

# Our leaders inured to our plight

*Stop the violence, resolve the crisis*

FOR government ministers to say that there is no political crisis is like burying one's head in the sand. If there is no crisis then why the 30 dead and more than 900 injured since January 5?

The country has suffered three weeks of violence and one sees no end to it. And while it is well and good that the government should take all necessary measures to stem the spate of violence it must also address the fundamental issue, which is entirely political. It has thus become imperative that the two leaders engage immediately with each other to resolve the political impasse. And that requires renouncing their implacable positions that have so far wreaked havoc on the lives and livelihood of the people of Bangladesh.

However, it appears as if our two leaders are oblivious of the deleterious consequences of their respective stance on the country. Consequently, on one hand we are faced with the prospect of an indefinite blockade and strikes that has become incrementally violent, and on the other hand, the government, which is taking increasingly severe measures to clamp down on the opposition, has categorically refused to hear any of the latter's demands for talks. With neither side ready to compromise, the public is left in the lurch, besieged by vulnerability and uncertainty.

While Khaleda Zia must order her party and alliance activists to stop the violence immediately and the government must take measures within the law to stop the violence, the prime minister should immediately address the underlying political issue to resolve the current flux.

# Passing of King Abdullah

*We mourn his death*

WE join with the rest of the world in mourning the sad demise of King Abdullah. We shall remember him for his efforts to further strengthen the long fraternal relations between our two countries.

The late King will also be remembered for ushering in reforms in various sectors, his advocating the cause of religious tolerance, and for women's rights, albeit in a limited way, in spite of strong opposition from religious conservatives from within. He is credited with opening the first mixed-gender university in 2009 as part of his vision to offer equal educational opportunities to all the Kingdom's citizens.

King Abdullah's economic and fiscal policies saw the Kingdom grow to be the largest economy in the Middle East. The late king played a key role in Opec and increased production capacity of the Kingdom by about a third to about 12.5 million barrels a day. King Abdullah will perhaps be best remembered for his deft handling of the country's finances during the global recession by spending some \$400 billion in stimulus spending to counter the effects on the Saudi economy whilst more advanced economies reeled and crashed.

Saudi Arabia's international profile was much lifted by the proactive role the King played during his time both in regional and world affairs. The late King will be remembered for his staunch stand on the fight against terrorism and the country's lead role in the coalition against the Islamic State.

We offer his successor King Salman our felicitations and hope that the policies of the late King would be continued and that the ties between Bangladesh and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will continue to advance even further.

# Real concern for the nation

JENNIFER LEWIS

STRIKES obviously affect everyone. Firebombing is useless and senseless and should be condemned in every case. Watching the targets each day in Bangladesh, the people of this country should start to consider the fact that apparently there is no pattern to the bombings and likely no forethought into the long term repercussions for this nation. The most recent example included two attempts to start fires inside Jagannath University campus.

I wonder if the strikers have considered what strikes do to the nation's future, specifically referring to the schooling for the nation's young people. How much impact does this add up to? Across the past 15 months, universities have lost considerable classroom time because students and faculty cannot safely go to classes (adding up to not weeks but months lost), which is a significant setback to the education of the nation's students. How can Bangladesh possibly have a smart, knowledgeable group of people to compete with other nations on the world market when it cannot even get them to the classroom to prepare them?

Additional challenges were added when strikers targeted property and lives within one of the nation's universities. At Jagannath University, strikers firebombed one of the school buses. A second attempt later in the day resulted in arrests. Thankfully, no one was injured or killed. But this breach within a university is seriously troubling. So, now the strikers are directly attacking the nation's future, after the education of the people has already been stalled...again...and again...and again.

What comes to mind when this sort of things happens? Cowardice, of course. It takes far more power and strength to work diplomatically to develop solutions to problems than it does to throw a firebomb. But now, it appears that a lack of intellect and real concern about the future of Bangladesh must also be included when considering the people behind the bombings and strikes.

The solution to the nation's problems will be complex, but violence and strikes only hurt the ability of Bangladesh to move forward. And without a generation equipped with the knowledge to help, how will Bangladesh ever progress?

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# Democracy on the brink: Can we pull it back?

ATAUR RAHMAN

State of aspiring democracies

DEMOCRACY, globally, has been facing a lot of challenges and setbacks in recent years. Two big, dynamic middle-income countries, Thailand and Egypt, where democracy was expected to consolidate, have returned to military rule as a result of political polarisation and intolerance. The democratic undertow has been particularly apparent in Muslim-majority countries. Arab Spring has given way to an 'Arab Freeze' in Egypt with the army's de facto political domination now constitutionally entrenched for some time to come. In Syria, authoritarian regimes have reasserted control though there is considerable vacuum of authority. In Africa, the trend of change has been towards increasing concentration and abuse of executive power.

Bangladesh context

In 2015, Bangladesh democracy seems to be in grave crisis. The fallout of the 'exclusive' election held on January 5, 2014, has resurfaced with renewed vengeance just after one year. The ruling party's arbitrary use of state power providing no space to the opposition has now resulted in a desperate move by the main opposition to go for dysfunctional orobodh and hartal that cast a dark cloud on the future of democracy and political stability. The consequences could be stark -- protracted internal conflict with further erosion of democratic institutions, rule of law, and freedom of expression pushing Bangladesh to the category of 'conflict state.' The country's laudable economic success will be hindered. The regime's legitimate credit in holding the war crimes trial will be overshadowed. The shrinking space for civil society and media, compounded by human rights violation, may lead to isolation of the Awami League government in the international community. In 'worst case' scenario the country could face the risk of a democratic reversal with high social and economic cost in addition to political costs.

Why has Bangladesh democracy come to such an impasse? Why could democracy not take firm roots after decades of experiment, and is now on the path of reversal to an authoritarian, personal rule, or military reset? It is certainly difficult to answer these questions as we try to establish causal link of democratic malfunctioning or failure to any particular factor. Rather, a number of factors can be identified in the transition and consolidation process. In broad terms, the bloody legacy of political evolution of Bangladesh since the country's independence partly takes the blame for the current political instability and uncompromising attitudes of political actors. Institutional weaknesses, especially in representative bodies like parliament and political parties, have remained weak and personal in nature. They mostly served the interests of the leaders and the elites. Limited entry and lack of competition have made the system unstable. As one noted author has aptly said: "Ruled by outside forces for many centuries, historically the society has not experienced the development of modern political order consisting of three institutional domains: a strong state, the rule of law and accountability" (Francis Fukuyama, 2013).

Political parties and public interest

One noticeable change in Bangladesh's party dynamics in recent years is the increasing disconnect between the

centre and grassroots. Weakening of inter-party relations and intra-party democracy and near absence of 'political feedback mechanism' between the centre and grass-root levels of political parties, among others, might have affected the country's democratic consolidation process. The degree of internal democracy in political parties has been extremely limited due to strong centralisation and prevalent informal decision-making processes controlled by the top leader or party-elite. Moreover, in recent years, heightened urbanisation, growing economy, nexus between business and politicians, and the kleptocratic capture of state institutions might have also affected the democratic institutions adversely.

Risks of democratic reversal

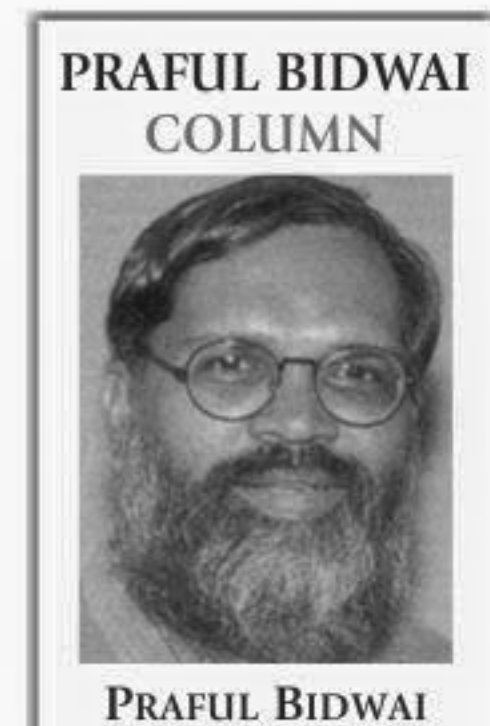
History shows that in emerging democracies, whether the ruling party could win an election with due legitimacy or not, obtaining power far beyond their popular support, makes it difficult to change the mindset. It tries to consolidate its position primarily by muzzling the opposition, putting its leaders in jail or into exile, and co-opting others with the temptation of profiting from a share of the economic rents that come with political power, and quite often justifying their authoritarian methods in the name of stability and development. The AL government began this process conspicuously after the 2014 election, putting a large number of BNP leaders in jail, filing innumerable cases against them, and trying to fragment and neutralise the opposition as a political force. In fact, BNP and other opposition parties today are faced with a historic challenge for their very existence as the future of democracy is at stake in Bangladesh.

Concluding: Way to change

The ordeals that democracy is undergoing in Bangladesh today raise serious concerns about its future. While democracy is one of the greatest aspirations of the people of Bangladesh, the way it unfolded over the past decades did not inspire them, and its prospect appears gloomy now. The ongoing violence and shutdown across the country in the name of movement has already brought the recipe for disaster (democratic reversal). The 'change' could accompany lingering crisis and chaos. Indeed, to avoid entering into a 'conflict state' characterised by unending violence and extremism, there needs to be a meaningful and effective dialogue and compromise among the political parties to resolve the current 'crisis.' The exhortations by the business leaders, development partners, media and most of civil society must result in greater unity to be forged among the non-state actors to bring the 'dialogue' and compromise into reality given the 'track record' of leaders of two major parties. Today, therefore, our challenge is not to choose the alternative to democracy as we sometimes preoccupy ourselves with power, personal glory, governing institutions and economic rent, and neglect the critical variable of public interest and cultural mode of our people. Let our optimism prevail over the pessimism, and positive energy triumph over negative and misdirected efforts, in bringing the desirable 'change' in Bangladesh state and society.

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# Europe in Islamophobia's grip?



PRAFUL BIDWAI

COLUMN

MORE than two weeks on, the debate on the barbaric killings of Charlie Hebdo journalists and the freedom of expression has become a conversation across time-zones and political, cultural and legal divides. This is probably the first time that such a debate is taking place in a world connected by Facebook, Twitter and U-Tube.

Serious doubts are being raised about the argument that the attack wasn't calculated, premeditated murder, or akin to other recent acts of terrorism; rather, it was an assault on "Western values," "European freedom," on "democracy itself"; the targets could have been "you and me"; so all freedom-lovers must proudly declare "I am Charlie."

This is utter nonsense. The attackers, the Algerian-French Kouachi brothers, executed a well-planned operation, called out the names of the weekly's cartoonists and killed them for what they self-avowedly had drawn or written. The brothers were -- wrongly -- "avenging" an alleged "insult" to the Holy Prophet. Al-Qaeda has since claimed responsibility for planning the attack.

The cartoonists' murder must be strongly and unequivocally condemned as a horrible crime. But it's impossible to deny that most of the cartoons pertaining to Islam and Muslims which recently appeared in Charlie Hebdo were meant to lampoon, insult and provoke.

Defending free speech of course means defending speech you don't agree with. However, those who demanded that the Fourth Estate publish the Charlie cartoons as a litmus test of its commitment to freedom were being hypocritical. They had every right to show solidarity with the victims by re-posting the cartoons, but they must respect the right of others not to do so because they find them aesthetically revolting, bigoted or incendiary.

Those who defend Charlie Hebdo say it has a history of lampooning all religions, including Christianity (although rarely Judaism), that fiercely irreverent satire is part of the French cultural tradition, and that many Charlie cartoonists came from the secular Left. This defence is at least partially valid. France does have a tradition of irreverence towards authority and savage humour -- as anyone acquainted with French society, culture and the media would know.

However, in the recent past, Charlie's vitriol was reserved overwhelmingly for Islam. This shows poor judgment in a situation where Muslims are a marginalised and stigmatised minority, which faces great discrimination in relation to the power-wielding White Christian majority.

A large number of French-speaking youth of Arab origin have been radicalised since 9/11 by the excesses that came with the "war on terror," including the barbarity of Abu Ghraib.

This doesn't justify, extenuate or condone the Charlie attack, but places it in its historical context. The conflict today is not between Islam and Western democracy, so much as between two rival ideologies/forces contending for global domination: the American-led "war on terror" in the name of democracy, and second, terror in the name of Islam. The West has the upper hand in this.

In Europe, the anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic Far Right is going from strength to strength, as is starkly evident in France, Germany and Britain. Under threat is not

the freedom of expression of the majority, but the security of the religious minorities when they see #KillAllMuslims trending on Twitter, and the media promoting Islamophobia in the name of "European values."

Many European countries don't allow Muslims to build mosques in convenient locations or to wear headscarves. Some don't permit ritual (halal) slaughtering. In Denmark, Muslims find it difficult to bury their dead since the Lutheran Church owns all the cemeteries. Muslims must either send their dead back to their "home countries" or negotiate their burial with local pastors in lands formerly reserved for non-believers in a limited number of cemeteries.

There has long existed a social compact in Western European countries, based on Christian culture and practices. Jews, who were held in contempt for centuries, have been accommodated into it since the War, but Muslims are still excluded.

Many Europeans are unaware of the discrimination their Muslims fellow-citizens suffer. Worse, they see Muslims as overrunning their societies. Recently, Fox-TV quoted an "expert" saying that Birmingham (UK) has become a "no-go" area for non-Muslims. In reality, only 22% of its population is Muslim. US politician Bobby Jindal has since made a similar assertion about Europe.

Such dangerous scare-mongering apart, many Europeans grossly overestimate the proportion of Muslims in their populations, says a Pew Research-Bertelsmann Foundation survey, quoted in The Economist. (www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2015/01/daily-chart-2).

Muslims account for 7.5% of the French population. But in popular perception, they account for 31%. The respective percentages are 5 and 21 for Britain, 6 and 19 for Germany, 2 and 16 for Spain, and 4 and 20 for Italy. This reality-perception disconnect indicates serious paranoia.

Even more frightening, a clear majority of French, (East) German, Spanish, Swedish and Swiss people believe that "Islam is not compatible with the West" -- presumably because it's not open or democratic enough. The percentage in France, which has the largest Muslim population in Western Europe, is 56; and in Britain only slightly lower, at 47. In Spain, it's an alarming 65.

These are the same societies that encouraged immigration in the past because their populations were shrinking or getting too old to work. In most cases, the immigrants are "here" (in Europe) because Europeans had colonies "there."

Yet, many European countries, including France, have laws that criminalise Holocaust denial, but none that prohibit the celebration or whitewashing of their own brutal record as colonisers who killed many more people than the six million Jews that Hitler butchered, unforgivable as that was.

These double standards and hypocrisies should be candidly discussed to draw some lessons, come to terms with the past, and deal wisely with the present and future. But these are precisely the issues that are erased from public debate whenever the question of religious fanaticism or extremism leading to violence or terrorism arises in episodes like Charlie Hebdo. The response is, invariably, to assert the superiority of "Western values" and Europe's "secular culture", and suppress rights through measures like a draconian French-style Patriot Act.

This vicious cycle must end. Instead of marching with the likes of Israel's Binyamin Netanyahu, Western leaders and the public ought to reflect seriously on how to break the cycle through non-discrimination, fairness and justice for all.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## 'Shoot on sight'

I read with astonishment that the BNP-led 20 party alliance are claiming that the government is giving law enforcers a licence to kill. It seems to me that it is the 20 party alliance that is giving its activists the licence to kill. Scores of innocent people, who are just trying to get on with their lives, are being brutally burned in attacks with petrol bombs. How such attacks can fall under the umbrella of "peaceful protest" is beyond comprehension. While the BNP and the Alliance may deny that these arsonists are acting on their behalf, this is not credible, because they are trying to enforce the blockade. Infants, young children and women are being burned alive and yet their leaders are saying not one word to discourage this kind of activity.

I believe that anyone who is seen to be carrying petrol bomb near any public or private transport, should be considered "armed and dangerous" and an immediate threat to human life. Their intentions are clearly not just to damage, but to injure, maim, kill and destroy. In most countries, in such circumstances, the use of deadly force is warranted. However, it is possible to instruct law enforcers to incapacitate rather than to kill, and shots can be aimed at the legs. "Shoot on sight" is not the same as "shoot to kill", and it is high time that the government instructed law enforcers to do just that, and perhaps that may be just the deterrent that is warranted.

Syed Hamde Ali  
 The Nawab Palace, Bogra

## Break the political stalemate

Being a septuagenarian, I had the opportunity to observe Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from a close distance. He was very simple, kind-hearted, and dedicated to people's cause. He sacrificed his own life for the cause of this country, leaving himself ever shining and immortal in the hearts of millions of his countrymen. Sheikh Hasina is blessed with such an outstanding legacy! The whole country is now on the threshold of an imminent political catastrophe. I strongly believe that she can steer the country out of this situation. If she sacrifices for the greater good of the nation, she will leave an ever-lasting imprint in the history of Bangladesh. Have we forgotten the path shown by the greats like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela and the likes so soon?

S. A. Samad  
 Boro Moghbazar, Dhaka

## Comments on news report, "All-out steps to contain violence," published on January 21, 2015

Siraj

Government should take the toughest measures to maintain law and order and save lives and properties of the people. Along with this, the leaders of the other parties should be allowed space to speak openly about their political demands.

Snr Citizen

A stitch in time could have saved nine.

S.M. Iftekhar Ahmed

In my view, a state of war should be declared against these miscreants, who, in the name of movement, are actually indulging in criminal activities against the people.

Deep

The current state of the country is the repercussion of halting democratic process. Now, it is the AL which is to blame for the current anarchy. No space for the opposition is being given by the AL which is a severe blow to the democratic process. BNP leaders acted in similar pattern while they were in power. Now they are trying to regain power by cruel means. It is the people who are/were always the victims of cruelty by both AL and BNP.

## "Public servants making political statements," (January 21, 2015)

Habib

This is a very timely article. But as always, we will see no righteous action. On the contrary, it's going to be appreciated. We are living in an "all possible" country. Here nothing is right, yet everything is right. No one bothers listening to conscience.

Mithun Ahmed

I thank Dr. Hashmi for making an important point. It was indeed timely. It is one thing to execute the directives of the government and another thing is to make random, brash public and political statements, including the date of the possible elections. It is a shame! It is unheard of in the civilized world. It is time these law-enforcing officials are brought back to order.

Hafeejul Alam

The writer should have rechecked the assigned duties and responsibilities of a public servant in the context of Bangladesh, particularly when the whole country is under the spate of terrorism. No one should forget that the civil servants are under obligations to follow the directives of the ruling government. This is even more applicable for the law-enforcing agencies, as they are supposed to protect the lives and property of the people in the face of rampant terrorist activities. In the process, they may need to motivate people and seek co-operation from them and these should not be considered as something political.

Taj Hashmi

Sorry, I can't agree with you that public servants are there to "motivate people". Only teachers, politicians, intellectuals and others may motivate people, while public servants are public servants, their only duty is to serve the people. They have absolutely no role to motivate anybody but only themselves so that they remain honest and dutiful.