

Call off blockade for examinees' sake

Enough is enough

IN exhorting the BNP-led alliance to call off their irrational and pointless indefinite blockade the education minister has voiced the concerns of all the peace loving people, particularly the parents and guardians of the nearly a million and a half candidates who are due to sit for the SSC and equivalent exams from the second of February. Regrettably, taking the exams has become uncertain as parents are frightened about their children venturing out during the period of blockades and strikes.

It is difficult to believe that the 20-Party alliance leadership is unable to comprehend the unmitigated damage they will be doing to the future of the examinees if they miss their exams for a year. As it is, a large number of O- and A-level candidates, particularly from Dhaka and Khulna divisions were unable to take the exams for the current session as those were cancelled in these two divisions. And the examinees will not be able to sit for the examinations in this session due to the cancellation. A year is a long time in a student's life. Who will compensate the loss?

Enough damage has been done to the country already in the month-long blockade and strike. So far death count in the violence has reached nearly forty, not to speak of the huge damage done to the country's economy. Can't politics take a back seat when it comes to the interest of our students who are going to take the first important public exam in their life?

We repeat, call off the blockade and the 72-hour hartal announced yesterday.

Real estate sector suffers setback

A pillar weakened

THE latest phase of political violence and non-stop blockade has badly affected the real estate sector. The sector has already incurred loss of around Tk. 792 crore in 22 days and apartment sales have dropped to the lowest point this month, said at a press conference organised by REHAB.

Many construction works are on hold as the realtors cannot transport raw materials to construction sites due to blockade. Delay in construction causes rise in overhead cost and apartments get pricier. Amid this uncertainty, investment is also going down in this field. Many realtors cannot even realise the installment money from customers.

As a whole, the sector has been going through a slump in sales in the last couple of years. The high interest rate of home loan and exorbitant rise in apartment prices between 2011 and 2012 are major reasons behind this slump. The current political stalemate is only exacerbating the situation and pushing this sector to the edge.

The real estate sector contributes 7% to our GDP. It creates one lakh direct and 35 lakh indirect employments as 200 linkage industries are affiliated with it. The government should seriously consider realtors' demand for arrangement of low-cost housing loans and loan rescheduling facility to revamp it. And the two major political parties should restrain from hurting the economy further and find peaceful way out of the current impasse.

Are terror and delusion new names for politics

STRANGER THAN FICTION



TAJ HASHMI

THINKING aloud about the ongoing killing of innocent civilians in Bangladesh by political goons and law enforcers for "democracy" is not over-emphasising the crisis. The cycle of mindless killing of unarmed civilians, including children, elderly and women, which was resumed early this month, is not a new phenomenon. It's the continuation of the old conflict between the two political parties, which has been going on for the last 30-odd years.

Supporters of the rival political parties—Awami League (AL) and BNP—behave more like sworn enemies than political opponents. At times it appears that given the opportunity, the party goons wouldn't shy away from literally eliminating their political rivals. By 1996, the outbreak of political violence took a new dimension. Along with killing political rivals, political activists started using terrorist methods to kill total strangers. Since then, setting fire to running buses with gunpowder, gasoline, and other incendiaries to kill innocent civilians has become the norm. Bangladesh since then has not looked back.

It's unfair to blame only the political activists at the grassroots for these crimes. Leaders are even more responsible for all the violent crimes their followers commit. The arrogance of some politicians—and disgustingly, of law enforcers—reminds me of the reign of Louis XVI (1754-1793) of France. He was not averse to reforms and known for his generosity, but lost his throne and life because of indecision, and inability to control the greedy and corrupt nobility and clergy during the Revolution. While history gives the essential sense of direction to the statesmen, Machiavellian leaders squander the opportunity; and learn nothing from history. Sadly, while the prime minister thinks all the recent killings of civilians by the Rab and police were due to "gun battles" between law enforcers and criminals, the Rab chief, in corroboration asserts "there has never been any extrajudicial killing" in Bangladesh. Meanwhile, one can only keep one's jaws wide open, in total shock and disbelief!

Power is so intoxicating! It gives rich dividends to those who exercise it, and to their cronies around them. It's as difficult for the power-drunk to relinquish it as alcohol for the alcoholic. Again, power just for the sake of it, or justifying holding it for an indefinite period in the name of whatever comes handy, reminds me of Madame de Pompadour (1721-1764). She is infamously known for her catchphrase: "After us, the deluge." She meant: "I care not what happens when I am dead and gone." However, the average Bangladeshi don't want to see Madame de Pompadours. They are concerned about what's going on around them in the name of democracy and freedom. Unless they forestall the mindless violence against innocent people, we don't know if Bangladesh will turn into another failing state one day, may not be in the distant future.

We learn from history that even countries with tremendous resources and potentials to be in the league of the rich and powerful nations, got fractured and became dysfunctional, and some even ceased to exist. Although it does not sound palatable, Bangladesh is not among the resourceful rich countries; it's still among the poorest and most backward ones. While richer countries like Iraq, Libya and Syria have failed to endure unrepresentative

governance, corruption, and prolonged civil wars; Bangladesh can't endure them for an indefinite period either.

Corrupt elites and their beneficiaries in the Third World seldom consider revolutionary changes and their own overthrow even as remote possibilities. Absolute power has its own limitations and nemesis. As Marx explains, ruling oligarchs often suffer from "bourgeois false consciousness," which is delusional or self-deceptive. It's different from mass "false consciousness," which is also delusional but subject to elite manipulation and cultural hegemony of mass consciousness. Elites in post-colonial countries like Bangladesh do not even behave like the bourgeoisie; as their values are feudal and colonial, so are they the neo-feudal lords and neo-colonial masters. No wonder, the country is infested with so-called VVIPs and VIPs! And being surrounded by sycophants and retainers, they only hear what they love to hear from them—sweet lies.

The new spate of violence and use of terrorist methods to kill innocent civilians have gone up alarmingly since the farcical parliamentary elections of January 2014. The ongoing killing of bus and rickshaw passengers, bus and truck drivers, and the deadly attack on a senior BNP politician earlier this month, reminds me of what the country went through in 1971. Alarmingly, the number of random bomb attacks in public places is going up.

It might sound hyperbolic, but people being unsure about the identities of the bomb throwers and arsonists, and the present crisis being so fuzzy and puzzling that it appears to be more challenging and unpredictable than what people experienced in 1971. While Bengalis by late 1971 knew they were going to be free from Pakistani occupation, they don't know if the present crisis will be over in one month, one year or in one decade. People are not sure if the violence they are experiencing today will turn into something more serious tomorrow to engulf the entire country.

The present crisis no longer reflects only a violent showdown between the two rival "political dynasties," represented by the BNP-Jamaat on one side, and the AL on the other. One believes there are multiple parties and sides engaged in the gory business of taking innocent lives and terrorising the whole nation to promote their political and other vested interests.

We notice the sudden rise in the incidents of extrajudicial killings. And when such selective and indiscriminate killing of civilians become widespread, terrorists emerge out of nowhere, mainly out of the surviving family members, friends and neighbours of the victims as had happened in some Latin American countries, Algeria, Iran under the Shah, Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan in the recent past.

Politicians, professionals, security experts, human rights activists, members of the civil society and law enforcing agencies should resolve the crisis, which still seems to be controllable, jointly. There is no point in the information minister's recent irresponsible comment that the crisis be resolved on the street, not by talking across the table. AL has no reason to underestimate the BNP. Recently, more than a million people turned up at the funeral of Khaleda Zia's politically inactive son. And this should ring the bell in the AL camp. Let good sense prevail and leaders find out a permanent solution to hold free and fair elections in the country, only by talking with each other across the table.

The writer teaches security studies at Austin Peay State University. Sage has recently published his latest book, *Global Jihad and America: The Hundred-Year War Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan*.

End politics of killing

BITTER TRUTH



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

IT was a noble gesture on the part of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to go to BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia's Gulshan office to console a grieving mother and offer condolence and sympathy at the death of her youngest son Arafat Rahman Koko. But upon reaching there she found the gate locked. Even if we believe that traumatised by shock and grief Khaleda Zia was sedated, her relatives or the BNP stalwarts present there could have received the PM and invited her into the office. But even that minimum courtesy was distinctly missing. Deeply embarrassed, the PM had to go back. People do not believe that this meeting would have healed the wounds or brought an end to simmering conflict and bloody feud on the streets instantly, but it could have paved the way for reconciliation between the feuding parties.

Some people believe that the ruling party made a strategic mistake by not allowing the BNP chairperson to hold rally in Gazipur on May 4 by confining her in her Gulshan office, and this time BNP circles committed a grievous blunder by not allowing the PM to see the BNP chairperson. People believe that this visit could have been a beginning of the trust-building effort.

Latest figures show that petrol bomb attack on running or parked buses and goods-laden trucks took the death toll to 38, including women and children, and thousands are still groaning in pain at DMCH and other hospitals. They will become totally disabled and disfigured for the rest of their lives even if they survive. Most of these people were the sole bread earners in their families, and nobody knows who will support their families.

People do not know how much either the BNP or Jamaat has been able to destabilise the government, but these patriotic citizens (!), either hired goons or radical followers of either BNP or Jamaat, have definitely succeeded in causing massive destruction in business, education, transportation and agriculture sectors. 14 lakh SSC examinees in the country face uncertainty and tremendous risk in sitting for the exams scheduled to commence from February 2. How can the guardians send their wards to exam centres braving so much risk?

There is a growing feeling that the idea of Bangladeshi nationalism based on the spirit of the Liberation War is under unremitting pressure from many quarters. Extremist, ultra-religious and other evil forces are making all kinds of demands so as to destabilise the society. The country no longer seems calm and placid, and travelling from one part of the country to another reveals a mood of despair, anger and helplessness. Actions taken here and there fall far short of what the people are beginning to

demand. Business community and disenchanted peace-loving citizens have demonstrated their anger by forming human chains to ventilate their mood in silent protest. But this silence might turn into bloody clashes, simply for the reason that people are being pushed to the edge.

While agreeing with BNP and its allies about the necessity of holding a fresh election that must be inclusive, free, fair and unfettered, the method adopted by them for the last 22 days is preposterous and incomprehensible. No political leader imbued with sanity and sensibility can issue order to kill innocent and uninvolved poor people so recklessly. The groups involved in this cruel killing mission must be innately evil and pathologically delinquent. These groups, either individually or collectively, will never serve the cause of Islam or party, as they claim to be doing.

BNP hierarchy does not even know the hidden agenda some obscure and closed-minded political groups are trying to implement by indulging in such animal rage and orgy of destruction. As it appears, some unscrupulous politicians in the country are fanning the flames of violence and acrimony instead of defending human values and preserving unity of the society. The sad fact is that not only are poor and innocent people dying, but, it appears that democracy will take a fatal beating with the government's inability to deliver political stability and safety of the people.

In a democracy, there must be an opposition party, and in absence of the opposition's voice authoritarian rule holds sway. As an opposition party, BNP has a mass base and the party can win the support of the people through political agitation on the streets, but not by enforcing blockade and killing innocent poor people on the street through the brutalities of Jamaat-Shibir cadres aligned with BNP in this power struggle. At the same time the ruling party, in its wildest of dreams, should not think that it can wipe out BNP by oppressive measures. Many leaders and followers of BNP were valiant freedom fighters, and in that light, people expect that BNP will assess and launch its programme and agitation based on the spirit of the Liberation War.

The politicians must hold talks on all conflicting and contentious national issues and reach a consensus once for all. For this, we need a congenial atmosphere. The matured politicians in both the blocs must not listen to calls of some immature and hyperactive leaders staying abroad, but must understand that the road to go to power or to stay in power can never be achieved through violence, killing people or by stopping flow of foodstuff from the point of production to markets. If they continue to do so by enforcing blockades and hartals indefinitely, they would be killing daily wage earners in the rural areas whose support they crave for going to power or staying in power. Sadly true, recent events and utterances by leaders from both the parties have shown that they have no love for democracy, nor the desire to come to a consensus by holding dialogue.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star. E-mail: aukhandk@gmail.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Permanent solution is required

The country is facing hazardous times due to the continuous blockade-hartal enforced by BNP-led 20 party alliances. Their main motive is to compel the government to arrange a national election under a non-party caretaker government. This demand of BNP is nothing new as they boycotted the national election of January 5, 2014 for the same reason. It seems the government is giving little importance to their demand.

It is notable that no senior leaders of the alliances are seen on the streets in favour of their demand. The ultimate sufferer of this continuous blockade-hartal is the common people. Dhaka is nearly disconnected from the rest of the country. How long this hurtful situation will prolong? A permanent solution of the stalemate is very urgent.

However, only a national election under caretaker government or changing of the present government is not the only solution of this deadlock. If the major political parties can reach consensus on issues like formulation of an election time government for at least five national elections, role of the victorious party after election, publication of true history of the Liberation War and finally the trial of war crimes, then the political stalemate might be removed.

Enamul Haq
Badda, Dhaka

Fruit ripening guidelines

A report on the subject was published in the business page of a local English daily on 22nd January which, hopefully, may bring some benefits. However, given that bribery and corruption are rife in Bangladesh, the real end result may well be the increase in the prices of fruits while ripening by chemicals will just go on!

Policing, catching and prosecuting of 'food ripening persons' will add further to the expenses. There will also be more 'under the table' cash flow by these gangs, who will still be operating as before. At the end of the day, buyers will still be getting 'chemically ripened fruits', but at a higher price!

Fruit Addict!
Dhaka

Why hartal?

Our country has made progress in many sectors: tourism, transportation, power generation and many more. However, now the table has turned as our businesses are losing millions of taka every day due to the ongoing blockade and shutdown; especially our garment sector is incurring heavy losses. Due to continuous strikes, students are facing problems such as session jam, and the poor people are losing their livelihoods.

Can't our respected politicians find a better way to press home their demands rather than call hartal? As some may believe, we need a 'miracle' to improve our country's condition. However, I believe that to bring about a change we don't need a miracle, but be the 'miracle'.

Nafis Nihal Ferdous
Anandamiktan School, Sylhet

If anyone needs to change, it's us

TANJILA MAZUMDER DRISHTI

I had been to many village households in the last three months. They were mostly poor people. I expected them to ask for financial help but not one family asked for help from me. Rather, they made me feel welcomed whenever I visited. The level of hospitality is unbelievable. They have no guarantee whether they would have enough food to feed their families the next day, but yet they want to feed any guest who comes to their house.

There are people of different religious beliefs living in the same area. I saw Muslims cooking to feed kids of their Hindu neighbours because the Hindu couple couldn't return home that day due to some emergency.

So much harmony, so much mutual understanding at the micro level; then why does it look like Bangladesh is going towards disaster at the macro level?

Let's bring politics into the equation! Whereas big business tycoons are mad at the politicians for making them lose some millions due to the strikes, blockades and violence on the streets, many village people are struggling for each meal of the day. Most of these people have no fixed monthly earning so they survive on their daily earnings. Thanks to the blockades and strikes the farmers are not able to take their crops to the designated markets, so they are selling them off at zero profit prices at the local market. Poor people like hawkers, rickshaw pullers, CNG drivers in urban areas cannot work due to the risk of losing their life on the streets.

So, when our politicians are busy playing with their egos and we are busy crying over our canceled lunches or the newly assigned make-up classes at universities, a large chunk of Bangladesh's population is sleeping hungry!

Am I blaming the politicians, like everyone else?

No! People keep blaming politicians and political parties, but the reality is that political parties are made up of people and citizens. Some of them are our parents, our siblings or may be our kids!

So, if the members of these political parties do not love Bangladesh it's not them alone who are to be blamed. We are to be blamed too! We failed to make our very own family members love their motherland.

Like many others of my generation, I hope and dream that someday this blame game will come to an end and we as a nation will stand together opposing every single individual who plays power monopoly with our motherland. It's high time we realise the fact that none of these political parties are as strong as all of us, "the Bangladeshis," put together!

The writer is a Young Professional at BRAC and One Young World Ambassador - Bangladesh.

Comments on news report, "Unrest puts poor in a tight spot," published on January 26, 2015

Rony

Both the parties are fighting for power. On the other hand the general people are fighting against poverty and for their basic needs. Sounds very funny when both the parties say that they are aware of protecting the rights of the people.

Sayed Rahman

What the day labourer Jotsna Das said is very true. Job scope for all kinds of professionals are shrinking, the economy is being crippled and the business sector is on the verge of destruction.

"No hope?" (Jan. 26, 2015)

Sundar

No, there is no light at the end of the tunnel; it has turned into a black hole.

"Opening fire to protect lives not rights violation" (Jan. 26, 2015)

Tanvir

Never try to satisfy Sheikh Hasina, she will not protect you.

Barkat

Never heard any such comments when citizens are mercilessly killed on the border.

"I cry for you, Bangladesh" (January 25, 2015)

Saleh Tanveer

A nice and a passionate article. Unfortunately, the people who are supposed to act as the conscience of the country-- the intellectuals -- are hopelessly divided along partisan lines.