

Fresh violence at Dhaka University

Authorities must go beyond tough words

THE death of a student of Dhaka University following a fresh spate of violence on the campus only reinforces the case for tough action toward restoring discipline in academia. Only a few days ago we had commented on the growing tendency of students towards violence and asked the authorities to do everything that needed to be done to roll back this slide to disorder. Unfortunately, the slide has continued, as demonstrated by the violence at DU and at institutions like Dhaka College, where the simple process of admission has become hostage at the hands of student politics. It is our considered opinion that unless drastic and foolproof steps are taken to restore a normal academic atmosphere on the campuses, things may spiral out of control and leave citizens helpless in the face of it all.

The death of Abubakr Siddique following police action to quell violence between two factions of the Chhatra League at Sir A.F. Rahman Hall of DU should send out a strong message to the government. And the message is that the time for tough words is past and what the nation wishes to see now is a translation of those tough words into concrete steps. It is a matter of huge shame that every now and then students break into violence over matters that cannot be within their jurisdiction. When students try to control the admission process in a college or take charge of tenders at universities or fight for control over hall dormitories, one wonders where the high principle of education has gone missing in all this. The year-old Awami League-led government has repeatedly reassured the nation that no one can get away with violence or any kind of wrongdoing. Now comes the time when it must follow through on its pledges. That process can begin when the authorities go to the bottom of the chaos on the campuses.

On our part, we feel that such a task can be accomplished through taking some important and necessary steps. In the first place, student violence must now be regarded as a grave matter at the intra-party as well as inter-party level. The major parties which have their student followers in very large numbers on the campuses must, in the interest of education, arrive at a consensus on the need for swift, meaningful action against their violence-prone student supporters. But that can only be done if the parties, individually within their inner councils, take the decisive step of moving against their young followers and convey the message that anyone and everyone who tries to take education hostage will face the full force of the law. In the second (and this follows from what has just been stated), student disorder must no longer be regarded as part of the broad law and order scheme of things because of the obvious fact that such a step has not worked so far. What must now come into place is a clear, unambiguous plan of legal action against any student found involved in disrupting the academic atmosphere. Such action, where students are judged guilty of criminal conduct, must lead to swift expulsion from the university or college concerned and so must serve as a deterrent to others with similar proclivities toward violence.

Violence on the campuses is a dire warning on what we must do. When students whip out guns and machetes and knives effortlessly, it is time to swing into action. Our schools, colleges and universities must have their sanctity restored in full measure.

Citizens' monitoring of public procurement

The watchdog body needs to be failsafe to deliver

THE planning minister's frank admission that graft gobbles up 40 to 50 per cent of the public funds allocated against any procurement contract only confirms the public perception on the issue. Since public procurement involves about 70 per cent of the expenditures under the Annual Development Programme (ADP), the amount of money involved in it is also huge. Naturally, unless the rules of procurement are strict and foolproof, one should not be too surprised if a significant sum of the money leaks through into corrupt hands.

Reassuringly, the minister has informed that a Public-Private Stakeholders' Committee (PPSC) has been instituted as a watchdog to ensure transparency and accountability in the Public Procurement Act (PPA) and thereby institutionalise social audit of public procurement.

This is certainly a good move to make the expenditure of the public money in the procurement process answerable to the representatives of the various stakeholders from the private and the public sectors.

However, the success of the PPSC in plugging the holes through which corruption creeps in depends on how effectively it can oversee the procurement process.

But recently, with a view to speeding up the procurement process some provisions of the Public Procurement Act (PPA), 2006 have been amended. The somewhat relaxed procurement regime has definitely thrown a fresh challenge before PPSC or any monitoring mechanism for that matter meant to ensure transparency in the purchasing procedure as it has by definition become vulnerable to quarters seeking to gain from the slackened procurement rules. By bringing public procurement activities within the ambit of what it calls 'social auditing' through engaging citizens through the PPSC, it is expected that accountability and transparency in the procurement procedure could be ensured. The point is, being a new entity itself it would have to go through a lot of self-assessment and evolution before becoming efficient in delivering the goods.

The exalted motive behind creation of the watchdog body, PPSC, to involve the private sector alongside the government to oversee public procurement is commendable. Now, its modus operandi will have to be worked out thoughtfully. It would have to devise a mechanism to ensure that it can deliver while on the job of monitoring the performance of public procurement activities.

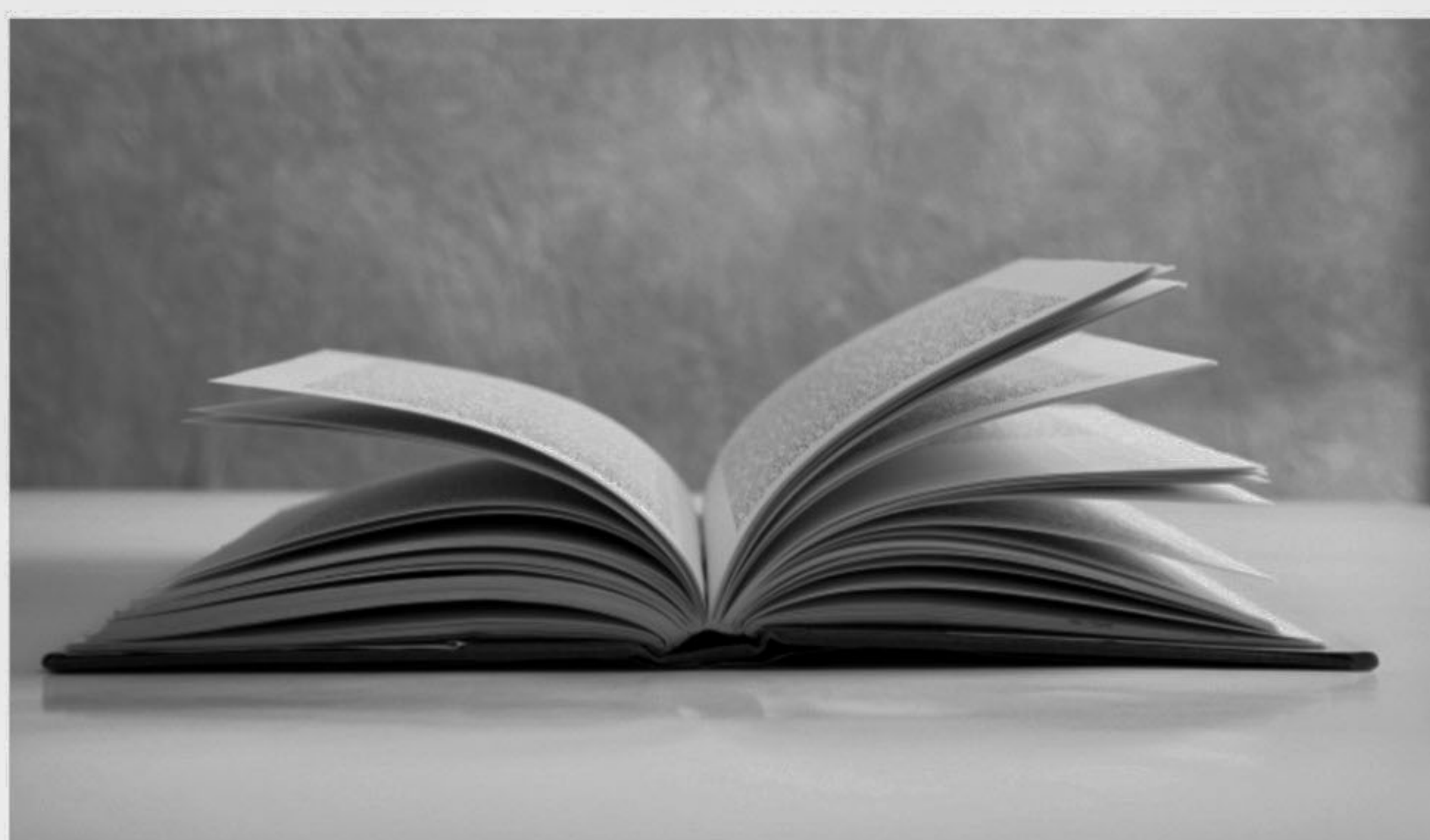
All in

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ZAFAR SOBHAN

WHAT is the significance of the recent decision by the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court to uphold the judgement of the High Court, that the 5th amendment to the constitution was illegal and therefore null and void?

The Supreme Court verdict means that the governments of Khandker Mushtaque Ahmed, Abu Sadaat Mohammad Sayem, and Lt. Gen. Ziaur Rahman that were in office between August 15, 1975, and March 31, 1979 (parliament was convened April 1, 1979), were in power without constitutional legitimacy.



For the first time, our history books are being re-written for all the right reasons.

I would like to suggest that, coming as it does on the heels of the execution of five killers of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib, the judgement could not be of greater political significance.

Following the 1979 elections which swept the BNP to power, parliament passed the 5th amendment on April 6, 1979, ratifying and confirming all martial law proclamations, regulations and orders, and other laws made between August 15, 1975 and April 9, 1979.

Some might argue that the verdict means little. As the Appellate Division itself noted, history cannot be altered, and what has happened has happened. No one cares today whether these governments were constitutional or not.

But I would suggest that the significance of the verdicts merits closer scrutiny, and that we are, in fact, witnessing the beginning of a tectonic shift in Bangladesh's political culture.

In the first place, we need to look at the

Supreme Court decision in conjunction with the executions of Bangabandhu's killers. Taken together, they represent the success of two long-standing goals of the ruling Awami League.

The fact that the AL has been able to bring these two goals to fruition suggests that this time around they are more confident in their power and more secure in their authority. This makes sense. In 1996, the party barely squeaked into power, with a narrow majority courtesy of a shaky coalition. This time, they won in a landslide.

In its first term in office for 21 years, the hand of the AL government was stayed by caution and the fear of trigger-

about which way the wind is blowing in today's Bangladesh.

More crucially, perhaps, the verdict represents a major strike in an ambitious offensive that the AL has decided to focus on this term. For too long, the AL feels, the nation has endured a long-standing propaganda campaign to denigrate the name of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib and glorify that of Gen. Zia.

Indeed, for almost all of the time since 1975, it is true that the nation's historical narrative has been under the control of parties opposed to the AL, with a corresponding impact on the nation's political culture.

Now, the time has come to reverse this. It has proved relatively easy to resuscitate Bangabandhu's reputation, as he remains incontrovertibly the father of the nation, who led us to independence.

Trying to tell kids these days that he was anything other than the seminal figure of Bangladeshi history is like trying to tell Americans that George Washington was a chump. They ain't buying it.

But this is not enough, the AL feels. It is also important to deligitimise Zia and to bring his wrongs to public attention, so that his carefully cultivated and sanitised public image, that remains a corner-stone of the BNP's electoral appeal, is called into question. It is this thinking that is behind the move to rename the airport.

This may hurt the AL in the short run. Donors and foreign governments may be dismayed by this expression of politics as usual. Those of us who would prefer a politics of inclusiveness and compromise might dismiss the move as counter-productive and suggest that it makes the AL look petty and small-minded.

They know this, but are willing to take the hit. They figure that people don't really care that much about issues that do not hit them in their pocket-book, such as renaming of airports, and so it won't hurt them with the public.

The upside, however, as the AL sees it, is enormous. If they succeed, they will be able to finally correct the revisionist history that has clouded the national narrative for so long, and, as a result, completely reconfigure the political landscape. The stakes could not be higher. They are all in.

Zafar Sobhan is Editor, Editorial & Op-Ed, The Daily Star.

Blair lied ... thousands died

Mistake of false alarm happens. But the invasion of Iraq wasn't a mistake made by mistake. It was calculated and cold-blooded.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

FORMER British Prime Minister Tony Blair appeared before a British inquiry panel last Friday to defend his decision to go to war in Iraq. What an unrepentant Blair blared in his six hours of testimony was nothing we didn't hear already. Saddam was a menace, and it was necessary to deal with him after 9/11. We heard that one before. Then Blair offered a little iddy biddy speck of dust concession. Mistakes were made both before and after the invasion of Iraq, he said. We know that for sure.

Believe me, I know what Blair means when he says that. I had once made a similar mistake many years ago. I woke up at night to the sound of footsteps in the house and jumped on the intruder with a cricket bat. The intruder turned out to be my cousin on his way to the toilet.

Mistake of false alarm happens. But the invasion of Iraq wasn't a mistake made by mistake. It was calculated and cold-blooded. The United States and Britain jumped on Saddam as a means to their end.

Every stone was turned to implicate Saddam. The story of his weapons of mass destruction was invented. He was purportedly linked to 9/11 attacks in order to prime him up as a target. He was also blamed for abetting and sheltering al-Qaeda operatives, which couldn't be proved till today. Everything was done to find, and I say it again, to find an excuse to go after the Iraqi menace.

But was it really Saddam they were after, or was it Iraq that they wanted? Here comes the mother of all logic, which nobody likes to talk about. Couldn't Saddam be removed through an engineered coup or assassination, something the CIA and MI6 are capable of doing with surgical precision? Couldn't they avoid the loss of nearly a million lives and a disastrous war that has trashed a cradle of great civilisations?

Understood, that would have given them Saddam, not Iraq. That's why the invasion was planned. Smart people cuddle the baby to fondle the mother. The United States and Britain went after Saddam to get into Iraq. They fattened

this obedient Iraqi stooge as a menace, and slaughtered him when they were done. Such is the way of gangland crooks. An accomplice becomes a menace when he knows too much.

What kind of a menace was Saddam? He let invaders take his country almost without firing a shot or flying a bomber. As it turned out, his big-mouthed propaganda minister was the deadliest weapon he had in his arsenal. He would probably go down in history as the only potentate who would be dragged out of a spider

then what about all the napalms the United States sprayed in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam? What about all the genocides the British committed in Asia, Africa and the Middle East? Saddam could be tried 20 years after his crime. Why not the US after 70 years, or Britain after 100?

Tony Blair may not be the right person to ask. He may not have all the facts because he was simply doing George Bush's pleasure. The media in his own country taunted him as America's lapdog. He maintained that uncannily canine loyalty during the hearing last week. He saw nothing wrong in doing what he was told.

Blair's only lucid moment came when he said that after 9/11, other nations,



If the truth can't help you, then lie.

hole, looking like a street bum.

How was Saddam a menace? Because he used chemical weapons against the Kurds in 1987? Who provided those weapons to him? And, why didn't the US and Britain protest right after it happened?

Besides, if that made Saddam a menace,

particularly Europe, didn't share the American and British concern about the threats posed, amongst other countries, by Iraq. Did he ever ask why? The answer is that the leaders of those countries didn't have Tony Blair and George Bush's jaundiced eyes. They had no axe to grind with

they hate you." If Blair was listening, Saddam whispered his revenge. Iraq taken, Saddam gone, he will be a disgrace for as long as he lives.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a columnist for The Daily Star. Email: badrul151@yahoo.com.