

Making a hostage of road transport

Can a minister be a union leader too?

Of late, the Shipping Minister has been very active in upholding the rights of those involved in the road transport business, to a point where a flagrant breach of ethics has been noticed. Through exercising his influence as a trade union leader, in this case of the road transport sector, he has lobbied hard -- and quite successfully, as it appears -- to have reckless bus and truck drivers absolved of responsibility for deaths caused on roads and highways. His family owns a transport company too.

It is inexplicable as to how a minister can be part of the government and yet put pressure on the government as a union leader. There is a clear instance of a conflict of interest here, a matter that should have drawn the attention of the administration and especially of the prime minister. Where a society expects ministers to work towards promoting the public weal, the minister has done the reverse. The transport sector is thus hostage to him and his fellow trade unionists.

If all that the minister is doing is aimed at eliciting electoral votes for his party, it is terribly bad policy. In recent times, every issue related to road transport has gone against the public interest. Regrettably, it is election time pandering by the government to the transport workers. Admittedly, the transport front has a strong organised labour support. However, the votes of citizens across the country are, let us not forget, no less crucial than the votes of transport workers.

Easy availability of illegal arms in CHT

Worrisome for whole country

THE widespread availability and use of illegal arms in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is alarming. The district's porous border is a conduit for illicit weapons in the region. Its contiguity to the troubled areas in Myanmar and India's northeast provides handy sources of illicit weapons.

The situation in the CHT is deteriorating fast, where both political parties and organised crime are taking full advantage of the easy availability of illicit weapons that find their way in through the porous border. Not only has it led to armed confrontation between rival factions, those for and against the peace accord, but on a more general scale, gunfights, killing, abduction and extortion have spiralled upwards at an alarming rate.

We would like to emphatically state that unless this trend is checked, the flow of illegal small arms could have a disastrous effect on the overall security situation in the country as a whole. In fact, taking stock of casualties over the last one year due to violence, the majority involved illegal firearms. Their easy availability points to the problem in terms of the overall human security nationwide, especially in light of the coming general elections.

In this context, it is impossible to separate the issue of narcotics since that is directly linked to illegal trade in illegal arms; hence both issues must be addressed simultaneously. Increasing cooperation with neighbours, putting into effect strategic management of the border etc, are steps that should be taken urgently if we wish to tackle this

Savage hartal violence stains our image

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

IN recent times, strikes and hartals, aimed at making a political protest and, in cases political stands, have turned into medieval barbaric episodes. In the latest one, a young Japanese tourist, who had come to Bangladesh and was on her way back from visiting Cox's Bazaar, sustained severe injuries to her left eye when a large stone thrown by pro-hartal picketers broke the glass of the bus she was in and hit her on the upper part of the face.

Naturally, among frenetic attention given to possible political twists aimed at ending the current AL-**BNP** impasse, this bit of news has found a small space though we feel that this single incident has done us irreparable harm, especially in promoting our struggling tourism sector.

It cannot be denied that when it comes to taking a chunk of the South Asian tourism pie, Bangladesh gets a tiny piece and with the latest episode involving the Japanese tourist, that negligible size stands to become even smaller.

Also, it won't be surprising at all if the victim's tragic experience is used to deter other foreigners from travelling around Bangladesh for tourism.

Of course from the angle of the pro-hartal supporters, the rationale can be that since they called a strike no vehicle should be allowed to be on the road. Political parties calling the strike in the name of democratic right to protest forget that in their reckless actions they not only mock democracy but also put ordinary people (the core of democracy), including foreign guests, at risk.

Newspapers have reported that the wound of the Japanese girl is grave and she may never retain full use of her injured eye. Regrettably, no apology has been issued so far from the strike calling party, whereas in such a case, it would have been civil as well as an 'Islamic' act to have asked for forgiveness and quickly find the person or persons responsible for punishment.

A few months ago, a diplomat's car was attacked near the Mohakhali flyover during a strike and an apology quickly followed since it's believed within the political circles that western diplomats cannot be antagonised as their support matters. It appears expressing contrition depends a lot on political calculations!

Modi: Next PM of India?

SUNDAY
POUCH



ASHFAQUR
RAHMAN

LAST week, news reached us that Narendra Modi, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader, has been anointed as their prime ministerial candidate for the general elections in spring next year. The centre-right National Democratic Alliance also endorsed him. Normally, this would have been routine news. But as Modi is a controversial person, it has raised many eyebrows not only in India but around the world.

The popularity of the Congress Party, which leads the incumbent government, has gone down to the lowest in its history. The Indian economy is in a slide and the currency has weakened considerably. Obviously, people in India are looking for a better person to lead them in the future. Modi's chances are, therefore, getting brighter each day.

Who is Narendra Modi? Why is he controversial? What is his background? And why do millions in India swear by him?

Narendra Damodardas Modi is the Chief Minister of Gujrat, a state in western India. He has been in that position since 2001. A member of the infamous Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) he is a Hindu nationalist who allegedly inflamed anti-Muslim sentiments in his state that led to communal riots in 2002, killing more than 2,000. Although a Special Investigation Team (SIT) appointed by the Supreme Court of India in 2009 to inquire into the Gujrat government's and Modi's role in it "did not find any incriminating evidence against Modi of willfully allowing communal violence in the state," an amicus curiae of the Supreme Court later commented that Modi could be persecuted for promoting enmity among different groups during riots.

Modi's family were grocers. As a child, he helped his elder brother run a tea shop near a bus terminal. But from an early age he excelled at the art of debating. He did his masters in Political Science from Gujrat University while he worked in the staff canteen of the Gujrat State Transport Corporation. While in this job, he became a propagator of the RSS. He did so well in this task that he was given charge of the RSS student wing. In that capacity, he became a master agitator and covert distributor of RSS pamphlets during Indira Gandhi's emergency.

In 1987 the RSS seconded Modi to BJP. This gave him the opportunity to rise to prominence after he successfully organised Murli Manohar Joshi's 'Ekta Jatra' (Journey for Unity). As an expert organiser he distinguished himself again by helping BJP win the Gujrat state elections in 1995.

Modi's rise was accelerated when, in 2002, incumbent Chief Minister Patel was in poor health and his government was accused of various misdeeds. At that juncture senior leaders of BJP were looking for a replacement. Modi was tipped as deputy chief minister under Patel. But he rejected the offer and said that he wanted "the full responsibility of Gujrat or none at all." The leadership relented, and by this brilliant stroke he took over the helms of his state.

One of the great obstacles to his ascending to the prime ministership of India is opposition by minority Muslims and by liberals and secularists. Modi has claimed that 25% of the Muslims in his state will vote for him. But his opponents say only 2 Muslims who are BJP leaders -- Shahnawaz Hossain and Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi -- will vote for him.

But then came the Hindu-Muslim riots in 2002. A train carrying Hindu pilgrims was attacked by Muslims at Godhra railway station where several passengers were torched. When reaction by Hindu activists came fast, Modi is reported to have advised functionaries to be slow in stopping them. He is alleged to have expected them to allow armed Hindus to have their emotions play out. This led to the death of Muslims. Later, Modi faced political turmoil which led to the dissolution of Gujrat parliament and fresh state elections. Modi used extreme anti-Muslim rhetoric to again sweep the elections and get reelected as the chief minister.

In spite of Modi being known as 'India's most divisive politician—loved and loathed in equal measure,' he has proved himself to be a successful economic manager for his state. He has converted Gujrat into an economic powerhouse from an economic backwater. So how did he do it?

Gujrat had always focused on industrial growth. Modi corrected the imbalance by focusing appropriately on social sectors. He conceived a five-pronged strategy for integrated development of the state. Today, Gujrat is witnessing massive changes in education, agriculture, health care, information technology, infrastructure, etc. The state leads India in e-governance, investments, poverty eradication, power, special economic zones, road development, fiscal discipline, etc.

Curiously, in all this Modi has ensured people's participation. Certain novel ideas such as soil health card, roaming ration card, roaming school card show his concern for the common man. One of his master strokes of putting Gujrat in the global map is his campaign called 'Vibrant Gujrat,' which has attracted foreign investments to the state.

Modi remains a youthful and energetic mass leader with innovative thoughts. But how would he fare as a prime ministerial candidate? Gujrat is a relatively small state with 50 million people. Running Gujrat is a far cry from presiding over the destiny of a big country like India. In his state, Modi runs a one-man show. There is no effective opposition there. But in India he will have to deal with cantankerous coalitions. There are also influential critics in his own party who are waiting for him to slip.

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Election season is just unfolding in India. Violence and political chicanery will rule the day till results are finally announced. One cannot be sure where BJP and its allies will find their roosting place. But one thing is sure, it is going to be an exciting time in India.

The writer is a former ambassador and a commentator on current issues.
E-mail: ashfaq303@gmail.com

Right to information

ALAMGIR KHAN

IN Rabindranath Tagore's play *Raktakarabi* (Red Oleanders), people in Jokkhopuri, the gold-mine-dependent capitalist state, had no freedom of thought, or freedom of speech and expression, or of association. A culture of secrecy was enshrined in that state. People led by workers rose against that regime and even the puppet king became aware of the injustices against people and joined the uprising. Rabindranath did not show what happened after this rise, whether it was successful or failed, or whether it turned into an Orange Revolution or something like an Arab Spring with more chaos and confusion.

Rabindranath composed this play in 1923, the year Official Secrets Act was passed in British-ruled India. In this drama, when Nandini, the leader of the uprising, desperately moved from one office to another seeking the whereabouts of Ranjan, her fiancé and the leader of rebel workers, every state official in Jokkhopuri upheld the Official Secrets Act and denied any knowledge about him, who had already been murdered by the brutal force of the state.

In the practical world, tortured by the experience of man's brutality against man in the Second World War, the UN General Assembly in its first session in 1946 adopted Resolution 59(1) that stated, 'Freedom of information is a fundamental human right and is the touchstone of all the freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated.' Article 19 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 states, 'Everyone has the right to ... receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.' Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Right (ICCPR) pledges the same too.

In 2010, Mr. Iftekharuzzaman, Executive Director of TIB, wrote in a paper entitled *Towards People's Right to Information in Bangladesh: High Expectations, Tentative Progress, the Way Forward*: "The history of the recognition of the right to information is much older though. The first country to have the RTI law was Finland and Sweden in 1766 when the former was a territory governed by Sweden. ... More than eighty countries have since enacted RTI law or act, of which over 40 have done so during the decade of nineties and thereafter."

Rabindranath's *Raktakarabi* ended with the message of the uprising only, readers cannot know further than this.

But those of us who saw the unfolding of 1971 before our eyes know more than the play says. Independent Bangladesh adopted a constitution that guaranteed for its people freedom of thought and conscience and freedom of speech and expression and freedom of association, all of which were denied to people in Jokkhopuri. Yet Official Secrets Act remained as enshrined as it had been since 1923. Because of this culture of secrecy at the state level, freedom of the press guaranteed in the constitution became worthless.

Therefore, in 1983, the Press Commission in Bangladesh recommended adoption of a Right to Information Act. Thereafter, through a long process of bargaining and heavy pressure from the civil society, the Right to Information Act, 2009 was enacted in the country. It is said to be a natural outcome of the constitutional pledges to the people of Bangladesh. This Act is seen as an inalienable part of freedom of thought, conscience and

speech, and necessary for the empowerment of people as all powers of the Republic belong to the people. It is also an instrument to increase transparency and accountability of all public, autonomous and private organisations.

Though by now many countries have adopted Right to Information Act, there are many countries that have failed to implement this Act properly, and Bangladesh is one of them. Right to Information has been given a very high honour in words in such countries but has been made ineffective like other fundamental rights given to the people.

"The Citizen Survey found that 44.2% of the respondents were unaware of RTI and RTIA. ... However, the tendency to use the RTIA was very low even among those who asked for information from different institutions. Only 12.5% applicants who asked for information used the prescribed application form of RTIA" -- (RTIA in Bangladesh: Challenges of Implementation, e-book, published by RTI Forum, November 2012.)

This 44.2% who are unaware of RTIA cannot be generalised. The number of people who do not know anything about RTI and RTIA must be higher in the country. In this context, we can legitimately ask on the eve of the International Right to Know Day, September 28, whether we have to make another Act in order to ensure people's Right to Know the RTIA.

The writer writes on theatre, education and socio-political issues.
E-mail: alamgirkh@gmail.com

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR
letters@thedailystar.net

Who benefits from riots?

This refers to the report, "UP Chief Minister faces protests in Muzaffarnagar" (Sept.16). It is unfortunate that political parties are engineering riots to influence the electorate. It is becoming a trend. A masjid was demolished in Ayodhya for the BJP to come to power. It is very easy to instigate riots on one pretext or other—just circulate a dated compact disc showing member of one community killing a person of another community and then send goons to start riots. People in UP have told the chief minister that they want peace. A chief minister who aspires to become the prime minister is facing allegations of communal violence. Muzaffarnagar residents are angry at loss of business which is said to be Rs.25 crores a day. The chief minister should agree to a probe by CBI instead of a judicial commission.

Deendayal M. Lulla
Mumbai, India

BNP's scary company

BNP seems to be supporting Jamaat's violence across the country. The Hefajatis, aided and instigated by the BNP, laid siege to Dhaka, gathered at Shapla Chattar and stayed there to topple the government. And when the government was driving them out of the Chattar, a small number of casualties took place and the government faced the wrath of both Hefajatis and Jamaatis.

It seemed from their recent activities that the party wants the bigoted mullahs to be with them to get back to power. Whatever ideals of Liberation War are still cherished by some, will be buried and the War Crimes Tribunal will be put on the back burner, if so happens. The scary thing is they call the people holding aloft the ideals of Liberation War and liberal thinking 'atheists,' and they will then buckle down to eliminate the atheists.

Ahmed Niaz
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Unrest impacts stock market

The strikes, violence, and turbulence of the past several months have slowed down the transactions in the stock market, and both individual and institutional investors are now reluctant to invest in this vulnerable market. In recent days, the Dhaka Stock Exchange General Index has plummeted alarmingly. There is no reason to believe that the ongoing political turmoil will end soon and so investors are reluctant to make new investments. Political stability and violence-free environment are prerequisite for keeping the market stable.

For the greater interest of the country's economic growth, the political parties should avoid hartals, violence, strikes etc. Political parties must think of alternative ways of protest.

Reajul Karim
Department of Finance
University of Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Home gives in to pressure," published on September 19, 2013

Ash C.

Home Minister MKA and his colleagues have nothing to worry about the road safety and average loss of 3,300 lives every year in the hands of the killer drivers. After all, whenever they travel by road, they are guarded left, right, front and back by gun totting security forces in vehicles in order to stop even a fly that dares to approach them! There's a saying: 'What goes around, comes around.'

Nds

Being a Bangladeshi is no identity to reckon with and he or she is not entitled to claim any value to his life. Only the life of the government people has any value in our democracy. The common citizens are mere raw materials fit to be used for government's value addition.

SM

The fate of Bangladesh is like that of the CNG. Sandwiched by two power hungry leaders!

Abbasuddin

The shipping minister is quite sympathetic to the killers of the highways. He convinced PM to initiate the softer laws with a promise to ensure a few hundred thousands of votes of truck drivers and their assistants who drive trucks without any license most of the times.

Vikram Khan

Elections are coming, so criminals and murderers got free to gain support. What is the value of the lives of common Bangladeshis?

Dev Saha

This will not be allowed in any civilised country. Where are these people going? To their final destination?

Snr Citizen

This is a matter of serious concern as the drivers are not quite efficient and law abiding. I can not fathom whom this new rule will protect and what comfort it will bring.

"Abul Hasan Chy among 3 charged by Canada cops" (September 19, 2013)

Abbasuddin

The main criminal to whom the bribe is supposed to go remained out of the charge. Shame on Canadian police!

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

So our Abul Hossain is off the hook?