

Grabbing lakes with impunity

Those responsible must be held to account

UNSCRUPULOUS individuals have been grabbing major portions of Gulshan-Banani and Gulshan-Baridhara lakes over the last six months with increasing impunity. Despite there being clear court orders freezing all such activity and indeed ordering Rajuk to go for a demarcation of the lakes, the grabbers have demonstrated not the slightest of fear or compunction in carrying on with their activities. As many as twenty influential individuals, we have been informed, have been filling up large areas of Gulshan-Baridhara lake. Then comes the matter of how and whether dishonest elements in Rajuk have colluded with these grabbers in gobbling up public property.

The situation, as one can easily understand, is grave and will certainly get worse unless drastic action is taken immediately to bring these illegal grabbers to heel under the law. And speaking of the law, there are quite a few legal moves relating to the lakes that draw public attention. In the words of the convener of the Lake and Environment subcommittee of Gulshan Society, a court order was issued in 1998, which was followed by a High Court directive to Rajuk in February 2000. Apart from the society's statement, there are other legal factors that have come in as well. In 2003, the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court ordered Rajuk to carry out a demarcation of Gulshan-Baridhara lake and acquire lands along its fringes as part of a conservation plan for the lake. Three years later, in 2006, the High Court issued an order prohibiting any earth filling in the lake. Besides, the lake is also protected by a rule nisi issued by the High Court this year. That said, in 2001, Gulshan lake was declared an ecologically critical area (ECA). Moreover, the lake is considered a crucial flood control reservoir in the nation's capital.

What is truly mind-boggling is that despite all these court orders and other moves, a group of individuals have not flinched from showing their audacity in swallowing up increasingly bigger portions of the lake. Their dismissive attitude to the law has been so blatant as to encourage some of them to put up signboards right in the middle of the lake as a way of claiming those particular portions of the lake. The question now is: where is Rajuk here and what does it plan to do about it? The chairman of Rajuk should have come forth on his own to explain the position. As it is, he could not be located on Saturday. On the other hand, the minister in charge of public works seems to be at a loss to understand how his instructions to Rajuk to put a stop to such illegal activities have been ignored.

It is now clear that decisive action must come from the highest levels of political and legislative authorities to protect the lakes. There are two critical factors that must be acted upon. The first is freeing the lakes from the clutches of the grabbers; and the second is to ensure that the wetland conservation act is observed in its totality. Finally, let the judiciary come in once again, this time to ensure an enforcement of all its earlier directives where protecting and conserving the lakes is concerned.

War history in textbooks

It would instill patriotism in young minds

WE welcome the decision of the expert committee to incorporate history of the epoch-making Liberation War of Bangladesh without any distortion in the school textbooks. The government had formed the committee on March 31 comprising eminent educationists, historians and litterateurs to remove any distorted account of history from the textbooks of primary and secondary levels. It has recommended incorporating a number of new stories, articles and poems on the War in Bangla textbooks of all classes at the secondary level, and also the historic 7 March speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the Bangla textbook of class VIII. The formation of the Mujibnagar government, its multifarious activities and the proclamation of independence of Bangladesh are also likely to be included in the social science books of the same class.

We also appreciate the idea of including a letter of a freedom fighter in the Bangla book of class VI and some essays on other important national leaders like Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Huq, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, four national leaders and former president Ziaur Rahman in the books of different classes.

We find the move highly laudable as it would help young students learn in detail all about the fierce battles our heroes fought on both political and military fronts in order to snatch victory from the clutches of the occupation army. The knowledge would help instill the much-needed sense of patriotism in them.

Indeed, the post-liberation generation has the right to know the unblemished history of the creation of Bangladesh to be worthy citizens. The knowledge would empower them to project the history and causes of Bangladesh in their true perspectives in various forums at home and abroad. Then again, it is they who would pass the knowledge down to the next generation.

We understand the committee has already submitted its report on secondary level textbooks to the education minister. It, therefore, now depends on the minister and his ministry how they will ensure implementation of the recommendations from the next academic session. We hope the education ministry will be right on target.

Trivialising the heroes

It can thus be seen that both Bangabandhu and Zia played crucial historical roles in their respective places. It ought to be understood by the BNP enthusiasts that, in spite of the greatness bestowed on both, history has placed Bangabandhu in a position at the apex, and that they can by no means knock him off his pedestal to catapult another person to that place.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

HERE is no denying the fact that Bangabandhu is the founding father of Bangladesh. Leaving aside occasional sophistry, it was also he who proclaimed the country's independence on March 26, 1971. A hostile BNP perversely fought a losing battle to disprove the historical truth for decades. A High Court ruling on June 22 upheld the truth that it was Bangabandhu who had been the proclaimer of our independence. In spite of the irony of its being settled through a court ruling the truth is vindicated at long last, and the victory belongs to what is historical truth.

There are indications in the BNP's reaction to the court ruling that it will continue to muddy the water in this regard to garner some political mileage, even if the great names involved are further denigrated. The great sons of the nation are indeed great in their particular context, even if they are irrelevant elsewhere. The BNP seldom understood the point and unnecessarily dragged Ziaur Rahman, a war hero and later a

politician and founder of BNP as well as the president of the republic, to an area where he had no relevance.

The proclamation of independence and its acceptance both by the people as well as international community is the function of political leadership, which was firmly in the hands of Bangabandhu whose Awami League spearheaded the independence war with an overwhelming public mandate given in December '70. In the fog of the war that had already ensued, any utterance by anyone would lack international acceptance. Ziaur Rahman also could have made a proclamation in the name of Bangabandhu out of sheer patriotism to boost the morale of those who joined the war of liberation.

But by doing politics over it, the BNP only belittled his stature as a patriotic war hero who later, as a politician, also paved the way for Bangladesh to become a modern nation-state. He earned a niche in the nation's history as the architect of a forward-looking Bangladesh after it was frozen in time during the AL's anachronistic rule after independence.

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historical roles in their respective places. It ought to be understood by the BNP enthusiasts that, in spite of the greatness bestowed on both, history has placed Bangabandhu in a position at the apex, and that they can by no means knock him off his pedestal to catapult another person to that place. The BNP has inadvertently been doing exactly the same, only to smear Zia's name with more and more controversies.

Notwithstanding the great contribution by Zia in the war of independence, he couldn't have been its proclaimer as it is understood in the lexicon of politics. The more they insist on it the more will the spurious claim fly in their face. The BNP oversold some of Zia's noble attributes like his personal integrity while championing in reckless corruption -- thus trivialising his greatness. So much so that an agonised Zia must be turning in his grave and his tormented soul may be cursing his pseudo-admirers who spare no lie to make him great.

Likewise the Awami League also found Bangabandhu's name convenient to take every step of way. Its votaries shed crocodiles tears in parliament and public meetings while eulogising his greatness in a way that the great leader would have been embarrassed had he been alive to witness the macabre display. Even if he was spared that embarrassment the slain hero couldn't but be tormented even in the grave by the sycophants' refined art form while drifting away from his dream.

The AL has turned Bangabandhu into a superman -- not quite recognisable to

the masses who passionately loved and followed him. He was a fallible human being but was full of compassion for his people. There are scores of regional and local institutions named after him, and more are on cards to be given the stamp of Bangabandhu's name. Bangabandhu is, today, more of a brand name for material gain, and little of the dream that once stirred up a people, a nation and a country is any more there.

There is another tragedy in the making, as newspapers report the possible enactment of a "Father of the nation's family's security Act 2009" a repeat play of an Act that was enacted during the previous regime of Awami League. Apart from full-time SSF cover, it entitled Sheikh Hasina the ownership of the Gano Bhaban and Sheikh Rehana a house in Dhanmondi. The Act died a natural death when, on 21 June 2001, the BNP-Jamaat government scrapped it.

Even before that Sheikh Hasina, who was living in Gono Bhaban as prime minister, quietly left the sprawling house -- perhaps after reading the writing on the wall. Sheikh Hasina must be given the credit for rightly reading the public mood at that time. Why should the AL be repeating the same mistake? Is Bangabandhu's name something to be bartered for gaining mundane personal advantage, which can be scrapped again if the AL fails to return to power? And the security? Everyone, including the Bangabandhu's family, is secure if we together ensure the country's security.

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Privileges for the privileged

The Institute of Parliamentary Studies should be set up immediately to assist the MPs in capacity building and to increase their skills for improving their standard of parliamentary jobs. Only increases in perks and privileges of the MPs will never improve their professional quality.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE speaker of the Parliament, Abdul Hamid, said that lawmakers would see a rise in their remuneration and allowances as they are not drawing much. The speaker said this at a function at the Jatiya Sangsad Media centre on June 21, while handing over keys of their offices to the MPs.

The speaker informed the nation a few days back that all MPs would be given offices before the year was out. He handed over offices to 92 MPs in the first phase at the old MP's hostel in the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban premises. The offices for the rest will be allocated gradually as the parliament secretariat is readying them. The speaker also said that MPs would also be provided with offices in the upazilas so that they could perform their duties properly.

MPs across the world enjoy special perks and facilities so that they can serve their people as best as they can. So it makes sense that perks and privileges to

our MPs should also be increased to make them enable to perform their public responsibilities more effectively and also to serve their constituents in full measure. But a pertinent question remains, are the perks and privileges they enjoy commensurate with the services they render?

It is disappointing to see that the persons who have been elected to speak for 150 million people in the parliament are not taking their jobs seriously. It is a very sorry state of affairs when the speaker is compelled to adjourn the parliament session because of the lack of quorum. Public expectation is that the MPs will perform their parliamentary jobs seriously, while they come by their new perks.

The perks and privileges of the MPs had been increased several times in the past. All possible assistance, including office and two assistants, had also been provided to them so that they could contribute to the law making process and enrich the proceedings of the House.

Naturally, the people of the country expected better performance from their representatives in the parliament. But most of the MPs had failed to fulfill the aspiration, and the huge amount of public money spent for their capacity building was a sheer waste.

To realise outstanding telephone bills of Tk. 6 crores from 427 defaulting MPs of the 5th and 7th parliaments, the High Court issued a verdict on a public interest litigation writ petition filed by the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, seeking the court's directive for realisation of arrear telephone bills from the MPs. The court's ruling also said that, if the defaulting MPs failed to pay the arrear bills, the BTB would take appropriate action against them.

The government provided the MPs with duty-free luxurious cars, which was abused by many of them. The duty-free car privilege was a chance to plunder the public exchequer. Many MPs of the previous parliaments brought in 275 luxury cars from abroad, costing the NBR over Tk. 280 crore in tax.

Now the government has decided to provide the MPs with new vehicles, creating a pool for them, though there is no such example in any other country. MPs all over the world get traveling allowances for their official tours, but no vehicles from the government.

The speaker recently said that MPs

would get government vehicles, which they would be able to own in exchange for a token price after their five-year tenure. Such an act of propitiating the MPs with tax-payers' money is sure to create a bad public impression.

The government may instruct the banks to give low-interest loan to MPs for buying a vehicle, if anyone of them does not have one.

It is quite unfortunate that the parliament has failed to set up an institution for parliamentary studies for promoting parliamentary culture, norms, manners and practices, despite the passing of a law for the purpose more than eight years back.

A move for promulgation of the law, called "The Bangladesh Institute of Parliamentary Studies Act-2001," was taken, and the law was enacted at the fag end of the 1996-2001 Awami League government. But their successor, the BNP-led alliance government, ignored it.

The Institute of Parliamentary Studies should be set up immediately to assist the MPs in capacity building and to increase their skills for improving their standard of parliamentary jobs. Only increases in perks and privileges of the MPs will never improve their professional quality.

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The wall isn't falling

There is one way religion could be used against Iran's leaders, but it would involve an unlikely scenario: were Iraq-based Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to issue a fatwa condemning Tehran in any way, it would be a seismic event, probably resulting in the regime's collapse.

FAREED ZAKARIA

WHENEVER we see the kinds of images that have been coming out of Iran over the past two weeks, we tend to think back to 1989 and Eastern Europe. That time, when people took to the streets and challenged their governments, those seemingly stable regimes proved to be hollow and quickly collapsed. What emerged was liberal democracy. Could Iran yet undergo its own velvet revolution?

It's possible but unlikely. While the regime's legitimacy has cracked for now, it will probably be able to use its guns and money to consolidate power. And it has plenty of both. Remember, the price of oil was less than \$20 a barrel back in 1989. It is currently \$69. More important, as Zbigniew Brzezinski has pointed out, 1989 was highly unusual. As a historical precedent, it has not proved a useful guide to other antidictatorial movements.

The three most powerful forces in the modern world are democracy, religion,

and national-ism. In 1989 in Eastern Europe, all three were arrayed against the ruling regimes. Citizens hated their governments because they deprived people of liberty and political participation.

Believers despised communist leaders because they were atheistic, banning religion in countries where faith was deeply cherished. And people rejected their regimes because they were seen as having been imposed from the outside by a much-disliked imperial power, the Soviet Union.

The situation in Iran is more complex. Democracy clearly works against this repressive regime. The forces of religion, however, are not so easily aligned against it. Many Iranians appear to be fed up with theocracy. But that does not mean they are fed up with religion. It does appear that the more openly devout Iranians the poor, the rural voted for President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

There is one way religion could be used against Iran's leaders, but it would involve an unlikely scenario: were Iraq-

based Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to issue a fatwa condemning Tehran in any way, it would be a seismic event, probably resulting in the regime's collapse.

Remember, Sistani is Iranian, probably more revered in the entire Shia world than any other ayatollah, and he is opposed to the basic doctrine of velayat-e faqih that created the Islamic Republic of Iran. His own view is that clerics should not be involved in politics, which is why he has steered clear of any such role in Iraq. But he is unlikely to publicly criticise the Iranian regime. (He did, however, refuse to see Ahmadinejad when the latter visited Iraq in March 2008.)

Nationalism is the most complex of these three forces. Over most of its history, the Iranian regime has exploited nationalist sentiment. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini came to power by battling the shah, who was widely seen as an American puppet. Soon after the revolution, Iraq attacked Iran, and the mullahs wrapped themselves in the flag again. US supported Iraq in that war, ignoring Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons against Iranians something Iranians have never forgotten.

Over the past eight years, the Bush administration's veiled threats to attack Iran allowed the mullahs to drum up support. And it is worth remembering that US still funds guerrilla outfits and opposition groups that are trying to topple the Islamic Republic. Most of

these are tiny groups with no chance of success, funded largely to appease right-wing congressmen. But the Tehran government is able to portray this as an ongoing anti-Iranian campaign.

In this context, Obama is quite right to tread cautiously, extend his moral support to Iranian protesters, but not get politically involved. US has always underestimated the raw power of nationalism across the world, always assuming that people will not be taken in by cheap and transparent appeals against foreign domination. But look at what is happening in Iraq right now, where Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki boasts that America's troop withdrawals are a "a heroic repulsion of the foreign occupiers."

Of course Maliki would not be in office but for those occupying forces, who protect his government to this day. But he is a canny politician and knows what will appeal to the Iraqi people.

Ahmadinejad is also a politician with considerable mass appeal. And he is already accusing US and Britain of interference. Our strategy should be to make sure that these accusations seem as loony and baseless as possible. Were Obama to be seen as grandstanding and taking ownership of the protest movement, he would be helping Ahmadinejad's strategy, not America's.

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