

# Voice that captured public mood

The conversations below took place between a burn victim named Gita Sen and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the burn unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital on December 1. They have been translated from a report published in the daily Prothom Alo on December 2.

"We have made you what you are; you have not made us. We live on our husbands' earnings ... you are playing games with us. We want a good government and not an ailing one."

Gita Sen, who suffered burns during an opposition-enforced blockade, said this to the prime minister while unloading her agonies over the ongoing violent attacks in the name of political programmes.

The prime minister went to see the burn victims at the DMCH on December 1. As she was enquiring about the patients' condition and consoling them, Gita burst out in tears. The journalists present recorded the conversations between Gita and the PM.

Gita: Please identify the culprits who had hurled bombs at us, and burn those who had ordered them [to do so]. They can only order, but they cannot protect us. For us you are the government.

PM: I have never seen or experienced this...

Gita: We want a good government

and not an ill one. Please make the opponents agree, and please unite and protect us.

PM: Killing people by burning them cannot be called political activism ... not at all. I have seen many demonstrations and protests in my life but nothing of this nature -- killing by burning.

Gita: The ones who call hartal ... let all the things [that happen during hartal] happen to their families. Please do this to them.

PM: Please have patience...

Gita: No sister... my...

PM: We are here...

Gita: My husband cannot afford my treatment.

PM: We will arrange what's needed for your treatment, I'm doing and whenever I get the news...

Gita: I don't have a son ... I have two daughters and who is going to look after them...

PM: Please don't cry.

Gita: We want a good government not a sick one... a good, not a sick one.

PM: This is government's...

Gita: We don't want to bring up our

children in this situation. We don't want to be affected any more. We want a good government. Why do they harm us? We have done nothing. We were just travelling, and don't even know who the attackers were. Neither we know Khaleda nor do we go to Hasina. We stay with our own families. Even then, why they attack us? Please do justice to us. Please be even-handed. We cannot tolerate any more. So many of us are here and all of us are injured. Now whenever I see fire I shudder as if flames are about to swallow me. The politicians don't realise our pain and sorrows.

Gita Sen's husband is an electrician. They live along with their two daughters in Old Dhaka's Laxmibazar. The couple's youngest daughter Sushmita Sen works as a young journalist for private channel ETV's 'Mukta Khobor'. Gita was taking her daughter to the ETV office on November 28 when their bus came under an arson attack. Nineteen including Gita and her daughter Sushmita were burnt.



Burnt by a petrol bomb during a blockade, Gita Sen vents her anger and frustrations at the confrontational politics of the ruling and the opposition parties when the prime minister visited the burn victims at the DMCH on December 1.

## Bangladesh in a new 'Great Game'

M. SAKHAWAT HUSSAIN

A popular game in Central Asia, known as Buzkashi, is played between two rival horse mounted teams in which a headless goat carcass is the object of contest to be dragged into the goal. The team that can snatch the carcass from the other team and cross the goal line is the winner. The game is the national sport in Afghanistan, which itself has been like headless goat carcass caught between rival powers for two centuries, known in geopolitical term as the 'Great Game.'

The 'Great Game' around Afghanistan started in mid-nineteen century when Imperialist Russia in the North and Imperial British India in the South East were contesting to dominate so called buffer state.

This article, however, is not meant to repeat the part of the history that had dominated Central Asia for two centuries but to draw an analogy with our part of South Asia which seems to have become an extended field of renewed 'Great Game,' but in new a format. It is evident from the tussle between one superpower and one middle-power centering on Bangladesh's upcoming 10th Parliament election. The issue of an inclusive election has already caused sharp division within the country. Most Bangladeshis are bitterly divided over the conduct of the upcoming election that has drawn outside players into the field.

Violent protests have been initiated by the parties opposing election destined to be conducted under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina with her party in power and the Awami league dominated parliament intact. Three years of verbal battle between two opposing political camps has taken a virulent turn since the election schedule was declared by the Election Commission (EC). The situation has become so vicious that it has brought regional and world powers almost face to face, opposing each other, on the modus of the election in which only the ruling party, supported by some smaller parties, is adamantly poised to go ahead leaving the largest opposition out of the election.

There has been overt and covert support from outside powers on each of the party's stand, i.e. holding an exclusive or inclusive election. The recent visit of the Indian foreign secretary and the endeavour of the US ambassador in Bangladesh along with other

countries, including China, are indications enough that each of the extraterritorial major players has a different geo-political aim in this part of South Asia.

India for its own political and strategic reasons wants to see that the political power in Bangladesh is not dominated by so called 'rightwing religious' groups who, according to Indian political analysts, could pose a threat to the volatile parts of India including influencing religious extremism through minority community in India. The just concluded visit of Shujata Singh and the substance of her dialogue with Jatiyo Party (JP) chief, as revealed by Ershad, asserts the fact.

Indian concern is not only about one issue but a couple of other geo-strategic issues as well. Delhi feels that the China policy of the Awami League government has reduced Chinese influence in this region, especially military to military cooperation, which could grow into the realm of strategic cooperation. Delhi has always had an uneasy feeling of being surrounded by pro-China regimes in its periphery.

On the other hand, US policy in the region has been recast around its persistent interest in the Indian Ocean, especially in the Bay of Bengal around Myanmar-Bangladesh coast. US policy in South Asia and elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region is designed to check Chinese incursion in the Indian Ocean in general and in the Bay of Bengal in particular.

Their political interest in Bangladesh is mainly to ensure that the third largest Muslim majority country is not pushed towards extremism in the name of liberal democracy. Perhaps this stems from the lessons learned in North Africa and the Middle East Arab Spring. China on the other hand has more of geo-strategic interest than geo-political interest.

To summarise, the present political crisis in Bangladesh makes us the helpless carcass, the object of 'Buzkashi' game in narrower terms and fresh field for 'new Great Game' in South Asian region. Will our politicians pause to give a serious thought on the issue and its consequences? We do not want to be the object of 'Buzkashi' or an arena of a new 'Great Game.' We want to preserve our pride that we fought and achieved freedom which was not gifted by the colonial power.

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M.M. AKASH

BANGLADESH has experienced a long political journey of forty two years and during this period it had been ruled by several different political regimes (Mujib, Zia, Sattar, Ershad, Khaleda and Hasina regimes). During this period, sometimes broadly acceptable democratic regimes and sometimes non-democratic regimes ranging from pure military regime to either civilian supported military regime or military backed civilian regime or a temporary caretaker regime based on democratic consensus had ruled the country.

The period under discussion can be divided into three sub-periods -- 1971 to 1975 and post-1990 up to now -- and can be classified as a period of "broadly democratic regimes." From 1975 to 1990, the country was under the rule of an elected or non-elected army chief. Today, in 2013, we are again facing a huge national turmoil around the issue of transfer of power. Two questions haunting the minds of all citizens now are: Who is going to succeed the current Hasina regime and how is it going to be done?

The set answer of the current regime to these questions is: "Everything will be done as per the revised constitution of the country." But the existing constitutional rules and regulations on power transfer process are not acceptable to the main opposition alliance led by Khaleda Zia. She has been waging a tooth and nail struggle to stop the current constitutional process, and her main demand is re-changing of the "changed constitution" for introducing the previous provision of "election under caretaker government."

The movement of the opposition alliance for the realisation of this change in the constitution has become violent. All kinds of weapons have been used by the opposition forces, especially by their hired hoodlums and the party cadres of the militant fundamentalist organisations, which are partners of the opposition alliance. This has created an unbearable situation all over the country. This so-called "political movement" has already resulted in the death of hundreds of innocent people, especially the poor who had to defy the hartal/oborodh programmes of the opposition alliance in order to earn their daily livelihood. The moot questions are, "at what cost will the opposition be successful and whether this political terrorism will ultimately lead to a state of emergency in the country?"

I think it may be too late now to re-convene the national assembly and change the constitution, since there are at best only thirty to forty days left in hand before which the election must be held, as per the constitution. It is more so because even if Sheikh Hasina agrees to such a constitutional change there will arise the new problem of finding a neutral chief of the caretaker government acceptable to both the party in power and the opposition.

Thus, meeting the main demand of the opposition is perhaps no more feasible now. What the opposition can at best do now is to resume the dialogue behind the veil and suggest some new proposals to make the election mechanism more level, more credible and more acceptable under the given constitutional framework. And then, with the gain of as many concessions as possible, they may decide to participate in the next election. This will give Khaleda Zia a legitimate ground for a future movement if there is any gross anomaly in the election.

I think there will be strong opposition to this kind of rational discourse within the opposition alliance from the militant forces of her party and

## Future political scenario

surely also from the fundamentalists who actually have no stake in the democratic process of the country. So far, these hawks had successfully prevented Khaleda Zia from taking such a rational decision. In the recent past, some old intellectual mentors of the BNP actually did try to persuade Khaleda Zia along this line but failed.

Since it would be an easy sail for the "boat" in an election without the participation of the main opposition, some extremists and unpopular contestants from the ruling party are also trying to close all opportunities of an honourable reconciliation. In this way, at present, there has arisen an unholy consensus against reconciliation among the extremists of both the parties.

The question is, what will happen if the opposition alliance does not participate in the election at all? Then the only option available to the current regime will be to hold the election within the framework of the constitution in as credible a manner as possible. It will then try to do two things: give incentives to as many parties as possible to participate in the coming election, and to ensure the highest possible turn out of voters on election day.

The first strategy of giving incentives will involve an increase in the bargaining power of all the moderate or loyal opposition parties, among which Jatiyo Party led by General Ershad will obviously be the toughest bargainer. Consequences of such a strategy are already visible now. The second strategy of inducing voters to cast their votes will require a guarantee of safety for the voters agreeable to vote in an election without the participation of the opposition alliance. This will need further tightening of the law and order forces. Because of this, emergency has become the talk of the town.

Given these strategies, will the current government be successful in its mission to hold a credible election? I think that, with the help of the army for a certain period along with the help of other law enforcing agencies, the Election Commission may be able to hold the election within the time schedule permitted under the given constitution. But without the main contestant in such an election, the voter turnout will not be very high. The magic number is here "50%." If the current regime can ensure at least 50% presence of voters, the election will acquire formal or legal legitimacy. This will be more so if the USA, EU, India, China and Russia give a positive opinion or at least remain non-negative on the issue of the legitimacy of the election on the ground of constitutional imperatives.

In that case, the post election regime may enjoy moderate stability, at least in the short run. But given the real correlation of political forces in our society and the exclusionary nature of such an election, the new regime may have to give a fresh election again within a short time. The above hypothetical political scenario is possibly the best possible scenario for the present ruling regime.

The other possibility is that the hartals/oborodhs would become so frequent and so costly that the current regime would have to proclaim "Emergency" rule before the election. If they proclaim the emergency before the election then the election will have to take place under the umbrella of "Emergency" or it will have to be postponed for an indefinite period of time. Either way, the democratic process will again be in a deep crisis. In that case the extra constitutional forces will decide the fate of the future.

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## Where politics has gone fugitive . . .

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

POLITICS in Bangladesh received a massive jolt through the assassinations of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and the four national leaders between August and November 1975. And then came a point when General Ziaur Rahman, as the country's first military ruler, publicly spoke of his intention to make politics difficult. That, coupled with the re-entry into the scene of the collaborators of the Pakistan occupation army, in time led to a de-secularisation of the state and the advent of a second military regime under General Hussein Muhammad Ershad.

The long, sustained struggle against the Ershad dispensation by the Awami League-led fifteen-party alliance and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led seven-party combine culminated in triumph for the forces of democracy in December 1990. Politics, or so it appeared, was on its way to a grand revival in the country. This truth was borne out by the elections of February 1991 through the victory of the BNP under Khaleda Zia.

Ironically, politics began a fresh new descent into what increasingly looked like an abyss when the ruling party presided over a patent rigging of a by-election in Magura in 1994, a blunder that not only led to the inauguration of a culture of parliamentary boycott by the opposition but also raised anew the demand for a caretaker government to oversee subsequent general elections in the country. Politics hit a new low when the rising conflict between the major political parties compelled the Commonwealth to dispatch a representative, Sir Ninian Stephen, to Dhaka to try to broker a settlement. The mission turned out to be abortive.

At this point of time, politics clearly has gone fugitive in Bangladesh. Despite the efforts at mediation between the AL and the BNP by the UN's Oscar Fernandez-Taranco, there is the clear perception across the country that anarchy is about to take over, if it has not already gained the upper hand. The rather sudden move by the ruling Awami League, in 2011, to do away with the caretaker system of government in the constitution proved to be a fillip to the opposition BNP and its alliance partner Jamaat-e-Islami to haul politics back on to the streets. In simple terms, the degree of violence let loose by the BNP and the Jamaat on the streets has pushed democratic politics into a state of the comatose, to a point where innocent people have been made victims of arson and sundry forms of violence. With trees being cut down to impede normal traffic movement on the highways and railway tracks being uprooted in diverse parts of the country, there is hardly any reason to suppose that politics is yet in activist mould. It is not.

That politics is haemorrhaging comes through the abnormality of Bangladesh's leading political figures pointedly refusing to preserve any semblance of inter-personal links between them. Where in the past, meaning the 1960s and early 1970s, politicians made clear distinctions between political beliefs and personal ties, in the period beginning in the early 1990s, the chiefs of the two major national parties elevated, in a tongue-in-cheek manner of speaking, non-communication into something of a negative art. Add to that the bitterness and rancour shining through the verbal assaults they make at each other, a form of behavior swiftly replicated at the lower tiers of their parties, all the way down to the village level. The clear distinction is one of white being in contrast to black, or the other way round. The colour grey is conspicuous by its absence.

The decline of politics manifests itself, again, through the survival, in however quixotic a form, of the deposed military ruler Ershad. He cannot hope to return to power, but he knows and so does the country that the

two women who pushed him from power twenty three years ago need his support to prevail against each other. Therein lies irony. And ironic too is the rise of medieval forces unabashedly advocating everything that militates against progress and liberalism, indeed is a throwback to pre-modern era darkness.

Ask the bus driver, the man who drives the CNG-scooter, the day labourer, the rickshaw-puller, the child trying to go to school, the mother desperate about saving her children on the riotous streets. They know what it means to be caught in the crossfire between feuding politicians and their frenzied acolytes operating in the alleys and lanes and streets.

Ask the leader of the opposition, for she has set this train of anti-politics into motion. She knows citizens have been dying. And she blames the ruling party for the killings. She says nothing about the grenades, the petrol bombs, the charred remains of human bodies, the flowing tears of those whose bread winners have died in this 'movement' for 'democratic politics'.

Politics is nowhere to be seen. On the streets, in the safe confines of drawing rooms, through the steam rising out of coffee mugs in elitist banalities, the talk is of retaining power...or seizing it. The 160 million people of Bangladesh do not matter.

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SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

WHAT we are witnessing today hardly meets the definition of political programmes or agitation. The situation is radically assuming the character of subversion, particularly the acts of Jamaat, a recognised political party, following the execution of Quader Mollah. Targeting political opponents, public establishments, burning of railway stations can only be described as blatant acts of terrorism. And there is a sinister motive in attacking the minorities. The only difference is that a terrorist organisation does not carry out such large scale acts in terms of numbers and location and time.

While agitation for a political objective is nothing new, it is the nature of the agitation that has created a sense of deep uncertainty. More than 300 people have died in the violence since January this year and as per a human rights watchdog report, more than 4,000 people have been injured during protests in November alone.

And a new dimension has been added to the situation where the appendages of the ruling party have been seen supplementing the law enforcing agencies in confronting the opposition. Regrettably, hostilities have taken a tri-party feature with the BNP-Jamaat on one side, and the police, Jubo League-Chattra League, on the other.

To add to that, the directive of the PM to her party leaders and lawmakers to launch counterstrikes on the BNP-Jamaat men if they tried to attack the people and Awami Leaguers to foil the polls, is a recipe for more violence since in the fray the AL will come in as another direct participant.

The worst sufferer in all this turmoil is the people. And one is not surprised by the call of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to the two parties to act immediately to stop the violence.

We need to remind ourselves that when people no longer feel safe, when the environment becomes so coercive as to threaten their wellbeing, it is the security of the state that stands threatened.

Apart from the deleterious consequences on

human security, the economic damage that the political unrest and violence is wreaking is incalculable. The current situation has also generated worries in the minds of our neighbours and development partners. We have had multiple visits of representatives from the UN and other friendly countries to broker an understanding. Our image received a jolt when, albeit in oblique comments and speculative reference, the option of an UN-led election with the help of the military was floated.

Notwithstanding the risks discussed in the foregoing paragraphs to my mind the greatest threat to our security will come from the radicals, extremists and the non-state actors, who will stand to gain from the current political flux.

History shows that over the last several years these elements have exploited the rift between the two major parties and managed to utilise the political

space thus offered to entrench themselves in politics, and unless a political solution is reached and violence stops there are all the possibilities of predominance of extremists and radicals in our politics. The threat is compounded when this predominance may be seen by India as a potential destabilising development for it. That is when the internal political situation will assume international character with the concomitant cross border ramifications.

Given the example set by the USA, which has pursued with force its national security interests outside its borders, there is no guarantee that such an option may not come into the reckoning of our biggest neighbour. But that is the worst case scenario.

By the same token the international community, under the aegis of the UN, can collectively choose to act to interpose its forces between the warring factions to stop violence and deaths, particularly because of the systemic failure to arrest the situation.

These are the real causes for worry for all of us, certainly for the political parties.

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