

Marred UP elections

The EC has come up short

THE first phase of union parishad (UP) elections saw widespread violence that left 10 persons killed and a thousand others wounded. Though the voter turnout, particularly women voters, was noteworthy we have strong reservation about the way the elections were held. There seems to be a pattern being set in our electoral practices where holding elections in anyway gets priority over free and fair conduct of polls.

Besides violent clashes between rival candidates, numerous incidents of storming of polling stations, ballot stuffing and snatching of ballot boxes were reported in the media. From the beginning there had been concern over violence in the polls as many candidates were barred from filing nomination papers and deadly clashes erupted in the run-up to the elections in many places. The grim picture of the election day shows that EC paid little heed to these apprehensions. It has certainly put question on the role of the election commission.

The EC has come out with an observation that the elections were held in a free, fair and peaceful manner except for some isolated incidents of irregularities. We wonder how a responsible authority can be so oblivious to the loss of so many lives and pervasive electoral irregularities. The ruling party also cannot shrug off its responsibilities as in most cases their party men were found flouting electoral rules. There are still five more phases of election to come. If this pattern continues the future of our electoral democracy may be at stake.

Terror attack on Brussels

Goes against Islamic teachings

THE mindless violence that erupted in a series of explosions in Brussels airport and a metro train station on March 22 that claimed some 35 lives has sent a shudder through Europe and the world. We are appalled at the wanton violence unleashed by the Islamic State (IS) against innocent people which has wounded hundreds. The incident has heightened Europe's inability to tackle terror, and we join voices with world leaders in the condemnation of such cowardly attacks that targeted ordinary citizens. What have attacks like this, and those that took place in Paris earlier, achieved? IS and like-minded terror outfits have done more harm to Muslims and Islam by resorting to violence that is specifically banned in Islam.

It is well that the renowned Islamic scholars have voiced their condemnation of these heinous acts. We are glad to see the Cairo-based Al-Azhar, which is a leading seat of learning in Islam, come out publicly in condemnation of these heinous crimes that violate the teachings of the Quran and Sunnah.

While security will undoubtedly be tightened across Europe to combat terrorism wherever it may exist, we hope that Muslim communities will not be subject to witch hunts. That will do more harm than good, and we hope that religious leaders of all faiths will come forward in greater numbers to preach peace and tolerance. If the terror outfit is retaliating against the actions of the West, as they claim they are, in Syria and Iraq, it should remember that two wrongs do not make a right. Nothing can justify the killing of unarmed people.

COMMENTS

"98pc port city auto-rickshaws flouting mandatory fare meters"
(March 22, 2016)

Engr Partha Saurav Roy

Not only in the port city but also in the capital, passengers have been suffering from this malpractice of the CNG auto-rickshaw drivers.

"Govt bans Shela route"
(March 22, 2016)

Zahid Akand

This route should have been banned many years ago for the greater interest of the Sundarbans. However, better late than never.

POLITICAL ANDELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN BANGLADESH

Trends and patterns

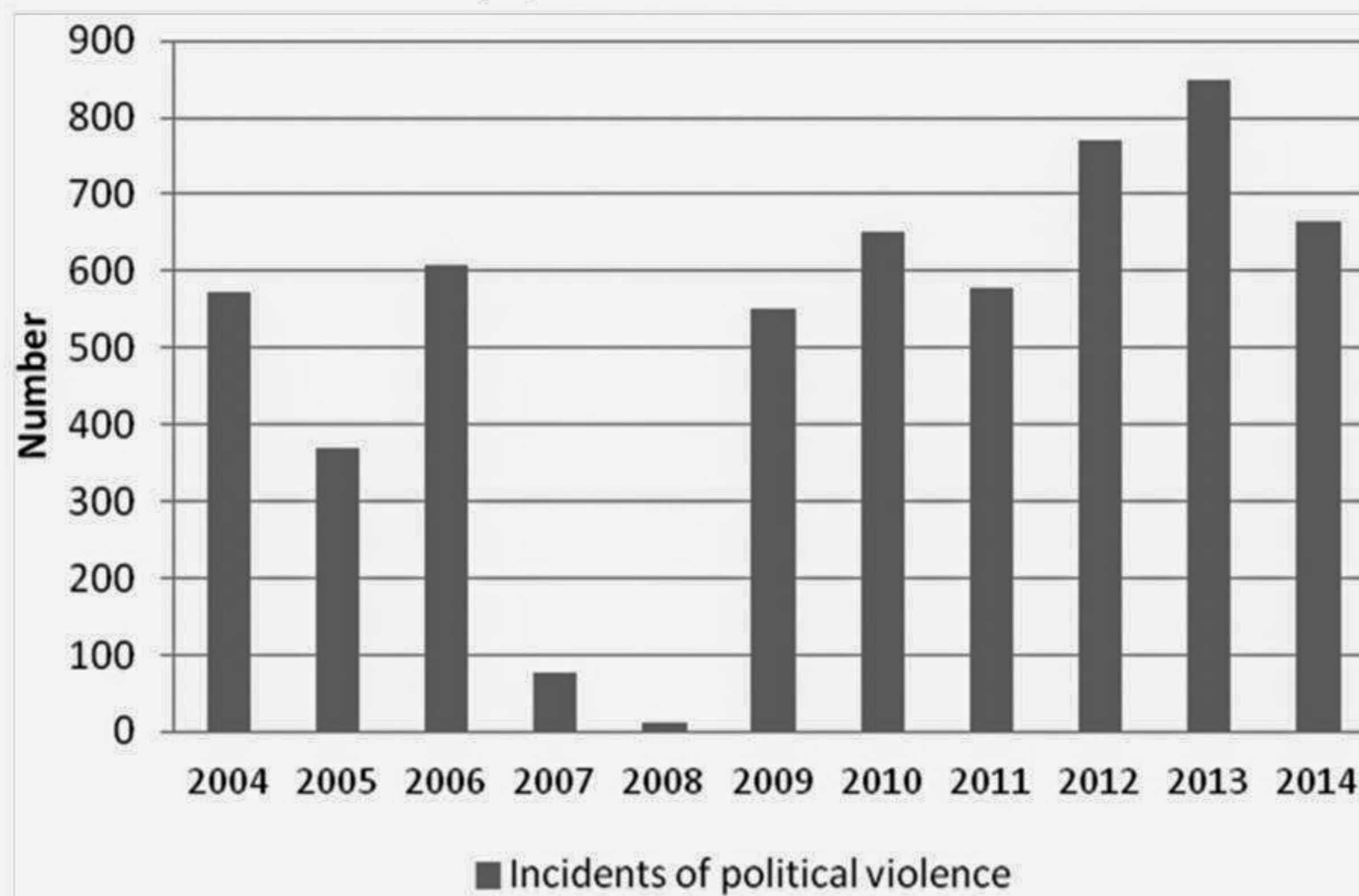
SYEDA SALINA AZIZ and FARHANA RAZZAQUE

POLITICAL violence remains inseparable from Bangladeshi politics and election violence is an integral part of that violence. The recent UP election is not an exception. Till now, 10 people have reportedly died while more than a thousand people were wounded in the first phase of the Union Parishad election held in 2016.

To varying degrees, political violence has been a concern for Bangladesh practically since independence. More disconcerting, it seems not to have abated since the restoration of democracy in 1991, and in recent years, has only escalated further. On January 16, 2015, the spokesperson for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), at a press briefing in Geneva, remarked that "the deepening political violence in Bangladesh...is very disturbing." In March 2015, an article headlined "Bangladesh paralysed by violence as scores die in political war" was published in the online version of *The Daily Telegraph*. Academic and activist writings on the issue suggest that, in the course of time, violence, introduced as an 'instrument' by political parties to exercise power over the opposition, eventually became 'institutionalised as the political norm.' Evidence from many countries indicates that ruling party-instigated violence can be backed by government authorities, while opposition-induced violence appears to be more difficult to understand, especially when it is widespread, indiscriminate and extreme in nature. That in Bangladesh political violence, regardless of who initiates it, has become inseparable from the political culture in the country which practices democracy is a matter of serious concern.

Data on violence clearly shows that there has been an upward trend in the number of incidents over a long period. The intensity and severity of violence has also increased. The political parties now employ more sophisticated weapons, and in doing so, affect more people than before. Let us consider the evidence. Research undertaken at the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD, BRAC University), based on print media sources, reported 2,500 incidents of violence from 1991 to 2001. The number of such incidents increased to 2,800 from 2001 to 2006, and changed little (2,700) from 2008 to 2013 across all 64 districts of Bangladesh.

Moving to the number of deaths and injuries from these incidents reveals two staggering findings. From 2001-2006, overall political violence claimed 1,500 lives and resulted in 37,000 injuries. In the subsequent five years, more than 500 people died and about 34,000 were injured. And, the number of deaths and



injuries were higher in 2006-2013 when compared to the previous years.

While interparty conflicts are expected (although, breaking out into serious violence is not), conflicts within party factions are also common. The same data shows that 20 percent of the total violence was a result of internecine factional conflicts within the political parties during the 1990s. This has risen in recent years. From 2008-2012, 37 percent of the total reported incidents of violence took place between party factions. Interestingly, irrespective of the regime, the ruling party consistently accounted for the larger share of total factional violence. This could well suggest that factional violence is related to struggles over control of resources. Boucek (2009) argued that when there is an excessive focus on factional interest in the party, it might reflect "weakness of the party as an institution," promoting "rent seeking" behaviour and shifting focus away from the party's collective interest. He termed this as a "degenerative" form of factionalism.

Looking at the data, it is evident that politically induced violence peaks before the period preceding the election years or during that time. This was evident from 2006 and 2013. The situation became even worse after the January 5, 2014 national

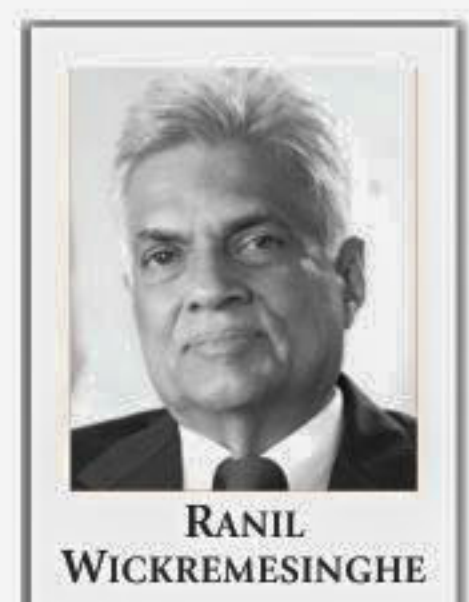
elections. Fifteen people were killed in 'gun fights' between January 1 and January 27, 2014. Similar incidents occurred during the local government elections, including pourashava, city corporation, municipal, upazila and union parishad elections. There were several incidents of violence resulting in death, injuries, vandalism, arson and bomb blasts in the aftermath of the Upazila Parishad elections of 2014. The recent first-ever partisan municipal election in 2015 also witnessed violence, vote-rigging and intimidation, which were widely covered by the media. Newspapers reported that people were killed, polling stations were captured, and fraudulent voting took place during these elections.

Electional violence is a threat to democratic institutions. While the Election Commission and law enforcement agencies assure the public of peaceful conditions during the elections, it has proven difficult for them to achieve their professed objective. A significant test in this regard would be for the authorities to learn from the severity of the recent UP election, and not just intend to take "appropriate measures to ensure free and fair polls" but also ensure that the outcome is achieved.

The writers are researchers at BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), BRAC University.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Trade in a Time of Protectionism



RANIL WICKREMESINGHE

AS China's economy slows and growth in the developed world remains anaemic, governments across Asia are working to keep their economies on an upward trajectory. In Sri Lanka, where I am Prime Minister, the challenge is to find a way to accelerate our already steady economic growth.

One thing is clear: We cannot expect the rest of the world to welcome our economic ambitions the way it once opened its arms to China's rapid rise as an economic power or - in earlier decades - cheered on the growth of Japan and the so-called Asian Tigers, including South Korea.

Today, we Asians are witnessing, on an almost daily basis, fierce political assaults on the tools and policies that have helped lift hundreds of millions of our citizens out of poverty. Indeed, this year, free trade appears to be the scapegoat of choice among the world's assorted populists and demagogues.

In the United States' presidential election campaign, for example, the leading candidates in both the Republican and Democratic primaries have questioned the wisdom of seeking greater openness in world trade. In the United Kingdom, eurosceptics campaigning for the country to leave the European Union denigrate the benefits of the single European market. Elsewhere in Europe, populists are demanding that the drawbridges of trade be raised.

Open trade is under attack even in parts of Asia. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had to drag some of his

country's special-interest groups kicking and screaming into the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Similarly, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been unable to convince state governors to lower trade barriers within the country. And in Sri Lanka, the "economic and technology agreement" that my government recently planned to sign with India, in order to bring about greater economic integration, has come under ferocious political attack.

For the most part, however, Asia's political leaders retain a very positive view of the benefits of open trade. After

component of these countries' growth strategies. In South Asia, however, we have been much slower to take advantage of the opportunities that can arise from more open trade - with regrettable consequences: The region is home to 44 percent of the world's poorest people.

We have an obligation to try to use trade to lift our people out of poverty. But with free trade rapidly becoming a global bugbear, the window for generating growth by tapping into world markets appears to be closing quickly. If trade is to become a key driver of growth

between India and Pakistan could jump from \$1 billion today to \$10 billion - if tariffs and other barriers were slashed to levels recommended by the World Trade Organization.

Tariffs and other needless restrictions hobble trade among all South Asian countries. These obstacles were supposed to be swept away with the establishment of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the largest of all the world's regional trading blocs, with close to two billion people. But SAARC's reliance on bilateral negotiations has slowed the process to a crawl, keeping the region much poorer than it needs to be. If SAARC is to succeed, a new multilateral mechanism for cooperation will be needed.

As climate change takes its toll, the stakes will only get higher. Our still largely agrarian countries, with much of their territory in low-lying coastal regions, are dangerously exposed to rising sea levels and violent weather. Receding Himalayan glaciers will disrupt the lives - and livelihoods - of some 600 million people in Pakistan, Nepal, and northern India.

The political obstacles to effective action will be stiff. Indeed, there is political opposition to greater regional economic integration in every SAARC country. But the scale of the challenges facing the region should impel all of SAARC's members toward greater cooperation.

It is time for SAARC's member governments to rise to the challenge. By working together, we can lay the foundations of a regional economy as dynamic as that of our neighbours to the east.

The writer is Prime Minister of Sri Lanka. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2016. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)

Today, intra-regional trade accounts for just 5 percent of South Asia's total trade, compared to 25 percent for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. This vast untapped potential presents the region with an opportunity for growth that does not rely on the strength of the world economy.

all, much of the past four decades of robust growth can be attributed to the fact that world markets were receptive to Asian goods. All we needed to do to get our economies growing, it seemed, was to identify our comparative advantage, produce quality goods at competitive prices, and then export as much as we could.

For decades, this model worked extraordinarily well, and China, Japan, South Korea, and the countries of Southeast Asia benefited greatly from it. Even today, with world trade in the doldrums, regional trade remains a key

in Sri Lanka or elsewhere in the region, we will most likely have to generate it ourselves - by transforming South Asia from one of the world's least economically integrated regions into one of its most integrated.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Cyber crimes on the rise

It is very common these days for companies to send unsigned letters, invoices, etc, claiming "the document is computer generated and does not require any signature." We seldom enquire if the letter/document is genuine and if it has come from a genuine person. Computer-generated documents have no evidentiary value. Therefore, documents should

be properly prepared and signed. Similarly, ATM transactions do not need the signature of the account holder. As a result of this loophole, thieves get the opportunity to use clone ATM cards and steal money. Everyone should be more careful about these types of cyber crimes. M. Zayed Ali Mridha Muksudpur, Gopalganj

Deaths in road crashes

Covered vans and trucks on the highways have become death machines, as these vehicles are responsible for majority of the road accidents that occur nowadays. Nowhere in the world are there so many road accidents on a daily basis. The drivers of trucks, covered vans and private cars don't even care to abide by the traffic rules. When will these drivers ever learn to care about people's lives? A. H. Dewan Dhaka Cantt., Dhaka



News or views?

I am a regular listener of news of various channels including BTV. BTV's news quality has deteriorated and it seems the news that this national channel broadcasts is no longer news, rather these can be simply called views or statements of the ruling party. And that is one of the major reasons why people don't watch BTV anymore. BTV should learn from channels like BBC, CNN and Al Jazeera where one can really get news. Mohammed Alaudhin Green Road, Dhaka