

International fallout of our political crisis

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

US Congressional hearing on current Bangladesh political crisis on November 20, and the New York Times editorial on the same topic the same day may be coincidental, but the impact of the crisis at home beyond our borders cannot be overstated.

Readers will recall that US Congressman Steve Chabot who chaired the hearing led a small delegation of Congressmen to Bangladesh earlier this month and interviewed our political leaders impressing upon them the need for peaceful, non-violent solution to the political impasse obtaining in the country through participation of all parties in the general election. They even emphasized on the necessity of a neutral government to oversee the elections.

Of course, the events that followed the visit would prove how unsuccessful the pleadings were, and how the leadership of the country turned a deaf ear to such advice. The culmination of this was the Congressional Sub-Committee hearing on the crisis. The New York Times editorial, which coincided with this hearing, went a step further than the Congressional delegation advice on elections. It not only puts the blame on the scratching of caretaker government provision in the constitution, but also terms the current political conditions in Bangladesh as violation of

human rights, and refers to the war crimes tribunals as political weapons to suppress political opposition.

Judging from these two events one may wonder whether the US is overly concerned for Bangladesh, or is the predicament in Bangladesh getting more traction internationally than it deserves? Is the country's political bout being orchestrated by forces aligned to supporters of one side or another to force international interventions? Or have we dragged ourselves to this pass by our own failure to settle political conflicts in a way other democratic countries do?

In Bangladesh we are not unknown to the concept of international interventions. From the day we began our fight for liberation through the fledgling days of newfound independence we have counted on support and assistance of foreign powers. Our dependence was dictated by necessity, initially for survival and later for development. But we always sought this international help for sustaining our people and developing our country economically. In this we followed other developing nations and the international assistance that we received was from our friends and agencies that respected our sovereignty.

Along with financial assistance from our international friends we also welcomed advice and expertise on economic development and other matters of governance. Many times we took advice because strings were attached to the

financial assistance. The assistance was necessary to buttress our meagre financial resources. But we never thought that a political advice or intervention would be needed because we felt that is one area we could manage ourselves. That is until the bottom fell out from our political base and the ugliness of bitter political feuds reared its head. And that also was initiated by our political leaders.

There is not much likelihood that there will be a repetition of events of seven years ago, there may not be a coalition of powers to settle our domestic political disputes.

We will recall how this moral bankruptcy began when a leader of opposition at the time pleaded for support from foreign ambassadors to intercede with the government party to press their case. The government in power cried foul and chastised the opposition for seeking foreign intervention in domestic politics, but only to repeat this solicitation of foreign support when the same party sat in the opposition. Our leaders would prove to our foreign friends their ineptitude and incompetence to settle their differences through dialogue. They would prove that although they wanted democracy in the country, they did not

believe in the very first tenet of democracy -- listen if you want to be heard. Democracy is a two way street, one has the same right as one's opponent.

In today's globalised world no country is an island. What happens in Bangladesh impacts just not perception or image of Bangladesh, it impacts on how others will conduct their relationship with the country. The image that emerged from the political fights is that of leaderships that are entrenched more in their desire for power and less in governance, more in protecting political turfs and loyal supporters than in the welfare of the country. There is also a lurking fear in the West; particularly the US that weak governance would lead to growth of terrorism in the country.

The US Congressional hearing on Bangladesh is not a unique event; scores of hearings are held each year in the US Congress over a variety of issues and causes, both domestic and international. There have been many hearings in the past years in US Congress over Bangladesh on other issues, good and bad. But the significance of the latest hearing as well as that of the New York Times editorial commentary should be very relevant to the direction our leadership in Bangladesh may take. The message from both is very clear; the current situation needs correction. This correction will not come from the course that the leadership of the country has chosen. This correction will come from a willingness to rise above personal

ambition or parochial interest, or settling of personal scores, to national interests, interest of millions of people. A unitary solution without involvement of all political parties will not lead to this correction.

In most writings and media dialogues over Bangladesh a reference is always made to the political happenings seven years ago, and the consequences that the country had to go through that time. There is often a temptation to draw a parallel to those happenings to the current impasse with a suggestion that foreign powers will collaborate again to force a solution of the crisis in Bangladesh. Absent from these dialogues is a reality check that there are far too many events in the globe today that have graver international impact than a political crisis in Bangladesh. There is not much likelihood that there will be a repetition of events of seven years ago, there may not be a coalition of powers to settle our domestic political disputes. However, there are limits to which our own people will go to suffer more hardships and uncertainties about their future. Our leadership may think of railroading another unwise decision to have it their way and dismiss international opinion and advice. If this happens, it will prove to be short lived, and pave the way for a more longwinded but costly solution.

The writer is a US based political commentator and analyst.

Paying homage to Mohan Mia

ABUL HASAN CHOWDHURY



A far sighted politician, visionary and beyond all a humanist Mohan Mia represents a culture of Politics now consigned to the folds of history - at least in Bangladesh. While paying our homage it is our earnest hope that today's youth, like in all ages hearken to the glorious past which is indeed our common heritage.

Scion of an aristocratic Zamindar family Mohan Mia chose to be different in order to make a difference. He prevailed at the times when Muslims were slowly waking up to the error of a misplaced sense of vanity leading them to turn away from modern education.

It is quite remarkable that this scion of a Zamindar family should choose to be associated with a party which actively upheld the cause of the farmers and tenants and by implication sought the abolition of the feudal order.

As a result in 1926 Mohan Mia established Moizuddin High Madrasa in Faridpur with the aim to cater not only with religious education but also with other modern subjects. A significant amount of his Zamindari earnings were spent on establishing of schools and Madrasas in the rural areas aside the town of Faridpur. Notably apart from boys Mohan Mia had paved the path for spreading women's education too through setting up Halima Girls High school in 1932.

During the colonial times politics was essentially a privilege of the landed gentry with rare exceptions in Muslims flocking under the banner of Muslim League. Following in the footsteps of his elder brother Mohan Mia's induction in public life came into being as an ardent supporter of Sher-E-Bangla's Krishak Proja Party.

At the age of 31 Mohan Mia was first elected to the Bengal legislative council leaving his relatively secured seat in his Zamindary estate and in 1940 with Sher-E-Bangla as the prime minister in Bengal politics he was elected president of Faridpur Muslim League. He occupied this position till 1952.

As the vanguard of the movement for Pakistan he worked under Sher-E-Bangla and later Huseyn Shahid Suhrawardy. It was during this period when one of his young comrades was a young Muslim student League leader by the name of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

A distinguishing trait in Mohan Mia was that he never held back in expressing his mind whatever party he may have belonged to. Following the birth of Pakistan he became the general secretary of Bengal Muslim League. During the tragic shooting of students on 1952's February 21 he not only denounced the heinous act but demanded exemplary punishment for the responsible shooters. As a later consequence he left the Muslim League in 1953 for good.

In fact in the united front formed in 1954 to confront the Muslim League Mohan Mia as a Krishak Proja Party candidate. After the KPP trouncing the Muslim League in the elections he was given Ministerial berth for a very short period.

As a member of the constituent Assembly in 1956 he was a participant in crafting a constitution, which unfortunately never saw the light of day. During the infamous Ayub regime, decade of decadence, Mohan Mia firmly hitched his standard with the opposition camp. Politics was in ferment those days. Except for the Awami League led with such vigour and courage by Bangabandhu rest of the opposition failed to project a united platform.

In 1961 when my grandfather contested for the speaker's position of East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Mohan Mia led the campaign on his behalf regardless of his political affiliation. In the end it came to be known Khawaja Khairuddin versus Mohan Mia fight.

There was no expectation or anticipation from either side. The ethos of responding to a friend or relatives is a value not measured in price. Sadly this ethos in our world of digits is often cynically challenged. "Let the dogs bark" as Omar Khayyam says "The caravan shall pass." It is not within my competence either to elaborately chronicle or offer enlightened observations have offered my respect to a personality who was a close friend of my family and from whom I received such enduring affection.

I pray to Allah for The Eternal Bliss of the soul of Late Yusuf Ali Chowdhury Mohan Mia.

The writer is former state minister, ministry of foreign affairs.

QUOTABLE Quotes

"Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it whether it exists or not, diagnosing it incorrectly, and applying the wrong remedy."

Ernest Benn

Pride, Prejudice and Future

MD. KHAIRUL ISLAM, SHEHLINA AHMED and AFTAB OPEL

THE recent Lancet series on Bangladesh is a matter of national pride. The articles thoroughly analyse factors leading to the commendable health outcomes attained by the country despite poor economy. However it is equally important to consider the complementary role played by the non-health sectors along-side the successes of the health sector itself. For example, a part of the gain especially in child health can be attributed to reduction in diarrhea among the under-five children due to improved access to water and significant reduction in open defecation from 32% in 1990 to 4% in 2011. It can be safely mentioned that the massive improvement in road density and network throughout the country and the introduction of the motorized boat since the late eighties have greatly reduced the time to reach health facilities. Another key contributing factor has been the rapid growth in cell phone subscription from 2.7million in 2004 to over 97million in 2012.

The paper Call to Action in this series highlights the double burden of diseases, Bangladesh is experiencing with communicable and non-communicable diseases; the latter a recent phenomenon with potential to further increase the already high out of pocket expenditure (OoP) if business continues as usual. Private health sector, accounting for over 80% of the total healthcare provision, is rapidly filling the gap in addressing emerging and chronic illnesses. However quality of private health services can be questionable. In the private sector medicines are largely sold by almost 200,000 vendors-cum-informal health providers, the main conduit to retail the \$1.25 billion pharmaceutical industry. The national health policy 2011 regards the "unskilled" informal providers as the first contact point but remains silent on their regulation. Aggressive and unethical marketing by the 20,000+ medical representatives and unregulated care provision coupled with low citizen awareness are driving up health expenditure.

The notion Bangladesh achieved "good

health at low cost" conveys false complacency and lack of urgency for health financing. Though per capita total health expenditure continued to escalate, health expenditure in public sector as percentage of GDP hardly increased over the decades (less than 1%). Consequently, out of Pocket expenditure in Bangladesh is one of highest in the region (64%). Cost of medicine, accounting for almost 70% of the OoP, is one of the major barriers to risk pooling necessary for financing universal health coverage.

The recently approved Health Care Financing Strategy, 2012-2032, aims to enhance efficiency, promote equity and generate resources for universal health coverage mainly through health insurance schemes, over a period of 20 years. The Government of Bangladesh currently finances a number of social protection schemes amounting to almost USD 3billion annually however unfortunately none of these cover health emergencies, a well-established cause of catastrophic expenditure incurred by the poor. On the other hand, the government's capacity to roll out major reforms is demonstrated by successful examples like the female education scholarship program, started with donor support and later expanded universally by the Government; the absorption of the over 20,000 family planning workers etc.

We apprehend that if the trend continues, access to health services by the poor will be limited and equity and social justice greatly compromised. There is no alternative to increasing financing for health if the 48million population below the poverty line are to be reached and universal health coverage is to be achieved. Also the emerging public health problems clearly call for more and equitable investments in health to sustain the gains and to move on. Strong and persistent civil society advocacy, as in the past, for additional and equitable financing coupled with consistent political commitment are essential to usher in the change.

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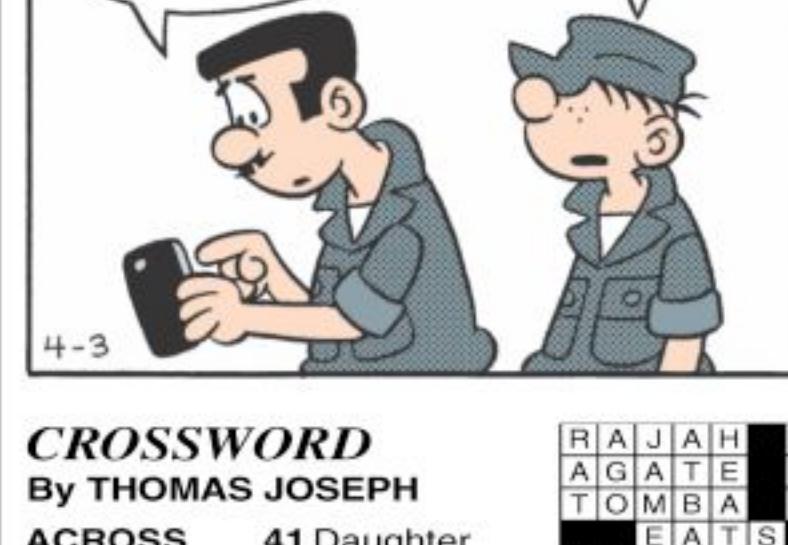
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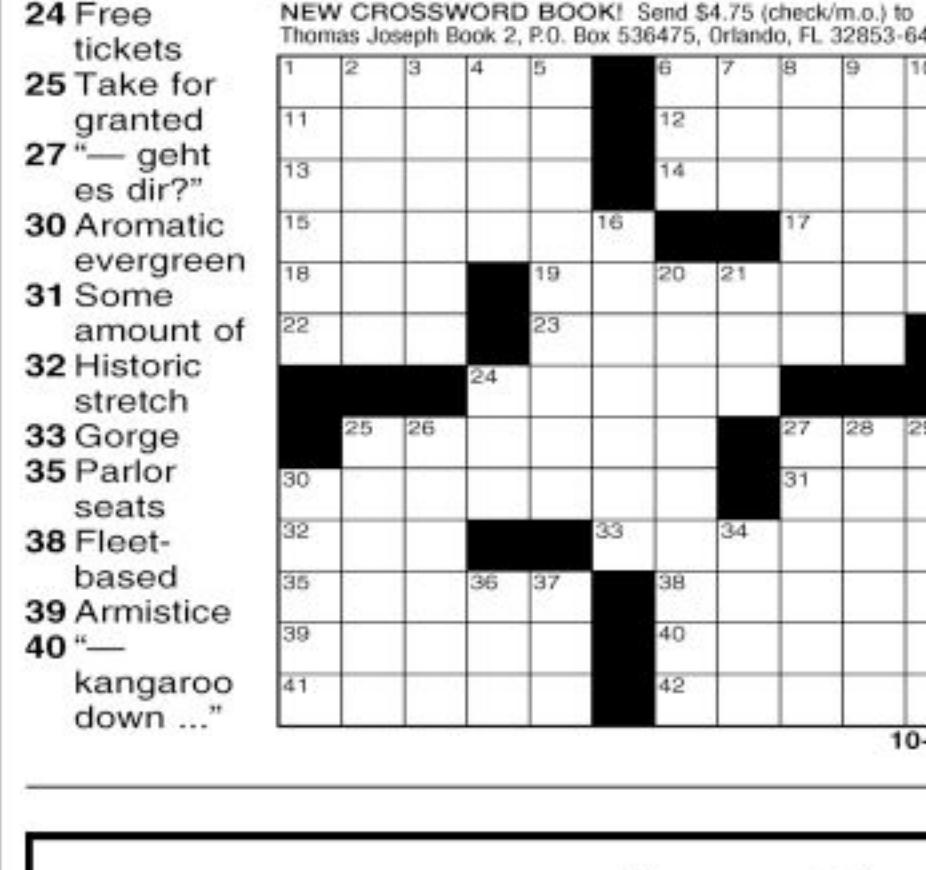


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15 Hampers	43 Weevils	49 Glut
17 Had something	44 Largo	50 Spun
18 Words with pickle, stew or jam	45 Remote	51 Vowel
19 Kramden's portrayer	46 Source of pressure	52 Inked
22 Road sealer	47 Heir, at times	53 Deere
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24 Free tickets	49 Dawn	55 Yesterday's answer
25 Take for granted	50 Goddess	
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31 Some amount of	53 Hog	
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