"THE problem is why we can or should no longer speak of evil, and why who so seem to be increasingly suspect, self-serving and irrational; why to speak of evil is in a peculiar way to perpetuate it, but at the same time, to refuse to be contaminated by the word is to perpetuate what it denotes ... the repertoire of evil has never been richer, yet never have our responses been so weak."

-- *Andrew Delbanco*

At a talk in Washington D.C. in January, I heard the following: "[T]here is talk in Bangladesh right now of trying the war criminals, you know, those who sided with Pakistan, having these tribunals, but I personally think it's not the time for Bangladesh to come up with policies that divide the people. It's more a time to improve our democracy, or to strengthen our institutions. It's not time to try people who ... I mean at the time of the ci ... liberation war, Bangladesh was East Pakistan before it became Bangladesh. And so we don't over here try people who supported slavery in the South. It was a civil war at that time. And so I think it's time for Bangladesh to move ahead. I think the country should focus on having elections rather than, you know, how do we beat up on our citizens."

These words are neither new, nor the thoughts original. The population of every country transitioning out of war and with experience of mass atrocities comprises, roughly speaking, two camps -- those who want justice, and those who want to let bygones be bygones.

I have come across similar arguments multiple times in the context of Bangladesh. They ran along the slightly (and I used the term "slightly" deliberately) similar vein of those in Pakistan who continue to define 1971 as a "civil" war, an unfortunate mistake which claimed a few thousand lives and was largely an Indian conspiracy.

Before any reader takes offence, I am not suggesting that anyone with such sentiments necessarily fall in the camp of genocide deniers. But minimising the extent of the suffering of the victims -- those who died, those who survived, as well as those who resisted -- does appear to be the modus operandi of how we today deal with our own tragic history.

Compartmentalise, minimize, and move on -- a convenient philosophy which greatly facilitates the focus on contemporary problems. The "peace now, justice later" echoes with the same refrain of "development now, democracy later" -- setting up both a false dichotomy and assuming these are mutually exclusive. Before analysing the problematic natures of these assertions, let me attempt to understand the logic that underscores this interpretation of our past.

First, such pragmatists are present-centred -- the problems of the present take precedence over the past. Bangladesh has a host of severe challenges: poverty alleviation, economic development, women's emancipation, corruption, overpopulation, environmental



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