

Are our leaders at war against citizens?

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expense and with exceptional leadership be destroyed? Is it their wish that we return to the label of a 'basket case' after having proven so determinedly and forcefully that the original remark was based on false premises?

If not, then how can they be pushing the country and its people towards an end that everybody knows will be disastrous? How can they be disrupting education of all levels of students and demoralising them in ways that are making them lose faith in the future of the country? How can they continue to call hartals and blockades for weeks, pushing more and more people below the poverty line? How can they knowingly create a situation which will inevitably lead to RMG buyers shifting to other countries? How can they set fire to public transport, killing and burning innocent travellers and commuters? How can they be destroying state and private properties in the way that mercenaries do inside enemy territories? How can they be just onlookers while our dream for

a better future slowly but surely fades?

Some of us may brush aside the above questions as rather exaggerated. Bangladesh, they will say, has seen similar political crises before and has survived. So will it again. While we hope that they prove to be correct, we still have reasons to believe that the situation is far graver than before.

The level and cruel nature of the violence that we have seen this time around has surpassed the violence of the past in intensity and fury. Throwing petrol bombs into a running bus full of passengers can have only one purpose --- kill people. Setting fire to vehicles with people inside cannot but have only one aim --- kill people. From January till date, 174 people have been killed and more than 4,600 injured. This makes for an average of 14.5 citizens of Bangladesh killed per month and 383 injured. These deaths are from political violence alone. The question is: Why should even a single citizen die just because our two leaders refuse to compromise?

What are these two leaders fighting for anyway? Sheikh Hasina wants to stick to the present constitution and Khaleda Zia wants to go back to the previous version of it.

What is the reason for Sheikh Hasina's sudden love for this constitution? Because she amended it to her liking in 2011, without consulting anybody, and abolished the caretaker government system meant to oversee national elections every five years. Why is an election time government so vital? Because our history says that every government uses the state machinery to influence the election. If we recall, it was Sheikh Hasina and her party that popularised the idea of the caretaker government and forced Begum Zia and her party --- vehemently opposed to the idea --- to incorporate it in the constitution in 1996.

The reason was as clear as it was simple. The incumbent government cannot be trusted to hold a free and fair election. So the incumbent government must go and be replaced with a neutral caretaker government that will hold a

free and fair election. People accepted this argument and went along with the AL and its chief's proposition.

Today, ironically, the situation stands totally reversed. The original proponent has now abolished it and the original opponent now wants it. And we, the people, must die because they cannot agree about it.

What is most disgusting is the duplicity and immorality of it all. The very arguments that the AL is putting forward today against the caretaker government system --- continuity of the constitution, unelected people running the government, etc --- were the very ones (in fact the wordings are the same) given by the BNP in 1996. And, conversely, what the BNP is saying today in favour of the caretaker government were the same arguments given by the AL to justify why its leaders wanted it. Both have shifted their respective positions because it increases their chances of, for one, retaining power and, for the other, capturing it.

Thus there is no principle, no ideology, no moral or ethical questions involved in today's standoff between Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia. It is a clear case of fighting for power and the people and the country be damned.

As a freedom fighter and as a proud citizen of this country, I feel ashamed that a UN envoy has to shuttle between our two supreme leaders to bring about an understanding between them so that people are no longer brutally killed, an outsider has to plead with them to compromise so that our people suffer less, so that our factories can run, our children can go to schools, our doctors can attend to their patients, our poor day labourers can earn enough to feed their families, so that we can again walk on our streets with a modicum of security. I feel a thorough sense of betrayal knowing that a foreigner has to fly in to teach us how to be civil to each other. Even so, we will be grateful if we learn.

We can no longer afford to be victims of the vendetta between these two leaders.

Int'l call for democracy in digital age

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common knowledge. With a few clicks of the mouse the state can access your mobile device, your e-mail, your social networking and Internet searches. It can follow your political leanings and activities and, in partnership with Internet corporations, it collects and stores your data, and thus can predict your consumption and behaviour.

The basic pillar of democracy is the inviolable integrity of the individual. Human integrity extends beyond the physical body.

In their thoughts and in their personal environments and communications, all humans have the right to remain unobserved and unmolested.

This fundamental human right has been rendered null and void through abuse of technological developments by states and corporations for mass surveillance purposes.

A person under surveillance is no longer free; a society under surveillance is no longer a democracy. To maintain any validity, our democratic rights must apply in virtual as in real

space.

Surveillance violates the private sphere and compromises freedom of thought and opinion.

Mass surveillance treats every citizen as a potential suspect. It overturns one of our historical triumphs, the presumption of innocence.

Surveillance makes the individual transparent, while the state and the corporation operate in secret.

As we have seen, this power is being systemi-

cally abused.

Surveillance is theft.

This data is not public property: it belongs to us. When it is used to predict our behaviour, we are robbed of something else: the principle of free will crucial to democratic liberty.

We demand the right for all people to determine, as democratic citizens, to what extent their personal data may be legally collected, stored and processed, and by whom; to obtain information on where their data is stored and how it is being used; to obtain the deletion of

their data if it has been illegally collected and stored.

We call on all states and corporations to respect these rights.

We call on all citizens to stand up and defend these rights.

We call on the United Nations to acknowledge the central importance of protecting civil rights in the digital age, and to create an International Bill of Digital Rights.

We call on governments to sign and adhere to such a convention.



Twelve-year-old Ridoy's body lies on a rickshaw van. He was killed during a running battle between law enforcers and opposition activists at Bahuli Bazar in Sirajganj yesterday. Local BNP leader Kamrul Islam, right, of Kansat in Chapainawabganj lying on a stretcher at Rajshahi Medical College Hospital after he was stabbed by criminals yesterday in his locality. The criminals also cut tendons of his legs.



PHOTO: FOCUS BANGLA/STAR

Boy killed in firing

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an unknown location.

Soon after yesterday's shutdown, the Jamaat-e-Islami called another nationwide dawn-to-dusk hartal for today to protest the death warrant for its leader Abdul Quader Mollah, condemned to death for crimes against humanity during the Liberation War.

The fresh programmes will eat up the whole week and deal further blow to the already struggling business, education and other sectors. The ongoing agitation has seriously disrupted final examinations in schools with the authorities finding it difficult to reschedule the tests.

Since November 26, people had a respite of only two days from countrywide blockade by the opposition that has been pressing for suspension of the election schedule, installation of a non-party polls-time government and the release of its leaders.

There could be more violence next week, as the opposition plans to go for tougher agitation programmes like non-cooperation movement to resist the January 5 election.

In the capital, activists of Islami Chhatra Shibir, student wing of Jamaat, clashed with police near Sayedabad bus terminal around 7:00am. As police chased them, they exploded crude bombs and tried to vandalise vehicles.

A Shibir activist, Asraful Islam, suffered bullet wounds after police opened fire on the unruly Shibir men.

In a separate incident, miscreants set alight a bus at Sobhanbagh around 6:30pm. Police detained a woman for throwing a

crude bomb at law enforcers in front of the Westin Hotel in Gulshan.

In Sirajganj, Sumon Hossain, 12, son of Anwar Hossain of sadar upazila, was killed by stray bullets during a clash between Jamaat-Shibir men and law enforcers at Bahulibazar. He was returning home from a salon.

Ten people were injured in the clash that erupted when police prevented a group of Jamaat-Shibir men from engaging in vandalism at Bahulibazar around 11:30am.

The Jamaat-Shibir activists threw crude bombs and fired at law enforcers, forcing the cops to retaliate, said Habibul Islam, officer-in-charge of Sirajganj Sadar Police Station.

The OC, however, couldn't say how Sumon was hit by bullets that left him dead on the spot.

In the meantime, a trucker and his helper suffered burns as Jamaat-Shibir activists set fire to the vehicle in Debidwar upazila of Comilla.

With 50 percent burns on his body, Mujibur Rahman, 30, the truck helper, was whisked off to Comilla Medical College and Hospital with, said police.

In Chapainawabganj, miscreants cut tendons of both legs of a local BNP leader at Kansat Bazar around 11:30am.

Locals took Kamrul Islam, 38, of Laghata village, secretary of ward-3 BNP unit of Dhainagar union, to Shibganj health complex. He was later shifted to Rajshahi Medical College and Hospital.

In Kushtia, Shibir activists beat up three

Ansar personnel with iron rods and hockey sticks, as the three obstructed them from removing clips of railway sleepers near Jibonnagar bazar on Chuadanga-Khulna railroad around 11:30am, said police.

In another incident, blockaders vandalised 22 fertiliser-laden trucks at Sheikh Para Bazar in Jhenidah around 7:30pm.

In Pirojpur, at least 30 people, including activists of the ruling and the opposition parties, were injured in a clash in Mathbaira area.

Besides, 16 people were injured as BNP men clashed with police in Gazipur. Six of the wounded were hit by bullets.

At least 10 people, including two policemen, were hurt in clashes between opposition activists and law enforcers in Rajshahi city.

A clash between Jubo Dal men and police left 10 people injured at Galachipa in Narayanganj.

In Sylhet, miscreants hurled two petrol bombs at the residence of Abdus Zahir Chowdhury Sufian, president of district AL unit and also district council administrator, at Baghbari in the town around 7:45pm.

There was no report of any casualty.

Hartal supporters exploded crude bombs in front of upazila election offices at Ghior, Shivalaya, Satoria and sadar upazila in Manikganj.

There have been reports of vandalism and explosions of crude bombs in Chittagong, Bogra, Satkhira, Narail and Bagerhat.

Govt asked not to execute Mollah

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penalty cases," Knaul said in a release of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights yesterday.

"Anyone convicted of a crime has the right to have his or her conviction and sentence reviewed by a higher tribunal, as laid down in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Bangladesh is a party," she said. "This provision is violated where a court of final instance imposes a harsher sentence that cannot be reviewed."

Heyns said, "Any death sentence undertaken in contravention of a government's international obligations is tantamount to an arbitrary execution."

The two claimed that Mollah was not granted a fair trial. They said under such circumstances, the execution of Mollah could trigger further violence and unrest that has been agitating the country in the recent months.

Meanwhile, Human Rights Watch yesterday asked Bangladesh to halt Mollah's execution, as according to it the trial was not fair.

In a report released on Sunday on its

website, the New York-based global rights watchdog also said Mollah should be allowed to appeal against the death sentence, reports UNB.

The death sentence was handed down on the basis of a retroactively amended law, a move that violates the international fair trial standards, it claimed.

Mollah's lawyer Abdul Razzaq yesterday served a legal notice on the government, asking it not to execute Mollah until the disposal of a review petition to be filed challenging the death sentence.

Jamaat last night called another daylong countrywide hartal for today, protesting what it said was the government's conspiracy to hang Mollah for political gain and in violation of the Supreme Court rules and jail codes.

Razzaq sent the legal notice to the home secretary, inspector general of prisons, deputy inspector general of prisons, Dhaka district commissioner, senior superintendent of the Dhaka Central Jail and its jailor.

The notice came a day after the death warrant of the Jamaat assistant secretary general was issued by the International Crimes Tribunal-2.

In the notice, Razzaq said the death warrant based on which the respondents were preparing to execute Mollah was defective, as it had been issued in violation of rule 979 of the Jail Code. He said according to the rule, the death warrant had to be issued by the court or tribunal that had delivered the death sentence, in this case the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court.

Since the warrant had been issued in violation of the law, its execution would be unlawful, he added.

A lawful warrant has to be issued after disposal of the review petition, Razzaq said, adding that the respondents were required to give Mollah 21 days on receiving the death warrant.

Mollah's family members and the defence lawyers held separate press conferences at the Supreme Court Bar Association yesterday. They urged the government not to hurriedly execute Mollah disregarding the jail code.

His family members said they did not care whether Mollah would be hanged. His execution would give momentum to the Islamic revolution in Bangladesh and fall of the present government, they claimed.

No good news yet

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opportunity to brief the media before I leave. This is as much as I would like to say right now. It might be some useful information for all of you."

The UN assistant secretary-general for political affairs did not take any question from the reporters saying he had more meetings and would meet the media before his departure.

Before his departure, he is scheduled to brief the press at 5:30pm today after a second and last-round talks with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at 4:00pm.

Yesterday evening, the CEC said important discussion was going on to resolve the political deadlock.

"We will not make any comment while important discussion is going on. Let the discussion continue and see what happens finally," he told reporters at the EC Secretariat.

Taranco, who came here to encourage political parties to initiate dialogue, met BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia at her Gulshan residence around 6:00pm.

Neither the UN side nor BNP said anything specific about the meeting.

But two BNP leaders, who were present at the meeting, told The Daily Star that the UN delegation wanted to know what would be the party's position if the election is held under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina with her powers curtailed.

Khaleda didn't accept the idea.

Taranco also said the election can be held in the presence of a big observer team of UN, BBC Bangla reported.

The BNP side said it would welcome the UN observers but never allow an election under Hasina even if her executive power is curtailed.

Taranco discussed limiting the executive powers of Hasina to bring BNP to election at a meeting with some top Awami League leaders yesterday, sources say.

Later at the secretariat, PM's International Affairs Adviser Gowher Rizvi said Awami League and UN representatives have reached a consensus on not disclosing the conversation between them until talks are ended.

According to some AL leaders, the party might agree on curtailing the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina but it would not accept any election after January 24.

The five-member UN mission also made swift talks with a Jamaat delegation led by its Assistant Secretary General Abdur Razzaq.

Emerging from the meeting with the UN team at Sonargaon Hotel, Razzaq told reporters that they discussed about how the next election could be free, fair, impartial and acceptable to all and how level-playing can be created.

"We gave our opinion on how peaceful, acceptable election can be held with participation of all parties. Another issue was discussed and that was how violence could be contained."

On a question regarding the cancellation of Jamaat's registration, he said the party cannot participate in the election following a High Court verdict but it is possible to find out a solution how the party can participate in the election.

At the meet, the UN officials said violence is not acceptable.

"We [Jamaat] also said violence is unwarranted to everybody. We told the UN officials that if a level playing field for a free, fair, and participatory election is ensured, the ongoing violence will be no more," he added.

On the war crimes trial of Jamaat leaders,

Razzaq said everybody wants the trial but the trial is below the par of international standard even below the standard of domestic practice.

The meeting, which continued for about 35 minutes from 10:05am, was attended by Jamaat leaders Jasimuddin Sarkar, Abdullah Mohammad Taher and Mir Ahmed Bin Kashem.

The UN official also met the Russian ambassador at the latter's Gulshan residence.

PM'S POWERS CURB

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia told the UN delegation Hasina earlier promised that the polls-time government will not make any policy decision. Rather, this government will carry out only routine works.

"But Sheikh Hasina did not keep her promise. The government recently issued licences to 12 private television channels and this is in no a routine job," a BNP leader quoted Khaleda as saying at the meeting with the UN team.

The BNP side also argued that there is no guarantee that Hasina will not exercise her executive powers as the prime minister to influence election in favour of her party.

Khaleda said her political career will be at stake if she agrees on such a proposal, meeting sources said.

BNP Standing Committee Member Abdul Moyeen Khan, BNP Vice-Chairman Shamsur Mobin Chowdhury, chairperson's advisers Sabihuddin Ahmad and Reaz Rahman were present at the meeting with the UN delegation.

Later, Khaleda hold an emergency meeting with her party's senior leaders and instructed them to wage tougher movement to materialise opposition's demand for an election under a non-party administration.

BNP leaders, including its acting secretary general Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir, standing committee members Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, Nazrul Islam Khan, Moyeen Khan and RA Ghani, were present in the party meeting.

In the meeting Khaleda asked party's senior leaders to remain visible on streets during opposition's movement.

AL POSITION

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, also the ruling Awami League president, convened a meeting with her party's senior leaders at Gono Bhavan last night.

The meeting focused on issues, including curtailing PM's powers, which came up at Taranco's talks with AL leaders, sources say.

The UN official held his second-round of talks with Amir Hossain Amu, Tofail Ahmed, Syed Ashraful Islam, Gowher Rizvi, Faruk Khan and Mahbubul Alam Hanif in the morning.

At Gono Bhavan, it was discussed that if the Election Commission defers the polls, what would be fate of some 33 AL candidates who are going to elected uncontested.

The leaders also opined that the party should not accept any proposal going beyond the constitution and the 10th parliamentary election has to be held by January 24.

At the meeting, AL leaders including Amir Hossain Amu, Tofail Ahmed, Obaidul Quader, HT Imam, Mahbubul Alam Hanif, Jahangir Kabir Nanok, Hasan Mahamud, Abdur Razzaq, Jatiya Party leaders Anisul Islam Mahamud and Ziauddin Ahmed Bablu were present.

The AL leaders discussed seat sharing in the polls and said the party is ready to sacrifice some 100 seats for Jatiya Party to bring it in the electoral battle.

Condition of Zohra Tajuddin

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Medicity Medanta in Gurgaon, a satellite city of Delhi, after she was admitted there about a week ago, she told The Daily Star.

Her mother had a fall at her residence in Dhaka and broke her hip joint. So, she had to undergo the surgery, Rimi said.

Rimi, a Jatiya Sangsad member, said everything was progressing well and "we were even

planning to take her back to Dhaka on December 11, but suddenly last Friday she developed breathing trouble, for which she was kept in intensive care unit for a day on life support system."

However, the life support system was removed on Saturday, and she has been kept in another room with 24-hour observation and monitoring by doctors, she added.