

Martyred Intellectuals' Day

It is time for the wheels of justice to turn

It is that time of year when we recall the sacrifices of millions of our fellow citizens in the War of Liberation in 1971. Today, it is especially significant that we recall yet once more the brave men and women --- academics, journalists, writers, doctors, et cetera --- who were picked up by the infamous al-Badr and Razakar goon squads and done to death on the eve of the liberation of Bangladesh. Those who died at the hands of the collaborators of the Pakistan occupation army, obviously with the nod of the army, were like the rest of us individuals who awaited the arrival of freedom with huge anticipation and a multitude of expectations. And those who murdered them thought, in all the darkness that conspiracy can muster, that by picking these men and women off they would be maiming the new, emerging nation at birth. Nothing could be more satisfying for a soon to be defeated force than plunging its already bloodied teeth one last time in the vigour and vitality of oncoming freedom.

Our remembrance of these martyred intellectuals today is, in a bigger sense, a recapitulation of the tortuous course of history we came through in 1971. In December of that painful year, the thought that in the final stages of the struggle we would lose some of our best and brightest was far from our minds. That the collaborators of the occupation army were going around abducting them even as the rest of us counted the hours to the rise of a free Bangladesh was a possibility that did not enter our consciousness, individual or collective. It was not until the surrender of the Pakistan occupation army that we discovered the horror of what had happened between 13 and 15 December, when all these good men and women, blindfolded, were led away to the killing fields of the al-Badr and Razakars. And since that sad dawn when their mutilated corpses were discovered in Rayerbazar, we as a nation have endlessly lived through pain. The families of these martyrs have plodded through worse, in terms of loneliness and agony. More tellingly, they have not seen the killers of their loved ones brought to justice in independent Bangladesh.

This morning, it is time to dispense with platitudes. It is not enough to say, every time December comes round, that we recall the sacrifices of our intellectuals. It is, indeed, time for the wheels of justice to turn, for those who kidnapped and killed these noble children of Bangladesh to be brought to account. Mourning does not become a society as long as it does not move to nab those who have caused it grievous misery. It is, therefore, fitting and proper that we take a pledge today to honour the memory of our martyrs through ensuring that their killers answer for their crimes in accordance with the demands of morality and internationally acknowledged law.

From our martyred intellectuals we draw renewed strength that will sustain us on our journey toward the creation of a just, egalitarian and secular Bangladesh. Their supreme sacrifice has not gone in vain.

Protection of consumers' rights

The law should be implemented and perfected

THE enactment by of the Consumer Rights Protection act 2009, to safeguard the interest of the consumers was very timely and welcome step. For too long the consumers in Bangladesh were helpless victims of the service providers who, in spite of the well established norms of providing the best value for the good purchased, did not measure up to the standard. And there was precious little that the consumer could do and had very little scope to have their grievances redressed.

However it appears that some of the provisions in the new law create more hindrances than compensate the consumer for not getting the worth for his or her money. This was made obvious in the comments of various speakers, including the Chairman of the Law commission, at a roundtable on Consumer Rights Protection act 2009, recently, wherein it was suggested that the said law, being faulty as it did not ensure the consumers' rights and interests, should be amended. A case in point is that while the guilty party faces the prospect of fine or jail there is no provision for compensating the aggrieved party i.e. the consumer.

What begs the question is why were the loopholes, or the shortcomings, not identified before the draft was placed to the parliament. Is it not the responsibility of the law ministry to scrutinise all draft laws before they are considered by the House? Not all laws are concerned with the law ministry but it is our understanding that it is the law ministry's responsibility to ensure that the draft that is put up as a bill is without any lacuna.

Side by side with updating the consumer law we feel that all relevant actions to implement the act should be started in full gear. We understand that the government, for the purpose of ensuring consumer rights, has planned to set up a National Consumer Protection Rights Council, to be formed at the district level in the first phase, which would receive complaints from the consumers. This should be set up immediately. Alongside this, the government should also complete the process of enacting a competition law which would help increase competitiveness among businesses so that they offer quality goods and services at fair prices.

We feel that both the law ministry and the law commission should both suggest necessary changes which must be incorporated in the law without delay. We would want the law to ensure that the consumers are provided quality goods in the right quantity and the right price, and the access to, and the process of the remedy should be pretty much straightforward deliver relief in quick time.

BNP: A shot in the arm?

So, the whole purpose of the council held on December 8 seemed to be not only to hold the party together, but quintessentially also to consolidate the supremo's power base, i.e. the BNP, of which she has now been elected chairperson for the third time. So it was an exercise to formalise and strengthen her authority in the party.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

ILL the BNP's just concluded council the party had indeed been in an existential problem. Badly battered in last general election, the BNP was hardly in a position to convene its council although there was an Election Commission (EC) imposed compulsion to hold the party council within the stipulated time to be registered with the Commission. Amid widespread factional feud in the party, resulting at times in intra-party clashes and bloodletting all over the country, BNP was dragging its feet for months only to put its house in order and bring the fast fading party into some shape so that it could be existent in public view.

In the meantime, the incumbent government also helped the BNP with its series

of gaffes, thus ridding the party of some of its stigma. But the BNP also had its share of faux passes pushing the party backward. The BNP also remained riddled with chronic disunity over the leadership and plum positions in the party, which had already been sharply divided between those who favoured reforms and others who remained loyal to Madam Zia's leadership. However, at the end of the day, Mrs. Zia emerged triumphant in this cold war and was awaiting a similar result in the upcoming council of the party.

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to formalise and strengthen her authority in the party.

Looking through the prism of the requirements the Khaleda loyalists and other party enthusiasts took calibrated risks and initiatives to turn the council into a grand rallying point for the disappointed and demoralised party workers as well as its gun-ho section. A large number of curious observers added mirth to the BNP's carnival of sorts and gave it a celebratory look.

The obviously carefully scripted speech for the delegates was delivered by the chairperson, who was in form despite her falling health which did not stand in the way of her stage performance. It was perfect to say the least. She spoke in her characteristic authoritative tone and note of finality with a bit of histrionics, like presenting Tariq Zia's video appearance before the audience. Madam Zia is still a magnetic crowd puller, reflective of her undiminished popularity.

That's all about the BNP council and there is nothing more or nothing positive beyond this. Dashing the expectations of many well-meaning and capable leaders of BNP the chairperson left none in doubt as to the future BNP leadership. Even if there were some having illusion in this regard, they witnessed how the succession in BNP

leadership was being processed. Those who saw, during the chairperson's last tenure in power, the rise of Tariq Zia as senior joint secretary of BNP with dismay have now seen the upgradation of the same wayward son who was responsible for the pillage and plunder of the country from the infamous Hawa Bhaban.

The council unanimously made Tariq Zia a senior vice-chairman -- the highest party position after Madam Khaleda Zia's. The succession seems to be hereditary from now onward. Is it the last nail in the coffin of Zia's heritage of multiparty democracy in Bangladesh and the denial of a democratic process in BNP politics? Nobody knows if the BNP chairperson is indeed aware of the harm she did to the BNP after it suffered severe body blows in the past.

Madam Zia's second-in-command, Tariq Zia, was given enough rope to hang himself in the past. So the BNP has given him even longer rope and the BNP's stalwarts were only silent spectators to it -- maybe to be pricked by their latent conscience in the future. They are bound to rue the day they failed to at least register a protest.

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Remembering our shaheed intellectuals

Thousands of people imbibed with the spirit of liberation pay floral tributes to the intellectuals brutally killed on December 14, 1971. A smartly turned out contingent of Bangladesh army gives a guard of honour as usual while military bugles plays the last post.

MD. SHAIRUL MASHREQUE and M. ABUL KASHEM MOZUMDER

EVERY year, the great victory month is observed in remembrance of the last 16 days of the liberation war when our valiant freedom fighters staged a strike back with sophisticated weapons, flushing out the occupation army and their collaborators from many parts of the country.

On December 3, the Indo-Pak war erupted as the Indian government was compelled to go for military solution to the humanitarian and political crises internationally created by the Pakistani military rulers who wanted to trample democracy to deprive Bengalis of the right to rule.

We feel proud of the historic victory in 1971. Bangladesh triumphed, with millions of freedom loving people dancing, rejoicing

and shouting joy Bangla in the streets. We remember that day, December 16, and the spirit of liberation is still alive in our sentiments and emotions.

During victory month various political organisations, cultural think tanks and civil society undertake a number of regular programs, but we cannot forget our main agenda in the victory month. This is about paying tribute to the intellectuals we lost when the capital city was surrounded by the allied forces. We feel a surge of emotion when we remember the supreme sacrifices of all of our compatriots, including our intellectuals.

In the final blow, the defeated Pakistan army tried to snuff out the Bengali intelligentsia. The intellectual martyrs contributed largely to the development of Bengali nationalism, nourishing the spirit of liberation based on values like nationalism,

democracy, secularism and socialism.

It was a planned mass killing on December 14 and 15. In company with its local quislings, who achieved lasting notoriety as Razakars and Al-Badr, the state of Pakistan went about picking out the best and the brightest among Bengalis, including top doctors, professors, journalists, to kill and maim at leisure.

On the eve of freedom, the Pakistani army and the killing squads fanned out all over the city seized our educated professionals and intellectuals and presided over their slow and painful death. It was a continuation of the game of death that began on March 25 with the murder of Prof. G.C. Dev and Prof. Jotirmoy Guhathakurata.

Among the dead were many educationists and some journalists. The murders were preplanned, a desperate attempt to annihilate our intellectual base. Under specific instructions from Maj. Gen. Rao Farman Ali, and Brig. Bashir the Pak troops moved around the city and its adjoining areas in a hunt for intellectuals, pulled them out of their houses and murdered them.

We pay homage to slain intellectuals like Dr. Fazle Rabbi, Dr. Alim Chowdhury, Mr.

Nizamuddin, a journalist, Sirajuddin Hossain, Dr. Santosh Bhattachaya, Prof. Syed Giasuddin, Selina Parveen and scores of others. The slain varsity teachers were sincere and committed, all with honesty and integrity. The orientation the students received from these academic talents with excellent manner and composed personality can never be passed into oblivion.

Thousands of people imbibed with the spirit of liberation pay floral tributes to the intellectuals brutally killed on December 14, 1971. A smartly turned out contingent of Bangladesh army gives a guard of honour as usual while military bugles plays the last post.

Leaders of different political parties and professional and cultural bodies place floral wreaths at the memorial in commemoration of the day. They visit Rayer Bazar monument and hold cultural functions there to mark the day.

We can observe the day by pledging to conduct an all-out campaign for the trial of war criminals. This is the demand of the day.

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US opinion turns against globalism of its president

But opinion polls show the American people are moving in another direction. Reeling from the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression and convinced that the world is an increasingly dangerous place, Americans despair about their country's future leadership role in the world.

BRUCE STOKES

OBAMA is pursuing an internationalist agenda. He has escalated America's military commitment in Afghanistan. He supports a global climate change treaty. He has promised to revamp US immigration policy. And he backs continued American integration with the world economy.

On each of these issues, the White House is at odds with the views of many Americans, as shown by opinion polls. And, in some cases, such policy is even at cross purposes with the views of members of the president's own Democratic Party.

This dissonance between American attitudes and US government policy raises questions about the sustainability of the Obama administration's international initiatives and threatens to undermine the reservoir of good will for US that was generated by Obama's election just one year ago.

Candidate Obama rejected Bush era unilateralism and promised a new American engagement with the world. As president, he reached out to the Europeans, seeking to work with them on Afghanistan and Iran. He chose a non-confrontational approach with China, North Korea and Russia. He pleased Southeast Asian nations by changing course on Burma, long shunned by Washington. And he embraced the creation of the G22 as the new global economic steering committee, replacing the G8 that long only represented only the interests of the world's richest nations.

But opinion polls show the American people are moving in another direction. Reeling from the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression and convinced that the world is an increasingly dangerous place, Americans despair about their country's future leadership role in the world. They have turned inward and once again become defiantly self-assertive.

Americans are now more isolationist and more unilateralist than at any time in recent history. For the first time in more than four decades of polling, a plurality of Americans now says that the US should "mind its own business internationally" and let other countries get along the best they can on their own, according to the recent America's Place in the World survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press.

This isolationist sentiment surpasses that at the end of the Vietnam War. Complicating matters further for a Democratic administration, a majority of the president's own party now holds isolationist attitudes.

In addition, more than four-in-five of those surveyed think US should go its own way on the international stage, not worrying too much about whether other countries agree or not. That is by far the greatest degree of unilateralist sentiment since the question was first asked in 1964.

This unprecedented isolationism and support for unilateralism runs at cross purposes to Obama's avowed goal of international engagement. The president talks the talk of internationalism, but he has yet to convince the American public to walk that walk.

In fact, some would argue that he sought to please the labour unions by imposing tariffs on some Chinese imports while pledging to uphold free trade. Nowhere is this friction between US foreign policy objectives and American attitudes more evident than with regard to Afghanistan. Only one-in-three Americans backed president Obama's troop surge, before his announcement, including just one-in-five Democrats.

If American casualties mount in the months ahead, as they undoubtedly will, if there is new evidence of the Afghan government's corruption or ineffectiveness and if the US is drawn even deeper into Pakistan to

fight the Taliban, the Obama administration has no reservoir of public good will to draw upon to ride out the storms that are bound to rise.

Maintaining the military initiative could then prove difficult, especially as public dissatisfaction makes Congress restive in the run up to the 2010 election.

Isolationism and unilateralism may also complicate future US defence relations with Japan. The new government in Tokyo has called into question American military bases on Okinawa and has expressed a desire for closer ties with other Asian nations, effectively beginning to distance itself somewhat from Washington.

Such actions could spark resentment among Americans who are already turning their backs on the world. And, with the Obama administration focusing most of its Asian energies on China, the US-Japan alliance, the bulwark of Asian security for the last two generations, could erode out of neglect and disinterest on both sides.

Americans' unilateralist impulses similarly threaten to derail Obama's delicate handling of Iran. The White House is slowly ratcheting up international pressure on Tehran in an effort to get it to dismantle its nuclear weapons program. But six-in-ten Americans support a military strike against Iran if it is certain Tehran has produced a nuclear weapon. Resisting that public pressure may become ever more difficult if the Iranian government continues to flaunt the United Nations on this issue.

Despite Obama's promise to reverse Bush administration foot dragging on climate change, curbing carbon emissions lacks public support in US. Less than half the American public sees climate change as a major threat, raising doubts about whether Congress will ever approve pending legislation to curb carbon emissions.

American obstructionism on climate change in the early part of this decade fuelled a worldwide rise in anti-Americanism even before the Iraq war. If the US is again seen as the roadblock to an international agreement, Obama's good intentions may not be enough to stem a revival of anti-American sentiment.

Similarly, Obama garnered global kudos for his denunciation of the Bush administration's treatment of suspected Islamic terrorists and his decision to close the Guantanamo

Bay detention facility. But half of the American public disapproves of the president's decision to close Guantanamo. And over half believe that the use of torture against suspected terrorists is justified. With the Guantanamo closing now delayed and the American public's willingness to abuse human rights in terrorist cases, America's stature could again suffer.

Immigration poses yet another issue where Americans' attitudes clash with Obama intentions. The US prides itself on its immigrant heritage. And president Obama has promised immigration reform next year that will create a path to citizenship for people now in the country illegally.

But only a minority of the American population supports legalization for illegal immigrants, according to a survey by the German Marshall Fund. And stronger border controls continue to be Americans' preferred option for reducing illegal immigration. Such attitudes are certainly not new and are widely shared in other countries, but they further tarnish America's reputation.

Finally, Obama trade policy and Americans' attitudes on trade are a paradox. The economic downturn coupled with rising isolationism would seem to be a recipe for growing US protectionism. And other nations charge that through Buy America procurement actions and its failure to finalize multiple trade agreements, Washington has turned protectionist. But surveys by Pew, the German Marshall Fund and others demonstrate that the American people -- especially Democrats -- are less protectionist today than in the recent past.

Yet the Obama administration has failed to articulate a coherent trade liberalisation strategy, forgoing an opportunity to pursue at least one internationalist policy that might resonate with the American public.

Obama is an articulate proponent of US engagement with the world. But he has failed to convince the American public. This dissonance between policy and public opinion threatens to thwart White House objectives and undermine America's stature abroad.

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