

Violence against minorities

Impunity regime must stop

WE fully endorse the call by some civil society members that the perpetrators of violence against minorities in Bangladesh should be tried by special court and examples be made of them for their heinous acts.

Needless to say, it is the regime of impunity, perpetrators getting off scot-free because of political links or legal lacunae that are responsible for the recent spurt of communal violence in Bangladesh. It is a pity that this should happen in a country which prides itself as an example of communal harmony. And what is even worse is that we cannot recall an instance where an accused charged with committing or inciting violence against minorities has been punished. There is need to identify the actual masterminds behind the violence as well the reasons for the failure of the administration to respond timely.

We would like to stress that the attackers be dealt with as nothing else but criminals irrespective of their political or other identity. In some instances political divide was breached while committing violence against the minorities. In many instances the assailants, reportedly, belonged to the Jamaat who should have been the first to offer their help and protection to the minorities if they sincerely believed in the fundamental teachings of Islam.

The matter should not be taken as merely a law and order issue. Resistance against the communal forces must come from the society that should project a combined front against these forces cutting across caste, creed, political belief or religion.

Garment export picks up with Japan

A destination of great promise

IT is a ground-breaking achievement with Japan, of sorts. Our garment exports to that country have soared from \$ 173.32 million in 2010 to \$ 478.48 million in 2013, topping 18.53 percent year-on-year basis.

An interesting combination of factors has contributed to this spectacular performance. The strategy adopted by Japan in 2008 to reduce dependency on China, the largest garment supplier worldwide, has benefited Bangladesh as something of an alternative destination for Tokyo to knock at. The policy content holds deeper meaning for Bangladeshi garments manufacturers and exporters. It allows for relocation of production units from China to other nations like Bangladesh.

The Japanese market has also become more promising as the people are taking to fast changing fashions which Bangladesh is able to cater for. For instance, demand for denims is very high. To make matters easier for Bangladesh it has duty free access to Japan for its woven products.

Given the rapidly increasing garment exports to Japan, some logistical deficits need to be addressed. If we are serious about gaining a foothold in a market worth more than \$ 35 billion a year, we have to turn out a breed of merchandisers with proficiency in Japanese language.

The overarching imperative, however, is that internally we remain politically stable; otherwise, we would never be able to realise the full potential for exports to Japan.

Politicised administration

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

WITH around 2600 civil servants promoted since 2009, mostly on the basis of being 'politically loyal,' it's time to ask what our ruling parties want -- 'politically obedient' or 'sincere and hardworking' civil servants?

With appointing of 85 new joint secretaries last week, currently the total number of joint secretaries is 928 against 250 posts. The excessive promotions have not only seriously damaged the ideal pyramid structure of the administration, but have also put in place a politically blessed group of people. Politicisation seems to have been taken to a ridiculous level

If we take the cabinet secretary's recent comments to *The Daily Star* at face value, then we now have a completely merit-based and service-oriented administration functioning in Bangladesh. However, the reality is the total opposite. We want to remind the AL rulers about a pledge included in its 2008 election manifesto -- A Charter for Change. It was about the formation and functionalities of a Public Administration Reform Commission (PARC), with an aim to establish good governance in the country. Has the Commission delivered what it was meant to?

The government's sudden shift from the reform process in the bureaucracy only re-affirms that our rulers, be it any party, are willing to go any length for strengthening their influence and vested interests. On one hand we have excessive promotions and on the other far too many disgruntled officers known Officer on Special Duty. But what about the ones in the middle who, irrespective of political preferences, keep on doing their job sincerely and honestly?

Not about the ones who are currently serving, but we are skeptical about the would-be civil servants of the future. What message are they getting? There is enough to fear that beside general preparations, the subject of political allegiance may count as a benchmark for entering and therefore serving the bureaucracy. Devoid of merit or performance, it's the frightening rate of political promotions happening in today's Bangladesh that compels us to articulate our fears.

We don't discourage our future bureaucrats to have their own political preferences provided that they don't get politically prejudiced while preparing to enter or function as a public servant.

The writer is Current Affairs Analyst, *The Daily Star*.

Lurking shadow of extremism

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

Incidents of November/December last, however, have proved, if proof was required, that there are organised elements with pronounced political views for whom violence and destruction alone justify their existence. To such elements, protests are 'jihad,' thus providing a religious overtone to recruit people, raise funds and justify acts of violence. A closer scrutiny would likely reveal a clandestine but extensive and collusive network of terror, duplicity and religious extremism that runs through the activities of organisations that are outwardly religiously benevolent and public-spirited. Appearances, however, could be deceptive and dangerous.

It needs to be noted that the extremist activities are always invariably secretive and protected and flourish under the guise of various charity organisations and trusts. A distinguishing characteristic of the so-called religiously motivated activities is that they are not driven by any domestic agenda or grievances but a broader supra-national agenda or ideology. The initial recruits for extremist cause may have been petty criminals and students from the religious schools, but as time passes a significant proportion of the new recruits are better educated with some holding professional degrees in medicine, engineering and computer science. The number of criminals joining extremist outfit, however, remains a constant feature of recruitment.

Informed sources opine that the philanthropic exterior of suspected extremist group has, over the years, quietly facilitated in usurping considerable space from the State. This has reportedly created significant political and social capital for the extremist ideology and may be helpful in manipulating political gains.

The power and influence of the extremists was dangerously reflected in the recent political violence. Those wishing to take a deeper look into the matter may find it inter-

esting that in times of political crisis the leadership extremist group has ventured to create a parallel narrative of hope and strength for expanding their political capital. There is, therefore, cause for concern because if mainstream political process slips into deeper levels of despondency, extremists will definitely dominate the political stage. The question is, should we be concerned about the growing political and social influence of extremist groups that could transform the polity into radicalism?

While delving into the above query, we may perhaps cite the example of Pakistan where problems of nation-building persisted as the society experienced long periods of unrepresentative rule. The ruling set-up there found Islamic ideology as the way out of the perceived challenges to its legitimacy. In Pakistan, popular sources of legitimacy based on a mass mandate started to lose their relevance and, almost as a corollary, divine sources of legitimacy were articulated and cultivated by the ruling elite.

In Pakistan, the power of the Islamic idiom undercut the intellectual idiom of the society in general. Thus, debates about democracy, economy, education, culture, women's issues, human rights issues as well as the functioning of bureaucracy, judiciary and army drew heavily on the divine sources of morality, authenticity and accountability.

Sub-continental experience indicates that the more the ruling establishment provides space for politics of Islam due to its own strategic compulsions in both foreign policy and domestic contexts, the more the disparate Islamic elements sought to shape the country's ideological discourse according to their own priorities and preferences. Religious groups have sought to define the State through street agitation, lobbying, networking and vote politics.

We have to understand that if we have a relatively mature institutional base then the extremist movement would neither be represented in the mainstream politics nor would it be able to carry out terrorist activities in various localities. We would not be subjected to hate politics along sectarian lines with its attendant human cost.

The military elite of Pakistan sought to activate the divine sources of legitimacy during the Afghanistan war in partnership with the American military might and financial muscle. In the process, the extremist and the obscurantist elements got strengthened beyond all proportion. Sadly, the agenda for democracy lost its momentum in Pakistan. We in Bangladesh surely do not want to jeopardise our democratic pluralist existence by not recognising the potential and actual threats from the so-called religious extremists.

The writer is a columnist of *The Daily Star*.

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The "Ershad Syndrome"

STRANGER THAN FICTION



TAJ HASHMI

and whatever was left of ethical values and piety among the average people in less than nine years of autocracy. We may call Ershad's legacy of crime, corruption, hypocrisy and mendacity as the "Ershad Syndrome."

Ershad's Machiavellian modus operandi is at the roots of most evils afflicting the country for the last three decades. In 1988, the late Quamrul Hassan, in the last sketch of his life,

titled *Desh Aaj Vishwa Behayar Khoppore* (our land is now in the hands of the champion of shamelessness), aptly portrayed him as he was at that time. Although Ershad was not the first or only autocratic, corrupt ruler, he was the one to institutionalise corruption, deception, and hypocrisy. His contributions to the degeneration process outweigh those of all the previous and succeeding regimes in the country. He is as deceptive as Bhutto, as dishonest as Marcos, as cruel as Suharto and as hypocritical and "Islam loving" as Ziaul Haq. Although he served only six years for misappropriation of public funds, renowned jurist Dr. Kamal Husain observed soon after his overthrow in 1990, that the dictator deserved at least 500 years for the various crimes he had committed against the people of Bangladesh.

His military takeover in 1982 came as a bolt from the blue. It was least expected and totally unnecessary. The country was just recovering from the trauma of the bloody Liberation War and the post-Liberation disasters -- socio-political and economic mismanagement, famine, political assassinations and military rule following the killing of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. While the country was crossing the threshold of democracy, Ershad's military intervention was instrumental in turning the country into one of the most corrupt, and what some experts believe, a "failing state."

Unfortunately, Awami League's top leaders welcomed the military takeover by Ershad in 1982, and later legitimised his autocracy by participating in the so-called parliamentary elections in 1986, along with the Islamofascist Jamaat-e-Islami. Preferring Ershad's Jatiya Party to Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the Awami League joined hands with the former dictator during the second tenure of the BNP-led coalition government in 2001-2006.

Then again, it is unfair to single out Awami League as the only party to have courted Ershad. BNP and Khaleda Zia also wanted him to join the BNP-led Alliance against Awami League's 14-Party-Alliance in 2006. Ershad's refusal led to his two years "conviction" for misappropriation of public funds in 2006. BNP also tried to win over the former dictator's estranged wife Roushan Ershad to forge an electoral alliance against Awami League. Interestingly, many "leftist" leaders and advocates of freedom and democracy, including Moudud Ahmed and Kazi Zafar, were members of the Ershad government in the 1980s.

Ershad was instrumental in de-secularising secular Bangladesh by introducing Islam as the "state religion," which has marginalised all non-Muslim citizens of the country. This act has also legitimised political Islam for an indefinite period. No government since the overthrow of this dictator in 1990 has succeeded yet in scrapping this clause from the Constitution, which is simply unconstitutional and in violation of the spirit of the Liberation War.

Unfortunately, the "Ershad Syndrome" is full of life and thriving at every level of society in Bangladesh -- from the parliament to the mosque, and from the market place to the bedroom. What was once taboo became an acceptable behaviour. Politicians, renowned intellectuals, well-to-do

professionals, "leftist" student leaders, and even "nice and decent," married and unmarried women -- housewives, singers, newsreaders -- legitimised his dictatorial rule, corruption and profligacy. Neither has the general changed after all these years, nor have his avid followers and comrades-in-arm. One may cite Ershad's and the Awami League government's latest somersaults -- before and after the farcical parliamentary elections of January 5 in this regard. What may surprise any political scientist is that Ershad and his party men are simultaneously part

of the government and also of the opposition. In sum, while the "Ershad Syndrome" is thriving in Bangladesh, Ershad is still the role model of corrupt politicians, traders, professionals and government employees. Thus, there is no room for complacency because of economic growth and rise in the Human Development Index (HDI) in Bangladesh since the 1990s. They are mainly attributable to the private sector and hardworking, poorly paid Bangladeshi workers.

Sustained growth and development are subject to the rule of law and very low incidence of corruption. As Bangladesh witnessed lower growth (which is likely to go down further) during the violent civil-unrest in the last few months, one may guess what can happen to this bubble economy if there is a big disruption in foreign remittance and garment factories, which anarchic rioters love to burn down, as witnessed in the recent past. According to the Foreign Policy magazine, Bangladesh is now potentially one of the ten most volatile countries in the world. Can freedom and democracy loving people and leaders of Bangladesh reverse the process by abandoning the "Ershad Syndrome" forever? It is the most pertinent question today.

The author teaches security studies at the Austin Peay State University at Clarksville, Tennessee.

(This column will henceforth appear on alternate Saturdays)

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Bangladesh: then and now

When I compare January of 1972 with January of 2014, the difference is so vast that I feel deep grief. At that time people were celebrating the victory of Liberation War... their eyes sparkling with joy and happiness, hearts filled with hopes for a prosperous and peaceful country. But now everything has changed, their eyes have become dark and empty, hearts filled with great fear and uncertainty. They feel that freedom has been snatched away from them, as their voting rights have been taken away.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is continuously blaming the opposition for this condition, not admitting that the situation came to this stage for her decision of abolishing the CTG. Feeling that Awami League might lose the election, she pushed the country towards a perilous condition. By staging a farcical election Awami League came to power again and the prime minister announced that she will be 'tougher' in the future. She is already extremely tough in her dealings, we are afraid to think what 'tougher' will look like. May Almighty Allah save the people of Bangladesh from further sufferings.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Brilliant feat of election engineering

Bangladesh Awami League (AL) completely outplayed Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

They (AL) took lesson from 2001 and did everything in a highly calculative manner not to suffer the same fate as they did in 2001. They realised that in 2001 they were over-confident of winning, for good reason though, yet they lost in the election.

This time around AL did not want to make the same mistake. To this end, the first thing they have done is demolish the caretaker government system, since they understood the psyche of the Bangladeshi people. One of our inherent characteristics is that we, the people of Bangladesh, are anti-incumbent. AL realised no matter how well they performed in running the government, they would still lose in the election. They put all their efforts to engineer the system. They have chosen a partisan election commission, changed many important rules regarding election and put obedient and trusted people in the key position. In my opinion, if scams like Hallmark, Destiny, Padma bridge, share market, etc., had not taken place during AL's regime (2008-2013), people would have put them back to power for the second consecutive term, since BNP did not play any positive roles whatsoever during the same time.

Dr. Kamrul Hassan
Professor
Department of Physics
Dhaka University

Growing Sylhet

People from many other districts like Sunamganj, Habiganj, etc., come to live in Sylhet. As a result, Sylhet has become very busy, while its traffic is getting more congested. People also come from far away for business and study purposes. Universities and business centres can be built in faraway places from Sylhet town. This way Sylhet city won't be overpopulated and people may live in peace.

Ahmed As Sami
Anandeniketan School
Sylhet

Comments on news report, "5-party cabinet of 49," published on January 13, 2014

SM

She breaks her oath of safeguarding sovereign Bangladesh all the time by looking after the interest of India over Bangladesh.

Mizan

Parliament and cabinet have become items of Sheikh Hasina's doll's house. 'Government of the people, for the people, and by the people' has been hijacked by Sheikh Hasina and her associates. She should enjoy her doll's house as long as it lasts, which may not be too long.

Masood Rahman

May Allah save the nation.

"Ershad finally back home with new role" (January 13, 2014)

Barkat

In Bangladesh politics 'Ershad' means shameless human, worthless leader and filthiest politician.

Probashi

I believed 1990's mass upsurge was to get rid of all dictators. I am feeling awfully ashamed. Bangladeshis have a long way to go before they reach the goal of a real democratic system and a truly independent country.

Akhtar Shah

He certainly lowers the tone of politics in the country.