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FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

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Turkish envoy called home for consultation

Misconceptions should be addressed

THE Turkish envoy to Dhaka has been called home by the Turkish government for consultations and in one sense, this is normal diplomatic practice. However, we feel that putting into context the manner in which Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan has reacted to Nizami's execution indicates that there is a gap in understanding amongst Turkish policymakers about our liberation war and the war crimes trials in Bangladesh. Indeed, the phrasing of Nizami's character that he had committed "no earthly sins" could not be further from the truth as far as his activities during our liberation war is concerned. Indeed, the Turks have been since 2012 been mistakenly likening Nizami to an Islamic scholar. We would like to point out that Bangladesh has a rich Islamic culture and we are very proud of it.

However we are forced to say that Turkey's understanding of our war of liberation is flawed. And Mr. Erdogan's recent statement and his predecessor Mr. Abdullah Gul's request to the Bangladeshi government in 2012 urging it not to pursue the trial of war criminals has put a strain on bilateral relations. As a friendly nation Turkey is expected to understand the fundamental spirit of our independence struggle and show due respect to it. But we are sorry to see Turkey taking sides with the convicted war criminals which essentially is a crime against humanity and these people have been convicted through the highest courts of the law and there should be universal condemnation of such actions and such people. It is unfortunate to see that the Turkish government has been lodging protest since 2012 to stop the trials, and it is now time for our government make efforts to clarify to their Turkish counterpart the historical facts of what these war criminals did in 1971 to avoid any further diplomatic rifts.

Stalled Karnaphuli dredging project

Deplorable waste of public money

WE are disappointed to see that the dredging project of the Karnaphuli River, a lifeline for Chittagong city and the port, has been stalled for more than three years. Due to silt deposition the river is gradually losing navigability that has serious impact on smooth movement of vessels.

The Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) had hired Malaysian Maritime and Dredging Corporation (MMDC) in 2011 for dredging the riverbed. The company failed to complete the work within the stipulated time. But the CPA could not scrap the deal as the High Court's put a stay order on it following a writ petition filed by MMDC. And the project remains stuck there. Before the contractor left in 2013, 80% of the project was completed and the company took Tk.166 crore from the Tk. 229.54-crore project. At present, a large part of the project area has silted up again which requires new dredging.

The project has proved to be a complete waste of public money. We see similar pictures in various government projects where chronic delay in project completion results in unacceptable cost escalation besides causing public sufferings. It clearly shows the weak governance mechanism in government projects. It also erodes public confidence on the government's efficiency. In this case, we urge the government to bring an end of this limbo and get the dredging completed within the earliest possible time.

MOHAMMAD SIRAJUL ISLAM

MUCH debate has been brewing in the media and in political forums about the on-going Union Parishad (UP) elections. The primary concerns for many have been the uncontested victories of a number of UP chairmen, allegations of electoral irregularities and a rise in the incidence of violence during the election. The Election Commission (EC) has planned elections in 4,275 UPs out of 4,546 in six phases within this year. The first four phases of elections were held from March 22 to May 7, 2016. In these phases, 151 chairmen in 2,673 UPs (i.e. 6 percent) were elected unopposed, and at least 65 people were killed. The situation was vastly different during the first phase of UP elections in 2011. Aside from a few sporadic cases of violence, no deaths were reported during the six days in which the elections took place. Further, no chairman was elected unopposed, and the overall election process was reported to be peaceful and acceptable. The most significant difference between the 2011 and 2016 UP elections is the party-based system, in which the candidates are nominated by the political parties, and use their respective party's symbol to contest the election. In previous elections, parties backed their candidates only informally, while aspiring candidates freely filed nominations.

Out of the 2,540, UPs for which results have been declared unofficially, in this year's election, the chairman candidates nominated by Bangladesh Awami League (AL) won 1,777 UPs, while Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)'s candidates succeeded in 235 UPs. In contrast, AL-backed candidates secured 2,101 chairman posts out of 4,298 UPs, while the BNP-endorsed candidates won 1,618 posts held in the polls of 2011. This shows that BNP's success nose-dived from 38 percent in 2011 to 9 percent in 2016, whereas AL's success rate increased sharply from 49 percent in 2011 to 70 percent in 2016.

The electoral results would be above controversy if independent observers assessed the elections as fair and peaceful. Media accounts, however, have so far suggested that there were many instances of intimidation, clashes between party members, storming of polling stations



Ballot boxes and torn up ballots after 15 to 20 people stormed the Narayanpasha Primary School polling station in Kanakdia of Patuakhali and took five boxes.

PHOTO: STAR/ BANGLAR CHOKH

and ballot stuffing in the recent UP elections. There may be many unwarranted consequences of election results that are not perceived to be free and fair: (i) The chairmen may not be effective in exercising their responsibilities. Instead they may feel greater loyalty towards the nominating party, thus, falling short of expectations of the electorate; (ii) Electoral manipulation and violence may raise the risks of lowering voter participation and increasing gender imbalance in the number of contestants; (iii) The weaknesses in conducting credible, transparent and inclusive elections may weaken the confidence of the international community in the country's democratic institutions, undermining its image; (iv) Political parties themselves run the risk of greater intra party conflict and factionalisation, thus undermining their unity, which may, over the long run, become irreversible. Unless these risks are

addressed or managed prudently, the political party as an institution may suffer; (v) Arguably, the most noticeable difference in the ongoing UP elections, relative to the past, concerns an erosion in the country's capacity to hold free and fair elections – an area in which considerable progress had been made.

The country needs to regain the capacity to conduct elections with minimal disruption. A strong Election Commission backed by matching law enforcement focused on their mission, does the job effectively in neighbouring India, for example. Secondly, unbiased, independent observation of elections provides the quality of assurance in the conduct of local and national elections. However, election monitoring organisations and observers must be restricted from deviating from the code of conduct stipulated for them. Finally, political parties have a responsibility to strengthen the electoral system and

evolve its institutions by setting aside individual or partisan preferences.

It is said that liberal democracy cannot work without a political party system, but equally, the system cannot sustain without a competitive electoral system which allows the people to choose their representatives freely. Bickers and Williams (2001) argued for appropriate structuring of rules, incentives, and constraints to resolve tensions between 'narrow' and national interests, not uncommon in democracies, and to avoid long run undesirable effects on democratic institutions. Bangladesh has travelled a long way on the road to democracy. It must now work towards a political consensus on accelerating the pace of building the institutions that underpin it.

The writer is a Researcher at BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), BRAC University. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the institution to which he is affiliated.

Drawing the line

FARAH GHUZNAVI

PARENTING is one of the hardest jobs in the world – that is, when someone is planning to do it right. It is a labour-intensive job, and it incorporates aspects of many other jobs, including teacher and nurse and coach and cheerleader, to name just a few. And as technology advances, it brings new implications in terms of parenting responsibilities.

Whether we are speaking of tablets, iPads, or mobile phones, handheld devices are becoming increasingly familiar to the children of today. In a way, they are a natural fit. The technology is designed to be user-friendly, and children have both an intuitive sense of how to use them, and a lack of inhibition. Unlike adults, who worry about looking foolish if they make a mistake. More than one father has proudly told me how his child under five uses the touchscreen on his tablet with the greatest confidence.

I do understand parents' desire for their children to keep up with others in the increasingly competitive and tech-savvy world in which we operate. But in allowing children access to handheld devices, there are several things that adults need to keep in mind. Not least the fact that a leading occupational therapist in the US recently wrote an article in the Huffington Post explaining why children below the age of 12 years should not be given access to handheld devices.

I can hear a collective groan going up at the prospect of such a ban. And I know that many will argue that allowing kids to use mobile phones to play games, or tablets to download things, is a good way of keeping them occupied for long periods of time, (particularly in Dhaka's



ubiquitous traffic jams). To such arguments, I would humbly suggest that anybody who wants to prioritize the welfare of a child should instead inculcate in them the habit of reading. Not only will this keep them happily entertained for long periods of time, it will also help them learn more about the world around them, and improve their reading speed and concentration. As an

added bonus, the latter is likely to be helpful for them in their studies as well.

Here are a couple of things to keep in mind before allowing children to use handheld devices, especially for any length of time. Firstly, there can be implications for their health. Not only does staring at a computer screen encourage sedentary behaviour and over-stimulate children – thereby contributing

to obesity and concentration problems during school hours, respectively – it can also lead to repetitive strain injury and related pain issues in the long term. And the long term isn't as distant as you might think! For example, I spoke to a physiotherapist who has had to treat several children for inflammation in their thumbs due to gaming. It now requires a daily application of ice to the hands in order to reduce the pain.

To make matters worse, and this brings me to my second point, as most adults who use computers a lot will admit, technology is addictive. As a result, despite the pain, the children go on playing these games. But such addictions also impact their behaviour. A friend of mine admits that before her ten-year old twins go to bed, the parents have to do a "pat down" to make sure there are no hidden mobile phones or tablets that they are trying to sneak into their bedroom. Often, one of the boys will come out after bedtime, allegedly for a drink of water or to use the bathroom, and will later be found to have smuggled in one of the devices in order to continue playing.

So while many people think that it is cute to see how good children are at handling technology, it is worth also finding out how it impacts their health and behavior. Given how some adults behave with Facebook, it shouldn't be difficult to understand why a child would get addicted to technology. I would like to point out the books, on the other hand – however addictive – involve none of these nasty side effects...!

Farah Ghuznavi is the author of Fragments of Riversong (2013) and editor of Lifelines (2012). Writer in Residence with Commonwealth Writers, her work has been published in Asia, Europe and N. America.

COMMENTS

"His final moments"

(May 11, 2016)

Udayan Dhar

Though I am against capital punishment, I have no sympathy for cases like these.

Bishonno Akash

People like him deserve this fate. We have no mercy for war criminals.

"Lethal, last bite of losers"

(May 11, 2016)

Toma

This man had tried to cripple our country intellectually and that's why he let his militias loose on us to implement his 'killing' mission. In fact, he deserves worse than the death sentence.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Australia relaxed ban on freights from Bangladesh

It's good to learn that Australia has relaxed the ban on freight from Bangladesh, allowing Bangladeshi freights to be re-screened in a third country before reaching Australia. It is sincerely hoped that the United Kingdom will also withdraw the ban on direct cargo flight from Bangladesh to UK, following the graduation of the cargo security system at

Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport.

Meanwhile, it is felt that the concerned countries may consider providing some special privileges to flights carrying perishable agricultural items, including vegetables and fishes from Bangladesh, with a view to protecting her agricultural export business. In this connection, the

international development and donor agencies working in the agricultural sector in Bangladesh may undertake some projects to strengthen the export facilities of agricultural produces, particularly vegetables, fruits and flowers.

Professor M Zahidul Haque
Department of Agricultural Extension & Information System, SAU, Dhaka

"Call on Myanmar, Bangladesh, India to conserve hilsa"

Apropos to the news "Call on Myanmar, Bangladesh, India to conserve hilsa" (TDS, May 5, 2016), it is important to mention that not only hilsa but the regional forests and wildlife conservation would also get a boost if both SAARC and ASEAN member nations come together for a joint conservation initiative. Both South and South East Asia are rich in biodiversity, and

adjoining nations need cooperation from one another to conserve natural resources. Such an initiative between the member nations can effectively prevent poaching, wildlife trade, trafficking and underground wildlife markets, which continue to operate in the region.

Saikat Kumar Basu
Lethbridge, AB, Canada