

Dialogue is the way forward

BNP blockade needs to end

CALLS from all quarters, both national and international, for dialogue between the government and the opposition has apparently fallen on deaf ears. As we approach the 50th day of the blockade coupled with near-continual hartals enforced by the 20-party alliance, the economy continues to bleed and the general populace suffer. The recent initiative by prominent members of civil society to urge some sort of dialogue to end the political impasse was summarily spurned by the government. Various foreign mission heads have tried and failed so far to impress upon both leaders of the opposition and the government to sit for talks. The UN chief has written letters in a similar vein to the two leaders as has US Secretary of State John Kerry.

This is disheartening to say the least. Are we then to understand that the present state of affairs is here to stay and we will settle our differences on the streets through might? The government's rejectionist reaction is ill-conceived. What we would like to know is if talks are off the table, then precisely how the government intends to stop the violence. The fate of the country, its people and the economy is at stake here. Every day of continued violence means more bloodshed and losses to the economy in the present besides the opportunity cost entailed. The universal norm in resolving political differences is talking things over the negotiation table. That remains the bottom line.

Cheery news

Our cricketers should keep it up

AT a time when no news in the country is good news, Bangladesh's first win in the World Cup against Afghanistan, though expected, has given the cricket-crazy people of Bangladesh a much-needed cause for celebration. In tune with the rest of the country, we wholeheartedly congratulate the Tigers for a solid performance, resulting in a whopping 105-run victory.

Despite a slow and shaky beginning, with our top order batsmen struggling to cope with the Afghan pace, we managed to put up a competitive score on the board, thanks to a sound execution from the middle order and a critical partnership between Shakib Al Hasan and Mushfiqur Rahim. But it was really our bowlers who seized the day, with an incredible opening spell from Mashrafe Mortaza and Rubel Hossain.

Shakib, in top form with 63 runs and 2 wickets, became the first Bangladeshi to score 4,000 runs in one-day internationals. We commend him for his all-round consistent performances and hope that he inspires the whole team to perform to their best potential.

However, as we prepare to take on the mighty Australia tomorrow, we cannot afford to be complacent about our first win. Consistency has always been a sore point for Bangladesh, so, win or lose, the team must make it a point to keep a calm head, play with humility and give a steady performance. After all, the emotions of a whole nation now rest on their performance.

Go Tigers!

COMMENTS

“Behind the politics of ATTRITION”
(February 14, 2015)

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Barkat

When institutions are not strong enough to function in non-biased way, then there is need for a non-biased party.

“Big step in Saarc travel”
(February 13, 2015)

▼

Colvinod

Great achievement! First time the SAARC countries have been able to do some practical good. Congratulations, this will help prosperity to grow and make life better.

“No compromise with terrorists”
(February 13, 2015)

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Salim Ullah

The PM is harping on the same string -- not to talk with BNP. Surely this type of approach would yield no good result; rather this would ultimately cast our hard-earned country into abysmal uncertainty. Time is running out. Immediate solution to this political deadlock that causes people's unbearable sufferings is imperative.

“Worries pile up for people”
(February 15, 2015)

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Faisal

Just the other day a foreign friend was telling me that if the current political situation had prevailed in any other developing country, there would have been an uprising by the ordinary citizens. He is surprised that the people of this country do nothing, leaving their fates in the hands of a few politicians.

“Resolve crisis now”
(February 15, 2015)

▼

Ahad Chowdhury

Listen to the people who are the backbone of the economy of Bangladesh. Show responsibility to them and resolve the stalemate.

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

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But it needn't have been this serious a mind game had we taken to dialogue as the normative practice of resolving political differences that are elemental to a predominantly two-party polity.

The sad truth is political discourse stands reduced to a single divisive moot point: Whether dialogue should precede end of violence or violence would be allowed to be used as a weapon by a political opponent to force the ruling party into negotiations. In the process, standard rules of engagement are thrown out of the window. When the whole world pleads for a dialogue urging the AL government to initiate it, the latter insists, and with good reasons, that the BNP should first call off transportation shutdown and hartal before talks can be considered. There is an overwhelming demand from all sane people that BNP should shun the path of violence. It has led to stupendous loss of lives and property, let alone burning people alive without a blink of an eye, wreaking havoc on education and economy.

On top of everything, the innocents are being preyed on by a kind of barbarism the people have been hitherto unaware of. You cannot equate partisan political agenda with complete disregard for sanctity of human lives.

For its part, the government is obliged to ensure answerability of the law enforcement agencies allegedly perpetrating so-called crossfire incidents. Accountability is all the more necessary because they

A sagacious PM, need of the hour

LIKE the universe, Bangladesh's politics is continually expanding! It is in a constant revolution on a bipolar axis, so to speak. And, the unresolved debate over genesis also curiously plays out: Which came first -- the egg or the hen? This shapes understanding of politics depending on which side of the political spectrum one is. The neutral silent majority knows full well where and how our political history coursed up on a wrong tangent from the core set of Liberation War

have been empowered to deal with an exigency. In Britain, a new law is likened to a new offense, to be erring on the side of caution.

Both parties need to climb down from the high horse touching on to the terra firma.

The twin backlash of an anarchic situation is that after each hard-lining announcement by an emaciated leadership from a hideout, the saboteurs get a freer hand to strike at the place and time of its choice. On the other hand, law enforcers ratchet up their responses.

Then you have the government's constant hammering at the BNP that it disassociate itself from the Jamaat-e-Islami. This is aimed to cut off muscle and

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money power to terror activities in collusion with other extremist fringes.

The Belgium-based influential conflict and policy research institution, International Crisis Group (ICG), in its executive summary to a big report, has counseled BNP-led 20-party alliance to extricate itself from Jamaat-e-Islami and settle for non-violent movement.

The ICG thinks that at the present juncture the AL government should keep from 'suppression of opposition politicians.' It suggested the AL at appropriate level could initiate talks with second rung BNP leaders in

COMMENTARY

PM'S THREAT OF ACTION AGAINST Free media not the enemy

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

MAHFUZ ANAM

The prime minister, however, felt differently, saying, "Publishing the poster of a banned organisation in a newspaper means helping to publicise that banned outfit. It is most unfortunate that The Daily Star gave such a huge space to publish a poster pasted in a corner of Bangla Motor of Hizb-ut-Tahrir... Perhaps none would have read that poster. Irrespective of whether (the paper) wrote in a negative or a positive way, I think giving such a big coverage to a poster is tantamount to patronising Hizb-ut-Tahrir... But I don't understand why they (The Daily Star) did this. However, we are taking appropriate action against those who are trying to patronise Hizb-ut-Tahrir by publishing its poster."

We want to unambiguously state that the prime minister's statement is ill advised, and no free and independent media will survive in Bangladesh if what has been said is implemented.

Let us first take the accusation that by reproducing the Hizb-ut-Tahrir poster we have helped with its publicity. In a lighter vein we want to point out that if we are "guilty" of taking a wayside poster and giving it coverage, the PM by her speech on the floor of the parliament gave the poster much more coverage than we could ever have.

More seriously, if terrorism is to be fought effectively, then public support behind it is a must. To get the requisite public support, the government and the free media must work hand in hand. This can be achieved only by allowing the free media to play its due role of informing, and in necessary cases, (as in this one) alerting the public and the government as to what the terrorists are doing, what they are saying, who they are targeting, and how they are going about it. It is the duty of the media to let the public know what is going on, especially the activities of organisations that mean to harm our state, our independence, our society, and our culture.

If informing the public and the government of activities of terrorist outfits is tantamount to helping to publicise them, then the whole world's media is "guilty" of the "crime" that The Daily Star is supposed to have committed.

Every action, every word, and every video rendering of Osama bin Laden or his successor Ayman al Zawahir which were uploaded in some obscure Al Qaeda websites were immediately taken by the Al Jazeera, BBCs, and the CNNs of the world, and published by the media of almost every country of the globe, including Bangladesh.

Were we then all supporters of bin Laden? Was the British media supporting the IRA when for decades it covered their terrorist activities and reported on their secret networks, often publishing IRA's secret plans of attacking the British army? More recently after the bus bombing in London and the bombing in Birmingham, the UK and the world media covered them extensively. The Basque separatists (ETA) in Spain are regularly covered by the Spanish media. Terrorist bodies in Denmark, Germany, and France are under constant media focus. Often they publish exclusive interviews, organisational manifestos, or plans of action. Never the media of these countries are accused of helping the terrorists.

Are we helping Boko Haram by publishing their atrocities? Would the world be better off if we ignored what they had done to nearly three hundred school-girls, and the recent killings of the people of other faiths?

What about the brutalities of ISIS? Is the media guilty of helping them by telling the world about them?

In our region, does not the Filipino media cover the activities of Moro National Liberation Front and its offshoot, Abu Sayyaf Group, in Mindanao? These are separatist bodies wanting to disintegrate the country.

Still the media covers them as diligently as possible. In fact the media helped to steer a dialogue between the government and the separatists who have now signed a peace deal, and are being absorbed in the mainstream of the Philippines.

Closer to home, does not the Indian media cover the activities of its own extremist groups? For decades, they have been writing about the separatists in the seven sisters. More recently after the attack on the Indian parliament, and the attacks on Taj Hotel and Mumbai railway station, terrorism and extremism is one of the most important areas of coverage by the Indian media.

Pakistan is being torn asunder by terrorists. Many Pakistani journalists are being killed while covering them. Are they helping the terrorists or helping the fight against them?

Focusing on our own country, have not the media done a sterling job in raising public awareness, helping our anti-terrorism efforts?

Perhaps the most illustrative case for us is that of Bangla Bhai. He came to spotlight in 2004 when his JMB (Jagrata Muslim Janata, Bangladesh) and JMB (Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh) started killing people in Rajshahi and Naogaon areas in the name of cleansing the districts' outlaws.

On May 17 of that year, Bangla Bhai rounded up three individuals, killed one of them after three days, and hung his body from a tree for the public to see.

The Daily Star and the Prothom Alo exposed the workings of this terrorist group and created public awareness about them. It was The Daily Star that published a huge picture of the hanging body and rang the alarm about Bangla Bhai's activities.

The erstwhile premier Khaleda Zia, in a meeting with editors in August 2004, said, "Bangla Bhai does not exist. It is a media creation."

In March 2005, on the floor of the parliament, Khaleda Zia said, "It's a propaganda against the government and the country. And it is aimed at causing a rift within the four-party alliance."

Thankfully she did not order any action against those of us who were most vocal in exposing the extremist-terrorist outfit.

Her finance minister, Saifur Rahman, dubbed the onset of Islamic militancy across the country as nothing but "foul propaganda" by a section of the media. "Taking advantage of the press freedom, some media outlets (read The Daily Star and the Prothom Alo, also the present suspects) have been making propaganda about fake issues like human rights violation, emergence of fundamentalist forces, and repression on minorities. A section of the print and electronic media is carrying out well-orchestrated propaganda against the government."

Similar statements were made by other ministers of BNP-led four-party government, including Nizami, Amini, and others.

Did The Daily Star give publicity to Bangla Bhai when it informed the public about him or was it alerting the public, and especially the government to fight against them? Was The Daily Star helping Bangla Bhai when we published the horrendous picture of the man, executed by the terrorist outfit, hanging from a tree?

The incumbent prime minister said, "Irrespective of whether the paper wrote in a negative or positive way... giving such a big coverage of the poster is tantamount to patronising Hizb-ut-Tahrir." How can this be? The editorial position of a paper is its very "heart and soul". Differing editorial positions is the very raison d'être that so many newspapers exist. It is the fundamental reason why people prefer one newspaper to another. Are we to understand that the PM sees no difference in the coverage of the on-going war crime trials, or saw no difference in the past coverage of the tragic BDR incident and the subsequent trial?

Following Sayeede's verdict, a rumour was deliber-

accord with a pecking order to melt the ice.

Major UN, EU and US efforts are underway to bring the parties together, with the UN's former Assistant Secretary General of Political Affairs Fernandez Taranco being assigned for the task. Initially, a government spokesman reacted negatively saying that talks with a terrorist party which the BNP has now become are to be ruled out. But optimists still pin hopes on a last minute miracle to happen as a formal reply from Bangladesh government is awaited.

The point to be driven home is this: Sheikh Hasina, being a member of a political family with long traditions, is no stranger to the art of making political overtures to opponents. These she had already done at certain turning points, some with success, and others having been aborted. Herself a student political leader, she has had her own experience, to say nothing of the accord with the PCJSS during her incumbency earlier on. She must have seen her father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman negotiating with various political elements crafting some kind of settlement or understanding with them. She has that pedigree in her to be politically savvy in trying circumstances.

Sheikh Hasina nowadays complains of being put on the same scale with Khaleda Zia by some quarters. Indeed, she cannot be placed on a similar pedestal, both background-wise and otherwise.

She perhaps will remember that Time magazine placed her 7th among 12 'most powerful women leaders' in the world in 2012. Among the criteria, of course, the influence she wielded was one, but Time termed her as a 'survivor,' pointing to the dastardly events of August 15, 1975, the August 21, 2004 bomb blast. She escaped to safety but with injury, and her comeback with a landslide in 2008-09 general election was also mentioned.

One final point, Bangladesh has carved a place in the world for its UN peacekeeping roles at various flashpoints, which the nation prides itself on in great measure. Why should we not muster up the national capacity without having others to counsel us, with the PM leading the way to set the troubled country on a road to stable progress and prosperity based on pluralistic inclusiveness?

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ately spread that an image of his face could be seen on the surface of the moon. Many papers published the picture of that image including The Daily Star, just to prove that the photo was doctored. So if "negative or positive" makes no difference, then are we not guilty of giving the fake picture a publicity by publishing it?

We printed the infamous photoshopped pictures showing the Imams from the Holy Kaaba gathering in support of Sayeede. The Daily Star exposed the fraud by publishing those fake pictures alongside the real ones. Again if "negative" or "positive" made no difference then the printing of those fake pictures alongside the real ones makes us guilty of giving publicity to the fake ones.

When Hefajat claimed thousands to be dead, after an action by law enforcers that evicted them from the Bangladesh Bank area, it was this newspaper -- because it had few reporters and photographers placed all night on site -- which could resolutely assert that the death toll during the night was 12 or 13, with several others dying from later incidents. If "negative" or "positive" is "irrelevant" then those who claimed thousands dead and those of us who contested, were no different.

Again if "negative" or "positive" makes no difference, then how to differentiate between newspapers that contested Tarique Rahman's recent distorted and false claims about Bangabandhu and our Liberation War, and those who just published his views without comments?

We would like to draw our prime minister's attention to the fact that the workings of the media can be seen in two broad perspectives -- democratic and totalitarian.

In the democratic perspective the fundamental belief is that an "informed public" is the best guarantor of national interest, and all sorts of democratic freedoms. Thus in this dispensation all information is made available to the public, so that they judge what is good and what is bad for the nation. No restriction is put on the media.

In the totalitarian way of things, the view is that the government is the best guarantor of national interest, and hence the public will only know as much as the government allows it to know. It is often said that of the many reasons why the Soviet experiment collapsed, one of the main ones was the absence of a free media. The Soviet leaders just did not know the truth about the country they were governing, and thus had no idea that it was collapsing under their own feet.

Coming back to the Hizb-ut-Tahrir poster, we printed it for the sole purpose of informing the public and the government that a banned organisation is again becoming active. The poster was not only pasted in a corner of Bangla Motor but in many other parts of the city. The photo, our heading, and the caption make the nefarious aim of the banned organisation very clear.

There is no way one can misinterpret our "intent" which is how a media report must ultimately be judged, unless it is a deliberate exercise to the contrary. Our purpose was to "serve the public" by informing them, which is the only way to build a strong and participatory democracy. Is the nation better served when such information is kept hidden from the public eye, or when it is shared with them so that every citizen of the country can resist those both individually and collectively?

We conclude by saying -- which is an article of faith with us -- that in any clash between a government and a free media, the government wins, but only in the short run. It is the free media that wins in the long run, with some valuable nation building time being lost in the interim period. It is our hope that this will not happen in Bangladesh which is poised to grow sustainably only if democracy and the free media are allowed to play their designated roles. We have no time to lose.