periSCope

Talking Politics

AHMEDE HUSSAIN

In the last two weeks the country has witnessed political violence at an unprecedented level. Members and supporters of Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) took to the streets of several districts, and, armed with sticks and machetes, attacked police stations and other such establishments to protest the verdict of a war crimes trial that handed down death sentence to the party's central Nayeeb-e-Ameer (Vice President) Delwar Hossain Sayeedi. It has claimed the lives of around 100, of whom, according to an unofficial account, only 36 were members of the JI and six belonged to the police.

Since the war of Independence in 1971, the country has never seen the loss of lives and the destruction of public and private property to such an extent. In the southwestern city of Bogra, the district administration had to ask for the deployment of the army to protect a police station. In an Upazila in north-eastern Chittagong, policemen ran for their lives and hid in a building which was set on fire by members of the JI.



Sheikh Hasina



Khaleda Zia

The magnitude and barbarity of the assaults point to intelligence failure, because of which the civil administration across the country might have been caught off-guard. There is no doubt that the loss of 100 lives could have been avoided had the intelligence agencies been performing their jobs well. Having said that, we still do not know whether the agencies have bungled their jobs or there has been a failure from the part of the political leadership to handle the crisis.

It has been evident that in our country the police are not trained to handle riots. Policemen were heavily outnumbered, and the way violence was unleashed across the country suggests that the police had no clue as to what was in the offing. In fact, they were put in such a situation without any proper briefing, let alone any training, and what has followed is an inevitable outcome of ineptitude.

The JI's violence and police firing, along with the BNP throwing its weight behind the JI, has encouraged the extreme rightist elements, which are now trying to cash on the *nastik* (atheist)/*murtad* (heretic) blogger issue. The issue has become so lucrative to rightist politicians that even General (rtd) HM Ershad has joined the fray and in several speeches since his return from the US has talked about upholding the spirit of Islam. He has even promised to give free water and electricity supply to all the mosques and madrasas in the country.

Since the country's independence in 1971, the nation has never been so polarised. And the continued violence and now--thanks to the BNP--a sustained political struggle for the popular caretaker government issue might push the government to take desperate measures, all of which might not be good for the AL and the country.

The way out lies in holding a fruitful dialogue. Some AL leaders have already talked about sitting with the main opposition over the caretaker government issue, which is quite heartening to see. But police raid on the headquarters of the main opposition, as an AL leader has already pointed out, is uncalled for and might push the BNP further towards the JI. The latter wants to strike while the iron remains hot, and the party leadership, it seems, has found an ardent admirer of its theory in Khaleda Zia.

Leaders of both the parties have so far turned up with comments that tell us that they haven't thought of the kind of dialogue they want to hold. Splitting the BNP, along the Muktijoddha vs Razakar line, might sound a good idea to the AL leadership, but at the end of the day an election held without the participation of all the major parties will not be acceptable to anyone, especially the masses, who see election time as a festive occasion, on which they exercise their right to choose their leaders for the next five years.

What might happen if the dialogue fails? The history of dialogue in the country – the most recent being between Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and Abdul Jalil – has never produced any fruitful result. Still, there is no harm in trying. There is always a first time for everything.

The writer can be contacted at <ahmedehussain@gmail.com>