

# BNP: Out of tune with the masses

**MOZAMMEL H. KHAN**  
POLITICIANS in every democratic society claim to represent the wishes of the people. It is the wishes of the people that become the prime movers of the successful political parties and the leaders who lead them. "You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time" - this famous saying of a great American President Abraham Lincoln was proven wrong time and again by a political party of Bangladesh. Lies, distortions and deceptions are the forte of this party which is once again proven by the party's

party agenda in the sole demand of the movement is outside the periphery of this unique movement on the one hand, while it is accusing that a particular political party has hijacked the agenda of the movement is absolute devoid of truth, on the other. It made no bones about its objection for the 'Joy Bangla' slogan, the most inspiring one during our liberation war, accusing that it was made party slogan after the independence. In fact, it was BNP's founder who reinstated the 'Zindabad' in line with Pakistani one after the August tragedy of 1975. It was not only the 'Joy Bangla', all other accompanied slogans of '71 have occupied the centre-stage of the

The statement said, "a front line familiar female organiser was assaulted by party cadres as she stood for maintaining the apolitical character of the rally". So BNP acknowledges that the fiery girl is an apolitical person. Those who are watching the Shahbag movement either through their presence or through TV, must be following that the BNP attributed so-called 'political' slogan chantings are led by no other than the apolitical 'female organiser'.

After publicly declaring that the accused Jamaat leaders are being tried in false cases, after putting the US government on the dock for its inaction in stopping the trial and attributing International tribunal as 'local' tribunal in Begum Zia's recent article in the Washington



**A solemn soul searching is in order for the freedom fighters in BNP who took part in the liberation war out of conviction. Human beings are mortal. In life, they are guided by greed for wealth and power. But, there are moments when human conscience should overtake all other aspects of human lives.**

Times, the BNP statement promised, "if BNP is elected to power it will ensure full independence of the judiciary and definitely ensure neutral and fair trial of all offences including the crimes against humanity".

Despite the unprecedented nonviolent nature of the mass movement, the BNP statement accused that its "noted intellectual" Pias Karim and "brave editor" (of Amar Des) Mahmudur Rahman are being threatened". Although the 'noted intellectual' and the 'brave editor' who are using their democratic rights, without adhering to their obligations, to speak the truth, are ceaselessly spreading venoms and terming this movement as fascism, while both national and international media are glorifying the movement as exemplary precedence of the peaceful exercise of democratic power. For instance, The Daily Star's report Solidarity in Silence captures, "A silence that was more overpowering than the strongest of slogans, a silence stronger than the high-tempered steel. A silence that cried in the loudest of voices: We want just trial of the war criminals. We want justice for the genocide committed 42 years ago."

Finally, a solemn soul searching is in order for the freedom fighters in BNP who took part in the liberation war out of conviction. Human beings are mortal. In life, they are guided by greed for wealth and power. But, there are moments when human conscience should overtake all other aspects of human lives, which only could make a human being immortal. Is it not that the auspicious moment is knocking at our doorstep?

The writer is the Convener of the Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.

## Who is afraid of Joy Bangla?

**MANZOOR AHMED**

BNP's statement on the unprecedented youth-led rally at the Shabagh Square (*Projonmo Chattar*), that caught the nation's imagination, defies logic.

"Questions and serious confusion have arisen about neutrality of the [Shabagh] gathering," said the BNP statement, "due to chanting of a slogan that was used during the Liberation War, but lost its general acceptability for being made too much partisan in the post-independence years."

Too much partisan, because BNP and its ally Jamaat chose to abandon the Liberation War slogan, while the Awami League and their allies did not? What compelled the BNP-Jamaat forces to banish the slogan that inspired millions of freedom fighters and became a call for determination of hope for the people during the Liberation War? Are they as afraid of the slogan as were the enemy forces in 1971?

How can one forget that the full-throated sound of Joy Bangla struck terror in the hearts of enemies of the liberation fighters in 1971? My contemporaries will remember that Pakistanis in Dhaka and abroad at that time referred to the liberation forces (Mukti Bahini) as the Joy Bangla Force.

The cruel twist of history, with the ignominy of the killing of the Father of the Nation and the coup d'etat of 1975, banished Joy Bangla as an assertion of pride and valour. Joy Bangla was replaced by Bangladesh Zindabad as the celebratory slogan for public occasions. Not that Zindabad was wrong, but how could this compare with the evocative power and historic significance of Joy Bangla? And can one be blamed for suspecting that the ban on the slogan was an attempt to turn the clock back and express nostalgia for the days of Pakistan Zindabad?

Even after an elected government was restored in 1991, Zindabad remained the sanctioned slogan, and Joy Bangla remained banned. Do we need to wonder why? The post-1975 military rulers and the political parties that were shaped on the anvil of military rule were not just unenthusiastic, but positively averse, to a slogan that evoked the spirit and ideology of liberation. How else can one explain the allergy to the words that inspired the liberation fighters and bolstered the morale of the people?

General Ershad, who harboured poetic pretensions, indeed had an ear for the evocative resonance of Bangla words in his naming of residential colonies and buildings around Dhaka while he was president. But he carefully avoided pairing the two words Joy Bangla and bestowing any official significance on them during his rule.

This situation prevailed until 2008, except for an interregnum between 1996 and 2000, when the coalition led by Awami League was installed in the government.

I recall that in 1996, after the new government was elected, a national education conference was held in Dhaka where several renowned educationists from the region were invited. The then Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, inaugurated the conference. Indian educationist Anil Bordia, a former secretary of education of the government of India, concluded his speech with the words Joy Bangla, in an expression of solidarity and friendship. The Bengali daily Inquilab made it a point to observe the next day that the Indian speaker had uttered the words Joy Bangla in his speech, which was reminiscent to the reporter of Jai Hind, victory to India.

I also recall that in a civil society gathering organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue prior to the aborted general election in 2006, A.M.A. Muhith, the current finance minister, concluded his comments with the words Joy Bangla. Some of the participants remarked that Mr. Muhith made the discussion unnecessarily controversial by bringing in "Joy Bangla." Unnecessarily controversial!

Should we not ask why exactly people of certain political persuasion were, and remain averse, to the evocative words Joy Bangla -- the words that struck fear in the hearts of the enemy of liberation; words that provided a boost of adrenalin to the freedom fighters; the words that should continue to be an assertion of pride and identity for citizens of Bangladesh. What exactly are they afraid of?

The author writes on education and development.

two successive statements vis-à-vis the history which is in the making at Shahbag Square, newly renamed as Projonmo Chattar. Bengalees living in every nook and corner of the world know very well who and how this movement started and how it is being relentlessly led by a few youngsters strictly maintain its apolitical character. The patriotic Bengalees all around the globe are coming out in unprecedented numbers to declare their absolute allegiance to the sole cause which is to ensure ultimate punishment to perpetrators of the crimes against humanity committed in 1971.

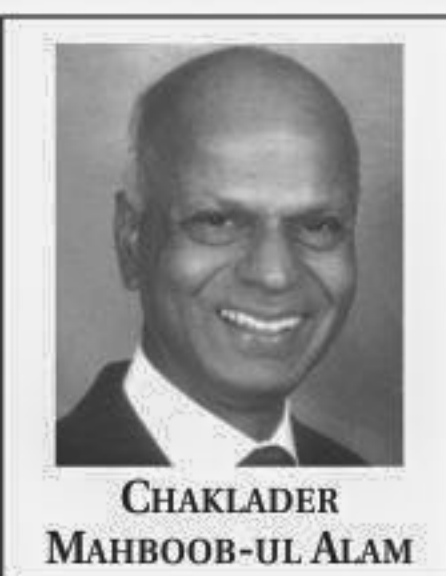
But the BNP leadership pretends not to understand the difference between politics and patriotism. Referring to the sole demand of the movement unparalleled after the historic '71, the BNP statement said, "the demand 'might have' some grounds, but it would have been 'more meaningful' had the youths included in their agenda", the political agenda of BNP as well. The BNP's statement connotes as if the organizers are begging for BNP's support for the movement. Using the words 'might have', the BNP statement has insulted the convictions and sentiments of the millions from all walks of life who are ceaselessly declaring their allegiance to the movement and getting inspired by the values and virtues that led the nation to freedom at the expense of three millions martyrs. The movement is not designed to implement any political party's agenda or to put or remove any political party to or from state power. So, BNP's demand to include its own

Shahbagm movement that has spilled over to the Bengali communities all over the world. As a matter of fact, if at all, it is the apolitical movement that has 'hijacked' the implied party's slogans, not the other way around! Even, had it been the other way around, AL must be credited with the prudence to play to tune of the people.

Over the last week, I personally attended a number of rallies in Toronto to declare our allegiance to the demand of the Shahbag movement, the largest of which took place on February 9 at the Bengali populated Danforth area of Toronto. There was one foot of snow in the previous 24 hours and three feet of snow bank on the street of Toronto. Yet, several hundred people of Bangladeshi origin gathered braving subzero temperature to form a human chain, which was a few kilometers long. It was a historic occasion. People of all age group from teen to late seventies, men, women and children, all came to declare allegiance to the making of history in Dhaka's Shahbag Square, where the spirit of '71 is being rekindled. The composition of a large percentage of women caught every one's attention. Groups came with different banners and posters hanging over their necks demanding death penalty for the razzakars. Echoing the slogans of Shahbag gathering, the gathering in unified voice chanted "Joy Bangla"; "Tomar Amar Thikana, Padma, Meghna Jamuna"; "Tumi Ke, Ami Ke, Bangalee, Bangalee". I was personally taken back to '71 when these slogans were party of our lives in those fiery days.

### LETTER FROM EUROPE

# Rhode Island, Roger Williams and democratic values



**M**EN and women from across the United States who are proud of their much cherished values of freedom of conscience, equal rights for all and separation between Church and

State will soon be celebrating the 350th anniversary of the official recognition of the establishment of Rhode Island as an English colonial settlement in North America. (The royal charter was granted in 1663.) I am writing this short piece to pay tribute to the man behind this project, Roger Williams, the founder of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations.

Now, the obvious questions are: Why in the history of the evolution of democratic values in America is this event so important? What is so special about Rhode Island? Who was Roger Williams? What role did he play in the fields of social justice and democracy in America?

A bit of history will help. As everybody knows, Jamestown occupies an important place in the history of European colonization of North America not only because it was the first English colony (established in 1607) that survived the onslaught of hunger, disease, and weather, but also because it is widely acclaimed as a bastion of Christian (Anglican version) civilization in North America

where the first European-style democratic system was introduced. On the flip side of Jamestown's history are the facts that it practiced a very limited sort of democracy. It started a process which led to the virtual extermination of the original inhabitants of North America, the so-called American Indians and that it also introduced African slavery and racism in North America. In order to perpetuate a system of "exploitation based on racial logic", the settlers actively promoted the theory that race was something fixed and immutable that God had created His chosen people, "the whites" to rule the world. This was the beginning of a new form of racism which was widely used to justify European colonialism all over the world.

Plymouth was founded in 1620 by Pilgrims (separatists from the Church of England), who fled from England to avoid religious persecution and death. These "separatists", who were much influenced by French Calvinism, repudiated the state church, (the Anglican Church) and formed voluntary congregations.

In the United States, where Puritanism and Presbyterian Church are strong, many American historians tend to undermine the existence of the history of Jamestown by creating the foundational myth around

Mayflower Pilgrims and Plymouth. The so-called puritan way of life and the famous American work ethics symbolize the importance of Plymouth in American history. Thanksgiving Day, which is celebrated as one of the most important national holidays in the US, was instituted

**This was an unusually tolerant society, probably more tolerant than the modern American society where one has to be careful to utter the word "Islam" or "Muslim" and where people belonging to the minority communities still suffer prejudice on a regular basis.**

by the Pilgrims in 1621.

Unfortunately, although they themselves had fled from England because of religious persecution, very soon the Pilgrims established a rigid theocratic society in Plymouth which became intolerant of other faiths and races.

It was under these circumstances that in 1631, Roger Williams, a Cambridge-educated minister arrived in Boston from England. Even though Williams was a devout Christian, he was a free thinker, a non-conformist and most certainly too progressive for his time. In Plymouth, he insisted that the land belonged to the Indians, therefore, without due compensation paid to them, the English king's land

grants could not give a just title to the land. He was also a firm believer in concepts like freedom of conscience, separation of state and church and equality of all men and women before the law. In the words of the American writer James Carroll, who, outside the United States is

often acclaimed as one of the most eloquent voices of American conscience, "He (Williams) saw that the rights he claimed for himself belonged to all, including Africans and women."

Williams was banished from Plymouth by the authorities because of his views which were considered not only radical but also dangerous. In 1636, he fled from Plymouth and found refuge in territories still controlled by the Indians. There he made friends with the Indians, learnt their language, earned their trust and bought land--due compensation was paid to them -- to establish a settlement which later came to be known as the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations.

This was an unusually tolerant society, probably more tolerant than the modern American society where one has to be careful to utter the word "Islam" or "Muslim" and where people belonging to the minority communities still suffer prejudice on a regular basis. Williams saw to it that besides the Separatists, the Catholics, the Anglicans, the Quakers, the Baptists, the Jews, the Muslims, even the pagans and atheists could live in peace and harmony

in Rhode Island. That was his idea of freedom of conscience. It took a civil war, the sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of human lives and ultimately, the death by assassination of Abraham Lincoln, the greatest of all American presidents to pass the 13th Amendment to the US constitution in 1865 to abolish slavery in the United States which was started by the settlers in Jamestown. Now consider the magnitude of the event that took place in Rhode Island in 1652-- more than two hundred years before the adoption of the 13th Amendment--when the Rhode Island General Assembly passed a bill outlawing slavery and involuntary servitude. It is worth mentioning here in this context that the state of Rhode Island ratified the constitution of the United States only after the Bill of Rights was incorporated in 1790. Williams went so far as to inculcate his fellow citizens with the idea that in a truly democratic society one should be tolerant of even the intolerant.

It is a pity that greater recognition has not been accorded to Williams for his pioneering work in the fields of social justice and liberal democracy. While celebrating the 350th anniversary of the official birth of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, the Americans would do well to remember Roger Williams with love and gratitude for his enormous contribution to democracy in America.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.