

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA SATURDAY AUGUST 24, 2013

Case withdrawals galore

Subverts legal process, spurs on impunity culture

IN the name of withdrawing 'politically-motivated' cases, political motives come into play placing justice system in double jeopardy. It is as though the purpose for which this is sought to be done is defeated by a similarly tainted counteraction.

The statistics speak for themselves: During the last four and a half years of the AL government among 11,113 cases brought before the national committee for recommending withdrawal of 'politically motivated' lawsuits, 7,101 cases have been ordered either completely or partially dropped. Consequently, thousands of persons accused of serious crimes like murder, terrorism, torture, rape have been either let off the hook or are going to be.

The process has been suspect from the very word 'go' as it aimed at sweeping away the deck of cases lodged during BNP rule and caretaker regime almost without any discrimination. In most cases the district committees had not themselves recommended for their withdrawal. In some cases, even public prosecutors opposed dropping their names off.

This amounts to subversion of legal system through an executive fiat. Successive governments have been doing it in varying degrees with the concomitant result that the size of the criminal world has vastly increased. People's sense of security and confidence in governance and legal system have diminished proportionately.

We suggest that an independent agency be put in place entrusted with the responsibility of determining cases instituted for political harassment of opponents and those meriting further legal pursuit.

Youngsters going astray

A sustained hands-on strategy needed

THE big talk on drug abuse starts again as a teenager allegedly slaughters her parents. Suddenly we are doing case studies on how much yaba, ice, heroin are taken in and who is who in the drug industry.

We are not sure how much we can blame our young generation for slipping and becoming substance abusers when some people holding power are actively participating in the drug business. This business is certainly more profitable in our nation than doing service to the country which would improve, say, education, tourism and transportation sectors -- knowledge, exposure and freedom -- all important components for teenagers while growing up. Building private universities and schools without playgrounds, keeping so-called extra curricular activities in schools which do not interest most teenagers, blocking our roads with construction, pot holes and a lace of unsafe net only create a narrower world.

How many teenagers will pick up a guitar or take singing lessons, how many of them will want to play cricket or football? And if they do, where will they go? The choices left are to hang out at each others' homes, with ample amount of television, Facebook and half-baked underground parties where easy happiness is sold through pills.

It is time we did something to change our system which has done little to support a healthier lifestyle. Lawmakers, build new fields to play, more institutions focused on art and culture, make our roads safer, employ the right people to teach us, and then see how well the business of drugs does in this country. We want to be over with the pink pills.

Defective rail clips!

S.A. MANSOOR

NEWS report about the abnormal damage to many railway track clips on the Bangabandhu Bridge was shocking! The railway authorities know only of the ones that had broken off. They, however, do not know about those that could be internally damaged. The damaged clips could lead to serious accidents in future, more so if the trains are at high speed or heavily loaded.

The strength of the clips depends on the type of steel used and the heat treatment. If it is high-carbon steel, then the heat treatment is critical; while in alloy steel, the chemical composition of the steel and the impurities present in both the high carbon and alloy steel could be the real culprits. Railway could ask the Buet mechanical department to test the clips and identify the reasons for their failure. If the clips were imported from India or China, the quality and heat treatment of the steel could be questionable.

Railways must make batch-wise detailed, chemical composition, physical and finished sample tests of the steel from which the clips were made. Was the steel inspected by reputable inspection authorities like Lloyds or SGS?

It needs to be repeated that the matter is potentially dangerous as defective clips under repeated load cycles, as the trains pass over these, can ultimately fail because of small and invisible defects. For ensuring safety, all the batches of rail clips should be replaced by more reliable clips imported from other countries besides India or China, and be certified by Lloyds or SGS prior to shipment. This is needed in the overall interest of passenger safety.

The writer is a retired engineer.

The August 21 carnage

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

Viewing criminal occurrences from a political angle only will be ruinous because that would not only be a damper to the growth of professionalism but also, in the process, shatter the confidence reposed in the vital institution of the state.

THE nation has observed the ninth anniversary of the ghastly grenade blasts but it still remains uncertain whether the trial for the gruesome attack will be completed during this tenure of a government which will leave office in a few months. To recollect, the attack was carried out at an Awami League rally in Bangabandhu Avenue allegedly to kill the then opposition leader Sheikh Hasina.

While extreme views advocating annihilation of the political opponent has been a sad socio-political reality of our society, there is a paramount need to stop it once for all. Many political murders have not been investigated properly while some cases are still under investigation and some have been perfunctorily looked into. Such a state of affairs points to the supreme necessity of a comprehensive investigation of the incident of attempted assassination of Sheikh Hasina because that is expected to be an example-setter in the criminal justice system.

To recollect, the multiple grenade assault of August 21, 2004, was clearly a manifest attempt to wipe out the leadership of a mainstream political party. The damage already caused with its far-reaching ramifications cannot be brushed aside. The double figure deaths and crippling injuries of hundreds should make us wonder if the state organs investigating the incident and the then political authority had realised the enormity of the dastardly attack.

We may also recollect that the investigation of the above incident was not taken in the earnestness that it deserved, and the first indication of that was the unpardonable failure to protect and preserve the scene of the occurrence. There was allegation that physical evidence was tampered with and destroyed. The field units did not act with desired speed and circumspection. The question is, did this happen because of so-called instruction from above? The culpability of all concerned, high and low, needs to be established.

In the fitness of things, every criminal case should be



STAR ARCHIVE

disposed of on its own merit. That is the ideal. In our situation, it would be necessary to dwell upon certain facts and circumstances of our socio-political existence, and in particular the perilous political polarisation of our society that has a definite bearing upon the basic regulatory function of investigation by the state agency, the police.

While the public's right to be informed cannot be denied and the nation's concern for the safety and security of innocent lives cannot be brushed aside, we will do well to look at the factual dimension of the bomb/grenade blasts in a dispassionate manner. Almost immediate apportioning of blame, mostly on rivals of the other camp, by responsible persons after each occurrence became pathetically recurrent. Indiscreet and uninformed comments in such sensitive matters further complicated the environment in our society.

The citizens need to know why our investigating outfit has to live with the double stigma of being partisan and inefficient. One may ask why our national level political leaders openly impute motives on the part of the investigators and cast doubt on their integrity. Who has failed whom? Had political leaders encouraged and abetted the malfeasance of the investigators, as alleged? Viewed from another angle, are we victims of misplaced priorities owing to the follies of myopic policymakers and professionals? These are queries that need to be pondered in serious earnest.

We will definitely put ourselves and our future generation in peril by our inability to let a truly professional investigating agency grow in accordance with the dictates of the law. Viewing criminal occurrences from a political angle only will be ruinous because that would not only be a damper to the growth of professionalism but also, in the process, shatter the confidence reposed in the vital institution of the state. It shall be in the fitness of things to allow investigative outfits to attain professional excellence without being influenced by any extraneous direction.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.

Left thrashed in W. Bengal local polls

PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN



PRAFUL BIDWAI

THE West Bengal electorate has handed a third consecutive defeat to the Left Front led by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM). In the latest rural-council (*panchayat*) elections, the Front only won one of 17 zilla parishads (ZP).

The Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress (TMC) triumphed in 13 ZPs -- equalling the Left's 2008 score. Although party-wise voting percentages aren't yet available, the TMC is the overwhelming victor.

The Left Front's percentage-share of ZP seats shrank from 68.7 in 2008 to 24.8, while the TMC's improved from 16 to 61.6. True, the Left did marginally better (31.1% of seats) in village-based *gram panchayats*. It also retained some of its support in North Bengal.

But the Left largely failed to recoup its 2011 losses in Southern Bengal, except marginally near Kolkata -- a fall-out of Trinamool's growing urban unpopularity.

More crucially, the Left suffered major setbacks in its Central Bengal citadels: Bardhaman, Birbhum, West and East Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia. These were its strongest bases. Bardhaman saw some of the greatest Communist-led land struggles, and produced legendary peasant leaders like Harekrishna Konar and Benoy Choudhury.

The losses are serious. They suggest that the CPM has failed to arrest its downslide since Singur (2006), Nandigram (2007-08), and the 2009 (Lok Sabha) and 2011 (Assembly) elections. Its alienation from its core-support -- small and middle peasants, workers and artisans -- continues.

The latest debacle reflects the Left's failure to capitalise on Ms. Banerjee's appalling governance: sharp rise in crime, growing corruption and cronyism, repression of legitimate protest, and the Saradha scam, which wiped out three million people's savings.

Crime against women has risen monstrously in West Bengal. It accounts for 12.7% of such crimes in India, well above its population share. But Ms. Banerjee dismissed these -- including the Park Street case in Kolkata's heart, and a student's rape-murder in nearby Kamduni -- as "concocted." She transferred the woman officer who investigated the Park Street rape.

This has greatly demoralised the police, as has a Kolkata thug's gunning-down of a policeman in broad daylight. Ms. Banerjee responded by sacking the police commissioner.

Her "off-with-his-head" ways -- e.g. arrest of a teacher who posted a cartoon on the Internet -- have earned her ill-will. Her uncouth manner has lost her the remnants of upper-caste *bhadralok* sympathy.

Her industrial policy and opposition to land acquisition by the state for private industry have perpetuated Bengal's investment and employment famine amidst disastrous public finances.

The Left attributes its defeat to violence by the TMC, undoubtedly a tuggish party. This is partly true. Some 6,000 Left candidates couldn't file nominations. And 12,000 were prevented from campaigning and mobilising their supporters.

More than 40,000 Left cadres fled their homes. Over 500 Left party offices were set on fire or vandalised. More

than 20 people were killed.

Yet, violence cannot explain the Left's rout. A lot of CPM cadres had defected to the TMC, which got divided between a "Green TMC" (the original) and a "Red Trinamool" (composed of defectors). The CPM was demoralised and couldn't mobilise its famous "party machine."

The TMC won 15% of the 85,000 *panchayat* seats uncontested. But to be brutally frank, the CPM also practised such coercion in the past. It won some 10% of the seats uncontested in 2003 and 2008. In those elections, more than 20 people were killed.

The Left's poor performance is primarily attributable to continuing popular discontent and anger against the CPM's long history of subordinating the state to the party, building an abuse-prone patronage system, and recent pursuit of neoliberal industrial and land policies.

The *panchayat* debacle comes on top of a fall in the Left's vote-percentage from 51 in 2004 to 43 in 2009, and further to 40 in 2011 (Assembly elections). The Front's seat-tally plummeted from 235 to 62 in the 294-strong Assembly, marking its exit from power after 34 years -- the longest such tenure in any democracy.

Yet, the Left doesn't admit to its grave errors. Its state and district-level leadership has continued unchanged, barring a few expulsions following cosmetic "rectification."

A recent opinion poll forecasts an even steeper 15 percentage-point fall in the Front's vote -- enormous by India's standard even for "wave" elections -- to 28% in 2014, with a likely loss of Lok Sabha seats.

At any rate, the Left doesn't seem set to recover from its setbacks anytime soon although it might make small gains in 2014 if there's no alliance between the TMC and the Congress.

The "blame game" has started in the Bengal CPM over responsibility for the *panchayat* debacle. The party has postponed its state committee meeting scheduled for August 22-23.

The Left's decline is now manifest both nationally and in West Bengal. Behind it lie deeper, structural causes: ideological rigidity and confusion, outdated programmes, over-emphasis on parliamentarism to the exclusion of mass work, and a socially non-radical upper-caste leadership.

Instead of looking for alternatives to neoliberalism, the Left's leadership often drifted into these very policies. It showed an unhealthy obsession with industrialisation at any cost, and neglected social sector agendas.

Unsurprisingly, West Bengal has some of India's lowest health and education indices, with school dropout rates higher than Bihar's. Its performance in the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act programme is the worst among 20 major states. Its food Public Distribution System is badly run-down.

The Left has failed to integrate issues such as caste, patriarchy and ecology into its theoretical understanding. It must reflect self-critically on these if it wants to modernise its programmes and policies. It must also transform its organisational culture which outlaws dissent and free debate -- and hence honest introspection.

Above all, the Left must rebuild its links with grassroots movements by taking up people's livelihood issues.

One must hope the Left regains its relevance. It's one of the few currents in Indian politics -- perhaps the most important one -- which is committed to empowering the marginalised, and relatively untainted by corruption. That's saying a lot in South Asia.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Islamist extremism and modern education

Boko Haram in Nigeria, Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Salafists in Mali and some other Muslim countries have one common objective: to destroy modern (Western) education by attacking schools and vandalising sites/buildings considered world's cultural heritage by UNESCO. Shrines of Sufi Saints in Bamaco capital of Mali was one of those. They did not spare pre-Islamic Buddhist statue of Bamyán in Afghanistan. In India during British rule, Western education was boycotted by the Muslims. Schools teaching modern subjects were not destroyed perhaps because non-Muslims were also students in these institutions and British rulers gave sufficient protection. A research should be conducted to find out the source of inspiration and causes of destructive behaviour by these extremists among the Muslims. Any kind of suppression of facts or unwillingness to go deeper into the matter considering the sensitivity of the issue would not help matters resulting in continuous downfall of the Muslims throughout the world.

Ahmed Shah
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Shapla Chattar incident death figures

Odhikar in its probe claimed that 61 Hefajat activists died in the Shapla Chattar incident. BNP and Hefajat leaders claimed that the figure was 2500-3000. This disclosure by Odhikar of 61 deaths has exposed BNP-Hefajat's conspiracy to topple the government in an undemocratic manner. People were also deceived with the photoshopped pictures of other events. This figure of 61 has been challenged by the government, and Odhikar was asked to give particulars of the dead listed by them. However, to our surprise, Odhikar has refused to give the details on flimsy grounds. And that leads one to wonder about the accuracy of their report. It may be noted that the government has all along been claiming that total death toll stood at 11 following the action of the law enforcing agencies on 5th May.

Group Captain Habibur Rahman psc (ret'd)
DOHS, Mohakhali
Dhaka

Fear that helps labour abuse

There are labour abuses in Bangladesh and their connection to US multinational corporations is a question. The US government did slap a small sanction on the Bangladeshi government for its record on workers' right. They took away their GSP special trade status.

Labour law is getting worse in Bangladesh. Workers in export processing zones still don't have the right to unionise. Reporting by people shows that the building inspectors are still doing the same kind of corrupt things they used to do in the past.

And, you know, the US could slap tougher sanctions on Bangladesh if they wanted to, but Bangladesh keeps throwing out this card that if they do, it will breed radical Islam in Bangladesh. So you really see, interestingly, the war on terror preventing tougher -- you know, disrupting activists at home here in the US, as well as preventing tougher sanctions on Bangladesh, because of this fear of radical Islam in Bangladesh.

Ted Rudow III, MA
Encina Ave
Palo Alto, CA

Comments on news report, "Cops hardly corrupt," published on August 21, 2013

Samih34

Let us look at the brighter side of this DU study 'report'. Two teachers plus thirteen students may now also qualify for some medals from police administration. And there is now better scope for good business in this 'research team' -- carrying out research on behalf of government organs labelled as corrupt to give them a clean chit.

SM

The whole report is an example of corruption.

M. Ashraf

Mr. Patwary, was this survey conducted in the back of a police truck? Was any part of the police funding sent directly to you? This report is a farce and a lie. Maybe you should take up politics.

deepjelejai

May Allah help them to open their eyes!

S. M. Iftekhar Ahmed

Next you will hear that the Razakars were actually philanthropists during 1971.

John Williams

That is just plain funny. The police force in Bangladesh is indeed one of the most corrupt government agencies. That statement is validated as you still require a bribe of at least TK 500 to lodge a simple report such as a General Diary. What a biased study conducted by students of DU! Complete and utter shame!

Snr Citizen

DU VC is party appointed. He may have been a catalyst to the doctored results.

Sheikh Monirul Islam, Opee

Very good news that our police forces are not corrupt. Bad news is the teachers and students are corrupt and police are good at corrupting them. Very entertaining!