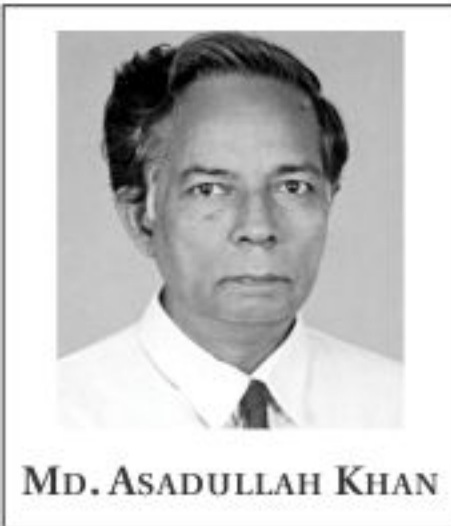


BITTER TRUTH

Crime but no punishment



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

WITH a surge of crimes such as murder, abduction, extortion and robbery occurring in broad daylight and with the law enforcers utterly incapable of combating it, the country, and most spectacularly Dhaka city, has in recent times plunged into a morass of chaos and anarchy.

Some other cities in the world surely have higher crime rates, but Dhaka's "reputation" could soon dwarf theirs in absolute terms.

Parag, a 6 year old child, was abducted when his mother was taking him and his two sisters to school at 7 a.m. The incident, in which the kidnappers shot his mother, sisters and the driver of their car, came as a chilling reminder of the vulnerability of the people on the roads or within the boundary of their houses. The people who want to live in peace burst into angry protests against such terrorism let loose by a handful of thugs and gangs who operate their clandestine activities with the patronage and blessings of some influential godfathers. Punishment of the monsters, even if they are arrested later, is a distant dream

The drama surrounding the rescue of Parag is still shrouded in mystery. While Rab officials claim that ransom money was paid to the abductors for getting him back alive, the father of the boy and police sources refute that claim. The administration must realise that such contradictory claims and a tendency to put things under a veil unnecessarily create a sense of despondency in people as well as lack of confidence in the government.

This incident reinforced the conviction that deadly violence, once mostly confined to crime-ridden, comparatively obscure places, may now lash out randomly at any one, at any time and even in the heart of the metropolis, which is considered relatively safe because it is under the very nose of the law enforcers.

Reports of gruesome murders published in the newspapers reinforce our belief about the horrendous crime

situation in the country. A report published in an English daily on November 13 indicated that murders in Chittagong city have increased alarmingly, with 15 people becoming victims of gruesome killings in just over a month ending November 9.

In a country that we proudly call cultured and civilised, and its people imbued with religious, ethical and moral values, such ghastly incidents put a stigma on our collective psyche.

Sadly true, most notably, the capital city and adjacent areas seem caught in a frightening coil of fear and trauma as extortionists of all hues are preying upon innocent people going out of their houses to perform their daily chores. It is worth mentioning that in one day (November 1), at least 10 people were killed in dif-

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ferent parts of the country, either as a sequel to political vengeance or falling victim to domestic violence and dowry related conflict.

People, especially residents of Dhaka can put up with damaged roads, clogged drains, mosquito menace and frequent load shedding and a host of other ills that plague their everyday life, but how can they take so much uncertainty, risk, and insecurity? In recent times the city and its adjacent areas seem so consumed with crime that people are incapable of thinking about anything else.

A report published on November 13 in an English daily said that on November 12, Saddam, spurned suitor of Farzana Akhtar (16), set her on fire when she was sleeping in her house. Seriously burnt, Farzana is

now undergoing treatment at the burn unit of DMCH. In another case, at least 40 people were injured in a clash between two groups of villagers in Kendua Upazila of Netrokona over stalking of a school girl. Another report on the same day stated that in Gaibandha at least seven people were injured as an alleged stalker Siddique along with seven accomplices stormed the house of a girl and opened fire as she refused to marry him. Reports published in newspapers on November 11 indicated that police recovered the decomposed bodies of Riyadh and Delwar Hossain, the first one from the Uttara lake and the other from inside a drum in Sadarghat launch terminal. Newspaper reports quoting family sources suggest that Riyadh became a victim of deception by some unscrupulous

manpower agent who, after swindling Tk.4.5 lakh from Riyadh with the false promise of sending him to Denmark, killed him. Police is still clueless about the reason for Delwar's killing.

A report carried by the media of the alleged violation of a fatwa victim in Rangpur by a policeman engaged by the High Court to ensure her safety is one more disturbing revelation of the sadistic tendencies and proclivity to sexual abuse by some deviant members of the law enforcement agency. The story has it that on the basis of a report published on July 7, the High Court in a Suo Moto rule ordered the arrest of the persons issuing edicts for imposing humiliating punishment on two women in Badargnj. On their appeal, and in apprehension of further harassment, the High Court asked the

Rangpur police superintendent to ensure their safety by posting police guards round the clock near their residences pending disposal of the rule. Sadly, one of the protectors turned out to be a perpetrator this time. On the basis of a written complaint by the victim to the police superintendent, the accused police guard has been temporarily suspended and closed in the Rangpur police line.

People are afraid to take their cases of trauma and suffering to the police even when they fall victim to rash and unjust treatment at the hands of an influential individual or group. Most worryingly, fear of corruption, criminality and harassment has become all-pervasive and rampant. The whole endeavour ends up being a tortuous process with no support coming to the victims from any quarter. What is worse, some law enforcers seem to think they can get away without being booked because they can twist laws, invent loopholes, and manipulate tricky factors or points in their favour. The sad part of these cases is that when they continue to be dragged in the court for years, the victims are taken to be guilty until proved innocent

The distressing crime scene calls for some introspection on the part of the democratic government. Unhappily, as the government has started its journey towards building democratic governance, it continues to face the most harrowing time with so much criminal action jeopardising governance, much of it initiated by some self-seeking party activists. For a government that came to power with soaring expectation, the fall or decline must not precipitate into a crisis situation. The euphoria over election victory with a big margin would all but dissipate and would be replaced by exasperation that is fast turning into anger. It is not enough that policy directives are framed, it is important that these are implemented and complied with by those in charge of police administration without malice, fear or favour, and of necessity without delay.

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Election alliances in Bangladesh

Mo CHAUDHURY

WHILE there are many political parties in Bangladesh, two dominant election alliances (EA) have emerged since the 1991 election, led by the Awami League (AL) and its arch-rival the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The goal of this commentary is to explore if the EAs are a net plus for Bangladesh.

An EA should be differentiated from the formation of a coalition government when no single political party wins absolute majority in the general election. A coalition government is a governance coalition after the election and not an ex ante EA to compete in the election.

EAs can have major implications for election outcomes. Under an EA, effectively only one candidate is supported in a constituency by all the allied political parties. To the extent voter preference for a political party translates to votes in favor of its EA, an EA minimizes splitting of the votes for the allied parties. This enhances the chances of winning a given constituency by an EA candidate against the candidate of an opposing dominant political party or a competing EA. Thus, an EA system can make the electoral contests more competitive, make the parliament more robust, keep the governing party or EA relatively more accountable, and allow smaller parties to be represented in the parliament and in governance.

Importantly, however, the above EA benefits are expected in the presence of a single dominant political party or an EA already in place. In Canada, for example, during the 1990s, the Progressive Conservative Party literally collapsed and by default the left of centre Liberal Party became excessively dominant in national politics. The competitive fix came from the formal merger of the Progressive Conservative Party and the ultra-right Reform Party. Capitalizing on voter disappointments with the Liberals, the newly formed Conservative Party came to power, and using their latest absolute majority, is pushing through policies that could reverse many progressive achievements of Canada. As such, talks are now back in political circles to unify the left leaning parties. To summarize, the Canadian experience shows the downsides of a single dominant party and the benefits of an EA (merging of parties in Canada) in such contexts.

In contrast, in countries like Italy, Israel and Greece, there are numerous political parties that routinely win some seats in the parliament, no single dominant party repeatedly wins an overwhelming number of seats, and as such post-election coalition governments are a norm rather than an exception. Coalition governments in Italy and Israel are often unstable though and results in premature elections. While these democracies are fiercely competitive, the lack of assured continuity of a government and political gridlocks can be debilitating as has recently been observed in Greece.

Let us now evaluate the EA system in the specific context of Bangladesh.

First, there is no single dominant party in Bangladesh and no lack of competing political ideologies. Further, in the pre-EA elections in 1991 and 1996, there was no lack of competition, and a single party (BNP, then AL) won governing majority in

each case resulting in stable parliamentary governments. Thus, there is no inherent need for EAs to make the elections competitive or to ensure stability in governance.

Second, the smaller parties have benefited the most from the EAs. Their representation in the parliament and their say either in governance or in EA positions on various issues have increased substantially. The disproportionate influence of the leftist parties on the AL-led EA and that of the religious right on the BNP-led EA can hardly be disputed.

Third, voters cannot choose any more between the stand alone views of AL or BNP, without yielding unintended support to either the extreme left or the extreme right. This resembles the US situation where a vote against the Democrats is a vote for the Republicans thus lending unintended support for the agenda of the extreme right groups that the Republicans need to court. Importantly, however, the US system of two equally powerful chambers of the legislature and the Presidency, builds in the much needed check and balance that is missing in Bangladesh since the winner EA in the parliament is in sole control of all organs of the government.

Fourth, the AL-led or BNP-led EA can form an overwhelming absolute majority government without the support of the majority of the voters. Thus, with no broad based electoral mandate, the winning EA can still bring about major and sweeping changes including constitutional amendments, and importantly it can do so without such changes being part of its election manifesto. The most recent example is the abolition of the interim Care Taker Government system by the ruling AL-led EA. Regardless of whether such changes are beneficial, the important point is that the EAs in Bangladesh expose the country to the risk of dramatic change in course with little support assured from the population.

Fifth, the parties not included in a coalition government do not typically have a unified opposition, but with EAs, the parties in the losing EA are by construction unified in opposition to the ruling EA. In the presence of two dominant political parties in Bangladesh, the marginal benefit of a unified opposition in the parliament is rather negligible. However, the unified opposition from the losing EA has traditionally led to much stronger anti-regime movements/agitations resulting in more frequent and widespread hartals, clashes, political violence, and disruptions in economic activities.

To conclude, with AL and BNP as the two dominant political parties, each allied with extreme partners in their respective EAs, the EAs appear to be a net negative for Bangladesh. With EAs, the extremist agenda, left and right, gains unwarranted leverage and can lead to polarization of the political landscape, moderate electoral choices are eliminated, the nation becomes exposed to dramatic changes in direction without a popular mandate, and the likelihood of the nation becoming hostage to disruptive political battles rises. It is thus recommended that the EAs are disbanded and banned in Bangladesh.

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Passport photo madness



WATCH OUT! The world craziness index is

ZOOMING up. Last week we reported that a black man, Paul Ashman, had his passport photo rejected by the UK authorities because it was "too dark".

This week we can reveal that a white guy, Christian Fardel, had his photo rejected by the Caribbean authorities because it was "too white". Maybe Mr Ashman and Mr Fardel (below) can send their photographs to each others' passport controls? At least they'd be the expected colors.

What does this prove? It shows the world has officially gone mad. A torrent of bizarre tales from readers followed a recent column about silly new regulations for passport photos, including one rule that says glasses must be balanced on the tip of the nose.

That's just the start of it. To fit into the official templates, travelers have to distort their faces, sometimes even using software to move their eyes and ears around. (I recommend Photoshop rather than do-it-yourself surgery with power tools.)

And even when the face is made to fit, photos are rejected and applicants told to try again in different clothes. An applicant for a Chinese visa was told to come back in a blue coat. Your humble narrator was told to change his shirt.

But the most tragic cases come from people whose photos are rejected despite the fact that they can't help what they look like. Reader Rika Nauck shared the sad story of a photographer friend who worked for days in his studio using a template to get a photo that the authorities would accept. "He has a rather long facetry to change that," she said.

Reader Angela Sias reported that a relative had a visa photo rejected because it looked like she had one eye bigger than the other.

But she DOES. They made her take a new picture in which both eyes were opened as wide as possible. "She looked like she was being strangled," Angela said. (At passport control, family members have to strangle her to temporarily achieve the same look.)

Some authorities have forbidden not just smiles, but ALL human expressions, accepting only entirely vacant looks. (Actually, that something I can manage.) "I look like a drug addict in desperate need of a shot," said Rika.

The result of all this is that people end up with pictures that look nothing like them. Erich, a reader from Guangzhou, said: "At least I know that if I am ever on the run, all I need to do is smile a lot and no-one will ever be able to recognize me as I make my escape over international borders."

The best tale came from one man who accidentally took his wife's passport on a business trip instead of his own. The photo was so awful that he sailed through check-in and immigration control without anyone noticing. Can anyone explain to me how this shows improved security?

If my passport photo gets rejected again, I'm going to the dog-shelter to get micro-chipped. My wife can then take me on the plane in an oversized dog basket. It's probably more comfortable than economy anyway. Woof! Woof!

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