

How to handle rallies of political parties?

Observe the rules of the game

THE Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islam postponed their planned rally at the Paltan Maidan yesterday, much to the relief of the worried citizens tensed up over a potentially confrontational situation -- thanks to Jubo League scheduling a rally at the same place and time. It has transpired that the Jamaat had applied for and obtained the necessary permission to organise the meeting at the Maidan well before Jubo League announced its rally programme on May 29. So, the Jubo League's counter-move was an act aimed clearly at disrupting Jamaat's rally.

Let's make it abundantly clear that we do not support the Jamaat's anachronistic politics and their hidden agenda of pushing the country back to the days of theocracy. In fact, we vehemently oppose Jamaat's politics. We have condemned it in the past and continue to do so, for their role in 1971. They collaborated with Pakistan army while it carried out a genocide. We have also condemned Jamaat's involvement with the killing of our intellectuals just prior to our victory in 1971.

What we find reprehensible is that even today, after 39 years of our independence, Jamaat has not apologised to the nation for its role in 1971.

However, though we find Jamaat's politics to be totally retrogressive, and its use of religion in politics to hoodwink the people repugnant, nevertheless, one cannot overlook the point that the Jamaat is a legal political party and it has the right to organise a meeting so long as it is peaceful and done with due permission. It is up to the people to decide how to respond to the Jamaat's politics.

The trick played by ruling party activists is simple: create a tense situation and force the law enforcers to take a tough position like clamping section 144 to head off a rally of the opposition. Incidents involving Jamaat rallies or processions since April 3 right up to May 31, including the Paltan one in Dhaka, fall into a pattern of clamping section 144 by the government as political activists opposed to them went about foiling their rallies. These were reported from Pabna, Rajshahi, Chapainawabganj, Dinajpur, Barisal, Sylhet and Chittagong.

Those opposed to Jamaat politics would do themselves as well as the country a world of good by tackling Jamaat politically which means unmasking Jamaat's legacy and agenda.

We firmly believe that any deviation from democratic norms and rules will be counter-productive in the fight against obscurantism. The forces calling themselves democratic and pro-people can ill-afford to be oblivious of this plain truth.

New varsity admission procedure

Worth a try

REPORTEDLY, the government has decided on principle to introduce a new system of admission to public universities, to start with it will be tried out on about 23. From whatever details available so far about the proposed system of intake, it would, we are certain, reduce time and expenditure, and all the other hassles associated with university admission.

The idea of arranging universities in clusters and requiring the candidates to take only one test for a particular discipline entitling them admission in any of the cluster universities is a very innovative idea indeed, and one that, we feel, merits consideration of all the universities.

A groundbreaking and innovative system was introduced last year by way of online admission to universities, which we are certain has helped, to a very large extent, save effort and time of all concerned including that of the universities. We understand that the idea, to admit students in the honours classes based on the cluster system, was first mooted two years ago, but could not proceed due to resistance from certain quarters.

We are for anything that simplifies life and ensures quality of intake. We note, however that several universities, particularly those belonging to the local 'ivy league' have expressed their reservations about the new system to the extent where a few vice-chancellors considered transiting to the new procedure almost sacrilegious. The position is quite understandable. As with all new systems, the newly proposed admission procedure will take time as well as a positive attitude to adapt and adjust. But the benefits should not be lost on anyone. Instead of outright rejection, it is advisable to try out the system which can always be discarded if it fails to deliver.

Given that the current admission methods have been brazenly subjected to distortions, exploitation and misuse, there is a case for innovative arrangements that will help to circumvent the lacunae in the current system. Who is not aware of the "admission trade" that the student fronts of the major political parties have been indulging in? Regrettably, there are instances where the faculty members too have become a party to the trade. Using available technology to plug the gaps in any system, and to make the system user friendly so to speak, should be welcome by all.

We feel that the cluster system certainly has strong rationale and is always worth a try by all concerned.



Rebuilding a new Bangladesh.

Pit of despair, peak of hope

The courageous and incorrupt young generation is the best wealth that the nation can boast of. They are the dream merchants. They make us see many sweet dreams at such difficult times when our hope dwindles and begins to plummet towards the ground.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

WHEN we were slowly drowning in the pit of despair, Musa Ibrahim took us to the peak of hope. We travelled to the top of the world with him where the air is thin but pure, heavenly pure. I hope Musa will bring some of that pure air to drive away the contamination that blackens our souls. We want to breathe the fresh air to our lungs' content. Musa proved the hardest way that reaching the goal is not impossible if only one can remain steadfast in one's determination. It is the tough who do not stop but get going.

He proved, up in the mountain, that he was the true son of the soil. Undaunted by the cruel surroundin, Musa pushed on and on, like Odysseus, to reach his destination. It was his youthful vigour and stamina that ultimately took him to where he wanted to be. Where he wanted to stand tall as a proud Bangali from Bangladesh. He is a representative of the young generation, and as a nation we have rightly invested our hope in his

generation. They will guide the nation to the top one day. And we have faith that young people like him will not betray us, no matter how much suffering they will have to endure.

Musa's success did not come easy. He fought against and defied the multitude of adversities that came his way. Often despair and desolation tried to pull him down on his knees and yet he stood up, just as the people of this land always do after every cyclone, every flood and every drought.

This is the unique characteristic of the Bangali people of this land. We never drown. We never give up. We never accept defeat. And ultimately we reach our goal. This has been happening for centuries. This has been happening for decades. Bangalis are endowed with the faculties to do impossible things, and then laugh the last laugh.

When the British colonial rulers asked the farmers to cultivate neel (blue dye) they refused. The rulers cut their thumbs in anger so that they would not be able to cultivate paddy or any other crop. But the

people endured the pain and fought back to oust the colonial power.

It was some young and undaunted Bangalis like Musa who took up arms to fight the British. Titumir, Khudiram, Bagha Jatin, Masterda Surya Sen, Pritilata, Binod Behari, Netaji Shubhash Chandra and countless others fought like tigers facing overwhelming odds. They did not falter for a second in their mission. At the end they came out victorious. The colonial power was ousted for good.

In 1952, when the people of this land found themselves face to face with a hostile administration, the young generation came forward. They got together and violated the order of the rulers. They were shot and killed. But that did not daunt them a bit. Bangalis won their right to speak in their mother tongue. Today, all over the world, February 21 is observed as International Mother Language Day.

It is again the young generation that stopped bullets with their own bare chests and fired back on the Pakistani occupied forces in 1971. The valour, the gallantry, the patriotism, the determination, and the sacrifice remain unparalleled in the history of human civilisation. The young men and women made it impossible for the occupied forces to see their dream of occupying this land forever come true.

The courageous and incorrupt young generation is the best wealth that the nation can boast of. They are the dream

merchants. They make us see many sweet dreams at such difficult times when our hope dwindles and begins to plummet towards the ground. It is they who remind us of our legacy of resilience and defiance during the British rule, and during Pakistani rule in 1952 and 1971. It is they who took up the responsibility of turning our dreams into reality.

I implore, I plead, I beg, going on my knees, please do not corrupt the pure hearts of these young people, of these dream merchants, who are getting ready to take up the reins soon. Please do not allure them, do not entice them with your evil plans, do not give them arms, do not give them drugs, do not give them forged money, do not give them false hope. Please do whatever evil things you do in the darkness of night but leave the young men and women alone.

Imagine what will happen to this nation if the vast majority of the young people become corrupt to the core in the vicious environment of corrupt politics, corrupt business and corrupt administration. Who will make us see sweet dreams? Who will fight the evil? Who will bare their chests before the guns of the evil men? Who will take us to the peak of hope? Who will help us take deep breath in the pure air to cleanse our souls?

This nation is in desperate need of many more like Musa.

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Face-off

The moment we start thinking that it is okay for the people in power to block a global network, even if momentarily, and remove particular contents from it, is the moment we step on a slippery slope downhill; today it is Facebook over a silly doodle, tomorrow it will be Wikipedia for a controversial article and the next day it will be YouTube for an undesirable video.

ADIT RAHMAN

I first heard the news from a friend on Facebook a couple of hours ago. A quick Google search turned up a couple of blogs and a Wikinews post that corroborated it. The final confirmation came from a journalist friend at the BBC (again via Facebook): Facebook, the world's most popular social-networking site, has been temporarily blocked in Bangladesh. My friend wasn't sure about the exact reasons, but there were rumours about a youngster being arrested for posting 'not so flattering' doodles of political leaders on his social profile. When I asked him about the media community's reaction to this incident, he told me that it is still a "non-issue." After all, the Facebook user base in Bangladesh is still quite small and a little delay in posting status messages or playing Farmville is not going to do any serious damage. (I must admit that for a moment, the idea of not having to see stupid notification messages seemed quite appealing.) However, the fact is, in this day and age, blocking a social media is just as unfortunate as shutting down a

mainstream newspaper or TV channel and just as alarming.

All around the world, online social media such as blogs, wikis and social networks are being recognised as potent sources of user-created information. In many ways they are even more powerful than traditional media; they create a networked public sphere (a term coined by Yochai Benkler in *The Wealth of Net works*) where everybody is able to voice his/her thoughts and concerns freely and openly. Everybody can become a pamphleteer, and directly speak to the world. With social media, the audience does not consist of passive onlookers, but active participants in the info creation and sharing process. I witnessed this firsthand as my Persian colleagues used a variety of online media including YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Blogger to gain access to news and to stage protests after the shooting in June 2009. Where it was possible to crack down and stop the information flow on traditional media, it wasn't possible to do so with social media.

Like in most other places, Facebookers in Bangladesh use it mostly

to stay in touch with each other. But there is more to it than that. Every once in a while we come across shared documents and video materials in there that the mainstream media decided to ignore (or had to avoid) but are no less authentic or significant. (For example, I came across a video a couple of days back in which a certain minister was professing some very questionable practices and plans of the ruling government.) People are also using YouTube and other social media for these purposes. As I see it, this can help people become more politically aware which is always desirable in a democratic process. As transparency is one of the things promised by a democratic government, it should have no objection toward social media. Needless to say, this is probably just wishful thinking in the context of Bangladesh.

Coming back to the situation at hand, it may seem that I have been crying a river over nothing. What was it about really? Have I been suggesting that the media and the liberal societies in Bangladesh should take a stand to preserve a foolish young man's right to post objectionable things on Facebook? The answer is yes, that is exactly what I am asking. The moment we start thinking that it is okay for the people in power to block a global network, even if momentarily, and remove particular contents from it, is the moment we step on a slippery slope downhill; today it is Facebook over a silly doodle, tomorrow it will be Wikipedia for a controversial article and the next day it will be

YouTube for an undesirable video. Come to think of it, it is not tomorrow or the next day, but just last year when the government went after YouTube. I dare say that the emerging pattern doesn't look very encouraging.

Also, if we condone these actions now, we would be allowing the government to send out a clear message that reads: "Be careful of what you post online because we are very willing and quite able to make you pay for it." This is definitely not the way to uphold freedom of thought and speech in a democratic society.

I would like to end on an optimistic note by pointing out that these policing activities are, in the end, quite futile. They can, at best, slow things down for a bit but can never really stop them. Ways are found to work around these obstacles quite easily. Within a short while after the Facebook blockade, the online communities started exchanging tips on how to bypass the firewall by using anonymous proxies. One of these chaters on lifedork.net read: "If Bangladesh Govt. thinks (that the) Internet is like a cell phone service (that can be switched off at will) then they are living in (a) fool's paradise." If worse comes to worst, people will just start posting "risky" elements on more anonymous platforms, much like the way hundreds of anonymous file-sharing sites sprang up after big record labels shut Napster down in 2001. At any rate, freedom of speech will prevail on the Internet.

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