

# WHAT KHALEDA DID

CLEAR AS MUD



AHMEDE HUSSAIN

*The BNP's future, like that of its junior partner Jamaat-e-Islami, lies in reform.*

**B**ANGLADESH Nationalist Party (BNP) Chairperson Khaleda Zia holds the rather unenviable feat of leading two consecutive failed political movements. The first in line was not a hands down defeat though, for the Awami League (AL), afraid that it would not be able to hold the polls in all the constituencies across the country, paved the way for the election of over half the MPs in the parliament unopposed. Even though this step has seriously questioned the legitimacy of the polls and the government that has been elected through such a process, the BNP has miserably failed to exploit the situation in its favour. The party, before the January 5, 2014 election, had launched a string of violent street agitation to force the AL government to reintroduce the caretaker government system. At the eleventh hour of the movement, all the top guns of the Dhaka city BNP suddenly fell silent and the only visible presence that could be seen during Khaleda's self-styled 'March for Democracy' programme was that of Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) activists.

In his famous essay *Der 18te Brumaire des Louis Napoleon* (The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon) Karl Marx, referring to Napoleon I and his nephew Louis Napoleon, said that history repeats itself, the first as tragedy, then as farce. The same perhaps goes for Khaleda Zia's second attempt at forcing the AL to swallow the caretaker pill. What started as the BNP's legitimate protest for not allowing the party to hold a gathering in Dhaka, later turned into a countrywide blockade. But like its famous predecessor, the movement fizzled out as soon as city corporation elections were declared. This time round, too, the BNP higher-ups failed to show up on the streets of the

capital, especially after some of its *thana* level leaders were allegedly picked up by law enforcers, later to be found dead. The burden of shame must be difficult to bear for the BNP leaders as they have been heard talking about fleeing from the sinking ship in some leaked telephone conversations.

What ails the BNP despite its apparent popular support can be a matter of serious scholarly investigation. It is, however, clear that to launch a movement or to sustain it, the party is heavily dependent on the JI. A partnership that started as a shelter for the Islamists is gradually turning out to be the BNP's lone source of hope. If organisational strength alone is taken into account, the JI is stronger than its senior partner; it is a cadre-based party and, as both the parties share the same ideology, the BNP's decline is directly proportional to the rise of the fundamentalist party. If the BNP leaves JI or the JI decides to break up with its long-term bedfellow, it will rob the BNP of any future possibility of launching any street agitation against the AL government. However, a concomitant byproduct of the discourse is also true: the absence of the JI in the BNP-led alliance might earn the party some popular support, especially those who are weary of the BNP's alliance with a party that has association of Islamism and war crimes. It might turn out to be good for the JI as well—it will give the party an opportunity to take a clean break, set its house in order to come out with a clean image.

But whether the BNP is capable of walking alone is cloaked in doubt. Taking advantage of the AL's open door policy, BNP leaders, most of whom are facing cases of arson, are joining the AL in thousands. Not only that, some top leaders of the BNP are quite openly talking about leaving the party or bidding farewell to politics. The average age of the party top brass is above 60, not considered a brownie point among the voters, a majority of whom are in their early

thirties. On top of it, the BNP is in general disarray. Its organisational chain of command has loosened, party grassroots are demoralised and are dogged with police cases. To turn around from such a political cul-de-sac demands brinkmanship, which the BNP leadership do not seem to have at present. Tarique Rahman, the BNP's chairperson in waiting, is living in London and, as the two failed movements have shown, does not seem to wield any active control over the party cadres. His remote-control leadership and occasional analysis of Bangladesh's recent history best serve as periodic shots in the arm for party activists' depleting morale.

When the BNP is like this, it is not unnatural that the AL will try to take advantage of the situation. A (non-Awami League) minister's comment that Khaleda Zia will be sent to prison soon sounded bizarre and farfetched. But the BNP splitting into a government-friendly opposition is a possibility in the changed political landscape of the country. Bangladesh's recent political history, however, does not encourage such an idea. The BNP has faced even worse times in its 37-year-old political existence. The worst, perhaps, was the murder of its founder Gen Ziaur Rahman within three years after the formation of the party. Party leader KM Obaidur Rahman, at the height of Gen Ershad's dictatorship formed Janata Dal with a ship as its election symbol. During the eighties, the party also withstood the defection of hordes of its leaders to Jatiya Party. In 2004, Dr Badruddoza Chowdhury, along with some BNP leaders, formed Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh (BDB). The party is now a microscopic entity in Bangladesh's politics. The BDB chief has never won any parliamentary election since he left the BNP. Closely following the BDB's footsteps, two years later, Dr Oli Ahmed, along with 24 MPs of the BNP, formed the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Oli still enjoys some popular support in his

constituency, but his party holds some sway only in Chandanaish and Chandina (Redwan Ahmed, LDP Secretary-General).

The BNP's future, like that of its junior partner Jamaat-e-Islami, lies in reform. The JI, for its turn, should slap a self-imposed moratorium on national politics, do a sincere soul-searching and reform some of its policies to earn the trust of the majority of ordinary Bangladeshis. The JI leaders, who are not accused of war crimes, should seriously entertain the idea of forming a new party or an umbrella organisation that will be more inclusive towards women and the non-Muslim members of the society.

The BNP has to come up with serious issue-based politics, especially the one that will be able to attract young Bangladeshis. During the mass upsurge against Gen Ershad's regime, the BNP had two crucial ideological advantages over other parties—it never participated in any election held under Ershad's rule and the party had brought itself before people as the only source through which the masses' anti-AL grievances could be channelled. While the latter is still very much true, the former has become redundant in 2015. Khaleda's uncompromising stance has led her to the blind alley in which BNP leaders have suddenly found themselves en masse. Economic policy-wise, after the AL has dropped socialism as a party policy, there is hardly any difference left with BNP.

Khaleda and her team have serious soul-searching to do in order to chalk out a plan to take the party to the young people. This job is insurmountable as it is, and her task will be made even more difficult by leaders and members of her student wing, most of whom - as their recent political history suggests - are not tuned in to the needs of the country's youth. Reform is a long running process; impatience can only lead the BNP to a third failure.

The writer is author, editor and journalist. He is Head of The Daily Star Books. Twitter: @ahmedhussain

## When 'empowerment' rings hollow



NAHELA NOWSHIN

**A**S the whole nation basks in the glory of our success in the cricketing arena, the news of a young housewife's eyes being gouged out by her husband doesn't seem to have gotten its deserved attention. Although the ways in which Shukhi was tied up and maimed with a mobile phone tester were nothing short of barbaric, we are not remotely shocked. The story of Shukhi, who was tortured by her husband and in-laws, is one of many incidents of dowry-related violence that pervades Bangladeshi society and usually goes unreported like many other crimes of violence against women.

Such inhumane crimes in this country have become the norm rather than the exception, and at the risk of sounding pessimistic, such instances of domestic violence often seem to be reduced to "examples" in gender and justice related conferences in academic circles, and good fodder for the media as potential "stories" and/or "headlines." Much has been written in academia and the media about the ills of dowry, how it is falsely justified in the name of religion, and the complex factors at play that perpetuate dowry practices in the South Asian region. But we barely understand that whenever a man chooses to manifest his "physical superiority" over a woman in such a brutal way, it has much more to do with his emotional weakness and moral corruption than physical strength.

To be honest, the term "women's empowerment" starts to seem quite hollow when the higher-ups, who claim that they will tackle gender-based violence, don't assure us that legal action will be taken against assaulters (often the husband) or publicly address these issues in the

aftermath of such incidents, further legitimising the culture of impunity where criminals are handed a blank cheque to carry on their heinous acts. Authorities would rather leave it to the media to print a short story on a housewife being beaten in an inconspicuous corner of the backpage until stories of many more Shukhis pile up, eventually being "documented" and preserved as an annual statistic in a report by NGOs. In the midst of these meaningless processes, personal stories of women like Shukhi get lost and we, as a society, continue the pattern of failing to truly empathise as our minds remain occupied with positive stories about cricket.

How do we reconcile "women's empowerment", whatever that means, with such monstrous acts of violence against women? What do we hope to achieve in terms of "women's empowerment", whatever that means, when an overwhelming number of women remain vulnerable to domestic violence? Maybe we should ask ourselves the question: who are the women who are/can be truly "empowered"? Is there any doubt that "women's empowerment" is a class-based, exclusionary notion? Because given the extent to which our society is highly stratified in terms of wealth, "women's empowerment" seems to be reserved for the privileged few. Semantics is important and using terms such as "financially independent" when referring to women garment workers masks the ground reality which is often quite different from derived generalisations, from statistics. How do we define the "financial independence" of garment workers when there are women who, despite having their own income source, almost always need to resort to the help of a male relative to prevent their hard-earned piece of land being



grabbed? What does "financial independence" mean to the less privileged when there are countless Shukhis and working women who are dehumanised and their bodies mutilated by their significant other when the latter's demands for dowry are not met?

In a society where dowry deaths and violence against women in general is culturally sanctioned, laws like the

Dowry Prohibition Act can do little especially when they're poorly implemented. The way in which Shukhi was ganged up on by her husband and in-laws speaks of a deeper national psyche in which mob mentality and violence against the powerless reigns supreme. The same way 13-year-old Rajon was lynched to death by a group of sadistic adults, the same way around seven women were molested by gangs

of unruly youths during Pahela Baishakh celebrations. It speaks of a dangerous need for power and a perverted sense of satisfaction for which these mobs and thugs are willing to gouge out a woman's eye and torture a child to death. It speaks of the laidback mentality and nonchalance of the nation as a whole to such crimes. It speaks of a country full of people who don't feel compelled to react until and unless they're faced with a viral video of a woman or child being abused. It speaks of a nation which seems to have accepted, rather than fight at the grassroots level, regular occurrences of violence against women and children as the norm.

The reductive ways in which we

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tend to "measure" women's worth, be it through dowry or export revenues of RMG, are alive and well. "Women's empowerment" seems like a convenient illusion when we continue to preserve the very power structures that stand in the way of truly empowering women who need it the most. No number of RMG factories and NGO projects can ameliorate the status of women and stop dowry deaths if we fail to educate, in every sense of the word, both our women and men, and we need to do better than simply "boost literacy rates" by teaching people how to write their name.

The writer is a journalist at The Daily Star.

QUOTE

Quote

**TAJUDDIN AHMAD**  
(1925-1975)

*Nowadays, those who raise a hue and cry over fundamental rights do not really care about freedom of expression but only about their private property. As a result, questions can't be asked about how you amassed your wealth, how it multiplied, whether it was hijacked or plundered.*

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Comb parts

6 Similar

11 Commercial cow

12 California cager

13 More polite

14 Letter after psi

15 Singer Franklin

17 Baseball's Ripken

19 Assam export

20 Central

23 Install, as a cartridge

25 Continental coin

26 Put into words

28 Dance move

29 Gor R

30 Jotting spot

31 Fast flier

32 Sheltered side

33 Urban grocery

35 Down-loadable read

38 Stylishly quaint

41 DVR button

42 What a listener lends

43 Nervous

44 Pigeon perch

DOWN

1 Finger count

2 Quarter-back Manning

3 Increased rapidly

4 Stadium section

5 Church's foe

6 Hi! hello

7 Eastern monk

8 Mamie's husband

9 Gunpowder holder

10 Historic time

16 Like some profs

17 Brooch feature

18 Main artery

20 Mangled

21 Tony winner worth

22 Avoid

24 Brief drop

25 Put away

27 Sideways

31 Not serious

33 Head honcho

34 Drummer Krupa

35 MPG-rating grp.

36 Outlaw

37 Not at home

39 Cloth scrap

40 Refinery supply

Yesterday's answer

G	O	T	T	A	M	I	S	T
O	P	I	U	M	P	A	R	T
P	E	N	N	Y	A	L	I	A
A	N	T	E	P	R	E	S	T
S	P	Y	A	S	S	H	E	N
T	I	P	P	L	I	N	G	
T	E	A	L	I	A	G	O	
T	A	B	T	I	S	V	E	E
O	F	L	A	T	E	R	E	L
S	T	A	G	E	B	A	S	I
C	E	D	E	O	V	I	N	E
A	R	E	S	D	I	N	E	R

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott