

# Disowning an article . . . and more

# Catering to the modern tourist



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

**F**IVE months into the publication of her scathing article against the government of Sheikh Hasina in the Washington Times newspaper, Khaleda Zia has publicly denied, on the floor of the Jatiyo Sangsad, having authored the write-up. When the article first appeared, a good number of people in the Bangladesh Nationalist Party cheerfully went around telling us that their leader had posted a purposeful article on national issues in the American newspaper in question. An apoplectic Awami League was in a murderous mood, informing the country that the article was in bad taste, indeed went against the national interest. A cheerful BNP leadership smirked in satisfaction. After all, the write-up had put the government in a spot, hadn't it?

The article has had consequences, obviously, the latest being a suspension or withdrawal of GSP facilities for Bangladesh by the American administration. The question is not whether Begum Zia ought to have written the article. It is one of what she meant to convey to the outside world in line with her brand of politics. In the narrow interest of local politics, in her fervour to bring down an elected government, the leader of the opposition made it clear that trade benefits for Bangladesh would need to be withdrawn. The entire article was misplaced, in logic and tenor, given that a party which has for a long time remained outside parliament and whose record of corruption in government remains unbeatable and unprecedented, cannot by any stretch of logic pretend to have returned to probity or respectability through a write-up in a newspaper abroad.

But let that be. Begum Zia's article has been making the rounds all these months. And now that the GSP facilities have really been taken away, the former prime minister informs the country that she did not write the article in the Washington Times. In light of what the Begum says now, you have a simple question to throw at her and at her acolytes: why did this denial not come on the day the

write-up appeared in the American newspaper? There could be an equally simple response here: at the time the Washington Times published the article, the BNP-wallahs probably thought that it was proof the government was getting its comeuppance now that their leader had found a slot in a foreign newspaper. That good cheer has not quite helped. It really does not help when you ask, no matter how bitter you may be about conditions in your country, a foreign government to punish your own elected government and so help facilitate its fall from grace or power or both. Do not forget that the pro-Beijing leftist leader Abdul Haq (all such pro-Beijing men were in course of time to align themselves with military-led communal dispensations in this country) solicited the support of Pakistan's Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1974 in the task of a removal of the government of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

No one, of course, is arguing that the Awami League-led government has been doing

There is thus this reality of life for us in Bangladesh --- we live between the shadow and the reality. The reality now is that Begum Zia says she did not write the article. Then who did? One agrees, from the literal point of view, that the leader of the opposition did not write the article. Leaders hardly ever write their own speeches or articles. But when those speeches are delivered and when those articles carry their by-lines, the ownership is theirs. If now the former prime minister says she did not write that Washington Times article, she and her party must ask the newspaper management how it came to be printed on its pages. If the article was a hoax perpetrated by someone out to malign the BNP leader, why did Begum Zia not protest five months ago? And shouldn't the BNP go for proper legal action against the Washington Times for publishing an item falsely in the name of its chairperson?

These are strange times. The daily Amar Desh systematically went on disseminating untruth and rubbishing reputations until a few months ago. Now it admits, at least where a particular photograph is concerned, that it was wrong. Strangeness leads to the bizarre. Followers of the Zia clan come together in London, to proclaim to the world that sycophancy is not dead, that even respectable men are willing to turn against themselves. Veteran politicians, two lapsed vice chancellors and journalists have just given us 'The Political Thoughts of Tarique Rahman'. They tell you the elder child of the Begum is the future.

In your naughtiness, you recall the sordid tales of the past --- Hawa Bhaban, electric poles without electricity, Justice Aziz and false and dead voters, the Iajuddin farce, the persecuted Hindus and Awami Leaguers of October 2001, the academics and journalists humiliated through arrest and remand, the police assault on Shamsunnahar Hall, the move to rewrite the nation's history, the entry of Pakistani collaborators into the cabinet, the ten-trucks arms haul, the grenade blasts of August 2004, the rise of Bangla Bhai and his cohorts, the purloining of Jatiyo Sangsad cafeteria provisions by the chief whip of the ruling party at the time, the stealing of votes in Magura in 1994. And more.

Recall. And try not to forget. Political thoughts, did you say?

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**D**URING a study tour to Bangladesh and India last year, by a 40-member team of which I was a part, which included American professors, architects, planners, historians, journalists, and investors, we had an opportunity to see comparatively how tourism industries work in Bangladesh and India. The tour was organized on behalf of the Chicago-based Society of Architectural Historians. For most of the tour participants it was their maiden trip to South Asia. Therefore, expectations were both high and uncertain. First, it seemed to that Bangladeshi tour companies lack an understanding of heritage tourism as a practice in historical knowledge. They focus overwhelmingly on arranging lodging and transportation. They do not provide knowledgeable tour guides who would lead the touring team through heritage sites and narrate their architectural, political, and social histories.

The company that we hired in Dhaka arranged a comfortable bus with a driver and an assistant. While they were very polite and courteous, neither of them spoke any English, creating a communication gap. This was not the case in India. Our tour company there arranged guides who were not only fluent in English, but also trained to offer historical narratives of landmark buildings and sites. They were not academic historians. But, as I was informed, they were trained through specialized programs created by public-private collaborations targeting the robust economic potentials of heritage tourism.

In Dhaka, I invited local academics and historians to share their expert knowledge with the visiting team. While tour guides can by no means replace experts, they surely can serve as "supplementary historians." Our team greatly appreciated this combination in India. Our experience made us aware of the shifting expectations of the modern tourist, a new but pivotal figure of mainstream tourism industry. The modern tourist comes with an appetite for knowledge, as much as he or she looks for affordable hotels, tasty cuisines, and bargain shopping. The modern tourists no longer just see, but want to learn, too, about what they see. They are no longer content just with the romantic experience of the Taj Mahal at dusk. They would also like to go beyond the myths and hear about the historical context in which this magnificent Mughal tomb was built.

International tourists frequently hire trained guides who speak their language, thanks to internet advertisements and a quick-response online etiquette, the signs of what has been dubbed as the "networked society." I have done this myself in India, China, and Cambodia recently. During a visit to King Suryavarman's 12th-century masterpiece, Angkor Wat in Siem Reap, Cambodia, an English-speaking guide conducted my tour of the city's renowned temple complex. Guided tourism has become a major income generator in developing countries.

Critiques may call the modern tourist a petit bourgeois who is lazy to learn on his or her own. I disagree. If it's a win-win situation for both parties involved, why not? The tourist gets an insider's perspective at an affordable price and the guide earns a livelihood.

The tourism industry in Bangladesh has not tapped into this opportunity. Knowledge-based heritage tourism is going to play an increasingly important role in global tourism, the trillion dollar industry that generated, according to one estimate, 6.4% of the world's combined GDP in 2011. This is a stupendous economic driver. Is Bangladesh taking measures to be competitive in this sector?

One crucial step toward tourism competitiveness would be to introduce rigorous training programmes to develop multilingual tourist guides. These programmes could be excellent investment opportunities for public-private partnerships. Universities could play a vital role too. Instead of offering predictable and trite BBA and MBA programs, they should seriously consider offering Bachelor and Master's degrees in heritage tourism, targeting the needs of a burgeoning industry. The graduates of these programs are most likely to bring innovation to Bangladesh's heritage tourism.

The notion of innovation brings me to my second observation. The country's tourism industry will not prosper by relying on conventional wisdom. Over reliance on scenic sites or overestimating modest (relative to regional competition) heritage buildings would produce a limited international tourism market, particularly due to the lack of good road communications and affordable lodging options.



ARTWORK: ROKON-UZ-ZAMAN

Therefore, in addition to existing attractions, the tourism leadership must come up with new types of tourism "exhibits" that tap into the country's popular image.

When it comes to heritage tourism, a bit of reality check helps. Bangladesh offers few iconic heritage sites. Only two are typically mentioned in global architectural history books: Mahasthangarh and Louis Kahn's Parliament building. The country doesn't have Taj Mahals or Pyramids or Gothic cathedrals. This is the reality. The Lalbag Fort is a sentimental local icon, but as an international tourist attraction it stands no chance next to the Red Fort or Fatehpur Sikri. The Mughal architectural footprint in Bengal was rather modest compared to the subcontinent's north. This is understandable. In the minds of the Mughal emperors, Bengal was the empire's swampy southeastern margin, unworthy of grand architectural indulgence.

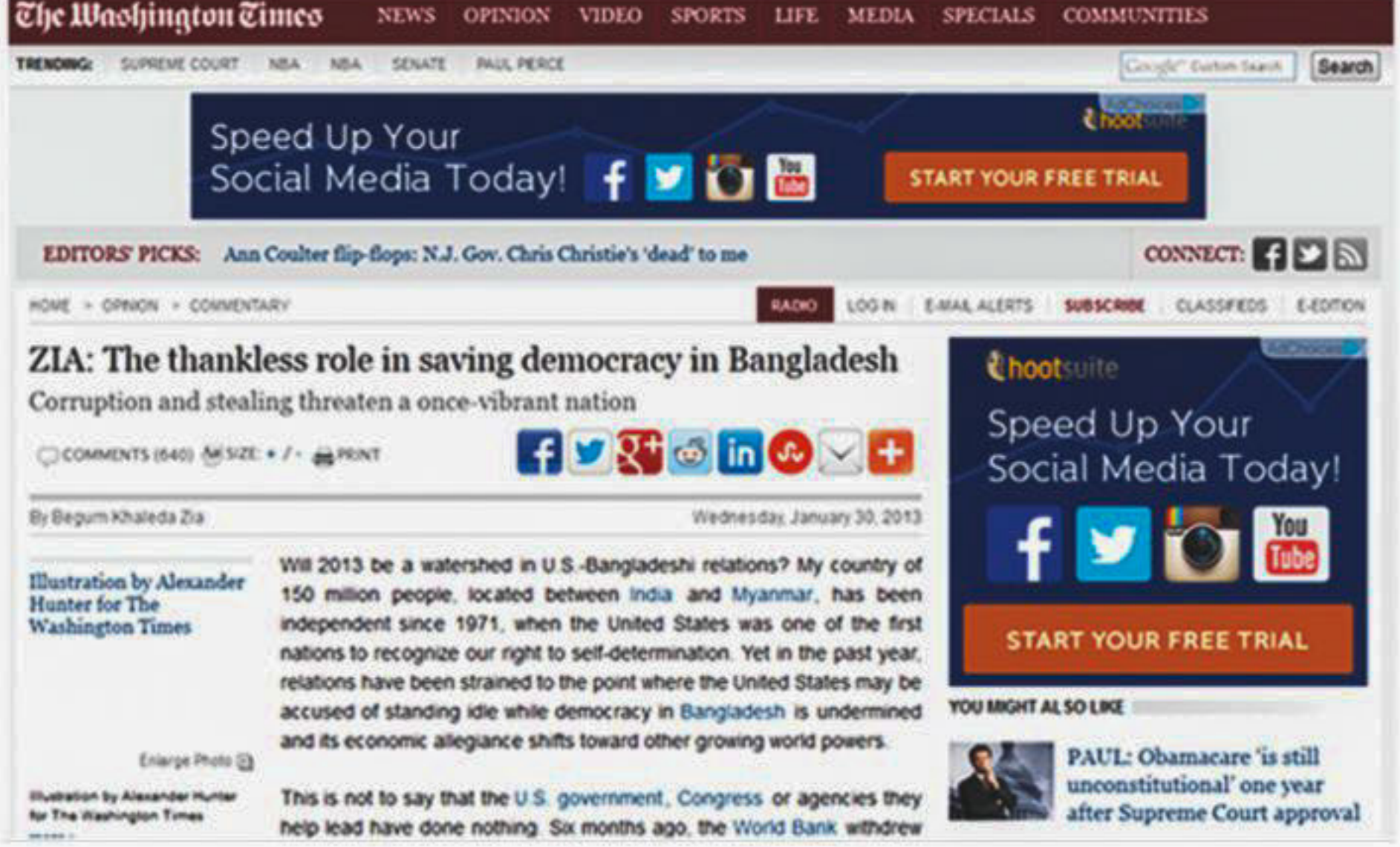
Thus, competing with India, for instance, with conventional tourism philosophy won't make sense for Bangladesh. When our study team visited the Armenian Church (built in 1781) in Old Dhaka, it was apparent that this beautiful but modest church hardly embodied the architectural exuberance of Chartres or Amiens cathedral in France. But when the visitors heard about this apostolic church as part of Dhaka's Armenian diaspora's identity politics and burgeoning economic footprint in the city during the late 18th century, it piqued their interest. To compete in today's tourism market a country must create its own distinct narrative. This uniqueness is what I think would galvanize the modern tourist.

But even attractive local narratives won't be enough. The country needs new "exhibits" to attract the modern tourist. I noticed that during our tour in Bangladesh, visitors didn't really expect to see Taj Mahals in Bangladesh. Alongside the planned visits to heritage sites, they took an anthropological interest in, among other things, the country's economic growth, urban poverty, woman's empowerment, and extreme urbanism (traffic congestion, urban density, etc.).

Fortunately, if thought over creatively, these challenges could be turned into tourism "exhibits." Given Bangladesh's prevailing image in the world, the knowledge-hungry modern tourist would like to visit a garment factory or a ship breaking yard or a micro-credit center. Part of the revenue generated from such tourism "sites" could be reinvested in solving industrial workplace safety problems or in the entrepreneurship funds for the rural poor. The morning vegetable and fish market on the Buriganga bank could be another tourism venue. Although it has been criticized as an "aestheticization of poverty," Mumbai's iconic slum Dharavi has become a popular site of socially conscious tourism (80% of the revenue generated from the Dharavi tour goes back to the slum's economy; no tourist photography is allowed).

The more novel the tourism idea the more attractive it is for the modern tourist. One of my colleagues from the study tour was so fascinated by the rickshaw art that he brought home six of them. How about a touristic visit to a facility where rickshaw art is produced in Dhaka and elsewhere?

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A screenshot of The Washington Times article that sought withdrawal of GSP facilities.

a fine job of running the country. It certainly has stumbled in some critical areas. It has opened fronts one too many to be able to handle them; it failed to assess the extent of the strength of pro-Pakistan elements among the rightwing; it ran into a muddle over the Padma Bridge. But, again, it has done well in other areas. Its mayors, those defeated at the recent elections, did a good job of administering their cities; it did the necessary thing of flushing out the Hefajat-e-Islam from the streets of the nation's capital (and, contrary to the lies put out by its detractors, not a single cleric or madrasah student was killed when security forces moved to restore order); it has reminded us that war criminals, despite the passage of decades, must pay for their long-ago crimes; it has, through its presence in power, reminded citizens of the secular values that must be restored and upheld in life.

# Winner takes it all

laser! The four mayoral winners have been publicly posing for photo opportunities with each other's family and dear ones. Showing friendship and goodwill for each other. Great, are these pictures going to be framed only to gather dust?

Are they truly going to represent the whole community or are they going to do a George Bush (Junior)? "If you are not with us, then you are against us!" We have already seen, heard and read that, one of the winners have scoffed at the idea of ever consulting the looser on matters of interest for the citizens of his city. Therefore, does one need to be sceptical about photo shoots and beaming faces full of bon ami?

What is likely to happen in reality is that, the winning party local leaders and workers will now treat the opposite numbers with utter contempt and disrespect. In some cases with gratuitous violence and resulting in loss of lives. Nothing new here though, that's exactly been done to them for the past term. So this behaviour is perpetuated by using harsher methods and more gruesome activities. This to show their one-upmanship and being more destructively innovative.

The winners will now get all financial perks, benefits and advantages. Cushy jobs will go to their people, tenders will be won by their men. Only their own people will get the

priority hospital treatments, school admissions, promotions. Why so? Because the Mayor got elected with the help of these sycophantic people and they need to be rewarded for the sake of buying their undying loyalty.

What's wrong with this one might ask! This is has been the case for years and it works in a fashion and therefore why change? If in a country the only criterion for recruitment of party supporters are, vocal cord busting speeches, walking the streets, being able to gather up thousands of people for meetings, endure law enforcer's wrath on the streets and be arrested. A question pops up in my head, where is the real human material for creating a modern dynamic workforce that's capable of taking on any country in the world and beat them?

Country needs meritocracy to be nurtured and promoted, not nepotism and 'payback pals' to rule the roost! It's not impossible, but these epic wins and photo opportunities need to be turned into real efforts of joining forces in the national interest, irrespective of differences. There can be no 'difference' in wanting to do good for the people; the style may be different with the substance remaining the same.

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**ARCHTAR SHAH**  
**H**OLIDAYING in Lanzarote, Canary Islands, relaxed and enjoying daily walks. Yesterday I was walking past a seaside restaurant playing an old ABBA hit, "winner takes it all, Loser's standing small, beside the victory ...."  
The front page of the web version The Daily Star came into my vision. 4-0 for BNP. What a rout! I thought, I wondered, is a ploy by the ruling party to show that such a phenomenal result is achievable under their rule, be it a boon to the opposition? "The Election commission is completely independent and thus capable of delivering a free and fair forthcoming National election - minus a caretaker government!"  
Such party mantra has been emblazoned on their brains and regularly mouthed off by the ruling party leaders, just like a worn out gramophone record! Behind their apparent confident mask therein lies an Olympian disdain for the opposition winners. How could this (result) be possible? E- media, Newspapers, Talk shows, political pundits and experts are pouring over data and producing opinions, judgements, information and analysis in abundance. I thought of not going there.  
Let me scan the event with a different

**ACROSS**  
1 Impale  
5 Father  
8 Waller or Domino  
12 Operatic solo  
13 Playwright Levin  
14 "Step ---" ("Hurry!")  
15 Kindly bloke  
16 Make a mock-up of  
18 I before E except

**DOWN**  
1 Long story  
2 Not kosher  
3 "I --- Necessarily So"  
4 Flat-bottomed boat  
5 Deny  
6 "Exodus" here  
7 Knighted woman  
8 Page numbers  
9 Big snake  
10 South American monkey  
11 Undo a character  
17 Last (Abbr.)  
19 Small stream  
22 Remained upright  
24 Lubricant  
25 Old French coin  
26 Quilty  
27 Germ layer  
29 Result of three strikes  
30 Tiny numbers  
33 Wrestling style  
36 Noisy swarmer  
38 Nikita's successor  
40 --- Aviv  
42 Branch  
43 War  
44 Morse  
46 Retro art style  
47 Lecherous look  
48 Vortex  
50 Dead heat

**Solution time: 24 mins.**

**Saturday's answer 5-27**

**CRYPTOQUIP**

B I G R F V F L E M U H G I G U T E  
R B M L P E X T F F B R G X V W L R J N O R  
B I F E H G M T P K G B J G M R W U P R  
G X I N T E R O F L K W T T F G U

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: SINCE THERE ARE THREE MORTGAGES ALREADY IN DEFAULT, ONE MORE MAY RESULT IN FOUR CLOSURES.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: X equal F

**BEEBLE BAILY**

WHAT'S POP DOING?  
HE'S GETTING OUT OF THE ARMY  
HOW DO YOU DO THAT?  
YOU JUST KICK SARGE AND RUN!

**HENRY**

FURNITL

**QUOTABLE Quotes**

"Let not a man guard his dignity, but let his dignity guard him."

**Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 - 1882)**