

TRIBUTE TO SHAHEED NUR HOSSAIN

Democracy and the role of media

PARVEZ BABUL

THE nation observes Shaheed Nur Hossain Day on November 10. I was at Gandaria rail station that day in 1987 to cover the news of the blockade. People got the news within a very short time that someone had been killed by police at Zero Point. The person was Nur Hossain, who staked his blood and life for democracy.

I wondered how an unknown youth like Nur Hossain became a hero striving to establish democracy in our country even without being a big leader! I then realised that if we have patriotism in our hearts, if we love our country, if we want to make a positive change for the people, if we respect the rights of others, if we really support democracy, every one of us can become a Nur Hossain. Nur Hossain created an historical example and became an inspiration in the struggle for democracy.

In fact, Nur Hossain has raised a question in our minds: what is democracy that we all hope for? There seems to be confusion about what the word democracy means, and what the role of our media is in establishing it. The media is called the Fourth Estate, and plays a very important role in establishing democracy, and also in making the dreams of martyrs like Shaheed Nur Hossain come true.

Democracy means government by the people and for the people. Aristotle said: "In a democracy the poor will have more power than the rich, because there are more of them, and the will of the majority is supreme." That means all the people should be able to have their say in everything that affects their lives because the majority of our country are poor.

There are four basic elements of democracy:

- (1) A political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections;
- (2) Active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life;
- (3) Protection of the human rights of all citizens;
- (4) The rule of law in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens.

Political analysts say that democracy is a means for the people to choose their leaders and to hold them accountable for their policies and their conduct in office. The people decide who will represent them in parliament, and who will head the government at the national and local levels. They do so by choosing between competing parties in regular, free and fair elections. Government is based on the consent of the governed. In a democracy, the people are sovereign -- they are the highest form of political authority. Power flows from the people to the leaders of government, who hold power only temporarily. The people are free to criticise their elected leaders and representatives, and to observe how they conduct the business of government. Elected representatives at the national and local levels should listen to the people and respond to their needs and suggestions. Elections have to occur at regular intervals, as prescribed by law.

The key role of citizens in a democracy is to participate in public life. Citizens have an obligation to become informed about public issues, to watch carefully how their political leaders and representatives use their powers, and to express their own opinions and

interests. Democracy is a system of rule by laws, not by individuals.

In a democracy, the rule of law protects the rights of citizens, maintains order, and limits the power of government. All citizens are equal under the law. No one may be discriminated against on the basis of race, religion, ethnic group, or gender. If democracy is to work, citizens must not only participate and exercise their rights; they must also observe certain principles and rules of democratic conduct. People must respect the law and reject violence.

Experts in democracy point out that nothing ever justifies using violence against our political opponents, just because we disagree with them. Every citizen must respect the rights of his or her fellow citizens, and their dignity as human beings. No one should denounce political opponents as evil and illegitimate, just because they have different views. People should question the decisions of the government, but not reject the government's authority.

Every group has the right to practice its culture and to have some control over its own affairs, but each group should accept that it is a part of a democratic state. When we express our opinions, we should also listen to the views of other people, even people we disagree with. Everyone has a right to be heard.

Media specialists maintain that access to information is essential to the health of democracy for at least two reasons. First, it ensures that citizens make responsible, informed choices rather than acting out of ignorance or misinformation.



PHOTO: PAVEL RAHMAN

Second, information serves a "checking function" by ensuring that elected representatives uphold their oaths of office and carry out the wishes of those who elected them. If the media is to have any meaningful role in democracy, then the ultimate goal of media assistance should be to develop a range of diverse voices that are credible, and to create and strengthen a sector that promotes such outlets.

The right to the freedom of speech/expression, as well as the freedom of the press, as a corollary of this right, represents fundamental values of the modern pluralist democracy. Without them, much of the progress achieved in the contemporary world couldn't be imagined. That is why all these rights must be defended. The experience of the last decade in Central Europe, for example, shows that the mass media contributed decisively in the construction of the civil society and in censuring the authoritarian trends of some politicians or parties. Also, it corrected and continues to correct, the excesses, negligence and management errors in the countries with a consolidated democracy. Without the freedom of expression, and thus without the freedom of mass media, a democracy cannot be conceived. A free press sometimes makes a democratic government's life or the life of public personalities difficult; it always makes a dictatorship impossible.

Terming journalism a catalyst for changes, civil society members of our country call for more responsible journalism in order to establish a truly democratic society and eliminate all sorts of injustices and discriminations. Journalists stand by the people in a crisis, and they should perform their role in better ways. Journalists should have high values of life and dignity, because they are the ones who give directions to the nation.

The writer is a media person, human rights activist, and an author.

SHIFTING IMAGES



MILIA ALI

and beasts under diverse circumstances. Since these are parables containing moral lessons, they are as much for instruction as for entertainment. Interestingly, most of them draw parallels between humans and animals and are relevant irrespective of time or generation. Oftentimes, Aesop's fables form part of the school curriculum. However, many of us have heard these stories as children -- narrated by a parent or a grandparent in an effort to teach us life's valuable lessons.

Of late I have been reflecting on one particular fable because of its relevance to the recent political fiasco in Bangladesh. The story is about a lion and a bear who jointly captured a child for food. However, once they got the child, they started fighting fiercely for the larger share. In the process they hurt each other and both collapsed from exhaustion. A fox, watching the whole incident, seized the opportune moment and ran off with the child. The lion and the bear were too engrossed in their own fight to stop the fox. Finally, tired and frustrated, the bear said: "Woe be to us, that we should have fought and belaboured ourselves only to serve the turn of a fox."

There are several versions of the fable -- but the moral of the story is the same: two animals weakened by a fight over their loot, only to have a third come and steal it. It's a simple and common sense lesson yet it seems to escape our leaders in Bangladesh. They seem not to know of the popular fable and are quite unaware of the fact that in their petty wrangling and personal ego battles, they might end up losing the real prize -- the governance of a potentially prosperous country.

No, I am not privy to any inside information on whether or not such an eventuality could occur. But when partisan politics reaches a level of acrimony that all rationality is lost how can we expect the country's democratic system not to be jeopardised? Isn't the basic premise of democracy to listen to the

other voice even if it's a voice of dissent? Whether the ruling party wins an overwhelming majority of 70% or merely edges a victory with 51%, the fact is that the remaining 30% or 49% are still part of the country and they deserve equal rights and privileges. They cannot be excluded from the system. Once voted in, the leader of the country represents everyone -- whether they are "for" or "against" her/him, because in a democratic nation all citizens are considered equal.

On the other hand, for a democracy to function the opposition must accept the elected leader as the country's chief executive. They must fight their battles in the Parliament, not in the streets. Once differences are brought out of the Parliament they are reduced to nasty squabbles where both sides hurl sticks and stones (even bombs) at each other. Unfortunately, the real casualty is a rational discourse on issues which truly matter to the welfare of the masses. In the British Parliament, too, there are occasional nasty altercations while in the US, partisan differences reach a point where the government is shut down. But these are ideological, issue-based fights within a democratic framework. Rarely are these differences reduced to mudslinging. As I listened to the recent telephone conversation between the prime minister and the leader of the opposition on YouTube, I was shocked at the personal attacks and the precious time and effort invested in mundane matters like fixing phones and microphones!

Democracy is not only about the people's right to elect a leader of their choice; an important part of the democratic process is building an institution which guarantees a peaceful and smooth transition of power. If the system in place doesn't work why not seek a constitutional remedy to fill the lacunae? After all, it's not just one election or four, we need a system for posterity. One that the voters can trust.

We also need tolerance on both sides. The elected leader must have the magnanimity to acknowledge that those who did not vote for her/him are also patriotic citizens. And the losing party must concede its loss graciously.

The wounds inflicted on the Nation by the two major parties run deep. The strife has already paralysed the leaders into inaction... like the lion and the bear in Aesop's fable. If this continues, the country might fall prey to a predator -- and who knows whether it will be a big bad wolf or a clever fox?

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Myanmar's national reconciliation

NEHGINPAO KIPGEN

FROM November 4-5, the Myanmar government peace negotiation team and representatives of ethnic armed groups met in Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin state. The meeting took place after a four-day (October 30 to November 2) conference of 17 ethnic armed groups in Laiza, also in Kachin state.

The meeting was significant mainly for two reasons. Firstly, it was the first of such large and inclusive gathering of ethnic armed groups and the Myanmar government since the country's independence, in an attempt to address the protracted minority problems.

The meeting, which was attended by over 50 leaders of different ethnic armed groups and several representatives from the government, can be termed a more inclusive one than the Panglong conference of 1947, which was signed by 23 representatives from Chin, Kachin, Shan and Bama or Burman.

Secondly, the meeting was attended by international observers -- Vijay Nambiar, Special Advisor to the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, and Mr. Wang Yin Fan, Chinese government's representative.

During the two-day meeting, the ethnic armed groups presented an 11-point proposal they agreed during the Laiza conference to the government, including the establishment of a federal army.

Naing Han Thar, General Secretary of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), an alliance of ethnic armed groups, said: "If we want to create a federal union, we need to have a federal army. If the army is controlled by a small group of people, it is not proper for a federal union and it can't guarantee inclusion for ethnic minorities."

On the other hand, the Union government presented a 10-point proposal to the ethnic armed groups, including non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity, perpetuation of sovereignty and democratic principles according to the 2008 constitution.

At the end of the two-day meeting, the two sides agreed to work together toward a nationwide ceasefire and establish a framework for political dialogue, and to hold meetings for political negotiation. They also agreed to meet again in Hpa-an, the capital of Karen state.

Initially, the government was hopeful of signing a nationwide ceasefire agreement before the end of November. But it is now certain that the ceasefire will not happen in November as the next meeting is scheduled for December.

Can recent developments resolve the decades-old political problems in the country? Though it is still premature to give a definitive answer, there is a

potential for a solution provided that both sides are willing to compromise and cooperate.

One setback of the Myitkyina meeting was the absence of United Wa State Army (UWSA), one of the most powerful non-state armed groups in the country. Other armed groups such as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang (NSCN-K) and the Kuki National Organization (KNO) also did not participate. All these armed groups also did not attend the Laiza conference.

For a nationwide ceasefire to be effective and successful, all ethnic armed groups in the country need to participate and cooperate in the peace-building process. Meanwhile, it is the responsibility of both the Union government and leaders of the participating armed groups to convince and invite the non-participating groups.

As it has been the case for the past several decades, the greatest challenge in the reconciliation process is likely to be on the question of the withdrawal of the Union army from ethnic minority territories and granting autonomy to the minorities.

And another challenge will be how the Union government will deal with the armed groups after a nationwide ceasefire is signed. Will the government be willing to integrate the armed groups into federal army, or transform them into other state forces?

If the government decides to integrate them, will the armed groups accept such proposal for long-term solution? And if the government decides to transform them into other state forces, will the government sanctions adequate funding to support them?

Moreover, the 2008 constitution needs to be either rewritten or amended in order to accommodate the demands of ethnic armed groups.

In any case, the armed groups are unlikely to surrender their arms if they are not fully convinced that the Union government is sincere in its commitment to addressing the longstanding demands of ethnic minorities, such as equality of rights and self-determination in their own territories.

Because of the historicity of lack of trust between the minorities and the successive central governments, building mutual trust is going to take time.

While the unprecedented nature of the Myitkyina meeting brings hope, one must be cautiously optimistic about the end-result. Nevertheless, recent developments are crucial for the success of national reconciliation, and should be encouraged.

The writer is general secretary of the US-based Kuki International Forum.

Remembering an admirable matriarch

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

ALHAJ Selima Khatun, a self-effacing educator and a kind hearted public spirited lady passed away at the ripe age of 82 on October 15, 2013, at her residence in Lalmatia, Dhaka. Her death has devastatingly affected all members of a well-knit extended family, a rare sight these days in an urban setting.

This writer, no relation of the family, first came to know Mosaddek Hossain, younger son of Selima Khatun in early 1990s when the latter was almost singlehandedly fighting a difficult legal battle against ill-meaning corporate entity, to get his dues. What surprised me most was Mosaddek's steely determination and fortitude behind a gentle and quiet appearance.

It was only when I met Selima Khatun that I could gauge the origin of Mosaddek's resolve and forbearance. In fact, whenever I talked to her, the care, concern, apprehension, and also premonition of a worrying mother, were all too manifest. Fifteen years back she had lost her caring husband, late Munshi Afzal Hossain, a public servant whose espousal of public affairs is well known to residents of Lalmatia residential area. This was also the time when her son Mosaddek's battle in the real world carried the portents of financial adversity. Her resilience helped greatly in weathering the storm.

Selima Khatun displayed commendable emotional stability when her elder son, a gifted engineer, died prematurely after long incapacitation caused by blood related disease. The excruciating pain owing to the demise of elder son did not deter her from engaging in public causes. This was quite clearly the shades of her phlegmatic personality. She did not exhibit her grief publicly.

In her personal life Selima Khatun was a successful mother who had held together a family, an accomplished educator who had a distinguished stint for long 38 years finally retiring as Head Mistress of Palassey Primary Girls School. She was deeply religious, prayed regularly and performed the Hajji, and also succeeded in



Alhaj Selima Khatun

imbuing the religious values and practices in all her children.

A successful homemaker, late Selima Khatun was admirably modern and progressive and ensured decent education for the children.

Selima Khatun was distinctly public spirited, and quietly and generously donated to educational and religious institutions. For women's education, she had established regular stipendiary arrangement in Lalmatia Girls School.

Selima Khatun leaves behind one son, three daughters, two daughters-in-law, three sons-in-law, eight grandchildren and one great grandchild and a host of admiring neighbours, well-wishers, beneficiaries and relations. May Allah rest her soul in eternal peace and bless the family with the courage to bear the loss.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.

By THOMAS JOSEPH

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 - 43 Long for
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- 45 Therefore
- Like some winter days
- Blue
- Second person
- Game caller
- Fast puller
- Future flower
- Second story
- Falling apart
- French friend
- Maze runner
- Notions
- Take care of
- Knight wear
- Malcontent's forte
- Mystical deck
- Bunch
- Epics
- Skirt part
- Linked with
- Geometry measure
- Plants
- Uttered
- Wonder
- Train unit
- Hearty brew
- Take in
- Pig's place



Yesterday's answer

A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW

On letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

10-10 CRYPTOQUOTE

H ZTPTI NJB J LAYHDK; H

NJPT SMCO OIHTB OA BA VK

PTIK WTCO TJDN JZB TPTIK

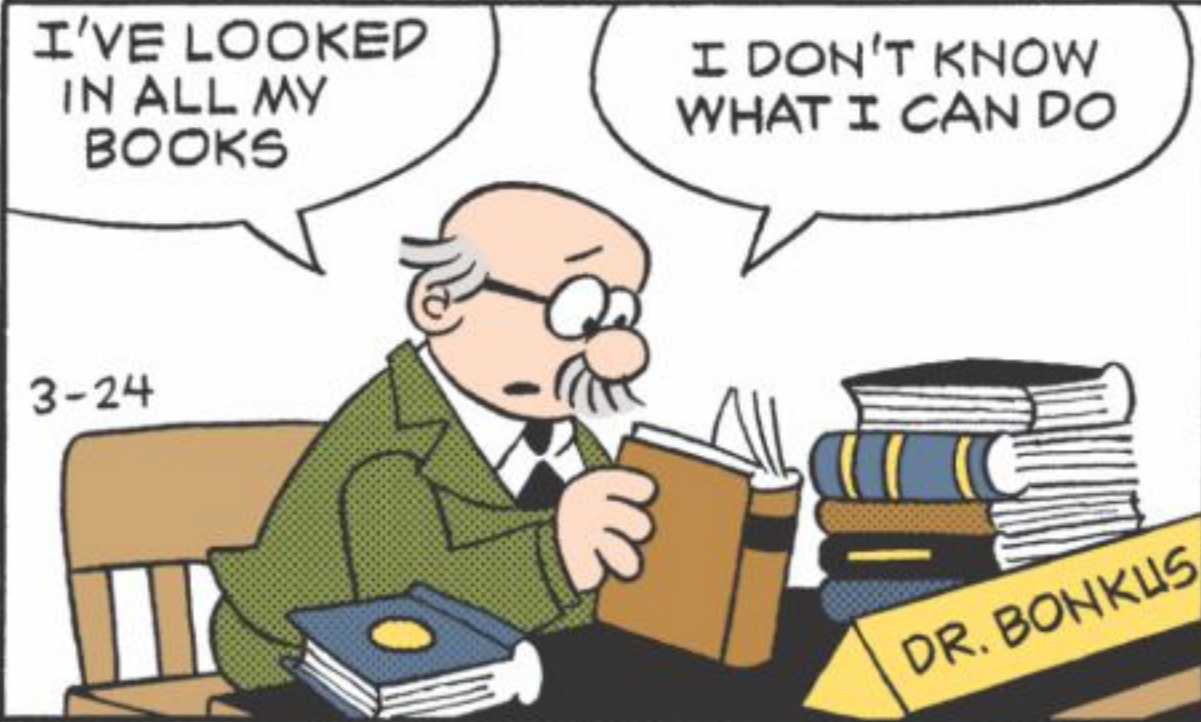
BJK. — JWIJNV YHZDAYZ

Yesterday's Cryptoquote:

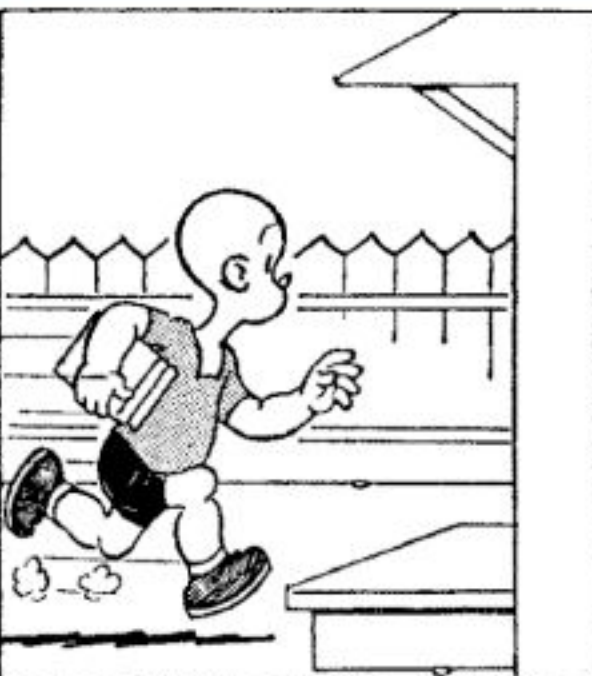
IN THE PRACTICE OF TOLERANCE, ONE'S ENEMY IS THE BEST TEACHER.

- DALAI LAMA

BEETLE BAILEY



HENRY



by Mort Walker

by Don Tranchte

QUOTABLE Quotes

"A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves."

Lao Tzu