

Sad day for democracy

Double standards unacceptable

BNP's stance of 'Death of Democracy' was, to start with, a rhetorical hyperbole. But by its own action, the government proved BNP correct. The way the government suppressed the BNP from holding a rally, and the way it kept Khaleda Zia confined to her office for the last 48-plus hours smack, if not death of democracy, but definitely a step towards it.

Now Khaleda Zia has called for open-ended countrywide blockade and we cannot fully blame her for it. So the government has pushed her to it.

We would like to ask what harm there would be to let BNP hold a rally. The question here is if Awami League wants to celebrate the first anniversary of safeguarding democracy, why cannot BNP and its allies hold a programme that demonstrates a dissenting view, which is within its democratic right to do?

We are aghast at the intimidating language coming out of the government. Not only has it been impolitic, rather it is downright hypocritical. If we go by some of the statements made of late, they put out a blatant threat to the opposition that the BNP would not be allowed to come on to the street. How can we justify the authorisation of Section 144 when Awami League and its various organisations congregated all over the city and the BNP was denied even normal movement? Are we then to understand that the ruling party has the sole monopoly on democracy and can bend it at will while the January 5 election on the strength of which it came to power was morally indefensible. It is an amazing way to celebrate upholding of democracy. If the idea was to contain the opposition parties from indulging in political violence, it has had the exact opposite reaction.

Govt. stance on banking sector

Stop encouraging financial malpractice

An economic review of this fiscal year by the private think-tank CPD has highlighted that the government's stance on the banking sector – in particular its decisions to recapitalise state banks despite their financial malpractices and to reschedule bad loans – will have a negative impact on the economy and the banking sector.

Last week, the government provided Tk. 1,500 crore to the two most-scram hit state banks – Sonali and BASIC – to meet their large-scale capital shortfall. Meanwhile, the loans of Beximco Group, Janata and Sonali Bank have been rescheduled.

These actions are troubling for a number of different reasons. The recapitalisation of state banks raises questions about allocation of public resources to keep afloat organisations encumbered by corruption, malpractices and lack of accountability. Capital infusion in the past year has seen no improvement in state banks. The government has continued to not hold high-up officials of scam-hit banks, reported to be involved in the malpractices, accountable; rather, by funneling tax-payers' money to these institutions, the government is essentially rewarding them and fostering a culture of fraudulence.

The government is not only recompensing public institutions, but also selected private institutions who curry political favours, and hence can engage in malpractices with impunity. The concentration of outstanding loans in the hands of a few business groups, as CDP suggests, will further weaken the banking sector.

The lack of oversight in the banking sector and the rewarding of defaulting institutions need to be checked immediately if confidence in the banking sector is to be restored. Concrete steps must be taken to prevent, rather than encourage, financial malpractices.

January 5: Feel the pulse of the people

ABDUL MATIN

THE 14-party alliance led by Awami League (AL) planned to celebrate January 5 as "Victory of Democracy Day" for holding a general election a year ago even though it was boycotted by the main opposition, a 20-party alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The AL-led alliance believes that failure to hold the election could have created a constitutional crisis.

The 20-party alliance claims that since the people didn't vote in the election, the present government is illegal. They decided to observe January 5 as "Death of Democracy Day" and demanded a fresh election under a non-partisan caretaker government. The ruling alliance insists that the next election would be held in 2019 and under the present government. Both the alliances intended to hold rallies on January 5. Police banned rallies in Dhaka. Hundreds of leaders of the opposition alliance were arrested or confined.

The 20-party alliance has been threatening to oust the government through movement since it came to power a year ago but failed to drum up necessary support. The people seem to be indifferent at least for one reason – the year 2014 was more peaceful than 2013 when prolonged hartal, violence, torching of vehicles (often with passengers inside) frequently paralysed normal life. The opposition alliance is threatening to start a tougher movement again.

I have spoken to several people, including some who are opposed to the present government. They all agree that the people are in no mood to join any movement for several reasons. First, they do not want to see any repetition of the violence. Second, after having observed the past records of other political parties, they are least convinced that any change of government would change their fate. Third, the economy of the country is gradually perking up. Nobody wants to disturb this momentum.

I recall that after Yahya Khan had replaced Ayub Khan in 1969, I asked a vegetable vendor in Karachi if he liked the changeover. He replied sarcastically: "No matter who comes to power, I have to push my cart for my livelihood." Likewise, the people were least interested in observing January 5 in any name. As apprehended, the day was marred by disruption of transportation, torching of vehicles, clashes and violent demonstrations across the country. Consequently, many activists have been injured, some fatally.

The people are now convinced that neither violence nor brutal repression of the opposition will solve any problem. They sincerely wish that all political issues are resolved through dialogues. It is time for the leaders to feel the pulse of the people or get detached from them totally.

The writer is a former chief engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission.

What a 'victory' for Democracy!

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd.)

several alternative locations it had suggested to the DMP. The government's tactic not to allow BNP to come on the streets yesterday is in keeping with its long term strategy to not allow its main opponent any political space in Dhaka city. But why so? Is it because, in spite of what the AL leaders speak about the BNP – that it is a spent force, that it is incapable of taking the people along with them – the AL leaders are actually worried about the BNP and its capability of managing large turnout, as was seen in many parts of the country where the BNP was allowed to hold meetings. The excuse that the administration wants us to digest about the likelihood of violence in a BNP meeting has become too hackneyed.

Unfortunately, it has been a one-sided game since January 2014, with the administration weighing in heavily on the side of the ruling coalition, the law enforcing agency in particular. While Gazipur was only the sample of what was to come, the happening since January 4 will do anything but help strengthen democracy or the rule of law in the country. As for now the country has to brace for an indefinite country-wide blockade called by Khaleda Zia.

It was 'victory' for democracy also in the sense that the person whom the AL considers 'real threat' to democracy, Khaleda Zia, has been held virtually interned in one of her party offices for almost 48 hours since going to press. And her efforts to leave her Gulshan office in the afternoon yesterday were prevented by the police.

The Gulshan office of BNP had also been put under lock and key since afternoon of Sunday. This was done following Khaleda Zia's comment to the BBC that she would try and hold a rally on January 5, to mark, according to her, 'Democracy Killing Day' in spite of the impediments placed by the government.

And these measures have been taken, according to the police, for Khaleda Zia's safety. The level of their 'concern' for the BNP chief's safety has been demonstrated by the deployment of several truckloads of sand/bricks quite like what we saw done last year in front of her residence. The bevy of policemen and women apparently was not enough for Khaleda Zia's 'protection' and thus the expedient in the form of sand laden trucks!

Democracy has been 'saved' also by putting the main BNP office in Paltan under lock, it having been sanitised of all the party workers who happened to be there in the early hours of January 4. Democracy has been saved also by declaring Sec 144 in certain parts of the city and by prohibiting meetings, rallies and assembly of any kind till further orders, not only in Dhaka city but also in many parts of the country.

And last but not the least, democracy has been 'saved' by not allowing the BNP to hold meeting in any of the



in the country. As for now the country has to brace for an indefinite country-wide blockade called by Khaleda Zia.

It would have accorded a great deal of political mileage to the AL if it had allowed the BNP to hold its meeting yesterday in any part of the city. If the AL had intended to hold rallies and meetings to commemorate 'Save Democracy Day' in 16 different parts of the capital, why was it not prepared to allow BNP to hold one meeting in one part of the city, to commemorate 'Democracy Killing Day'? Would one be remiss to think that the biggest and the oldest political party in the country actually suffers from a moral weakness and that it has qualms about the January 5 elections? Is it a moral defeat for the AL?

One wishes one could agree with the AL that on this day a year ago democracy was saved. Actually, it was the day when democracy was killed. And both the AL and BNP had their hands on the handle of the dagger that delivered the death blow to democracy.

The writer is Editor, Oped and Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Countering terrorism: Need to change pro-Taliban narrative

SHAFQAT MUNIR

THE year 2014 claimed lives of over 4,065 people in conflict and terrorism related incidents in Pakistan, including the worst ever terrorist attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar on December 16.

This incident happened to be the 9/11 of Pakistan that brought the whole nation on one page, from the military to the political establishments all are talking about rising beyond 'good Taliban, bad Taliban' division. Even Imran Khan, who has been opposing the military operations against Taliban saying it was not 'war of Pakistan' but a 'war of the United States,' had to rethink and end his anti-government movement to express solidarity with the army, government and the people of Pakistan in general, and the families of the children martyred in the December 16 incident in particular.

The people of Pakistan from across all divides and shades came to the streets, demanding stern action against terrorists who are on a killing spree. It seems that the Taliban fear factor is diminishing and civil society and political parties and the prime minister himself are talking about action against terrorists and their abettors and supports. The government is devising a counter-terrorism strategy to combat the menace and to regain its writ in various cities and the bordering areas from where Taliban are continuing with their sporadic terrorist activities.

Despite the fact that the army and the government with almost all stakeholders on board are busy taking some serious actions, people apprehend that this spirit might be diluted with the passage of time as they believe that only cosmetic actions may not be helpful. Since the issue is not just fighting terrorists or Taliban who are killing people in the name of Islam, there is a need to fight against the growing narrative of religious fanaticism and radicalism supporting the Taliban narrative in the country.

Unfortunately, media discourses on select media outlets and 'Tableeghi' (preaching) approaches in and outside madrassas have been instrumental in spreading the extremist narrative in the name of Islam. The abettors and supporters of Taliban's narrative are found everywhere – in villages, towns, government offices, media houses, military and political establishments. First of all, we have to fight this narrative that spreads hatred and extremist thoughts and fans intolerance in accepting others' point of view and uses 'gun' to impose their religious thoughts on all and sundry. This sort of militancy needs to be tackled seriously with a commitment that this 'war is our war and not of others' if we are really serious to ensure that terrorists cannot kill our people.

Unfortunately, pro-Taliban narrative has been prevailing in Pakistan, mostly out of the fear of Taliban attacks or due to influence of 'Deobandi' and 'Tableeghi' schools of thought. The 2013 election campaign was dominated by the Taliban factor as they had openly said they would not attack rallies of Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (Imran Khan led-PTI) and Jamaat Islami and some other right wing parties. Taliban had categorically stated that they would not allow Pakistan People's Party (Zardari-led), Awami National Party (Asfandiyar Wali-led), Mutahida Qaumi Movement (Altaf-led) and other liberal democratic parties to run their election campaigns.

PML-N, PTI and religious parties openly campaigned and returned to parliament. Jamaat Islami and PTI formed coalition government in Khyber Pukhtoonkhwa. Imran

several alternative locations it had suggested to the DMP.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Making utility bill payment easier

I want to draw the attention of the authorities concerned to an important issue that we face almost every month, which is payment of WASA, DESCO, BTCL etc. bills. Among the arrangements available for payment of such bills, payment at the bank is the most common. The regular banking hour is 10am to 4pm, but the banks collect utility bills till only 1 pm, which causes serious difficulty for the clients. Most bill payers find it hard to go to the bank every month for bill payment during prime office hours. So they pay two to three months' bills at a time, which is a large amount of money, and add to that the fine for late payment. This is a huge pressure for the people. It also takes a long time to collect the bills of one user and so the queue never ends. The service providing agencies also suffer as they are deprived of regular cash flow.

In order to mitigate the sufferings of the commoners, I propose that the counters for bill payment be kept open for the entire banking hours on the banking days. This would improve the bill collection performance as well.

Jawad-UI Islam
Uttara, Dhaka

Raid on New Age office

The New Age office had come under police raid recently. Is it a prelude to something ominous? Independent dailies not complaisant towards the ruling class face government wrath. We strongly condemn such activities and join our voice with the DRU for punishment of the law enforcers for their behaviour and ask for guarantee of safety and security of the journalists in discharging their professional duties.

Yusuf Azad
Chief Evaluation Officer (Retd.)
Education Board Rajshahi

Footbridge needed near Prantik Gate of JU

Dhaka-Aricha highway is one of the busiest roads of the country which is used by all the vehicles that come to Dhaka from the south-western part of the country. Jahangirnagar University, located at Savar just beside this highway, has two main gates: one is known as Dairy Gate (opposite a dairy farm) while the other as Prantik Gate. A footbridge was constructed in front of the Dairy Gate years ago, after several fatal road accidents occurred at that point which claimed many lives. But there is no footbridge in front of the Prantik Gate, an equally dangerous spot. Students are facing difficulties while crossing the road at Prantik Gate point. Serious threatening accidents can take place here any time. We urge the authorities to build a footbridge near Prantik Gate to ensure safe road crossing for the students and staff of the university.

Md. Selim Reza
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Jahangirnagar University

Comments on news report, "Import bill may go down by \$2b," published on January 02, 2015

Jayanta
Good news!

Khondkar Saleque Sufi

The low global oil price will allow BPC and government to reduce the subsidy burden and facilitate BPC in earning operating profit. Government may not reduce the fuel price but it must not increase power tariff either.

100pc pay hike for armed forces too (January 02, 2015)

OpeeMonir

If the civil - military bureaucrats get all the access to wealth, I suppose we are virtually approaching a social condition similar to what we had during pre-liberation period. This is a very difficult period for the nation. It happened to be 22 families at that time, and now I suppose we have many more that number who control the wealth in the country.

"Beijing positive on Ctg-Kunming road" (Dec. 29, 2014)

Isaac

It's nice to know that after so many years China has agreed to this road link. Now everything will depend on Myanmar's consent to this road as it lies between China and Bangladesh. If this road comes into being, southern China will be able to use Chittagong port.

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