

## CROSS TALK

## Aggression won't get Jamaat anywhere

*Policy of wanton arson will backfire*

JAMAAT-e-Islami appears to have decided to go on a progressively violent trajectory to have its partisan demands met—the release of accused war criminals and stopping of war crimes trial, for which the people at large are standing in support. These “mega showdowns” that appear to be a decision by the party's high command calls for party cadres to deploy hit-and-run tactics on law enforcement agencies. Indeed, going by media reports, some 5,000 party workers have been deployed to create havoc all over the country. That tactic has already cost the life of one policeman in Jessore.

It appears that the Jamaat-e-Islami and its student wing Shibir have opted to realise their demands terrorisation tactic. We firmly condemn it and declare that their methods will be resisted by the mass people. There is no sympathy for Jamaat's demand. The party risks losing legitimacy as a political party due to the ratcheted up mayhem, vandalism and destruction of public and private property. We find it that BNP, the main opposition party in parliament has extended its “moral” support to the strike called by Jamaat. There is nothing morally supportable about blasting bombs, torching vehicles, wounding ordinary citizens and attacking law enforcers in the name of stopping the trial the nation has been waiting for since gaining independence.

The fact that Jamaat has extended its unruly attack frenzy to district towns where identical methods of engagement have been deployed reveal a disturbing pattern of behaviour. Shibir is out to create trouble and it is not averse to taking lives. Jamaat being a registered political party will have to behave as one and not as a reckless bunch of hooligans disrupting public order and peace. However, if what has happened today is an indication of what is to come, then authorities will have to rethink their policy on containment with special emphasis on intelligence gathering. For its part, the Jamaat should seriously think about the consequences of its current level of bellicosity and settle for peaceful means.

## Defense purchases

*Bring in more transparency*

FOR the first time the Transparency International has produced a government defence anti-corruption index, a review of corruption risk and vulnerability in defence ministries and armed forces in several countries. It offers an insight of the corruption risks in national defence and security. According to it, Bangladesh is in high risk category because of absence of certain mechanisms that mitigate the risk of corruption. We feel that there are certain pointers in the report which we will do well to implement.

Unfortunately, public discourse on anything related to defence in Bangladesh has been made a taboo, more so when it has to do with defense purchase. That is an unacceptable situation, given that a huge amount of public money is spent on maintaining the military and on defence procurement.

Thankfully, we have seen a departure recently, albeit slight, nevertheless commendable, when the government made public the one billion dollar defence purchase deal with Russia, although there are quite a few grey areas regarding that too, including the fact that the matter was not discussed in the cabinet.

However, we would like to see the purchase agreement with Russian as a start to a more open military deals in future, particularly where huge sums are involved and where new weapon systems are being inducted. Transparency in defence purchase has become a global imperative, and there are good reasons for it. National security and national defence are like conjoined twins, but unfortunately, in the name of national security many important issues of defense are kept out of public purview and even out of the scrutiny of the parliament, endangering national security in the process.

We feel that it is for the very reason of national security that large defense purchases and indeed the entire gamut of defense spending ought to come under close parliamentary oversight. There is need to thrash out the rationale of a particular purchase and the cost involved as much as the need to keep the parliament informed about the mode of payment or about any restrictive clause which may prove prohibitive for the country in the long run, so that we, as the purchaser, are not left at the

# Should Mirza Fakhru languish in jail?



MOHAMMAD  
BADRUL AHSAN

FROM apparent to obvious, the government is harassing acting BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir. He is

being dragged back and forth between court and prison, his fate resembling that of Tantalus. A tragic figure in Greek mythology, Tantalus was made to stand in water under a tree, and the fruit forever eluded his grasp while the water receded if he tried to drink. The BNP leader is being tantalised. Every time he gets bail and freedom appears within his reach, new charges are slammed to send him back to jail.

One shouldn't get the idea that here comes another BNP sidekick. Instead, everybody should be concerned over this dog and pony show of lopsided justice. The government is playing the cat-and-mouse game, using this one prisoner as the punching bag to send the message to his party.

Is this man guilty as charged or innocent? That brings us to the story of Gopal, the chief court jester for Maharaja Krishna Chandra of Bengal. A man bathing in a pond on a winter night was found guilty of keeping himself warm in the light coming from a faraway house. Gopal protested in his characteristic style. He proved the inanity of that absurd accusation by staging a cooking act.

He placed pots on top of a palm tree and lighted a fire at the base.

By that remote connection, the BNP leader is responsible for the city corporation vehicle that was torched by his party workers. He was arrested for the first time on that charge, subsequently repeated like chain smoking. New cases opened on the heels of old ones, he is arrested as quickly as he is granted bail.

A similar connection has been used in other charges leveled against this

and the subjugated in the hicks and hacks of bitter showdowns.

Proof of the pudding is in the eating. Most recently, the police refused to record a case when a family in the capital went to lodge complaint against monstrous men, who raped and killed their daughter. There are many more examples all over the country when victims run from pillar to post begging for police help. Yet, thirty-eight cases have been instantly

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man, which, if valid, has wider ramifications. The Indian prime minister is guilty of every Bangladeshi killed by BSE. The US president is guilty of every single death caused by drone attacks in Pakistan. Somebody in Awami League should take responsibility for many aberrations of its student wing. God is responsible for my indigestion caused by overeating.

Since none of these connections works, why should Mirza Fakhru languish in prison? Somehow it smacks of colonial-era contradiction when political prisoners were tried by the laws and judges appointed by rulers who usurped their country. That one thing has never changed. We are taking turns to play the subjugator

piled up on one man in a rare instance of proactive policing!

Hilary Mantel's Booker-winning *Bring Up the Bodies* tells the story of a gross injustice committed in British history. King Henry VIII accused his wife Anne Boleyn of infidelity, treason and witchcraft, and got her beheaded at the Tower of London. Historians claim none of those charges were true, and the king's real intention was to get rid of Anne by all means. She had failed to give him a male heir and stood in his way to marrying his new flame, Jane Seymour.

Like frenzied waves whip up foam, Hilary in the course of her storytelling embarks on this crucial question: "What is the nature of the border

between truth and lies?" she asks in page 159. That question is critical; it summarises history in its ultimate sense. Edward Gibbon expanded on it when he defined history as a little more than a register of crimes, sorrows and misfortunes.

That "little more" is mankind's unyielding hope that rational should eventually prevail over irrational, beauty over ugliness, intelligence over instincts, kindness over cruelty, compromise over conflict, and decency over depravity. This hope should also come to this country at least in the limited scope of the sky reflected in a waterhole. That optimism alone sets apart savage-infested wilderness from civilised society.

This government has thousand and one reasons to strike back at BNP, particularly after the grenade attack in August 2004. But revenge in democracy comes sweetest when an opponent suffers political defeat. If there is no convincing case against Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir, his detention will backfire and win him public sympathy.

Since the government is certain of its achievements, it shouldn't be worried. It should set the BNP stalwart free and wait for the crowning moment when, given enough rope, opponents often make the mistake of hanging themselves. To the contrary, inordinate harassment has an inherent risk. What goes around comes around, each time exacting greater vengeance.

The writer is Editor, *First News*, and an opinion writer for *The Daily Star*.  
Email: badrul151@yahoo.com

# India growling

KHURRAM HUSAIN

HOW the tables have turned! For years it was India that held out the hand of trade and economic opportunity to us, and it was Pakistan that growled back defiantly, wedded to antiquated notions and primitive instincts.

And now, one incident on the Line of Control (LoC) later, it is India that is doing the growling and Pakistan talking the language of peace, of resumption of dialogue.

Let's get one thing clear on this whole issue: the incident on the LoC was just that, an incident. It was not a terrorist attack. With two large armies facing each other across such forbidding terrain, in such close proximity, it is inevitable that such incidents will occur, and have occurred with almost boring predictability.

This is not unique to India and Pakistan. Wherever you have two large armies, belonging to countries with a history of armed conflict, faced off against each other within line of sight, and stuck in these positions for years on end, incidents of this sort occur.

What's more, we also hear that the story is a lot more complicated than imagined at first, that it was not a case of unprovoked firing and infiltration by the Pakistan army, but that there was, as with everything else, a history and a context to the whole thing.

What is unusual in this case is how the Indian media whipped up a storm of fury and peddled a dubious version of events that whitewashed any trace of responsibility on the part of the Indian army and held the Pakistan army responsible for the entire sequence of events.

The hype and fury whipped up by television anchors was so intense that ordinary Pakistanis on a visit to India under newly improved cross-border sporting and cultural ties felt personally threatened in the street if they identified themselves as Pakistani.

Much credit belongs to the few brave journalists in India who actually took the trouble to unearth the facts, and brought to light the understanding that the events were complicated, were not without precedent, and that both sides had engaged in brutal behaviour towards each other for over a decade.



**There are three large issues that need to be sorted out separately between India and Pakistan. They are territorial issues, arising from disputes on how to draw a line on a map. Second is water sharing, and the third is economic opening up. It bears repeating here that it was a good idea to separate these issues and place them in different compartments.**

I thought the entire point of the thaw in relations was to get past these primitive sentiments and antiquated notions. I thought that the composite dialogue was meant to compartmentalise the relationship precisely so that events and incidents of this sort did not spill over into other domains. And I also thought that setting up the dialogue in this manner was an idea that originated in India.

So what happened? We're told that heightened sensitivities on account of the elections lie at the root of this whole fiasco.

Apparently the media pandered to the lowest common denominator in its thirst for ratings, and none amongst the politicians had the courage to stand up to this right-wing fury for fear of how it might impact their chances for reelection.

fury travelled from the screens to the streets to the highest levels of policymaking with blinding speed.

Fair enough. We in Pakistan understand these things because we have seen them happen in our country too.

We know how the approach of elections can make the political system jittery and vulnerable to emotional storms. We know how the media can pander to the howl in all of us in its thirst for ratings. Many of us also know that anchors tend to be, almost universally, a rather ignorant breed.

So what else is one to expect then? A media driven by ratings will peddle hate from time to time because of all primitive instincts, nothing sells like hate. Anchors will dissemble before their viewers because that's what they do night after night anyway. And what's an anchor without ratings? Politicians will cover in fear because

if they were so brave as to be able to stand up before an enraged mob, they wouldn't be in politics.

The biggest shame here is that the talks on economic opening up have been stymied on account of this whole sordid episode. It would've been far better if economic issues, that were supposed to be removed from these primitive instincts, had not been allowed to once again become hostage to them.

Only this time it's happening in the very country that has, for years now, lectured Pakistan on the importance of disentangling economic considerations from LoC-related matters.

The best hope both these countries have of finding a just and lasting peace with each other is through greater economic cooperation.

There are three large issues that need to be sorted out separately between India and Pakistan. They are territorial issues, arising from disputes on how to draw a line on a map. Second is water sharing, and the third is economic opening up.

It bears repeating here that it was a good idea to separate these issues and place them in different compartments. Cutting off talks that are trying to deal with water-sharing issues, for instance, due to an incident on the LoC makes no sense. Some of us have spent many years trying to knock this sense into thick heads here in Pakistan. Now it seems we will have to spend a few more years trying to knock it into equally thick heads in India as well.

It's pointless to rage against the media for pandering to the ratings, or to urge anchors to show more sense. But it is possible to reach across to those sections of the journalism profession in India where better counsel still lives and breathes, and urge them to do the hard slog, and take the big risks, to ensure that this maelstrom of emotion doesn't sweep us all before it.

After all, that's precisely the job that some of us have been doing on this side of the border for decades now.

The writer is a Karachi-based journalist covering business and economic policy.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 1

1924

The United Kingdom recognizes the USSR.

1946

The Parliament of Hungary abolishes the monarchy after nine centuries, and proclaims the Hungarian Republic.

1958

Egypt and Syria merge to form the United Arab Republic, which lasts until 1961.

1979

The Ayatollah Khomeini is welcomed back to Tehran, Iran after nearly 15 years of exile.

2005

King Gyanendra of Nepal carries out a coup d'état to capture the democracy, becoming Chairman of the Councils of ministers.