

Which way to social harmony?

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THE cycle of violence that began on January 5 is still continuing. So far over 120 people have died, 66 of them by petrol bomb. Killing people by throwing petrol bombs is a heinous act and must be stopped immediately. The law enforcement agencies must identify, arrest and bring the perpetrators to justice. At the same time, they must also stop extra-judicial killing and abuse of their power to arrest.

It is the responsibility of the government to maintain public order and provide safety and security to the citizens. We hope the authorities will be successful in bringing an end to the present cycle of violence and achieve social harmony. Lack of social harmony has its costs. Disharmony is reflected in discord, disunity and conflict. Conflict may lead to violence, and unchecked and sustained violence may end up causing havoc.

On the other hand, the maintenance of social harmony has its dividends. One of the dividends is the creation of 'social capital.' Social capital, as distinct from financial capital, is formed when people of all walks of life in a society work shoulder to shoulder, and it can complement financial capital. Creating social movements and social resistance by uniting people can effectively solve many social problems.

Normally disharmony, conflict and violence in a society originate from two sources -- identity-based prejudice and political rivalry. Many societies have people of different and distinct ethnicities, nationalities, races, religions, castes and languages. Such differences are the basis of a pluralistic society. It is clear that identity-based diversity in a society is a reality. Dealing with such a reality requires molding social attitudes to combat prejudice. Such attitudinal changes can be achieved by various interventions, including creating champions to promote social harmony. It also requires concrete and effective measures for inclusion of the excluded in the social, economic and political processes. Ensuring justice for the downtrodden is another means of promoting social

harmony. As Martin Luther King said: "Peace is not absence of violence, but the presence of justice."

Conflicts and consequently violence also often originate from extreme political rivalry. In a society where people in power can loot and plunder with impunity, an all-out competition prevails among political parties to be in power. Such competition to capture power at any cost often leads to violence. Thus, fostering and maintaining social harmony requires avoiding unnecessary conflicts among political rivals. But unfortunately the mindless politics of Bangladesh has divided the country, which was united at its birth, into two

relevant to a nation-state. It is normal that political parties will have differences in policies. Such differences in policies are usually the reflection and affirmation of a pluralistic society.

However, political parties are expected to have consensus on certain fundamentals. Political parties may agree to a minimal consensus, such as showing mutual respect and tolerance, and practicing democratic values and norms. Mutual respect and tolerance keep the communication channel between political rivals open and allows dialogues and discussions to resolve contentious issues. It also allows reasonable voices and moderates to play constructive roles to avoid

In Bangladesh, the original consensus, contained in our 1972 Constitution, was violated time and again by convenient amendments, especially by the 15th Amendment, which unilaterally changed about a third of our Constitution, including some of its 'basic structure.' In fact, the 15th Amendment, by abolishing the provision of the caretaker government, subverted the process of peaceful transfer of power. With such subversion of peaceful transfer of power, we may not, unfortunately, have peace in the country in the foreseeable future. Thus, to achieve sustainable social harmony in our country, we need to develop new consensus on constitutional issues, including on the issue of peaceful transfer of power in the future.

It should be noted that there is an intimate relationship between poverty and violence. If we look around the world, we find that violence is more prevalent in poorer countries, and the poor are the overwhelming victims of such violence. In fact, poverty and violence go hand in hand and they affect each other. Thus, Gary Haugen and Victor Boutros, in their bestselling book, *The Locust Effect* (Oxford University Press, 2014), eloquently argue that the end of poverty requires the end of violence.

We have found through our own experiences that improving the socio-economic conditions of the people can also prevent violence. Broad-based socio-economic development can transcend identity-based differences among people.

To conclude, political violence has become a serious problem in Bangladesh, which is threatening the stability of our social, economic and political systems. Our democratic process is now in serious danger because of continuing violence. Combating this persistent violence and maintaining social harmony in a sustainable way would require political settlement through confidence building, dialogues and discussions to reach consensus on broad ranges of fundamental issues, including constitutional issues.

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PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

'warring camps.'

It should be noted that sometimes there are linkages between politics, power and identity-based violence. Powerful politicians and rulers often exploit identity-based differences among people for their own selfish ends. Sometimes politically powerful groups promote religious and ethnic conflicts and violence to dispossess the vulnerable of their lands and other immovable possessions. In Bangladesh, we have many examples of such economically motivated violence against minorities.

To understand and mitigate political violence, one needs to make a distinction between policies and fundamentals

conflict and violence. Needless to say that when moderates are silenced extremists take over. Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, our major political parties have little respect and tolerance for each other. Nor do they practice democratic norms.

The wider the areas of consensus on fundamentals in a society, the stronger is its foundation and lower is the prospect of debilitating political conflicts and violence, which can tear a society apart. Thus, achieving social harmony requires expanding the range of consensus among political rivals. It requires reaching a new consensus on fundamentals if the original consensus, reflected in the country's Constitution, breaks down.

Khaleda Zia speech disappointing

Nation wants sanity of action

WHAT the BNP chairperson said in her first speech to the national media since January 19, was disappointing as well as foreboding. What has become abundantly clear is Khaleda Zia's intention to continue with the violent movement in the name of the people. It is hard to accept the BNP chairperson's assertion that the last two months of violence, an outcome of so-called blockade and hartal, has not been caused by the BNP activist and its allies. We are perplexed at her insistence on continuing with the same programme without realising that it has not had the desired outcome, i.e. the government has not relented on BNP demands, and is not likely to soon.

The question is when a political programme fails to fulfil its primary objective, what is the point in continuing with it? It is also hard to understand the party's insensitive position towards the unmitigated harm that it has done to the country and its economy.

The government for its part has tried to address the issue, which is essentially a political one, with force. Consequently, the people, the economy and country as a whole have borne the brunt of the political stalemate. The policy of the government remains as counterproductive as that of BNP's, which has proved to be a self-defeating exercise.

It falls upon leaders, particularly those in the government, to devise ways and means to come out of the morass and deliver the nation from a situation which has cost us dearly in every respect.

Promise deferred is promise denied

Declare specific timeline for CHT Accord implementation

WE can understand only too well the frustration of indigenous groups whose repeated pleas for full implementation of the CHT Peace Accord seem to have fallen on deaf years of successive governments. Instead of peace, the region is now embroiled in increasing human rights violations, land occupation and communal conflicts. It is unacceptable that more than 17 years since the Accord was signed by the then AL government, we are still writing to demand that the provisions of the accord be implemented fully.

Seventeen years on, some of the most basic demands of the Accord are yet to be addressed. The CHT Land Dispute Commission still does not have any real power to resolve land-related disputes and ensure the rights of the indigenous population over their land. The district councils, too, remain ineffective as no elections have been held for the last 20 years. The accord stipulated that the government withdraw all temporary military camps and all but six cantonments from the region, which it has not done.

The Home Ministry directives issued in February, which severely curtail freedom of speech, assembly and movement of adivasis, have made the situation in the region even tenser.

We cannot help but wonder if the government is at all sincere about keeping its pledges made to the indigenous people and the country at large. We urge the government to declare a specific timeline for the implementation of the Accord and assure the indigenous people of their commitment to establishing peace in the region.

How to defeat ISIS

HASSAN MNEIMNEH

MANY months and thousands of airstrikes after the US Administration proclaimed its intent to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the "Islamic State" in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), progress towards the intended aim remains slow. Many ISIS assets -- human and material -- have been destroyed, but the radical formation has succeeded in acquiring suitable compensation. In fact, the US-led coalition's attacks have helped it settle to its advantage a jihadist civil war, opposing it to rival groups in Syria, and, through the hyped prestige of facing a global alliance, to gain the allegiance of numerous radical factions, from Afghanistan to Nigeria. ISIS has engaged in a defiant propaganda and atrocities campaign to maintain a "shock and awe" effect aimed both at deterring enemies and at attracting recruits. Over the past months, the ISIS theater of savagery has featured the burning alive of a Jordanian pilot, the mass slaughter of Egyptian (Christian) workers, as well as the destruction of antiquities, in addition to its established repertoire of beheading, stoning, limb amputation, and crucifixion. The need to put an end to the depravity that is ISIS is yet to be met with a concerted, deliberate effort capable of securing the result.

Despite some eloquent pronouncements, the US administration has not proposed a coherent strategy to defeat ISIS. It is evident that reliance on air power alone, however massive, will not achieve the goal, while inflicting on the civilian population and the infrastructure an increasingly heavy price. With solemn commitments to refrain from dispatching US armed personnel to combat situations, President Barack Obama has been in search for partners able to provide alternatives in both Syria and Iraq. He is yet to be met with success.

Washington's repeated claim of its intent to "arm the moderate opposition" in Syria, to serve as a ground force against ISIS is absurd, and from the point of view of most Syrians, patently hypocritical. The United States proposes to train a few thousand fighters (in a war that consumes that many on a monthly basis), over a period stretching well over a year, to fight the enemy it has designated, requesting them in the process to postpone their struggle against the regime that has devastated their towns for the past four years. Since the start of the Syrian uprisings, the United States has endorsed successive futile diplomatic initiatives to address Syria's crisis, despite obvious assessments that these initiatives were incapable of bridging the differences between the warring parties. The current claims of "arming the opposition" seem to fall within the same pattern of irrelevance.

In Iraq, where the spectacular ISIS gains last June elevated its perceived threat to international levels, government forces, aided by Shia militias, and supported by Iranian "advi-

sors," have succeeded in recapturing some of the lost territory. Their achievements were, however, through the use of questionable tactics sometimes mirroring ISIS depravity. The US administration had declared its determination to re-arm and re-train the Iraqi army, which had fared poorly against ISIS' blitzkrieg, to serve as the core of a ground force, with further support from the Kurdish Peshmerga and Sunni tribal fighter. But Baghdad's current maneuvers, with open Iranian involvement, depart clearly from the publicised script. Speculations abound as a result on whether Washington has thus been out-staged, or whether it had implicitly condoned or even approved the Iranian role as part of secret deal.

Irrespective of Washington's stance, the current push by the Iraqi government to regain territory is not conducive to an ISIS defeat. With Iranian-supported militias leading the charge against the Sunni majority regions currently controlled by ISIS, and the alleged participation of Iranian Revolutionary Guards in combat operations, in addition to the open involvement of

The primary element may be the coherent identification of the character of the enemy. Contrary to ill-informed, politically correct, musings from Washington (including the administration's own pronouncements), the temptation of radicalism is not primarily the result of socio-economic frustration. But contrary to the assertions of "Clash of Civilizations" adepts, it is neither embedded in the nature of Islam, nor is it an unavoidable war of religions -- although mismanaging it is surely enhancing its motion in that direction. Washington ought to recognise Sunni grievances in both Syria and Iraq -- different in each, and unrelated to ideology and theology -- as a basis for its conceptualisation of a solution. In both locales, the failure of the nation-state, which had been confiscated and depleted by dictatorship, has promoted the emergence of factionalism. ISIS has sought, and partially succeeded in ideologising and theologising Sunni factionalism. At its essence, however, it remains a communitarian bond for an alienated population.

A corollary of this recognition is that the Syrian dictatorship, responsible for the death



Iranian military "advisors," the current push is far from the national liberation exercises that were supposed to restore confidence among the Iraqi Sunni population in the Shia-dominated central government. It was indeed the management of Iraqi Sunni grievances by Baghdad that provided major opportunities for radicalisation and thus enabled the ISIS takeover of much of the Sunni-majority areas of the country. With loud mobilisation calls in Shia media for the eradication of Sunni towns, Iraq seem more headed towards a protracted civil war than to the restoration of the nation's unity. ISIS may retreat from further territory, but its grip on the Sunni population is likely to be strengthened, and its ability to muster resources, regionally and internationally may be enhanced.

Whether attributed to incompetence, indifference, or even the malevolent pursuit of self-interest, one aspect is by now certain about the US ISIS policy: it is unlikely to morph on its own into a lucid productive strategy. Yet the elements for success are all within Washington's reach.

of hundreds of thousands, the displacement of half its country's population, and the destruction of its infrastructure, cannot be "part of the solution." It is the perpetrator, generator, and catalyst for radicalism; maintaining it will guarantee the survival of ISIS.

The second corollary is that, while Kurdistan has solemnly earned its right to independence, the rest of Iraq has to be made whole again, geographically as well as politically and in its national narrative. Sunni Iraqis cannot be expected to submit to a government that relies on Shia religious edicts for the conduct of politics and openly behaves as a vassal to Iran.

Washington has loitered for too long while the Middle East suffers continuous attrition. It remains, however, the only credible power capable of summoning a global accord on the way out. This way out, the way to defeat ISIS, is through a Syria without the dictatorship and an Iraq remade whole and free, not through concealed statements and concealed questionable deals.

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COMMENTS

"BNP leader Salahuddin still traceless"
 (March 14, 2015)

Jamal Hasan

I hope the government will take immediate measures to find him. How is it possible that a person just disappeared without any trace? Are we safe under this government's rule?

"Ministers irked by poor performance"
 (March 12, 2015)

Dian

Ministers and the high officials of the ministry are unhappy and irked by the performance of IRIS Berhard now, but the newspapers have long been writing on this issue. Why did they remain silent then? Shouldn't they have taken measures in this regard long before?

Aditi

So finally they have awoken from their long slumber!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Iran's nuclear programme

This refers to the report, "EU sees 'good deal' at hand" (March 7). The world should be free of nuclear weapons. Research is going on to develop neutrino beams to destroy nuclear weapons. Neutrinos are decaying particles of radioactive material. Another danger lurking is nuclear weapons falling in the hands of terrorist organisations. There was a report recently that the dreaded terrorist organisation ISIS has managed to lay its hands on uranium in an Iraqi laboratory in a town which it captured. This report sends shivers down one's spine.

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