

BITTER TRUTH

Democracy must not be pressed under boots



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

WITH the parliamentary election due after about two and a half years, the political climate in the country is heating up on the issue of caretaker form of government. A growing sense of despair, intolerance, distrust for each other, and naked manifestation of petty self-interest and an erosion of values have gripped the nation.

All concerned with the development of the country must recognise that economic issues are as vital to maintaining peace as political ones. The situation did not come to such a sorry pass all on a sudden. Leaders at all levels have failed to exploit the resources as well as the potential of the younger generation, who are drifting away from the mainstream of national planning and rejuvenation activities.

With the prime minister and the leader of the opposition taking a tough stance, one with an emphatic "No" and the other with an emphatic "Yes" about holding the next parliamentary election under the caretaker system, the people have become really perturbed about the prospect of political turmoil.

The drama relating to politics, modalities of election, or alleged

rigging in the election or foul play resorted to either before the polls or after the polls, only bring about death and destruction. That means that long-term goals or gains achievable through democracy are sacrificed at the altar of short term-goals for the individual.

Even though BNP has for the time being put on hold *hartal*, the people are afraid that the confrontational politics that will follow in the form of road marches and rallies in consequence of the hard lines the two supreme leaders have taken will throw the whole country into a cauldron.

The use of *hartal* started because of BNP's (then ruling party) intransigence in accepting parliamentary election under a caretaker government after the Magura by-poll fiasco. The biggest casualty in this turmoil is the badly needed economic expansion as investors are wary of venturing into an inflammable area. And the sad fact is that once the "law and order" situation deteriorates, it is difficult to get rid of the scourge by any mechanism.

Shockingly, a continuous barrage of scandals involving the police has given rise to many questions and stoked fears about the crimes committed, more so about those allegedly abetted by members of the law enforcement agency. Who do you call for help when it is the police that you fear most of all? For millions of ordinary Bangladeshis, the

question is far from academic.

Aggrieved people, including businessmen, narrated tales of alleged police harassment and extortion by syndicates reportedly abetted by the law enforcers, in a view-exchange meeting with the home minister and IGP. Remedial measures were announced by the high-ups but past experience suggests that all these assurances will fall on the deaf ears of the police personnel indulging in such crimes. To be sure, it is not only the question of

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the image of the police that is at stake but also the reputation of a democratic government.

These days, the citizens' concern is the lack of security of the disadvantaged ones, namely women and children who are abused not only by the criminals but also, what is worse, reportedly by some members of the police force. This does not mean that all members of the force are bad, but some of them are bringing bad name for the entire

force. In other words, the attitude of the government in condoning the acts is more dangerous than the acts themselves.

It is time the executive also woke up from their deep slumber. While the present government has been struggling to put democracy on a sound footing, so far it has shown little stomach for attempting the difficult job of protecting its own people from the police, not to speak of hardened criminals.

All types of crimes have soared

alarmingly in recent times. Add to this police excesses in either extracting confessions or in dealing with agitating crowds during *hartals*, rallies, processions and road marches. But the national and international clamour against alleged brutalities committed by police and Rab is growing too loud to ignore.

In fact, decades of political meddling have left the country's police force unaccountable to any higher

authority or to the public. During the Ershad regime police were given unlimited power to stifle the political opposition: authorities just turned and closed their eyes as the police resorted to sadistic torture to elicit confessions. The abuse continues unabated.

What is more appalling is that it puts the government in power in poor light. It must be said in fairness to all, especially the law enforcers, that halting the slide in the law and order situation or stopping mayhem in the street, and vandalism of public properties is a prerogative for the law enforcers, and can be done by arresting the agitators. But stamping on the chest of an agitator on the street, as people recently saw in a photo printed in newspapers, only tarnishes the image of the police personnel.

When people belonging to all segments of the society know that it is only the instruments of government that violate individual rights, it is better to cure the disease than the symptoms. This calls for upholding the rule of law and establishing a judiciary that is independent of interference from the executive. It must be emphasised that no nation that disregards rule of law and ignores individual rights can prosper in the long run.

Parties or powers that be would never have dabbled in filthy vote buying tactics on the eve of election if the cases instituted against such

rigging and the false declaration of the candidate's personal history (affidavit) were promptly dealt with. Only an independent judiciary can have the power to protect the rights of an individual from arbitrary state action or from the tyranny of the majority.

There seems to be an unwritten law that somewhere into the second year in office, a government gets into a mid-term crisis and runs out of steam regardless of the size of the majority. People are inclined to think that the prime minister now feels out of sorts in cruising through the bumpy road to achieve the goals she wanted to. The seemingly impulsive stance she has taken on the modalities of conducting the next parliamentary election under a party government is hardly rooted in reality.

As the cynics in the administration continue to defy all prognoses, the country may even burst into protest rallies demanding a credible election with all parties participating in it in a spirit of accommodation by empowering the Election Commission. In a democratic atmosphere, the political leaders, most often treated as repositories of trust and hope, must have the backbone, stamina and courage to hear the harsh truth, and to endure the blow, if it comes because of their wrongdoings.

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New Statistics: 25 million in extreme poverty

JOHNATHAN PERRY

THIS year two major reports came out of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) which, when put together, tell a story about the state of the nation. The first was a preliminary report on the "Household Income & Expenditure Survey (HIES), 2010." The second was the preliminary results of the "Population & Housing Census 2011."

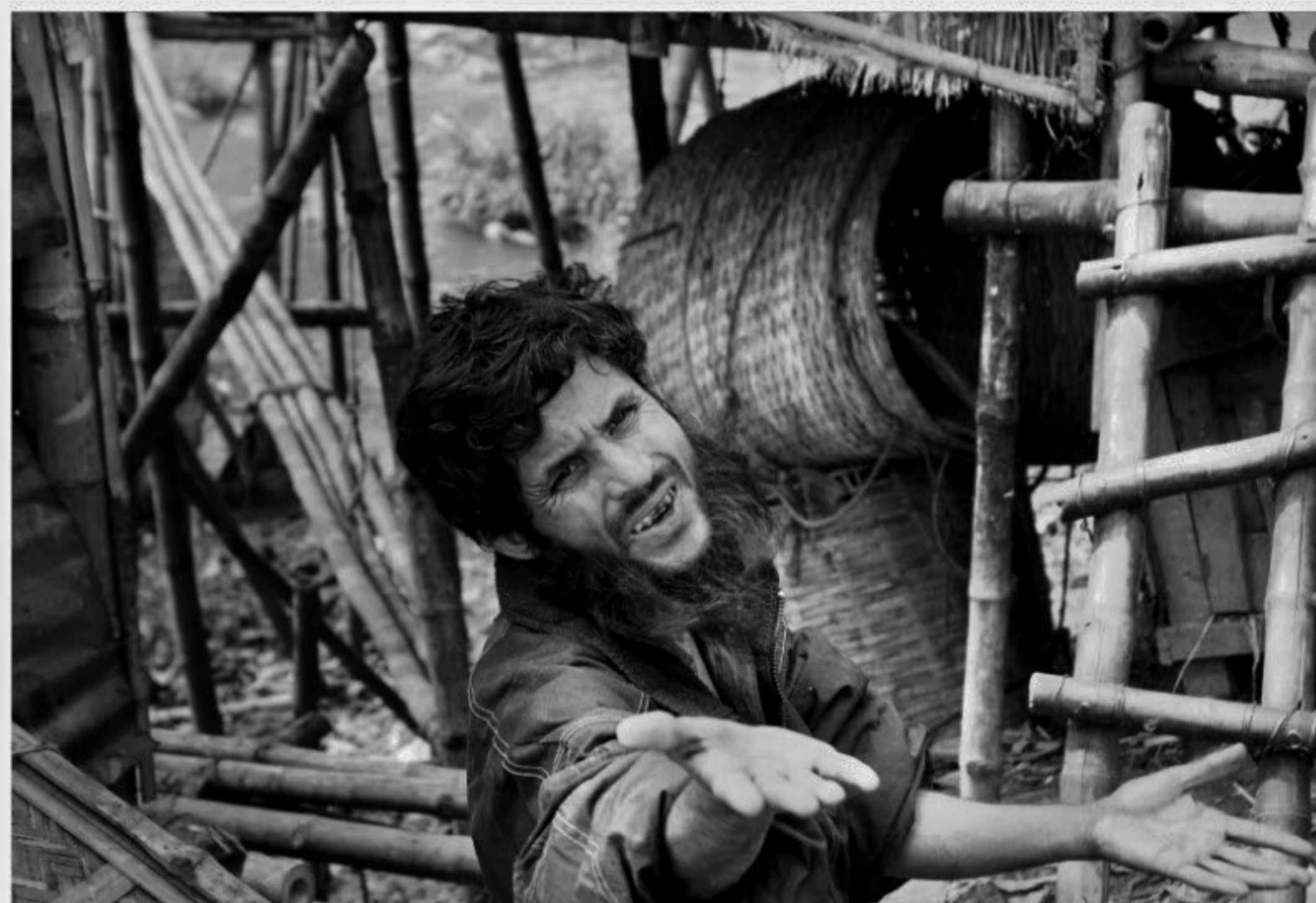
In July, the latest census reported there were 142.3 million people in Bangladesh, making it by most counts the 8th most populous country in the world -- behind China, India and the USA, but ahead of Mexico, Japan and even Russia. In fact, the figure is conservative compared to that of the World Bank's "World Development Indicators," which puts the population at 162.2 million.

Just one month before, the HIES for 2010 had told us that 17.6% of the country currently lives in extreme poverty -- defined as those people whose total expenditure is equal to the food poverty line (the cost of a basket of goods amounting to the consumption of 2,100 Kcal per person day). Combining just these BBS figures equates to approximately 25 million extremely poor people in Bangladesh. To put this figure in context, if all the extreme poor people of Bangladesh were a separate country, they would be the 53rd largest country by population in the world. In fact, there are more extreme poor people in Bangladesh than the entire population of say, Australia.

The message from the BBS and the government of Bangladesh (GoB) is that the rate of poverty reduction in Bangladesh is cause for celebration, and that in general the country is making excellent progress. This cannot be denied -- and certainly, compared with many other countries, the trend of poverty reduction in Bangladesh has indeed been impressive. The most recent numbers suggest that since 2005 (the last HIES) the incidence of extreme poverty in the country has decreased from 25.1% to 17.6%.

However, this narrative from those in power obscures the scale of poverty and extreme poverty in Bangladesh. Let's remind ourselves -- 25 million people living in extreme poverty (using the lower poverty line). If we use the upper poverty line -- defined as those households whose food expenditure is at the food poverty line -- then there are almost 45 million Bangladeshis still living below this threshold.

The size of this country -- updated by this year's census -- conveys a huge moral responsibility on those in power. They are charged to protect and serve the interests of 142.3 million human lives. Too often in domestic and international dialogue about Bangladesh, does the country's strong performance on



MUNEM WASIF/DRINK NEWS

25 million Bangladeshis still live in extreme poverty and we have a responsibility to look beyond the statistics and positive trends paraded by those in power, to these real human lives and ask ourselves and our government: what more can we do?

statistical indicators (like GDP growth or poverty reduction rates) obscure and the cold, hard facts about absolute numbers of people living in moderate poverty and extreme poverty. These huge numbers (45 and 25 million respectively) tell us that there is a long way still to go. They remind us that we should keep pressure on those in power to make the strongest possible efforts to improve the lives of those who, by any measure, would rank as some of the world's most vulnerable people.

This article does not aim to belittle the achievements of the people in this country in the years since independence. In spite of numerous challenges, including natural disasters, economic crises as well as deficient government service provision, the people of Bangladesh have managed to not only survive, but also to drive their country forwards and upwards. These achievements have been momentous and should be celebrated. However, we should always try to refocus the narrative on the huge challenges ahead for those most vulnerable.

A major concern from the recent survey is that extreme poverty has decreased slower than moderate poverty, suggesting that those

most in need are still failing to reap the benefits of the widespread economic growth in the country. Further, the incidence of extreme poverty in rural areas has decreased more slowly than in urban areas, suggesting a widening gap between the economic core of the country and those on the periphery. Indeed government service provision to the extreme poor (including healthcare, schooling, social protection and agricultural extension services) is generally limited and 25 million people rely on service systems riddled with problems and inefficiencies. The government has a moral responsibility to reform these systems, with the needs of the extreme poor taking the highest priority in reform.

The extreme poor in Bangladesh strive every day to improve their situation, but they need help. 25 million Bangladeshis still live in extreme poverty and we have a responsibility to look beyond the statistics and positive trends paraded by those in power, to these real human lives and ask ourselves and our government: what more can we do?

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A TRIBUTE TO STEVE JOBS Stay hungry, stay foolish

SABRIA CHOWDHURY

THINK different. Those two words sum up the brilliance, the magic and the creative icon that was Steve Jobs. President Obama said it best: "The world has lost a visionary. There may be no greater tribute to Steve's success than the fact that much of the world learned of his passing on a device he invented."

Ask yourself: when was the last time you heard of floral tributes being left at Apple stores and an inundation of tributes with an outpouring of great affection all over the internet and media for a corporate leader?

We have often associated the word "visionary" with Steve Jobs. It seemed to synonymously crop up as soon as his name was mentioned. Very, very few people in the world in any domain and any walk of life had a vision, a clear conception of what could encompass and so tastefully combine what we need and what pleases us aesthetically.

Let's face it. Technology has permeated every facet of our existence. It is no longer a luxury. It is a necessity. What Jobs has done with that amazing vision is given us beauty, design and a pride of ownership of a product which is so beautiful to look at, so sleek to the touch, so sophisticated to maneuver.

The appearance of the man himself was a reflection of his products. His very original style of dressing ... his signature black turtle neck shirt, jeans and tennis shoes were like his inventions ... unusual, simple and unique.

No other company can boast of lines of people or rather fans waiting for hours for the latest Apple product, whether it be the new iPhone, iMac, iPad or iPod. One journalist aptly put it when he said that waiting to see Steve Jobs speak at a new product launch was like waiting to enter a rock concert. To my knowledge, no other technological product can evoke such emotions about its dependability, intuition, style and design.

I am reminded of a discussion with a friend in 2003 about whether my new laptop update should be a PC or a Mac, who summed it up (pun intended!): "You can't compare apples and oranges. It's as though you're debating between buying a Chrysler or the finest Mercedes-Benz." That was definitely not the first or the last time I have heard such analogies about the user-friendly, beautifully designed Apple products being made. My very first computer was an Apple. That evokes a great deal of nostalgia, like one's very first car.

Thanks to Jobs, today we can carry 15,000 songs in our pocket, we have phones which serve as cameras, we can use them to send and receive emails, we can use them to listen to music, watch videos and so very much more. He has given us computers that are world famous for not only their dependability of resistance against viruses and crashing, but also their sleek and elegant style. He has shown us that technology and art could merge beautifully. He has also given the world a unique style in film animation and production.

Steve Jobs is also responsible for the growth and spread of "fonts" in the present day, perhaps a less known fact about him. While designing the first Macintosh, he decided that computers should have a wide variety of fonts to offer its users. Most were named after cities, capturing their mood and character in letter form. Fonts such as London, Geneva and Chicago can be attributed to him.

Today, many products made by many different companies are designed beautifully, are sleek and intuitive and fun to use. The origin of those ideas came from Steve Jobs. It is said that imitation is the best form of flattery.

To quote Steve Jobs: "You have to trust something -- your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down, and it has made all the difference in my life."

We are so very thankful to you that you did trust your gut feelings. You have changed the world as a result. You have shown us the beauty of the fusion between technology, design and fun like no other. Thank you for your humility, discretion and good taste over the years. We have become so familiar with your inventions that it is like losing a friend. We should learn from you and live every day like it was our last.

RIP, Mr. Jobs.

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