

# Making hope *and* history rhyme

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**O**UT on the political beat I often ask young hopefuls why they won't challenge the use of violence on their opposition. I ask seasoned politicians or those in government why they abuse the powers of violence to beat the daylight out of anyone with a modicum of dissent in their voice. The answer, invariably, remains: That's just the way it is.

For far too long, this country has been ruled by an abiding fear of an absolute and unchangeable reality of violence. Yet, time and time again from 1952 to 1990, people have acted on the belief that another reality is possible and fought against fear to attain the full measure of their rights. The discrepancy between these two divergent strands of the Bangladesh polity haunts this part of earth as truly and as recurrently as its natural disasters.

It is a stark choice: to either gravitate lazily towards a nihilistic abyss or believe in the possibility the another reality is achievable. It is a choice between conceding the future to political actors who acquiesce to criminal violence, or to walk into the fire with an optimism that is informed by a history that calls for politics to be practiced in the realm of possibility and not to be trapped in the fatalistic traps of (im)probability.

This choice has been diluted by a reality in Bangladesh between what we see in our immediate reality and what we remember. What we see in our environment is the replication of our fears: the use of overwhelming violence to maintain power at the cost of lives and livelihoods. Yet, the country is fed on a history of martyrs and heroes who took on empires, armies and dictators.

The country's history stretches past the oft-forgotten years before 1971, that demonstrates a national conviction in hope have consistently destroyed the myth of absolute power. From the Quit India movement and the struggle for Bangla to the catharsis of '71 and '90, Bangladeshis have demonstrated an ability to overcome their fears in favour of having a say in their future.

But, this history has come to serve as convenient distraction from the worries of the ever-expanding political mess. Instead of rigorous examination by historians, these yearly historical rituals have come to serve as a comforter that is invoked to rejuvenate and replenish memories of an otherworldly past. This has condensed history to small, fast-food packages of time: the 9 months of military war, 'that winter' of 1990, or that day on February, 1952. History is more than that.

Sheikh Mujib's speech on March 7 is a prime example. We are often reminded of the sound bites that so powerfully captured the demand of the time: "This struggle is the struggle for freedom." The nation was elevated with a deep conviction in the possibility of independence.

What we don't see are the



references to the thirty years of a carefully planned national movement that propelled Awami League to victory in the 1970 elections. What we don't see is the long hard struggle for democracy in the 1980s that finally exploded in the 1990s. What we don't see is that belief in another reality where unwavering commitment can accomplish the seemingly impossible.

As successive regimes took to that revered pulpit of Bangladeshi politics they offered the same possibility of hope, but one that is stripped of conviction and commit-

ment. From Zia, through Ershad and then the two Begums, each government was welcomed with a tenuous belief in their balmy promise of healing old wounds and turning the page on Bangladeshi history.

Unfailingly, each government, democratic or otherwise, worked to reinforce the reality they promised to change. This gap between what is preached and practiced has only widened in the past three decades. They are living off borrowed ideas, borrowed rhetoric and borrowed strategies from the

past. They use the symbols invoked by the clumsy fast-food package of history. They follow a lazy, anachronistic approach to find a shortcut to destiny.

The current government does not break from this practice. Its initial support singularly depended on its wildly popular anti-corruption drive that cut down undeservedly tall poppies. But, it fell back on past habits that were propelled by past fears. The abuse of the state's monopoly on violence, a penchant for circumventing judicial processes, and the

subtle but highly effective manipulation of the press all smack of old habits.

Their call for a new, courageous form of politics has fallen flat because they have failed to practice politics in the realm of possibility. They failed because one cannot defeat fear with more fear; one cannot break reality if one is ruled by it; one cannot achieve democracy by practicing less democracy.

The most dangerous effect of this fear of an unchangeable reality is that it has been practiced for so long that anyone who dares to chal-

lenge it, physically or conceptually, is immediately disciplined often violently.

Yet, we see pockets of resistance that seek to break the illusion of an absolute reality with the power of their conviction. The events in Phulbari and Kansat demonstrate that people are unwilling to sit quietly while their lives and their future are taken away from them. The garment workers' continuing confrontation and the hard-fought struggles of jute-mill workers in Khulna are reminders of a flame that has dimmed but has not been

extinguished. As much as political violence is entrenched in this country these events remind us that this is another reality. It does not have to be the way it seems to be.

As Seamus Heaney writes:  
"History says, 'Don't hope  
On this side of the grave.  
But then, once in a lifetime  
The longed-for tidal wave  
Of justice can rise up,  
And hope and history rhyme.'"

The author is staff correspondent, The Daily Star

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