

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

Breivik punishment a licence to kill?



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

ANDERS Behring Breivik, the Norwegian mass murderer, has been let off with light punishment. He has been sentenced to 21 years in prison with a guarantee that he will be able to seek parole after just 10 years. Norwegian law prescribes this as the maximum sentence an offender can face "whatever the scale of the offence."

Even one year per murder would have added up to 77 years in jail, still that would not even marginally heal the trauma and wounds inflicted on the families of the victims and in an extended sense on the Norwegian people and the world at large. There have been sentences up to 150 years or more, knowing full well that human longevity does not extend that far. The rationale for handing out such an impracticable conviction lies in its power of deterrence.

A parallel to Breivik's monstrous act can be drawn in the Timothy McVeigh case, the latter killed 168 people with a truck bomb in Oklahoma City in 1995. But the difference is he was executed and his motivations were slightly different than Breivik's.

Timothy said he was avenging the US federal government's sieges on Ruby Ridge in Idaho and Waco in Texas in 1992 and 1993 respectively. The confrontation in Ruby Ridge originated in one Randy Weaver refusing to be an informant for the

federal government. The Waco siege began and ended violently after "the United States Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), accompanied by several members of the media, attempted to execute a search warrant at the Branch Davidian ranch at Mount Carmel" betraying a religious sensitivity.

Mark the fact: Timothy was driven by a sense of heroics, he boastfully asked: "Isn't it kind of scary one man could wreak this kind of hell?" Breivik too might have had a perverse motivation of megalomania.

Timothy McVeigh claimed as an afterthought in an essay he wrote in the prison that "terrorist bombing was 'morally equivalent' to US military actions against Iraq and other foreign lands."

For his part, Breivik believed that the government's immigration policies were adulterating "Norwegian blood" and leading to war with Muslims. The Labour Party's youth camp that Breivik massacred on the Utoya Island has long backed "multi-culturalism to accommodate Norway's different ethnic communities."

The country has had neo-Nazi groups in the past but assumed that such groups had been largely eliminated and did not pose a significant threat, going by BBC's Richard Galpin's take from the spot.

Far right militant sentiments are nothing new; in fact, it had been sweeping Western Europe largely as an undercurrent for long. In Britain, there have been right-wing National Front, skinhead and latterly English Defense League (EDL). Remember,



If Einstein's brain has been studied to fathom the mysteries of its power, that of Anders Behring Breivik should interest criminologists for the power of the evil it held in his neurotransmitters.

Enoch Powel's "River of Blood" speech as an anti-immigration metaphor, a throwback to the past. There was also Oswald Mosley, the founder of British Union of Fascists.

EDL in various forms is associated with European right wing parties. There are the extremist fringes propagating Germany for Germans and France for French.

But in all fairness to countries

with colonial experiences they have a degree of acceptability for multi-cultural societies, besides recognising the economic need to welcome immigration, especially in countries with negative population growth. Although Norway had no colonies, it has been fairly liberal to immigration.

USA is a somewhat different ball game which likes to see a mosaic of

cultures being a traditional melting pot, but an element of Islamophobia lingers even over a decade since 9/11. Ideological extremism would have to be countered with interfaith bulwark.

Back to Breivik; he shouldn't have had any right to live -- but the Scandinavian countries keep no provision for capital punishment. Yet, the truth is the tradition of

forgiveness in Norway subordinates cold-blooded murder of human lives and the emotions and agonies of the maimed and the bereaved families to a high standard of punitive legalism. Did it somehow work at the back of Breivik's mind, who can tell?

If, however, a court still considers a prisoner dangerous after the jail term has been served it can keep him inside indefinitely. This is said to be rare in Norway because it has the tradition of seeking rehabilitation.

If Breivik serves full term he will be freed at age 54, still a danger to society. For, he has vowed in court testimony he would do the killings again if he ever has the chance to. He showed no sign of penance when it was pointed out to him that he had murdered teenaged children. In fact, he has had to be cut off by the court when after sentencing in his brief statement he was about to apologise for "not killing more people."

If Einstein's brain has been studied to fathom the mysteries of its power, that of Anders Behring Breivik should interest criminologists for the power of the evil it held in his neurotransmitters. Was he genetically encoded to enact the monstrous single-handed annihilation of 77 teenager compatriots or a product of extreme-right reactionary undercurrent gripping the imagination of the idle youth? We need a new breed of experts to interpret such mental gigantism.

The writer is Associate Editor, The Daily Star. E-mail: husain.imam@thedailystar.net

A debate is now ongoing on the performance and legal standing of Grameen Bank, and the role played by its founder, Prof Muhammad Yunus. Yunus Centre has compiled a set of frequently asked questions and provided answers to them. The Daily Star reproduces, in installments, the full document for the sake of informed public opinion on this vital issue that has attracted tremendous national and international interest.

Questions by critics on Grameen Bank and the facts

by Yunus Centre

[Second Installment]

Q7: How many elected female representatives are there in the Grameen Bank board? Who are they? How do they come to the board?

Answer: According to the laws governing Grameen Bank there are nine elected members in the board. The election process within Grameen Bank is specified in the Grameen Bank Election Rules. The members of Grameen Bank are divided into nine constituencies. The election is held in three tiers in each of these constituencies. An election commissioner conducts these elections. Returning officers and polling officers are appointed. The voter list is published. Only those who acquire shares of the bank get enlisted in the voter list. A single representative is elected from each tier. The elected representatives of the first tier become the voters for the second tier. One representative is elected in each of the second tiers. Representatives of the second tier constitute the council of representatives in the third tier. Council member elected in the third tier is the representative in the board from that particular constituency. The one who gets elected as a member of the board has to get elected in each of the three tiers including the final one. The one who becomes a member of the board has to come through a rigorous election procedure. The voters elect representatives in each tier by carefully assessing different attributes of each of the

candidates. A proof that the members of Grameen Bank are very well accustomed to the election procedures is that 13 Grameen Bank members have been elected as chairmen and 4,022 Grameen Bank members have been elected as members in the last Union Parishad Election. In the Upazilla elections, 98 members got elected as women vice chairmen and one member contested independently against a male candidate and won the position of vice chairman. Additionally, one got elected as Poursabha chairman and 148 as Poursabha councilors. Apart from this, amongst the families of Grameen Bank members, 47 were elected as chairmen and vice chairmen, and 248 as councilors. These statistics are only of those who have been elected. The figure of those who have contested but have not won is much higher. Grameen Bank members are closely attached and involved with the election and leadership process. Those who are trying to depict them as uninformed helpless women are completely wrong.

Q8: Are not the women who are elected to the Board of Directors of Grameen Bank puppets in the hand of Professor Yunus? Do they have any actual role in the Board?

Answer: Routine issues come to the Board for decisions. There is no need for decisions on loan proposals at the Board level. Such

issues are settled at the branch and area office level. The Board handles issues of planning, policy proposals and budget. At Board meetings, Board members openly discuss, question, state their opinion and express their satisfaction over all issues being discussed. Many Grameen Bank policies have been changed and many have been formulated on the basis of the opinions of the elected Board members. The elected members provide the vigour to the Board. In order to satisfy them, the chairman and government representatives make sure that all issues are jointly discussed and decided upon. The Board has a total of 13 members of which the chairman and two secretary ranked officers serve as members of the Board. To date, no decision has been taken on the basis of a vote. Decisions are taken after reaching a consensus. From the very beginning, a learned and respected individual has served as the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Grameen Bank. According to the Grameen Bank ordinance provisions made thus far, and the gazette relating to the Election of Grameen Bank Directors, it has been ensured that the representatives in the board are elected in a transparent manner from among the shareholders; and they have been fulfilling their duties accordingly. Presence of the nine shareholder borrowers of Grameen Bank creates a distinctive environment for discussion. Views can be exchanged and various

discussions relating to the operations of the bank can be held with them; no one else in the world possesses such grassroots knowledge and expertise. They are the direct owners of the bank. They are directly affected by the decisions taken in Grameen Bank. Their lives are tied to Grameen Bank. Their presence compels the discussion to be life-oriented. From the very beginning the chairman, government-nominated directors and the board representatives elected from the borrower-shareholders of Grameen Bank have all played a vital role. One has to remember that it is through their capable management that it was possible for Grameen Bank to achieve a Nobel Prize. When they formulate a policy, pass an order and go back to their respective villages, they know very well if their policy decisions have not pleased the members of Grameen Bank of their village and of the villages around them, they will be under pressure. That elected representative is alone in front of the others. They live with the other members and attend weekly meetings with them. The elected representative will never do anything to aggravate the others.

Q9: Hasn't Grameen Bank been extorting money from poor people through very high interest rates just like the money lenders?

Answer: Of all microcredit organisations, governmental or non-governmental, Grameen

Bank's interest rate is the lowest. The highest rate of interest in Grameen Bank is 20%. This is a simple interest. The interest rate is set with a diminishing interest rate method, which at a flat rate comes to 10%. Bangladesh Microcredit Regulatory Authority (MRA) has set the highest interest rate for any microcredit institutions to be 27%, which is 7% higher than Grameen Bank's rate. Grameen Bank's Housing Loan has a yearly rate of 8%. Grameen Bank also has a Higher Studies Loan programme, which during the period of education is 0% (i.e. no interest) and after completion of studies is 5%. Loans given to beggars have an interest rate of 0% (in other words no interest is charged). Grameen Bank's interest is the lowest among all the microcredit institutions of Bangladesh, and it gives the highest interest on the savings (ranging from 8.5% to 12%). All of this information has been available in various policy publications and the website of Grameen Bank for a long time now. This information is known to Bangladesh Bank and other relevant regulatory authorities as well. Yet a lot of well known and responsible people take freedom to mention in the media imaginary higher interest rates as they please. This is very unfortunate indeed. It should be mentioned here that even after the retirement of Professor Muhammad Yunus from Grameen Bank in 2011, the interest rate charged and collection

methods of Grameen Bank have remained unchanged.

Q10: Aren't the members of Grameen Bank being oppressed by forcing them to create a saving in a compulsory manner?

Answer: Grameen Bank started with a policy of compulsory savings. Over time the amount of compulsory savings was reduced. Since the members were encouraged themselves to save, the compulsory savings scheme was eventually abolished. Now savings is no longer compulsory in Grameen Bank. From the very beginning Grameen Bank has provided an interest of 8.5% to 12% on savings (Microfinance Regulatory Authority has set 6% to be the lowest interest on savings for all microfinance institutions). The members of Grameen Bank are thus encouraged to save more and more. For example, members show a lot of enthusiasm in the pension fund savings. They get a return of 12% on this. Their savings grow faster. Many members save in single long-term schemes. The money being saved can be withdrawn at any time, even on the day after they have deposited it. Currently the total value of saving by Grameen Bank members is Tk.7,000 crore. Where there is no scope for compulsory savings, how does the issue of oppression through forced savings arise? (To be continued)