

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

This is the third force



MAULANA Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani had called Hotel Shahbagh "Saddad's paradise," then under construction during post-partition Muslim League rule in these parts in the early '50s. The hotel is long gone, and with it its elitist overtone. We have a Shahbagh, turned into a massive venue, for a resounding expression of long-felt public emotions centering around Liberation War, war crimes trial, its proceedings and verdicts.

Shahbagh square has transformed into a magnetic field for an unprecedented popular movement for justice. It is now a place reborn from the aristocratic to being the commoner's rendezvous. Actually, a miracle has happened through a providential intervention. It is a God-sent. What with political bankruptcy, intransigent standoffs, autocratic misrule in the garb of elective democracy, high living and business costs and a fatalist love for brinkmanship, the silent majority have been looking for a third force to emerge. Shahbagh's young men and women stay connected with people of all ages and from different backgrounds radiating a moral force. They have launched a new platform, an apolitical third force, so to speak. Not quite the one that some very senior politicians were trying to forge as an alternative to two-party centred governance by turn. But it has come about anyway -- what's in a name!

Let's make no mistake about the fact that so long as people's power is sustained through transparency, neutrality and selfless dedication to a high moral value, it will continue to wield its influence on the power that be. Our leaders have been vociferously claiming that

they are doing what the people want. The people instantly ask: "How do you know what the people want when you dump them after each general election?" Now Shahbagh is revealing what the people really want.

It is still too early to predict how long the movement will continue; yet what is crystal clear is the structure and experience of the movement remain a part of valuable knowledge-based communication paradigm capable of galvanising people at short notice. Integrity and a sense of purpose will be its inner strength. A constant vigil is being kept by the organisers to preempt any intrusion of politics into the arena.

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The BNP has taken a bad hit, the AL forced into soul-searching and the Jamaat-Shibir combine's battle for survival is baying for more blood. The left has a sophisticated political appeal among the youths, so a surmise goes.

The BNP is in a crisis of a magnitude it has not confronted before. Not quite an existential challenge, given its ideological base in the people, but it will take some doing for the party to come on the other side. Currently, of course, its populist urban foothold is somewhat loosening up -- thanks to its support for Jamaat-Shibir's aggressive programmes and posturings. The senior ally BNP is said to be

now distancing itself from its junior partner.

With its back to the wall, Jamaat-Shibir may be up to yet more rabid kind of extremist vandalism including surprise strikes on the law enforcement people and vain attempts at landing on a square of its own. With the people standing as bulwark such machinations will be frozen on the track.

BNP's failure to capitalise on AL's failings had already dampened its ammunition. And, just when it was trying to dry the ammo by the heat of Mirza Fakhrul Islam's release on bail in 26 cases, Shahbagh's protestations have put them on the back foot.

For the AL, an apparent beneficiary of the movement, the task is far from easy. Already, the youth has utilised its influence in bringing about a change in the International War Crimes Tribunal Act. The other five points of the six-point charter of demand that they have submitted to the government and received an endorsement of will test the government's abilities. It will be well worth watching how intrepid the government's handling of the raft of demands will be.

On one particular demand, namely elimination of religion-based parties from the national polity, AL Assistant Secretary General Mahbulul Alam Hanif had hinted at the necessity for associating BNP with such an initiative. This pointer to bipartisanship is welcome because of its potential for setting a process of dialogue afoot. Perforce the major political parties will have to evolve a working formula for coexistence and effective functioning from their respective positions. The present situation calls for it as never before. Let the Shahbagh organisers go by both head and heart.

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ANISUR RAHMAN

Egypt: Revolution or chaos?

KAMAL GABALLA

THE aggressive attack of Egypt's police on one of the peaceful protesters and stripping him naked and dragging him in front of the presidential palace that was aired all over the international media on February 1, 2013 summarises the deteriorating state that the January 25 revolution has reached. Angry protesters commemorated the 2011 uprising last week with not much hope for better conditions, whether in terms of security or political, economic or even social stability.

On Friday, February 1, 2013 cold winter winds and heavy rain could not stop the peaceful protesters from gathering to march across the country after Friday prayer under the motto "The Friday of Salvation."

My wife and I participated in one of the peaceful marches from Rabaa Al-Adaweya Mosque in Nasr City in Northern Cairo and we walked for about four kilometers towards the presidential palace along with thousand others. They were chanting angry slogans against the Muslim Brotherhood and its supreme guide and against President Mohamed Mursi.

Many of the chants of the peaceful protesters were the same ones repeated during the January 25 revolt that toppled Hosni Mubarak. Before he left, Mubarak handed over power to the supreme council of armed the forces that managed the country until the election of Mursi in June 30, 2012 with just over 50% of the vote.

In the march to the palace the victim, who was subjected to humiliation hours later, may have been walking close to my wife and I. Hamada Saber, 48, was also with his wife and three children, coming from one of the less fortunate areas of Cairo, chanting, "Bread, freedom, social justice and human dignity."

The secret of my extreme sympathy for this case and insistence to tell the story of Hamada Saber does not just stop at it being a perfect symbol of the worsening situation in Egypt. It is also because the barbaric attack on him, from being stripped and dragged by police officers at the doorsteps of the federal palace, could have happened to any of the other peaceful protesters including my wife or me.

The striking aspect was how the victim changed his testimony under grave pressure by the police and actually claimed while he was at the police hospital that protesters were the ones who attacked him.

In the preliminary investigations with the victim, he said that the protesters attacked him! After people saw him on television being beaten, dragged and stripped, he claimed it was in fact a delusion and not accurate at all. He also claimed that the police tried to save him from the attacks of the protesters, which puts us in a very awkward position.

This situation reminded me of something I learned in journalism school about 40 years ago, "When a dog bites a man that is not news, but when a man bites a dog that is news." We could not



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believe that the peaceful protesters were the ones who attacked Hamada Saber while the police tried to save him!

While I was writing this article for a Bangladeshi newspaper, a Japanese friend, Mr. Masayuki Shiota, Director of Shi-Shaman co, ltd for Business & Tour operations came to me complaining.

Shiota san's complaint was that he opened up an office to attract tourists in Osaka and Kansai to visit Egypt upon the election of the country's first democratically-elected president Mohamed Mursi. This deal included reactivating a direct flight line between Egypt and Osaka -- which was suspended for the past two years.

All international and domestic indications at the time suggested that Egypt was witnessing a large boost in terms of security and political, economic and social stability when the president assumed power from the army. Especially because Mursi promised Egyptian voters that he would adopt a great "Renaissance" project which will lead to economic productivity and thus attract more tourists from around the world to revive the ailing economy, in addition to foreign investments.

What Mr. Shiota witnessed during his last visit to Cairo was very disappointing violence and stripping and dragging of a person in an inhumane manner in front of the presidential palace. He insisted that his host made him stay at a different hotel than the one he was used to staying at because it was safer.

How can Mr. Shiota's investment project succeed on which he spent millions of yen on and was very hopeful about -- when he can see for himself the terrible state Egypt is in.

When he asked me about my expectations, I was not optimistic; my answer was indeed shocking. In light of what I've witnessed for the past two years. From violence, instability and a messy management of the transition period under the military council; then finally being handed over to the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamist group's insistence to dominate institutions and not share power. Lack of respect for the law and allowing political room for thuggery and violence, like what happened in front of the constitutional court and the media city; terrorising the judiciary; writing a of constitution by an Islamist-dominated assembly without consensus; and forging the will of voters by passing the disfigured constitution through a referendum.

Before the January 25 revolution of 2011, Mubarak used to intimidate the people, claiming that the only alternative to his rule was chaos.

It seemed like the revolution successfully ousted autocrat Mubarak in a short time ... in not more than 18 days. With the least effort possible, and the least casualties, amid national unity and cooperation between the army and people under the slogan "The army and people are one hand," some analysts dismissed Mubarak's chaos theory.

But at the same time, there were warnings from other analysts who believed that removing

Mubarak alone does not necessarily mean that the regime has fallen, insisting that the revolution is ongoing and is not yet complete. There were other analyses at the same time directed at the regime remnants (Mubarak aides) and the deep state that Mubarak built over three decades and how difficult it would be to rid the country of it as fast as their leader (Mubarak) was toppled. But no one, from Egypt's protesters or analysts, thought that Egypt would reach this division and polarisation between revolution partners who participated side by side in the 18-day revolt, from Islamist, liberals, socialists, etc. No one predicted that this state of non-trust and violence that has swept the country would come and bring Mubarak's "chaos" scenario to life.

It is unfortunate to say that if the crisis in Egypt continues as it is between the Muslim Brotherhood and their allies on one side and the opposition, including national, liberal and socialist forces on the other side, it is certain that Egypt will walk directly into chaos and the dream for revolution will perish forever.

To be more cautious about where Egypt is heading I will cite what an online American newspaper had reported about Hosni Mubarak's prediction for chaos. They said he had already plotted it. The newspaper added that the prediction of Mubarak for chaos was not a careful political analysis but more of a pledge; Mubarak is the main author behind the policies that post-revolution Egypt inherited and is suffering as a result of.

The newspaper added that during the past three decades that Mubarak ruled Egypt, political institutions diminished instead of growing. Mubarak and Anwar Sadat before him, refused to let real political parties flourish and the civil society and non-governmental organisations were all crippled -- to leave room only for the Muslim Brotherhood and the army to flourish -- because Islamism of course was an important tool used by the Mubarak regime to threaten the people into submission.

It turned out Mubarak was not just deceiving us and that the threat is real; violent confrontations and chaos in Egypt's streets have become common. Even worse, Egypt is in fact living the alternative scenario of Islamism that Mubarak once threatened the people of.

The newspaper also says that the decisive factor in the past two years is that people have become less tolerant of revolutionary chaos. Many of those who once voted for the Muslim Brotherhood are perhaps ready to accept a "peace" leader, maybe with an army background -- maybe one who removes his army uniform and instead puts on a civil suit and necktie.

After telling the story of the stripped, beaten and dragged Hamada Saber in front of the presidential palace in Egypt and after the story of the suffering Japanese investor, the American newspaper sees that a satanic or angelic scenario awaits Egypt in the upcoming period; either real revolution or chaos.

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