

Slow work of Mouchak-Malibagh flyover Public misery mounts

One was wondering about the reason for the slow pace of the Mouchak-Malibagh flyover consisting of three large segments covering eight kilometers, the detailed report in the leading Bangla daily appearing yesterday on the said project has made it clear why it is so. It is unacceptable that a huge project involving a sum of nearly a billion taka would be allowed to commence without detail drawings of the constructions, which has, not surprisingly, led to almost 15 percent jump in cost. One doesn't know if it was deliberate, but surely the authorities must be held liable for the gross breach of procedure.

Two segments of the flyover were supposed to have been opened in December 2014 for public use. They were not, and on the average only 40 percent of the project work has been completed in the stipulated time. Regrettably, this project, like many government projects, has been plagued by both time and cost overrun.

But apart from the procedural flaws like subcontracting of construction and employing contractors, the operational aspect betrays lack of planning also. The delay has not only increased the problems of the residents of the locality, and the commuters subjected to unbearable traffic gridlocks, a good part of the city's traffic management has been derailed by this one single project. The slow progress has also impacted the start of other projects like the mass rapid transit.

Mouchak-Malibagh flyover is fairly representative of most other badly managed public projects. And these have remained so because of absence of accountability. Time overrun that leads to cost overrun must be severely penalized. The Mouchak-Malibagh flyover project completion cannot brook further delay.

Development without consent! Address indigenous concerns

THE establishment of a Rangamati Science & Technology University has generated widespread protests by indigenous communities and civil society groups who believe that, in the absence of full implementation of the CHT Accord, the project will further displace and deprive already marginalised indigenous communities. We urge the government to take serious note of these concerns.

Why should indigenous people be opposed to development projects? Obviously there are reasons for this opposition. First, they take it as an imposition, as the decision was taken without prior consultation with local communities and representative institutions, even though the Accord stipulates that no land within the control and jurisdiction of the Hill District Council (HDC) shall be acquired or transferred by the government without consultation and consent of the HDC. It also recognises the rights of indigenous people to decide their own development priorities through representative institutions.

Second, the track record of the government in matters of development project in the CHT has not been one of trust and confidence-building. Indigenous communities fear that they will be evicted from their lands, as they have been in the past, to make way for the institution and for non-indigenous students, teachers and staff who will consequently settle in the area.

Development in a democracy must be of, for and by the people. Any decision taken without the people's consultation and in violation of the Accord can hardly be effective or desired.

We implore the government to prioritise indigenous demands in designing development projects and to implement the accord without further delay, allaying all concerns.

Blocking Viber and Tango counterproductive

SHAHIDUL K. K. SHUVRA

OVERSEAS telephone callers through the internet felt disheartened when they found Viber and Tango connections on their smart phones were disconnected on so-called security ground. One wonders how Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) could block its free services when it played no role in bringing down overseas call charges.

Such blocking invites adverse impacts even if is for a time being or to know the intensity of people's reactions. This is not the first time that BTRC blocked such online services. In fact, BTRC didn't learn any lesson from blocking YouTube.

Blocking of YouTube hampered regular cybernetic works; for example, the study of students whose learning is based on educational video sharing, and of medical students who could not see surgical works to enhance their knowledge.

It's common for government not to like Viber-like technologies because they deprive a government of taxes, and also save the people from paying over-charged telephone bills. This technology is for the benefit of the people, and eventually for the nation. IT skilled people were able to access YouTube with different means and passed the technological know-how to common IT users.

Our country shouldn't join Pakistan, China and Afghanistan, which are infamously branded for blocking website and strictly conducting cyber surveillance and imposing censorship on freedom of thoughts expressed on websites. Block or banning a cyber technology regenerates the technology in other forms; duplication of the software mushrooms over cyberspace. Most of the terrorist groups and banned societies have own encrypted software for their underground communication; they know how to evade surveillance over them.

Our policy makers talk about Digital Bangladesh but are digitally uninformed. This blocking doesn't go with the government's pledge for making our country Digital Bangladesh. Blocking is not a solution at all. BTRC should develop skills on cyber security to fight all sorts of cyber crimes. Without hampering the cybernetic communication of general people, security software could be integrated with any cyber communicative tool to monitor the communication between criminals.

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'We, the People of Bangladesh'

SYED ABUL MAKSUD

THE Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh begins with the words, 'We, the people of Bangladesh...'. Who constitute the 'people'? All the citizens of the state are the 'people.' The dignity of an individual citizen has the highest value as per our Constitution. The state in a democratic polity is the creation of its citizens. They must be given maximum opportunity to participate in the political system and exercise their rights. If they are denied the exercise of their civil and political rights, it is a travesty of the Constitution.

Good governance depends on the democratic leaders who govern the state and not on a good constitution. The first president of India, Rajendra Prasad, had observed: "If the people who are elected are capable and men of character and dignity, they would be able to make the best even of a defective constitution. If they are lacking in these the constitution cannot help the country... It requires men of strong character, men of vision, men who will sacrifice in the interest of the country at large for the sake of smaller groups and areas, and who will rise above the prejudices" [History of Parliament of India, Vol. I]. We, the people of Bangladesh, are not fortunate enough to have such men elected by the people in the history of the state.

A senior minister told newsmen that trucks filled with

The elected members of the Sangsad and the civil servants often do not respect the sovereignty of the people of Bangladesh. They treat them as subjects rather than as rulers. This is a violation of the Constitution.

sand and iron have been kept at the entrance of Khaleda Zia's office to protect it from any bomb attack. The DG of the Bangladesh Border Guard warned that it would use lethal weapons in self-defense and when necessary to contain violence. Rab and the police are also face to face with the opposition activists. The law enforcement agencies need to be insulated from political influence.

Socio-political unrest in any democratic polity is not uncommon. The constitutional obligation of the government is to take lawful action to stop violence of any kind, whether it is social or political. The law enforcers must be professional and impartial to maintain law and order. They are paid from the national exchequer. They cannot kill the perpetrators of political violence. Political violence caused by political dispute must be resolved politically, by means of dialogue, and not by means of suppression and repression.

Violence is incompatible with democratic way of life. The present crisis is the outcome of a controversial election without participation by all major parties. The election was held in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution amended by the 14-party alliance. The one-sided non-inclusive election is contrary to the democratic spirit of the War of Liberation and the expectations of the people. A vast majority of the people were denied their voting rights as 153 candidates were declared elected even before the elections were held. Our electoral system needs to be reformed.

The two parties are persistently accusing each other of hatching conspiracy instead of facing the people. Charges and counter-charges demonstrate that the two parties have largely become isolated from the larger segments of the society. The ruling party depends on the law enforcement agencies and its cadres while the opposition depends on its cadres and hooligans.

The US, UK and European Union have expressed concern over ongoing political violence and urged "the government to ensure people can freely exercise their right to peaceful political expression." In a meeting with foreign minister A.H. Mahmood Ali, the heads of missions of the European Union resident in Bangladesh expressed concern over the shrinking of democratic space. "Actions to restore peace and stability should not be at the expense of freedom of assembly, movement and speech," they opined.

On January 16, the United Nations Human Rights Commission also expressed concern and urged all political parties to show restraint and bring an immediate end to violence. In a statement, the UNHRC called on the authorities to "ensure prompt, impartial and effective investigation of all killings committed -- irrespective of whether they are committed by state or non-state actors".

It is 'we, the people' who have given the people the entire framework of governance, including the presidency, the parliament, the judiciary, the cabinet, the civil service and other institutions of the state. In recent years, there has been sharp erosion in the democratic values. Governance has not become citizen-friendly. The elected members of the Sangsad and the civil servants often do not respect the sovereignty of the people of Bangladesh. They treat them as subjects rather than as rulers. This is a violation of the Constitution. The principles of the Constitution have been blatantly disregarded.

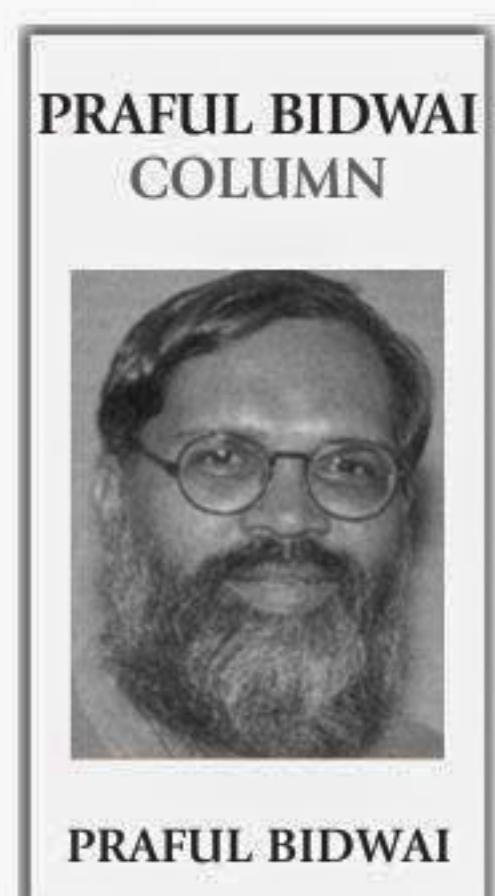
The problem largely stems from the lack of commitment of the political leaders to the basic norms of democracy. The values and ideologies are largely absent. Major parties are failing to accommodate each other's views. The two parties are almost equal in strength. The duo-politic structure has eroded the pluralism. So, the political parties should go through certain reforms to get rid of confrontational politics. The bipolar polity has contributed to the confrontational style of national politics, which is undermining the working of parliamentary system. The masterminding of each other's annihilation is not the solution. Rather, it would aggravate the situation.

Our leaders of cadre-based parties have largely been isolated from the people. Sheikh Ali Bin Al-Hajveri, popularly known as Hazrat Data Gunj Buksh of Lahore, (d. 1071), who was the earliest among the Sufis and thinkers in the sub-continent, is famous for being the author of the oldest Persian treatise on Sufism, *Kashf-al-Mahjab*. The book presents important discourses on a variety of issues ranging from good manners to moral and spiritual values. Says Data Gunj Buksh: "Nobility of character and devotion to Allah in prayers are of prime importance; but one's close contact with the masses should not be neglected, ... as it is the common people that control the destiny of the nations."

The AL and the BNP are in a race for grabbing and clinging to power. The nation has been suffering from abject leadership crisis. The present band of leadership cannot be expected to deliver the democratic polity -- the need of the new century. So long this leadership crisis continues, there is no hope before the nation.

The writer is a noted author, columnist and social activist.

Time for a new start



PRAFUL BIDWAI

SRI Lankans have made democracy's cause proud by ending President Mahinda Rajapaksa's 10-year-long authoritarian rule and electing former health minister Maithripala Sirisena. All South Asians should celebrate this defeat of majoritarianism and militarist nationalism and struggle to make our countries inclusive, pluralist democracies which accommodate diversity in religion, culture and ethnicity.

Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera has alleged that

Rajapaksa tried to stage a coup to prevent the election result's announcement. These charges testify to the climate of confrontation and suspicion that Rajapaksa created. They must be impartially investigated. Sirisena faces tough challenges. The first is to cohere the different parts of the rainbow coalition that catapulted this low-key politician to power, including the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist Jathika Hela Urumaya, the two main Muslim parties, and arch-rivals: former president Chandrika Kumaratunga and former prime minister Ranil Wickramasinghe.

This shouldn't be easy. Nor will it be easy to convince the Northern or Jaffna Tamils that they can expect a better deal under Sirisena than under Rajapaksa.

Over 80% of Northern Tamils voted for Sirisena. In a brilliant tactic, Tamil National Alliance leader R. Sampanthan delayed announcing support until a week before polling, denying Rajapaksa an opportunity to polarise the contest along ethnic-chauvinist lines.

Implementing the promised political reform -- replacing the executive presidency with a parliamentary system within 100 days -- would require the support of 150 members of the 225-strong Parliament. This cannot be done without neutralising the Rajapaksa brothers, whose Sri Lanka Freedom Party holds 135 seats.

Rajapaksa has surrendered the SLFP's chairmanship, but wants that all inquiries related to his family's corruption and undemocratic conduct be dropped. This cynical manoeuvre must be, and can be, scuttled.

Sirisena will have to negotiate hard with JHU and other Sinhala supporters. In the North, he must send the army back to the barracks. Many soldiers have grabbed lands belonging to displaced Tamils. Evacuating them is a precondition for defending the livelihoods of this persecuted minority.

Another challenge is arresting the drift towards neoliberalism and foreign-capital dependence for growth. During the civil war, foreign aid and Western investment dried up. Rajapaksa opened new avenues for financial flows, primarily from China, into real estate, casinos, and for-profit universities and hospitals.

This has aggravated unemployment in the Sinhala South. The North and East are plagued by a collapse of agriculture, a fall in rural incomes, and widespread

indebtedness. This comes on top of the dispossession which Tamils suffered during the war. An estimated 40,000 civilians were killed during the last phase of the massive operation against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, many of them in planned war-crimes.

The Rajapaksa government always described the war as an "anti-terrorist" operation and inflicted cruelties on civilians branded "LITE supporters." This is impermissible under the laws of war. Colombo has defied attempts by UN agencies to hold its functionaries accountable for war-crimes.

India failed to restrain Colombo, and supported its "sovereign" right to "defend" itself. The "all-out" war against Tamil separatism became a Right-wing, militarist-Hindutva model for what India should do in Kashmir, and how it should deal with recalcitrant minorities.

The model's proponents argue that human-rights violations and war-crimes are permissible if they deliver "results": the short-term price is worth paying to achieve a stronger, more united nation in the long run.

This dangerously mistaken view fails to recognise that short-term excesses create discontent which feeds counter-violence, worsening the long-term prospect.

Sirisena unfortunately inherits his predecessor's "anti-terrorist" war premise. His manifesto said: "No international power will be allowed to... touch a single [Sri Lankan] citizen ... on account of the campaign to defeat terrorism." This is retrograde national-chauvinism.

South Asian governments must mount pressure on Sirisena to fix responsibility for war-crimes, if necessary through a domestic truth commission.

Such efforts are most likely to succeed if there's devolution of powers to the North and East as part of a grand inter-ethnic reconciliation. Sirisena shouldn't reject devolution proposals just because they weren't part of the terms on which the Tamils supported him.

Their support was unconditional. But it reflected the character of the election, a referendum on corruption, cronyism and family-based rule, represented venally by Rajapaksa.

Sirisena helped set up the referendum, at the right moment. He won because the people didn't want to degrade Sri Lankan democracy further.

We South Asians too can get rid of leaders who today seem invincible, as Rajapaksa did. We should at least try -- through mass mobilisation, where necessary.

Many analysts have focused, obsessively, on the election's security implications, which offer India a chance to displace China as a major source of finance and armaments to Sri Lanka. Chinese policy is of course opportunist. Rajapaksa exploited it as a shield against Western human-rights pressure.

But the Indian state is no paragon of virtue. It regards its whole neighbourhood as its exclusive sphere of influence. India first armed and trained the LITE, and then turned against it. India's military intervention in Sri Lanka (1987-90) was a disaster.

India must seek a balanced, primarily non-military, relationship with Sri Lanka. Today's situation opens a good opportunity.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Do cries of people reach the PM?

On January 14, 2015 many newspapers carried the news of the prime minister calling a noted Rabindra Sangeet on a live TV show and wishing her on her birthday.



PHOTO: STAR

The incident has made us think ruefully that the PM has got the time and enthusiasm to call a celebrity, but the cries of sixteen crore helpless people fail to move her. If she wishes she can bring peace in a moment, as "her wish is command".

We hope PM Sheikh Hasina will not remain indifferent but do whatever is needed to bring peace and stability to the country.

Nur Jahan
 Chittagong

Tarnishing the image of Islam

2014 ended in shock with the attack on a Peshawar School. There is no sign of peace yet in 2015 for the Muslim world. The latest attack in France followed the same path of violence. These acts are committed by those who use religion to justify violence. To be honest, the terrorists' targets are not the non-Muslims alone; millions of Muslims are dying in countries like Pakistan, Iraq and Syria.

What they fail to understand is, in the name of glorifying Allah, they are actually tarnishing the image of Islam. Moreover, these are not acts of some misguided marginalised youths, rather these are the actions of a determined group of people who have their own interpretation of religion and are committed to implement it by force. And it is because of their actions that the Muslims in general are treated as constant threat to the people of other faiths across the world. The Muslim leaders should sit together and discuss possible solutions to the problem.

Anika Tasneem
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Comments on commentary, "BNP-Jamaat's mindless violence, again," published on January 16, 2015

Taslima Islam

Mr. Editor, why are you always in such a hurry to blame the BNP for acts of terror? Who was responsible for the shooting of Reaz Rahman?

I am surprised that after seeing what the ruling party has been doing against the BNP and its leader Khaleda Zia, you still have your pen ready to blame the BNP.

Mahboob Hossain

Sir, I agree with you, but it would have been better if we could do something effectively to convince this illegitimate government to go for a fair election during the last one year when BNP and Jamaat remained non-violent.

Binodbangali

Hopefully, our leaders would pay attention. You have been providing the readers with perspectives that make sense and I appreciate it!

S.M. Iftekhar Ahmed

So much has been written about the stubbornness of politicians, but they continue to be adamant out of arrogance. So what are the chances that Mr. Anam's article would be read, let alone be pondered or considered by one who is doing everything to stay in power or the other who is clearly being dictated by a party that opposed the very existence of the nation and abuses religion?

"New terror strike feared in Europe" (January 17, 2015)

John4534

It is good to search and find out hidden terrorist cells from Europe, but it is impossible to complete the task. However, it is much easier to find out why these misguided youths are determined to throw away their lives by killings many innocents.

"BGB to use lethal arms if attacked" (January 16, 2015)

M Sirajullah

Congratulations for the decision. It should have been done earlier. Politicians have no right to kill and burn public and their possessions. Government is failing in its duty to protect people.