

# Benefitting from RTI Act

Still a long way to go

It seems we have not yet been able to make a steady start in terms of securing the citizens' right to information promised by the RTI Act. A survey report on stakeholders' perception on the functioning of the Information Commission in implementing the RTI Act 2009 reveals that 80% of the respondents hardly received any information within the stipulated 20-day period. Moreover, the information they received belatedly were of partial or vague nature.

The survey was conducted by Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) encompassing some 45 representatives of the civil society and NGO's, journalists and Information officials. When such professionally well placed people face impediments in getting information where does this leave the fate of common citizens?

Three cogent opinions were expressed by majority of the respondents. First, leniency in penalizing the violators of the RTI Act discourages the people to seek information. Secondly, there is need for reducing the 20 days' requirement to furnish information to quicken the availability of information.

Last but not least the Information Commission will have to expand its activities in areas where Information can be considered a tool for ensuring accountability and transparency of public institutions.

It's a sad commentary on the state of implementation of RTI that officials assigned to public bodies such as those dealing with lands and electricity are lacking in co-operation largely 'due to fear of their seniors.'

Four years since the inception of the RTI law the progress of its implementation leaves room for both acceleration and qualitative improvement.

# Tiff over badminton game

How could it get so malicious?

A scuffle between two groups of young men in Barisal over a game of badminton led to violence and a young man died. That itself was a tragedy. As if that was not enough, malicious rumours were spread about an injured from the incident having died, that set-off violent retaliation and 16 houses belonging to Hindu residents in a neighbouring village were gutted. We are outraged.

We find no words strong enough to condemn such an attack on members of minority community especially in a country that is known for peaceful coexistence and harmony between different religious faiths. Why the local police could not prevent the occurrence is a pertinent question. The matter merits a thorough investigation.

At a time of heightened tensions, all concerned must be careful to avert any nefarious design that that vested quarters might be up to. We must ferret out the culprits and make them face the full force of law. It appears that trouble mongers wait in the wings to drum up communal feelings at the slightest of pretexts. We must beware of them.

Though it is the government's responsibility to protect minority communities, it falls upon majority community leaders to come to their aid in the interest of protecting the fabric of society. It is imperative that all steps necessary be taken to prevent any force from exploiting religious sentiments.

# Read the prime minister's lips, please!

ABDUL MATIN

BANGLADESH is passing through a serious political crisis. First of all, the crisis was created unnecessarily by abolishing the caretaker system of government through the 15th Amendment to the Constitution though the Supreme Court judgment allowed scope for retention of the system for two more elections. The opposition also should not have boycotted the parliament and avoided discussions on the 15th Amendment. Instead, they should have attended the parliament and put forward their views.

Secondly, what is wrong in having an election under an elected government? Is this not the common practice in most countries? Was this system not practiced in Bangladesh prior to 1991? Did the present government try to influence the results of any of the elections held during its tenure? The type of the poll-time government is not the issue. The important issues are: (i) the independence of the Election Commission (EC) and (ii) the division of power between the government and EC. If these two issues are resolved satisfactorily, there should not be any problem in having a free and fair election under any government. Neither hartals (accompanied by arson) nor arrests (accompanied by repression of the opposition) will solve the present crisis.

Lastly, there must be a resolution of the crisis before the dissolution of the parliament. The existence of the parliament allows a lever for any amendment to the constitution, if necessary.

The prime minister recently made two very significant statements. On November 5, she requested the leader of the opposition to place her demand for the ministries she wants in the all-party poll-time government to oversee the next general election. Five days later, she said: "I want peace and development for the people, not the prime ministership." What else does the leader of the opposition want? Shouldn't she read the lips of the prime minister and take advantage of those words? As a matter of fact, these two statements could form the basis of a fruitful negotiation between the two leaders.

The prime minister initiated a dialogue by calling the leader of the opposition. Whatever was the outcome, it was a good start. Why can't the leader of the opposition now call the prime minister and continue the dialogue mainly on two issues: (i) the prime ministership and (ii) the distribution of portfolios of the poll-time government.

The prime minister has gone the extra mile. Now it is time for the leader of the opposition to do the same. The ball now lies in her court.

The writer is a former chief engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission.

# Remembering the Red Moulana

GROUND REALITIES



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

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oulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, wrote a Pakistani journalist not long ago, was one man who could have saved Pakistan if circumstances had been different. The way Sheikh Mujibur Rahman went ahead with his political programme and the manner in which the army and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto made a mess of things, argued this journalist, it should have been for Bhashani to stem the decline of the old Muslim state.

The Pakistani journalist's understanding of Bhashani's politics is flawed. It is much the same with many others here in Bangladesh. The Moulana was a complex man. He shed copious tears before Mohammad Ali Jinnah as he narrated the plight of the Muslims of Assam in pre-partition India. And yet by the late 1950s he had come round to the conclusion that Pakistan needed to be accorded a farewell in East Bengal. His 'assalam-o-alaiikum' remains one of the myriad ways in which he continues to be defined. And do not forget that Bhashani, only four days before the general election of December 1970, declared the 'independence' of East Pakistan.

A few days before the anniversary of his death, it is certainly time to analyse the place Bhashani, once castigated as the Red Moulana because of his leftist leanings, holds in Bangladesh's history. That he was a pivotal figure in the gradual build-up of the movement against Pakistan in the 1960s is beyond question. And yet you cannot forget that in the mid-1960s, he did not want Ayub Khan to be disturbed because Pakistan's military ruler was then busy forging links with China. Bhashani admired China and yet, in less than a decade, as Bengalis waged war against an oppressive Pakistan, he was disappointed and embarrassed that the Chinese leadership had taken Yahya Khan's side in the conflict, that it had not heeded his call for support for Bangladesh.

It is to Moulana Bhashani's credit that peasants and workers in East Pakistan were roused to an awareness of their worth in life. And nothing that the fanatical Muslim rightwing did to damage his reputation among his followers worked. He was looked upon as a revered soul, one who was regularly asked to bless the unfortunate and the poor by praying and blowing into the water they brought to him in jars and bottles. Politically, he was a brave man and not even Iskandar Mirza's threat to shoot him like a dog had any effect on him. As part of the United Front with Suhrawardy and Fazlul Huq in 1954, he crisscrossed the country informing Bengalis of all the evils the Muslim League administration had been perpetrating. It was one of his finest hours.

And then came another such hour in 1969, when he publicly demanded that the Ayub regime free Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and withdraw the Agartala conspiracy case. He believed there was nothing morally wrong about asking people to burn and besiege -- jalao gherao -- a regime that lacked legitimacy. And do not forget that it was his threat to lead a million Bengalis to the Kurmitola cantonment to free Mujib that unnerved the government. That act made the nation fall in love with

him all over again. And yet the nation was perplexed when he, in alliance with Bhutto, decided to stay away from the Rawalpindi round table conference to which Mujib, by then Bangabandhu, was going.

The Bhashani character was a continual, queer mix of the defiant and the unpredictable. He evidently was unhappy at the minimal role he was made to play at Mujibnagar in 1971. But that was no reason for him to abandon the struggle. It was in anger that he turned his lieutenant Mashiur Rahman Jadu Mia away when the latter linked up with him and tried persuading him to return to occupied Bangladesh. His belief in the secular struggle for Bangladesh was unequivocal; and yet when in free Bangladesh he launched what he called his Muslim Bangla programme, it was the Bengali state that was undermined. He did not see the damage he was causing.

The Moulana's affection for Bangabandhu was public knowledge, even if Bhashani had once thought Mujib would, like him, voice his opposition to Pakistan's involvement in CENTO and SEATO. The imposition of the Baksal system on the state in early 1975 caused him justified anguish. He made it clear that a reversal of democracy was an act he did not welcome. Barely a couple of months later, when Bangabandhu travelled to Santosh to see him, Bhashani left no one in any doubt that he supported Bangabandhu's Second Revolution. That position changed again when a coup d'etat claimed the life of the Father of the Nation in August 1975. He demonstrated no sorrow or regret, in public, at the tragedy. But when Khondokar Moshtaque visited him soon after the coup, Bhashani reprimanded him for what he called teaching the tiger to taste blood.

Warts and all, Moulana Bhashani was a significant factor in the politics of pre-1971 Pakistan and later independent Bangladesh. He commanded respect across the spectrum despite the shifting sands of his politics. Never seeking office, he was content to arrogate to himself the role of a people's guardian, constantly berating those in political authority about their failings, endlessly reminding people that he was the spokesperson of the oppressed. In his shadow rose some politicians of conviction and left-wing persuasion. But those politicians eventually betrayed his ideals through compromise with military dictatorship, through sharing political platforms with the capitalist class and with the forces of communalism.

And there lies the tragedy. All these years after his passing, there is no one to carry his torch forward. Those who could have simply walked away, into a domain where elitism corrodes politics and idealism loses meaning.

(Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, eminent preacher and political leader, was born on December 12, 1880, and died on November 17, 1976).

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# Politicians have to deliver

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

P

essimists would say that politics has never been a particularly edifying activity. Daniel Webster said that the unvarying tendency of the mad strife of politics "is to belittle greatness and corrupt goodness. It contracts the mind and hardens the heart." John Dewey observed that "while saints are engaged in introspection burly sinners run the world." As of now, pessimists in Bangladesh perhaps could not be blamed for holding a view as above because there is an unpalatable feeling that the politicians have let us down.

Our civil society activists and other public-spirited folks would say that at this moment, when the nation is standing on the escalator of disorder and destruction, right-minded citizens cannot afford to stand frozen in disgust and dismay. The do-gooders would insist that we cannot merely look upon the political developments in sorrow and upon our politicians in anger. Their premonition is that the crisis, if not mastered, can turn into a disaster further down the road.

The militant civil society enthusiasts would ruefully say that by voting ignorant politicians to power, we have kept a singularly gifted and enterprising nation in the ranks of the poor. Theirs is a belief that the time has come when citizens must wrest the initiative from professional politicians and from political parties, and insist upon men of knowledge, vision and character being chosen as candidates for parliamentary election.

In the present political stalemate, well-meaning citizens would impress upon a deep-felt need for an intelligent and adequate organisation of voters. They would recommend the formation of a citizens' council in every constituency, consisting of impartial individuals who would appraise the candidates and suggest the right candidates to the voters. They would expect that the voters will be able to insist upon the right type of candidates, instead of allowing the political parties to palm off the undesirable on them.

Whatever maybe the state of politics and the deficits of our politicians, a dispassionate look and balanced view would suggest that politics should not be reviled in the manner it is being done now. Perhaps it is a natural weakness to revile that which we cannot do without. However, what is disheartening is that in political exchanges we are witnessing a temper that is pressing a partisan advantage to its bitter end. This temper cannot understand and respect the other side and does not feel a unity between all citizens.

Our politicians appear to be oblivious of the reality that democracy depends upon consent and compromise which are attributes only of mature political societies. They are ignoring the fact that the lack of the spirit of moderation is contributing to the degeneration of

our society into crippling polarisation and that hatred is replacing goodwill.

The facts of our recent political history that include assassinations and violent deaths and injuries of political actors and workers do not augur well for a healthy polity. While cohesion is supremely important for socio-economic emancipation, our unfortunate scenario is one of politicians, across the divide, holding diametrically opposite views on important aspects of national life. The political diatribe is fuelling the pernicious polarisation of our society.

Under the circumstances, would it be an impracticality to hope that our democratic society will harbour a certain extravagance of objectives so that real and potential leaders wander beyond the safe provision of personal gratifications? Shall we see group cohesiveness and work and achievement? Will our democracy involve the cooperation of all perceptive citizens?

One will see that a phenomenal change has taken place during the last ten or fifteen years in the thinking and behaviour of the general masses. And it is a positive one. While things at government level are deteriorating or stagnating, at societal level there is a yearning for change -- a realisation that this is our own country and we have to do something to improve it.

To the discerning eye there would appear an unfortunate disconnection between the state and society. There is a wide and growing gulf between the ruling elite and the people.

The elected government has to ensure that power and hunger for more resources does not become an end in itself. Protecting the status quo from all challenges shall not become the prime activity of the government. Devoting the energy and resources of the establishment for solving people's problems and maintenance of order in the society should be the main focus of rulers as against the use of government machinery to keep the rival claimants to power in check.

Cynical observers of the current Bangladeshi political scene entertain grave doubts about a real change in the style and substance of politics insofar as desirable democratic governance scenario is concerned. Their continued pessimism is not without ground as hapless Bangladeshis sadly watch their guardians unmoved despite the combined onslaught of logic and reason, law and fact.

Politically speaking, this is not the first instance when otherwise responsible people have talked irrelevantly and irreverently. The tragedy is that we are forgetting that democracy, with freedom of opinion and opposition, is not the normal way of organising society but is a rare human achievement. In our environment, many citizens may appear un-dimensional but our political leaders have no excuse for being so perilously un-dimensional. They have to act as catalyst. The responsibilities which today lie on their shoulders are far greater than at any earlier time in our history.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## Research on Ctg. landslides

I would like to bring to the notice of all the environmental groups, engineers and policymakers of our country a recent research on statistical analysis of rainfall-induced landslides in Chittagong.

This research is being conducted at the University of Regina, Canada. I am a graduate student of the university. I studied several case histories of landslides and collected various data of rainfall from different published sources. It is very important for every citizen of our country to know the statistical trend of landslide events over time, how these landslides are triggered and what consequences they have. Rainfall-induced landslides are for the most part a manageable hazard. A coordinated effort to reduce landslide could be highly effective in Bangladesh. I think the government should consider this issue, take it as a priority and conduct research on it so that the result might be beneficial for the residents of Chittagong hilly areas and save their lives and properties.

Imteaz Bhuiyan  
Graduate student, Environmental Systems Engineering, University of Regina  
Regina, Canada

## Time to look for a political alternative

Experiments with our fledgling democracy have been botched up now for over 23 years and Bangladesh's condition now is akin to that of a small kitchen with 2 headstrong women in charge. The whole place is in a stinking mess because they both insist on preparing and serving what they think best to the rest of the household, like it or not!

I am amused and irritated as well to read in hundreds of articles day after day, servile incantations of pious hopes for sanity to return to the proceedings and patience, tolerance and a compromising spirit to be ignited. On what premise do the intellectuals of our society base their appeals, when there has been nothing but deafening silence to their entreaties for over two decades?

Is it not time now to look at other alternatives?  
Sikander Ahmed  
Gulshan-1, Dhaka

## ACC in death throes on opposition's watch

It is not surprising that the AL government has turned the ACC into a show-piece just like the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). Such shenanigans are to be expected from a party whose antecedents and acolytes speak loud of democratic pluralism but whose record in government is marred by the creation of a one-party state where only four newspapers were allowed. The surprise is the fact that none of the opposition parties has told us bluntly that, should they go to power, this wanton destruction of the ACC will be reversed. Perhaps the silence of the opposition should not be a surprise either. After all, most Bangladeshis know that the only time there is a check on unrestrained, unaccountable, and untrammelled state bureaucratic power is when there are non-partisan, non-political governments in office. No Bangladeshi political party worth its salt will ever tolerate an independent body that protects the rights of citizens from state abuse: hence the worthless state of ACC and NHRC today.

Esam Sohail  
Kansas, USA

## Comments on news report, "Ministers make fun of resignation," published on November 13, 2013

Aasfisarwar  
The attempt to deceive the nation by false resignations makes two things crystal clear: 1) They are dishonest. 2) They are unfit for becoming public servants. They even don't know how to write a resignation letter!

Molla A. Latif  
The intention is to form a smaller election-time cabinet with accommodation of MPs from BNP (open to its wish) and other parties and that is the sin they have committed.

Nds  
What a heartrending tragedy! The ministers are making fun when the innocent people who voted them to power are being subjected to brutal killings for no fault of theirs.

Abul Kashem  
Does our constitution allow everyone to interpret it in his/her own way? The ministers themselves along with eminent lawyers are divided in explaining provisions of the constitution. Why does this happen frequently in our country?

Shahjahan  
Resignation is another drama directed by the prime minister to befool the nation.

Shahin Huq  
These ministers have lost all sense of shame. They want to enjoy the privileges of ministers and at the same time submit resignation letters to PM.

Mortuza Huq  
The AL government can make fun with people on anything.

The truth  
All must be punished for making fun of the nation and of the Constitution of Bangladesh.