

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

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Attack on railway unacceptable

Do not slide into anarchy

THE blockade of Dhaka remains in effect. With it comes the arson attacks, and now the removal of fish-plates on railway tracks resulting in derailment of bogies has added a whole different dimension to reprehensible behaviour. While we support the right of the opposition to congregate to hold rallies within the norms of democratic practices, this sort of act goes far beyond what can be condoned. With as many as 50 passengers injured as five carriages got derailed on route to Chittagong, we come face to face with political elements bent on creating chaos with no regard for public safety. We condemn in the strongest possible terms at this unwarranted escalation of endangering people's lives by putting into harm's way the lives of the innocent.

The opposition party leaders must realise that unless they rein-in on the more extreme elements within their ranks, the country may well descend into anarchy. With about twelve of the fifty people injured in the Dhaka - Chittagong rail incident, who is going to bear the responsibility should some of these individuals die? Will such an act of sabotage not work against the movement being waged in the name of the people? This was not the only incident of attack on railway that had until now remained beyond the scope of the anti-government movement. By showing indifference to safety of people, the opposition has merely hurt itself. The perpetrators of such actions must be brought to justice. Our concern at this point remains that public safety must be ensured at all costs.

400 vessels in a single day!

Sundarbans can't be trifled with

IT is disquieting to see that despite the government's direction on 'controlled movement of vessels' through Shela River, 400 vessels plied through the route on the very first day of its reopening. Though the Sundarbans is still reeling in a catastrophe, the government decided to reopen the route only 26 days after the disaster. It defied recommendations of environmentalists and UN experts. The people remain in the dark as to the basis on which the government took the decision; whether it has conducted any study on the feasibility of the route and what precautionary measures it has taken to avoid any repetition of the disaster. These are important questions awaiting answers.

According to a report in a prominent Bangla daily, though the government endorsed vessel movement under strict supervision of the Coast Guards and BIWTA, there was no trace of these watch bodies on the opening day. The forest department volunteers made an announcement for staggered movement of vessels. But almost none paid heed to such caution. This is a glaring example of lack of coordination among the government bodies in the management of the Sundarbans.

Earlier, the oil spillage incident exposed the government's irresponsible attitude towards the Sundarbans. The present incident shows it has learnt very little from the disaster and is still resting on rhetoric like 'controlled movement' rather than taking any sincere measure to protect the Sundarbans. We urge the government to form an expert committee to go into the points at issue, employ adequate supervision on the spot and, for the time being, allow minimum traffic along the channel. In the meantime, the authorities should expedite the dredging of Mongla-Ghasiakhali channel and explore alternative safer routes.

Management of disasters

ABDUL MATIN

OVER the years, Bangladesh earned significant experience in management of disasters like cyclones and floods. While more than 500,000 people were washed away in the 1970 cyclone, very few people are killed nowadays in similar calamities. This is due to improved early warning systems, better communication facilities, efficient evacuation, construction of adequate cyclone shelters and efficient distribution of relief materials. Many foreign countries now follow the Bangladesh model for management of similar disasters. How prepared are we to deal with other disasters like earthquakes, oil spills or nuclear accidents?

We took weeks to clear the debris, rescue the trapped people and recover the dead bodies after the collapse of the Rana Plaza building. According to experts, about 38% of the buildings, including schools and hospitals, of Dhaka are considered vulnerable to strong earthquakes. If an earthquake like that of the Great Indian Earthquake of 1897 or of magnitude of 6 and above shakes Dhaka, the consequent devastation and the aftermath could force the surviving residents to abandon the city altogether. Even if all the vulnerable buildings are demolished and re-built with earthquake resistant structures (a remote possibility), it will be a Herculean task, perhaps beyond our capability, to take care of the dead bodies and the wounded persons and restore the damaged communication, electricity, water, gas, and sanitation systems within a reasonable time.

The recent oil spill in the Sundarbans showed how unprepared we are in coping with such a situation. Without any planned arrangement for confinement and collection of the oil, the entire exercise was left to the goodwill of the unskilled local population who tried to collect the oil with bare hands. By December 15, only 50,000 litres of oil was collected, out of 3,50,000 litres leaked. Most of the people engaged in collection of oil are now suffering from skin and other diseases. More recently, the fire brigade failed to rescue a 4-year old boy from a well in Dhaka though they tried for almost a day. His body was later recovered by four young volunteers within a matter of minutes.

With such preparedness, how shall we deal with a more dangerous nuclear disaster at Rooppur? If we are to evacuate an area within a radius of 20 kilometers from the reactor, we have to move 15 lac people to a safe area within hours and arrange shelter, food, sanitation and medication for them not for days or weeks but for decades. Do we have enough resources and infrastructures to do so? Should we wait to learn nuclear disaster management from our own experience too?

The writer is a former chief engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission and author of Rooppur & the Power Crisis.

Fragility in fledgling democracy

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

ENRAGED citizens say that the corroding contours of our confrontational politics were ominously exposed in the mindless violence of last Monday that caused not only widespread destruction but also succeeded in creating serious concern and panic in law abiding hearts. The cynics observe that they were manifestations of the dynamics of our fledgling democracy and should cause no surprise.

Admittedly, citizens and residents of Bangladesh have cause to worry. Their premonition is that life-unsettling transactions including the paralyzing, economy-wrenching *hartals* accompanied by large doses of violence would visit them in increasing numbers in the not-too-distant future. Political protests would, in fact, amount to plight of the public. The question is, why? And more importantly, are there ways to extricate ourselves from this mess?

Any serious attempt by caring Bangladeshis to understand the incidences of the malfunctioning of our polity by placing them in the historical, sociological and political context may turn out to be an agonising experience. One suspicion could be whether our concern for democracy amounted to merely a false consciousness or worse, was it a crude legitimisation of the so-called politically driven conflict? Should we look for the roots of the problem in the phenomena of social exclusion, economic marginalisation, contests for power and other contingent factors?

Although politics, without doubt, is an edifying activity, not many in Bangladesh would talk reverentially about politicians. Some would even go to the extent of depicting some of our politicians as active participants in the creation of disorder. Their malevolence has been criticised as being planned and diabolically purposeful.

In Bangladesh, unfortunately, we have witnessed violence that has been purposive. In our polity we have seen political motivations ranging from local turf wars to an ugly and vulgar race for quick riches; from teaching a rival group a "lesson" to polarising communities into voting blocs.

Politics did enter into a situation in which hired thugs who perpetrated violence were assured of protection from prosecution. Very few felt ashamed as politics in our context acquired a pejorative connotation by its manifest association with conflict and violence. The civil society has been undermined by the stimulation of politics based on division and acrimony.

Cynical observers of our social scene are of the distressing view that there is a functional utility of violence for politicians. Such opinions point an accusing finger towards suspected state complicity in the perpetration of organised acts of violence and the inordinate delays in securing justice for the victims. This delay is alarming as it sends a clear message to potential delinquents that no harm will come to them in the event of repeat performances of criminal activities.

Political activities, partly on account of historical factors, have assumed a dominant agitational character. Over the years, since after liberation and more particularly during the anti-autocracy movement in the eighties leading to the fall of the military dictatorial regime in December 1990, political protests demanded crude physi-

cal courage from the field level activists of the political movement. As the dictatorial regime primarily depended on brute power and looked towards non-political quarters for its sustenance, it did not bother about the excessive use of force by the state apparatus. It had no qualms in utilising dangerous goons to intimidate and if necessary liquidate political party workers and leaders. A section of the law enforcement personnel sadly turned out to be a partner in such patently illegal acts.

All in all, the political scenario became so desperate and menacing that only the very physically brave and intensely committed workers could dare to take to the streets to face the insensitive actions of a despotic government nearly bordering on megalomania.

It is a sad commentary on our political reality that however eloquent we may be on the subject of freedom of speech, assembly and movement, we can be the worst of autocrats when under a clear democratic dispensation the government of the day does not allow assembly and protest gatherings of opposition political party to venture beyond the immediate confines of party office. The untenable scenario is that the government would not issue prohibitory orders restricting or banning assembly of persons, but would transmit verbal orders to embarrassed law enforcement personnel to virtually quarantine the opposition elements in a limited space.

Politically speaking, the current scene is not the first instance when otherwise responsible and erudite people have talked irreverently and irreverently. The tragedy is that we are forgetting that democracy, with freedom of opinion and opposition, is not the normal way of organising society but is a rare human achievement. In our environment, many citizens may appear un-dimensional but our political leaders have no excuse for being so perilously un-dimensional. They have to act as catalyst. The responsibilities, which today lie on their shoulders, are far greater than at any earlier time in our history.

We seem to be oblivious that law moves on a unique plane and that a lawful society reflects man's sense of order and justice. Such society embodies rules and traditions that have a binding effect and provide the enduring element, the dimension of permanence, in history. We cannot have a government without order and there can be no order without law. Viewed in the above context, there is no doubt that the country is in the midst of a serious crisis and the premonition is that the downward slide to dangerous uncertainty may have commenced.

The country is now sharply and dangerously polarised with political adversaries bent upon maligning each other. The language of reason and moderation is absent while there is hardly any trace of tolerance. This, however, does not come as a surprise as forebodings of a perilous polarisation were there for any keen observer to realise. One feels constrained to comment that the country is held hostage to the partisan ambition of an immoral and acquisitive class whose kleptocratic instincts are no secret.

For our democracy deficits to gradually lessen and disappear, the political parties have to make the crucial choice between absolute power on one hand and the restraints of legality and the authority of tradition on the other. They have to decide on whether to constitute a moral association maintained by duty or a physical one kept together by force. They have to say whether executive action violative of the rule of law has to be tolerated and if the balance between legislature, executive and the judiciary has to be rudely shaken.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

The fall of Netanyahu?

THE WORLD IN WORDS



SHLOMO AVINERI

THE dissolution of Israel's parliament, the Knesset, just a day after Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu sacked two senior cabinet ministers, marks a surprising turn-about. Indeed, when Israelis vote again in March, more than two years ahead of schedule, Netanyahu could be voted out of office, with important implications not only for Israel, but also for the wider Middle East.

Until last summer, Netanyahu appeared politically unassailable. His coalition government, despite some internal bickering, was expected to serve out its term. Not even 10% of Israelis would have preferred the opposition leader, the Labor Party's Yitzhak Herzog, as prime minister.

Things began to unravel when two cabinet ministers abruptly resigned, citing family commitments or policy disagreements. Then came the inconclusive war in Gaza, which, given Netanyahu's unfulfilled pledge to "crush Hamas," undermined his credibility, especially when ministers like Naftali Bennett, the leader of the nationalist-religious Jewish Home party, openly challenged his policies.

When some European parliaments voted in 2014 to recognise Palestine as an independent state, many Israelis, who had long blamed the Palestinians for the continued failure of peace talks, began to worry. More significant, Netanyahu's public clashes with US President Barack Obama fueled concerns among Israelis -- including supporters of Netanyahu's Likud party -- that their government's policies were deepening Israel's isolation and thus undermining its security.

The domestic situation is not much better. Netanyahu has failed to fulfill his promises since the massive demonstrations of 2011 to address prohibitively high living costs, especially for young couples. On the contrary, housing prices have continued to rise. When Yair Lapid -- the ambitious but inept finance minister, who leads the centrist Yesh Atid party -- proposed waiving the value-added tax on first apartment purchases by young couples, Netanyahu failed to respond decisively, giving the impression that he lacked control over his own cabinet.

But it was Netanyahu's support for draft legislation seeking to constitutionalise Israel's identity as the Jewish people's nation-state -- to the detriment of Israel's Muslim, Christian, and Druze citizens -- that brought the situation to a head. The bill, which emphasises Israel's Jewish identity above its democratic principles, has caused deep divisions not only among the electorate, but also within the government coalition.

Netanyahu, with his weak and vacillating leadership exposed, sacked his opponents, Lapid and Justice Minister Tzipi Livni (who also denounced Netanyahu's settlement-construction plans), and called for new elections. But the real game changer was the declaration by Herzog and Livni, who leads the small centrist Hatnuah party, that their parties would run jointly in the elections. If they win, they will rotate in the prime minister's post.

This changed Israeli political discourse almost over-

night. Far from invincible, Netanyahu is now viewed as a failed prime minister, confronted by a centre-left bloc that may well become the most powerful voice in the Knesset. Yesh Atid voters, who have been disappointed by Lapid's failure to deliver the "new politics" of efficiency and transparency that he promised, may supply the Herzog-Livni alliance with the necessary votes.

Some of the moderate orthodox parties, which have been undergoing their own internal splits, have also signalled their willingness to work with a centre-left bloc that might enable Israel to make real progress. Even Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Lieberman, head of the right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu party, is now criticising Netanyahu for alienating the US and has suggested that he would not rule out joining a centrist government.

All of this bodes well for the Herzog-Livni alliance. But three months is a long time in politics. Netanyahu may be a dismal prime minister; but he is also a formidable campaigner. And if the centrist alliance finishes first in the election, it will still need coalition partners to form a majority in the Knesset. Gaining fewer than 30 of its 120 seats might drive it to seek potential partners among the orthodox -- an approach that could alienate moderate secular voters.

Moreover, once in power, the Herzog-Livni alliance would be met with serious challenges -- beginning with reaching an agreement with the Palestinians. Given that the Palestinians' political leadership is divided between the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority, which controls the West Bank, and Hamas, which has established an Islamic fundamentalist regime in Gaza, a deal between Israel and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas would mean little.

Nonetheless, a Herzog-Livni government would bring significant change, particularly in terms of relations with Europe and the US. Netanyahu's provocative policies and statements, which have undermined support for Israel among even its closest allies, would be supplanted by a willingness to negotiate in earnest and make genuine concessions.

Such a shift would reinvigorate hope among Israelis -- and not a moment too soon. There is a growing realisation in Israel that it is time to chart a new path.

Netanyahu, always eager to impress upon the Israeli public the impossibility of making peace with the Palestinians, failed to address the question of what kind of country Israel will become if it continues to rule millions of people against their will. This is what has turned so many people in the West against Israel, leading some to question its very legitimacy. If Zionism means eternal dominion over the Palestinians, is it really worthy of support?

The Herzog-Livni alliance has tentatively named itself the "Zionist Camp." It may not be catchy (and it is likely to be changed), but it expresses an essential truth: Zionism is about the right of the Jewish people to self-determination, not about the permanent domination of another people. One hopes that Israeli voters recognise this in March.

The writer is Professor of Political Science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a member of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities. His most recent book is Theodor Herzl and the Foundation of the Jewish State. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2015. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

International Year of Soils-2015

As per UN resolution, every year December 5 is observed as the World Soil Day to create awareness of the importance of soil, and how we can preserve and restore it. The United Nations has also declared 2015 as the International Year of Soils.

According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, 95% of our food comes from soil, and



most of that food comes from family farms, which is a key to alleviating hunger and poverty. But due to the continuous use of soil plus natural calamities and climate change factors, soil is facing degradation and desertification. Conservation of soil through proper agricultural practices is a must.

Let us protect soil against degradation and desertification through local as well as global action.

Professor M Zahidul Haque
Department of Agricultural Extension & Information System, SAU, Dhaka

Why this visa harassment?

Few days back I along with my friend went to the Malaysian Embassy at Baridhara for submitting my student visa. We saw a notice on the notice box before the entry gate that read "Malaysian Embassy will not receive any individual student's file till further notice". We asked the gateman what we should do. He told us to contact the Malaysian Embassy's tourist agents for dropping the file at the deposit counter. We contacted a few enlisted tourist agents and were informed that it could take more than three months to get visa approval with extravagant amount of agency fees. We waited in front of the embassy gate on the two following days. On those days we observed that the gateman allowed some people to enter. After seeing that, we went to the gateman and asked him to allow us in. But he refused and told us to seek recommendation from any embassy official. Finally, on the third day, during the embassy opening hour, one Malaysian gentleman (embassy visa official) came out and took a few students inside including us and that time he explained that some officials were doing "dodgy business" there. Even he received our individual student file in a friendly manner. So what is the point of this type of harassment to student-visa applicants?

Bipul K Debnath
Dhaka College, Dhaka

Comments on commentary, "Making a mockery of democracy," published on January 7, 2015

ATM Shirajul Haque
Politics of Bangladesh lacks principles and logic. Mr. Mahfuz Anam's commentary has just showed the exact situation we are in. He just did not criticise rather he has explained the dilemma.

Hafeejul Alam

Indeed a balanced write-up by the learned editor. However, in practice, there exists no political party in Bangladesh which can ensure both development and democracy, at least there is no such possibility in any foreseeable future. Therefore, the choice is rather too clear to be ignored: Whether we would go for the so-called BNP-type democracy which accommodates Jamaat and creates terrorists like Bangla Bhai and so on, or whether we would go for AL's lesser democracy but more development.

S. M. Iftekhar Ahmed

Excellent article! This is truly a mockery and the victims are the people and I hope that the next generation will not make the same mistake of supporting those so-called leaders who have proven over time that they only care about hanging on to power; even if that means an alliance with a party that abuses religion and has rejected the idea of this nation's existence, or through cheating during elections and unleashing a spoiled and arrogant student wing.

Iqbal Ali Khan

Great commentary. Is it at all needed to pursue a 'one-party' system, as we see now? Suppressing opposition is never necessitated.

Dev Saha

Love for democracy is really great! However, BNP should figure out that their version of democracy where war criminals will be leading some key ministries, would be a big slap on the people who loved Bangladesh and fought for its independence.

Sukhamaya Bain

It is actually worse than making a mockery of democracy. It is hard to tell when Bangladesh had democracy. When did the country have intra-party democracy? When did the ordinary party workers/supporters have a choice of nominating candidates? The candidates have always been hand-picked by the big leaders. In many instances, votes are earned by criminals through intimidating the ordinary citizens.

SM

Would a few meetings by BNP bring the downfall of this government? Why is AL so scared?