

Streamline the building sector

All unauthorized construction should now be identified and demolished

THE PM last evening ordered the arrest of the owner of Rana Plaza and four other owners of garment factories who forced workers to work even after the discovery of cracks in the building. We thank her for it and point out that if this action was taken earlier at least Friday's outburst of the workers -- we can in no way be sympathetic to the lawlessness -- may have been averted. Lack of immediate action created suspicions in their mind that owners, as in some previous cases, would get away. The very fact that the order for Rana's arrest needed to come from the level of the PM, which should have been done at a lower level, speaks volumes for the autonomy of action enjoyed by our law enforcing agencies. Also we must point out that the crime of the building owner and those of the factory owners cannot be judged to be the same.

The PM should also immediately set up a high level judicial commission to investigate all big buildings in areas like Savar, Gazipur, Ashulia, Tongi and low lying areas where likelihood of faulty constructions is the highest. This is most urgent in view of her own comment that 90 per cent buildings in those areas may have faulty construction. The anger of the garment workers has accumulated over the several instances when similar garment factory collapse did not lead to either punishment or adequate compensation for the victims.

The real issue here is the collapse of governance in the housing sector. Rules are flouted literally at all levels. As is clear from the case of Rana Plaza construction starting from land acquisition, soil testing, to earth filling and making all sorts of construction, no legal guidelines were followed. The owner of the building itself, which was on one of the main traffic arteries of the city, had no permission to construct anything leave alone a nine story shopping cum factory complex. How could the owner do it, why Rajuk never intervened for so long, and how such an illegal building was allowed to operate for long, which has now cost us so many lives?

The question is will we learn from all this and put an end to such "death traps"?

Body-blow to garment sector

Apply immediate brake on the backlash

THE garment workers across the sector have been on a vandalising spree in what we consider to be misplaced rage following the massive humanitarian disaster of Rana Plaza building collapse at Savar. On Thursday they bashed 100 vehicles in the city followed by at least 150 being damaged on Friday creating blockade to highways and many city streets. Taking out processions in splinter groups, they also took out their wrath on various garment units.

The fallout was so severe that many garment industries were shuttered down and their production suspended. Closely on the heels of hartals the backlash comes as a double jeopardy for the apparel sector. It was just trying to make up for some of the losses inflicted on the industry through successive shutdowns.

This is not an expression of mourning for the victims, nor is it any respect shown to them because the shock and the solemnity of the occasion were turned into a demonstration of blind rage. That they will be emotional at the imperiled plight of so many co workers and would seek security in their work places are understandable. Even peaceful protest rallies outside their working hours would have been in order. But to storm public and private transports, ransack shops, and attack garment units is nothing but a rowdy and self-defeating conduct.

Already, the garment sector has lost around Tk 200 crore on each hartal day. Furthermore, it faces cancellation of orders beyond what has already been suffered including upsetting shipment schedules. The apparel and knitwear units also risk losing in terms of competitiveness because the buyers are at an advantage in the pricing negotiations.

They are getting everything so cheap which in turn meant sidelining the issues of poor, insecure work environment and low wages for our five million-strong garment workforce. All this has come under international spotlight. If anything, the countless casualties under the wreckage at Savar agonised the buying countries who now are exerting pressure on big name retail buyers to protect the workers' right to descent wage and secure working conditions.

Hence, the agitating workers must be persuaded by their employers and the BGMEA as such to shun the path of violence in their own interest as well as that of the economy which benefits from foreign exchange earning worth



IMPASSIONED speeches pertaining to subjects that are political and outpourings of religious sentiment originating from events that are apparently affairs of the state are taking many by surprise. Religious zealotry of the undesirable kind is also uncomfortably visible. Religious leaders are venturing to occupy a larger part of the public space while mainstream political parties are trying to woo such elements with a view to garnering popular support in the not-too-distant general election.

Retracing the political history of the sub-continent one would find that religion was never totally detached from politics nor was it ever exclusively confined to private space. The issues that the Indian National Congress discussed and the reforms it recommended to various provincial organisations had strong religious implications. The revivalism of late 19th century and early 20th century was marked by a conceptualisation of a glorious Hindu past, believed to have been degenerated under Muslim rule and threatened by the British. This glorification of Hindu civilisation over Islamic or western often boiled down to attempts to exalt and rationalise Hindu institutions and practices.

Swami Vivekananda's evocation of Hindu glory mixed with patriotism which sought to restore the masculinity of the Indian nation denied to them by their colonial masters, had a tremendous impact on the popular mind. He became the "patron prophet" for a whole generation of extremist leaders and militant revolutionaries, dreaming the resurrection of a glorious Hindu India. Hinduism became a useful rhetoric for organising a more articulate and sometime even militant opposition to foreign rule.

In Bengal, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee portrays the mythical figure Krishna as the modern politician and a nation builder. It was in his novel *Anandamath*, published in 1882 that

he invented an icon for the nation, the Mother Goddess, identified with the motherland. And the song *Bande Mataram* (hail mother) which he composed in exaltation of this once beautiful mother, became the anthem of nationalist movement in India. The imagination of this icon was clearly taken from the repertoire of Hinduism.

In Maharashtra Bal Gangadhar Tilak in alliance with the Poona revivalists frequently invoked Hindu, Brahman and Maratha glory. The use of orthodox Hindu religious symbols for political mobilisation took a more militant form in north India through the Arya Samaj and the cow-protection movement which led to widespread communal violence in 1893. This movement was later absorbed into the dominant pan-Hindu revivalist framework. Their propaganda was mainly directed

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against the Muslims and the Christians. The Arya Samaj developed the concept of "Suddhi", which aimed at reconversion from Christianity, Islam and Sikhism.

It was in late 19th century that Hindu community began to define their boundary more closely and began to display more communal aggressiveness. At this time Hindu mobilisation took place around the symbol of cow, which communicated a variety of cosmological constructs relevant to both the Brahmanical and devotional traditions of Hinduism.

The cow-protection movement became an issue of communal rivalry as the debate over the legal ban on cow slaughter arose. Cow slaughter had a political meaning for Muslims as it meant a symbolic assertion of freedom from Hindu supremacy. The cow was

being used as a symbol for community mobilisation. There was an increasing necessity for mobilisation along community lines as constitutional questions were now being discussed, new competitive institutions were being created. This was necessary in order to register collective presence in the new public space, and the cow served as a handy symbol.

The cow-protection movement put an unmistakable Hindu stamp on the nationalist agitation. The Indian National Congress though not directly involved, remained silent and even patronising. Prominent cow protectionist leaders attended the Allahabad congress in 1893 and the Congress postures alienated the Muslims from Congress politics. Consequently, Muslim representation in Congress sessions declined drastically after 1893.

The lines drawn by cow protection were further reinforced by skilful manipulation of other available cultural symbols, such as language. In course of cultural campaign, Hindi came to be identified with the Hindus and Urdu with the Muslims. The association of political leaders with the campaign gave it an obvious political colour. The language henceforth became an important component of the cultural project of nationalism in India.

In the wake of cow-protection riots, there were also other more overt attempts to use Hindu religious and historical symbols for the purpose of political mobilisation. What followed in Maharashtra, was "the political recruitment of God Ganapati." Politics was clearly imbued in the Ganapati festival. Celebration of Hindu mythical

or historical symbols became an accepted practice in Poona politics. The Hindus who previously participated in Muharram festivals in previous years, now largely flocked to the Ganapati festival. Added to this was the Shivaji festival to commemorate the coronation of Shivaji Maharaj, who was regarded as the champion of Hindu self-respect and was credited with giving particular direction to Hindu religion.

In Bengal leaders like Aurobindo Ghosh believed that the use of Hindu mythology and history was the best means to reach the masses and mobilise them in support of their politics. Religious revivalism was a main feature of new politics of early 20th century and '*Bhagavadgita*' became a source of spiritual inspiration for swadeshi volunteers and Hindu religious symbols were frequently used to mobilise the masses. This alienated the Muslims in a very large measure.

Among the Bengal Muslims a distinct Muslim identity had been developing at a mass level from the early 19th century through various Islamic reform movements. These movements started purging the society of practices that were thought to be of un-Islamic origin. This gave the vast majority of Muslim peasants a sense of social mobility. Religious meetings and local associations that initiated the process had certainly helped in political mobilisation and in strengthening the argument about separate Muslim interest leading ultimately to the creation of Pakistan.

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The whirligig of time

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EVERY general election in Pakistan is an exercise in self-flagellation. It provides an occasion for adult voters and their elected representatives, like contrite sinners, to scourge themselves in an attempt to atone for sins past.

The sins of the voters are those of commission, committed in February 2008 and in occasional by-elections thereafter, when they voted in members of their choice to the national and provincial assemblies. The sins of those elected representatives were primarily ones of omission, for all those actions they could have taken in the national interest, and chose not to, during the five barren years they remained in office.

In another fortnight, the country will have decided who it wants to be governed by for the next five years. Perhaps these elections will once again confirm the cynical adage that every country gets the sort of government it deserves. Perhaps this time, the voters may yet confound political pundits and bring in a government of leavened competence that can rise above the expectations of its voters. History awaits their verdict.

Meanwhile, an interim national government has deflected the unwanted and gratuitous burden of instituting a case against former president Pervez Musharraf for treason. It has declared that its constitutional responsibility is to ensure free and fair elections, not to ensure that a former chief of army staff and president is given a fair trial.

In a sense, having brought the whole issue into the public domain, now the judiciary finds itself on trial. Will it be able to resist what Shakespeare's Fool Feste in Twelfth Night described as

"the whirligig of time" that brings in its own revenges?

Had Shakespeare been a Pakistani playwright, he would have found it difficult when writing about our present political situation to separate tragedy from comedy. Could his equivalent of Titus Andronicus have been "The Most Lamentable Romaine Tragedy of Pervez Musharraf"? Or his comedy based on our legislature titled "A Pleasant Conceited Comedy" called "Love's Labour's Lost"? Or would he have settled for a generic catch-all title: "A Comedy of Errors"?

Election-watchers believe that the horse race in a fortnight's time will be between the Pakistan Muslim League (N)'s two-horse brougham and the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf's single-horse barouche. And the Pakistan People's Party horse-cart? It stands mired in the muck of its past performance, overloaded with fattened opportunists, and sadly driverless.

Our previous elections have never been without overtones of drama and undertones of comedy. This present election campaign can be said to have surpassed them all. A fortnight ago, everyone assumed that the contest would be a free-for-all between political opponents, in which individual candidates without the right paperwork were disqualified, seat adjustments negotiated, turncoats who brought a dowry of loyalists accommodated, and a residue of disgruntled aspirants left clamouring to ventilate their grievances on television talk shows.

No one thought for a moment that the elections would be overshadowed by a trial that will be unique in many ways, for it would be the first occasion that a former head of state and military

chief was to be tried for alleged crimes that range from constitutional illegitimacy to mutinous treason.

Would Pervez Musharraf be made to stand alone in the dock? There are some witnesses still alive who can recall the names of those who helped him come to power and then sustained him while he governed our country for eight years, the equivalent of two US presidential terms.

Political coups are not a Pakistani phenomenon. History is replete with examples of coups in other countries. Some failed, like Lin Biao's against

Chairman Mao Zedong in September 1971. Others succeeded, like the one within the British Conservative Party that toppled Margaret Thatcher in November 1990 or Boris Yeltsin's against Mikhail Gorbachev less than a year later in August 1991. A few inverted failure into success, most memorably Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings of Ghana, who attempted a coup in May 1979, failed, attempted another a month later, and then settled in as the elected president of Ghana for 12 years or more.

Constitutional lawyers defending Musharraf will undoubtedly have a field day in court, presenting tortuous arguments and legal precedents in his defence. And when they charge on the offensive, they may seek to pinion

those who once supported Musharraf. These lawyers should be advised to save their client's time and our taxpayers' money. In their submissions, they should simply quote Sir John Hartington's epigram: "Treason doth never prosper: what's the reason? / For if it prosper, none dare call it treason."

Over the past 66 years, we have oscillated between various permutations of real, sham and synthetic democracy. We have experienced every shade and hue of authoritarianism.

The past 60 or so days have confirmed that we have not yet reached a level of dependable, reliable, consistent self-governance. We are the modern equivalent of the Lost Tribes whose Moses died soon after they fled Egypt. We have yet to find another to lead us to the Promised Land. Meanwhile, as a stop-gap, we console ourselves by following lesser Aarons.

Older voters are wary of worn-out leaders whose flaws have been cruelly exposed. A younger generation of voters seems eager to risk its future in Imran Khan's (albeit untested) prowess as a political all-rounder.

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