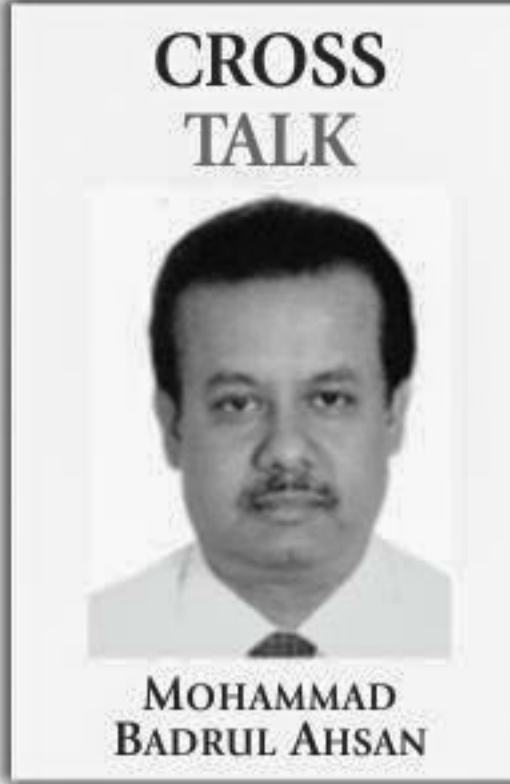


The Teflon republic



MOHAMMAD
BADRUL AHSAN

CROSS TALK
LATE US president Ronald Reagan was called "The Teflon President" by his detractors to reflect on how a number of scandals surrounding his presidency seemingly had no effect on his individual popularity with the public. The phrase was coined by Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder, who derived it from Teflon, the brand name for a non-stick chemical used on cookware popularised by

American chemical company DuPont. Sitting on the other extreme of the Teflon spectrum are the wretched people of this country. Scandals, slanders and all things shocking committed by their leaders, businessmen and public officials don't appear to stick to them.

That perhaps explains the great futility, which characterises our social dynamics. The TIB trumpets, NGOs natter, civic groups criticise and individual citizens intellectualise, yet nothing works to stanch the hemorrhage. Corruption is conspicuous, crime is copious, mischief is mundane, greed is growing, and lawlessness is limitless. This nation goes through an absurd exercise of writing its rules and erasing them at once.

In other words, thesis and antithesis are compounded into every single function. Leaders are laggards, teachers are cheaters, police are profligate, bureaucrats are bullies, scholars are shallow, wise are wicked and professionals are perfunctory. And each of these pairs of opposites is also equally true in reverse.

That gives us a lockstep of contradictions: One foot forward is offset by one step backward. The surging tide of national interests is held back by the undertow of parochial interests. Every motion is crippled by stagnation. All in all, this is a society that enunciates right and wrong in the same breath. It does that with an equanimity leading to a stasis.

This stasis has the effect of rowing a boat tied to the pier. There is a great deal of efforts going into it and we are making a great commotion in the water with our oars, oblivious to the fact that the boat may not be going anywhere. Everyday workshops, seminars, newspaper columns, television talk shows, political rallies, court verdicts, statements, comments, screams and shouts are generating so much steam, yet the engine doesn't cough to life.

The law of motion is that an object at rest stays at

rest and an object continues in motion until an external force acts on it. Both are simultaneously happening to us. What hasn't changed doesn't change. Our politics is its best example, our pathological passion for all things dubious being next. One may also throw in our complete disregard for the rule of law.

Again, what can be changed has been changed. Our economy has done well and living conditions have improved. Compared to 1971, everybody in this country is better fed, clad, and housed. Loin clothes are gone, mud huts have disappeared, and emaciated bodies scarred by hunger are hard to find.

This condition of half change and half constancy is comparable to that of a paraplegic. This nation has a vibrant upper half sitting on its vegetating lower half. It has the duality of the Janus masks, which are a set of two separate masks, one happy and one sad. It can also be compared to Ouroboros showing two snakes, each biting the other's tail.

This dichotomy amounts to the clinical condition of split personality when each part is dominant and controls behaviour in a bizarre neurosis. And that neurosis is apparent in each and every one of us, who don't practice what they preach. Hypocrisy at the lowest level, this state of mind is progressively deluding us. We don't say what we believe, and we don't believe what we say.

A top bureaucrat from the yesteryears has recently said that the police are now under political control. As much as he has stated the obvious, he has also understated it. Police in this

country have always been under political control so much as anything else. Bureaucracy has been under political control, trade and commerce have been under political control; teachers, students, doctors, lawyers, judges, singers, actors, journalists, and even beggars on the street are driven by partisan passion.

This is but an example of how we refuse to see the whole picture, truth trivialised in its truncated form. If we look at 43 years of independence, history has been like a mutilated body, everybody running with his or her choicest parts. This terrain is broken into pockets of influence instead of making a coherent whole because in so much as we are sticking together we are also falling apart in that struggle.

On the eve of yet another Victory Day, it's the Teflon that comes to mind. The leaders don't stick together; neither do the people. Nobody sticks to anything, and everything is in a state of fluid flow. In this Teflon republic, government sticks to election no more than power resides with people.

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CIA's odious torture tactics

Perpetrators must be held to account

THE revelations made by the US Senate Intelligence Committee about the cruel methods that the agents of CIA used to extract information from detained post-9/11 terror suspects have come as rude awakening for the world's conscience. It's hard to believe that this is from a nation that prides itself on being the leader of the free world and enlightens the rest of us about ideals of democracy, human rights and all that is lofty and noble. At one with the rest of the world, we have no words to express our shock and consternation over the report and demand that those responsible in the US government for the excesses so committed be brought to justice.

What is most reprehensible about the horrifying report is that the techniques of torture so devised by two CIA-funded psychologists served no other purpose than misinforming and misguiding the then-Bush administration about its perceived enemies. And the end result was that tens of thousands died and were maimed while millions of others underwent untold sufferings in unnecessary wars thrust upon countries like Afghanistan and Iraq. Worse yet, those wars spilled into neighbouring countries leaving its devastating impact on millions of unsuspecting others. It is none other than the US government of the time who must accept responsibility for the war crimes committed against those people.

The present US government cannot also wash its hands of the matter as it is yet to bring the perpetrators of the CIA-sponsored tortures on the prisoners to justice.

While condemning CIA's ghastly methods, we appeal to the international community, the International Criminal Court (ICC), in particular to prosecute the perpetrators and their mentors for their crimes against humanity.

LGED chief's audacious bid

He should face the consequence

THE LGED chief engineer's alleged bid to have an extension of his service through bribing LGRD minister with a luxury car is reprehensible. Needless to say, the luxury vehicle was purchased illegally with project money meant for developing primary education infrastructure. A front page report in Wednesday's issue of this paper provides the sordid details of what lowly tricks the LGED official in question has been resorting to just to enhance his position as well as to prolong his service. To say that one is outraged or shocked is not enough to describe the wickedness involved in such an effort at self-aggrandizement.

As the report goes, before this latest venture, this infamous LGED high-up submitted false freedom fighter's certificate to extend his service for three years, a fact that has been vindicated through an investigation conducted by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). One wonders, how, despite this scandalous track record, he has not only been continuing in his job unscathed but has also taken yet another audacious attempt to hang on to his position.

While being scathing in our critique of the LGED chief's highly corrupt practices, we are no less baffled at the failure of the law to hold this person to due account. Worse, how are we to explain the strange phenomenon that with such a despicable background this man is yet to fall from the LGRD minister's grace?

Evidently, corruption is too pervasive in this department for its head to feel ashamed of anything. The government must act decisively to clean up the mess by removing and

Oil spill and our friends

HARUN UR RASHID

ON November 9, a tanker loaded with furnace oil sank near the Sundarbans after being struck by a cargo vessel. It is reported that a thick layer of furnace oil is floating on the Shela and Pasur rivers covering more than 50km area, seriously endangering the aquatic life in the deep water and plants on the shorelines.

Four characteristics of oil spill debris influence the potential for immediate and long term oil migration:

- Oil content
- Water content
- Chemical content
- Biodegradability of solid debris and/or sorbents

Heavy fuel oil, grease, solid paraffins and high molecular weight asphaltenes may migrate or be biologically oxidised before they are evaporated.

Oil collected from the surface of the sea can contain debris such as seaweed, wood, plastic materials of various types, dead birds and animals. Collection and disposal are greatly complicated by the variation in waste composition and appropriate disposal techniques have to be selected for the particular circumstances.

It is crucial for relevant authorities to prepare a national contingency plan for disposal methods, taking into account the possible range of sizes and types of oil spills likely to occur, and the shorelines likely to be involved.

Environmentally and technologically sound disposal of oil spill debris is essential for minimising the environmental damage from an oil spill. Depending on the size and location of the spill, the location of final disposal sites and the storage capacity of emergency storage measures implemented at the site of the spill, longer term interim storage is likely to be necessary at existing waste management depots and landfills.

There were two incidents of oil spills in September, but vessels were still allowed to ply during night, which is reportedly against the law. Forest officials had forewarned the authorities of such accidents, but the authorities did not take the warnings seriously.

In recent days Maldives had a severe fresh water shortage because fire destroyed a plant that had supplied water to 120,000 city-dwellers. Bangladesh, China, India, Saudi Arabia, and Sri Lanka had rushed to help the Maldives from the crisis.

However in the case of Bangladesh, no country has yet offered any assistance to contain the oil spill. We wonder why? In such a disaster cooperative action from other states is necessary because the oil spill would not adversely affect aquatic life of Sundarbans but also other living organisms in the Bay of Bengal.

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

COMMENTARY

Human Rights or Human 'Farce' Day

Are we moving towards a society of 'sanctioned thuggery'?

(continued from page 1)

MAHFUZ ANAM

TO comprehend the centrality of human rights in today's world one key relationship needs to be understood -- that between the government and the people, both as a collective and as individuals. In the recent past, especially as the notion of democracy took firmer root, importance and status of the individual became stronger. A government exists to ensure the welfare of the individuals, and the former derives all its power and its very right to exist from the support given to it by the people as individuals.

As individuals cannot run a country, we elect a government to do so. But at the same time we put the government within a straightjacket of a constitution, the laws framed within it, and the various rules and regulations so that it operates within clearly specified limits. Even when a government is extremely powerful it can only operate within the limits of the law.

The problem arises when government start exceeding those 'limits' and behaving as if it is above the law. This feeling is directly proportional to its strength within the parliament, and transforms into a sense of 'right' when a government has three-fourths majority. We can easily imagine what happens to a government when it practically 'owns' the whole parliament.

This is where our story begins. In our case, the government not only feels that is above the law, its feels that it IS THE LAW. When a parliament is virtually without any opposition save in name, and when that same opposition party sits both in the cabinet and in the opposition bench and when more than 50% of a parliament is elected uncontested from a single alliance -- meaning that a majority to form a government is obtained before a single vote is cast -- then it is natural that the government in question should consider itself to be THE LAW.

That is why our society is becoming one of 'sanctioned thuggery.' The culture of impunity that is being enjoyed by our law enforcement agencies has made them totally non-answerable to the people who they are supposed to serve.

Take the case of Shahnur Alam, a trader from Brahambaria. He was picked up by Rab on April 29, and handed over to Nabinagar Police Station on April 30. On May 1 he was produced before a court and sent to local jail. On May 4 he was shifted to a hospital in Comilla. This is when his family could see him for the first time, when he recounted his torture ordeal. Next day, on May 5, he died. Rab is a legal body, police is a legal body -- both answerable under law -- and the courts are there to uphold the people's rights. Where did the law operate in Shahnur's case?

Four year old Arwa and her 10 year old elder sister Raita came to the Press Club on Thursday, December 4, demanding to know about their father who was allegedly picked up by Rab from Bashundhara residential area. So were seven others, in the same place, making the same demand, to know about their near and dear ones who were picked up from different parts of the city by law enforcers and have since been missing. ASK has many

other horrifying statistics in reply to all that State Minister for Home Affairs, Asaduzzaman Khan, told the BBC on the same day: "I asked Rab, I asked Detective Branch (DB) whether they knew about any such incidents. They both denied." End of the matter. Nobody is responsible, nobody is answerable to the law, to the courts, to the relatives of those who have disappeared. There are so many other stories.

This can only happen when public agencies consider themselves above the law, which they can only do when the elected government of the day allows these agencies to think that they are NOT answerable to anyone.

The culture of impunity has given birth to what we would term as the rise of 'sanctioned thuggery.' This means that if one belongs to any part of the law enforcement agencies and if one belongs to any part of the ruling party then one can take the law in one's hand and practically do anything, including, and literally, get away with murder.

It all started when, early on, the last AL government started withdrawing cases of those accused of murder, rape, loot, abduction, etc. under the guise of withdrawing 'politically motivated' cases. Soon, it was followed by activities of the student and youth wing of the ruling party. The more 'impunity' the more were the frequency, depth and extent of their crimes. When direct denial failed to convince the public, it was said that 'crimes were being committed by outsiders in the name of ruling party bodies.' Soon, police, Rab and others got into the act.

Whenever media tried to focus on the rising crimes from within the law enforcers we were accused of 'tarnishing' their image and serving some 'agenda' of somebody somewhere.

Perhaps the only ray of hope in this dismal picture of 'impunity culture' is the latest probe report by Rab, which revealed that 21 of their personnel were involved in the sensational 7-murder case in Narayanjanj. It may be recalled that Rab initially vehemently denied any involvement and was forced to investigate because of a ruling by the High Court, which earned the displeasure of the prime minister who publicly criticised the judiciary of interfering in the work of the executive.

On the occasion of this human rights day, we feel constrained to ask how free are we in today's democratic Bangladesh, and what is the real status of our freedom of expression and freedom of assembly? Why should people be jailed for expressing their views on powerful persons? Why should there is arbitrary arrest and detention of people? Why should newspaper offices be raided and news-men hauled up for publishing so-called 'provocative news,' when established avenues exist to hold the media accountable.

An unmistakable smell of authoritarianism is "blowing" in the wind." The 'sanctioned thuggery' appears to be a weapon of intimidation to suppress dissent.

If the present "culture of impunity" is not completely removed and genuine rule of law is not established soonest our democracy will run the risk of becoming something only in name.

The writer is Editor and Publisher, *The Daily Star*.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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CIA's cruelty revealed

Your front page report of Reuters published on 10th December is the tip of the iceberg of some of the cruelty practiced by CIA. CIA, with their operatives coming from many European forefathers, has remodelled and vastly improved upon the techniques, with much higher levels of cruelty that was not known to the Gestapo and the Russians or the Chinese. The report summed up only a few of the many top secret modes of inhuman practices. The shocking techniques, summed up alongside the report, possibly reflect only the 'cleared for public levels of brutality and inhuman deeds perpetrated by the secret service officials of the US government! All this is allowed under the excuse of protecting the country from the so-called enemies.

Civilized human being
On e-mail

Fixing prices of agricultural products

Although farmers are the key-role players of our agriculture sector, they are not getting fair prices for their produces. Even our neighbouring country India has agricultural price commission whose main



PHOTO: STAR

responsibility is to determine the prices of agro-products both in domestic and international level. Unfortunately, we don't have that kind of a commission to protect our farmers' interest. It will be difficult for a country like Bangladesh to establish an independent price commission within a short time but the government can set up a Post Harvest Committee (PHC) hiring people from agricultural universities, DAE, BARC, BARI etc. PHC will be responsible for determining the prices of all agricultural products considering the production costs of the particular crops with a profit margin. To control the value chain, from farm level to consumers' level, government can employ licensed buying companies (LBC) under a national stock company. I request the authorities concerned to take necessary steps for protecting the interest of our farmers.

M.G. Ferdous
Faculty Member, Department of Entomology
EXIM Bank Agricultural University Bangladesh

Punish women molesters

Every day throughout the country women are being harassed, raped, beaten and even murdered in their own homes. Violence increases women's vulnerability and decreases their productivity. We have been reading news of violence every day in newspapers. We want an end to this. Exemplary punishment should be meted out to the stalkers, rapists and murderers; otherwise gender based violence in the country will never stop.

Anika Tasneem
Dhaka University

Comments on news report, "Helpline they need to fight stress, depression," published on December 9, 2014

Laura Smith
For anyone suffering from depression, I recommend the "Destroy Depression System," written by a former depression sufferer. It teaches 7 steps to help you eliminate depression from your life.

"Some murderers enjoy free life" (Dec. 9, 2014)

Rashid Ahmed
Politics is a give and take thing. I give you immunity from arrest and prosecution while I am in power and in return you organise violent street protests, processions, blockades for me when I am in trouble.

Dev Saha

This is not a surprise. Ruling parties need cadres. There could be some mock trials but who knows when these murderers would be released through the back door of the jail. Been there and have seen it all before. The thugs need to be kept employed for the greater good of the ruling party.

"Yaba trade run by 25 influentials" (Dec. 9, 2014)

Nazmul Haq
Prof. Amzad, the acting proctor, admitted to having information on Yaba trade at DU dormitories. "We will take necessary actions to stop the illegal business," Amzad said. Really? Good luck, Mr. Professor.