

These are not "isolated" events

Home minister's comment misleading

THE latest killings indicate that the killers have expanded their target. Can it get any worse than this? Will it be fear mongering to suggest that the next targets might be those who sell their books and even those who buy them?

Just as we have been disappointed by the lack of progress of the police in netting the culprits in the past, so we are dumbfounded by the home minister's comment that yesterday's tragedy was an "isolated incident". What will it take to prove to him that it is the same groups, or their offshoots, who are doing all this? Whatever different name they may adopt from time to time, the same poison of extremism drive all their actions.

We find the minister's stance humiliating. There are others in the ruling party who, like before, have already started politicising the tragedy. We would like to strongly refute the minister and assert that these are not isolated incidents but part of a bigger scheme to promote extremism in this country.

We want concrete action by the police. The killers must be identified and nabbed and brought to justice as soon as possible.

The nation's soul is under threat. And unless we sink our differences and stand up to the peril, the only alternative is capitulation of the majority of the people to a minuscule number of misguided dogmatists. Is that what we want to see happen?

Journalists endangered worldwide

States must ensure their safety

THE journalists are increasingly becoming an endangered species. And we are reminded of this unpleasant fact once again as we observe the 'International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists' (IDEI) today.

The casualty figures are very dismal, made even more so by the fact that the number of journalist targeted while in line of duty is rising. According to UNESCO reports, 680 journalists have been killed between 2006 and 2014 of which only 6 percent cases has been resolved. The print media had to bear the brunt of losses that tallied up to 41 percent of the total casualties. And 70 journalists were killed up until September 2015.

It is regrettable that in spite of various resolutions adopted by the UN between 2006 and 2013 the number of journalists killed every year has not fallen primarily because of the failure to address the issue of impunity of the perpetrators.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, in 2015 Bangladesh has been among the top 10 deadliest countries for journalists in the world. Although the journalists in Bangladesh are not facing a conflict situation as in many other countries, they nonetheless at times fall foul of the political parties. Apart from the threat to life, journalists are often harassed with legal actions for doing their professional duty of informing the people on matters of public interest. In fact, almost all cases of journalist killings in Bangladesh in the last decade remain unresolved.

Good journalism depends on safe and secure ambience for journalists to function in. And without responsible and unfettered journalism democracy, and by extension the people, is the loser.

ATTACK ON FREE THOUGHT

"Terming these as 'isolated incidents' will only embolden the terrorists"

MEGHNA GUHATHAKURTA
Executive Director, Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB)

ONE after another, our citizens are being killed, but we are yet to see a proactive approach from the government. Maybe they don't realise that the blogger killings are damaging the country's stability. What the government must understand is that by killing the bloggers and publishers, the extremists are actually killing freedom of speech and freedom of expression. The question is: why is the government unable to look at this in a broader perspective? They should be looking at it in a much more strategic way.

Terming these as "isolated incidents" is one way of depoliticising them. Such statements will only embolden the terrorists to carry out more attacks. This government was involved in the Liberation War, so they must know how guerrilla tactics work. Terrorist attacks are always isolated incidents. The main point is whether or not the government is willing to take anti-terrorist strategies.

They have now targeted the publishers because publishers are free thinkers who believe in freedom of opinions. If the government now trivialises these incidents, there may come a time when they, too, will be obstructed from giving their free opinions. I don't understand why the government is failing to see the impending danger.

The government seems to have accepted this anti-blogger stance to maintain their own interest. We have observed an anti-blogger, anti-atheist discourse, equating bloggers with atheists, since the time of Hefazat-e-Islam, a discourse which was not there at the time of the Shahbagh movement.

Those who are carrying out such brutal attacks thought that they had a control over the youth of the country, which seems to not be the case. Our young generation believes in secularism, so the other side, which believes in religion-based politics, feels threatened. One can only assume that they are attacking the free-thinkers to retain their control.

On our part what we can do is make

"As a society we are failing to see the grave ramifications of all these"

BAKI BILLAH
Blogger, political activist

I knew Faisal Arefin Dipan since 2006 when he presided over the first gathering of the free thinking bloggers who write in Bangla. And I have known Ahmedur Rashid Tutul for a long time both on business and personal terms. Dipan was living in fear. And Tutul, well

origin. It is obvious that there is a lack of commitment on the government's part. When someone is killed, an investigation is launched. But such investigations are often half-hearted.

If this kind of a situation was created in any civilised country, the government would have to resign. Unfortunately, we do not have many options available to us in our country. The alternatives are even more hostile to free-thinking.

Almost all the political parties and groups have taken a stand against us or are keeping a distance from us. The government from the very beginning made it clear that they are not on our side. Senior people in the government have, on different occasions, said that the bloggers themselves are responsible for the current situation. It is clear that the government does not want to recognise any platform for freedom of expression. And section 57 of the ICT Act 2006 is proof of that. Anyone can be arrested for saying anything that is 'hurtful to religious sentiments' and 'hurtful to the image of a person or the State'.

The goal of those behind these killings has already been achieved to some extent. Fear is prevailing. A lot of bloggers have left the country while others are trying to do the same. A lot of writers are censoring themselves. As a society, we are failing to see the grave ramifications of all these. It seems that only bloggers and the forces supporting the Liberation War are the targets now. But what we are failing to see is that restrictions will only expand with time and there will be new targets. And that's a sure sign of going backward, not forward.

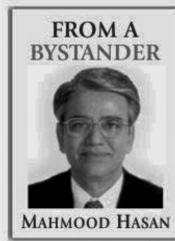


people understand that such attacks will not be limited only on the bloggers and that eventually, we all are going to be affected by this. Those who are fighting against these extremists and terrorists have not been able to spread this message among the masses, whereas the terrorists understand the message quite well. Our middle class has always been complacent. We have to break this complacency.

aware of the threats he is facing, restricted his movement. He also filed a General Diary in Mohammadpur police station. But, you see, these killings cannot be stopped by providing security at the individual level. Occasionally, security is provided on an individual basis but that's not enough. The government needs to launch an all-out campaign against these extremist groups and their

MYANMAR GOES TO POLLS

"Disciplined democracy" versus "Time for change"



FROM A BYSTANDER
MAHMOOD HASAN

AS the parliamentary election in Myanmar nears, there are differing forecasts about the performance of the two biggest parties.

Opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) is actually pitched against the incumbent military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Many predict that NLD led by Aung San Suu Kyi will win this time and end military rule; others have forecasted that USDP will return to power.

There are two constitutional provisions that NLD cannot overcome before the election. Section 59(f) was specifically enacted to debar Suu Kyi from becoming President, as her husband was British and her two sons are also British. Since Suu Kyi cannot become president, she said that NLD will put forward a "suitable" presidential nominee, if NLD wins a majority. However, she may become Speaker of the lower house.

Clause 436 stipulates that the constitution can be amended only by a majority of 75 percent votes of the Pyithu Hluttaw (lower house). According to the constitution, 25 percent seats (110 seats) are reserved for the military personnel in the house of 440 seats. This ensures that the military members can veto any amendment to the constitution.

Suu Kyi has declared, "If NLD wins in the election, we will amend the constitution". To change the constitution, she will need the support of regional ethnic parties, which are likely to play a crucial role in the post-election scenario. But without the blessings of the military parliamentarians, she cannot garner 75 percent votes. Interestingly, none of the political parties have formed any 'coalition' or 'alliance' to fight the election.

Apart from being organisationally and

financially weak, NLD is at odds with the military because of its anti-military attitude. Army Chief Gen Min Aung Hlaing cancelled a scheduled meeting with Suu Kyi last June. In reality, NLD has no channels of communication with the army.

General Hlaing has told the BBC that the military will respect the results of the election. Hlaing could say that because

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tactics of the 2010 elections. It will invite or coerce town elder and village leaders to join the party and win the election. It may also dish out favours and buy votes.

To strengthen his position, Thein Sein, president of so-called "civilian government" and USDP chairman, has taken three drastic steps in mid-August. First, he threw out retired General Thura (hero) Shwe Mann, speaker of the lower house and also acting-chairman of USDP. Shwe Mann was accused of hobnobbing with Suu Kyi, who called him "an ally" when he moved the bill to amend the constitution. He was aspiring to become the next president. Shwe Mann is now called a 'traitor' by his former colleagues. Second, Thein Sein allowed nearly 200 retired military officers to join USDP, but Shwe Mann blocked this move. Finally, he reshuffled his cabinet in August. Former President General Than Shwe was reportedly behind these changes.

There is another phenomenon that will help USDP. The hard-line ultra-nationalist Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu of Committee for Protection of Nationality and Religion ("Ma Ba Tha" in Burmese) has openly called upon the Buddhist community to vote for USDP. Wirathu, who led the xenophobic campaign against Muslims in 2011 and 2013, draws huge crowds and is openly patronised by the military. Surprisingly, General Hlaing called on the people to vote for candidates "who can protect race and religion" - a highly politicised statement that echoes Wirathu.

Probably taking cue from Wirathu, the Union Election Commission has debarred Muslim candidates from contesting. Suu Kyi has thus far kept quiet on the plight of Rohingyas for fear of losing Buddhist votes. Sadly neither the USDP nor NLD has chosen Muslim candidates to contest, though Myanmar has over five million Muslims. Rohingyas are automatically disenfranchised as they are not considered citizens of the country. It will

be a Muslim-free election. The election campaign that started on September 8 has been peaceful, so far. However, parties and candidates have been banned from criticising the Tatmadaw. The Election Day is expected to pass off quietly and may appear free and fair. But what the military has done surreptitiously prior to the Election Day is something many observers will not understand or see.

Carter Centre, one of the observers, has raised issues related to political space, access to voters and disenfranchisement. NLD has also raised objections over errors in the voters' list and warned against "phantom voters". There are also serious concerns about harassment of local and foreign journalists.

Myanmar's 31 million voters will go to polls on November 8, 2015 to elect 1171 representatives - 330 for the lower house (Pyithu Hluttaw) of 440 seats, and 168 for the upper house (Amyotha Hluttaw) of 224 seats. The remaining 673 representatives will go to the regional assemblies. A total of 92 political parties have fielded 6189 candidates, while 323 are running as independent candidates. Vote counting will take several weeks before the results are announced.

The new parliament will convene end of January 2016, when the new president will be elected by the two houses of parliament. Thein Sein enjoys the support of Army Chief General Hlaing and is sure to win a second term. The new government will start working in March 2016.

NLD is popular because of Aung San Suu Kyi. It will be a test of her slogan "Time for Change" against the Tatmadaw's "disciplined democracy".

In all likelihood this election will bring back USDP with a majority to be led by Thein Sein. The Tatmadaw is unlikely to hand over power to a real civilian government. It will be old wine in a new bottle.

The writer is former Ambassador and Secretary.

COMMENTS

"Freethinking Mauled Once Again"
(November 1, 2015)

Ahmed Farhad Salim
This is totally unacceptable.

Robi Rahman

The same extremists who killed the other bloggers slaughtered the publisher. We hope the masterminds behind these brutal murders and attacks are brought to book without delay.

"Never say over"
(October 30, 2015)

Abdul Hai
This man deserves respect from all of us.

"Nuclear power plant to cost \$13.5b"
(October 29, 2015)

Nilav Shuvro Rupom
With this money, we could have set up many hydroelectric plants that are safer than nuclear power plants.

"Brutality personified"
(October 31, 2015)

Abdul Bahar
Catch the culprit and make him pay for the killing.

Lal Shobuz Potaka
The perpetrator must be punished as per the law of the land.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Invest in youth empowerment

The report titled "Toward Solutions for Youth Employment: A 2015 Baseline Report", released by World Bank has pointed out that Bangladesh is simultaneously experiencing a fall in the employment growth rate and job creation. It also looks into new areas that can increase the chances of employment for

young people around the world. In Bangladesh, the number of students entering the university has increased in recent years and so has the number of graduates. However, unemployment continues to remain a major problem. The reason behind high youth unemployment rate is the lack of required

skills, education and training. It is important to provide our youth with necessary skills and knowledge for the development of our country. Our education system should be linked with skills demand in various sectors.
Anika Tasneem
Institute of Modern Languages
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Asia Cup 2016 in Bangladesh



PHOTO: AFP

We are very happy to learn that the next year's Asia Cup is going to be

held in Bangladesh. We hope Australia will realise that their decision to cancel their tour of Bangladesh was wrong.
MD. Khurshid Alam Palash
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