

## The disappearance of Chowdhury Alam

As a citizen, he must receive due protection from the state

**D**HAKA City Corporation councillor and local BNP leader Chowdhury Alam has been missing since he was reportedly abducted by some men late in the evening of June 25. Begum Zia and her colleagues in the BNP have accused the government of being behind Alam's disappearance and have demanded that he be traced and returned safe and sound to his family. Alam's family and his party have alleged that law enforcers in plain clothes were involved in the abduction. The Rapid Action Battalion and the police authorities have, however, denied any involvement in the incident. As for tracing Alam's whereabouts, they have said that they are yet to have any clues in the matter whatsoever.

Any act of abduction or disappearance is a serious affair. In the present case, the matter is much more than the kidnapping or disappearance of a politician or public figure. It is simply a worrying case of a citizen vanishing or being made to disappear. And in the nineteen days that have elapsed since the incident, the government or the law enforcers have been unable to do anything about recovering Alam or finding out what elements have been involved in the sordid affair. That is not only deeply disturbing but also outrageous. One hardly needs to be told, least of all the government and its agencies, that it is the moral and legal responsibility of the state to ensure the security of all its citizens. When a citizen vanishes or is kidnapped, such responsibility becomes doubly important in that the state must go all the way to recover the individual in question. We will urge those trying to make capital out of the issue not to do so. We find the opposition claim that the government is behind it, unfounded; basically because there is no evidence to accept such an interpretation. But contrarily, we must express our deep disappointment at the laid-back attitude of the law enforcement people to trace him out, which lends credence to the opposition claim. Indeed, we are of the opinion that until the opposition's claims are corroborated beyond question, the disappearance of Chowdhury Alam must be dealt with as an urgent case of a citizen, and quite a well-known one at that, vanishing into thin air.

A word or two about the role of the police must be said here. Alam's family has claimed that the police refused to record the case of the abduction being committed by plain-clothed law enforcers and only obliged when the family accused unidentified persons of being behind the act. The police should have gone into immediate action once the disappearance was reported. It is not their job to tell families of crime victims how they should file cases or who should or should not be made accused in the complaint. There are clear, specific laws in operation to deal with such crimes and the police should have applied those in trying to trace Alam and those who made off with him, even if those accused were law-enforcers. That they have been sitting on the matter demonstrates a clear laidback attitude on the part of those who we expect to do better.

We demand that concerted, full-fledged efforts be made to recover Chowdhury Alam. The disappearance of a citizen is no light matter. And the state cannot and must not give the impression that it has nothing to do about it. The home minister must see to it that a full, swift and efficient operation is launched to have Alam recovered and restored to his family.

## Holding the price line

A sharp eye on supply and distribution is the key

**L**ESS than a month to go before Ramadan, the market of essentials is smarting under price pressure. Even though it is a peculiar seasonal phenomenon in this country, the degree of restiveness of the market at this stage is purely speculative and artificial; for the stocks, we are assured, remain adequate with more in the pipe-line. Given our rather critical dependence on import for the availability of Ramadan essentials, their timely procurement, keeping pace with projected demands is of crucial importance. Simultaneously, steady supply and distribution of domestically produced commodities will have to be maintained.

In all of this, joint monitoring by commerce and food ministries and business community leaders, going beyond occasional consultative engagement can make a huge difference in the fight against speculative, manipulative and syndicated trading. In playing out its role, the government should refrain from interfering in the working of market forces of demand and supply. Let them penalise the hoarders and speculators, but in the main their job is to facilitate balanced demand-supply equations by flushing the channels clean of muscle-men, rent-seekers and middlemen.

It is reported that the commerce ministry will have four price monitoring teams operate a fortnight or so before Ramadan. Hopefully, such teams will include representatives of commerce and chamber bodies to associate the private sector with the process. Of course, the FBCCI and their units together with representatives from the retail networks will be protective of their business interests, but only subject to certain business ethics. This is the time for extensive business to reap decent profits overall through spread of sales.

As for food stock, the minister is confident of its sufficiency, although of the targeted four lakh tonnes of boro procurement, only a half has reached his silos. His raising the procurement price by Taka 3 per kg has apparently fuelled a price hike in the cereal market. But the hindrance placed by the millers to the procurement of the remainder of the targeted amounts has been removed by their retraction from the earlier demand for the higher purchase rate with a retrospective effect. All the same, the PM has stressed import and wheat in substantial quantities seem to be in the pipeline. International prices are still not high, so that if we should need to import rice it better be negotiated from now on to avoid higher costs. As for distribution to the poor and middle income groups OMS operations will have to be elaborately planned.

The Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) has been historically reduced to a speck; even last year it played a negligible role. TCB will have to be a sizeable public sector player for fair distribution of commodities at affordable prices. It must be given all the logistic and resource supports it needs.

Principally, however, whatever fiscal intervention and bank lending would be needed for energetic private sector trading must not be denied them.



## Of Kamal Hossain . . . of what might have been

In this era of all-consuming mediocrity and irritating pedantry, Kamal Hossain speaks to us of the brilliance he and his generation personified in the days when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was our window to the world.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

**I**T is time to recall, in these moments of depressing, partisan, parochial, dispiriting, decadent politics, the times in which Dr. Kamal Hossain was one of our reasons for hope. There is a strange, inexplicable silence into which the former foreign minister and reputed politician has lapsed. But, again, that is understandable.

In these past three decades, this nation has not quite derived the advantages, in the intellectual as well as political sense of the meaning, it ought to have from a full utilisation of his abilities because of the careful way in which the politicians who came after him pushed him into the sidelines. Losing Kamal Hossain signified a de-linking of our souls with our past, an era with which he was closely associated. Losing him also meant, in a sad way, the nation's losing its way into the future.

Kamal Hossain is the last survivor of the generation which gave us our greatest cause for happiness and our biggest reason for being as a nation-state. He was a passionate defender of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the so-called Agartala conspiracy case.

As the future Father of the Bengali nation

vigorously argued the case for the Six Points program at the round table conference in Rawalpindi in March 1969, it was Kamal Hossain, in association with Syed Nazrul Islam and Tajuddin Ahmed, who underscored the legal aspects of the program. He was young, he was idealistic and he knew that the future belonged to those who had the courage to speak up for Bengal.

Bangabandhu knew of the principles that defined Kamal Hossain. And it was these principles that brought Hossain into active politics, through the elections of 1970. It remains a definitive point in Bengali history that between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, politics in Bangladesh was forged, practised and made honourable by Bangabandhu and the men around him. Those were times of intense hope and profound dreams. Kamal Hossain was a significant presence in that constellation of stars.

In these decades since the restoration of elected government in 1991, Kamal Hossain's ought to have been a voice for Bangladesh in the world beyond our frontiers. That he did not become that voice, that he was not given the space to be that embodiment of a vibrant nationhood, speaks of our collective treachery with our history. It was his singular move that saw the

Awami League unified under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina in May 1981.

It was his spirited campaign for the presidency against Justice Abdus Sattar in November of that year which first informed us that a return to values, after the devastation of August-November 1975, was possible. He lost the election, but through him we won a moral battle. Indeed, morality and principled politics have always been part of the Kamal Hossain persona.

When Bangabandhu fell to the forces of counter-revolution in August 1975, Hossain was on a visit abroad as foreign minister. He could have returned home and linked up with Khondokar Moshtaque Ahmed. That he did not, that indeed he chose a life in exile and in intellectual pursuits abroad demonstrated yet once more his loyalty to the ideals along which he had shaped his political career.

It was similar loyalty that Kamal Hossain had upheld as a prisoner of the state of Pakistan during the entirety of the War of Liberation. There were the rumours about his "negative" role in those dark moments of history. Many were the accusations hurled at him by those who assumed he had betrayed Bangabandhu. Unbeknownst to us all, he refused to cave in to Pakistani pressure, to tell the Yahya Khan junta what it wanted to hear: that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the man who had caused the crisis in "East Pakistan."

Despite his family connections in West Pakistan, despite the chances of his leading a good, safe life minus Mujib and the Awami League, he stood by his leader. As the junta

prepared to try Bangabandhu on charges of treason and waging war against Pakistan in August 1971, the Bengali leader demanded that Kamal Hossain be his defence lawyer. That would be a problem, said the Pakistanis, for Hossain could not at that point serve as his lawyer. Bangabandhu, ever the shrewd political being, understood then that his constitutional adviser was, like him, in detention. The two men were reunited in January 1972. Pakistan could not hold them in its grip any more.

For all his silence, for all our failure to have him occupy centre stage as Bangladesh's elder statesman, its voice of wisdom, Kamal Hossain remains our claim on the past and our dream of what might have been. In March 1971, he articulated our case at the political negotiations before Pakistan opted to burn and pillage and rape and murder.

As law minister, he was a leading voice in the formulation of the nation's constitution. In his role as foreign minister, he was a powerful, purposeful and articulate spokesperson for Bangladesh abroad. He ought to have been president. He could have been Bangladesh's prime minister, of depth and substance.

In this era of all-consuming mediocrity and irritating pedantry, Kamal Hossain speaks to us of the brilliance he and his generation personified in the days when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was our window to the world. His has been a life pursued in dedication to a cause. Our lives could have been an emulation of his.

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## Aquino: New chapter to Philippine dynasty?

Another issue that the president has to handle is land reform and redistribution in the country, even though his family had declined in the past to distribute land from its vast sugar plantations, as is required by the government's agrarian overhaul program.

HARUN UR RASHID

**T**HE Philippine presidential election was held on May 10 and Benigno Aquino III (popularly known as Noyonoy Aquino), the son of two democracy heroes (his father Benigno, a former assassinated senator and mother, former president Corazon), won handsomely and was proclaimed as president in a joint session of Congress on June 9. He was sworn in as the Philippines' 15th president on June 30.

Aquino's surge to the presidency was driven by a wave of emotion following the death of Corazon Aquino last August, with the family's reputation for propriety and honesty a powerful lure after two administrations dogged by allegations of corruption.

Outgoing President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo did not stay for Aquino's inauguration, which was watched by former presidents Joseph Estrada and Fidel Ramos.

Many in the crowd were dressed in yellow, the colour of the 1986 People Power revolution that drove dictator-President Ferdinand Marcos from office and swept Aquino's mother Corazon to power (the writer was Bangladesh ambassador to the Philippines at the time). Yellow confetti was sprinkled over the crowd from helicopters

shortly before Aquino III took his presidential oath.

In his first speech as president, Aquino said he would fight poverty, improve the investment climate, and seek a just resolution to a long-running Muslim separatist insurgency in the south of the poor, mainly Catholic, nation.

"My parents sought nothing less, and died for nothing less, than democracy, peace and prosperity," Aquino told an adoring crowd that police estimated at about half a million people. "I am blessed by this legacy. I shall carry the torch forward," he said at the ceremony at the Quirino Grandstand near Manila Bay in the old part of the capital.

Aquino later hosted a reception for the diplomatic community and attended a street party open to the public.

Aquino's first directive declared vacant about 4,000 executive positions in the bureaucracy, although he extended contracts of key officers, particularly in the presidential palace, for at least 30 days to prevent any disruption.

He swore into office 26 cabinet secretaries (ministers) on June 30, and asked his cabinet to identify top spending priorities ahead of his submission of the 2011 budget in July or August.

Aquino inherits an economy whose annual growth rate over the past two decades has averaged 3.7% lower than most economies in Southeast Asia. He has to tame a budget deficit which is estimated at \$6.4 billion, that reached nearly 4% of GDP in 2009, which he said he would first do by enforcing existing tax laws to improve collection before considering any increase in tax rates.

Finance Secretary Cesar Purisima said that the new government had a mandate to implement existing programs more aggressively against tax evaders and smugglers, with charges to be filed soon against individuals and business groups. Prosecutions would encourage greater compliance, but the public also needed to accept that taxes had to be paid, he said.

A day before he took oath of office, President Aquino said that he was setting up a Truth Commission to investigate allegations of corruption, electoral fraud and rights abuses against his predecessor Arroyo and her administration. Arroyo denies any wrongdoing.

"To those who talk about reconciliation, if they mean that they would like us to simply forget about the wrongs that they have committed in the past, we have this to say; there can be no reconciliation without justice," Aquino said.

Aquino said he would review Arroyo's "midnight" appointments -- those made late in her term. He took the oath of office from Associate Justice Conchita Carpio-Morales rather than Chief Justice Renato Corona, whom Arroyo appointed after the May 10 election.

Arroyo is not departing the political scene, having won a seat in the lower house of Congress in the May election, and she could potentially block some of the new president's agenda.

Apart from corruption, Aquino faces problems from decades-old insurgencies by Muslim separatists on southern Mindanao Island and Maoist-led guerrillas, and restoring public and investor confidence in governance and institutions.

"My government will be sincere in dealing with all the peoples of Mindanao. We are committed to a peaceful and just settlement of conflict, inclusive of the interests of all," he said. He made no mention of the Maoist insurgency.

The new president is also faced with the task of improving human rights record. One rights group, Karapatan, reportedly said it had documented more than 1,200 cases of extra-judicial killings of activists as well as the torture and abduction of hundreds more.

Another issue that the president has to handle is land reform and redistribution in the country, even though his family had declined in the past to distribute land from its vast sugar plantations, as is required by the government's agrarian overhaul program.

The challenge now is how to use the enormous goodwill that President Aquino has to get the country of about 94 million people on the path of democracy and economic growth.

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