

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

Social resistance, the last resort



MEATY One-Liners author Ken Alstad said: "Never approach a bull from the front, a horse from the rear or a fool from any direction." But a *gyan papi* (knowledgeable sinner, or an informed person) posing as uninformed should perhaps be approached from all directions whatever the harm done to the one taking

issue with them. For, that is all freedom of press or the right to know is all about.

In Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhith's shrinking universe, the stock exchange scandal and now the Sonali Bank-Hall-Mark scam have been the handiworks of *dushtoo lok* (notorious people) and the media. Find a scapegoat for every act of misgovernance!

The latest spin to his narrative on Hall-Mark loan corruption enacted through involvement of by far the largest chain of bank officials is the finance minister maintaining, had the media not divulged it, the entire sum of over Tk.3,500 crore could have been recovered. But now the government would have to be content with 50% recovery.

There can be three deductions from what the finance minister says: One, Sonali Bank, the Bangladesh Bank and the banking division of the finance ministry were in the know of things and that they were biding time to pounce on the culprits. Is this credible even to an infantile? Assuming that it happened that way, they are clearly guilty of not nipping it in the bud. Two, if they had known it and yet not acted on available information, then they were party to it and those on the sidelines virtually abetting in the crime. Three, they would have swept the corruption spiral under the carpet, if they could.

That they have been denied that opportunity through the whistle-blowing by newspapers goes only to the credit of the media.

Jatiya Sangsad Speaker Abdul Hamid warns MPs against reckless comments in view of the addition of a designated children's corner to the visitors' gallery in the House. Our children are going to see firsthand how the parliament works. Seeing is believing, MPs beware!



Where the government, opposition and the institutions fail, social resistance is the bulwark of the last resort against spiraling street violence. Who but the civil society can lead such social resistance duly backed up by volunteering neighbourhood committees? Citizens' committees offer the best line of defence in a society of decaying values.

Whereas they need to imbibe the right messages from the JS as future leaders of the country, if they are fed on a diet of bad mouthing, as greenhorns they will be a generation of lost innocence.

If, however, we have to depend on children's presence in parliament to ensure sobriety of the MPs'

behaviour, then we stand on a very tenuous ground as far as propriety of parliamentary practices goes.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in parliament on Wednesday blamed inept public administration and weaknesses and irregularities in financial management for overall bad governance. She is very much right. But

isn't the administration headed by her and as such she has to take the responsibility for the misgovernance? Should she discover that something is seriously wrong in public administration and financial management into the fourth year of her tenure, where goes her *Din Badal* agenda?

The ruling party has failed people, so has the opposition. In a context where the whole country is critical of the both, the question is who is in charge?

As the government runs rudderless, society gets fragmented and factionalised, and is, therefore, pulling in different directions without any purpose except coterie self-aggrandisement. Vandalism and violence have become the order of the day as these are effective means to having demands met. When a road accident takes place or a rumour spreads about it or feuding breaks out, be they students, or garment workers, or transport operators, they would wreak havoc on the street, smash or torch vehicles or block traffic, making people suffer for no fault of their own. People are the boxing sack.

Picture the helpless children and women caught in a car smashing orgy, they are panicked victims to the rule of jungles. Shame on us.

Rule of law is simply not working for a host of reasons we know all too well. While the civil society including various rights activists groups organise demonstrations and form human chains to protest a plethora of excesses committed by law enforcement agencies and gender violence they are curiously silent over the phenomenal rise in vandalism and street violence at the slightest of provocations.

Where the government, opposition and the institutions fail, social resistance is the bulwark of the last resort against spiraling street violence. Who but the civil society can lead such social resistance duly backed up by volunteering neighbourhood committees? They may have the advantage of moral strength to galvanise people around their cause, but they can only work effectively under some protective umbrella of a composite apolitical law and order force.

Citizens' committees offer the best line of defence in a society of decaying values.

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Significance of NAM

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DURING the Cold War, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) constituted an influential bloc separate from the dominant eastern and western camps. Since the end of the Cold War, the significance of NAM has been doubtful at best. Nevertheless, the recent NAM Summit at Tehran is worthy of studying. It offers essential lessons about two Middle Eastern powers: Iran and Egypt.

In the days leading to the Summit, Iranian media laboured to overstate the importance of the meeting. In particular, the media has focused on Morsi's visit to Tehran. This was the first visit by an Egyptian president to Iran since 1979, when the two countries broke diplomatic relations.

Since the US was not particularly thrilled about Morsi's trip to Tehran, Iranian state media claimed that the visit signifies a break in the Iranian isolation as well as a defeat to the US and Israel.

But Morsi's speech did not go as the Iranian leadership had hoped. So, Iran's official TV translated Morsi's criticism of the Assad regime as: "There is a crisis in Syria and we must support the ruling regime in Syria." Further, Iranian TV mistranslated the Arab Spring as the "Islamic Awakening."

But if Morsi is not the nice new ally Iran had hoped for, then why did their media portray things differently? One possible interpretation is that Iranian bureaucrats thought that Morsi would be kinder in his speech, but when this was not the case, they tried to cover their mistake by mistranslating the speech. This interpretation is not implausible. Bureaucrats in an authoritarian regime such as Iran's are chosen based on loyalty and patronage rather than skill. Thus, it is possible to imagine them making such a mistake.

A more likely interpretation is that the Iranian leadership used the Summit to send a message to its own citizens. In its coverage of the Summit, Iranian media was effectively telling its audience that US efforts to isolate Iran are failing. Leaders and representatives of many countries as well as the Secretary General of the UN were all present in Tehran.

Many Iranians are unlikely to be deceived by their state media, especially as it is not their only source of information. But the fact that the government is going to such lengths to impose its interpretation has significance. Perhaps sanctions and efforts to isolate Iran are severely punishing. Hence, it is possible that the media

wanted to tell Iranian opposition not to be so hopeful; the international community still supports Iran.

The Summit had another more important message; it showed a shift in Egyptian foreign policy. In the past weeks, Morsi called for a regional contact group that includes Egypt, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia to discuss the Syrian issue. Including Iran and excluding the US and Europe did not make Egypt favourable in the West. Then, Morsi decided to visit Tehran himself, making him the first Egyptian president to do so in more than thirty years. Again, the West was not thrilled.

When Morsi went to Tehran, he provoked Iran in its own capital. His criticism of Assad's regime was not surprising -- he did that before. But Morsi's praise of

Prophet Mohammed's companions was unnecessary. When he gave a speech in Tahrir Square in the end of June, he did not praise the Prophet's companions. Thus, praising the Prophet's companions in Tehran was designed to provoke Shiite Iranians, who view those companions as usurpers. By not siding with a single camp, Morsi was defining a new, non-aligned, Egyptian foreign policy.

But Egypt's newly crafted foreign policy is unlikely to turn as radical

as some neoconservatives warn. The strategic environment where Egypt exists has not significantly changed. Further, countries act according to their best interest, regardless of the type of regime in power. Thus, Egypt's foreign policy is not likely to be radically different than it used to be. As former Egyptian ambassador to the US, Nabil Fahmi, argues, Egypt is likely to have a more proactive, rather than reactive, foreign policy. This would better for Egypt and for the Arab world. There are three regional powers in the Middle East: Iran, Turkey, and Israel -- none of which is Arab. The Middle East and the Arab countries would benefit from having an Arab regional power. Egypt could do just that.

Although the NAM is not significant anymore, the Summit in Tehran marked important changes in the region. It showed that the Iranian regime is taking desperate measures to convince its people of the international importance of their country. Further, the Summit showed that Egypt is establishing a new, independent foreign policy. It means that Egypt should not be taken for granted anymore, especially by its former allies. In fact, over the long run, the NAM Summit might usher in the rise of a regional power; Egypt, and in the fall of another; Iran.

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Sonali Bank scam and finance minister

MD. ATAUR RAHMAN

ON August 28, when journalists asked Finance Minister Abul Mal Abdul Muhith whether the Board of Directors of Sonali Bank would be dissolved due to Hall-Mark loan scam at Sonali Bank Ruposhi Bangla Hotel branch, as recommended by Bangladesh Bank, he became furious and said Bangladesh Bank had no authority in this regard. The finance minister questioned the authority of the central bank by this comment.

Renowned senior bankers of the country were surprised at the comment of the finance minister. This comment damaged the status of the central bank, while the involved persons in Hall-Mark loan scam were encouraged. What Bangladesh Bank can do or cannot do is clearly mentioned in the Bank Company Act, 1991.

As per Section 46(6) of the Bank Company Act, the governor of Bangladesh Bank Dr. Atiur Rahman wrote a letter to the finance minister on August 27 requesting him to reconstitute the Board of Directors of Sonali Bank after dissolving the present Board of Directors, since the existing Board could not disown the gross irregularities committed by Sonali Bank Ruposhi Bangla Hotel branch in disbursing loan to the tune of Tk. 3,547 crore to Hall-Mark Group and other entities without maintaining banking rules. It is unbelievable that such a huge loan was disbursed from time to time beyond the knowledge of the existing Board of Directors.

Dr. Md. Farashuddin, former governor of Bangladesh Bank, said that Bangladesh Bank had taken the correct decision. He said that, as per Sections 45, 46 & 47 of Bank Company Act, Bangladesh Bank has the right to take action against any bank, if gross irregularities are committed by them violating banking rules. He further said that Bangladesh Bank lacked proper supervision and monitoring in this regard, but those who misappropriated such a huge amount must be punished under any circumstances.

Dr. Wahiduddin Mahmud, who was a director of Bangladesh Bank, said that Bangladesh Bank had taken the correct decision. Former governor of Bangladesh Bank Dr. Salehuddin Ahmed said that, as a first step, Bangladesh Bank had only recommended dissolution of the present Board of

Directors, but if they want they themselves can dissolve the Board of Directors.

Chairman of Bangladesh Krishi Bank and former deputy governor of Bangladesh Bank Khondoker Ibrahim Khaled said that Bangladesh Bank had followed the directives of Bank Company Act. If Bangladesh Bank had not done it, allegations against the Bank would have come up.

That only bank officers were involved in misappropriation of such a big amount is not believable. The Board of Directors cannot disown responsibility

in this regard under any circumstances because this huge loan of Tk.3,547 crore could not have been sanctioned and disbursed from time to time without their knowledge. On the other hand, Bangladesh Bank also cannot disown its responsibility. Definitely, there was lack of proper supervision, monitoring

and follow-up. Otherwise, it would not have been so easy to misappropriate such a big amount.

In this context, it may be mentioned here that the governor of Bangladesh Bank sent a letter to the finance minister on January 4, 2011, regarding overall situation of the state-owned banks and the role of the Board of Directors of the captioned banks. In that letter, the governor recommended reconstitution of the Board of Directors of the state-owned banks, since the directors of the Boards were directly interfering in and influencing the internal affairs of the banks, including transfer/posting, promotion of officers/employees and sanctioning of loans.

That letter was also not given any importance at that time, rather, the finance minister arranged a meeting with the Directors of the Boards, where some directors expressed their dissatisfaction regarding the governor's views. In this way, the role of the regulatory body was questioned. But, if the governor's letter was attended to properly at that time, an incident like Hall-Mark scam might not have happened, some senior bank experts think.

In view of what has been stated above, the Boards of Directors of the state-owned banks should be reconstituted immediately and the politically appointed directors, who have no banking experience at all, must be dropped from the Boards in the interest of the banks.

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