

Where do the parties stand on human rights?

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BRAD ADAMS

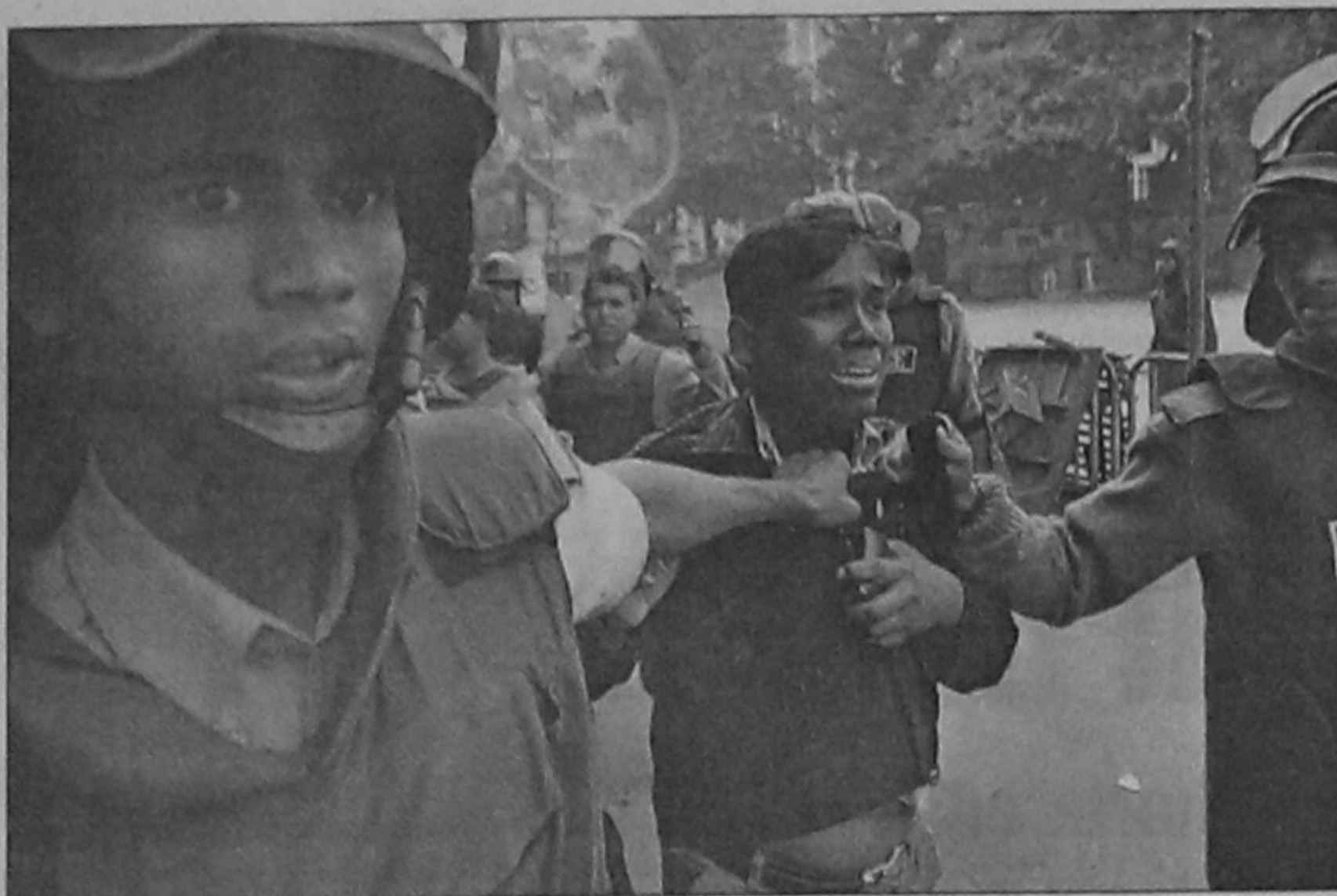
WITH just weeks left before parliamentary elections, voters can be excused if they don't know where the political parties stand on human rights. The main political parties have plenty of reasons to complain about how the government and security forces have behaved since January 2007, but they also need to look inward. What will they do to promote and protect human rights if they come to power? How will they improve their own poor human rights records of the past? Will they purge all elements who have abusive records?

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the new government will face? How can they persuade voters to believe they will not just use nice words while in opposition, but then commit or allow abuses once in power?

The Fakhruddin government publicly stated its commitment to the rule of law, yet it has not taken measures so that the security forces abide by the law. Torture is routine and faked "encounter killings" continue in large numbers by members of Rab and the police. Virtually no one is held to account. Impunity is a deep-rooted problem, which, if not addressed, will lead to further human rights violations, undermine the rule of law and create political instability. The political parties, which took no serious actions to root out the problem, should commit to holding all human rights violators to account through an impartial, transparent and fair judicial process. No one -- not the army, the DGFI, Rab or the police -- should be above the law.

Corruption continues to be a serious



We should all be able to agree on right and wrong.

problem in Bangladesh. Although fighting corruption was one of the main justifications for the caretaker government's stay in power, its anti-corruption drive has failed to live up to initial expectations. In some cases, the effort has been guided by political considerations, marked by incompetence, and, as confirmed by Human Rights Watch research, accompanied by illegal detentions. As a consequence, corruption remains a problem of endemic proportions in almost all sectors of society, robbing millions of people of basic rights. All parties will pay lip service to fighting corruption, but voters deserve to know how they intend to tackle the problem consistent with human rights standards.

It is also important to know where the parties stand on women's rights. The government's welcome announcement of a new National Women's Development Policy (NWDP) in March sparked protests from a number of Islamist groups. The government responded by establishing a committee of Islamic scholars, which recommended amendments to the policy that would, if accepted, seriously undermine government efforts to eliminate discrimination against women in both the public and private spheres.

The political parties need to declare

their support to firmly and decisively implement the NWDP and to live up to the commitments made to the women of Bangladesh in the constitution and international treaties.

Of course, it would be wrong to solely blame the parties for their prevailing silence on fundamental policy issues. Some things, such as the nature and role of the military over the past two years, remain taboo subjects. The caretaker government, with its constitutional mandate of ensuring that the Election Commission can organise free and fair elections, should have encouraged a debate on issues of fundamental importance for Bangladesh's future. Instead, it completely ignored the fact that free and fair elections are not only a matter of technicalities and some campaign rallies.

For nearly 22 months, the state of emergency made it difficult and illegal for the parties to candidly share their ideas with voters. This aspect of the emergency was lifted in early November, but the free exchange of information continues to be affected by the fact that it has only been lifted for the parties and not for trade unions and other civil society actors. The state of emergency, therefore, continues to hamper the exchange of information and ideas essential for free and fair elections.

At the same time, the "minus-two" and "manage-two" policies, the long, arbitrary detentions of senior party

officials and the ineffective anti-corruption campaign (it is not enough to assert that officials are corrupt, because "everyone knows" they are corrupt -- this has to be proven in an independent court with full due process; quite why the government failed so miserably to do this remains a mystery), have intentionally left the parties in disarray, while failing to break the nexus between politics, corruption and organised crime (which also includes the military, a subject few dare to raise in Bangladesh).

Sadly, foreign governments and international donor agencies that have provided support to the Election Commission and declared their intention to uphold international standards have shown limited concern about the absence of a genuinely open political climate.

The Awami League and BNP have been focusing their time and energy on the conditions under which the elections are to be held and on securing the political future of their leaders. But they have yet to release their election manifestos. Now is the time for them to recognise that meaningful elections also require that voters know where the political parties stand on key issues. Despite all the hurdles, they need to make their views known on how they intend to address major human rights problems. The Bangladeshi public and media should demand no less.

Brad Adams is Asia Director at Human Rights Watch.

This fire needs to be put out

The problems of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh are now bleeding into one another, and any purely national approach is not going to work. The best outcome of these attacks would be if they spurred cooperation and reform. If instead they feed rivalry, bitterness and finger-pointing, the victims will have died in vain, and there will be more victims and an insecure neighborhood.

FAREED ZAKARIA

MY first memories of the Taj Mahal hotel are probably of when I was 8 years old, going to the Sea Lounge restaurant with its lovely view of Mumbai's harbor to eat sev puri, a savory Indian treat. I also remember passing through its grand ballroom a few years later, while it was being decked out for a dinner in honor of the president of Bulgaria -- crystal chandeliers, ice sculptures, bouquets of roses, platters of shrimp carted around by liveried waiters.

My family would celebrate special occasions at the Golden

Dragon, one of the best Chinese restaurants outside of China. The Taj is a fixture in the life of Mumbaiers (or Bombayites as we used to call ourselves). Last week, those memories came flooding back as I watched from New York, and saw the Taj hotel on fire.

The terror attack on Mumbai has been called India's 9/11. For me there is another similarity; like 9/11, this attack hit close to home. My brother worked next door to the Twin Towers, at the World Financial Center, on 9/11 and he evacuated his office staff when the first plane crashed.

I knew people who worked in

the World Trade Center and some who died there. This time, the tragedy is also personal. My mother's office is in the Taj hotel (she is the editor of the Taj Magazine). Luckily she was out of town on the day of the attack. My brother-in-law and niece, however, were in their apartment, which overlooks the Oberoi, the other hotel that was attacked.

A dozen commandos took over their apartment, positioned snipers at the windows, and began giving and receiving fire. (My niece is keeping the bullets as souvenirs.) And as with 9/11, I know people who have died. The general manager of the Taj hotel, a young man, lost his family.

These kinds of events bring out the best in ordinary people. There are reports of hotel employees taking pains to get guests out of harm's way, at risk to their own lives. Some of the freed hostages have told stories of the bravery of the Indian armed forces.

But not everything went well. By all accounts, the initial response of the local authorities was slow, haphazard and incompetent. These terror attacks have highlighted one of the key weaknesses of modern India. Its private sector is dynamic, efficient, responsive. Its public sector is not. Government in India is dysfunctional.

With the exception of a few elements of the national government -- the armed forces and antiterror commandos, for instance -- the Indian state is simply not up to the challenge that it now faces. India has a decentralized political system that is plagued by weak coalition governments, patronage and corruption, with little emphasis on professionalism and competence. If this is India's 9/11, then it should be a spur to the country to finally get its house in order and reform itself to succeed in an age that requires smart government.

India also has a political problem with its Muslims. It remains unclear whether any Indian Muslims were involved with these attacks, but it is quite possible that the terrorists had some small pockets of support in the country. President Bush likes to point out that India has 140 million Muslims and, because it is a democracy, not one is a member of Al Qaeda.

Even if this is still true, it is simplistic. The cancerous rise of fundamentalism and radicalism that has swept up Muslims everywhere has not spared India. In addition, Muslims there are disaffected and vulnerable to manipulation. They are underrepresented at every economic, political and social level -- with a few high-profile exceptions.

A perverse consequence of the partition of the Indian subconti-

nent is that Muslims are everywhere a minority which closes off the chance at political power. (The parts of British India that had Muslim majorities became Pakistan and Bangladesh.) They have not shared in the progress of the last two decades and face a Hindu nationalist movement, parts of which are ugly and violent. None of this is to excuse in any sense the cruel choice anyone might make to join a jihad. But moral clarity does not always yield intellectual clarity.

This is not just India's problem. The terrorists seem to have had foreign connections. This might have included Qaeda support, though more likely inspiration. They almost certainly got both support and training from groups in Pakistan. Let us assume that the Pakistani government was in no way involved. There remains the basic and enduring problem: the Pakistan government has created, supported and trained Islamic jihadists for decades.

The Pakistani military needs to genuinely embrace the idea of zero tolerance for jihadists, not distinguish between good ones (those that keep Afghanistan and India on edge) and bad ones (those that set off bombs within Pakistan). These groups blur into one another and cannot easily be segregated. And they are all enemies of modernity and democracy.

The problems of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh are now bleeding into one another, and any purely national approach is not going to work. The best outcome of these attacks would be if they spurred cooperation and reform. If instead they feed rivalry, bitterness and finger-pointing, the victims will have died in vain, and there will be more victims and an insecure neighborhood.

The crucial point is to remember the common enemy. When discussing causes and cures, never forget who is to blame first and foremost: the terrorists, the evil men who chose to deliberately kill innocent men, women and children, to burn young families to death. They are the ones who did it.

And while Indians have many troubles, they have one great counterterrorism policy resilience. The Mumbai stock exchange reopened last Friday and closed higher. The country will persevere, the city will bounce back, and all those who have reasons to go there should not be deterred.

I have a trip to India planned in a couple of weeks. I'll be there as scheduled. And I will make a special point to pay a visit to the Taj Mahal hotel in Mumbai, which I am sure, will be humming with life.

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Statistically speaking

Accurate and timely macroeconomic statistics are vital to policy makers, researchers and the business community, among others. Without them it is difficult to formulate appropriate and effective economic policies, to conduct research to inform the economic policy debate and to make well-informed investment decisions.

JONATHAN DUNN

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Bangladesh produces a wide range of economic statistics yet the statistical database suffers from a number of weaknesses. These arise from a combination of factors, including many years of inadequate funding for statistical survey and compilation work, and the historical practice of political review of key statistics before they are released to the general public.

The confidence of researchers and the general public in published statistics would be enhanced through simultaneous and regularly scheduled dissemination of economic statistics -- and the methodologies and underlying information used to produce them -- to all users. Policy makers would benefit from having better statistical information as input to major economic policy decisions, and public confidence in those decisions may be enhanced as a result.

The frequent discussion of projected real GDP growth for any current fiscal year brings out some of the issues related to the quality and timeliness of macroeconomic statistics in Bangladesh. Statements made over the past year by academicians, economists and journalists have noted that around the midpoint of any given fiscal year it is far too early in the fiscal year to make a reasonable projection of GDP growth because not enough information is yet available. These statements are completely accurate.

As I write this in November 2008, the most recent GDP growth figure available for Bangladesh that is based on full-year underlying data is for fiscal year 2006/07. The official GDP growth figure of 6.2% for fiscal year 2007/08 is in fact an estimate prepared by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) in May 2008, using data from just the first six or seven months of last fiscal year.

Based on past practice, the BBS's first hard numbers for real GDP growth and the composition of nominal GDP for fiscal year 2007/08 will not be released to the public until May 2009. The first revision to those data will be carried out only in May 2010.

Long data lags, as illustrated by the GDP statistics, arise in part from various bureaucratic constraints within the government. No documented and established procedures exist to ensure the timely flow of data for the national accounts even though the calculation of these accounts depends on data from many sources outside BBS.

Even within BBS there are no set rules for exchange of information among the statistical wings and there are often long delays in

data transfer. To complicate matters, the exchange of information between government agencies needed by the BBS for the computation of the national accounts is almost all paper-based, and national accounts staff often has to wait for the availability of final publications.

Aside from the long lags in compilation and data release, national accounts statistics are weak because the necessary underlying sector and market surveys are under-funded and infrequent (the vast majority of sector surveys used at present to estimate GDP and construct its components at present are more than 10-years old); rebasing takes place only once a decade, which is inadequate in a rapidly evolving economy; and the highest frequency of national accounts data is annual rather than quarterly.

A major institutional constraint to the compilation of timely and independent statistics in Bangladesh arises because BBS does not have sufficient autonomy from the rest of government. It is accepted internationally that legal autonomy and a high status within the government bureaucracy are prerequisites for providing statistical agencies with the ability to gather information in a timely manner, and to compile and publish statistics that are seen as independent and verifiable.

In this regard, Bangladesh should consider proceeding quickly with the adoption of a Statistics Act. This act should grant full independence to BBS in the collection, compilation and dissemination of statistics; provide for the independence, and senior civil service status, of the Director General; and ensure full financial support to BBS's operations through annual budgets.

In addition, Bangladesh may want to consider establishing an advisory board for BBS with members from the business community, government, academia, and the media. This is a model followed by many successful statistical agencies and in Bangladesh could help to boost the status and overall legitimacy of the BBS.

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Only courage can put out this fire.