

2015 in Perspective

DOMESTIC POLITICS – DÉJÀ VU

Regrettably, 2015 started on the same pitch as did 2014 - with *hartal* and blockades by the Jamaat-BNP alliance and with the leader of the main opposition party, BNP, under virtual house arrest. Tension was created around the issue of elections of January 5, 2014 and the two parties' attempt to commemorate the day in their own ways. AL wanted to celebrate the day as 'victory of democracy' while the BNP, which boycotted the polls by noon on election day, wanted to observe January 5 as 'death of democracy'. In the end, the police administration refused BNP permission to hold meetings anywhere in Dhaka and prohibited any assembly, rally or meeting in the capital till further orders. That, however, did not prevent AL and its associated bodies from gathering and holding meetings in the capital. (They did not use a mike, and thus, did not violate police orders, according to their leaders).

Tensions occurred from the very first day and the Jamaat-called *hartal* ran into the New Year. Khaleda met the same consequences for her intent to hold a rally, despite the government's refusal of BNP's request for holding a meeting in Dhaka, as she did in 2014, for her intention to hold the "March for Democracy". She was interned and this time there were a dozen sand laden trucks in front of her Gulshan office where she was held captive.

The drama continued as she was not allowed out of her house until March, despite the government's pronouncement that she was free to "go to her house". The BNP office in Paltan was also put under lock and key.

The blockade period witnessed several incidents of violence and acts of terrorism by BNP Jamaat cadres, on the railway lines, causing derailment, death and disruption of communication. Meanwhile, the government tried to undo the blockade by escorting commodity laden vehicles to Dhaka under police escort.

The first week of blockades by the BNP-Jamaat, had taken 11 lives and caused destruction and damage to more than 150 public and private transports.

The UN, EU and the US had expressed their concern at the violence and deaths as a result of the political programme of

the BNP-led alliance.

In January, BNP leader Reaz Rahman was shot and injured. Between 5 and 16 January the casualty figures were 23 dead, more than 700 injured and 200 vehicles damaged.

Arafat Rahman Koko died in Malaysia on Jan 24. Another drama unfolded with the aborted attempt of the PM to pay her condolences to the bereaved mother Khaleda Zia. She had to return as the gates were locked on her face.

The latter part of January witnessed a spate of extra judicial killings. The Asian Human Rights Commission's report of Jan 28 stated, "At least nine people including two women have been disappeared, and seven men extra judicially murdered between January 5 and January 27, 2015. Personnel from the Detective Branch (DB) of Police, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), and the Joint Forces (which is comprised of Police, RAB, and the Border Guards Bangladesh officers) detained these sixteen citizens, resulting in their disappearance and extrajudicial execution."

From January 5 to January 29, 35 people were killed in crossfire, of which 29 did not have any political links. The political unrest in that period resulted in a loss to realtors of Tk 36 crores a day and

generally the economy lost Tk 5,000 crore per day. The worst to suffer was the RMG sector which saw cancellation of orders. 800 public transports were torched/damaged.

As of March 8, the figure of those dead stood at 88 out of which 66 were not directly involved with any parties. 1,345 people were injured, 53 were killed in arson attacks by BNP-Jamaat men, 654 vehicles were vandalised, and the estimated cost of shutdown between January 5 and March 7 was Tk 1,38,897 crores.

Blockade continued adding another 3 days of *hartal* from February 15. The blockade ended with the announcement of the Dhaka and Chittagong city mayoral elections.

Law enforcement agencies began mass arrests of BNP-Jamaat leaders and activists. Many were faced with charges relating to the political violence during the beginning of the year.

One of the most dramatic episodes in the political saga was the sudden disappearance and reappearance of Salahuddin Ahmed, Joint Secretary Gen of the BNP. He went missing on March 10, presumed to have been kidnapped by the police. He reappeared in Shillong on May 13.

On the legal side, the most significant story of 2015 was the hanging of Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury and Ali

Ahsan Mujaheed on charges of crimes against humanity. Both were ministers in the BNP government. Convicted war criminal and former Secretary General of Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, Kamaruzzaman, was also put to the gallows on April 11.

The three city corporation polls were held on April 28, amidst accusations of wide-scale rigging.

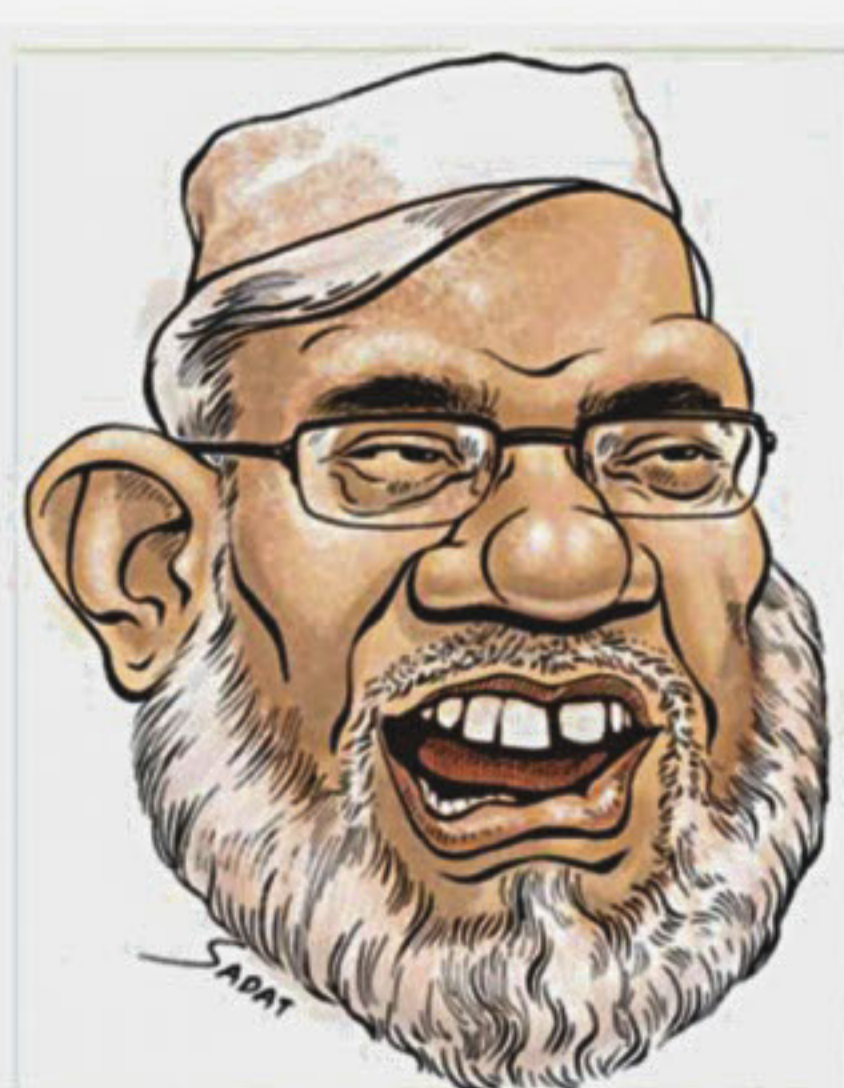
Meanwhile, municipal elections scheduled for December 30 have been plagued with controversy. With the official declaration that the nominations would now be partisan in nature, the major parties lost no time in choosing their candidates. Even the BNP joined in the race though there have been allegations of its candidates being intimidated by ruling party men. In fact the presence of a large number of rebel candidates of the AL has caused some irritation within the ruling party.

It has been alleged that many of the rebels have been harassed so that they drop out of the elections. Amidst major violation of electoral codes by mainly ruling party candidates and their powerful backers, the Election Commission's authority has been severely compromised as it could not take



Blockaders set a BRTC bus and a private car on fire in front of Rajuk Bhaban in the capital's Motijheel on January 6, 2015.

PHOTO: STAR



Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujaheed and Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury were executed on war crimes charges on November 22, 2015.



2015 was rocked by a series of attacks on foreign nationals, Christian and Shia community that have raised serious extremist worries in the country. In May, 2015 the government banned Islamist militant group Ansarullah Bangla Team, which claimed responsibility for killing and assaulting several pro-secular public figures.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4