

# US, India and Bangladesh extremism

## Nizami's end Justice at last

**N**IZAMI was the highest ranking Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) leader to be hanged for crimes against humanity in 1971. With his execution, the stigma that we had been carrying for the last 45 years has been removed.

He was the most notorious JI leader who organised and helped the Pakistani army to turn our country into a killing field. But for the help from people like Nizami and his killer gangs, the occupation army would have capitulated much sooner and without the aid of Nizami the atrocities of the notorious Al-Shams and Al-Badr militias could not have been let loose on the people of the land. And it is he who planned and carried out the killing of our brightest intellectuals.

It is a pity that these killers had been rehabilitated to places of honour in society. Indeed, we had to witness monsters like Nizami elevated to cabinet positions of a former government and preside over a very important ministry at one time. This was a slap on the face of a people who had fought and died for their independence and which men like Nizami had done everything to prevent. Regrettably, in the 45 years of our existence, neither Nizami nor any of the JI leaders and war criminals had ever expressed remorse much less seek forgiveness of the people.

Justice has been served, albeit belatedly. And credit must go to the Prime Minister and her government for bringing the cohorts of the perpetrators of the most brutal atrocity since the Second World War to justice. We hope this will assuage the grieving hearts of the relatives of the victims, and some solace to the survivors, of his brutality.

**R** EPORTEDLY the US and India have agreed to work together with Bangladesh to counter extremism in this country. The US has made no secret of its worry about the current situation in Bangladesh to the extent that its foreign minister Kerry called our prime minister to express its anxiety. As of now Bangladesh is not on any war on terror arrangement either formally or informally although there had been efforts by the US to get our forces physically involved in its GWOT (Global War On Terrorism) by contributing troops to its forces in Afghanistan. I think good counsel had prevailed on our leaders in declining the offer.

There is a general inclination of viewing with a degree of circumspection attempts of 'jointry' of plans to address any problem in a third country. The matter is compounded further when one of the two happens to be the main protagonist of the current global war on terror and whose policy of fighting that war stemmed from the most injudicious, self-centered strategy that has accentuated rather than attenuated extremism, and whose policy has helped extremists spread their tentacles in countries which were not in their radar before the start of the GWOT. The outcome of the US GWOT has been that most of the major participants in the so called coalition against terror have been eventually targeted by the Al Qaeda and Talibans and now lately the IS.

Should Bangladesh feel energised by the news of the two virtual strategic allies to help overcome a problem it is now faced with, whose dimension or depth, apparently, it has not fully fathomed as yet?

Both India and the US have expressed their intention to work together with Dhaka to counter extremism, to be exact religious extremism, in this country. Apparently, such a plan was conceived during the visit of Nisha Biswal, the US

to us without as yet any riposte, it will be worth hearing what the modus of support and help to Bangladesh might be.

This is not the first time that such intentions have been articulated, but previously that was done individually on a one-to-one approach. The new approach has not been officially stated and one is not sure whether the idea has been informally discussed with the government of Bangladesh; and even if

neutralise the violent extremists must stem from the security and strategic planners of the country facing the problem. In this case the strategy should originate from the rationale factoring in of all the related issues by our planners.

Military power is often reckoned as the only means of subduing and neutralising the extremists. If that had been so Operation Iraqi Freedom would have seen Iraq's freedom both from the extremist and US occupation. And Operation Enduring Freedom would have seen an enduring free life for the people of Afghanistan, who at the moment are neither free from the Talibans and Al Qaeda nor the American presence.

It would be nice to know how the two countries wish to help us. India has been at the receiving end of state sponsored terrorism thrust upon it by its western neighbour. But there are other shades of extremism it is facing. The extremists, both religious and political, have established links across the border but our recent experience is different from theirs. We should be under no illusion that Bangladesh has not come under the radar of the IS and a denial mode can only be at the risk of the country's security. As for the US, it must realise that the general opinion of the people at large in this country as well as across the globe is that the US is responsible for much of the flux in the world today. What we suffer is the fallout of those conflicts. The sooner the US resolves those problems, the sooner will reasons for some of the extremist groups to exist cease to be relevant.

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Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, in Dhaka last week when notes must have been exchanged between her and the Indian High Commissioner in Dhaka about the current activity of the extremists demonstrated through the very well planned killing missions, five in one month alone in the month of April. The Indian foreign secretary who is in town will perhaps broach the idea with his Bangladeshi counterpart. One is not sure what our reaction will be, but when we find ourselves in a situation quite unique

the three countries 'are on the same page' with regard to facing extremism, one wonders whether all three have the same take on the matter particularly why that has manifested in the manner it has around the world, and more important, why it has manifested in Bangladesh at all.

One cannot overlook the reality that extremism or terrorism germinates in a particular country for reasons germane to that country, although external factors have influence in motivating extremist actions. Thus any counter action to

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## The price hike is baffling

Strict monitoring needed to protect consumer rights

**W**E are dismayed to see a continuous increase of prices of onions, gram, lentils and other essential food items. It is not new for consumers of Bangladesh to suffer during the month of Ramadan, or any major festival, when a syndicate of hoarders and retailers push up prices of certain fast moving food items for no reason at all. What is really new, however, is that the unholy trend has started almost a month before the holy month of fasting commences.

Any excuse of shortage in supply or stock flies in the face of available data confirmed by the relevant government authorities. The commerce minister has also assured that the current stocks of sugar, lentil, onion, soybean and other essential items would be sufficient to meet the increased demand during Ramadan. Therefore, any arbitrary price hike is totally unjustified, and only for excessive profiteering.

We urge the government to intensify monitoring of the markets by employing special teams led by magistrates, and take stern action against the unscrupulous hoarders and retailers. We also fail to understand why the TCB (Trading Corporation Bangladesh) is operating virtually as a toothless body. The government should strengthen TCB to its full capacity so that it can effectively curb price manipulation through timely intervention. We hope the government's repeated assurances of maintaining stability of food prices during Ramadan would be immediately translated into action.

## LABOUR UNIONS IN THE GARMENTS INDUSTRY

# What can be done?

DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI

**I** hear from union leaders, labour law advocates and "garments owners". Unfortunately, I heard different versions of what's going on in the field. The important point is that while I do not expect them to always speak in unison, the current discord is not healthy for industrial growth and economic progress of Bangladesh. If we are going to achieve middle income status by 2021 and join the club of rich countries by 2041, as Bangladesh Industries Minister Amir Hossain Amu reiterated last week in Boston, it is imperative that: a) we all speak in the same voice in the arena of labour and management relations; and b) the government and industrial leaders must be serious about playing by the rules of the game.

What does the data show? There has been some growth in the number of unions while the number of registered unions has almost doubled in the last three years. While we can take pride in these achievements, last month on the occasion of the third anniversary of the Rana Plaza disaster, I also read headlines such as "Remove obstacles to trade union in RMG industry", which echoes the sentiments of the Human Rights Watch. The picture that emerges is not very encouraging. ILO's Solidarity Center reports that the Directorate of Labour, in 2015 and 2016, rejected the application for registering unions at a fast clip - at a 73 percent rate to be precise. I also watched a webinar where a union organiser at one of the biggest telecom operators in Bangladesh complained that four years have passed since filing of the application, but the registration is still pending. Reports also abound about different tricks used to harass, discourage and disenfranchise the union movement.

While we observed the National Occupational Safety Hazard Day with pride on April 28, progress in various fronts in ensuring workers' safety has been slow. On January 2, 2016, *The Daily Star* reported that "workplace deaths increased last year". In 2015, 93 of the 373 deaths reported by the Safety and Rights Society occurred in garments, plastics and ship breaking industries. While training of the newly recruited Labour Inspectors who will support the



PHOTO: STAR

efforts to improve working conditions and labour safety in Bangladesh is under way, it is still a far cry from effective enforcement. Vigilant workers, including trade unions, can play a vital role in promoting the interest of health and safety. Other areas for improvement are collective bargaining, establishing a public database for factory inspection reports, and healthy industrial relations.

I wonder why the government and its bureaucrats would sit by idly when we are not only being harangued by foreign governments and our trading partners in the EU and the US about lax enforcement of labour laws and safety standards in the RMG sector, but also paying a hefty penalty for them? In a seminar organised by the International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI) at Harvard University last year, Trade Minister of Bangladesh Tofail Ahmed assured the world that Bangladesh had met all the conditions set out in the action plan when our GSP was revoked, and implored US government officials from

the Congress, the Office of Trade Representative, and the State Department to ensure that the country is granted reduced tariffs for its RMG products. Similarly, last week, the country's Industries Minister made a strong case for foreign investment (FDI) in Bangladesh, citing the favourable "investment climate" and "protection of labour rights". These assertions are in sharp contrast to the case filed by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) with the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which among other issues, detailed "how the government ... sought the dissolution of existing unions and stood idly by when factory management have engaged in union-busting in contravention of the Bangladesh Labour Act and criminal law."

For Bangladesh, it is now time to reflect on the road we have ahead of us, and the challenges that we need to face and address in order to develop a healthy workforce on the march to a middle-income status for our country. Let there

be no doubt that we need to have robust trade union activities in the RMG industry, not only to meet the stipulations of our clients, but also to ensure that our workers are engaged and feel a sense of ownership to this surge in industrial growth and rapid development of the country. While it has been a bumpy road till date, things have to move faster - all parties must strive to arrive at a consensus and make quick and healthy unionisation our goal. If Bangladesh wishes to genuinely take pride in its exemplary investment climate and a hospitable FDI environment, our endeavours should target not only infrastructure, ICT sector, and law and order situation, but also make an honest effort to remove various administrative bottlenecks that impede timely reviews of license applications, whether in the setting up of factories or registering of trade unions.

The writer is an economist and author of Economics is Fun: Short Essays for the Masses.

### COMMENTS

**"Maiden Mominul ton boosts Victoria" (May 10, 2016)**  
 Hasan Masud  
 Both Mominul and Anamul Haque Bijoy are world class players and they deserve to be included in the ODI team. But sadly, both of them have been ignored by the coach and the team management.

**"For children with cancer" (May 8, 2016)**  
 Shaiara Zulfiqar  
 Thanks to *The Daily Star* for sharing the extraordinary story of a compassionate soul. Salute to Salma Choudhury.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Working conditions need further improvement

The Rana Plaza accident has at least led to the talk of improvement of workers' rights and working conditions in the garments sector. Even a couple of years ago, garment factories, in most cases, presented a hot and humid environment, resembling prisons, as they often lacked any basic safety consideration,

like emergency exits in case of fire. Most factories also lacked proper ventilation at the enclosed workplaces. Many owners were not concerned about it and we wonder if the same condition continues in many factories even now.  
 Engr. S. A. Mansoor  
 Dhaka

### Lack of digital etiquette

We appreciate the digitisation of ministries, city corporations and other departments by the government. But it is a matter of sorrow that despite the government's sincere efforts, there is a serious lack of etiquette in correspondence via emails. When an email is sent to any government department or to the

relevant officer, there is no acknowledgement of receipt of the mail which is very frustrating. I feel that that an auto reply should be made mandatory. I hope this matter would be addressed by the relevant departments.  
 Ziauddin Ahmed  
 Gulshan -1, Dhaka

### Nepali politics taking wrong turns

The political parties in Nepal seem to be interested only in grabbing power at any cost. Till date the unresolved constitutional issues and redrawing of boundaries have been left to accumulate dust with no serious attempts of resolution; and no significant infrastructure building or economic revival is noticeable. Nepalese politicians need to come together to reach a consensus on how to take their country ahead.  
 Saikat Kumar Basu  
 AB, Canada