

## One more shocking murder

*When will we realise that impunity feeds criminality?*

**W**E are shocked by the murder in broad daylight of a local Awami League leader in the city on Friday. The death is all the more disturbing because the incident took place as Fazlul Huq, general secretary of the ward 41 unit of the ruling party, was on his way to offer Juma prayers in a mosque. We condemn the killing and offer our sincere condolences to the family of the deceased. At the same time, we cannot but point out that the incident is a potent sign of how law and order has been taking a slide in these past few weeks. The manner in which individuals have been attacked and killed are all a pointer to the blatant nature in which crime has been committed in recent times.

We appreciate the fact that Minister for Home Sahara Khatun has taken swift action over the murder on Friday. Two policemen have been suspended while two others have been transferred. Such action is without question decisive. Even so, it remains worrying that while the government has acted with speed in the matter of the murder of one of its own, it has done precious little regarding similar incidents involving workers of other political parties as well as simple citizens. So far, to our regret, the authorities have demonstrated a lackadaisical attitude to crime especially when it does not affect ruling party loyalists. Indeed, many have been the occasions when government functionaries have claimed that law and order is improving and in fact is better than at any time earlier. Such absurd claims were made despite the fact that crimes like murder and kidnapping were happening every day in the capital. To our consternation, the kind of swift action that has now been taken on the Fazlul Huq murder has sadly been missing in the case of others. It is our belief, which we think is shared by many in the country, that the relative indifference with which crimes have so far been approached has given criminals a degree of impunity the consequences of which we are now beginning to see in different dimensions.

We expect action on the crime front in a manner that demonstrates the seriousness of the government regarding the maintenance of law and order. The recent murders in the capital only expose the hollowness of the claims by ministers and police officials to the effect that the police have successfully been handling crime. The reality is out there for everyone to see. The home minister, being responsible for the security of life and property of all citizens, must convince people that her responsibility is not just to her party but, on a bigger basis, to Bangladesh's people irrespective of their political affiliations or loyalties. She must firmly lead her ministry in curbing crime whenever and wherever it occurs. Any and all irresponsible utterances by ministers and others must be curbed, something that the cabinet itself must ensure through its periodic deliberations.

Finally, we note that unless crime is dealt with firmly and without any hint of selectivity being there, more families will lose their own and so find themselves in crises of a varied sort. Too many widows make the front pages of newspapers these days. How many more such unfortunate women must we see before we can claim that life is secure and worthwhile for us?

## Exit of Bin Ali

*Isn't there a message for the Arab world?*

**A**FTER weeks of upheaval, which started as a protest against rising food prices and then snowballed into a popular movement, Tunisia turned the page on President Zine Al Abidine Bin Ali, ushering in an opportunity for change. He ruled the Arab country for 23 years with an iron fist now making way to Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi who has taken over provisionally as interim President. He has promised to call 'free and plural' elections in six months.

This is a momentous event, being the product of arguably the first popular uprising leading to ouster of an elected President in the Arab world. What repercussions it will have in changing political landscape of countries in the volatile region, only time will unfold. Nevertheless, it does contain a message of immediate relevance to a shrinking world of authoritarianism.

Stifling of popular democratic aspirations and curbs on civil liberties, topped off by rising unemployment undid Bin Ali's entrenched hold on power as his repertoire of tricks to wriggle out of the mess ran out of steam and crumbled before his own eyes.

Arab leaders would do well if they give more space to freedom of expression and democratic aspirations of peoples in their countries. Of course, they have created riches and wealth leading to affluence in society. Yet, some work needs to be done in the areas of democratic dispensation, empowerment of people including that of women in particular, providing them with freedom of expression and voice in running the state affairs.

The ouster of Bin Ali should be an eye-opener to long serving rulers who cling to power without having delivered good governance in a truly participatory dispensation redolent with respect for the will and aspirations of the people.

It would be sometime before Tunisia settles down to normalcy. But given that it is a country rich in natural resources, a sustainable democratic system can put the country firmly back on a road to reconstruction, progress

# Lure of Bhutanese happiness index

ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

**T**HE Prime Minister of Bhutan L.J.Y Thinley, during his recent visit to Bangladesh, gave a lecture on Gross National Happiness in Dhaka University. He described people in today's world as "economic animals" and characterised development activities as tools for materialistic growth. He said that societies were doing little to make people happy.

The prime minister was not pointing a finger at any particular country but to all persons whose purpose in life is only to create wealth and damn the finer aspects of life. Countries are being ranked on the basis of wealth (Gross National Product) so created. Bhutan, however, employs a set of indices each year to determine the state of happiness of her people. To the Bhutanese leadership happiness is an end in itself.

The study of happiness and its use as an index to measure human welfare goes back in history. Adam Smith, an English economist of the eighteenth century and Jeremy Benjamin, a philosopher, had seriously studied happiness as an economic phenomenon. But with the introduction of quantitative methods in economics, happiness fell out of fashion and utility became synonymous with income.

A century passed before Richard Easterlin, an American economist, revisited this relationship between happiness and income. He discovered a paradox -- average happiness level did not increase as countries got richer. There was also no clear relationship between average per capita GDP and average happiness level across countries, once such countries crossed a certain minimum level of per capita income. This is generally known as the Easterlin Paradox.

Apart from economists, scientists have also investigated happiness. Initially, they determined that no effort to increase happiness is lasting as there was an "unchangeable and biological set point to happiness." It is a person's genes and upbringing that decide and bring us back to our set point of happiness.

Nowadays, however, neuroscientists say happiness is tangible and is the result of brain activity. You can see and even measure happiness. Yet, there are opinions in the scientific community that says happiness is pleasure without desire, a state of contentment and indifference. Such a state is a kind of bliss which Buddhists seek and experience through meditation.

Enter Bhutan's royal family. In 1972, the former Bhutanese King Jigme Singye Wangchuk, who opened his country to modernisation, was determined to build an economy that would serve Bhutan's unique culture based on Buddhist spiritual values. He, therefore, introduced happiness of humans as the key indica-



BRUNO MUFF

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tor of growth.

After King Wangchuk, learned Bhutanese themselves developed a survey to measure the general level of wellbeing of the people. Other academics around the world then devised policy screening tools to measure potential impact of economic projects and programmes on what Bhutanese call as Gross National Happiness (GNH). They suggested that human society benefited more when material and spiritual development occurred side by side to complement and reinforce each other.

GNH has four pillars: sustainable development, preservation of cultural values, conservation of the environment and establishment of good governance. GNH is also applicable across various cultures. Thus, it can be used equally in a Buddhist polity as well as in a Muslim society or in the Christian world.

There are also eight contributors to happiness: physical, mental and spiritual health, time balance, community vitality, cultural vitality, education, living standards, good governance and ecolog-

ical vitality.

Bhutan is a country with a unique history. The country was never conquered or colonised. The Bhutanese have, therefore, developed a culture free from outside influence. They cherish their institution of monarchy and have developed a deep sense of nationhood. So when they arrived in the modern world they already had an ancient culture strapped on to their backs.

Their pristine environment is another element that always dominated their lives. They live among beautiful mountains which have protected them from the vagaries of nature and also from human depredations. Living in splendid isolation they became a happy people.

The people of Bhutan practice Mahayana Buddhism and their religious institutions continue to play an important part in their lives. Monks there play key roles in their daily lives. Hence, this simple life style easily enhances their happiness. The contentment of the people is the basis which defines what they refer to as economic growth. The

# Achievements need to be sustained

ZAHURUL ALAM

**E**VALUATION of the government's two-year performance continues. Some evaluators have concluded that the government has failed to keep its election pledges. They have their own logic, evaluation methodology and basis for such a conclusion. More logical, however would be to measure success level based on the assessment of the nature of activities, prevailing socio-economic and political environment, resource mobilisation opportunities, time needed for accomplishment of targets vs. time spent, etc. The conclusions often ignored the above factors, which reduced the value of most conclusions, leaving room for doubt about their neutrality and fairness.

Two important factors need to be brought to the notice of the evaluators. Firstly, two years are not enough to make a complete evaluation. This is especially pertinent for Bangladesh that experienced long lasting military regimes and persistent mismanagement and bad governance for half of its life. A corrupt system has polluted the socio-political life of the nation.

The bureaucracy has not only become inefficient due to undemocratic and colonial legacy, it also lacks the capacity to implement decisions of the political governments. All elected governments are compelled to use the bureaucracy for implementing their plans. The implication is that the developmental goals of the governments are delayed and obstructed due to its incompetence and non-responsiveness to people's aspira-

tions and requirements. The tax payers are victims of such delays and non-implementation.

Secondly, in performance evaluation, the nature of the job to be performed and the required timeframe for accomplishment need to be considered. It is irrational to expect major changes and achievements in all sectors irrespective of the initial and the current situation.

For example, sweeping changes in the power sector within a short time would be more than an extraordinary expectation. Zero level of development in the power sector inherited by the present government, and alleged corruption during the previous elected government, could also be taken into consideration in evaluating the power sector performance. In general, same applies to all other sectors.

Addition of 1,000 MW of electricity to the national grid in two years is an obvious success, which needs to be recognised. The prime minister has announced her government's determination to add another 2,361 MW to the national grid by next year. Achievements

and deficiencies in other sectors are visible and do not need elaboration. The government's plan to mitigate or abolish the deficiencies and attain expected results has been mentioned by the prime minister in her recent speech.

The most challenging issue for the government now is the price spiral of essentials. Bangladesh is a least developed economy with very limited purchasing power, and practically no savings of the general mass. Price spiral of the essentials, especially of rice, puts people's survival at stake as rice price still acts as the determinant of prices of all other essentials. Immediately after the formation of the current government, rice price and subsequently prices of all other essentials came down because of some positive actions taken by the new government.

However, it could not be sustained for long. In a year's time the coarse rice price recorded an increase of 25%. The current price of coarse rice is around Tk.35 per kg, an increase of 75% over two years, which is quite unusual for a harvesting period when the prices generally show a downward trend. The connotation is that there are factors other than the free

Bhutanese prime minister's assertion that people around the world are not pursuing happiness is somewhat true, if seen through his lens.

The science of happiness, however, poses serious questions for politicians everywhere.

Although governments in many countries have been able to produce income and wealth for their people, this has not brought happiness to them. Therefore, the very basis of modern life and its principles are being challenged.

Tony Blair, former British prime minister had once said: "Money isn't everything. Delivering the best possible quality of life for us all means more than concentrating solely on economic growth." David Cameron, the present British prime minister, had said: "We should be thinking not just what is good for putting money in people's pockets, but also what is good for putting joy in people's hearts." The idea that politics should be about creating the "greatest happiness of the greatest number" still holds good and deserves serious attention.

In Bangladesh, politics is of a different genre. It is practiced by a few to create enormous wealth. But the wealth is not always meant to be shared with the greatest number, but only with the privileged few who helped to create it. The rest are required to fend for themselves, if they can.

Politics in Bangladesh is also disempowering. We often have to witness how our environment, our culture and even our time balance are subject to influences beyond our control. Our happiness, as per Bhutanese standards, is always under severe test. When we seek good governance, happiness instantly becomes a distant goal. Our politicians do not always know what good governance is and how they can provide it to their people. Hence, they are unable to make us happy.

The Bhutanese prime minister has raised a pertinent issue before our politicians and leaders in society. The question that beggars us all is what type of animal we really wish to be -- economic, social or just spiritual. Or do we rest our case by being a happy person. We need to think, and seek the answer from within us.

The lure to formulate our own happiness index is quite compelling. In that event, we need to describe what should constitute happiness to a Bangladeshi. Is it only the Bhutanese eight that we know about or are other items need to be added to build our own happiness index. Maybe our economists and planners, philosophers and politicians should consider a brain-storming on this subject.

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market forces that instigate the price hike. Hopefully, the government will undertake fruitful measures to bring down the prices of rice and other essentials within the purchasing capacity of the general mass.

This is extremely important for the government, since Bangladesh's history shows that popularity is largely dependent on the price of essentials, particularly that of rice. The rice price hike investigation needs to look into the existence of any trust, syndicate or monopolistic venture in the business sector and ensure their abolition immediately.

The existing market policies do not address the free market concept and hence are not suitable for protecting consumer interests through broad-based competition in the market. Neither can they be instrumental in preventing the formation of monopolistic coalitions, business syndicates and trusts. The government should immediately pass anti-syndicate law in the parliament with the provision of heavy penalties in the case of violation, similar to those in many countries, aimed at preventing monopolistic practices and ensuring free market competition.

In a nutshell, for sustaining its popularity and moving forward with the election pledge, the ruling alliance needs to concentrate on an urgent basis on curbing the price spiral of the essentials. All other achievements of the government will otherwise be washed away leaving no trace.

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