

The Laws of Inertia



THE MIDDLE PATH
ADNAN R AMIN

IN 1988, Ershad's predictably dictator-esque declaration of a state religion led to the formation of the Committee to Resist Despotism and Communalism (hereinafter CRDC). The CRDC filed a petition against the declaration, but to no avail. After a watershed verdict overturned the amendment legitimising HM Ershad's military rule, and declared all legal proceedings under it unconstitutional, the legitimacy of this promulgation of a state religion came under scrutiny. Then some weeks back, the petitioners learnt that their petition would finally be heard. By then, two-thirds of the eminent petitioners had passed away.

The High Court asked CRDC for an explanation, seeming oddly like an afterthought, on February 29, 2016. The story broke the next day: Islam's status as the State Religion was at jeopardy! Right-wing propaganda news-site *Breitbart* was one of the very first to report it. In three days, major outlets like *Huffington Post* and *Yahoo!* got whiff of the story. Within a week, it had spread like wildfire over international media.

The court – once the petition came up – determined that the petitioners had “no *locus standi*,” meaning that they had no grounds for the complaint and had not shown that

the challenged law was causing them harm (WSJ, March 28). The sequence of events – judging from media reports – sounds hurried. As the *New York Times*' headline went, “In 2 minutes, Bangladesh rejects 28-year old challenge to Islam's role.” CRDC lawyer Subrata Chowdhury told *Al Jazeera*, “without a hearing and without giving us any chance to present our argument on the point of *locus standi*, the court dismissed the case.” (March 28).

Whether the illegitimacy (according to court ruling, valid “till *Qayamat*”) of Ershad's rule had any bearing on the matter, remains uncertain or unresolved. The *Amici Curiae* (friends of the court) – comprising towering legal giants like Dr. Kamal Hossain, Rafique-Ul Haque, Amirul Islam and Rokonuddin Mahmud – got no chance to offer their professional opinions. It was going to ‘cause delays’; not surprising, since there must have been a hurry after 28 years had suddenly elapsed. Ironically poetic, that the petitioners and their lawyers got 28 days to prepare, after a wait of 28 years. The rest is history, and not even rhetorically. But whether we like it or not, the law is the law and the court has done the country a service by upholding it.

It is interesting to note in passing the associated framing and language used by local and western media. Local media mostly termed it an unforeseen development and framed the hearing against ‘secularism in the constitution’ and ‘Ershad's despotism’. Hefazat-e-Islam was peripheral in most analyses. Many

social media commentators, however, were viewing the events through the lens of ‘political opportunism through the decades’. Not so the international ones.

All prominent names – *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *The Guardian* – contextualised the story through a description of post-Shahab developments, the rise of extremism and targeted killings.

Only this narrative – i.e. yet another moderate Muslim country succumbs to rising extremism – could knock off the Bangladesh Bank ‘hacking’ and IT-expert abduction stories. Rampal and CHT have taken a back seat too. Given the short shelf-life of news-stories in the age of social media – it is unlikely that these or any other story of the past can be completely revived, or activists mobilised.

Having said that, any responsible citizen should entertain with caution the wild rumours that the petition was revived as a distraction or was plain pandering. Such rumours make light of a grave contradiction in our national stance on both religion and secularism, and try to imply political influence on the judiciary. Neither should be publicly attempted.

It is not uncommon for dictators to resort to religion or cultural traditions to draw legitimacy. Francisco Franco, Zia Ul Haque, Saddam Hussein are all good examples. True activists resist immoral or unjust actions, so the CRDC's actions are understandable. The Court is a house of the law, and that is what it upheld. All politicians pander to religious sentiments, so

even that is predictable. The media goes where the powerful go, and we saw convincing evidence of that. Every one played their part in these developments, but the educated citizens. Why is there no demand for a parliamentary debate or even a referendum? Can there be no social conversation even? Would it be the same if this were 1988?

In an ideal world, there would be a public disclosure, or at least summary, of what arguments were prepared by each party. Such a disclosure – at the risk of an inevitable media trial – would help citizens evaluate their own convictions and positions. It would spark a debate perhaps. But more importantly, it would give us an agreed-upon definition of what a ‘state religion’ is. Since these are legal arguments, there is no reason to fear that their secrecy is integrally linked to national security or the hunt for terrorists and/or hackers.

An honest discussion about state religions would entail the philosophy of the categorisation (e.g. can a nation state have a religion?), the rational need for a state religion (e.g. does it contribute more value than it takes away?), the economics of such a distinction (e.g. will it give the dominant group disproportionate resources?) and last but not the least, the social impact of this designation (e.g. does it bestow special access, status or influence to adherents of the state religion?). It would answer the questions: ‘what does it mean to have a state religion? Does having a state religion merely mean ‘most of our population subscribes to one creed’?

Or does it install one stream of beliefs over all others? What reality, ranks, rules, resources and returns signify its meaning beyond the Constitution? How can one know if having a state religion is contrary to the principle of secularism, when (s)he doesn't know what the former entails?

The court's ruling is not an

off our central bank. Twenty million was returned by dint of a spelling mistake (by riffing off which, a coaching center is about to be shut down). There needs to be accountability for this, not mere resignations. Let us consider that people who built a left-hand drive flyover are probably building a stronger safe for the hacked bank as

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embargo on citizen activism and political debate. So a steady, civil conversation can indeed be revived. And proponents of a state religion need to be a part of this conversation. Let us respect legal rulings, but retain active interest in the philosophy and spirit of the law.

Meanwhile, let us not forget that ‘hackers’ siphoned US\$101 million

you read! Let the anti-corruption crusaders act, or be faced with questions themselves. There have been unacceptable levels of institutional failures in the country of late, and we deserve better. We would do well to keep our eyes on the ball.

The writer is a strategy and communications specialist.

Autism: The role of the family

MST. MALEKA PERVIN

THE theme of World Autism Awareness Day - which is observed on April 2 every year and aims to increase awareness about people, especially children, with autism - for 2016, is “Autism and the 2030 Agenda: Inclusion and Neurodiversity.”

Autism affects approximately 1 out of every 150 children around the world. It refers to a neuro-developmental disability defined by a number of behavioural features that ranges in

girls) as having autism spectrum disorder. In addition, the CDC offers data from numerous studies in Asia, Europe and North America, showing an average prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) of about 1 percent (CDC, 2012). A culture has developed around autism, with some individuals seeking a cure and others believing autism should be accepted as a difference and not treated as a disorder. No definitive answer or specific cause has yet been scientifically linked to the onset of autism. However, there could

or being born too small.

Awareness about autism in Bangladesh is the demand of the day. Many people living in rural Bangladesh carry false conceptions about autism, and hence a stigma is attached to this mental condition, thereby acting as a barrier in promoting the scientific management of ASD. In the last four years, the Government of Bangladesh has made tremendous progress in reducing the stigma related to autism, and has taken necessary measures to address concerns related to ASD.

As a part of an awareness campaign, the Centre for Neurodevelopment and Autism in Children (CNAC) was established in 2010 as a nationwide paediatric neurodevelopment and autism related management, training and research centre in Bangladesh. In 2011, Bangladesh hosted the international conference titled “Autism Spectrum Disorders and Developmental Disabilities in Bangladesh and South Asia”. In this conference, the Dhaka Declaration on ASD was ratified by seven regional countries, which highlighted the need for awareness, treatment, research and legislative framework for children with ASD. Resolution 67/82, which builds on the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), was unanimously adopted by the UN in 2012. The major goal of this resolution is to enhance support for individuals, families and communities affected by ASD, all over the world. In 2013, the Bangladeshi government passed two laws. The Neuro-developmental Disabled Persons Protection and Trust Act allows for a trust fund to be set up for the benefit of people with neuro-developmental disabilities, including ASD. This Act also seeks to ensure the rights and safety of people with neuro-developmental disabilities by providing them physical, psychological and financial assistance. Secondly, the Disabled Persons Right and Security Act was formulated to ensure the rights and security of children with ASD.

Many children with autism also

have different ways of learning, paying attention, or reacting to things. As a whole, there is no single impairment, behaviour or ability that can be attributed to autism. Autism is a lifelong disability that presents multiple challenges for families at each stage of the life course. It is acknowledged that parents play a vital role as a primary actor in the education of their children, so the aim is to support kids with autism in exercising their skills and competences, and to bring together all the actors who work with families. Moreover, the daily functioning of a family, and the way each member of the family perceives the situation is important for interactions between children with disability and their parents. In addition, parents of children with autism play multiple roles in their kids' life. They are often the first people to recognise a developmental problem. Parents are typically active partners in their child's education to ensure that skills learned in the educational programme transfer to the home setting; they are also responsible for teaching their children the norms and mores of society that are best mastered at home and within the community.

Parents often have to confront a sea of emotions - ranging from sadness, anger, disappointment - when they first discover that their child has a significant developmental problem. Most families cope effectively with these demands, but some may encounter substantial stress when raising a child with autism. It is important to keep in mind that throughout childhood, parents must be recognised and valued as the key elements of any intervention. Information, training and support, always within the context of family values and culture, should be the common denominator of any professional intervention. Other important sources of support - such as babysitting services, respite care, short breaks or tax benefits - should be available to avoid the discrimination that many of these families face.

Adequate support for social, medical and educational services is necessary to ensure that these families are able to enjoy the same quality of life as everyone else. We need to understand that autism is not the same as portrayed in media or popular culture. Families with an autistic child often find it challenging to deal with this condition. There are, however, some effective strategies and approaches to support the teaching and learning process for children with autism. A decision to use a particular approach should be based on an in-depth knowledge of the child, what one wishes to teach and what the child needs to learn. A child's member diagnosis affects every member of the family in different ways. Parents/caregivers must now primarily focus on helping their child with autism. The needs of a child with autism can sometimes complicate familial relationships, especially in a family with more than one child. However, parents can help their family by informing the rest of their children about autism and the complications attached to this condition; they could help their kids understand the challenges their sibling faces. Moreover, they could involve members of the extended family to create a network of help and understanding.

Children diagnosed with autism often follow specific routines in their everyday life. Parents can rearrange their daily routines to accommodate to the child's timetable, as children with ASD can be unpredictable, and are often unable to regulate their behaviour. Although raising a child diagnosed with autism can be extremely stressful and life changing, it's not necessary for families to have a negative experience when dealing with this condition. Parents can find resilience in their child's autism diagnosis, and can even recognise positive ways in which autism has impacted their lives.

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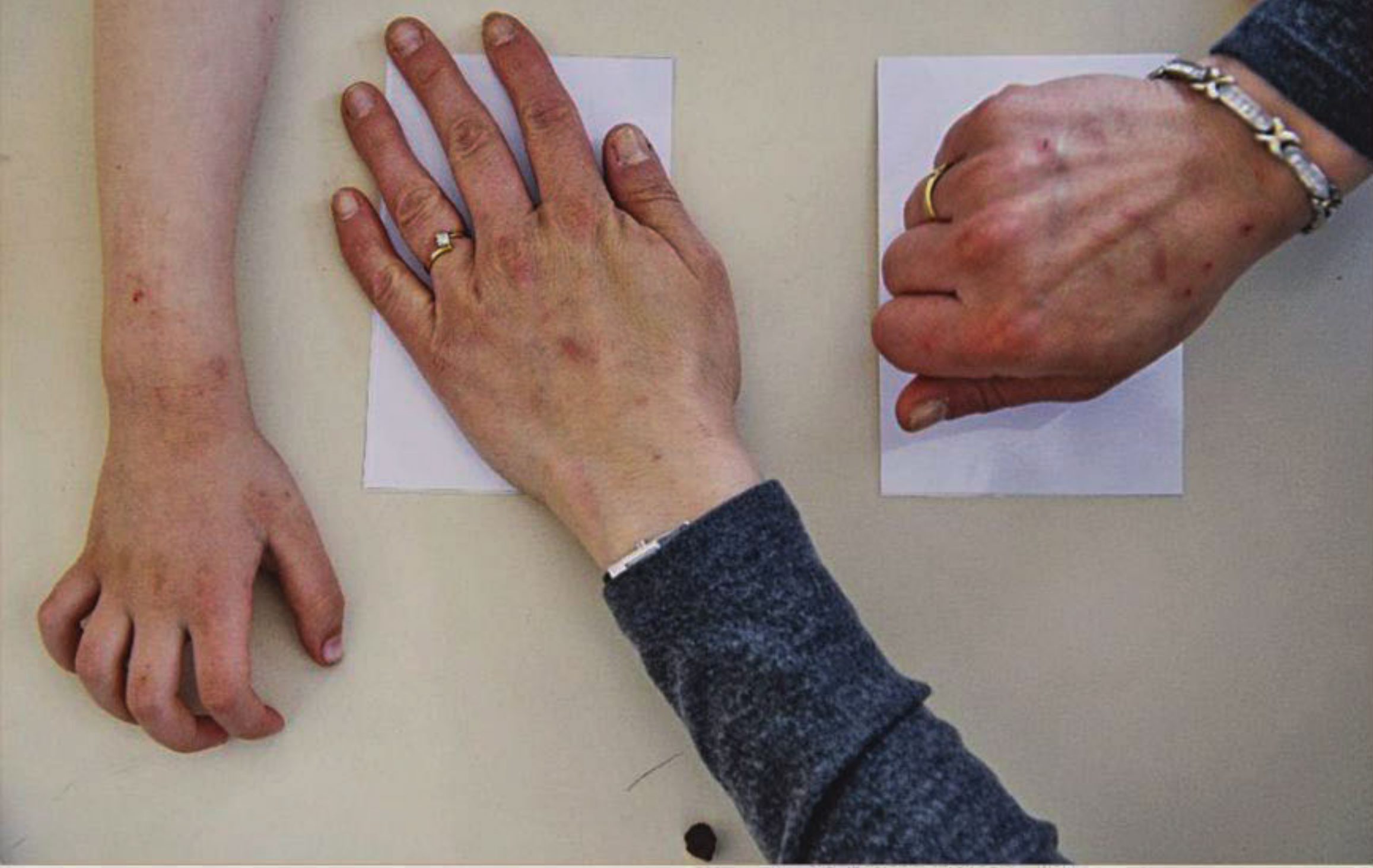


PHOTO: AFP

severity levels, from mild to moderate. Children with autism typically have a markedly abnormal or impaired development in social interaction and communication and a markedly restricted repertoire of activity and interests.

The Centre for Disease Control (CDC) released report on the prevalence of autism in the United States. This study identified 1 in 68 children (1 in 42 boys and 1 in 189

be different factors that make a child more likely to have autism, including genetic, environmental and biological factors. For pregnancies conceived with Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART), for example, the increased risk for autism is in large part due to the higher likelihood of adverse pregnancy and delivery outcomes. On the other hand, using ART may lead to factors that are known to put children at risk for autism, such as being born too early

QUOTABLE Quote

EQBAL AHMAD
(Political scientist, writer, anti-war activist and journalist)

[...] the truth has to be repeated. It doesn't become stale just because it has been told once. So keep repeating it. Don't bother about who has listened, who not listened... the media and the other institutions of power are so powerful that telling the truth once is not enough. You've got to keep repeating different facts, prove the same point.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

Across

- 1 Farm towers
- 6 Prom transports
- 11 Grownup
- 12 Take as one's own
- 13 Preparing to pick something up
- 15 Fall back
- 16 Sheltered side
- 17 Memorable time
- 18 Voter
- 20 Week part
- 21 Sweetie
- 22 Mosquito attack
- 23 UFO flyer
- 26 Had a feast
- 27 Minimal change
- 28 Peruvian coin
- 29 Decay
- 30 Cook's pan
- 34 Small bill
- 35 Sewing aid
- 36 Vining plant
- 37 Obliging to appear in court
- 40 Writer Chekhov
- 41 Dancer Castle
- 42 Peevish

43 Bird abodes

DOWN

- 1 Dark fur
- 2 Perfect
- 3 Fencing move
- 4 Hoary
- 5 Blue-veined cheese
- 6 Saloon quaff
- 7 Marring words
- 8 Made oneself at home
- 9 Run
- 10 Got off course
- 14 Very bright
- 19 Atkins of country music
- 22 Potential law
- 23 Circus star
- 24 Like Simba
- 25 Purposes
- 26 Murdering
- 28 Tattoo site
- 30 Like cacti
- 31 Cat's nine
- 32 News item
- 33 White-walls, in Whitehall
- 38 Period
- 39 Mine find

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

S	L	A	N	G	S	T	A	G
C	O	L	O	R	C	A	R	A
A	W	A	R	E	A	M	A	Z
L	E	M	E	R	R	M	E	L
D	R	O	P	T	H	E	B	A
B	A	B	A	R	D	I	C	E
I	V	A	N	S	E	E		
T	A	K	E	T	H	E	F	A
O	I	L	H	E	P	L	I	E
F	L	A	K	E	N	I	N	O
F	E	V	E	R	E	V	I	N
D	A	N	E	D	E	E	D	S

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott