

Big arms haul case verdict Gives a sense of relief

THE curtain has been drawn over the long-pending arms haul case with capital punishment given to 14 convicts by a Chittagong court on Thursday. While we have reservations about the high number of death penalties, we, however, welcome the verdict as it has unburdened the nation of a moral crisis as it has come to light that the arms and ammunition recovered on our soil were destined for a terrorist group, Ulfa, based in Assam in neighbouring India.

We know now that even ministers and top ranking officials of two state security agencies were complicit in the arms smuggling that took place in April 2004 when BNP was in the government.

In terms of scale and implications, the hauling of 10 truckloads of smuggled arms and ammunitions was something unprecedented in Bangladesh's history.

Terming it unusual, the judge of the trial court has also given an unusually harsh verdict. However, the defendants will be able to appeal to the higher court against it.

Clearly, the masterminds behind this sinister scheme were out to subvert the stability of the region. It boggles the mind how high-ups of vital security agencies of that time could get caught up in such a nefarious plot. Their action bore the portents of endangering the country's security itself and placed Bangladesh's bilateral relationship with India along a conflicting trajectory. One wonders what kind of security concept guided the policymakers of that period! Obviously, it was seriously lacking in foresight.

It is relieving that the schemers did not succeed in the dangerous game they had been playing with national security, thanks to the risk taken by some members of the police who challenged the smugglers and thereby helped to foil their evil design.

ADP in focus Ways to quicken implementation mulled

WITH the ADP implementation during July-December 2013 being estimated at only 27 per cent, the government has woken up to accelerate the pace. The low rate was explained in terms of political unrest.

The first quarter, however, is largely taken up by paper work and the second sees the face of implementation following staggered disbursements. Usually the last two quarters are marked by hurried pace of project execution with the result that quality work and meeting of physical targets suffer a good deal. With the AL government re-elected through a controversial election it feels the pressure of doing a better job with the remainder of the fiscal 2013-14. So it has decided not to make a deep cut in the outlay which will be around Tk 60,000 crore and that the pace of implementation will be fast-tracked to round off the year with considerable development accomplishments.

Among the methods being talked about are holding two Ecne meetings a week, the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) placing a report on project implementation in every Ecne meeting and holding detailed weekly committee and cabinet discussions on implementation under the fast-track six big projects.

Waiving some clauses of the public procurement rules is being apparently contemplated, something that the development partners have often been wary of.

To our mind, implementation capacity of some ministries would have to be revamped with delegation of authority to project directors. Also, the IMED will need a greater voice.

Child rights violation

ALAMGIR KHAN

RECENTLY, politics has been dragged down to a new low by keeping children standing without food in order to satisfy the whims of some very important persons. Bangabandhu, Zia and even Ershad never kept children standing for hours in the sun or cold to welcome them. Maulana Bhasani did not come to power, but if he had, none would have dared to insult him by insulting the children of this country. Neither Hasina nor Khaleda has done such a stupid thing.

Yet this happens and will keep happening in this country. The education ministry issued circulars in the past prohibiting use of children to give reception to public representatives, important persons and top government officials. But to no avail. Social hatred, protests and resistance against such practices will have more effect than circulars. However, circulars issued by both the MOE and MOPME are riddled with weaknesses, which the authorities may consider remedying.

According to the circular, it has been observed that important people have been given reception by keeping students standing on roadsides and by suspending classes. It is inhuman to keep school students standing for hours under the open sky to greet VIPs. The reasons for prohibiting this are that it wastes time, hinders academic activities and has a negative physical and psychological impact on the students. Therefore, the government warned of legal actions against headmasters and governing bodies of schools if the order were violated.

What if the students are kept sitting instead of standing and canopies are erected for them in order to greet these people? What if they are provided with books in order not to hinder the academic activities? Who knows whether it has a negative physical and mental impact on the students, whereas it clearly has an enormous positive impact on the psychology of the VIPs? Why legal actions only against headmasters and governing bodies of schools, giving full impunity to the very important persons?

No matter whether the students are kept standing or sitting, under the open sky or with canopies overhead, why is the government shy of calling it a pure and simple violation of child rights, which should be punishable -- especially for the top persons involved?

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Militancy and counter-narrative

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

with a view to raising appropriate awareness, and that the deficit needs to be proved.

Upon scrutiny, one would find that a large number of the country's imams belong to the Deoband school that promotes an uncompromising, puritanical and exclusive fundamentalism. It is relevant to note that the Deoband Madrasa, founded in 1866, denounced music and dancing and distanced itself from much that was progressive in Indian society; it shunned the British Law Courts and retained jihad as a central pillar of faith. The focus of this Jihad was "on the promotion of Islamic revival and identity through the principle of the immutability of Shariah, the oneness of God and the overarching, guiding authority of the Ulemah."

Deobandism waged a ceaseless war of words against Shias, Hindus and Christian missionaries; it also caused the issuance of *fatwas* on almost all subjects, including declaration of activities of Syed Ahmed Khan of Aligarh as 'un-Islamic' and banning all Muslims from joining his Patriotic Association. This writer has a suspicion that our imams, being largely influenced by the doctrinal claims of Deoband school, tend to believe that the anti-militancy sermons are actually the handiwork of anti-Islam schemers prodded by the west. Hence, they display marked disinterest in the motivational programme. Such presumption, does not, however, preclude the suspected inertia of people in authority in properly arranging the communication session.

The imams, apparently, have good reason to suspect the motives of western establishment and their influence on our ruling class. Amongst other happenings, the loss of Palestine has become a potent symbol of the humiliation of the Muslim world at the hands of the western powers, who seemed to feel no qualms about the dispossession and permanent exile of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. The European occupation has often left a legacy of bitter conflict as in India, or deliberate effort to control the economy after the independence as in the Suez Canal crisis.

An important issue is whether the authorities have been able to agree as to the contents of an historically credible and religiously correct counter-narrative to confront the extremists. Should we not project Islam as being just as

rational as any western system? We should be able to demonstrate that Islam was and is the most rational and advanced of all the confessional faiths; that strict monotheism of Islam had liberated humanity from mythology. Our narrative could also emphasise that the empirical spirit that had given birth to modernity had in fact originated in Islam.

We need to project that Muslims have a vital mission to witness the divine dimension of life, not the retiring from the world to engage in contemplation or indulging in suicide-bombing, but by an activism that implements the social ideals of Shariah. We also need to realize that politics had never been a secondary issue for Muslims.

The counter-narrative needs to recognise that politics had been the theatre of religious quest of Muslims. Salvation for them does not mean redemption from sin, but the creation of a just society in which the individual could more easily make that existential surrender of his or her whole being that would bring them fulfillment. The polity for the Muslims was, therefore, an aspiration that required a jihad, a struggle that could find no simple outcome.

It needs to be stressed that fundamentalism is a global fact and has surfaced in every major faith in response to the problems of modernity. In fact, of the three monolithic religions Islam was the last to develop a fundamentalist strain, when modern culture began to take root in late 1960s and 1970s.

The counter-terrorism strategy's narrative should be able to effectively dispel the misgivings about fundamentalism that gives the impression of its being a violent form of Islamic religiosity. It needs to be stressed that fundamentalism is a global fact and has surfaced in every major faith in response to the problems of modernity. In fact, of the three monolithic religions Islam was the last to develop a fundamentalist strain, when modern culture began to take root in late 1960s and 1970s.

The struggle to enshrine the Islamic ideal in State structures and to find the right leader has preoccupied Muslims throughout their history. The notion of true Islamic state is difficult to perfectly express in human form and perhaps will elude the grasp of flawed human beings. Secular rationalism of modern culture poses special problems for people in all the major traditions. Therefore, it must not willy-nilly appear determined to wipe religion out. The vast mass of the people want to be modern and religious.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.

Overpowering “Ershad Syndrome”

STRANGER THAN FICTION



TAJ HASHMI

This article is a sequel to two of my earlier op-eds, one on the "Black Swans", and one on "Ershad Syndrome" in Bangladesh (DS, Jan 7 & 18, 2014). Despite the overthrow of Ershad, Bangladesh is still under the spell of what he carefully promoted and nurtured during his so-called presidency. While during the first decade of independent Bangladesh, one wrong step after another by the ruling elites kept the country under the spell of crises and disasters, the legacy of Ershad's decade-long intemperance and profligacy are still so overpowering that his overthrow in 1990 and successive elections since then have not ushered in the post-crisis era in Bangladesh.

As I have argued earlier, (a) there is no point in either glorifying or blaming Sheikh Mujib or Zia for what Bangladesh has achieved or failed to accomplish since its inception; and (b) no other events are as responsible as Ershad's corrupt and systematic ways of governance in gravely damaging our traditional social ethos and cultural norms of decency, honesty and integrity.

Identifying "Ershad Syndrome" as the main retrogressive force is necessary, but it cannot be an end in itself to reverse the process of degeneration. Bangladesh needs a way out of the crisis. What most experts and analysts fail to notice is that, contrary to popular perception, Bangladeshis are not the most politically conscious people in South Asia. Thanks to Ershad's legacy of political opportunism and over-indulgence to corruption, Bangladeshis are in fact one of the least politicised people on earth.

We know, politics is all about human behaviour in power perspective; and the quest for legitimate power to do good to society or nation is an exalted human attribute. We must identify the "Ershad Syndrome" as an antonym of politics; and realise that the Syndrome promotes acts of collective banditry from the top, while the people at the grassroots either resign to their "miserable fate" (become God-fearing and next-worldly), or adopt "pre-political" behaviour or short-lived, sporadic violent acts against real or presumed enemies. Masses in Bangladesh at times are not aware of their own role, as are they unaware of the role of their leaders. Pre-capitalist, pre-modern values -- a combination of "caste system" and colonial rule -- have further legitimised their rulers as their patrons and benefactors. While Ershad's predecessors were not innocent spectators, he was the main actor and promoter of this "caste system," which later metamorphosed into what we may call the "dynastic democracy" in Bangladesh.

Despite the holding of so many rounds of parliamentary and local elections since the overthrow of Ershad,

Bangladeshis have miserably failed to agree on the method of elections -- especially to elect their lawmakers -- and the bulk of the supporters of the losing parties do not consider the winners as legitimately elected representatives of the people. In sum, the end of military rule has not signalled the end of autocracy and dysfunctional governance. The "Ershad Syndrome" is breathing too heavily down the neck of the nation.

There are examples in history that unless the factors that nurture evil monarchies, ruthless dictatorships and corrupt autocrats are not uprooted once for all, countries experience what France and Russia experienced after the overthrow and executions of Louis XVI and Czar Nicholas II, respectively. France and Russia went through decades of tyranny after their glorious revolutions, in the name of liberty, equality, freedom and social justice. While successful uprooting of the roots of dictatorship in Germany, Italy, and Japan after World War II brought democracy and peace in no time, corrupt politicians still run Bangladesh in the name of democracy.

The mass euphoria and optimism one witnessed in the wake Ershad's fall have practically disappeared today. 'Ershadism' is very much well entrenched at every level of society. One wonders that if war criminals could be tried more than forty years after they committed

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the crimes for the sake of justice, why Ershad and his cronies should remain unpunished. Unless members of the civil society, students and workers come forward to eliminate the "Ershad Syndrome" -- once for all -- what Gramsci has called "Passive Revolution" will prevail in Bangladesh for an indefinite period. "Passive Revolution" is all about the ascendancy of reactionary values where the masses remain as inert as "sacks of potatoes" (to paraphrase Marx); and elites represent them to safeguard their own interests. Bangladesh needs new sets of rulers and political parties to make people constituent parts of the state.

It is time to get rid of the "Ershad Syndrome," which has become an indispensable part of Bangladesh's "dynastic democracy." The country needs to try Ershad and his cronies -- academics, bureaucrats, professionals and generals -- to attain what Germany, Italy and Japan accomplished by exterminating the last vestiges of authoritarianism after World War II. Once the last remnants of the "caste system" and pre-capitalist values are eliminated, people become free. And as Washington believed: "Liberty, when it begins to take root, is a plant of rapid growth."

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Raising awareness about domestic violence

A government survey was conducted a few days ago which revealed that nearly nine out of ten husbands abuse their wives severely in Bangladesh. The survey was conducted on more than 12600 women across the country. According to the study, about 87 per cent married women are abused severely by their cruel husbands and other members of husband's family.

The laws regarding domestic violence should be properly implemented and at the same time women should be encouraged to report on domestic violence to the law enforcers or appropriate government body who should also maintain their privacy and ensure them security. The electronic media can broadcast small dramas and advertisements to make women aware of their rights.

Md. Maskurul Alam
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Decentralising govt. to ease communications

The other day at around 7 pm I went out to visit my sister and her family at Zia colony from Mohakhali. It is at best a 10 minutes' drive by bus but, it took me around an hour and a half to reach there.

I was waiting for a bus, but failed to get into one because those were already overloaded and saw that some passengers were hanging precariously from the bus door. After an hour of waiting, I finally managed to get into a staff bus of some institution.

I think we should not build any more high-rise buildings in Dhaka. Universities, hospitals and offices should be shifted outside Dhaka. And we need to modernise our communication system inside Dhaka. Also there is no other alternative but to decentralise the administration.

Merina Hossain Mita
Dhaka

Govt. has taken the right step

The news report that schoolchildren cannot be lined up on streets was published in most dailies on 28th January. It is a very good decision taken by the government, for which I congratulate them. For quite some time students have unnecessarily been diverted from their studies for the day; just for a meaningless gesture to ministers passing in front of their schools.

This important circular needs to be circulated to all primary and secondary schools all over the country. And authorities must ensure that local politicians and party enthusiasts do not influence the schools in their localities to carry out this meaningless exercise anymore!

S. A. Mansoor
Dhaka

Comments on news report, “Three Musketeers back down,” published on January 29, 2014

Ash C.

It's baffling! BCB President Mr. Papon saying what is good for the future of Bangladesh cricket! According to the report "...he would vote against anything that bars Bangladesh from playing Test cricket." What's going on? Hope our prayers come true for Bangladesh to keep playing Test, and the evil plan of India, England and Australia and their Bangladeshi cohorts does not succeed.

Snr Citizen

BCB simply could not fathom the consequences of conducting the vote. How could they ignore the millions of fans and the players?

This reads like a sane agreement and a logical document. Restructuring, without a change in current status of member states is acceptable and good for the game. It is like a review as I understand so far. NO board or country should show its supremacy.

“BNP denied permission” (January 29, 2014)

Mortuza Huq

I think BNP is doing the right thing by actively participating in upazila elections. This elections and strengthening the upazila level committees should go hand in hand. The grassroots need to be strong so that they can ensure effective resistance against the government. Eventually this must be replicated at national level.

Another good strategy could be to hold frequent national seminars and lectures involving the civil society and other parties to find a workable model for acceptable election and lasting democracy. BNP should not waste even one day to start the campaign for a national consensus in holding the 11th parliamentary election before the end of this year.

“Not safe even among people” (January 29, 2014)

Alekanda

For the first time in my life, I felt safe enough and was not being groped while walking on the footpath in Dhaka during my visit in BD in 2011. Any sexual harassment including groping is a social stigma in our society. This is the time that we should talk about any sexual harassment openly and not be silent when we become the victims.