

SILENCED WE SHALL BE NOT

The systematic attacks on writers and publishers have left many of us speechless, but our youth remain adamant in their insistence on a more tolerant, pluralistic nation where diverse ideas will flourish without fear.

We all know where the buck stops

NABILA IDRIS
Development practitioner

Much column space has been dedicated to the blogger murders, and undoubtedly much more will be. In many ways it seems a futile exercise of preaching to the choir: do I really believe the murderers are reading this column and nodding along? Yet, I still feel compelled to write so future generations can see we at least tried to stop our country's slow descent into hell.

What strikes me first about our reaction to the murders is the "all murders are equal, but some murders are more equal than others" attitude among the intelligentsia. It is important to see these terrible murders in the context of failing law and order across the spectrum, where impunity is almost guaranteed. Although it is dangerous, it is not uncommon for countries to have violent groups among its citizens; the secular nature of most Western countries, for example, has not eliminated the presence of terrorist cells in their midst. What is uncommon is for the state to be conducive to them, as our state is. Drik's Shahidul Alam told *BuzzFeed*, "I think what we are looking at is a general upscaling of action against dissent of any form. When that happens, that creates an environment that anyone outside can take advantage of." Spot on. Of the many killings happening for criminal, political, and personal reasons—almost all of which go unchecked, or are openly lauded as 'justice served'—the blogger deaths are but one, albeit a truly terrible one. Unless law and order is improved

substantially, trying to deal with just one type of death in isolation from the plethora of deaths has very little chance of succeeding.

It seems unlikely though that there is any attempt to improve the dismal law and order situation. Thrice this year at least the government has insisted all's quiet on the security front: "The law and order situation in the country is now normal," said Industries Minister Amir Hossain Amu in February; Health Minister Mohammad Nasim upped the game this September, claiming, "[Bangladesh's] law and order situation is far better than other neighboring countries"; and this week, in the face of patent disbelief from everyone, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal declared, "The prevailing law and order situation of the country is satisfactory. Satisfactory for whom?"

The second issue that worries me is the impact of stifled freedom to voice dissent. *Washington Post's* Ishaan Tharoor wrote, "[Avijit] Roy's killers may have hated him for his views on Islam, but they operated in a far larger, fraught context." This context was clarified by Dr Ali Riaz of Illinois State University who told *BuzzFeed*, "Growing use of extremist rhetoric and acrimonious mainstream politics all contributed to it, as much as the external developments such as the rise of ISIS."

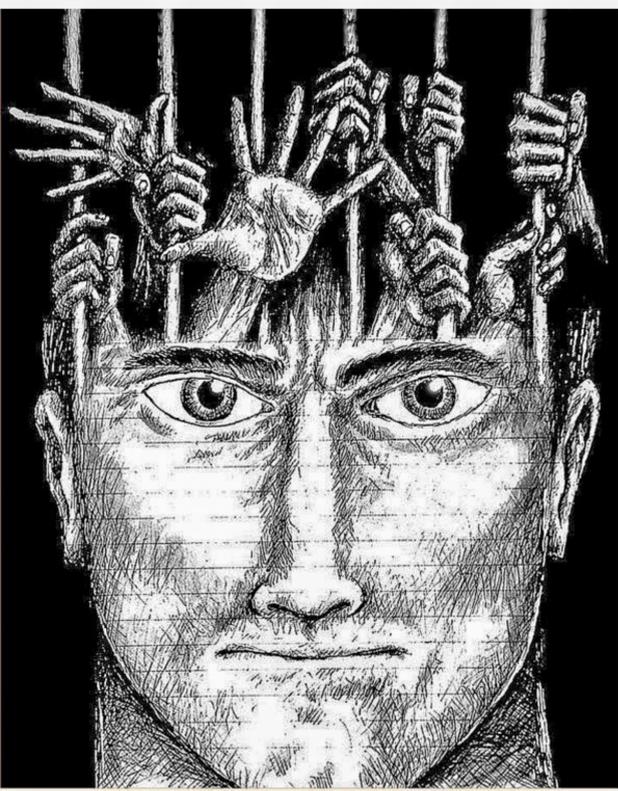
The anti-VAT protests by private university students stood out for me because of

their absolutely revolutionary slogan – "Gulikor," they said to the police, "Shoot us". Similarly, the father of the recently slain publisher told us from the depths of his grief that he doesn't want justice for his son's murder. In both cases the state is being told: do what you will – we don't care anymore. That's dangerous for a state's legitimacy. While peaceful citizenry may deal with the squeezing of democratic spaces through courageous defiance (like the students) or tragic resignation (like the father), the less peaceful types will respond with violence. Eliminating the violence needs a combined approach of improved security for all citizenry as well as safe spaces to voice dissent, again for all citizenry.

The respect that is accorded the memory of Colonel Gulzar is indicative that the elimination of Bangla Bhai and his murderous gang still has support of a broad spectrum of people. So the government can be confident most Bangladeshis do not condone terrorism. If it truly becomes serious about improving the law and order situation (which requires an uncomfortable but mandatory scrutiny of its own ranks), their popularity will surge. If it continues to languish in this state of denial... well, everyone knows where the buck stops. Whoever's committing the murders, the question on the streets still is, "Why is the government doing nothing about it?" Does the government truly wish to be seen as aiding and abetting terrorism?



ILLUSTRATION: SAIQ'A CHOWDHURY



No country for critical thinking

SAAD ADNAN KHAN
Researcher

I am currently conducting a project on gender, through which I hope to engage community members in critical thinking, self-reflexivity and action. However, I often wonder what these even mean in the current context of hostility and intolerance in Bangladesh. Forget critical thinking, we are far off from even thinking, because the only response towards criticisms or thinking seems to be violence and murder. Sadly, many community members do not see anything wrong in these incidents or are completely indifferent, because our culture of anti-intellectualism thrives not only in politics, but also in education and communication. There is full on effort to shove aside and bury alternatives and different opinions from our sight, and this process has been going on for some time, through banning of books, forcing a writer to go in exile or simply annihilating a life. This is deeply worrying, because we now have to be afraid of what to say, and what not to say, and whether we would be jailed or murdered for simply thinking the way we think.

I envision a country where community members will have the space to think critically and raise questions, and challenge each other, without taking things personally every time someone raises questions -- about religion, and every other set ideology. We should not let fixed ideologies guide the way we treat others; we should really see how absolute ideologies can be oppressive for everyone in the long run. Unfortunately, with a rise in consumerism, repressive state apparatuses and a culture of impunity, our work of creating these pockets for critical thinking and action becomes more difficult. There is nothing harmful about thinking, writing and questioning. It is exciting and that is the only way we can grow, understand and connect.

Fear and a state of failed justice

SABHANAZ RASHID DIYA

Policy analyst

Fear, just like secularism, is a tricky business. Behaviorist John Watson – in his Little Albert experiment – conditioned fear into a young boy by playing loud music every time he showed him a white mouse. Initially, the boy was only afraid of the loud music, but because of repeated exposure to the mouse and the music, he was "conditioned" to fear the mouse in absence of the music. Similarly, if large groups of individuals are coerced into fear – which in itself does not exist in the absence of the fundamental fear of death – what happens when death can no longer stop people from retaliating?

My newsfeed on social media has been bleak, hopeless and dark since the two writers and two publishers were hacked by militant Islamists. The subsequent death of Faisal Arefin Dipan hit closer to home than anticipated. Both publishers, Dipan and Tutul had published books by Avijit Roy, the writer and blogger who was hacked to death in public earlier this year. His wife, Rafida Ahmed Banya issued a public statement following the recent attacks commenting on the lack of accountability and the purposeless in seeking justice as the number of murders by militant Islamists rises. Banya is not alone in her despair – Dipan's father, publishers and writers have resonated her feelings and are beginning to lose hope on any form of redemption.

In essence, this is an indication of the dysfunctions of the government and a failed state of justice. As citizens stand on the sideline and watch their government make a mockery of their human rights, of democracy, of freedom of expression, it is no rocket science to foretell that they too will react and make mockery of the same government. When the vessel responsible for protection fails to protect its own and succumbs to fear and denial, the passengers it was meant to protect retaliate in order to survive – fear can no longer impede their actions, or reactions.

The only catch however is the secular movement in Bangladesh is not nearly as united as the militant Islamist movement. This, of course, is the nature of secularism. There is reason why people agree to disagree – because every opinion, in theory, needs to be valued. The conversation over recent years, especially since the Shahbagh protests, has evolved from this theoretical appreciation towards disagreement of opinions to the necessity to align every person next to you to your opinion. It's 'us' versus 'them'. Should we then denote the practice of secularism in Bangladesh as a less violent form of extremism? Is screaming for the death of any and every believer the only way forward, the only way to survive?

I have often believed a combination of fear and despair is a dangerous one. It compels people to act upon instinct and that instinct is a mad dash of fearlessness to establish one's worth. If no accountability is sought for these murders, we risk a situation where intolerance is fought with intolerance, where belief is equated with extremism, and religion with militarism. We need to go back to the ideals on which our Liberation War was waged, where diverse identities found common ground and respect for one another, and where justice was the rallying cry.

Are we united?

ZUAIRIJAH MOU

Writer and cultural activist

The term "freedom of expression" is open to debate in our country. If we want to discuss it, we must see what kind of opinions are being restricted from being expressed. It is mostly liberal views that are being silenced. On the other hand, hate speech and extremist views are often getting a free ride. The government does not seem to have any problem with that.

In our society, it is becoming increasingly difficult to talk about religion. There is no platform where people can participate in objective discussions and exchange ideas and opinions as part of a civilised discourse. But this situation has not been created in one day. History was re-written and many institutions were politicised. For a long time, writing openly about the Liberation War and its spirit was not possible. As a result, we have a whole generation that is not educated about our past. Now some people have managed to instill in their children liberal values on which the Liberation was fought and won but that's at the individual level.

The government's inaction or lack of action to tackle the extremist groups is pushing the country down the path of darkness. Why are the murder cases not being resolved?

And are those who want to exercise the right to express themselves freely and without fear united? Because those who are set to trample upon this right of the people are.

We must not die before we are killed

SAIKAT MOLLIK

Political activist

After the Liberation War, late journalist Nirma Sen wrote an article titled, "I am scared." During the war, he wrote, it was easy to identify the enemies, but in independent Bangladesh, it's difficult to know who they are. He had wanted the guarantee of a normal death. After 44 long years of independence, the whole nation is as scared and alarmed as Nirmal Sen.

Since independence, Bangladesh has been moving – or rather, it has been made to move -- in the opposite direction to what people had envisioned. People are being denied their democratic rights at every step. Even the most basic right in a democracy – the right to vote -- has not been ensured by this government! Freedom of expression is now tantamount to an offence for which you may get killed.

But the recent bout of violence has crossed all limits. The 'terrorist organisations' are admitting to these murders, yet they remain outside of the purview of the law. We have not seen any real effort from the government to address the situation or to give protection to the citizens.

Instead, what we have seen is that, by citing "terrorism and counter-terrorism" as reasons, the government has further curtailed our democratic rights while mass movements have been suppressed through autocratic means.

Through their irresponsible and insensitive comments, important people in the government are only encouraging the killers. The responsibility to identify the killers belongs to the state; but it's unfortunate that the people we have entrusted with our security, with our taxpayers' money, are too busy protecting the interests of those in power, rather than protecting the people. If the government cannot ensure justice for these killings, there will be misgivings in peoples' minds about the relationship between the government and the extremists. The onus is on them to prove they are not on the side of the killers.

Meanwhile, all citizens of Bangladesh must come together and stop this division amongst us. And we must keep in mind that we should not die before we're killed. II