

## CROSS TALK

# The chainsmoker's dilemma of history

## That dark night in 1971

### Remembering the martyred

**F**ORTY years ago tonight, seventy five million Bengalis were witness to an orgy of killing and pillage and rape by the Pakistan army equalled by few in modern history. At a time when the people of the then East Pakistan as well as West Pakistan looked forward to an honourable, democratic solution to the political crisis caused by the machinations of a class of West Pakistani politicians and the military junta led by General Yahya Khan, the regime went for the dishonourable act of subverting the people's aspirations through a resort to force. Under what was euphemistically given out as Operation Searchlight, the state of Pakistan launched a genocide that would leave millions dead and the lives of those who survived changed forever.

On the night of March 25, 1971, it was plain deceit the junta resorted to. While on the one hand it gave the impression that a way out of the morass was being found, on the other it went busily preparing the army to unleash the calamity that eventually was not only to dash all hopes for democracy but also undermine the very foundations of the state of Pakistan. General Yahya Khan fled out of Dhaka secretly in the evening, but not before he had given the order to his officers to go for a military solution to the problem. On that night of terror, thousands were murdered by the soldiers. Among those killed were respected academics, students, policemen, East Pakistan Rifles personnel, rickshaw pullers, indeed citizens from all walks of life. The brutality of the Pakistan army extended to the Central Shaheed Minar and Kalibari at the Race Course (today's Suhrawardy Udyan), which the soldiers destroyed in unmitigated frenzy.

It was a night of unspeakable horror and unadulterated evil the Bengali nation went through on March 25, 1971. We remember those who died on that night and on all the days and nights that followed, right till our achievement of victory. Their sacrifices were to pave the road to our freedom. And those who killed on that night were forever tainted by ignominy.

## No election to Zilla Parishad

### The issue needs a rethink

**T**HE Zilla Parishads are now set to have government-appointed chairmen. Prime minister Sheikh Hasina, while informing the Jatiya Sangsad (JS) of the government's decision, has, however, assured the nation that the objective of this arrangement is to strengthen the local government system.

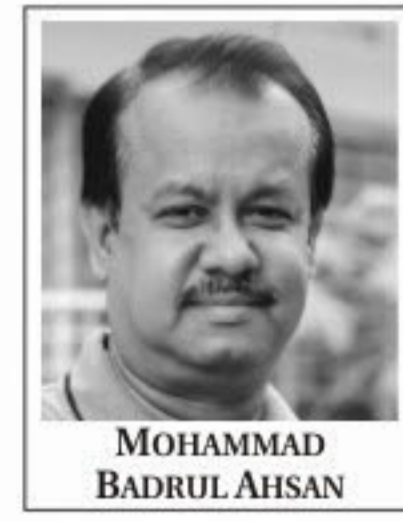
The prime minister's assurances aside, what still baffles comprehension is how can a non-elected body strengthen the local government system?

It is worthwhile to note that the article 59 of the Constitution has made it quite clear that "Local Government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to bodies, composed of persons elected in accordance with law." Oddly though, as far as the tradition goes, no election was ever held to form Zilla Parishad bodies. The practice of appointing MPs as Zilla Parishad chairmen was introduced during the rule of Ershad in 1988 under, Zilla Parishad Act. However, in 2000 the then Awami League government by repealing that Act framed another law that required an elected body to constitute Zilla Parishad.

So, the question that naturally arises is what exigency has come about now that the government is shifting from its original stance in favour of this new arrangement? The 15-member Zilla parishad conceived of in this scheme will be but the same old system of selecting rather than electing a Zilla parishad body, but presented in a new package, though not clearly outlined.

We would like to point out that a non-elected local government body runs the risk of being tinkered by the bureaucracy or the party in power. We also know from previous experience, how these local government bodies became ineffectual as well as a tool to serve the purpose of the executives of the state. Though elected local government bodies can also be tampered with as far as its autonomy goes, there is still room for accountability in an elected body.

If the government is earnest about strengthening the Zilla Parishad, as the prime minister has given out at the JS, it would do well to have a rethink of its present stance and thereby live up



**L**AWRENCE Lifschultz is a veteran American journalist, who came to Dhaka to depose before the High Court. He came at our invitation,

albeit at his own expense. He was no less eager to tell than we were ready to listen. Lifschultz had covered the military trial of Colonel Taher in 1976. Shortly afterwards he was expelled from the country.

Thanks to Lifschultz he came. For 35 years he carried the burden of our truth. And he carried it with conviction. At long last he got to clear his chest before a legitimate authority in this country, and the verdict announced last Tuesday was a vindication of his hope. Lifschultz must have gone back a lighter man than he arrived. The weight of unspoken truth can sit like a heavy stone on the chest.

Hope he also understood. His country has 70,000 tons of nuclear waste material and it doesn't know where to put it. Likewise, this country has its historical waste and it doesn't know where to dump it. We have often made others the mule for the burden of our own conscience.

In an interview with a local television, Lifschultz said something of veritable consequence. Bangladesh must deal with the blanks in its history. True, we have many unresolved mysteries. Many political killings have been left dangling like loose ends.

Lifschultz knows it all too well. Many such blanks punctuate his country's history. John F Kennedy was shot dead in Dallas. Robert Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles. Martin Luther King was gunned down in Memphis. Many Americans still believe in conspiracy theories that for each of these murders only hired



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hands were captured, while real culprits roamed free.

Hollywood director Oliver Stone made a movie on the JFK assassination, suggesting that it was the work of the military-industrial complex in the United States. E. Howard Hunt was a CIA station chief and at the time of his death his son released tapes, which implicated vice-president Lyndon B. Johnson in the Kennedy killing. All of these conspiracy theories were based on circumstantial evidence. In other words, people required an inference to connect it to a conclusion of fact.

Lifschultz returned to connect the dots for us. He was not an eyewitness to the trial of Colonel Taher, but it

happened within his earshot. Lipschultz was there when the trial took place, standing outside the special court inside the central jail and taking pictures of people ducking their heads. He also knew a lot of people who knew what was happening. It is possible Lifschultz had second-hand access to first-hand information.

We all know, and Lifschultz does also, that after 35 years it's too late personally for both Colonel Taher and Ziaur Rahman. But a closure was necessary in this case to get rid of a blank in our history. It was necessary for all of us, particularly for Taher's family, his friends and admirers. All these years they have suffered in quiet

anguish.

Lifschultz, however, should know that blanks are unavoidable in history. Every country has its share of conspiracy theories and every country has its share of unresolved mysteries. Many people worldwide believe George Bush went after elusive WMDs in Iraq because he wanted to seek his father's revenge on Saddam.

How much of history is hypothesis and how much of it is hypocrisy is hard to tell. History written by the victor is not what it should be if the vanquished wrote it. It would have a different vantage point if the bottom, not the top, were to write history.

In Bangladesh, history has been played like a seesaw. The ruling history goes up, the losing history goes down. Again, what goes up also comes down. Now we see it, now we don't. Our politicians like frenzied drivers always miss truth in their blind spot.

Lifschultz came a long way to tell us what he knew, and he didn't come for nothing. Many people in this country probably knew as much, even more, but they haven't opened their mouths. University of Oregon psychologist Paul Slovic has a theory that may explain their mindset. "Psychic numbing" is what he calls it. Human beings get worked up when one or two lives are at stake, then the numbers begin to blur and they tune out.

We have tuned out in this country. We have played Russian roulette with truth, putting it in a revolver and spinning the cylinder for so long that we don't know if and when it will fire the actual shot. Truth can set us free only if we can set it free. But not so when blanks become fillers and truth is lost in travesty. We are caught in a chainsmoker's dilemma. Do we put out the finished cigarette? Or, light another off its burning ember?

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## BARE FACTS

# BNP's return to Parliament



**A**FTER boycotting 74 consecutive sittings, the opposition BNP lawmakers led by the party chairperson

Begum Khaleda Zia returned to the House on March 15. Earlier, in a meeting on March 14, the BNP Parliamentary Party decided to join the Parliament. Lawmakers of Jamaat-e-Islami and Bangladesh Jatiya Party, which are partners in the BNP-led alliance, also returned to the House.

The ninth Parliament's eighth session, which is also the first session of 2011, began on January 25 and was addressed by President Zillur Rahman pursuant to Article 73 (2) of the Constitution. BNP joined the eighth session three weeks after it started.

BNP did not attend the second, third, sixth and seventh sessions of the ninth Parliament. It attended the fifth session for only one day. BNP also does not have a satisfactory record of attendance in the sittings of the other sessions that it joined. The leader of the opposition attended only 5 sittings out of the 199 sittings in the last two years.

BNP, which started boycotting Parliament sessions from the second session over the "silly issue" of seating arrangement in the front row, later made several other demands -- withdrawal of "politically motivated cases" against Khaleda Zia, her two sons and other BNP leaders and workers, scrapping of the decision to cancel the lease of Khaleda Zia's cantonment residence, giving BNP lawmakers chairmanship of two more standing committees -- to be fulfilled for it to join the Parliament.

Some people saw a "go it alone"

attitude in the ruling AL in running the Parliament. The AL did not initiate any serious initiative to bring BNP back to the House by addressing some of its genuine grievances.

However, immediately before joining the current session, BNP softened its attitude and limited the demands primarily to the creation of congenial environment for attending the

*The success of parliamentary democracy depends upon the democratic spirit of tolerance, sense of respect, and institutionalism of democracy. Political parties must do everything possible towards developing a political culture that will contribute to the successful functioning of democracy.*

Parliament sittings.

According to some political analysts, the ruling AL actually does not want BNP to join Parliament sessions or stay therein. Even if there is some truth in it, why should BNP give this opportunity to the ruling AL? BNP should not boycott sittings or sessions even if the opposition leader and lawmakers were not shown due respect by the government and the treasury bench.

Parliament is not owned by any political party, whether it is ruling party or otherwise. Parliament is an organ of the state. Here, both the treasury and opposition bench members

will discharge their responsibilities, exercise power and enjoy privileges as per the Constitution and the Rules of Procedure of Parliament. Moreover, BNP should not forget how it behaved with the opposition AL when it (BNP) was in power.

It is true that BNP has a small number of lawmakers. But it is also true that BNP has some very experienced parliamentarians. By attending the sittings of Parliament regularly, BNP may point out the weaknesses in the policies, programmes and activities of the AL-led government.

In a parliamentary system of government, the opposition refers to itself as a shadow government. Therefore, BNP should conduct itself in Parliament in a manner that would persuade the people of the country that it could be an improvement on the AL-led government.

Shortly after her return to the House, Begum Khaleda Zia took the floor. The issues that were highlighted in her hour-long speech include: (a) price hike of foodstuffs and other essentials, (b) deteriorating law and order, (c) shortage of electricity and gas, (d) share market crash, (e) politicisation of administration, (f) turning of Anti-Corruption Commission into a partisan organisation and weakening it by amending the law, (g) controlling of the media, (h) removal of Professor Yunus from Grameen Bank, and (i) killing of Bangladeshis by the BSF of India.

What is more striking is that Khaleda Zia demanded mid-term polls because, according to her, the government has "completely failed to meet people's expectations."

The opposition lawmakers have already submitted notices to the Parliament Secretariat asking for discussions on different issues, including share market crash, soaring food

prices and the sliding law and order situation. Khaleda Zia emphasised that discussions should be held on those important issues in public interest. It is heartening to learn that Speaker Abdul Hamid assured the opposition that he would accept the notices if they "keep coming to the House."

Replying to the AL leaders' criticisms that BNP joined the Parliament to save the membership, Khaleda Zia said that they returned to the House to speak for the people and save the country. In the absence of Prime Minister and Leader of the House Sheikh Hasina, Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury responded to the criticisms made by Khaleda Zia. What is noteworthy is that Matia Chowdhury urged the opposition lawmakers to stay in the House and criticise the government in a constructive way. Apparently, these are encouraging statements.

The success of parliamentary democracy depends upon the democratic spirit of tolerance, sense of respect, and institutionalism of democracy. In Bangladesh, where democracy is yet to take root properly, the political parties, particularly the ruling party or the principal leadership, must do everything possible towards developing a political culture that will contribute to the successful functioning of democracy.

To attain this objective, the leadership of the AL must, inter alia, respect the opinion of the opposition, resolve all political disputes with the spirit of democracy and take all steps to make Parliament effective and vibrant. The BNP-led opposition should also recognise the right of the AL-led alliance to rule the country for the period granted by our Constitution.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### March 25

**1807**  
The Slave Trade Act becomes law, abolishing the slave trade in the British Empire.

**1821**  
Greece revolts against the Ottoman Empire, beginning the Greek War of Independence

**1941**  
The Kingdom of Yugoslavia joins the Axis powers with the signing of the Tripartite Pact

**1943**  
Start of the American amphibious landings in the Philippines a turning point in the Pacific War.

**1957**  
The European Economic Community is established (West Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg)

**1965**  
Civil rights activists led by Martin Luther King, Jr. successfully complete their 4-day 50-mile march from Selma to the capitol in Montgomery, Alabama

**1971**  
Bangladesh Liberation War: Gen Yahya Khan, the Pakistan President leaves Dhaka secretly after issuing orders to launch Operation Searchlight by the Pakistani Armed Forces against the people of Bangladesh. It was to start the greatest genocide since WWII. Around 3000 people were killed on the very first night.

**1975**  
Saudi's King Faisal assassinated King Faisal of Saudi Arabia has died after being shot and killed by a mentally ill nephew.