limited in its capacity, that a few politicians accused of corruption can make it fail?

We find the adviser's argument rather puerile and indefensible, coming from a responsible member of the caretaker government that had embarked on its tasks with the unstinted support and confidence of the public which has since worn thin. Even more than the infantility of the statement is the disturbing message it carries, which in itself is destabilising for the country.

Such a comment only reflects the tangential focus of the government on issues that require unmitigated concentration. Are we to assume that the "conspirators" are winning and the government, despite all the resources under its command, is failing? We recall the adviser's statement in the same vein where he talked about the consequences of "failure" of this government, which did not go down very well with the people. Adviser Hosein then went ahead to accuse economists across the board of not helping the government either, implying that somehow they are also making the government fail.

We agree that there are challenges facing this government. But that can be easily addressed by the more sensible approach of seeking cooperation of the politicians, economists and civil society members. Making reckless and unthinking comments helps neither the government and much less the country.

We have observed that some advisers make comments on issues that fall outside the purview of their portfolios, thereby confusing people and unwittingly undermining the government. In an earlier editorial, we had suggested that advisers should learn to use the term "no comment" when they are asked to pronounce on matters outside their domain.

Advisers speaking without realising the implications has reached an alarming level, where credibility and effectiveness of the government are coming into question. It is high time that the Chief Adviser puts a stop to all this.

UPA government under strain

Congress and Left drift apart on policy

A war of nerves clearly defines relations between the Congress-led UPA government and the Left in India. The divergence of opinion that has surfaced over the civilian nuclear deal between Delhi and Washington appears to threaten the stability of a government which depends on the support of the Left for its survival. Now that CPI(M) General Secretary Prakash Karat has publicly warned against any operationalisation of the deal between the United States and India and has even spoken of serious consequences if the warning is not heeded, politics in the country looks set to take a turn toward unpredictability. Karat's warning has not, at least on the surface, unnerved the government. For once in a long time, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has been sounding tough, to the extent that he has dared the Left to withdraw support from the government.

The threat from the Left obviously places the government in something of a bind, considering especially the fact that the nuclear deal with the US has reached a stage where Washington has made it known it is in no mood for renegotiations. And with the Manmohan Singh government already known for its close, and still developing, ties with the Americans, it is fairly easy to understand that there is little likelihood of a backing down on its part. And that precisely is where the problem lies. A fundamental premise upon which the UPA government has been working so far is the support the Left has given it, a reason for such support being to prop up secular forces after a spate of Hindu fundamentalist government in the shape of the BJP and its allies. The alliance between the government and the Left has certainly put a check on any resurgence, for the moment, of the religious rightwing. Yet it is also true that over the past many months clear differences over policy issues have emerged between the Left and the Singh government. The CPI(M) has opposed a number of economic reforms initiated by the government and also made known its reservations about such issues as India's vote against Iran's nuclear programme and its participation in naval exercises with the US, Japan and Australia in September.

The honeymoon between the government and the Left may be over, as a communist leader has suggested. It will be interesting to see, though, how the situation pans out.

Through a layman's eyes

It is understood even by a layman that a thief has to face the law even if he returns his stolen goods. However, this perception seems not to be true anymore after what has been revealed in the news media after the declaration of emergency and the government's all-out effort to curb corruption and punish those who were involved in it, irrespective of the time frame of its occurrence.

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

WHILE I was working in Iraq as an academic in their good old days, my car was stolen by a member of the people's army. Through the help of my students I got it back quickly. The poor mother of the momentarily misguided youth came to me and begged for mercy for her only son.

In the summary court, the honourable judge asked me if I wanted the accused to be punished from my side. When my answer was negative, the judge thanked me for my kindness but still handed, albeit a lighter, sentence down to the accused, since, in his words, freeing him would be tantamount to condoning the crime by the state.

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In a report in the Prothom Alo (Aug 19), it was revealed, quoting

reliable sources, that so far around 753 crores of ill-gotten money was deposited in the national exchequer by a number of persons and agencies. Out of this, the maximum amount of around 237 crores was returned by a business syndicate headed by Azam J. Chowdhury, the plaintiff of the much-known extortion case against Sheikh Hasina, for which she is now in jail.

According to the report, it was proven (not certainly in court of law) that his syndicate laundered money out of the country. Around 12 crores taka and 19 lakh US dollar were returned by businessman Noor Ali, another plaintiff of the second extortion case against Sheikh Hasina. However, no legal suit has been initiated against any of them.

To those who lecture very often that "law will take its course," as if law is a natural stream, or champion the verse, "everyone is equal in the eyes of law," as if law is applied or interpreted by some divine entity, may we, the laymen, humbly ask about the secret behind their indemnity from prosecution even though indictment of their delinquencies was self-evident?

According to the same report, 52 crores was returned by the

detained former state minister Lufuzzaman Babor, who reportedly returned 20 crores bribes that he took from Basundhara Group chairman for the deal to acquit his son from a murder charge. This was disclosed by Babor during his remand (which I initially did not believe, as confession in remand is made under duress). This is the worst form of crime a human being could commit.

Babor also disclosed that he took the bribe (50 crores) in concurrence with the PM of the day and booty was supposed to be shared. What happened to the remaining 30 crores? Yet, no charge has been brought, neither against him nor against the former PM. Babor also disclosed receiving of 300 crores for her party by the former PM from three foreign countries, a startling revelation indeed. Here again, it seems that the story has gone under the carpet as it is not within the periphery of the authorities' drive against corruption and decriminalisation of politics.

The accusations that have been brought against many of the detainees and the charges, for which many of them have already been convicted, I am afraid, may not play very well in the Bengali psyche in course of time. The sentence that

has been handed down in many cases seems utterly disproportionate.

A case in question could be five years of imprisonment for keeping five bottles of unlicensed liquor. In the same token, as opposed to wide belief about the magnitude of corruption of the former law minister, a ridiculous charge of keeping a few bottles of unlicensed liquor has been brought against him, which will only elevate his public position in the long run.

Notwithstanding volumes of exceedingly serious crimes, as confessed by him, a trivial charge of keeping an unlicensed firearm has been lodged against Babor. A devil's advocate could easily argue why a state minister of home holding the power of top licensing authority would keep any unlicensed weapon in his possession.

A charge of non-payment of income tax has been brought against a former state minister of the erstwhile AL government and his wife. A layman would surely ask: if a former PM and a finance minister, who used to lecture the nation on financial ethics, were allowed to pay income tax on their previously undisclosed income, then why not everyone, including the former state minister, should be given the same privilege.

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was brought against godfather of corruption in custody and were expecting to see case after case against him for his alleged laundering of hundreds and thousands of crores. Amazingly, only a single charge of extortion has been brought against him and the amount involved is peanuts when compared to widely held belief of an astronomical amount that he has supposedly amassed.

Here again, a devil's advocate would argue that the charge of extortion brought against him possesses little merit since the plaintiff in question was a nominee

of his party in the de-railed January 22 election. The accused could have gotten many times more than the amount in question, simply sitting in his office, since there was not an iota of doubt about the identity of the victor in that election. If this is the only legal suit against him, he is certain to come out of the prison one day not only as a hero to his followers but would surely deserve apologies from his detractors for nurturing ill perceptions about him.

The army chief revealed in his speech on March 27: "Corrupt politicians smuggled their money overseas, including at least Tk 20,000 crores smuggled off shore from the energy sector in the last five years."

The layman has not seen any charge or conviction commensurate with the magnitude and gravity of corruption that has been published in the nation's many credible news media or as revealed by the army chief.

If it does not happen, the charges and convictions on flimsy and trivial charges that we have seen so far will eventually fall flat in the eyes of the layman.

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On atheists and politics

As my constant companion, Socrates, reminded me, there is, of course, absolutely no reason why an atheist should not be accepted as a political leader even in this country. He, or she, is by definition devoid of the religious bigotry that has been so harmful for the country. He will not tread on anyone's religious toes. Since morality has little to do with religious beliefs, the atheist as a political leader can also be as staunchly "moral" as the next politician.

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

IN the recent escalation of the war of words among the leaders of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party over "reform," Begum Khaleda Zia, former prime minister and chairperson of the party, called her secretary-general and long-time confidant, Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, a leftist and an atheist. One need not always attach much significance to name calling in a country long inured to the habit of calling names. But this one looked different.

I am not sure how Mr. Bhuiyan took this rather late discovery of his atheism by his party chief. But curiously enough, it reminded me of a story I read long ago about Rita Hayworth. The Hollywood heart-throb of yore is reported to have said of her many male friends (and I quote from mem-

ory): "Men sleep with Rita Hayworth and discover in the morning that it is only me."

Given the long association between the two political leaders, the matter of the belatedness of the discovery is easily seen as being a sham. The real thing, of course, is the put down that Begum Zia's description of Mr. Bhuiyan implied. By using two adjectives, rather than just one, Begum Zia probably wanted to make sure that her victim did not survive: if the first only felled him, the second could be used as a bludgeon that would put an end to him. Her eminence as a political leader makes it quite likely that other politicians would emulate this technique. This is not to suggest that the present assault by Begum Zia has finished Mr. Bhuiyan off, or that it is sure to do so in the near future. But one

never knows.

That put down must, therefore, have been important to Mr. Bhuiyan. No less important is its potential implication for politics in Bangladesh. Of the two epithets used by the BNP chairperson, "atheist" must be the more devastating, and not just for Mr. Bhuiyan. This is not to belittle the stigma of being called a leftist in the present political climate of the country. Brand someone a genuine leftist and, perhaps with few exceptions, his political career would run into trouble.

But present him to the public as an atheist, and, perhaps without exception, he will be just about finished as a politician. In Bangladesh, as in other Muslim majority countries, a leftist politician can survive only with the aid of an elaborate contraption that constantly proclaims that he is

not, repeat Not, against religion. For a self-confessed atheist survival is even harder because, by definition, he does not care about religion.

The handicap of being an atheist is not, however, entirely peculiar to a country like Bangladesh. A surprising fact is that in some secular societies too, a professed atheist has only limited chance of success as a political leader. Richard Dawkins, foremost Darwinian of our time and one of its leading atheists, quotes a Gallup poll according to which in the United States only 49 percent of Americans would vote for an atheist for election to public office, as compared with 95 percent for a woman and 79 percent for a homosexual (Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Houghton Mifflin, 2006, p.4.).

Other industrial countries are in general significantly more tolerant of atheists as political leaders, but the American example is important not least because the separation of the state from the church has been carried to greater lengths here than just about anywhere else. It also suggests how small the chances are for an atheist to survive as a politician in

Bangladesh.

As my constant companion, Socrates, reminded me, there is, of course, absolutely no reason why an atheist should not be accepted as a political leader even in this country. He, or she, is by definition devoid of the religious bigotry that has been so harmful for the country. He will not tread on anyone's religious toes. Since morality has little to do with religious beliefs, the atheist as a political leader can also be as

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And, given that secularism is one of the main pillars of the state as envisioned by its founding fathers, he has a far better claim to leadership of the nation than the politician who does not subscribe to that ideology. Finally, he can as legitimately declare himself as the defender of the rights of the individual to his beliefs, including the religious, as any so-called liberal.

Does a country need any other qualification for a politician?

This is a compelling question and, hard though it may be for an atheist to prosper as a politician in this country, it must be asked. A case can surely be made in his support. Such an imperative may

not save Mr. Bhuiyan if Begum Zia's arrow finds its mark and finds him alone. Not everybody will see that as a great loss to the country, especially in the context of his role in the sorry saga of the four-party alliance that ruled the country in recent years.

But if he is an authentic atheist, he, and others of his ilk, should do what my wise friend suggested, which was: make a clean break with the past, get into a coalition with real secularists, who may not be dyed-in-the-wool Godless creatures but who would keep God out of politics, proclaim his unequivocal commitment to secularism and liberalism, which still have considerable support in the country, and make common cause even with leftist (a few of them are still left on the political scene) -- and never mind Begum Zia's insinuations -- in matters where state intervention in the economy of the country is desirable. He might, thus, be able to mount a formidable coalition of the good. And good luck to him.

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tis among IDUs.

Drug addiction, a decaying menace, is not only injurious to an individual but also imperils the health of the entire social fabric and national development, with fast cascading impact. Drug abuse is responsible for lost wages, soaring health-care costs, broken families, increased complicated diseases, deteriorating community living, and loss of productive force.

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The author, a physician, is a specialist in Public Health Administration and Health Economics.

Just say no

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ZULFIQUER AHMED AMIN

HUMANS have always used drugs, probably as part of their evolutionary and nutritional heritage. However, this previous biological adaptation is unlikely to be so in the modern world, in which 2 billion adults (48% of the adult population) are users of alcohol, 1.1 billion adults (29% of the adult population) are smokers of cigarettes, and 185 million adults (4.5% of the adult population) are users of illicit drugs. There has never been a time in human history when so many lives have depended on finding the next dose in time.

Global situation

Illegal drug trafficking constitutes 8% of total international trade, and the United Nations estimates the global trade in illicit drugs to be worth \$400 billion a year. Traffic patterns

tend to follow drug types and country of origin. Cocaine trafficking, for example, begins in the Andean region and spreads northward through Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean region to end-points in North America, Europe, and elsewhere.

Major heroin trafficking originates in South-west and South-east Asia, with final processing of the consumable product close to the point of origin. The route of distribution involves many countries and territories, such as Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong, Bangladesh, and China. Some 162 million people are addicts to cannabis, 25 million people to amphetamines, and almost 10 million people to ecstasy. The number of opiate abusers is estimated at some 16 million people, of which 11 million are heroin abusers, and 13 million people are cocaine

users.

Drug abuse and health effects

Recent informal estimates are that perhaps 200,000 drug injection-related deaths may occur per annum, based on the estimated size of the current world population of injection drug abusers of approximately 5.3 million. It is estimated that the number of HIV infections among injection drug users worldwide has risen to 3.3 million. The most serious medical consequences of cocaine abuse include heart trouble, strokes, renal failure, respiratory arrest, neuronal destruction, and sudden death.

Drugs cause malnutrition and compromise the functions of various areas of the brain, leading to progressive lack of attention, impulsivity, execution, memory, motivation, and decision making. Another common danger

is impotency. During pregnancy, drugs can have very strong adverse reactions in the unborn child, which can kill the baby and mother or lead to lifelong health problems.

Drugs and crime

There is close connection between crime, violence, and drug use. A study findings on 3,000 arrests in 14 US cities in 1989 found drug-positive for cocaine for a high percentage of persons in New York (76%), Philadelphia (74%), Columbia (65%), Indianapolis (26%) and San Antonio (24%).

Economic costs

Substance-abuse related cases tend to be more expensive to treat than the average hospital case, accounting for 23 percent, or nearly one fourth, of the total Medicare payments for hospital care in the US. Furthermore, Medicare spent over \$13 billion of its \$57 billion inpatient short-stay hospital expenditures on substance-abuse related care. These amounts exceed the 1 out of 5 dollars spent in the Medicaid program for substance-abuse related conditions.

The economic cost of drug

abuse in the United States was estimated at \$180.9 billion in 2002 due to criminal justice system activities, including productivity losses, expenditures on health services, costs of premature mortality, and therapies for HIV. In Bangladesh, the average cost of drugs per person was from \$1.9 to \$3.1 per day, or from \$707 to \$1,135 per year.

Geographical vulnerability of Bangladesh

Bangladesh is located between the Golden Crescent to the west, comprising Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, and the Golden Triangle to the east, comprising Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand. Afghanistan remains the largest cultivator of illicit opium poppy in the world, accounting for approximately 87% of illicit opium worldwide, and amounts to one third of its GDP. Myanmar is the world's second largest producer of