

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI
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Unthinking and cruel Call an immediate halt to blockade and hartal

THE BNP has a litany of grievances against the ruling party, some of which we sympathise with and have been critical of the government. The list includes denial of space to the party to express dissent, harassment and arrest of its leaders, and to top it off, Khaleda Zia's confinement in her party office for two weeks as happened lately.

One would also find resonance with some of the thoughts she aired in her address to the press following removal of fetters on her movement. But we cannot help but be taken aback by her announcement that the blockade will continue until "the people's right to vote is restored". This is too open-ended an option to be taken by any responsible political leader. Knowing full well what further havoc an indefinite blockade could wreak, a 48-hour hartal from Wednesday morning through to Friday dawn has been called.

Fundamentally, this is tantamount to punishing the people for no fault of their own whatsoever. The public would have definitely wanted her to declare an immediate halt to the deadly blockade in view of the horrific spiralling of deaths, burning, destruction, economic losses and existential threats they have been through and want no more of. But she chose otherwise, which does not mesh with the general preference for a political solution to an essentially political conflict.

It is the most anti-people, unimaginative, cruel and destructive programme that the BNP is embarking on. We urge it to withdraw the blockade and hartal to meet public expectations.

Non-communicable diseases rising

Healthy eating and lifestyle mandatory

BANGLADESH is experiencing a rapid rise in non-communicable diseases (NCDs) as per a World Health Organisation (WHO) report. From what has been reported, NCDs such as cancers, respiratory complications and heart ailments registered a 59% increase over a four year period 2008 - 2012. To put all that into perspective, nearly 1 in 5 deaths were caused by cardiovascular diseases, 1 in 10 people died of cancer and 11 per cent by chronic respiratory diseases. The fast paced life of urban residents has brought about fundamental changes in food habits. With more people consuming "fast" yet unhealthy foods that are rich in unhealthy fats, it is only natural that NCDs have risen so alarmingly. Coupled with a leisurely life devoid of essential exercise and the consumption of harmful energy drinks have all contributed to this phenomenon.

WHO points out that most initiatives taken by authorities to promote a healthier lifestyle including the introduction of more nutritious food intake have largely fallen short of desired goals. The onslaught of quick-to-eat meals, while very convenient for busy working people, fail to provide nutritional value needed for the average adult. The overall lack of appropriate health education is another area that has contributed to the general lack of awareness of people on what is good food and what is not. The WHO recommends a reduction in salt consumption, replacing trans fats with polyunsaturated fats, promotion of breastfeeding, early detection and treatment of high blood pressure and periodic screening for cervical cancers as some of the means to reduce NCDs.

Mathematics deserves patronisation

ABDUL MATIN

GOOD news is rare now-a-days. I read one with amazement under the caption of "Love for maths stands tall" (DS, December 6, 2014). AF Mujibur Rahman Foundation, a charitable trust, built an eight-storey modern building for about 850 students of pure and applied mathematics of the University of Dhaka. The Foundation has been awarding medals and prizes to the students of mathematics departments at Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi universities. The charity also collaborates with Bangladesh Mathematical Society in sponsoring the National Undergraduate Maths Olympiad.

The AF Mujibur Rahman Foundation is the brain child of Rezaur Rahman, a chartered accountant and worthy son of AF Mujibur Rahman who was placed first in first class in his master's exams in pure mathematics at Kolkata University in 1920, beating the record of Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, then Vice-Chancellor of the university. AF Mujibur Rahman later joined the Indian civil service.

Rezaur Rahman, who is also the chairman of the foundation, has done a remarkable job. He has donated all his properties to the foundation which has spent Tk 20 crore for the building. Be it for the love of his father or any other reason, Rezaur Rahman has chosen the right subject for patronisation at a time when our younger generation has become apathetic towards studies of mathematics and science.

Mathematics is known as the mother of science. Technology is applied science. In this modern world, we cannot conceive of any development without technology. Mathematics is thus closely linked to the development of a country. Logically, if we want to develop our country, we must study mathematics seriously.

We should give credit to the AF Mujibur Rahman Foundation for providing both incentives and facilities to our university students for studying mathematics. What is important here is that such incentives should be extended to school levels to build a solid foundation for studying mathematics among school children. This will attract more students to study mathematics and science at higher levels.

Some students often get scared of studying mathematics. They try to memorise different formulae and theorems without understanding. In many western countries, mathematics is taught without any need for memorisation. We need properly trained teachers to make mathematics interesting and attractive to the students.

It is hoped that like the AF Mujibur Rahman Foundation, other charities or individual philanthropists will come forward with scholarships, prizes and other incentives for school students securing the highest grades in mathematics in annual examinations. This will help to popularise mathematics among school children. It will not cost millions. A donation of Tk 10,000 per annum for a school should be enough. Is it difficult for a well-to-do alumnus/alumna to donate this amount to his/her old school?

The writer is a senior nuclear engineer.

Fooling Democracy



RUBANA HUQ

KNOT SO TRUE

WHO really rules for public good? A man who I know from my childhood, a freedom fighter who still carries a bullet in his body, is someone who is today seen in media openly critiquing violence and the senseless killings. A few days ago, he was quoted saying that people causing violence should be killed. That press conference made headlines and subsequently the valiant freedom fighter was subjected to endless critiques. Knowing his spirit, I can vouch and say that what he said stemmed from an utter disillusionment of watching the country going up in flames. A tolerant politician such as him who preaches secularism in his constituency of Boalkhali cannot seriously be favoring punishment as severe as death. Yesterday a news site just ran a story on his village home being bombed. He was not there of course. Who threw the bomb and how lucky he was to have escaped it is another story. But what is alarmingly worrying is that many reasonable and rational minds like his are falling prey to this current insane atmosphere of intolerance and rhetoric. What prompts this fever in the brains of these heroes who once fought the liberation war? There is no clear answer...

On the other hand, does democracy faintly resemble a burnt body of a wife, a broken limb of a daughter or the cry of a mother at a loss? No.

More than 5 children have been killed in the last thirteen days. More than 10 vehicles were broken in Feni last night. Many import trucks are now stuck in petrol pumps and all of them are carrying import material. Even if we stop counting losses of the business community and become selfless overnight, who is going to account for all the injury and the loss of lives of our colleagues, workers, friends and relatives? If it's people that the politicians fight for, people that our politicians want to serve, what justifies killing the same people who vote them in and out of power? When will all the warring sides remember that power cannot be justified by authoritarian growth or insensitive democratic agenda...and certainly not at the cost of fooling people? Often those who fool the people assume a few flawed practices while they rule and oppose establishments. A few instances can be quoted below.

In January 2000 in Harare, Zimbabwe, when the Master of Ceremonies drew the winning ticket for the national lottery organised by a fully state-owned bank called the Zimbabwe Banking Corporation, he had apparently been "shell shocked" to see that the ticket drawn for the Z\$100,000 prize had Robert Mugabe's name written on it. The lottery has gone down history as the most discussed "lucky" episode that could happen to a man who led the national malaise. It was the same President who declared the Central Bank independent in 1995 at a time when inflation was at a 20%. It was 140% by 2002, 600% by



2003, 66000% by 2007 and 230 million% by 2008. A law making the central bank independent meant nothing. Bottom line: Laws are not effective if authorities lack sincere intent and focus.

On May 12, 1978, in Sao Paulo, fourteen years after strikes were banned in Brazil right after the military government overthrew the democratic government of President Goulart, the workers at a truck factory decided to put down their tools. The government was trying to manipulate the inflation figures so that the rise in the cost of living would be underestimated. A thirty-three year old activist called "Lula" refused to negotiate with the workers and along with his other colleagues worked towards a reactivation of a civil society and end military rule. The Scania factory is what changed the political scene in Brazil, where Lula formed his Workers' Party in October 1979, and entered into a lot of symbiotic relationships with many social movements. Upon his third attempt, Lula finally became the President of Brazil in 2002. Brazil today is a part of BRICS, the first Latin American country to have a meaningful global influence. Bottom line: Success has to be earned and not engineered.

I just returned from Kolkata. In mid-January, Kolkata was one city wearing many billboards. In a space of less than 30 feet near Gariahat, there were four of them of different sizes filled with new year greetings, welcome messages for pilgrims, announcement of the Bengal Global Business Summit and messages countering the 'wrong', 'motivated' media attacks on the Chief Minister of Bengal by the media. There's only one face in the billboards - that of Mamata Banerjee herself. Whatever happens in Kolkata,

Mamata steps in. Even when the Vice Chancellor of Jadavpur University was hesitating to resign, Ms. Banerjee stepped in, went to campus herself and made him step down. The Sarada scandal may have scarred Trinamool for good, but for now and for the elections in 2016, the current CM of Bengal apparently looks all set to sail through. Yet the atmosphere smells of failing health as many now associate Ms. Banerjee's reign with corruption and nepotism. Bottom line: Propaganda does not help in the long run and while it may sway the public for a brief period, it is not effective in the long run.

There are many more instances in history when people were fooled by politics and politicians; just like ours where not a single strike is geared towards securing the rights of the people, and not one blockade towards re-sketching the democratic route.

For how long will the authorities pretend to be on top of everything or for how long will the opposition just fool themselves by thinking that the entire nation is rooting for them? Thanks to the electronic media sound booms and the print reaching the voices on the streets, hopefully the nation won't be fooled anymore.

The writer is Managing Director, Mohammadi Group.

PROJECT SYNDICATE East Asia's Historical Shackles



BRAHMA CHELLANEY

DIPLOMATIC relationships in East Asia have long been held hostage by history. But the region's "history problem" has been intensifying lately, with growing nationalism among major actors like China, Japan, and South Korea fueling disputes over everything from territory and natural resources to war memorials and textbooks. Can East Asian countries overcome their legacy of conflict to forge a common future that benefits all?

Consider the relationship between America's closest East Asian allies, Japan and South Korea. Though historical disagreements have long hampered bilateral ties, the increasingly nationalistic stance of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and South Korean President Park Geun-hye has aggravated festering tensions. If they fail to work together to stem the revival of bitter historical disputes, their relationship will remain frozen, playing into China's hands.

And nobody plays the history card with quite as much relish as China, where President Xi Jinping is also relying on nationalism to legitimize his rule. Earlier this year, China introduced two new national memorial days to commemorate China's long battle against Japanese aggression in World War II: "War against Japanese Aggression Victory Day" on September 3 and "Nanjing Massacre Day" on December 13. What would happen if countries like Vietnam and India dedicated days to remembering China's aggression toward them since 1949?

By reinforcing negative stereotypes of rival countries, such squabbles over history and remembrance sow fragmentation and instability, and have certainly fueled the region's recent territorial disputes. Indeed, the politicization of history remains the principal obstacle to reconciliation in East Asia. Repeated attempts to rewrite history - sometimes literally, through textbook revisions - along nationalist lines make it nearly impossible to establish regional institutions.

This should not be the case. Japan and South Korea, for example, are vibrant democracies and export-oriented economic powerhouses, with traditionally close cultural ties and many shared values. In other words, they are ideal candidates for collaboration.

US President Barack Obama recognizes this potential, and has promoted increased strategic cooperation between South Korea and Japan in order to underpin a stronger trilateral security alliance with the US that can balance a rising China. But Japan and South Korea refuse to let go of history.

To be sure, there is some truth to South Korea's accusation that Japan is denying some of its past behavior. But it is also true that Park - who has refused to meet formally

with Abe until he addresses lingering issues over Japan's annexation of Korea - has used history to pander to domestic nationalist sentiment. Indeed, adopting a hard-line stance has enabled her to whitewash some inconvenient family history: Her father, the dictator Park Chung-hee, collaborated with the Japanese military while Korea was under colonial rule.

Abe, too, has stoked tensions, particularly by visiting Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine - a controversial memorial that honors, among others, Class A war criminals from World War II. Though Abe visited the shrine only once - in December 2013 - he felt compelled to do so in response to China's unilateral declaration of an air-defense identification zone, covering territories that it claims but does not control.

Of course, the divergences between Japanese and South Korean historical narratives go back further than WWII. More than a century ago, the Korean activist Ahn Jung-geun assassinated Japan's first prime minister, Hirobumi Ito, at the railway station in the Chinese city of Harbin, cementing Ahn's status as a hero in Korea and a terrorist in Japan. Ito's image can be seen on Japan's 1,000-yen note; Ahn has appeared on a 200-won postage stamp in South Korea.

Last year, Park asked Xi to honor Ahn. Xi seized the opportunity to drive a wedge between America's two main Asian allies, and built a memorial to Ahn. Japan responded by blasting China for glorifying a terrorist and propagating a "one-sided" view of history - a move that, Japan asserted, was "not conducive to building peace and stability."

Such conflicts have a clear catalyst: Asia's rising prosperity. As their economies have expanded, Asian countries have gained the confidence to construct and exalt a new past, in which they either downplay their own aggressions or highlight their steadfastness in the face of brutal victimization.

All countries' legitimizing narratives blend historical fact and myth. But, in some cases, historical legacies can gain excessive influence, overwhelming leaders' capacity to make rational policy choices. That explains why Park has sought closer ties with China, even though South Korea's natural regional partner is democratic Japan. One source of hope stems from Abe's landslide victory in the recent snap general election, which gives him the political capital to reach out to Park with a grand bargain: If Japan expresses remorse more clearly for its militaristic past, South Korea will agree to leave historical grievances out of official policy.

Japan and South Korea cannot change the past. But they can strive to shape a more cooperative future. As a Russian proverb succinctly puts it, "Forget the past and lose an eye; dwell on the past and lose both eyes."

The writer is Professor of Strategic Studies at the New Delhi-based Center for Policy Research, is the author of *Asian Juggernaut, Water: Asia's New Battleground, and Water, Peace, and War: Confronting the Global Water Crisis*.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Stop this violence

I am a student of BRAC University. The other day when I was on my way home on a BRITC bus, my parents called me to know if I was alright as something horrible had happened on the road I regularly take to go home: a bus was set on fire and some of the passengers were burnt and injured badly.

No one is safe nowadays; people are getting burnt and killed on the roads regularly. What is the point of all this violence? We want an answer! Stop this violence and let us live a normal life.
Worried Citizen
BRAC Business School
BRAC University

Why attack public vehicles?

In Bangladesh violence is the answer to everything. When students get angry with anything, they start vandalising and burning vehicles. And violence soon spreads outside the campus. If a problem arises in a garment factory, the workers take to the street and try to establish their rights through acts of vandalism.

The same happens during hartals and blockades as the supporters of the opposition party burn and vandalise public vehicles indiscriminately. Don't they understand that they are destroying the country's assets by such violence? Who are suffering? It's the people, not the government. Have the blockaders succeeded in putting pressure on the government by doing so? Not at all. Attacking public vehicles can not be the language of any protest. Protests should be peaceful and effective.
Ripu Sen
International Islamic University Chittagong

Please reconsider the decision

The latest decision of the government that one and two taka notes will be withdrawn has surprised me. As I work on rural education, I spend half the month in villages where one and two taka notes are greatly in use. You can buy more than ten types of candies which cost taka one or two only. The price of a matchbox is Tk 1 or 2. We can still buy so many things that cost the same. If all on a sudden the government withdraws one/two taka notes, it will hike the prices of low cost daily commodities thereby putting pressure on the lower income groups of the country. We urge the government to please reconsider the decision.
Khandaker Zia Hasan
Communication Trainer & Journalist

Comments on news report, "Arsonists to face stern actions," published on January 18, 2015

Afreen
But we have not seen any action to arrest and punish the arsonists yet.

Jamil
This can't be called a movement, it's simply terrorism. Serious action must be taken against the perpetrators of such crimes.

Rose1024
Instead of wasting time on lip service, they should take action.

Barkat
These people are paying the price for both Hasina and Khaleda's dirty politics. Hasina is equally responsible for this situation. Hope sanity prevails and both the ladies leave aside their rigidity and arrogance and start caring about the people.

"Politically charged statements of law enforcer chiefs" (January 18, 2015)

Mohammad Auwal
This is an excellent and timely editorial. It shows your paper's commitment to democracy and patriotism.

Hafeejul Alam
The civil servants are under obligation to follow the directives of the government in power. This is even more so for the law-enforcing agencies, for they are supposed to protect the lives and property of the people. In the process, they may need to motivate people and seek cooperation from them and these should not be taken as something political. We expect a more matured editorial from The Daily Star, instead of repeating what BNP leaders say in the so-called talk-shows.

Taj Hashmi
Any sensible government would have dismissed the BGB, RAB and Police Chiefs -- who are nothing but public servants -- for their audacious behaviour. They are public servants, not politicians.