

# PM's repudiation of military rule welcome

## Isn't the onus largely on her to avert it?

THE Prime Minister has asserted yet again that 'she would not allow unconstitutional forces to grab state power again. She wouldn't want martial law either.' We couldn't agree more with her.

However, under two sets of circumstances state power is usurped by unconstitutional forces: One, when ambitious militarymen invent excuses to grab it at gunpoint. The second set of circumstances has to do with the situation getting out of control of the political leadership through their own blunders much to the mortification of democracy lovers.

We condemn with all the force at our command the heinous burning and arson campaign of the opposition, which they have to take the responsibility for and call an immediate halt to. At the same time, we cannot overlook the lack of any genuine effort for a dialogue on the part of the ruling party coupled with the jailing of the bulk of BNP central leadership or forcing them into immobilisation.

The PM's cardinal mistake has been unsettling of a settled issue centred on the nonpartisan caretaker provision which she unilaterally abolished by the 15th amendment. She knew full well the opposition couldn't accept it, and yet she pushed it down its throat. It is for her now to meet the opposition halfway and accommodate their demand for a head of poll time government acceptable to both sides.

# Talks behind the scene

## Should we take the minister seriously?

THE communications minister's comment that the two political parties are conducting political parleys secretly appears to us to be a bad joke. It is difficult to take him seriously, given the nature of politics that we have been witnessing in the last several weeks.

The reality on ground belies the statement of the minister. When the office of the main opposition is vandalised in the late hours of the night by the police to arrest its joint secretary general, when the police seek remand for the arrested BNP leaders, when the BNP spokesperson resorts to video messaging to make party statement public, for fear of being arrested, is there an environment for dialogue? And when the communication minister says that the arrested BNP leaders would be released if the behind the scene talk is successful, should there be any doubt left regarding the motive behind the arrests.

Furthermore, when the top leadership of the BNP is under incarceration, and a good many of them are in hiding, we wonder who the interlocutors are on the side of the BNP with whom the AL is conducting the so called talks behind the scene.

We would like to ask why, when the public demand for dialogue between the two parties is becoming increasingly louder, the two parties should be meeting in secret to decide the fate of the country. First, conditions must be created for dialogue, and any talk between the two should be done up front with the full knowledge of the public.

# Our 'politicians'

M.M. JALIL

THE bus is torched and in few minutes 19 lives are changed forever. Simple, ordinary people who were probably commuting from their office, with families waiting for them to return home after a hard day's work, individuals with dreams and hopes, trying to earn their livelihood in whatever way they can, now will be forever traumatised. Is this democracy I ask you? When we are used as mere cannon fodder to achieve political agenda, where is the democracy? The blatant truth is all of our political parties do not attach an iota of worth to our lives; we are a mere calculation in their political stratagem.

If the elections are carried out without the caretaker government and the opposition gives in, then the ruling party will be all smiles and blame the opposition for needlessly engaging in bloodshed for a position they did not hold on to. Should the ruling party finally acquiesce and give in to the growing pressure and conducts the election under a caretaker government then the opposition will stand vindicated and blame the ruling party for holding out for so long which led to such bloodshed. God forbid, should a repeat of 1/11 occur then the parties will blame each other for precipitating the situation to such a level. But my dear reader, under all circumstances it is we the commoners who are the expendables, the ones who will die and burn, it is our lives which are being sacrificed and used, while these politicians go on surviving and keeping us hostage. It is a blatant truth that can no longer be denied that the political parties of Bangladesh do not have our wellbeing in their heart. They have their personal and political agenda to fulfill and we are but pawns. Until we realise this and take collective action we shall remain hostage to these power mongers. Next time you see a politician, pity them for they have lost their humanity. I ask my readers the following question, paraphrasing Epicurus:

"Are our leaders willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then they are impotent.

Are they able, but not willing? Then they are malevolent.

Are they both able and willing? Then whence cometh so much death and chaos?

Are they neither able nor willing? Then why call them leaders?"

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# It's all for consensus!



COMPARED to Watergate, Friday morning's breaking into BNP's central office at Nayapaltan by plain-clothesmen was too violent to be called the AL-run election-time government's 'Nayapaltangate.' The 'Watergate Scandal' in the USA that was instrumental in the resignation of President Nixon did not involve any forcible entry by US police into the Watergate headquarters of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) in Washington D.C. some 41 years ago. Five men were arrested in the act of bugging DNC office and the incident shook the world at that time. 43 top Nixon administration officials landed in jail.

But in our present political culture, such an incident would not have even created a ripple in political circles, far less cause any nationwide hue and cry. So, however much the opposition BNP leaders may decry it as piracy, burglary or robbery, no heads will roll, nor would any investigation be carried out into it.

In the Watergate, it was the US police who caught those trying to break into Democratic Party HQs. But in the present case, members of police themselves were involved in what an opposition leader termed 'piracy.' So who would catch the catcher, or conduct a probe into what and against whom? If such an audacious incident would ever take place in the US or in any other civilised country, that would have caused nothing short of a 'social and political tsunami,' perhaps resulting in the impeachment of the entire administration. But our governments are too 'strong' to collapse at such a 'small' perturbation! And

who cares about any entity--a political party, an institution, a leading personality or whoever -- if they don't have the luck to have a hold on the lever of state power?

In Bangladeshi style of 'constitutional, democratic and parliamentary system' of politics, opposition political leaders can be treated like 'outlaws.' You can treat them like terrorists and criminals, can place them under remand to undergo a cruel process of exacting confession; the police can beat them up mercilessly and hurl abuse at them, as they reportedly did while arresting Ruhul Kabir Rizvi, BNP's joint secretary general, from his party office in that early morning raid.

And in this kind political culture, leaders in their seventies and eighties can be charged with breaking or setting fire to vehicles, or even attempting to murder. And the most astounding aspect of it all is that an administration with a limited mandate to perform only routine work as part of overseeing the general election can treat a political rival in this manner! Monarchs of old might, perhaps, envy such power in the hands of an administrative authority in transition.

If political scientists and constitutional experts are



AMRAN HOSSAIN

*It's all for a political consensus on who will conduct the election, politicians of both the political camps would say in chorus. But to the man in the street it's barbaric, bizarre and killing!*

already scratching their heads over this vexing governance phenomenon, they are in for further shocks. Listen to the reassuring words of communications minister Obaidul Quader suggesting that once a consensus is reached it would result in the freedom of the arrested opposition leaders. So all the chase, the arrests, denying senior political leaders the respect they deserve, are all fun, part of the game of 'consensus reaching'!

We have so far been hearing the talk about talks to reach an agreement or consensus on what will be the form of the administration that would hold the election to the 10th Jatiya Sangsad. There was the drama of failed telephone talks between two party chiefs, visits by UN and US envoys, shuttling of foreign diplomats between the two leaders, the business community's plea, civil society's requests and cautionary notes. Nothing has so far worked to create pressure on them to sit and talk to devise a formula about the form of polls-time government. Now we hear about this strong-arm tactics of 'consensus making.'

Whoever has heard of such a weird manner of thrusting consensus down the throat of the political opposition?

This is but one side of the story. The opposition are also not far behind in their own style of making consensus.

They have enforced a deadly political programme of hartals and blockades triggering blasting of crude bombs, cocktails and even petrol bombs, breaking and torching of vehicles and railway coaches, uprooting of rails and fishplates from railway tracks. Dozens have been burnt, hacked and shot to death, while scores of other got badly injured. Many of these victims died in police actions during encounters with the opposition activists.

But why these violent street programmes? To force the government to agree to their demand for the kind of polls-time government they want, the opposition BNP-led alliance would say. So it's their approach towards 'consensus making.' But why should innocent passers-by, travelers in trains, drivers of buses, auto rickshaws and covered vans pay in blood to make the politicians' consensus to take place? No, it's not them, but the agent provocateurs of the government who are behind these dastardly incidents, the opposition would waste no time to complain.

It's all for a political consensus on who will conduct the election, politicians of both the political camps would say in chorus. But to the man in the street it's barbaric, bizarre and killing!

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# Bangladesh's remarkable progress and political violence

ABDUL MATIN

ACCORDING to the 2013 Legatum Prosperity Index (The Daily Star, November 4), Bangladesh is ahead of India in overall prosperity. In a ranking of 142 countries, based on a variety of factors including wealth, economic growth, personal wellbeing and quality of life, Bangladesh's position is 103 while that of India is 106. Pakistan, by the way, occupies the 132nd position. Even though Bangladesh's per capita income is about half of that of India, Bangladesh has a higher longevity rate, a lower infant mortality rate, lower undernourishment and better access to sanitation than India.

Some economists forecast that Bangladesh's economy might overtake the western countries by 2050 (The Guardian, December 18, 2012). The Guardian's list of new-wave economies includes eleven countries. Even though some of the countries were once dismissed as basket cases, they are expected to "dominate the top 20" of the growth forecast for 2013.

"In most of the social indicators Bangladesh has gone ahead of India," Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen said to Al Jazeera. According to Indian Rural Development Minister Jairam Ramesh, "Bangladesh demonstrates that it is possible to have superior social outcomes at lower per capita incomes and lower rates of economic growth. There is more to social development than just Gross Development Product (GDP)." An IMF report released in January found Bangladesh "on track to meet all eight of its Millennium Development Goals (MDG) by the target year of 2015."

Thanks to the hard working and innovative farmers of Bangladesh, the country now produces more food than it needs. It is the second largest exporter of garments and knitwear and the sixth highest remittance earner in the world. It is interesting to note that Bangladesh has been moving ahead in spite of being a victim of frequent natural calamities, global recession, climate change, occasional labour unrest and corruption. The dynamic resilience of Bangladesh to prosper against all odds has no comparison.

Can Bangladesh sustain this development? This question is worrying economists and well-wishers at home and abroad. Frequent hartals accompanied by widespread violence and sabotage appear to be the major obstacle to our growth rate. The International Monetary Fund predicts that our economic growth is likely "to slow to less than 6% in the year to June 2014 from 6% the previous year because of unrest and political uncertainties in the run-up to elections."

Available information shows that the average number of days of hartal per year, which was 3 during 1947-70, 7 during 1971-82 and 17 during 1973-90, increased to 46 during 1991-2013 (Source: ASK and CPD). In addition, hartal has become more violent in terms of human casual-

ties and damages to public and private properties. In the recent 71-hour blockade alone, 22 people were killed and more than 3 thousand wounded due to violence.

The majority of the victims of violence are ordinary people who are not even remotely connected to politics. All political activities are expected to be directed to the welfare of the people. Politics becomes counterproductive if ordinary people become the victims or targets of any political activity.

Continuous hartal disrupts exports, imports, transportation, industrial production and supplies of essential commodities. Export oriented industries like garments are badly affected. They are counting huge losses without being able to maintain the schedules of deliveries.

Estimates of economic losses for one day's hartal vary widely. According to DCCI, the daily losses are Tk.1,600 crore while FBCCI estimates the losses at Tk.10,000 crore. Hartal retards local and foreign investments, reduces employment opportunities and creates obstacles to future growth of the economy.

Inflation is common during hartal. Prolonged hartals or blockades result in shortage of essential commodities in the retail markets. Naturally, the prices increase, often beyond the purchasing power of the common people. The day labourers are the worst sufferers. Without employment, they are unable to buy their daily necessities including food.

Education suffers badly during hartal. It creates session jams and disrupts examination schedules. Examinations are often taken without completing the courses, thus compromising with the quality of education. A nation is bound to degenerate if the quality of education cannot be maintained.

The uncertainty about the next general election and the accompanying political violence are real obstacles to our rate of growth. The future looks too bleak. Violence breeds more violence. The present trend is likely to continue even after the general election, no matter which political party comes to power. Our dream of prosperity is, therefore, likely to go down the drain if our politicians fail to resolve their differences peacefully, come to an agreement to hold a free, fair and credible election and follow civilised and truly democratic political norms both during and after the election.

The economy and the future of democracy are now at stake in Bangladesh. History will never forgive us if the remarkable progress in economic and social fields cannot be sustained due to the greed for power of our political leaders, whose number is too small compared to the vast majority of the population striving for progress and prosperity. Should the hopes and aspirations of so many people be jeopardised by so few?

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

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## What's patrol police's task?

The law enforcement agencies are supposed to be the protector of people. But the current level of corruption and negligence of our police is quite alarming. Recently I witnessed a shocking event of hijacking. Two women were going by a rickshaw near Baily road when two hijackers on a motor-bike sped up and snatched the purse of one woman and fled the scene. The helpless victims went to the nearby policemen on patrol for help. But surprisingly they said that it was not their duty to catch hijackers. If this is the response of the protectors, then who is safe in this country?

Shams Rashid  
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## India should show its greatness in action

When I look at the atlas, next to India, Bangladesh looks like a molehill alongside a mountain. I feel so sad; the small country with its 16 crore people is besieged with so many problems. Natural calamities and man-made disasters are taking a huge toll and now it is facing a severe political turmoil.

During the Liberation War, India helped us and we are grateful for that. However, it was naive of us to think that way. It was not as simple as that; India had its own interests. As time went by, the truth began to unfold. India is taking advantage as much as possible and wants to continue it. Ninety percent people of Bangladesh want the next general election to be held under a caretaker government system. But in an article published on November 1, 2013 in the Economic Times of India, Shubir Bhoumic wrote, "Bangladesh is in a violent phase and India must do all it can to see a friendly regime to power". To India, Awami League government is the friendly regime because it bows to its every whim, not caring how it affects our country. India is a great country; it should show its greatness in its actions also.

Nur Jahan  
Chittagong

## Tehelka subscribers' predicament

This refers to the report, "Indian HC rejects Tejpal plea" (TDS Nov. 28). What will happen to the subscribers of the Tehelka magazine who have already paid their subscriptions in advance, if the owner goes to jail? This is a peculiar situation faced by a magazine, perhaps for the first time in India. Should not the subscribers be returned their money which they have paid in advance? No one has given a thought to it.

Deendayal M. Lulla  
Mumbai, India

## Comments on commentary, "A picture and a train," published on November 29, 2013

### Ibrahim Zaman

Only two people in Bangladesh own the power to end this but unfortunately they don't have the willingness.

### Saleh Tanveer

It is said that evil persists when good men keep quiet.

### Taufiq Ahmed

They read it and they forget it. Reading and realising these facts will bring no benefit for them. I am sure most of the victims have voted for both the two parties in the past.

### Jafar Iqbal

Shouldn't we start a freedom war like in 1971? This time against evil politicians instead of Pakistanis?

### Mohammad Rahman

However, can our prime minister claim that she has no responsibility at all for what is happening?

### OpeeMonir

Responsibility is not a word in their dictionary; it required leadership which both of them lack miserably...what an irony to a brave nation!

### Javed Akhtar

There can be two solutions: one is a democratic solution where a third force by the educated middle-class is formed—not like the flip-flop outfit Ershad runs—to challenge these two parties. Or, wait for takeover by a 'benevolent' dictator who will run the country properly.

### Guest

"Who are responsible for these deaths?" That is the burning question.

### Niaz Ahmed

Stop blaming Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia; you (the voters) voted these people to power and you are responsible for where your country is today.

### Muntasir

What a timely and impartial writing by Mr. Mahfuz Anam! Time has come to re-evaluate our humane qualities as an independent nation. Is it this freedom for which 3 million people gave their blood?

### Muhammed

Why don't we have a platform like 'Gonojagoron Mancha' now, at a time when it is needed the most?