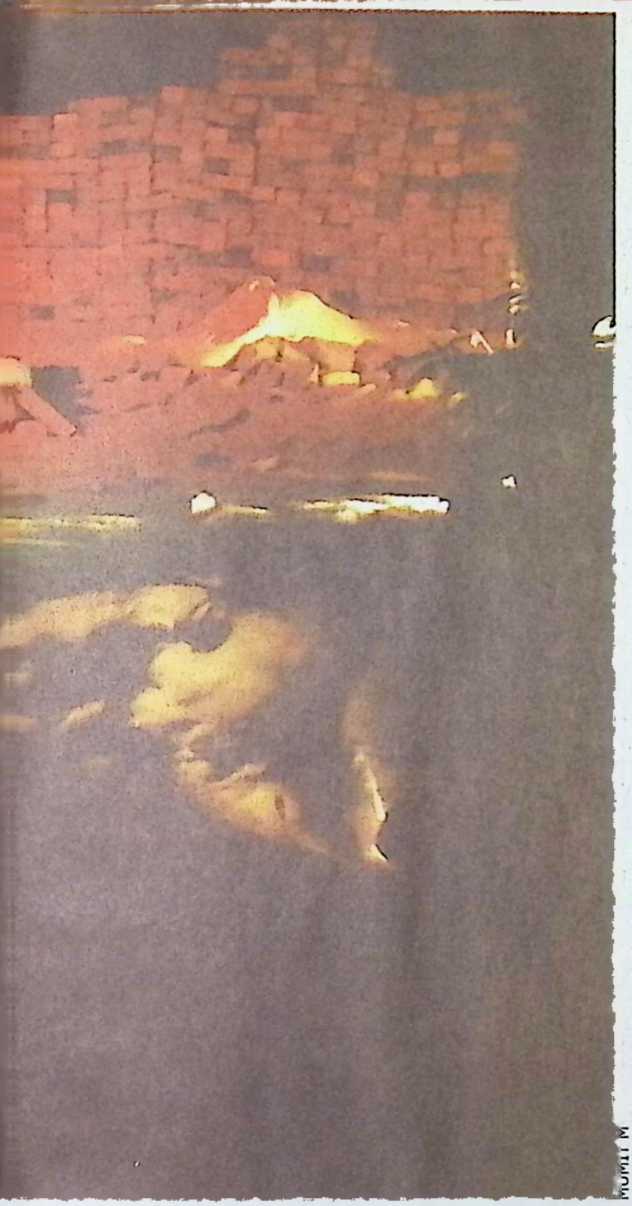


WHEN the war crime trials in Bangladesh became a media focus and a subject of intense public debate once again during the elections last year, we heard several questions. Should this be a priority for a poverty-stricken country that has other daunting tasks before it to feed and rear its millions? How would the government go about the trial when the real criminals from the occupying Pakistani forces were let go decades before? How do you go about rescinding an amnesty that set free those accused of collaboration for war crimes years ago? Would this be fair to resuscitate a War Trials Act when the majority of those accused of the crimes are long gone or are in a safe haven? Is the demand for war crimes trial now a highly orchestrated act to settle old political vendetta?

A commentator once remarked that these questions were neither new, nor the thoughts original. The population of every country transitioning out of war and with experience of mass atrocities comprises, roughly speaking, two camps -- those who want justice, and those who want to let bygones be bygones. To this, however, I will add a third camp. This is the camp of the quislings who had sabotaged our war of independence from within, who had never believed in Bengali nationhood, and had never come to grips with our new identity separate from an ideology that they continue to be beholden to. In fact it is this third camp -- the neo fifth columnists in our country -- who have the most to gain if the trials for war crime are never to be held. These are the same people who denigrate our war of liberation and the sacrifices of millions by labeling it as a "civil war", a war between brothers that we should leave behind us and forge ahead. To them the millions who lost their lives, the millions who lost property, and countless women who were raped, are nothing but unfortunate victims of a civil war -- mere collateral damages.

Let us a for a moment ignore the divisions on the war crime issue, and focus on what led to the resurgence of the genocide deniers and the causes of our collective national amnesia of the war atrocities. This did not come overnight. It came through gradual rehabilitation of the quislings -- both economic and political -- by the same elements who had been opposed to our birth, and machination of the political process to reestablish a political ideology that we fought against.

We fought a war to rid ourselves of an oppressive regime. A regime led by a force that never recognised us for what we are, denigrated our language and culture, demeaned our values and wanted to permanently enslave us to an ideology that the majority among us could not relate to. Therefore we fought this war; a war seeking liberation from a bigoted political philosophy that was grounded on religious intolerance, communal and ethnic divisions and hypocrisy.

The values of our liberation war were secularism, democracy and religious freedom. To our delight and to the applause of an admiring world the leaders of our war of liberation and the father of our nation enshrined these values in our Constitution. But in less than four years of our independence, these values were thrown into the dustbin when the country would catapult back to military dictatorship and authoritarian rule.

The first process started with the repeal of the Collaborators Act in December 1975 by the new military regime that had toppled the