

Escalating crime undermines citizens' faith in law enforcers

Government must get a grip on the situation

HERE has been a clear, steady decline in law and order all over the country. The degree to which crime has been going up has once more been manifested by the brazen manner in which a group of gunmen stormed a market in the city's Mirpur area on Monday, leaving a person dead and eight others injured grievously. In fact, it appears that as the days go by, criminals are increasingly getting the upper hand, so much so that even the administration is clearly at a loss as to how to tackle them. And this failure to tackle them has of course to do with the rapid return of many or most godfathers of crime who had during the period of the caretaker government either fled the country or lay low. This latter point is buttressed by the thought that returning criminal elements associated with the ruling party may clearly be playing a role behind the rise in crime.

Add to all the above reports of how trade in the selling and buying of illegal weapons has lately turned into a lucrative and dangerous business. Contract killings have in recent weeks been responsible for the deterioration in law and order. At the same time, petty crime in the form of mugging and robbing and plain theft has come back to haunt citizens' lives. Besides, ruling party elements, through an unbridled programme of extending control over institutions, and laying claim to tenders and the like, have only exacerbated the situation and no one in political authority has yet been able to clamp down on them. Given such stark realities, one quite does not understand why the authorities are not being able to put their finger on the core of the issues involved here and then move on to combat the menace. Those who bring disrepute to government and destroys its credibility are actually enemies of the government and should be treated accordingly.

One of the prime reasons why public confidence in the ability of the government to guarantee rule of law and ensure a decline in criminal activities throughout the country is low is the all too evident laid-back attitude which has come into the home ministry. It is one of those sadly unusual situations where a ministry is reduced to being a rudderless body because of the absence of political leadership. The home minister is away in Singapore for medical treatment, while there has been no word yet on when the minister of state will return home from his personal visit to the United States. In other words, a crucial ministry now seems to be at sea regarding its normal, routine functioning. And so crime goes on apace.

A hard, indeed purposeful and professional handling of the situation is called for. The police should be encouraged to act without fear or favour and will have to be sufficiently equipped with transports and other logistical gears and gadgets to match the criminals who have become sophisticated in their operations. Besides, the law-enforcers are thinly spread on maintenance of law and order and crime control, an imbalance in force deployment that has largely resulted from their preoccupation with VIP duties. This needs to be corrected.

The overarching reality that must dawn on the government is that without an effective maintenance of law and order neither is good governance possible nor investment in the economy would be forthcoming to the desired extent.

Mitford can be a model

Even with slim resources, public service is attainable

WE were heartened to read the news item earlier this week about the massive improvement in the services offered by Mitford Hospital, the oldest public hospital in the country. The Mitford example shows us how, even with scarce human and financial resources, it is possible for public institutions to do much better than they are, and to deliver good service to the public.

What the improvement in Mitford demonstrates to us is the kind of accomplishment that is possible with dedicated and committed leadership. The right kind of leadership can not only chart out a course of progress for any public institution that is both workable and far-reaching in its ambition, but can also provide the inspiration and motivation to its staff members so that an environment of service and excellence can be created and maintained.

It is this attitude that we need to inculcate in our public institutions. The example of Mitford tells us that however dismal the environment might appear on the surface, there is always scope for dramatic improvement if leaders with vision and commitment are empowered to bring reform.

The moral of the Mitford story is that if Mitford can do it, then so should other public institutions be able to, as well. There can no longer be any excuse for under-performing. Mitford's performance, with slim resources and support, puts the record of many other more august public institutions to shame.

The lesson to be learned, therefore, is two-fold. The first is that with commitment and leadership that we can pull our public institutions out of the doldrums and provide the level of service that the public deserves and should be able to expect.

The second lesson is that we now have concrete evidence of the difference good leadership can make. Thus, under-performing public institutions, especially public hospitals are something that it is incumbent on the government to fix.

We would like to see wholesale reform and improvement in our public health institutions. Mitford points the way forward and the public has a legitimate expectation that there will be many more such success stories in the future.

Our politics and our disappointment

These are but a few instances of how our disappointment with politics seems to be going up in leaps and bounds. You almost feel that all the good work of the two years of the caretaker government (and that is quite at variance with the bad deeds committed by that self-same government) is now about to be set at naught.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE government has just informed us that the deadline for applications regarding a withdrawal of what it calls politically motivated cases has passed. And then there is President Zillur Rahman asking the new chief of the Anti-Corruption Commission not to compromise over the matter of penalising the corrupt.

The opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party has cheerfully kept itself away from Parliament but has lost little opportunity of making itself heard on all those ubiquitous talk shows on all those television channels. The former speaker of the Jatiyo Sangsad, along with his friends, is yet to make his appearance before the parliamentary committee that has charged him and those friends with corruption in their days in the sun.

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Remind yourself of all the decency, all the adherence to the rule of law, all that renewed faith in politics you looked forward to as the Fakhruddin Ahmed administration moved into the business of setting things back in order. You cheered the campaign against the corrupt. You were happy that the elements of manifest evil had taken to the bushes and quite clearly imagined that they would never return.

Now, it seems, we are about to make a

brisk, happy return to the days when democracy was made unworkable, Parliament turned comatose and government was but cavalier behaviour on the part of those who constituted it.

Take that small matter of the withdrawal of the cases. The first question you ask here is why or under what aspect of modern politics or under which point of rule of law a government is entitled to withdraw cases filed against individuals by its predecessor. Should that not be a matter best left to the judiciary to handle? Of course, an easy way for the government to withdraw those cases (approval has already been granted for 174 such cases to be retrieved from the police files and what have you and binned) would be not to proceed with them. But why should that happen?

Besides, if you have had occasion to keep track of things, you might have noticed that it is only those in the ruling Awami League, or affiliated to it, who are deriving advantages from this withdrawal syndrome. The opposition has remained outside all this intensity of withdrawal excitement, which again is not a cheering sign. How do you ignore the feeling, or how can you, that when comes its time today's opposition will not go into the business of taking out all the cases that were filed against its leading lights and sundry other individuals?

We are setting a bad precedent here, in two ways. The first is in assuming that the executive branch can do what the judiciary should be doing, and thereby blurring the clear, fine distinction between the two organs of state. And the second is to arrogate to ourselves the right and the



Are we going back to business as usual?

power to exonerate ourselves from difficult situations only because we happen to be in political control of the state.

And now move on to that presidential emphasis on a purposeful Anti-Corruption Commission. The ACC was doing a fine job with Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury at its head. He should have been asked to stay on. He was not; and when he moved out of his own volition and a minister of state as well as other politicians could not conceal their glee at his departure, we knew the ACC was not going to be the same any more. For starters, where Chowdhury exercised ministerial rank and authority, his successor was informed that he would enjoy the powers of a secretary to the government.

Again, with all this withdrawal of cases going on, how much of real authority do you think the ACC will in the end be able to exercise over the next five years? Things are not looking up. With some people mulling ways of clipping the wings of the Election Commission, with the upazilas being overwhelmed by the presence of lawmakers, you do not any more see the

silver lining in the clouds you spotted in caretaker times.

It is morbidity all around you. The opposition BNP, having lost power, has chosen not to move out of its bad old ways but to make sure democratic politics does not function. It comes up with excuses, one after the other, to make the argument that it is the ruling alliance that has been shutting the door to our collective future. All defeated politicians and parties go for soul-searching at the end of the battering at the ballot box. The BNP has proved to be an exception to the rule. And there lies the pity of it all.

And pity turns to moral outrage when you remember that the home ministry is as good as a lost cause. The minister is on medical leave in Singapore. The minister of state, on family leave in the United States, has not deigned to inform the country when, if at all, he will come back to his desk.

It's all so sad!

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Security for Sheikh Hasina and her sister

He was a great man who preferred to live a simple life and never asked for anything more than he could give to his people. Surely it would amount to sully the name of this icon if his daughters should choose to use his name for gaining any mileage, political or otherwise.

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

THE cabinet approved on July 6 a draft law titled "Father of the Nation's Family Members Security Act 2009" aimed at providing a special blanket security cover to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her sister Sheikh Rehana, and made the draft law operative from the same day pending the parliament passing it later.

Details of the act have not been made public as yet but as speculation is rife that the new law is going to be a repeat of the "Father of the Nation's Family Security Act 2001" which the previous AL government passed just 23 days before it was due to step down on completion of its tenure.

The earlier act which, had authorised Sheikh Hasina to take possession of Gano

Bhaban, the then prime minister's official residence, a sprawling state property allotted to her by the state, and Sheikh Rehana, to own a house likewise in Dhanmondi in addition to their being entitled to full-time security by members of Special Security Force, transportation facilities, and a host of other perks and privileges at state expense, was scrapped by the BNP-led government soon after it came to power. AL observed an eight-hour general strike in Dhaka protesting the government move to scrap the law.

No matter how much the government may try to justify the new act, it is and it will remain a questionable law for the simple reason that it seeks to create a new privileged class, hitherto unknown, namely, family members of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

On principle, any law which seeks to discriminate between people on grounds of birth or family descent is a bad law, and it must not have a place in our statute books.

There is nothing wrong with providing state security to important political leaders and personalities even when they are not in power. Examples of such state protection extended to former presidents and prime ministers abound in democracies all over the world.

The government could very well beef up the existing security measures for ensuring added safety and protection of the prime minister, considering threats posed to her life by extremist elements. But to enact a law specifically for a particular family, and to provide a range of such state facilities and privileges to this family on life-long basis is a violation of the principle of equality and democratic rights of people in a democracy which we all cherish and promise to uphold.

We do hold Bangabandhu in high esteem for his great qualities as a leader who united the entire 75 million people of this country and led them to freedom and independence from Pakistani colonial rule in 1971. He was a great man who preferred to live a simple life and never asked for anything more than he could give to his

people. Surely it would amount to sully the name of this icon if his daughters should choose to use his name for gaining any mileage, political or otherwise.

People voted the AL led grand alliance into power in the last December election with such overwhelming majority against the background of total lawlessness, crime, and corruption raging across the country during the five years of the BNP-JI alliance government at a scale never seen before.

They expected genuine democracy from this government as a policy of change promised before election. The daughter of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Sheikh Hasina, must rise above personal and party interest. She must not back down from her pre-election pledges of giving us democracy and seek any political mileage beguiling under the cover of this undemocratic law. She must undertake essential democratic reforms so that democracy strikes roots in our politics and in our system of governance. For the last six months, the government has done little to suggest that democracy, and not expediency is its ultimate goal.

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The beginning of the end

The resurgence of protests (unprompted by opposition leaders) last week makes it look like the opposition is as strong as ever. In fact, though, the character of the protests makes one thing clear: the government is now winning the battle for the streets.

HOOMAN MAJD

WHEN Michael Jackson pushed Iran from the front pages and protests simmered down, both the Iranian government and the opposition tried to figure out their next moves. The government realised that the burst of citizen fury over Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's controversial reelection was not limited to students, secularists, or the rich -- on whom they've never relied for support and that bore little resemblance to Iran's silent majority.

Officials began a campaign to persuade those Iranians that the unrest was being guided by Iran's enemies. Meanwhile, the opposition, mindful that the accusation might stick, chose a strategy emphasising Islam and the rule of law while opposing government moves in court.

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makes one thing clear: the government is now winning the battle for the streets.

Before and during the Jackson-induced media lull, the message got away from the opposition and was badly warped in the Western press. Inside Iran, throngs gathered on the streets not because they wanted liberal democracy but because, in the words of Ali Larijani -- the conservative speaker of the parliament and a close ally of the Supreme Leader -- "the majority of Iranians don't believe the election."

Anger is why Iranians cursed through the capital: young, old, bearded, clean-shaven, chador-clad, pious, secular, and Chanel-wearing fashionistas all wanted to register their disapproval of what they believed to be a rigged vote. It was that simple.

But overseas, reporters strained to Tiananmen-ise the protests and draw bogus analogies to 1979. In newspapers and on TV, they yearned to see the demonstrations as a rejection of the Islamic regime altogether. In doing so, they badly

crippled the movement, because the easiest way to lose credibility in Iran is to be seen as a threat to the "Islamic" state. It's exactly what the government needed to demonise the opposition -- and particularly the organisers of street protests.

Largely impotent exile groups -- ones like the monarchists or the Mujaheddin-e-Khalq (MEK), based in Iraq and Paris -- joined the frenzy and excitement of a brewing revolt. But by expressing solidarity, they linked their names to genuinely disenfranchised voters and discredited them.

Nothing could have been more sickening to the Iranians who braved batons and bullets than to see the head of the MEK (a largely despised pseudo-cult on the US terrorism list that supported Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War) hold a press conference in Paris with a poster of the brutally murdered protest-martyr Neda Agha-Soltan as the backdrop.

And nothing could have pleased the enemies of reform in Iran more. Prince Reza Pahlavi, son of the former shah, called another press conference in Washington and shed what many Iranians saw as crocodile tears, which was no less harmful to opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi. In Brussels, a famous and well-meaning filmmaker (and a self-appointed spokesman for Mousavi) told the European Parliament that if nothing was done to confront Iran, it would shortly have nukes.

Tehran's propaganda machine could not have asked for a greater gift. In all these ways, the revolution has been hijacked.

Even so, it wasn't clear just how much damage had been done until the protests resumed last week. What we saw was exactly what the hardliners in Tehran wanted us to see: young, upper-middle-class Tehranis demonstrating against their government -- some of them fleeing the scenes of protest in \$100,000 SUVs. There were few chadors, fewer families, and no broad cross section of people that Larijani had said "don't believe the election."

Perhaps ordinary Iranians who don't believe that Ahmadinejad is their president have been cowed into submission by the riot police and the threat of jail; but perhaps also some of them are now more convinced that nefarious foreign hands are guiding the revolt.

Iranians, like people all over the world, simply wanted their votes counted; most didn't want the destruction of their system. Now, the "green wave" is no longer what it started out as and, as a result, it is far less of a challenge to the government. All the reformists can do is search for less exciting ways to continue their fight.