

GROUND REALITIES

Why demonise TIB?

Don't castigate the messenger, heed the message

THE strongly-worded denunciation in parliament of the TIB on Monday, even so much as accusing it of committing sedition by one MP, comes as a severe jolt to public sensibilities. This has been disproportionately reactive rather than proactive on the part of the Jatiya Sangsad. The fault of the transparency research body was that it had released data and analysed trend largely about MPs' negative activities outstripping positive ones outside the parliament as they transpired from a focused research exercise.

Ruling party MPs' outbursts in parliament need to be evaluated on the following counts: First, the methodology of the TIB study which the MPs have all the right to know about; second, the territorial spread of the research activity; third, any deliberate bias detected to the content; and last but not least, the spirit with which the entire exercise was undertaken.

As for the methodology, it was focused group discussion engaging locally known persons of integrity and credibility in eliciting their opinion on local MP. This is an interactive scientific method of soliciting public view, an established and acceptable modality for opinion gauging. There were 44 such group discussions spread over 37 districts and eight upazilas. They took an overview on conduct of 149 MPs in which 97 percent were perceived to be indulging in 'negative activities' and 53.7 percent figured for their positive deeds.

In all democracies, recently in India and the UK, public opinion polls have been exposing abuse of power and corrupt deeds by ministers and MPs. Few months back the UK press exposed the gross misuse of public funds by British MPs hugely over-billing personal allowances. Neither the Lok Sabha nor the British parliament reacted the way that our parliament has to the TIB's revelations. The threat of stopping the functioning of TIB amounts to throttling the voices that bring out unpalatable truths to public knowledge.

If the TIB has only conveyed public assessment of the MPs' conduct, why take it out on the transparency body rather than taking the feel of the public pulse and making amends?

We humbly submit that the whole exercise was undertaken to help the parliament by providing public feedback about the MPs. In fact, parliament as the central institution of democracy should be grateful for the service done to it through informed analysis of independent observers and oversight bodies.

The question is: do we want members of parliament to maintain high moral and ethical standards? If the answer is yes, what do we really consider more important -- the feedback about MPs' conduct outside the parliament or running down the body that serves the cause of accountability and transparency for the greater good of the country and democracy?

We urge the Speaker to take a sagacious view of the whole matter and thereby raise the parliament in public esteem.

Obama adds a powerful voice on Rohingya issue

Follow-up measures needed urgently

RESIDENT Obama has spoken out against widespread ethnic violence in Rakhine state in his speech at Yangon University on Monday. With the death toll hovering around 180 and some 110,000 people displaced due to clashes between the dominant Buddhist and ethnic Rohingyas since June, the western state in Myanmar bordering Bangladesh has turned into a humanitarian disaster one that needs to be resolved through national reconciliation above all else.

Rakhine state is situated adjoining the Bangladesh border and hence any disruption in communal harmony over there causes problems on our side. We wholeheartedly support what President Obama has stated. We would like to add that international bodies like the UNHCR and other influential quarters in the West must persuade Myanmar to see reason and end the internal displacement of Rohingyas and their exodus.

What we now urge the Bangladesh government to do is to be proactive in mobilizing the international community in favour of calling an end to the perilous plight of Rohingyas, as well as engaging the Myanmar government on the issue bilaterally. Recent statements by Myanmar leaders with reference to the Rohingyas being immigrants from Bangladesh simply do not hold up in the face of historical fact that these people are Arakanese and they have been so for centuries. Hence attempts to push ethnic Rohingyas into Bangladesh's territory constitute a violation of international as well as human rights. It has now become imperative that the statelessness of the Rohingyas be addressed on a permanent foot-



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

HOME Minister Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir has brushed aside American suggestions that the Bangladesh government engage in a dialogue with the opposition. A dialogue is certainly a healthy thing, considering the proliferation of ideas it generally throws up. Besides, politics is all about dialogue, about an exchange of ideas. But in this particular instance, when activists of the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Islami Chhatra Shibir have been doing all they can to disrupt normal life through pouncing on policemen, the idea that the ruling Awami League should engage the opposition in discussions with it sounds rather queer. The US ambassador could have done something better than suggest a dialogue. On behalf of his government, he could simply have condemned the violence that the Jamaat and its adherents have been resorting to over these past few weeks before throwing in the idea of political engagement between the government and the opposition.

The home minister is absolutely right in informing the country that before any thought of a dialogue takes hold of the government, stability and discipline must be brought back on the streets. A government works on trust, which trust does not allow it to appease those trying to undermine it every day through repeated and organised violence. Beating up policemen and trying to seize their weapons is an invitation to chaos the Jamaat ought not to have indulged in. But now that it has, it remains for the government to ensure that the violence does not escalate and that those behind it are

brought to justice. At the same time, it becomes the government's moral and legal responsibility to plumb the depths of the conspiracies now afoot to create disorder in the country, identify those behind the recent mayhem and haul them up before the law.

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The sort of regressive activism the Jamaat has lately demonstrated, and so terribly, on the streets has had repercussions of another kind as well. A fairly good number of individuals have come up with the demand that a ban be clamped on the party as a way of neutralising it in Bangladesh.

as a way of neutralising it in Bangladesh. On the ban issue, we think it is extremely important that emotions do not come in the way of reason.

The Jamaat, whether or not we agree, is a party which has been operating under the terms of the law in this country. It is essential, therefore, that the legality behind the party's operations be seriously considered before any moves are made to proscribe the party, if indeed that is what the government aims for. What has been happening is that a beleaguered Jamaat, shorn of its senior leadership, is waging a desperate battle in the interest of its survival. Its back is to the wall. There are political organisations, all over the globe, that have lost their will to live once their leaders have been put away. That is not what the Jamaat appears

to be ready to do.

And yet the Jamaat cannot be permitted to go free with all this demonstration of fury. The home minister is right to think that a serious handling of law and order is called for in the face of the militancy of the party. While that is a necessity, there is too the truism that if a party is not banned under the law, it cannot and should not be prevented from exercising its democratic rights in public. If the Jamaat wishes to organise a public rally or hold street corner meetings, there is no law in the coun-

try which says it cannot do that. The senior leadership of the Jamaat are on trial on war crimes charges. The Jamaat is not on trial. That being the reality, there is little validity in the government's opting for measures that circumscribe the party in its activities.

From such a perspective, the home minister's recent directive that anyone who is a part of the Jamaat or engages in its politics ought to be identified and caught and handed over to the law enforcers is a clear invitation to danger. The danger is not that the Jamaat will expand its area of violence. It is that such governmental sanction of action against its activists could sooner or later result in the rise of vigilantes all over the country. In a land where extrajudicial murders worry an entire nation and the impunity with which

security agencies often operate quite undermines our collective faith in democracy, asking citizens to go looking for Jamaatis to catch and punish is certainly not a healthy exercise of political liberalism.

And liberalism, at least through a clear and swift response to incidents and events, is what the Bangladesh Nationalist Party could have called forth. A senior figure in the party has given us to understand that the BNP has had nothing to do with the Jamaat's recent activities. That is understandable, perhaps even acceptable up to a point. It would have been truly reassuring, though, if the BNP had gone for a public condemnation of what the Jamaat and its student wing have been doing in recent times. That it has treated violence as politics as usual says something about a party which refuses to learn from history. The BNP is certainly not helping itself by the manner in which it has chosen to agitate against the ruling party. Its ties to the Jamaat are yet in place. It refuses to go to parliament, but will go only if the ruling party places a bill in the House on a restoration of the caretaker system. That is a preposterous thought. Its vocal leaders do not remember that their lawmakers have a job to do. They have forgotten the horrific misgovernment they subjected the country to in their last stint in power.

Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, all things considered, is right. You do not negotiate with an opposition which sends panic running through citizens on the streets. You do not have a conversation with a political party which is only interested in parliament when it has a majority there.

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The challenge ahead for China

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UNLIKE the cliffhanger US elections on November 6, the leadership change in China this week was hardly an exercise in suspense -- or democracy.

Xi Jinping's anointment as the new leader of the Communist Party of China and president of the world's most populous country as of March 2013 had been long expected. Similarly, Li Keqiang has also been in line to take over as China's premier.

The lack of surprise, however, does not make the latest developments in Beijing any less momentous. Even though the names of both the next president and prime minister have been known for years, the size, composition, and priorities of the team -- there are no women in the top team -- who will be leading China for the next decade require careful study. After all, what happens in China matters to the rest of the world. Years of rampant economic growth has turned China into one of the world's emerging political, economic, military and cultural powers.

But with newfound prosperity have come problems. These include growing inequality between the rich and poor, corruption, and anger over a lack of services like healthcare.

China is the second-largest economy in the world. Over the last three decades, China's rise, its success in delivering growth and development to millions of poor people and its increased confidence in global affairs has mesmerised a watching world. The future is more challenging, however. The economic model that delivered 30 years of double-digit growth is running out of steam and the country's next leaders face tough choices to keep incomes rising. The cost of inaction could be high.

The World Bank says without change, annual growth could sink to five percent by 2015 -- dangerously low by Chinese standards. Domestic challenges facing the new leaders include a slowing economy, a growing middle class and increasing demands for political reform.

Yawning wealth disparities cause increasing public resentment. China has a huge pollution problem. Corruption is a major sore.

While individual liberties have greatly expanded, anybody advocating competitive democracy outside the one-party system is likely to end up in jail. The political straitjacket imposed since the Communist Party

China will soon also have to tackle demands for political reform and openness. The world will also be watching carefully to see how China's new leaders respond to international criticism of Beijing's human rights record.

won power in 1949 is at odds with a society connected by social media.

China's new leadership will also have to contend with an increasingly fraught relationship with the US and its Asian neighbours. The Obama administration has been bringing more cases against China through the WTO, charging China with unfair trade practices.

In Asia, there's a growing level of concern about China's rise and its increased assertiveness in defending territorial claims in the South China Seas. In the East China Sea, China and Japan both claim ownership of the uninhabited Senkaku Islands, which are currently controlled by Japan. Chinese surveillance ships have been seen sailing in the waters

around the islands.

Significantly, the team at the helm of Chinese decision-making has been reduced from nine to seven in an effort to make collective decision-making less contentious and more efficient. The general feeling is that the new leaders are a conservative group likely to favour cautious economic reforms rather than radical policy change. Their average age, after all, is 63.4 years.

Most notably, two candidates with strong reform credentials -- Guangdong party boss Wang Yang and party organisation head Li Yuanchao -- were not promoted to the top team, along with the sole

woman candidate Liu Yandong.

Still, expect a change in leadership style. Xi is widely believed to be more of a "people's man" than his predecessor Hu Jintao, who has been criticised for inaction and relying too much on empty slogans. In his first public remarks after his appointment, Xi focused on the new leadership's responsibility for the Chinese nation and the people, saying: "It is the people who have created history, and it is the people who are true heroes. The people are the source of our strength."

"Our party faces many severe challenges and there are many pressing problems within the party that need to be resolved, particularly corruption, being divorced from the people,

going through formalities and bureaucracy," said Xi.

In his brief speech, Xi vowed to address the Chinese people's "desire for a happy life" by providing "better education, more stable jobs, more income, greater social security, better medical and healthcare, improved housing conditions and a better environment."

Of the seven men who made it to the top of the party, four of them, including Xi, are "princelings" -- children of former senior party leaders -- an extraordinary fact for a supposedly egalitarian party that rejects hereditary rule and claims to promote on merit alone.

Given the immense challenges facing them, China's new leaders are likely to spend their time, energy and money on addressing internal challenges and meeting public expectations. Questions likely to dominate their agenda include meeting the aspirations of China's growing middle class, responding to public pressure as regards quality-of-life improvements such as a cleaner environment, higher food-safety standards, water security, and social protection. China will need outside help in meeting the diverse demands of the country's "urban billion."

Like it or not, however, China will soon also have to tackle demands for political reform and openness. The world will also be watching carefully to see how China's new leaders respond to international criticism of Beijing's human rights record.

China has helped millions to climb out of poverty. Can its leaders now open the doors to political reform and transformation?

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

November 21

1962
The Chinese People's Liberation Army declares a unilateral ceasefire in the Sino-Indian War.

1971
Indian troops, partly aided by Mukti Bahini (Bengali guerrillas), defeat the Pakistan army in the Battle of Garibpur.

2006
Anti-Syrian Lebanese Minister and MP Pierre Gemayel is assassinated in suburban Beirut.