PM IN DISGUISE

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It is perhaps no big surprise that a Prime Minister would pose as a taxi driver to get an idea about what voters think of him. After all what better way to know what's going on in the public mind than drive them around the city and engage in chit chat normally expected of most taxi drivers? Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg's few hours as a cabbie probably earned more political brownie points than any other campaign to win votes.

True, his disguise was rather poor – sunglasses and a taxi driver's uniform - in fact quite a few people recognised him or at least likened him to their prime minister. He could at least have grown a beard or worn a wig. But the point is that he took the effort and the risk (though Norwegians are not particularly prone to political assassinations) to go out into the field to know the truth about what the people really thought of him and his government.

In countries like Bangladesh this is not necessary. Leaders in this nation are clairvoyant. They know exactly what the voters are thinking. This is why the Prime Ministers will say things like: *the people of this country have rejected the opposition's destructive strategies and are now fully aware of their evil nature.* Similarly Leaders of Opposition will scream out that the people have *wholeheartedly participated in the nationwide hartals and are demanding the ousting of the fascist government.* And how one may ask have the people wholeheartedly participated in the hartal? By not coming out of their houses and allowing the lucky few who don't have a choice to brave the empty streets and face the slight inconvenience of being burnt alive in a bus, getting shot in the crossfire or being knocked out by a brick.

But let's be the devil's advocate and suggest that our leaders are pretty clueless about the pulse of the people. Let's say the PM disguises herself as an ordinary citizen, and takes public transport. Being one of the two most photographed women in the country, major transformations will have to be done. Perhaps those face masks they show in the movies that can turn an African American male into a White Caucasian female and vice versa, would suffice. We will not go into details of what the disguise would be lest we are picked up and placed in the docks but just suppose it makes her completely unrecognisable.

On a normal day she would have to learn to do stunts such as run towards a bus that is already moving, get one foot on the bus, grab on to any part of the vehicle, if it's a human hand so be it, lift the other foot simultaneously and then hold on for dear life for the next two hours or so, sometimes swinging from side to side. During this joyride however, much can be learnt from the conversations of the passengers. The latest joke the public is laughing about is the bombardment of aesthetically shocking, humongous, billboards all over the city that announce the government's phenomenal achievements – how it has developed and 'dizitalised' the country, generated thousands of additional megawatts of electricity, built new flyovers, Hatirjheel and so on. This, while passengers, including the disguised leader, is sweating buckets while stuck in the crème de la crème of Sonargaon Road's daily gridlock. Someone throws up her *bantabhat* breakfast. Someone spits out the phlegm of his soul. Someone spews out betel juice along with a steady stream of expletives aimed at the VIP for whom the roads have been cleared out, hence the extra hour exposed to the man-made and natural elements. *There was no electricity the whole night,* says a grumbler. *We couldn't cook anything this morning as the lines for the sole gas cooker in the building was too long and we missed the 4am slot,* says another. *We did not go to the village this Eid – the roads are broken, at least a few hundred people have been killed in accidents in those three days...*

A traffic policeman halts the bus for stopping in the middle of the road to take passengers, asking the inebriated helper-turned bus driver for his nonexistent papers. The driver doles out a generous 'bakshish' and the *murir tin* rolls off. Meanwhile, the disguised PM is refused the women's seat in the sardine tin of a bus, by a ruffian who looks suspiciously like a minion from her party's Youth-in-their Forties-League.