

# Demonising dissenters: Dead or alive

## New low in Bangladesh politics

C R ABRAR

THIS week has marked an important watershed in Bangladesh's fast eroding political culture. The universal norm of respecting the dead not only fell short, but sunk to a new low when a diatribe was orchestrated against a dead professor who held non-conformist views of society and politics, and was bold enough to express them in no uncertain terms. As the friends and well-wishers of the deceased planned a befitting farewell at the central Shaheed Minar, they also became targets of the tirade and was declared persona non-grata at the Shaheed Minar by these self-proclaimed guardians of the spirit of war of national liberation.

Such desecration of the dead and moves to demonise intellectuals signal ominous portent for Bangladesh's already tensed and fractured political mores. A new form of bigotry is gaining ground and its protagonists, supported by the ruling party and its cohorts, have been blatant in pursuing their agenda. Their main purpose is to terrorize the few remaining intellectuals who do not subscribe the views of the establishment, but also dare to challenge them in talk shows of various television channels and op-eds in newspapers.

As a backdrop of unfolding of these events one needs to understand the psyche of those in the authority and their henchmen. In a situation where the parliament has been made dysfunctional, opposition political parties virtually decimated through use of brute force and litigation, administration neatly lined up along partisan lines and large segment of the media and the civil society insti-

tutions brought successfully under control, it is the handful wayward talk-showwals who are misleading the public. In the absence of any meaningful platform to debate and discuss on politics and policies of the government that affect the ordinary folks it was these talk-shows and op-eds that provided the citizenry with important insights and critical perspectives and helped shape their opinion. Media analysts are in agreement that although aired in ungodly hours, these talk shows draw the largest audience and significantly improve the TRP ratings.

This is not the first time that that the deceased professor and some among the group of intellectuals have come under attack. Senior functionaries of the state, including the chief executive, were candid in expressing their disapproval of the late night talk-shows, occasionally on the floors of the parliament. The recently sacked Minister in his last public appearance in New York was contemptuous and obnoxious in expressing his opinion of the talk show "night birds".

One does not need to be a well versed in Bangladesh public policy making to conclude that a plethora of media related laws that have been and are being framed by the Ministry of Information are essentially directed to curb freedom of expression, the core human right acknowledged universally and reiterated in the constitution of the country. This assault on individuals who hold views contrary to the ruling elite is nothing but palpable expression of intolerance and prejudice. It therefore undermines the cardinal tenet of a democratic order: the right to dissent.

Bereft of decency and civility, the recent act against late Professor Piash Karim and decree against the group of intellectuals is a worrisome trend. It augurs a new wave of hatred and revulsion to ideas, ideologies and political positions that may appear to be threatening to the current political dispensation.

The guiding precept to deal with

such claims. One declaration is enough to mobilise an ensemble of supporters to taint the identity of the concerned individual. Even active participation in the war of national liberation is no guarantee to ensure immunity from such labeling. There are scores of examples to cite.

The detractors have conveniently shunned the fact and the logic that it



such individuals is to harm their reputation and the easiest technique is to brand them as razzakars (collaborators of the Pakistan occupation army). If that becomes difficult to peddle (i.e., for consideration of age), then label their parents or grandparents to be razzakars. One does not need to provide evidence to back up

was the ideals of freedom, rights and liberty that Shaheed Minar epitomizes that made the family and friends of the deceased to consider taking his mortal remains to that monument. If the deceased or his companions were against what the Shaheed Minar stands for why would they select the site for bidding final

farewell? In all fairness therefore, one may surmise that those who opposed Piash's body to be taken to the Minar themselves were undermining the great ideals that the language movement and the war of liberation stood for, and that they did for petty political gains.

One would hold the custodian of the Shaheed Minar the Dhaka University authority responsible for pandering to the irrational demand of a section of student leadership. Their public endorsement of the demand was an affront to the sentiment of the family and friends of the deceased and contributed to the unpleasant turn of events centering the funeral. The Proctor of the University has a case to answer as to how groups who did not take permission secured their position at the Shaheed Minar to spew out invective against the deceased professor and other intellectuals.

The responsibility also falls on the leadership of political parties whose student fronts were involved in the reprehensible act. After all, the so-called leaders of the student fronts were not elected by their rank and file, they were hand picked by the mighty leaders of their mother parties and thus the latter should be held equally accountable for the misdeeds. It is gratifying to note at least one member of the Cabinet picked up the courage to give his version about the role of Piash's family in 1971 that differed from that of his attackers.

Responsibility also lies on the much decorated and revered public intellectuals who in the past had taken bold stands and high moral grounds on various social and political issues. One wondered what kept

them silent this time when a section of their fraternity is subjected to such monstrous and unfair attacks. Is it because they also tacitly endorse the position of the detractors and their modes of character assassination, innuendoes and intimidation? If issuance of fatwa declaring someone a Murtad (disbeliever) by a religious bigot is offensive and amounts to criminal act, so is declaring an individual persona non grata to Shaheed Minar on grounds of being 'intellectual prostitute'. This silence of the conscience keepers of the nation at this critical time reveals that they do not deserve the high pedestal where they find themselves in. One is also perplexed at the stark stillness of the rights activists and women's organizations who are not moved by the actions of this self-proclaimed interpreters of spirit of the war of national liberation. It also appears that ink of liberal editors have also gone dry. History will not absolve the complicity of these people with the neo-bigots.

All these acts of omission to condemn the attack on the dignity of human person will contribute to breeding of a culture of impunity for the perpetrators and further erode values of shomman, shohabosthan and shohishnuta (respect, co-existence and tolerance) that are essential for a democratic polity. History has provided us with umpteen examples of tragedies that befall on societies and states where dissent is quashed and angels of freedoms fear to tread.

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# Time to value girls and end rape culture

MARIE SOPHIE PETERSSON and FARIA SHABNAM

The key to change is reversing the system of silence - challenging dominant violent men, endorsing in-laws, unsupportive parents, judgmental community members and a legal system of impunity and victim-blaming. While the blame for rape must go to the rapist, everyone else who does not speak up against rape is effectively endorsing rape culture.

ROKEYA, one of seven children, studied only up to class 5 since her grandfather feared she was at risk of rape in school being an attractive girl. At 12, Rokeya's first marriage was arranged with a 22-year-old man who abandoned her after only 13 months. At 15, Rokeya left home to take a job in a garments factory. A single girl, living alone, she faced sexual harassment and returned home. Her father confined her to the house to protect his honour. At 18, Rokeya was married again, this time to a 60-year-old man with six children. His first wife soon died, leaving Rokeya to care for them all. Rokeya had six children with him. She tried taking birth control but her husband disapproved and beat her up. Later he abandoned her. With nowhere to go, Rokeya migrated to Dhaka. There, she was tricked into prostitution and trapped in a hotel room with her children for three days. She was given no food or water while men came to sexually assault her. Rokeya took her children out of school, sold all her assets and resorted to begging. Still she was not safe on the streets. As a single mother, men would often ask Rokeya and her teenage daughters for sexual favours.

Do we want more stories like Rokeya's in Amader Shonar Bangladesh? Bangladesh is on track for attaining middle income country status. There is a growing private sector and our government is committed to eradicating extreme poverty. Bangladesh is a front runner in boosting women's empowerment in South Asia. Look at girls' enrolment in

school, engagement of women in microfinance, awareness of family planning and creation of jobs for women in the booming garments sector. Bangladesh is well on track for achieving the 3rd Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of promoting women's empowerment and gender equality.

This is all good. But other statistics are alarming. A BBS and UNFPA (2011) nationwide survey revealed that about nine out of ten (87%) husbands abuse their wives. One-third of married women report rape by their husbands. One percent of women respondents claim a family member had committed suicide due to domestic violence. Widespread violence against women remains a key unresolved issue holding back 50% of the population, especially women in extreme poor families.

The earlier a girl gets married off against her will, the more likely she is to become a victim of rape by her own husband because she is too young to consent to the sex her husband demands. 30% of women in rural Bangladesh reported that their first sexual experience was forced (World Health Organization, 2012). Married girls often become pregnant as early as her husband and in-laws demand it.

Many girls entering their teenage years are seen as economic burdens to their parents. Once a girl gets married off, sold by her parents for a cheap dowry, she is 'owned' by her husband and moves in with the in-laws. She has no protection against violence. She becomes voiceless. These are the risks faced by two-thirds of women in Bangladesh aged 20-24 who were married before the age of 18 (Plan and ICDDRDB 2013).

Violence affects both the female victim and her children. Several studies have shown that a mother's experience of domestic violence may lead to behavioural risks (e.g. smoking, alcohol or drug use), as well as a range of negative consequences: psychological (anxiety, depression), physical (injury, disability, fatigue) and nutritional (anaemia, poor weight gain). These factors all directly impact a children's welfare. Children exposed to domestic violence have poorer health and cognitive development (Holden 2003). Domestic violence during pregnancy can lead to: delivery complications, impaired fetal growth, low birth weight, post-natal depression, and impaired ability to breastfeed and child malnutrition. These factors often continue to negatively impact children into their adolescence, e.g. through growth retardation.

We asked women about their opinion and experience of gender-based violence. In the North West, Malati said "a husband can rebuke his wife if she spoils food while cooking or if she defies her husband's orders or requests". Gouri believes that husbands are superior to their wives and wives should be under their control. Madhabi viewed that a husband can rebuke his wife if she makes mistakes, refuses to show obedience to him, or goes outside their home without his permission.

In the majority of cases, survivors of rape and violence have no means to object. If they do, they are likely to be outcast, stigmatised and abused by their parents, in-laws, husband and community. If they have the courage to report the violence, the legal system is likely to consider it their own fault.

Reports show that the majority of female prisoners in Bangladesh are women who reported different kinds of violence (forced marriage, rape, domestic violence, forced prostitution, sex trafficking) and were treated as criminals. This happens despite the Domestic Violence Act implemented in 2010 with the aim to protect female survivors of violence.

Many girls remain silent, trapped in a vicious circle of ever more violence should they object or resist. Studies have shown that as coping mechanisms many women start blaming themselves. Many use religion either to seek comfort or to justify the injustice against them, seeing it as a punishment from God.

Let us stop this silence. Let girls speak up, report violence and become educated breadwinners free from fear. However, women's increased mobility and participation in the workforce has come at a cost. The more educated girls and women are and if they are breadwinners, the more likely they are to become victims of violence. Some argue that this happens due to perceptions that educated working women pose a threat to male authorities in their lives. Thus too many women remain uneducated, unskilled housewives. Such life destinies are to the detriment of the life opportunities and future well-being of both the girls themselves and their children. But it is also preventing extreme poor families and the entire nation from fulfilling 50% of its economic and intellectual potential.

The key to change is reversing the system of silence - challenging dominant violent men, endorsing in-laws, unsupportive parents, judgmental

community members and a legal system of impunity and victim-blaming. While the blame for rape must go to the rapist, everyone else who does not speak up against rape is effectively endorsing rape culture.

Crucially, men must stand up and promote non-violent, non-dominant models of masculine behaviour which value women and girls as equals. We need fathers, husbands and in-laws to allow girls to consent to marriage, sex and having children. Girls need the freedom to educate themselves and contribute to the economy side by side with men and boys free from fear of disapproval or violence.

Many NGOs, government and donor supported projects show the violence against women and girls can be stopped through counselling and awareness raising with entire families and communities. A solution is possible. It needs to be replicated and scaled up across the extreme poor villages of Bangladesh.

These problems and solutions need to be captured in the UN Women Background Paper on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment for the 7th five Year Plan, and in the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals. These are both in alignment with the Bangladesh Poverty Reduction Strategy and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to which Bangladesh is a signatory. Let us all keep Rokeya's heart-breaking story in our minds and let it drive us to say "no more, ar na".

The writers are Gender Adviser and Programme Analyst and Nutrition Coordinator at (EEP)/Shiree, respectively.

QUOTABLE Quote  
The will to win, the desire to succeed, the urge to reach your full potential... these are the keys that will unlock the door to personal excellence.  
Confucius

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph  
ACROSS  
1 Tall boot  
6 Scour  
11 Higher than  
12 Lead to  
13 Model sticker  
14 Frequently  
15 Powerless  
17 Reservoir maker  
19 Young fellow  
20 Silent  
23 Frittata  
25 Game for the gentry  
26 Sanctions, e.g.  
28 Villa d'-  
29 Full grown  
30 Word of accord  
31 Jelly holder  
32 Spring month  
33 Serve a sentence  
35 Wheel tender  
38 Keyed up  
41 Find darling  
42 Showy flower  
43 Eccentric  
44 Power beam  
DOWN  
1 Gum mass  
2 Homer's dad  
3 Official papers  
4 Writer Hunter  
5 Feels empathy  
6 Bowl out  
7 Lunch spot  
8 Tire track  
9 Try out  
10 Writer Jonson  
16 Tub-side item  
17 Happy colleague  
18 Tickle  
20 Obelisks, e.g.  
21 Extreme  
22 Saunter  
24 Tell tales  
25 Favorite  
27 Kind of bliss  
31 Not serious  
33 Move quickly  
34 Monument Valley sight  
35 Blue  
36 Fuss  
37 Write hastily  
39 Spot  
40 Go astray

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER  
CRYPTOQUOTE 8-27  
PQZWAF QZ KAV C TNAWEGV AS ZGLAADFKO HEV AS VLR FQSRFAKO CVMRDIVVA CGYEQRQV.  
-- CFHRNV RQKZVRQK  
Yesterday's Cryptoquote: THE ONLY USEFUL THING I EVER LEARNED IN SCHOOL WAS THAT IF YOU SPIT ON YOUR ERASER IT WILL ERASE INK.  
- DORTHY PARKER

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER  
STALE WEST  
TEBOW HARPO  
OLIVE ERROR  
KALE ARMORS  
EVE ALI LEO  
RINGLETS  
VEAL ANTS  
SINGLETS  
SEA NEE NAP  
OLDHAT CAPE  
FIDEL SABLE  
ATOLL OGLE  
REND LEERY  
A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW  
One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

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