

The meaning of the Dhanmondi playground fiasco

ADNAN MORSHED

THE Dhanmondi Club's Faustian bargain has ended. The club's sneaky scheme to profit by exploiting the Prime Minister's soft spot has ultimately failed. There is nothing more gratifying than seeing the rights of the people upheld. It was a fight between "elite" Goliaths and environmentally conscious Davids.

The story, however, has a crucial subtext. It signaled the transition of land-grabbing to the next generation of devils.

In the last two decades or so, we have witnessed how political mafia and business communities grabbed public lands under the cover of the dark or from behind a curtain of secrecy. Their bullying tactic has been audacious, yet quietly deployed under the table. They filled up rivers, lakes, and wetlands, while rarely showing their face. They planted signposts to mark off their occupied lands, but they seldom came to the front. This is how the Jamuna Group, Bashundhara group, or other real-estate giants have occupied land in Ashulia, Khilkhet, and other areas. These groups cast a comprehensive net of deception, secrecy, opacity, bribing, intimidation, and silent terror to seize land. In short, their modus operandi has generally been to occupy land by hook or by crook, while remaining invisible.

The Dhanmondi Club offers a perspective-altering new model. The club has transitioned to a new tactic of open bullying. It tried to rob a popular public playfield in broad daylight, while the whole country and media looked on. The club owners call themselves "elite" and claim that they have received historic mandate to occupy the playground. Besides, the people of the city were too unimportant to have access to an urban luxury like an open field in an ultra-congested city like Dhaka.

The self-declared oligarchy's neat Victorian classification of society into elite and "tokai" was presented with complete



indifference, as if this is how the world is meant to be. And the public better get used to it. Their world is vertically polarized. From above, the elite would rightfully enjoy all kinds of social benefits. Below, the non-elite would toil all day to make ends meet. When is there time for the lowly people to play tennis and squash anyway? To invoke the military dictator Ayub Khan to grab a piece of land in the middle of the city not only suggests monumental insensitivity to the history of Bengali nationalism, but also presents, most intriguingly, audacity as a new tactic to intimidate the public. There was a "Nero fiddled while Rome burnt" moment in the Dhanmondi Club's elitist narrative. This is likely to begin a dangerous trend.

Bangladesh's neo-oligarchy's plotting of a self-serving Gilded Age—in which the rich and powerful would claim elite status to demand impossible perks—will have a devastating effect on the quality of public urban life and, more broadly, on the environment of the country.

The confrontation between the self-declared elite and the public would revolve a great deal around competing demands on land. This friction will continue to worsen for two key reasons: Bangladesh is a land-scarce country and

lacks rule of law. According to some projections, Bangladesh will become an urban-majority country by 2030. The demand for accessible urban land will skyrocket. Oligarchs would try to occupy as much land as possible and develop it to maximize profit, inflicting an irreversible damage on the environment. They themselves would not need any public place or green parks in Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi, or Jessore, because they would go to Singapore, Barcelona, or Florida to vacation. The absence of rule of law and resulting disorder would work in their favor. As history teaches us, a chaotic country with a non-functioning judiciary has often been a fertile breeding ground for a greedy, immoral oligarchy. The public would have less and less access to natural resources and outdoor spaces.

If there is no paradigm-shift in policy thinking, we are surely heading toward a new Gilded Age, in which income and social inequality would take Bangladesh's environment to a point of no return. Alas, this is already happening. For example, Dhaka's 20 percent vegetation cover in 1989 has decreased to 7.3 percent in 2010.

The French economist Thomas Piketty's Capital in the Twenty-First Century

(2014) proves instructive. He shows that society is in fact returning to a new Gilded Age, one that is marked by the rise of an oligarchy whose power rests on inherited wealth. This top 1% would not really create jobs, but peddle political influence based on their static wealth.

Consider Piketty's argument in the context of Bangladesh. What the Dhanmondi Club's owners are doing is not entrepreneurial. They are just creating a little oasis for their patrons, depriving the people of everyday life (which also includes both the rich and the poor) of their right to public places. The club owners are exercising power based on their outsized sense of entitlement. They believe they have more rights than others simply because they are elite. No democratic society can thrive when a deviant oligarchy feels they are above the law. A functioning judiciary must dispel the public fear that some people are beyond the reach of law.

In their recent book The Locust Effect (2014), Gary A. Haugen and Victor Boutros give us compelling advice. Poverty alleviation isn't enough. Violence and the culture of fear must end for a democratic society to move forward. Economic growth wouldn't mean much, unless people feel that a basic order drives their society and justice is available for all. Although it would be an unfair comparison between developed and developing economies, a parallel look at two distant places may paint a useful picture. Washington, DC, invests about \$850 per person per year on police, as opposed to Bangladesh's \$1.5 per person per year on police. Without proper institutions to maintain basic order in society, predatory elites will gobble everything up. And the public space will continue to diminish. Seeing the Dhanmondi Playground ultimately reclaimed for the public gives us a glimmer of hope.

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The people deserve better

SHAKHAWAT LITON

WE the people of Bangladesh feel proud of President Abdul Hamid because of the mode of his election to the presidency. His uncontested election to the highest constitutional office was acceptable to all including the opposition. He was elected to the office of the president by the Ninth Parliament which was constituted through a widely acclaimed parliamentary polls held in December 2008. So, he is now the lone individual who has assumed a constitutional office without any controversy over his election. The present parliament, the prime minister and ministers can in no way claim similar honour because they are the products of a controversial and voter-less parliamentary election. Therefore, it will not be an exaggeration to say that it is only President Hamid who is now the lone but true representative of the people. And it will not be unusual for people to expect him to do something for them and to speak for them. The present situation in the country has further enhanced people's expectations from him.

President Abdul Hamid, who has a long political career and deep link with grassroots people, seems to have opted for silence about the prevailing situation. His latest remarks, however, are very interesting. He has completed one year in Bangabhaban on April 23. On that occasion he talked to some selected journalists attached to the Bangabhaban, on April 26. According to a news report run by BSS, Hamid has said that the regulated and relatively secluded life of Bangabhaban has not always been 'pleasurable' as it debarred him from the usual socialization with people at the grassroots. "I don't feel good here, whatever good food you give to a caged bird, the feeling would not be like a bird in the wild. In fact, I find no personal or private life here."

The President has also spoken about his long political career, previous relation with grassroots people and his experiences as the Speaker. However, going through the BSS report it is difficult to find any word he has said about the current situation and about people's anxiety. He did not say anything about his plans to do something in the coming days. He has just expressed his personal feelings. But people want to hear from him something substantive from which they can take heart and feel that their president is speaking for them. Deterioration in law and order including unabated abduction and forced disappearances has put people in a state of anxiety. The President did not speak about it. We do not know whether he has advised the government to take necessary measures to ensure people's security. Instead, what he said about his life at Bangabhaban does very little to cheer the people up.

In his first year in office, people had expected the President to play a role in overcoming the political crisis centring on the last parliamentary election. The BNP-led opposition alliance leaders under leadership of Khaleda Zia and some civil society members had met him and requested him to take steps to overcome the political deadlock. The CEC and his colleagues had also met him and requested him to take steps to ensure participation of all the political parties in the parliamentary polls. But he did nothing to bring to bear the weight of the president's office to address the situation. The results were not good for the country. We had to witness a controversial and voter-less parliamentary election held amid a boycott by the BNP-led alliance. We have a unique parliament which is without a genuine opposition. And it is impossible for us to expect that this current parliament will function effectively to ensure good governance and welfare of the people.

We all know the President's constitutional limitations. He has no executive power. In the parliamentary form of the government, the real executive power is with the prime minister and the cabinet. Yet, none can bar the president's office to do something for the betterment of the people and to speak for their welfare. As the president, Abdul Hamid is head of the State and he takes precedence over all other persons in Bangladesh. Many people term the president as custodian of the State. Analysing the constitutional provisions on the president's powers and functions, constitutional expert and former attorney general Mahmudul Islam in his book titled "Constitutional Law of Bangladesh" writes that the president is entitled to be informed by the prime minister on matter of domestic and foreign matters. The constitution empowers him to request the prime minister to submit any matter for the consideration of the cabinet. A man of high stature, integrity and experience holding the office of the President can exert great influence on the executive government by way of advice and counseling and play a great role in building a bridge between the government and the opposition, writes the former attorney general.

The people of Bangladesh are looking at a future that remains uncertain. As a seasoned politician, the President knows only too well what he should do for his people who deserve much better than what they have got.

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Reconnecting with the US

SARWAR JAHAN CHOWDHURY

BANGLADESH and the US have just completed the 3rd US-Bangladesh Security Dialogue. Notwithstanding the remark by some of our cabinet ministers, the US-Bangladesh relation seems to be on the path to recovery. This is important for both the countries. The US wants constructive engagement with the moderate Muslim majority countries of Asia and Africa. Preventing the spread of global terrorism and strategic understanding are the foremost agendas in case of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh needs to reestablish the cordiality that existed until couple of years back for various reasons. There are some contemptuous anti-Bangladesh comments by the controversial BJP prime ministerial candidate which has transcended mere rhetoric. It's almost a certainty now that the BJP led NDA would be back in power after a decade, riding on fervor strangely mixed with chauvinistic belligerence and slogans of development.

The US has been, and still is, the lone super power, the only one exerting great influence almost all over the world including South Asia and Indian Ocean region. By and large, this most powerful democracy of the world has a certain clear foreign policy and geo-strategic principles. The smaller and weaker nations all around the world look up to the US for their direct or implicit security guarantee and preservation of their vital interests. The US does what it can, basing on its principles and policies.

Coming back to the security dialogue-

all the issues discussed in it are of great importance. Our government has able to contain terrorism quite successfully with special effort put behind this. But there is no scope for complacency. Existence of splinter terrorist groups discovered last year and the daring snatching of convicted senior JMB figures vindicate the view that the fight against terror isn't over yet. Persistence and vigilance would be necessary for many years to come to see the end of this phenomenon. US help would be imperative in technical and intelligence assistance. Many of the terror groups in Bangladesh are foreign funded. The US agencies have special expertise in tracking the sources of finance of terrorism.

Defence/security cooperation was on the agenda. Often, our politicians, mainstream media and even the intelligentsia fail to comprehend the essence and the immense utility of it. Strangely, some quarters starts raising the issue of sovereignty etc. This is absurd. So many developed nations around the world have US military formations and equipment to strengthen their national defence or to attain their strategic position. Closer defence cooperation with the US should be welcomed.

Other agendas of the dialogue cover several important issues. Americans have great disaster management capacity. As they extend their hand of cooperation in this arena we should make maximum use of it in terms of receiving physical, material, knowledge and training assistance. Apart from US Marine's interest in the post cyclone disaster management in the coastal belt of Bangladesh, we now have seen the US Army's interest in disaster management in the urban centers. They are already working on 'Mega City' concept

which is essentially disaster management preparation for Dhaka in case of earthquake, big fire outbreak, city flooding etc.

Bangladesh is already a leading member in UN peacekeeping effort worldwide and Bangladeshi peacekeepers have established great reputation in peacekeeping with their touch of humility despite being in uniform and with weapon. This has rendered a great sense of satisfaction as the peacekeepers work for building invaluable peace on troubled countries. The participation provides our officers and soldiers with great exposure and practical experience. This has also done great branding for Bangladesh in addition. US support is crucial for continuing Bangladeshi contribution in the UN peacekeeping effort.

America needs global presence, engagement and alliances and we need closer American friendship more than any time in the recent past. US strategic alliance with India isn't a natural alliance per se, as the Indians have their own designs beyond what US envisions. Eventually, for the US, India will be more of a competitor than an ally in the region. The Americans know that.

The successful US-Bangladesh Security Dialogue and the continuation of cooperation from it would help clear the air between two old tested friends - Bangladesh and the US. Bangladesh may be a small junior partner, but surely there are multiple mutual benefits of considerable value of this partnership. Our policy makers should to grasp this reality quickly.

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QUOTABLE Quote
It is better to lead from behind and to put others in front, especially when you celebrate victory when nice things occur. You take the front line when there is danger. Then people will appreciate your leadership.
Nelson Mandela

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

- ACROSS
1 Skewered dishes
7 Coffee, in slang
11 Asimov classic
12 Looked over
13 Filling levels
15 Contest form
16 Radiator part
18 Shade trees
21 Feature of some '50s cars
22 Parking attendants
24 Louvre fill
25 Toast spread
26 Carnival city
27 Brewing need
29 Formal salutation
30 Take turns
31 "West Side Story" gang
32 Full range
34 Accountant's arrangements
40 Aid in crime
41 Cotton pest
42 Hard at work
43 Swift
- DOWN
1 First aid case
2 Importation
3 Carton
4 Convent head
5 Carried
6 RBI or ERA
7 Hyde's counterpart
8 Seaman's answer
9 Old hand
10 TV spots
14 Coffee add-in
16 Employes
17 Like some beer
19 Deserve
20 Mixes up
21 Dieter's no-no
22 Brewer's sight
23 Sinking signal
25 He was swallowed by a great fish
28 Messy room
29 Sofa's cousin
31 Minty drink
33 Cat comments
35 -- Dhabi
36 Dhaki at ballot
37 Second person
38 Relieve
39 Cunning

Yesterday's answer

TOAST DWARF
INLAW RADII
MAPLE EXAMS
ARCAPS MET
OVERPASS
DAVY TEAPOT
ONICE DIRGE
RELATE LOLA
PASSOVER
AFT GEAR
QUAKE SCRAP
UNDER HAITI
ADAGE APPLE

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

DID YOU GET SARGE TO CENSOR HIS LANGUAGE, CHAPLAIN? YES
I EVEN GOT HIM TO CLEAN UP HIS THOUGHTS
GREG + MORT WALKER

HENRY by Don Trachte

MILLINERY DEPT.
A FEATHER IN YOUR HAT MAKES YOU LOOK TEN YEARS YOUNGER!
HENRY

CRYPTOQUOTE
CPHYQVEXHYQEDRDKDU FVDAWUDCEW.D KWA VS DO
ALW CYQDOK XOZ D KY AY NWZ XA ODKLA. DO
NWAMWVO, DJYJVPSPUWEH XU NWUA DJXO.
-- JXQP KQXOA
Yesterday's Cryptoquote: IN THE SPRING, AT THE END OF THE DAY, YOU SHOULD SMELL LIKE DIRT.
-- MARGARET ATWOOD