

Political impasse: Light at the end of the tunnel?

AKHTER HUSSAIN

HARTALS associated with violent hit and run processions, arson, indiscriminate destruction, and torching of vehicles and trains, business establishments and even residences have currently become the order of the day. All these started with the pronouncements of the verdicts of the war crimes tribunal.

Holding of the trials for crimes against humanity was one of the election pledges of the AL for which it received mandate from the people. Initially, the protesters were the party cadres of the Jamaat e Islami (JI). Most of the persons who are being tried for crimes against humanity committed during our War of Liberation in 1971 were leaders and members of that particular party.

The JI enthusiastically supported and collaborated with the murdering Pakistani armed forces. They were directly involved in the killings, rapes and arsons as members of the Razakar, al Badar and al Shams *bahinis*, the auxiliary forces created by the Pakistanis. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) initially lent support to the JI in their protest movements but joined them later.

The BNP lost miserably in the last Parliamentary elections because of widespread corruption perpetrated by party leaders and members, and due to the repression unleashed against minority communities just after the 2001 parliamentary elections which they won. Later, the BNP, because of its leadership failure and organisational incapacity, also failed to act as a responsible opposition party. It was also unable to develop effective opposition against the Awami League's failures and mismanagements both inside and

outside the parliament.

Under such realities, the violent protests unleashed by the JI provided an opportunity to the BNP to master destructive opposition, especially in the streets, on the shoulders of the cadre-based JI. Later, other Islamist forces also joined them on the pretext of "saving" our religion, Islam, from the members and supporters of the Gonojagaran Mancha, whom they termed as "atheists" for allegedly planting anti Islam blogs.

Now, lives are being lost every single day. Police stations and members of the law enforcing agencies, especially the police force, are being attacked and even mercilessly killed whenever the so-called protesters find an opportunity. This type of violence is a completely new phenomenon in the country. The whole purpose of these heinous activities seems to be to turn the country into a failed state to seek vengeance for their defeat at the hands of the people in 1971. They want to create a situation similar to that of present day Pakistan where people are being killed regularly even while praying in mosques.

Against this backdrop, let us analyse what the various stakeholders of the current impasse are ultimately going to gain in the end. Here, the stakeholders include the JI, BNP, other Islamist forces and the AL. The people of Bangladesh, who are the real owners of the country, would be the recipients of the outcomes of the activities of the above mentioned stakeholders.

The Jamaat is out to save its long-time leaders with the commonly accepted allegation of crimes against

humanity committed against the people of Bangladesh during the Liberation War. But here, it must be noted that the Jamaat, in successive elections, could not manage to get more than 3-5% of the popular votes. It, of course, has some pockets of supporters, in almost all cases in the border belts.

These pockets have a sizeable population who migrated from India during the partition of 1947. In all these years, they have not been able to get rid of the ghost of the two-nation theory based on religion; this is still deeply ingrained in them. However, the JI, with this meager popular support base and past stigma, will not have any noticeable gain out of the current situation.

On an optimistic note, we hope that the political parties will come to an understanding soon and good sense will prevail as history suggests that ultimately the evil forces are defeated and people emerge victorious.

Though it has been able to enlist the support of the BNP and other Islamist forces (many have sufficient reasons to believe that these are their subsidiaries or B teams), but under no circumstances will it be able to grab state power nor will it be able to free its leaders and other

members being tried for war crimes.

Even if the BNP comes to power, it will not dare to set them free going against the collective will of the general masses. In this case, the example could be cited of the case of the convicts of the Bangabandhu murder case. The BNP definitely deliberately delayed the process of justice at the Appellate Division, but could not venture to set them free on any pretext.

As such, the Jamaat is not going to gain anything out of its violent agitation and close alignment with the BNP. Rather, the BNP is using JI to further its own agenda of grabbing state power. The Jamaat will only

earn renewed wrath of the common people who are aware of its past deeds and also the hatred of the younger generations who had only heard of their past roles, but are now experiencing the vengeance and atrocities committed by the JI.

On the other hand, even if BNP succeeds in lodging the elected AL government or forces it to hold elections on its (BNP's) terms and come to power, it will not be very happy sailing for it. There will be immense pressure from the JI and other Islamist forces for concessions, which will be extremely difficult for BNP to accede to as it will lose its identity as a political party.

In the context of elections, we also should not forget the Jatiyo Party of General H.M Ershad. With 7-8% of popular votes, it will also play a crucial role in deciding the fate of the next elections' outcome. The AL, with its historical popular support base of 36-38%, will come up with agitation programmes from the very beginning and will be joined by a more informed and awakened new generation with their demands for justice and rule of law more vigorous than ever before.

The above analysis and perceptions suggest that the political parties in Bangladesh are engaged in a game of mutual destruction. This will not bring any good to them. But the economy, society and the common men and women will have to pay very dearly with their lives, properties and future prospects for the zero some game that is currently going on.

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Ganges Barrage: Talbaria site is best option

M. INAMUL HAQUE

THE Farakka Barrage is located a few kilometres upstream, from where a substantial quantity of water is diverted to the Bhagirathi River during dry months. This reduction of flow in the Ganges led to catastrophic damages in the environment in its dependent areas inside Bangladesh.

Before completion of the Farakka Barrage, an interim agreement was concluded on April 18, 1975, allowing minimum 44,000 cusec of water to Bangladesh at the period of diversions. The second agreement, known as the 1st Ganges Water Sharing Treaty, signed on November 5, 1977, ensured minimum 34,500 cusecs of water for five years. After its expiry, two Memorandums of Understanding were concluded in 1982 and 1985. There was no sharing agreement from 1989 to 1996. In 1996, the 2nd Water Sharing Treaty was concluded, which is valid for 30 years, and provides minimum 27,633 cusec of water to Bangladesh during diversions.

Bangladesh plans to build a barrage somewhere between Harding Bridge and Rajbari on the Ganges River. Tippetts Abbott McCarthy Stratton (TAMS), a consultancy firm from New York, proposed this barrage in 1963, at a location 3 km downstream of the Gorai River off-take. The barrage site was changed in 1981, at a location 4 km downstream of the Pakshey Railway (Harding) Bridge, with possibility of reducing its river training cost. But later in 1986, considering possible backwater effects up-to the Indian territory, the site was again shifted, to a far downstream point near Habashpur, Rajbari. In 2002, a study on the Ganges Dependant Area went for a fourth location for the barrage site, near Thakurbari (Sheldidah) of Kushtia.

Bangladesh, in the eighties, constructed the Tista Barrage to irrigate a large part of the northern region. With this experience we can construct the Ganges Barrage with our own manpower, skill and technology. Four sites have been selected so far, but they all have weaknesses on the aspects of construction, operation and maintenance, and the benefits gained. I have a proposal for a 5th site near the Gorai off-take. The major aims of the barrage are, (i) to divert water to the Gorai River to fight salinity in the southwestern region, and (ii) to feed the G.K. Project areas, Pabna Project areas for gravity irrigation. The Hatash Haripur site (1963) is about 3 kilometres downstream of the Gorai off-take. This site would be too far to supply irrigation water to the G.K. Project canals. The Bheramara Bahirchar site (1981) was about 4 kilometres downstream of the Paksey Railway Bridge.

To divert water to the Gorai River from this site would need an off-take regulator and a 15 km long link canal to link the Gorai River. Moreover, it would need another barrage at the original off-take of Gorai, like Bhagirathi off-take at Jangipur. However, this site would benefit the G.K. Project by providing irrigation water by gravity.

The Bheramara Bahirchar site was shifted in 1986 on the ground that backwater afflux of the barrage may reach the Indian territory. This was nonsense, as the location of this site was 40 km away from the international border. The Tista Barrage is only 8 km away from the border, where no such problem arises.

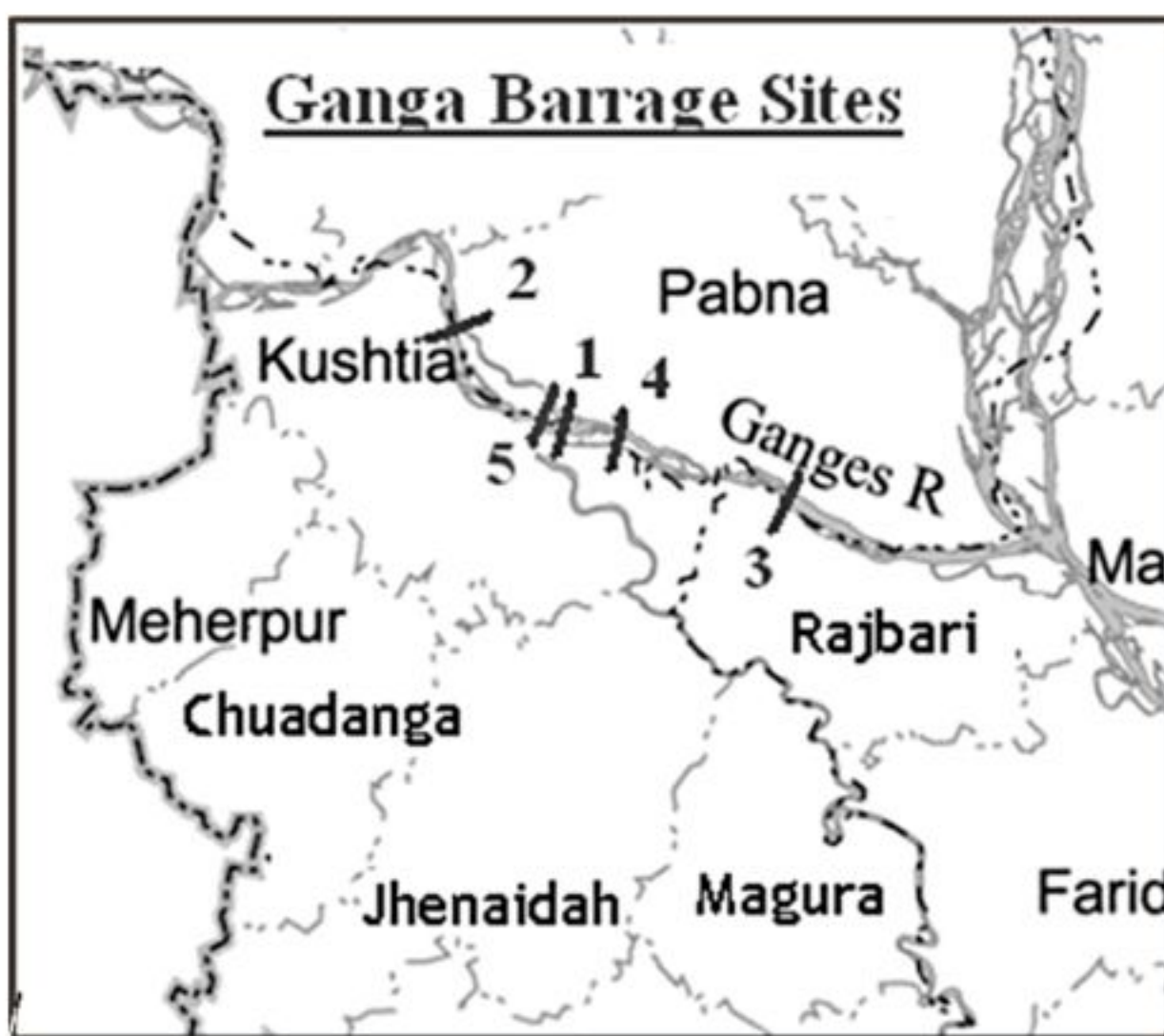
The Habashpur, Pangsas site proposed by Halcrow Consultants in 1986 (proposed again by Development Design Consultants in 2012), is about 30 km downstream of the Gorai off-take. Because this site is located far downstream, diversion to the Gorai River will not be possible. The Habashpur, Pangsas site will neither be able to preserve river water during monsoon -- because a barrage is never built as a High Dam for storagenor will it be able to irrigate greater Kushtia, Jessore, Khulna, Pabna and Rajshahi district areas it is located far downstream.

The Ganges is the breeding place of *hilsa* fish from Rajbari to Chapai Nababganj for about 200 km length of the river. A barrage at Habashpur site will obstruct *hilsa* migration to this spot, causing serious damage to the environment. The Thakurbari, Sheldidah site (2002) is about 10 km downstream of the Gorai off-take. A Ganges Barrage at this site will need protection work of 10 km length from southern bank of the barrage to Gorai Barrage northern bank. As this site is located far from the G.K. Project areas, it would be difficult to supply irrigation there.

Analysing the pros and cons of the so far identified sites, the Talbaria- Kushtia site for the Ganges Barrage appears to be the best. This site is about 6 km downstream of Dadapur of Pabna and 3 km downstream of Talbaria, Kushtia on the left bank *char* lands of the Ganges River. With Talbaria hard point on the right and Dadapur hard point on the left, it becomes a nodal point of the Ganges River. By fixing the barrage site between them, outflanking will not be possible beyond those two points, and will need less bank protection works.

A major advantage of this site is that the barrage will be able to supply water to the G.K. Project, Pabna Project and Faridpur area for irrigation, and to the Gorai River easily by gravity flow. A barrage at this place will allow *hilsa* migration 30 km upstream of Habashpur, Pangsas site, thus substantially reducing the environmental damage.

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Spare education from *hartal*, please!

ABDUL MATIN

THE Daily Star printed on March 29 called it outrageous. The primary and mass education minister termed it heinous and barbaric. Perhaps it is worse than how it has been described.

I am referring to the attack by some political thugs on the headmaster, two female teachers and 60 class II and class III students of the Khuniagach Government Primary School in Lalmonirhat on March 28, for not observing *hartal* on that day. The culprits were carrying sticks, iron rods, sharp weapons and cricket bats -- they had also vandalised school properties.

The activists could have requested the headmaster to close the school and send the students home, but then why should they or did they beat the teachers and the students so indiscriminately? Have they no respect for teachers, no mercy for the innocent kids and no consideration for the properties of the school? Spare education seems to be of no importance to them, they cannot be regarded as human beings.

It had always been a tradition in the past not to call *hartals* during the SSC and HSC examinations. This tradition had been violated recently. More than 1.4 million students appearing at the SSC examinations suffered from both mental and physical agonies as their scheduled examinations had been shifted at the last minute; due to *hartal*.

Over one million HSC examinees are undergoing an anxious period; apprehending that they too may be victims of *hartal* during their own exams which are to be held this month. They and their guardians have appealed to the 18-party alliance not to call any more *hartals* in the near future.

The education minister was passionate in his appeal. He requested the political parties not to hold any event which "may harm the students' education and hinder their academic careers." He added, "They (students) are our future. If they are not allowed to attend classes and examinations freely, how could we expect a sound future from them?"

A senior leader of the opposition, on the other hand, told The Daily Star that they "would intensify their agitation in April and would not consider any public examination [this] month." He suggested that the concerned authorities should instead adjust the exam schedules with their programmes.

What a statement from a public leader! The students are unable to attend classes. Their examinations schedules are being disrupted. There is

already a session jam at public universities and the current *hartal* status will aggravate the session jam even further; setting the students' careers towards more uncertainty.

Experience has shown that students taking O and A-level courses are required to sit for their examinations at odd hours, often very late at night, during *hartals*. It is reported that the concerned authorities are contemplating to withdraw all O and A-level examination centres from Bangladesh because of the disruptions due to such nationwide strikes. Imagine the plight of the students if they are required to go to neighbouring countries to sit for O and A-level exams!

Our political leaders do not hesitate to declare the younger generation as our future. So then, is this how we should treat our future generation? What will our future look like if they grow up without education? Is there any substitute for education in this modern

world? How can our leaders spoil the careers of our children? Do they not think about the future of their own children?

I remember my father's concern when, as school students, we had started a non-stop strike starting from February 22, 1952, soon after the martyrdom of some of our language activists in Dhaka.

Although he actively supported the language movement, he did not support a continuous abstention from classes. He argued that he had spoiled his own educational career by joining the non-cooperation movement of Mahatma Gandhi when he was studying at Dhaka College. My father is no more, but his warnings against strikes at educational institutions still ring in my ears.

The present *hartals* are worse than those of the 1950s or 1960s. Having a prolonged *hartal* was unheard of at the time and no *hartal* was called during public examinations. *Hartals* have taken a new and dangerous turn today -- standing synonymous to terrorism. We witness explosions of cocktails and hand grenades, arsons, torching of vehicles and vandalism like that of the Khuniagach Government Primary School.

Is it not time to wake up? We cannot afford to silently observe the destruction of our education system. Let good sense prevail among our political leaders. Let us bring some discipline and sanctity to politics and spare education from such strikes. If we fail to do so, the future will be doomed and our children will never forgive us or our present political leaders for our failures.

The writer is a former Chief Engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission.



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