

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

# Making sense of PM's interview with BBC



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PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina in her latest interview with BBC Bangladesh correspondent, Ambarasan Ethirajan, came into her elements like she did in Stephen Sackur's HardTALK encounter on July 30, 2012. She refuses to be cornered by any question, however provocative and unsavoury it may be; she keeps her composure -- unruffled. She has an uncanny way of breaking free from any shoehorn situation that experienced interviewers are likely to put her into, given the controversies she has created around her leadership profile. Like a leopard never changing stripes, the ruling party and the opposition have been locked in do-or-die battles in the last year of an incumbent government as a matter of rule. The people and the economy are cracked under a sledgehammer, as it were. Of course, the seeds of distrust and suspicion, sown in the preceding four years, only reap a monstrous whirlwind at the end of the day. In the words of Rebecca West, a left-wing journalist in UK: "There is no such thing as a conversation. There are intersecting monologues, that's all." You get an echo of Rebecca's wisecrack in the question-answer session over the BBC World Service's interview with the prime minister. Ambarasan Ethirajan did not hesitate to put tough, probing questions to the PM, a line he steadfastly maintained, tinged with politeness, to get answers to some core questions agitating the minds of the people. So also the prime minister kept making her points insistently with the conversation turning into "intersecting monologues." The government's ruthless law and order approach

can breed a false sense of invincibility as the objective situation strays into dangerous territory. The PM has termed *hartal* as a commonplace occurrence (*mamuli*). But can successive hartals be made light of, given their paralytic effects on national life? Curiously, she said that her government did not interfere with *hartal* which she thought was a democratic right of any political party. At the same time, her government adopts obstructionist policy including imprisoning senior opposition leaders on grounds not befitting their known reputation. Making it difficult for a major political party to function with its hierarchy mostly in jail is clearly taking the standoff to a point where avenues for discussion are shut off. Giving the BNP the taste of its own medicine, that too in overdose, smacks of blood feud as though in a tribal culture. Granted, the AL government had firmly dealt with extremism and terrorism between 2001 and 2006, but now the country faces radicalism of a different type, of which we have had no previous experience. This raises the spectre of attempted Talibanisation, or a variant of it. How could we be treated to a set of demands that threatened to push life into medieval age? The PM's ruling out of blasphemy act finds a responsive chord in the BNP, which is laudable. The Islamist movement ballooned around a single issue of hurting religious sentiments of the people by a handful of bloggers. The arrest of some bloggers has been accompanied by placing the social media network under the microscope. Even free and responsible thinking might be a casualty of moral disciplining, stretched to any inelastic

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point. Besides, instances of making intrusive entries into the blogs of others are before us. A case in point is planting hurtful message into Uttam's Facebook that caused a destructive communal maelstrom in Ramu. The massive gathering of Islamic parties came as a reaction to Jagaron Moncho; the battle lines were clearly drawn pitting modernist secular temper and liberation war ethos against 'Islam in danger' bogey bandied about by obscurantist elements. Much is being made about "atheism" but as Erica Jong, a poet and fiction writer, quipped: "There is no atheist on turbulent airplanes." At any rate, if Hefajat-e-Islam takes on the character of a political platform it may lose appeal with the people that at one time had climaxed into a resounding grandstanding by the religious formation. This is not to trifle with the Islamist resurgence but to say that ideology will have to be fought with ideology. You cannot lower your guard on the phenomenon of financing ideas and counter ideas, some from external sources. The prime minister's assumptions of everything being hunky-dory has a fragile foundation. For instance, she presumes that opposition will take part in the general election even if it were held under the incumbent government -- indeed "egotism is an anesthetic" that dulls the sense of realism. How does she also assume, given her staunch opposition to the caretaker system, that a situation will not arise in which the army may be drawn into playing its "constitutional role"? Let me echo two of the suggestions voiced lately by



discerning quarters about the ways to bridge the deepening cleavages in national politics. One, the progressive forces should unite to fend off regressive tendencies by dinning this message into the ears of the gullible: that our people have in their DNA a certain proclivity towards drawing a line between religion and politics or state affairs. Two, the AL and the BNP as centrist parties, one left-of-centre and the other to its right, should make a common cause of staving off ultra radicalism.

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## War drums in Korean Peninsula

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SINCE early March this year tension in the Korean Peninsula has been spiraling and has now reached a worrying point. Pyongyang has been making threats of attacking South Korean targets and US bases in the region. How has all this come to pass? The Korean War, which ended with the Armistice in 1953, left the peninsula divided along the 38°N parallel. North Korea, a cold war ally of USSR, has been at odds with the West over its nuclear programme since 1985. Communist North Korea, since the very beginning, has been suffering from a sense of insecurity. Pyongyang has always looked upon South Korea as a threat because of the presence of American bases. This sense was further strengthened by the fear that unification of the Peninsula will lead to the elimination of Communist Party. China replaced USSR as North Korea's trading partner at the end of the cold war and collapse of Soviet Union. China currently supplies North Korea with 80% of its fuel imports and almost 70% of its food requirements. With a population of 24 million (2011) and a GDP of \$40 billion (2011) Pyongyang's security paranoia pushed it to make tremendous strides in developing its military might. Diversion of resources to the military has left the country impoverished in agriculture. Famine stalked the country between 1994 and 1998, which led to deaths of 3 million people (according to some estimates). Yet North Korea has one of the largest armies in the world -- 1.1 million men. In May 2009 it successfully tested an underground nuclear device after its first attempt in 2006 failed. The North also developed missiles of different ranges despite stiff UN sanctions. Armed and emboldened with this arsenal North Korea has been threatening South Korea and USA from time to time. The current round of anger and threats began when North Korea carried out its third nuclear test on February 12, 2013, drawing condemnation from around the world, including China. The United Nations moved to tighten financial restrictions on North Korea. To make matters worse US-South Korea annual military exercise began on March 11. US Air Force flew stealth aircraft, capable of carrying nuclear device, in a show of strength. Pyongyang saw a serious menace to its security and threatened South Korea with nuclear attack. The North Korean statement said the "ever-escalating US hostile policy towards DPRK and its reckless nuclear threat will be smashed." On March 30, Pyongyang announced abrogation of the 1953 Armistice and that it was entering into a "state of war" with the South. It also declared that the dormant Yongbyon nuclear reactor was being re-commissioned. North Korea also moved two missile batteries to the East coast, sending jitters that a launch may be imminent. To these threats US Secretary of State John Kerry firmly said: "What Kim Jong-Un has been choosing to do is provocative and reckless, and the United States will not accept DPRK as a nuclear state." Kerry also stated: "The United States will defend our allies and we will not be subject to irrational or reckless provocation." Meanwhile, America beefed up its bases in the region with anti-missile batteries and has moved nuclear capable naval vessels closer to the peninsula. China, North Korea's neighbour and ally, is worried at the rhetoric coming out of Pyongyang. Beijing expressed "serious concern" and requested the international com-

munity to "remain calm" and "exercise restraint." Though many believe that China has strong leverage over North Korea, recent events suggest the contrary. China can ask Pyongyang not to do anything rash, but cannot actually restrain Kim Jong-Un. China is not only embarrassed at Kim Jong-Un's rhetoric, it is also deeply annoyed with Pyongyang. Exasperated, it has stopped supplying fuel to North Korea. Washington, taking advantage of Chinese ire over North Korea and an apparent shift in its policy, has been talking to Chinese President Xi Jinping to restrain North Korea. China knows that even a small military incident will lead American to expand its military presence in the region -- something Beijing definitely will not relish. Observers believe that young and inexperienced Kim Jong-Un is trying to assert his authority over his party and the military establishment through the current war rhetoric. He wants to prove that he is the strongman of North Korea, like his father and grandfather. Russia, also close to North Korea, is worried and angry. A foreign ministry spokesman in Moscow strongly criticised Pyongyang for its "defiant neglect" of UNSC Resolutions and said: "We are counting on maximum restraint and composure from all sides." United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon appealed to North Korea to change course saying it has "gone too far" in its rhetoric. Clearly, the stakeholders do not want any conflagration in the Korean Peninsula. To further heighten the tension North Korea, on April 5, asked foreign embassies in Pyongyang to evacuate as it cannot ensure their safety after April 10, in case there is conflict. What will be the consequences if the current rhetoric plays out? Given the fact that China is irritated with North Korea, one can probably assume that it may not get militarily involved in any conflict in the Korean Peninsula. In that case, North Korea cannot win the war because of superiority of US-backed South Korean war machine. In that scenario, North Korea will most certainly be overrun by South Korea. That may lead to unification of the divided Peninsula, pushing thousands of Korean as refugees into China. North Korea's Communist Party and leadership will disappear. That means a united Korea with US bases with nuclear weapons and large number of troops will be in China's backyard -- a very unpleasant scenario for Beijing to contemplate. North Korea knows that it cannot win any war with US-backed South Korea, but can cause real damage with the missiles and nuclear bombs it has. Clearly, it is using its nuclear capability as a bargaining card. Sanctions have stifled the North Korean economy. Pyongyang wants recognition as a nuclear nation and wants the sanctions removed. Though tension in the region is at an all-time high, Washington has been playing down the threat. The Americans are talking to Moscow and Beijing to de-escalate the tension. Washington, so far, has not got involved in the war of words despite provocations, except for a firm statement from John Kerry. China too wants de-escalation of tension in the region. Desperation and paranoia can sometimes lead to actions that may not bode well. The sooner the drums of war stop in the Korean Peninsula the better will it be for all.

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## 'Black propaganda': Is blogging a sin?

MAHAMUDUL HAQUE

BLOGGERS in Bangladesh are facing "black propaganda" as some so-called Islamist groups have branded them "atheists" to win the political game of saving the accused war criminals. They have launched a propaganda campaign against the bloggers, utilising the lack of understanding of the concepts -- blog, blogging and blogger -- among general people who have no knowledge about social media. So, awareness of these terminologies among people could help stop "black propaganda" against the bloggers and may be even resolve the current political crisis. Before understanding these concepts we should know the history of propaganda. The term propaganda, first used in 1622, was widely spread by Adolf Hitler in the '30s. Hitler had appointed Joseph Goebbels as minister for propaganda in 1933. Goebbels did his job to gain political success, not intellectual depth. US theorists later identified three types of propaganda -- black, white and gray. Black propaganda involves deliberate and strategic transmission of lies -- its use was well illustrated by the Nazis. White propaganda involves intentional suppression of potentially harmful information and ideas, combined with deliberate promotion of positive information or ideas to distract attention from problematic events. Gray propaganda involves transmission of information and ideas which might or might not be false. The so-called Islamist groups are spreading lies -- black propaganda -- by calling the bloggers "atheists" since the Gonjagoron Mancha had gained popularity and seemed to be a threat for Jamaat-e-Islami's plan to foil the war crimes trials by any means. Jamaat-e-Islam and Islami Chhatra Shibir are disseminating lies with manipulated pictures using social media, including blogs and Facebook, and even traditional media, against the bloggers who join the *mancha*. A Bangla daily intensified the "black propaganda" through instigating religious sentiments involving slain blogger Ahmed Rajib Haidar who was killed on February 15. The propagandists are also doing the same against other bloggers who joined the Shabagh movement. The groups also convinced a section of people, including women and children, to join attacks in Bogra. A report in *The Daily Star* on March 3 says: "It was all lies -- outright and outrageous -- but it worked. Jamaat's propaganda machine used a photoshopped image of Delawar Hossain Sayedee's face on the moon yesterday [March 2] to entice people to unleash a second wave of terror that killed at least 19 people in five districts." Temporally, the propagandists were successful in (i) creating violence involving some general people, (ii) involving some other so-called Islamist groups,

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including Hefajat-e-Islam, against Gonjagoron Mancha and bloggers. As a result, the government has made list of bloggers and arrested four of them, (iii) starting a movement by Hefajat-e-Islam, which also placed a 13-point demand at a rally on April 6 including enactment of a law allowing exemplary punishment to "atheist bloggers," and (iv) making Gonjagoron Mancha and blogging "controversial." This was possible because of strong propaganda and lack of knowledge of general people about blogging. If you introduce yourself as a blogger, social media illiterate people take you to be an atheist! Because of this, all bloggers are now facing such kind of trouble though they (Muslims bloggers) have full faith in the Almighty Allah and Islam. Blogging is not a sin. The word "blog" is short form of weblog, which means log on the web for writing or posting what the person thinks or feels. And "blogging" means the actual act of creating or updating a blog with texts, photos, audios or videos or any other graphics. A blogger is a person who writes the blog, so, what's the problem with being a blogger? Nothing, but we should consider what types of content a blogger posts on the web. Like in other countries, different professionals, including propagandists, Islamic scholars, and self-proclaimed atheists write blogs in Bangladesh. When a new medium like blogs had not been introduced, people expressed their ideas through traditional media like newspapers. Before introduction of blog, there were some self-proclaimed atheists but they did not have any open sources for writing. But now they have such open sources. So, blogging is not a practice of atheism and every blogger is not an atheist. It depends on what type of content is posted at a blog and whether it is hurting Islam or other religions. But what are the ethics or rules of blogging? Actually, there is no state government code of conduct or ethics for a blogger in Bangladesh, but ethics of general writings or journalistic writings are taught in some university departments, including journalism. So, without enacting any new law or policy on blogging or online journalism, the government should formulate general writing ethics for blogging. Journalists follow some codes of conduct and ethics imposed by the state or the organisations concerned. The propagandists should avoid the path of telling lies as such bad propaganda was finally defeated, as history shows. They should remember that blogging is not a sin but telling a lie is a sin and completely against Islam, which they use to win political games. On the other hand, bloggers should not hurt anybody or any religious community through blogging, rather they should follow general ethics of writing to avoid any reaction against it.

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