

BANGLADESH

A fractured nation?

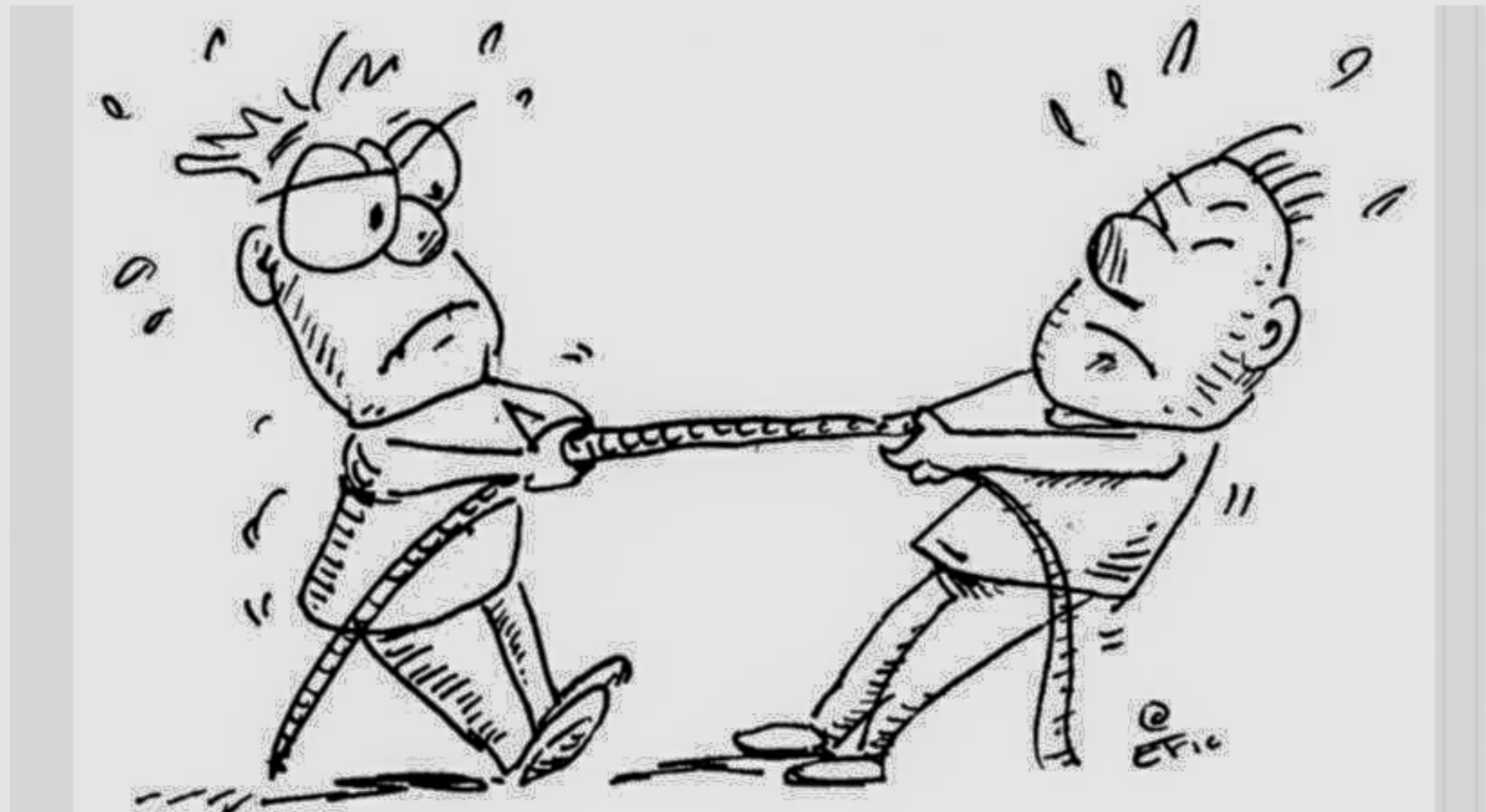
HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

Political differences divide people in their interpretations of the vital national issues and how to address those issues. But to sacrifice innocent human lives at the altar of their blind ambition is unconscionable.

“WHERE are we heading to? It is so sad! Why will infants and common people have to be burnt in the name of political movement?” wrote my FaceBook friend and brother in response to a post that I posted which said: “While so far my thought was, more or less, on how to delay death and live a meaningful life with all its joy but right now I am forced to think of not just about the inevitability of death but also about the method of death. Should it be hacking the head off the body or the barbaric murder of Jordanian pilot as in ISIS occupied Syria, or cruel deaths by petrol bombs in Bangladesh perpetrated by random contract murderers on the payroll of the opposition parties? I can avoid going near Syria and Iraq but how long can I avoid going to Bangladesh?”

Another young FB friend chipped in: “First they kill the people and after that play their filthy political games over the dead bodies. Today (February 7), within 24 hours, 10 people including 2 children died by petrol bomb.” This is the friend who lost her cousin Maisha, a 15 year old sweet girl, when the hired terrorists threw a petrol bomb on a bus. The fire engulfed Maisha and her father when they were in a passenger bus on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway on February 4. That young girl could have been your daughter or sister or friend.

The debates on all aspects of media, including social media, revolve around the brutality, insanity, politics, intrigue, conspiracy, and so on by sometimes smart commentators as well as self-seeking pundits who are vying for positions in the next government. They all can be forgiven too.



Politicians like political commentators will have their divergent interpretations. This is understandable too.

Beyond all that, it is time to think: how did we come here? Just consider this: why can a group of Bangladeshis -- however small and criminal -- be mobilised for a fee or promise of a reward to kill fellow Bangladeshis? The death squads may consist of some stray, random, lumpens but they are undeniably fellow Bangladeshis. The “political activists” who remove the fishplates of railway tracks are fellow Bangladeshis.

Surely, some morally bankrupt politicians whose only ambition is to go to power by whatever means possible, moral or immoral, hire these

stray criminals. While the behaviour of small criminal gangs who take charge of committing murders on the highways can be understandable, it is difficult to explain the minds of their instructors and cheerleaders in the media. Political differences divide people in their interpretations of the vital national issues and how to address those issues, but to sacrifice innocent human lives at the altar of their blind ambition is unconscionable.

Sometimes extreme measures have been taken in revolutionary struggles but they often involved war between nations. A nation stands together to fight an oppressor. The rules of war are relaxed. Some people call it patriotic terrorism. In the Indian nationalist struggle, we had Master Da

(SurjaSen) and Khudiram Bose, who targeted colonial administrators and outposts but not fellow Indians. In the Liberation War of Bangladesh, bridges and roads were destroyed to disrupt the marauding Pakistani military and not to take lives of fellow Bangladeshis. Did any freedom fighter throw a petrol bomb at a busload of civilian Bangladeshis?

In extreme cases, sometimes “ends justify the means” as some people invoke Niccolò Machiavelli who wrote this in the early sixteenth century. He discussed coming to “power by crime” by “some criminal and nefarious method” as one of the two ways of coming to power. The other is “when a private citizen becomes a prince of his native city with the approval of his fellow citizens.” Yes, Machiavelli was thinking of the city-states since nation-states were yet unborn. And Machiavelli too prescribed the dictum “ends justify means” to the princes that as rulers they sometimes need to do unusual things in the larger interest of the republic. He definitely did not endorse hurling petrol bombs at unsuspecting passengers in a public transport.

There are only two ways one can understand the fact that a small group of Bangladeshis can be made to take actions that kill fellow Bangladeshis. First, there has been an exponential growth of criminals in Bangladesh for which the successive administrations must take responsibility. The other explanation is a failure in nation building. What happened to the “we are a nation”? Where did “we” go? Nationalism is all about a feeling of “we.” If we cannot see ourselves as a nation, we are a fractured nation.

The writer is a sociologist and a commentator.

Quest for transparency on treaties

MD. RIZWANUL ISLAM

TREATIES signed between two or more states create rights and obligations for sovereign states and in the process also have impact on citizens who pay their allegiance to those states. Any observer would probably agree that there is a serious lack of transparency in the process of negotiating, signing, and ratification of treaties by Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, generally only the diplomats and government agencies directly engaged in the negotiation process of treaties, or at best some well connected public think tanks or stakeholders, are genuinely conversant with the process of negotiation for or signing of treaties. In most cases, a researcher or an interested member of the public would have to gather information on Bangladesh's signing of treaties not from any national agency but from international agencies or other party/parties to the treaty. The general lack of information or probably sometimes even a deliberate shroud of secrecy involving treaties signed by Bangladesh may not serve the public interest.

In an era in which there is increasing emphasis on transparency globally, the scarcity of public information and the very limited or non-existent room for public engagement in the treaty making process is abominable. In some cases, modern treaty provisions may be so in-depth they could impact citizens' day-to-day lives just as national laws do. It is almost accepted in modern democracies that for a law to have moral force it should not only be devised in a legally acceptable process but should also be the outcome of a participatory process where citizens would have their say in the process of its making. It is this desire for public engagement that often drives the Parliament, executive or Law Commission to seek public inputs on proposed laws. In a similar manner, particularly in case of those treaties which would directly impinge on people's lives, members of the public

should be apprised of the status of the negotiation process. Such involvement of the public is only the first step and the role of the public should go much beyond just being informed of the process.

Before the signing of a treaty, the executive agencies sometimes conduct some sort of feasibility study to assess the case for the treaty and fix their negotiating position. As states represent a very wide array of interest groups and their interests would not often coincide with each other, it is important that various groups can present their position on the different aspects of a proposed treaty. This gives the executive a better chance to take into account the interests of a diverse group of stakeholders. On the other hand, the whole environment of a non-transparent negotiation process of a treaty nurtures a rumour-mongering culture where uninformed and emotive voices become aplenty, making reasoned debate very difficult. For example, the Trade and Investment Cooperation Framework Agreement signed with the United States of America often evoked arguments from both its advocates and detractors, which were embellished and driven by ideological orthodoxies. In such an environment, the quality of public debate and discourse on important matters of public interest suffers.

The absence of scope for engagement is not just an issue for members of the public; apparently even the Parliament is seldom seen to play the role that it could or should play in this sphere. Although Article 145A of the Constitution requires that all treaties with foreign countries (except those which are connected with national security) must be laid before the Parliament, very little discussion is held in the Parliament about treaties signed by the executive. Even in case of those treaties which are connected with national security, the Constitution provides that they be placed in a secret session of the Parliament.

In Major (Retd.) Akhtaruzzaman v

Bangladesh, (Writ Petition No. 3774 of 1999), this constitutional provision of laying treaties before the Parliament was subject to interpretation before the High Court Division (HCD) of the Supreme Court. The HCD took the view that although there is an obligation to lay a treaty before the Parliament, it would remain valid even if it is not so laid. This reading of the provision begs a question whether or not it makes Article 145A of the Constitution superfluous. Having said that, the Constitution is silent on the consequence of not laying a treaty before the Parliament, and hence, the restrictive view taken by the HCD is comprehensible. Since there is a persistent movement for greater transparency in public matters, it would be intriguing to see if in any future case the HCD takes a different approach and compels the executive to lay treaties before the Parliament and in the process ensures greater transparency on treaties signed by Bangladeshis.

It may be mentioned here that the Prime Minister's Office with support from the United Nations Development Programme and United States Agency for International Development is working on a programme entitled 'Access to Information (a2i) Programme,' and the government has promised to build a digital nation. It would befit the government's commitment to build a digital nation if it could ensure greater participation of citizens of Bangladesh in the process of negotiation of treaties by providing more information and seeking as much public input as is possible. At a bare minimum, it would be a very good initiative if the government prepared a database with the full text and other relevant pieces of information such as the date of signing, ratification etc. on treaties signed by Bangladesh. This may greatly contribute to the enhancement of the quality of public discourse on various treaties signed by Bangladesh.

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Import of natural gas and hydropower from Myanmar

ABDUL MATIN

ONE of the worst decisions of the BNP-led government in 2004 was the rejection of the Indian proposal to lay a gas pipeline from Myanmar to India through Bangladesh. This could enable us to share part of the gas and significantly reduce our dependence on the import of costly oil (and perhaps LNG) to meet our energy needs. China immediately grabbed the opportunity and built a 2,806 km pipeline from Myanmar to China with a maximum discharge of 424 bcf of natural gas per year. China also built a 771 km oil pipeline running parallel with the gas pipeline to deliver 240 thousand barrels of crude oil per day. India tried in vain to revive the Myanmar-Bangladesh-India gas pipeline project in 2013.

Recently, Bangladesh took an initiative to import natural gas from Myanmar and build a power plant at Chittagong with the option of sharing electricity with Myanmar. The proposal was put forward by a high-powered delegation that visited Myanmar recently. It is reported that Myanmar responded positively to the proposal and decided to send a technical team to assess the viability of exporting gas from its Chin State, which is adjacent to Bangladesh.

Myanmar started to export natural gas to Thailand in 1999. Thailand decided to invest \$3.3 billion in oil and natural gas development in Myanmar by 2020. Gas exports yielded a total of \$3.5 billion for Myanmar during the 2012-13. The country's current natural gas output comes primarily from the offshore Yadana and Yetagun fields, but is likely to rise because of the political and economic reforms in Myanmar and the subsequent easing of sanctions by the US and the European countries. Myanmar is also keen to attract foreign investment and is issuing production-sharing contracts through direct negotiations. There is now good prospect of discoveries of new gas and oil fields in Myanmar. The country has proven natural gas reserves of 7.8 tcf.

The Bangladesh delegation also proposed to purchase 500 megawatt of hydropower from Chin or Rakhine provinces through erecting cross-border power transmission line and offered joint investment in developing hydropower projects. Myanmar has an enormous hydropower potential of up to 100,000 megawatts.

The initiative taken by the government to import natural gas and hydro-electricity from Myanmar is a very wise decision. The proposal has two major advantages: (i) a common border between the two countries requiring no approval from a third country to build pipelines or electric transmission lines and (ii) the close proximity of the gas fields and hydropower sites from Bangladesh. These factors will make the cross-boundary transmission of natural gas and electricity easier and more economic. Moreover, Myanmar will benefit from our experience in construction and operation of gas based and hydropower plants.

In view of the shortage of energy resources, one of our best options is to share the resources of the neighbouring countries. Bangladesh is now importing about 500 MW of electricity from India. This capacity may be increased further very soon. It has also taken initiative to import hydroelectricity from Bhutan through India.

Unfortunately, the relationship between Bangladesh and Myanmar had not been very good in the recent past. Following the settlement of the maritime boundary dispute between Bangladesh and Myanmar, the prospect of cooperation between the two countries is now brighter. In our interest, we should now build a good neighbourly relationship with Myanmar and seriously cooperate not only in energy sector but also in all other sectors of trade and commerce.

The writer is a senior nuclear engineer.

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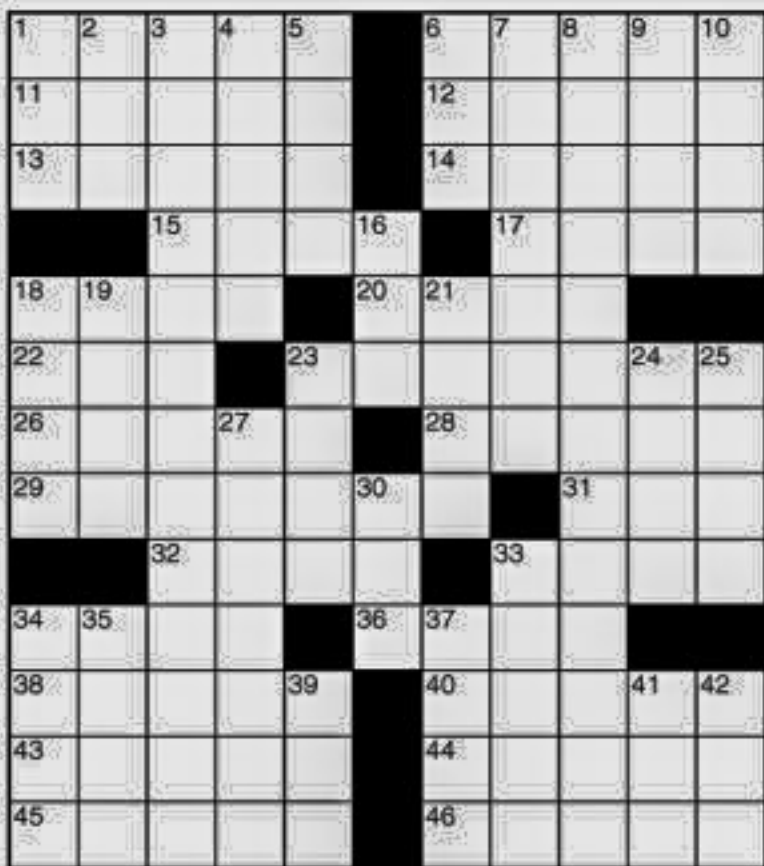
QUOTABLE Quote

While democracy must have its organizations and controls, its vital breath is individual liberty.

Charles Evans Hughes

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

- ACROSS
 1 Gate feature
 6 Espresso order
 11 Allergy sound
 12 Garden pest
 13 Microwave sounds
 14 Miser's problem
 15 Understands
 17 Minuscule
 18 Manor head
 20 Make printing plates
 22 “—Believer”
 23 Trains
 26 Supermarket section
 28 Parts of hearts
 29 Biblical peak
 31 Saints' org.
 32 Barracks sights
 33 Aid in crime
 34 “Nuts!”
 36 New Zealand native
 38 Stay away from
 40 No-no on some diets
 43 “Holy cow!”
 44 Pick from the menu
 45 Possessed
 46 High homes
- DOWN
 1 Research site
 2 Perfect serve
 3 Colleen McCullough novel
 4 Made do
 5 Party leader
 6 Fall back
 7 Jam choice
 8 Colleen McCullough novel
 9 Draws
 10 Water whirl
 16 Brief time
 18 Neeson of “Taken”
 19 Skip
 21 Asian language
 23 Posted
 24 Longest sentence
 25 Sea dog
 27 Treat as a celebrity
 30 Demand
 33 In the know
 34 Harry Belafonte hit
 35 State frankly
 37 Computer symbol
 39 Pop
 41 Stake
 42 Fourth-yr. students



CRYPTOQUOTE
 YC CYF P FXFS RVMLFXFA QLYRYVLRG
 QLWYFPP ZLWM R NRYDRSO SFPCGDWLCY
 WMRWP RIRYACYFA IO QFISDRSO.
 -- PDUFCSTRY

Yesterday's CRYPTOQUOTE:
 WHAT THE NEW YEAR BRINGS TO YOU WILL DEPEND A GREAT DEAL ON WHAT YOU BRING TO THE NEW YEAR.
 -- VERN MCLELLAN

Yesterday's answer

ASHE KABOOM
 NEON IGUANA
 TENT TESTER
 EMERGENT
 SEA TUSKS
 BATES SPINE
 ALA LEE
 REBUS SPEED
 EXERT HEN
 GOGETTER
 RENEGE ACRE
 URANIA LAIN
 MATTER SLED

A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW
 One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.



Request for Proposal

Katalyst is a market development project that aims to increase the income of poor men and women in rural areas. It does this by facilitating changes in services, inputs and product markets, which in turn increases the competitiveness of farmers and small enterprises. Katalyst is co-funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the UK Government, and the Danish International Development Agency (Danida). It is implemented by Swisscontact under the umbrella of the Ministry of Commerce, Government of Bangladesh.

Katalyst is looking for innovative proposals in the following issue:

Promoting the Value of Media Relations among Upazilla BMOs

Katalyst invites interested consulting firms, international and local non-governmental organisations, with associated experience to submit innovative project proposal on this issue. The Request for Proposal and templates for submitting the proposals are available at:

http://www.katalyst.com.bd/abtus_procurement.php

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