

Khaleda's accusations

She needs to substantiate those

BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia made a very serious claim in her Thursday's press briefing that in a month between December 26, 2013 and January 27, 2014, some 300 opposition activists were killed or made to forcibly disappear by the law-enforcing agencies and AL men. But she could provide the names of only five of such victims and designations of two others, including one from its alliance partner Jamaat-e-Islami, while the identities of the overwhelming majority of the rest remained unknown. Needless to say, this only made her claim lose credibility before the public eye. Worse yet, her slapdash approach towards such a serious matter supplied enough arsenal to the government to dismiss her accusations out of hand.

The question that naturally arises is what was the basis of the BNP leader's information about the victims of killing and disappearance? If she has any details about the names and addresses of the victims those demand immediate disclosure. Otherwise, the whole exercise will look like an attempt at playing a sheer numbers game with the plight of the victims.

The government, on its part, cannot confine its responsibility to just dismissing BNP leader's claim about atrocities said to have been committed by law-enforcers and ruling party cadres. If truth be told, reports of excesses committed by different arms of the law-enforcement department abound. Given the media reports and occasional disclosures by local and international human rights bodies, the government has little room for complacency about the issue.

So, before brushing off BNP's claim as fake, the government must clarify its position about the widespread allegations of atrocities committed by law-enforcers against the opposition activists and members of the public.

Plunder of state resources

Cut-off illegal connections

WHAT has transpired through investigative journalism is that some 12,000 illegal gas connections have been given over the past year in nine unions of Sonargaon upazila under Narayanganj district. The "subscribers" have paid an average of Tk45,000 per connection and the activity is being overseen by the local high command of the ruling party. Not only are these homestead connections not sanctioned by Titas Gas Transmission Limited, the manner in which lines are being laid using substandard pipes and without sufficiently technical support opens up the possibility of a major explosion in the areas. The other area of concern obviously is the huge siphoning off of our limited natural resource gas, the proceeds of which do not go the national exchequer, rather fatten up the coterie of vested interests involved in the racket.

That grassroots political entities associated with the ruling alliance are in connivance with unscrupulous members of the state-owned gas company is a very worrying sign indeed. It certainly allows a high degree of immunity from law enforcement agencies but at what cost? At a time when the productive sectors of the economy are being deprived of natural gas supply, we are witness to such flagrant violation of the law. With people's representatives at local levels choosing to turn a blind eye to what is obviously illegal activity in the fear of losing votes, precisely how will such illegal activity be curtailed is an obvious question. It is essential that authorities at the centre get a move on these illegal connections and punish the thugs in national interest.

What people think

Friday: January 31, 2014
Do you agree with the Human Rights Watch that the government should conduct an independent investigation into a recent spate of alleged extrajudicial killings by security forces?

● Yes (85%)
● No (15%)

Saturday: February 1, 2014
Do you agree with President Abdul Hamid that the new House was formed through a free and impartial election?

● Yes (15%)
● No (85%)

Sunday: February 2, 2014
Do you agree with Rana Dasgupta, general secretary of Hindu-Buddhist-Christian Oikya Parishad that women of the country faced challenges last year as religious extremism entered the political arena?

● Yes (53%)
● No (47%)

Monday: February 3, 2014
Do you think it is justified for the political parties to pick candidates for the upazila parishad polls which is a non-political election?

● Yes (31%)
● No (69%)

Tuesday: February 4, 2014
Do you think that the government should proactively disclose information instead of creating barriers to bring down corruption?

● Yes (84%)
● No (16%)

Wednesday: February 5, 2014
Do you think ruling Awami League will take any stern action against its student wing Bangladesh Chhatra League activist for Sunday's incident at Rajshahi University?

● Yes (13%)
● No (87%)

Thursday: February 6, 2014
Do you think reshuffle in administration would able to make bureaucracy more efficient?

● Yes (21%)
● No (79%)

Grievous accusations, predictable reactions

BNP should give credible evidence and AL should seriously investigate

THE THIRD VIEW



MAHFUZ ANAM

opponents are capable of nothing but vile actions.

One of the most tragic expressions of this political culture is how ruling parties habitually deal with opposition's claims of "killing," "torture" and "disappearance" of its activists either at the hands of the law enforcement agencies or ruling party thugs. However, it is also true that our opposition prefers to make astounding claims and generally does not furnish sufficient details that would make for a credible case. The net result is that many lives are lost and their deaths get buried under mutual rhetoric of acrimony and blame.

Regrettably, a similar play is on at this moment. In a press conference last Tuesday, Khaleda Zia blamed Sheikh Hasina's government for some serious crimes and misuse of power.

First, she accused the AL government of killing 242 individuals and causing the disappearance of another 60 people in just one month, from December 26, 2013 to January 27, 2014. Secondly, the BNP chief claimed that under Sheikh Hasina the law enforcement agencies have been turned into a "Killing Force" through what she termed as "politicisation" which in this case means partisan recruitment and promotions, and postings made solely on the "loyalty" factor.

As could be expected, the government brushed aside the opposition's accusations and instead the PM in her question-answer session in the parliament said that the role of the BNP chief and her son, Tarique, in the infamous ten trucks arms smuggling case, whose verdict was also pronounced on Monday last, will be investigated.

On our part we would like to take the accusations made by the BNP chief very seriously. As the former two time prime minister, two time leader of the opposition and as the present head of one of the two biggest political parties of the country, her statements deserve our highest and most serious consideration.

Her death and disappearance figures were based on information received by BNP at its central office. Of the 242 killed, Khaleda Zia was able to provide the names of only two people. They are Tareq Mohammad Saifullah of Meherpur, who is the local Ameer of Jamaat, and Touhidul Islam, an Upazila BNP leader from Noakhali. There are three names of those who disappeared. She also provided a district-wise list of those killed and have disappeared, without any names or other details.

According to Khaleda Zia's list, the districts with eight highest deaths are: Satkhira 27, Chandpur 23, Laxmipur 20, Cox's Bazaar 17, Chittagong 15, Sirajganj 14, Chapainawabganj 13, Jaipurhat 12. Only these eight districts make up a death toll of 141 citizens of Bangladesh within a span of one month. It is most important that we investigate the authenticity of these claims and follow the due course of law if found to be correct. (The Daily Star has already asked in district correspondents to investigate and authenticate these claims). These deaths and disappearances are not acceptable and the people responsible must be held accountable and punished.

Earlier on January 22, the BNP's acting secretary general, Mirza Fakrul, told the media that total number of deaths and disappearance for previous three months was 481, with 294 deaths and 187 disappearances. Later, he told BBC that 294 was the total figure for deaths and disap-

pearances, bringing his own figures down by 187. This prompted us to headline "Fakrul flip-flops on figures." Now his boss is claiming 242 deaths in one month to Fakrul's 294 deaths and disappearances in three months.

As a proof of how our politics has gone in circles and has made no headway in terms of fair play, we recall that in 2001 after BNP won a massive two-thirds majority in the elections a well orchestrated attack was unleashed on AL workers and Hindu voters with many being killed and hundreds injured. AL claimed that thousands of its workers were either killed or injured, demanding proper inquiry and punishment of the culprits. BNP government took no notice of that massive human suffering and instead, as is being done now by the ruling party, blamed the AL for violence against BNP and its front bodies. (We covered the story in great details and came under severe criticism of the then BNP government).

It is now well established that our political parties are much too callous or even deliberately misleading about figures. They seem to believe that making astounding claims is far more effective than credible ones, and winning over a gullible public is far more important than convincing serious observers of political events, including the independent media. Thus we saw BNP holding a press briefing on May 6, 2013 and claiming that thousands of Hefajat activists died, and that "genocide" occurred on the night of the of May 5, a claim that Hefajat itself did not make about its own people.

The most likely future scenario will be that no serious and credible investigation will be done by Sheikh Hasina's government about the accusations made by the BNP chief and the latter will become subject of vicious attacks by the ruling party henchmen. Contrarily, we might see fast track legal proceedings against the BNP chief and her son.

Here we would like to recall the attempted assassination of Sheikh Hasina, the deaths of 24 AL leaders and workers that occurred on August 21, 2004, the killing of former finance minister SAMS Kibria, AL leader Ahsanullah Master, Advocate Manzurul Islam, former MP Mumtazuddin and many others whose deaths were never investigated by BNP governments and the real culprits never punished.

The question is will AL do the same, and perpetuate the cycle of miscarriage of justice that we have been seeing for last two decades under our two present leaders?

It hardly requires much thinking to say that it should not be so. Over the years what Shiekh Hasina and Khaleda Zia -- our two leaders who have ruled this country uninterruptedly for the last 21 years -- have failed to realise is that the partisan use of the law enforcement agencies and the legal machinery has, more than anything else, destroyed public confidence in the fairness of our legal process. When people lose faith in a country's laws and in the legal process then we are talking about a fundamental malaise which, in time, may threaten the very survival of that society.

In conclusion, we would like to firmly state that regardless of possible exaggeration by the opposition many deaths have actually occurred both in political violence and at the hands of the law enforcement agencies. Just as petrol bombing by the BNP and Jamaat activists has killed many innocent people (the BNP chief was shamefully silent about them in the press statement) so have many died at the hands of the law enforcers. Both these instances need to be and should be investigated. This should be done simply to make Bangladesh a better country to live in. We urge Sheikh Hasina's government to make a significant shift from the past and seriously investigate the accusations made, take fair and appropriate actions that are needed and restore public faith in the legal process and in the law enforces, both of which are now very low.

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The politician's version of a Ponzi scheme



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

slogged through so much proverbial mud and never before democracy looked so remote in this country. In the past we have had democracies. In the past we have had dictatorships. But this time it's different. A government has broken a few eggs to make an omelet.

The omelet in question is the half-hearted election of January 5. Just to recap the shortcomings, the main opposition party abstained from this election. Then half the parliament members are oxymoronic because they got elected without an election. The election of the other half has been at best marginal as voter turnout ranged from pathetic to poor.

If you throw in the false votes and other manipulations, this election has been a curious concoction. The political circus of Hussein Muhammad Ershad made the dog and pony show even juicier. But the absurd parliament brings us the punch line because the opposition also sits in the government! As a matter of fact, the opposition is working so closely with the government that one can't tell the difference. For example, the chairman of the opposition is on the payroll of the leader of the parliament!

This country has seen sham elections before. We have had dictators whose rise to power was less than kosher. In that sense, this government's claim to glory is that it has come to power at least through a semblance of an election. Then why are people curious to know how long this government is going to last? And why does it matter how long it does, if it does?

This election has left people with an incomplete gustatory lateralisation. Since 1990 people have lived in the hope that democracy was a phenomenon waiting to happen. It took people a number of years to build the taste for it. The leaders understood it better than the people in the early days of Bangladesh, and it was easier to sell democ-

THE question that everybody in this country would like to ask and nobody would like to answer is how long this government is going to stay in power. It's not about taking a position with one crazy-quilt of alliance or another, but this question persists on both sides. The ruling side aspires to endure in power, while the estranged opposition is determined to remove it from there. Never before politics

racy to people because they were already heady with the joy of independence. The transition from subjugation to freedom was sufficiently absorbing for them.

Then people slowly got introduced to the idea of democracy, not in mere words but also in action. The mass uprising of 1990 that toppled a dictator played for the first time the action-packed drama of democracy on the big screen. It was a turning point in our history because people, so long familiar with a political jargon, also learned to appreciate its meaning.

The terrain of democracy has been rugged since then, and every five years the struggle culminated in disputed elections. But this nation was able to pick up where it left off every time, running with the torch of hope that democracy was inevitable once the teething pains were gone. In 2014, people have stumbled in that journey, their optimism shaken to its core.

Also, the table has turned after 42 years. People now have a better understanding of democracy than their leaders. It's a different story that they don't have the power to influence outcomes. In the past when military juntas seized power, they resigned to despair because they thought they had no business in the matter of who ruled the country. The people were more interested in the keeper than the usurper, little concerned that most of the time both were the same entity.

Interestingly, when people ask how long this government is going to last it's not because they're interested in one alliance or another. It's rather because they feel deprived. Not only has a national election eluded them, but it has also robbed democracy in its inner sanctuary.

When the dictators subverted democracy in the past, it only strengthened people's resolve to strive harder for it. When democracy faltered between elections in the past, it stoked up their ambition to fix the problems. But this time it's different, different because people have been exposed to a grievous contradiction. The government of the people, by the people and for the people has the spurious taste of a vegetable curry without the vegetables.

The ruling party vows to stay in power for five years and the opposition vows to unseat the government as soon as possible. In this tussle democracy stands farthest from its destination, because it's the politicians' version of a Ponzi scheme. Never before has a miniscule minority, who voted in an election, has so manifestly swindled the significant majority who didn't.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Punish those RU BCL cadres

General students of RU were just protesting against fees hike and introduction of evening shift. They can do so, as it is their democratic right to protest. The university authorities can not just take such important decisions without the consent of majority students. Since police are to protect law and discipline, they can try to control the agitating students. But how dare they, along with BCL cadres, open fire on the general students? Who provides BCL cadres with illegal arms? We firmly condemn it. Please arrest the criminal students of BCL and punish them severely. **Noman Khandoker**
Student of BBA
SUST

Include mumps vaccine in EPI

Measles, Mumps and Rubella -- all these three diseases are very contagious and common in our country. The ill effects of these diseases as well as their complications are so severe that people who suffered from these diseases can well remember their hazards e.g. mumps has very bad complications including inflammation of testes in males and ovaries in females as a result of which many people in our country suffer from sterility in the long run, but to our utter disappointment our Health Department did not include the mumps vaccine in the Expanded Programme of Immunization (EPI), rather they have included only measles and rubella vaccines in their vaccination programme. If the government added the mumps vaccination to the programme, thousands of children, especially the underprivileged, could have preventive measures against this contagious disease. So, our earnest request to the government is to include mumps vaccine i.e. MMR vaccines instead of MR vaccines in EPI.

Dr. Ahmad Munir Hussain, MBBS
Medical Officer
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JNU dorms under illegal occupation

We are the students of Jagannath University. We got admitted to this university after competing with thousands of other students, but we are deprived of basic facilities here. Although JNU have twelve dormitories, those have been occupied by grabbers. The JNU administration failed to recover the dormitories from the grip of grabbers. We urge the authorities to take proper steps to free our dormitories from illegal occupation. The government should help our university in doing so.

Rafikul Islam
Mass Communication and Journalism department
JNU, Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Victim punished, accused spared," published on February 04, 2014

Abdus Samad

Women's rights organisations have neither the resources nor the inclination to work for exploited and vulnerable women in rural areas. Bangladesh do means its 68,000 villages and empowerment of women in those areas is critically important. I recall that the High Court did ban the issuance of this type of indiscriminate fatwas and yet it doesn't stop. Laws alone won't change anything. We have to start teaching our youngsters that it's vital to treat women with fairness, equality and justice.

Akhtar Shah

State should now take up the issue of the child's (a 13 year old is one) wellbeing. Let the Law take its own course. The media should also be alive to the issue to ensure that the complaint of the wronged is not swept under the carpet. It's a pity that none of the political or especially religious parties condemn such acts of barbarism. The fatwa deliverer should face the law and if found guilty, be punished.

Touchstone

This is always the case: blame the victim of rape. In this day and age the paternity can easily be determined by DNA testing in order to bring the culprit to book.

Ibrahim Zaman

Rezaul should be awarded the maximum possible punishment under the laws that may apply in this case. Simultaneously, the state should ensure the security of the mother and her to-be born child with its full capacity. But a question will still remain: what will be the ultimate fate of these two? Will our society ever become generous enough to accept the victims as innocents?

"BCL men clash in presence of minister" (February 04, 2014)

Mofi

So what? Ministers are no more important than BCL, are they? Moreover, most of these ministers were BCL members when they were students. Therefore, it's just a little bit of naughtiness by the juniors.

Barkat

Even their own party juniors neither care nor respect the ministers and MPs.