

## STRAIGHT LINE

# For substantive resistance



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**E**RUDITE analysts of our socio-political scenario have witnessed a darkness that is yet to lift in its totality in free Bangladesh.

The emphasis is on the needful to overpower the descendants of the local collaborators and quislings who once killed and helped to kill three million Bangalees in 1971. The reality on ground is that those descendants, more appropriately the new generation of collaborating bigots, displayed their ugly fangs as early as 1980's when they started the process of cutting off veins and slicing away tendons of those they considered their enemies.

The question is, why was the law of the land powerless to haul the bigots and the obscurantist to the citadels of justice? Were there powerful people only too keen to protect the collaborators and their successors to retain and consolidate their political power? Was it an act of unpardonably shameful political expediency?

Answers to the above may not be easy to come by but that should not cause unnecessary and unproductive lamentation and keep us frozen. While the battle against the bigots needs to be multi-pronged, this writer wishes to focus on the appropriate law enforcement tactics to deter and contain and finally marginalise the enemies of our democratic republic.

To see developments in proper perspective, it is pertinent to note that, whether in fighting or controlling or even containing the so-called religious extremism, the first step is to understand and appreciate the very prevalence of such elements in a given society and its pernicious effects on the way of life of the citizens. Unfortunately, in Bangladesh,

we have been perilously late in awakening to the realities on ground. This is not to discredit anybody or apportion blame to any particular political party because the growth and muscle flexing of the obscurantist elements has not been limited to the tenure of one regime. Cumulative inaction of the regulatory authority resulting from a lack of appreciation by policy-makers about the mindset and modus-operandi of the extremists has brought us to the present state of affairs.

We need to be clear and definite about the threat perception. This is crucial because one cannot possibly treat a disease by denying its very existence. So from vague generalities if one has to venture into meaningful specifics, one cannot but

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make a pointed reference to our constitution. This is obvious because our constitution is still the way of life the citizens of Bangladesh have chosen for themselves, and it remains the solemn expression of the will of the people and the supreme law of the Republic. Article 11 of the constitution says: "The Republic shall be a democracy in which fundamental rights and freedoms and respect for the dignity and worth of the human person shall be guaranteed."

The constitutional position vis-à-vis the programme of the extremists leaves no room for any ambiguity. While at the macro-level it may be a matter of political direction to sort out disagreements through dialogue and persuasion, the field-level operatives, both in uniform and plain-

clothes, must have clear directives and plan of action for preventing violent subversive actions. This is all the more significant now because the new enemy has an emotional and religiously sensitive alignment with the common folks of the country. One must not be oblivious of the fact that the enemy combatants are entrenched in places and institutions that are traditionally respected and revered in our society.

As part of strategy, the enforcement apparatus should succeed in separating an act of violence from its so-called politico-social context and thus criminalise a certain mode of political expression. In Bangladesh's context this line of action would be very appropriate because there is a greater need to reject the religious extremists' right

clouding the pragmatic understanding of our real national interests.

Now that we know who the self-declared adversary is, there must not be any hesitation in the battle against the frontal attack on our constitution. There must not be any ambivalence in relentlessly pursuing the bigoted mischief-makers. Religious institutions or places of prayer should not be allowed to be used as sanctuaries. In order to do that quite a number of such entities should be subjected to well-planned surveillance.

Voluntary or charitable work or even religious teachings which are suspected to be used as cover by some organisations should be shadowed so that bonafide welfare work can be separated from malafide subversive ventures.

Foreign donations whether by individuals or organisations must pass through government scrutiny. This must be made mandatory. Along with this there must be a complete account of all educational institutions and the areas covered in the instruction should be known to competent authority.

Democracy has to allow interaction of different shades of opinion or divergent views to ensure vibrancy of a pluralist society. However, that does not mean that there will be freedom to convert the entire country into a theocratic dispensation by application of force and intimidation. There is a challenge to our way of life. This must be realised by the mainstream political parties who are pledge-bound to uphold, protect and preserve our constitution. Therefore, the visible enemy must be caught by the forelock and be dealt with under the law. A sovereign Republic born out of a historic struggle entailing epic human sacrifices demand that. We must not fail.

The writer is a columnist for *The Daily Star*.

## Violence cannot achieve anything

*We condemn it in the strongest of terms*

**A**CTIVISTS of 12 Islamist parties including Jamaat-e-Islami and its student wing Islami Chhatra Shibir came out in large numbers after Friday prayers in the city as elsewhere in the country and clashed with the law-enforcers.

A large number of journalists were hurt while discharging their professional duties.

According to reports, so far at least two persons have been killed and around 200 received injuries, some 20 sustaining bullet wounds.

From the extent and scale of violence and the way it took place at a time across the country, it evidently has been orchestrated and premeditated. Activists of different like-minded Islamist organisations chanted slogans demanding death to the bloggers and on-line activist youths of Projonmo Chattar at Shahbagh. At the same time, at various places across the country Gonojagoron platforms were ransacked.

The terror tactics of Jamaat-Shibir and other Islamist activists have caused panic among the public in the city as elsewhere in the country.

The police held their ground and they met the violence with courage. In many places they found it hard to control the situation and restore peace. But in the end, they were able to restore normality and peace.

As in the past, we condemn any kind of violence as a means of holding certain political programmes to press for demands.

It is important to note that, the 17-day movement launched by the Shahnagh's Projonmo Chattar youth activists was non-violent and peaceful.

But on the contrary, the Jamaat-Shibir and other pro-Islamist campaigners are using extreme form of violence as a method of their protestations.

Extreme and violent means have never paid, far less helped anyone achieve one's ends.

We hope good sense will prevail and Islamist parties including Jamaat-Shibir will shun the path of violence.

May we point out that the kind of rabid violence demonstrated on Friday can only lend credence to Projonmo Chattar's latest demands.

The law-enforcement agencies clearly have a job on hand to prevent further violence and ensure peace and security of citizens.

## Welcome HC orders

*Saving the environment a key concern*

**T**HE High Court's direction to the authorities to immediately stop operating 22 brickfields and 20 saw mills in a reserved Lohagara forest area in Chittagong district is a laudatory move. This bears testimony to HC's intervention in securing protection of forest, environment and biodiversity against predators in different shape or form.

We also take the opportunity of congratulating Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association (Bela) on its filing a writ petition to the HC based on violation of Forest Act 1927 by the brickfields and Sawmills Rules 1998 by the other category of offenders. The pertinent question is: How could the ministries of environment and forest and Local Government and Rural Development (LGRD) permit setting up of those brickfields and saw mills in a reserved forest area in the first place?

By that one yardstick, the kilns and mills were illegal, let alone the provisions of the Forest Act and Sawmill Rules which have been violated. Whilst setting these up many trees must have been felled and also for operating these industries more trees must have been destroyed. In all, environment and biodiversity have received a setback for some years.

The High Court directive can be read in two parts: First, this calls for a closure of the 22 brickfields and 20 saw mills. Secondly, the concerned ministries have been asked to be cautious in issuing licences and clearance certificates without which such business could not have kicked in at all.

The problem, therefore, must be struck at its root with an application of the relevant laws and rules that the government agencies are obliged to take recourse to at all times. Besides, such potential for collusive activity cannot be allowed to exist because it spawns corruption aside from inviting dangers to environment, ecology and

KOR KIAN BENG

**L**AST Friday, Xi Jinping marked his first 100 days in power as China's supremo since taking over the Communist Party's top positions in November 15 last year.

Though there is no practice in China of assessing a new top leader's work, observers say Mr. Xi has managed to keep the people generally happy during the honeymoon period. His penchant for frugality and simplicity, his image as a "man of the people" despite his aristocratic background, and an aggressive anti-corruption stance have helped him win support, they say.

Xi and his team, including incoming Premier Li Keqiang, have also struck the right note with their policy initiatives, including an income-distribution plan with higher taxes for the better-off and more help for the poor and needy.

But observers say Xi has failed to impress on foreign policy, with moves and rhetoric that may have overly stirred nationalistic sentiments and caused concerns among China's neighbours, which could boomerang to hurt him.

Asked to grade Xi on a scale from "A" to "E," Singapore-based observer Li Mingjiang gave him an "A minus." "Xi has done a fairly good job so far. First of all, he has created a new and positive political atmosphere in China," he added. Professor Li cited Xi's efforts such as cutting back on lavish ceremonies and receptions for officials, encouraging local governments to be less wasteful, and taking tougher steps against graft.

His moves in highlighting the

importance of military build-up, emphasising the continuity of reforms, and trying to chart a middle-of-the-road ideological approach have also helped him score points, said Prof Li.

Xi got a "B" grade from Nottingham University analyst Steve Tsang, who credits the leader for taking on corruption and abuse of power verbally. "He has also projected an image of taking these issues seriously by appointing Wang Qishan to this portfolio," he added.

Wang, the outgoing vice-premier known to be a no-nonsense fire-fighter, was named to the apex Politburo Standing Committee as the new anti-corruption czar amid China's leadership change last November.

But Hong Kong-based analyst Willy Lam gave Xi "a mere pass" -- a "D" grade. He said Xi has been disappointing in not saying much so far about economic and especially political reform, and has also continued the illegal treatment of dissidents such as the house arrest of jailed Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo's wife Liu Xia.

"Since he is only accountable to the 82 million party members, he has fulfilled his primary role of maintaining sociopolitical stability and the Communist Party's monopoly on power," said Professor Lam. "But for the great majority of Chinese, he hasn't even begun the uphill task of picking up the threads of reform," he added.

Also, analysts say Xi has not done

as well in managing China's foreign relations, particularly in its dispute with Japan over an island chain known in Japan as Senkaku and in China as Diaoyu.

"He could have handled the maritime dispute with Japan better, rather than allowing or authorising the escalation to continue, culminating in the use of fire-control radar on a Japanese naval ship and helicopter," said Professor Tsang.

He also questioned the timing of Xi's "prepare for battle" speech last

December when he visited troops of the Guangzhou Military Region, and a trip aboard the Haikou destroyer that patrols waters in the disputed South China Sea.

Xi was quoted as saying: "We must insist on using battle-ready standards in undertaking combat preparations, constantly enhancing officers and troops' thinking about serving in battle, and leading troops into battle and training troops for battle."

While it is normal for military forces to prepare for combat, Prof Tsang said Xi "could have made the same point without giving rise to a sense that he had Japan and other neighbours in mind."

Prof Li, who is from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, believes the combative talk was deliberate, with the new leadership deciding to use nationalism as a political tool to enhance national cohesion.

**In a nutshell, the Chinese people are happy, while other countries are worried. The real test of Xi's support from the people comes after he assumes the Chinese presidency next month.**

# Grading Xi Jinping's first 100 days in office

After all, Xi gave a rousing speech last December about the revival of China and its people in his vision of a "China dream" soon after becoming general secretary of the Communist Party and chairman of the powerful Central Military Commission. But Prof Li thinks such moves could backfire.

"The new leaders' rhetoric of 'China dream' and a strong military does not help build a good image for China in the region and the world," he added. "The heavy-handed approach to territorial and maritime disputes may not bring about the results that they expect."

In a nutshell, the Chinese people are happy, while other countries are worried.

The real test of Xi's support from the people comes after he assumes the Chinese presidency next month. It would mark the end of the unofficial honeymoon and the start of rising expectations among the people for substantial policy changes on hot-button issues like graft and rising inflation. Prof. Lam said Xi looks likely to be a stronger supremo than his predecessor Hu Jintao, "who has a weak personality and tended to seek compromises."

Prof Tsang said Xi has shown that his top priority is to keep the party in power by nipping in the bud any movement that may appear to be a challenge. "He is committed to 'reform' as a process, but prefers not to reveal where reform should lead to eventually," he added. "In other words, reform is just a means to keep the party in power, certainly not to bring China towards democracy."

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 23

1944

The Soviet Union begins the forced deportation of the Chechen and Ingush people from the North Caucasus to Central Asia.

1955

First meeting of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO).

1991

Gulf War: Ground troops cross the Saudi Arabian border and enter Iraq, thus beginning the ground phase of the war.

1991

In Thailand, General Sunthorn Kongsompong leads a bloodless coup d'état, deposing Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan.

1998

Osama bin Laden publishes a fatwa declaring jihad against all Jews and "Crusaders"; the latter term is commonly interpreted to refer to the people of Europe and the United States.