

Government walking a tightrope

FOUNDER EDITOR
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Fire safety in shopping malls

Remove lacunae

WE are happy to note that fire fighters had successfully doused the massive fire that broke out on Sunday in the Bashundhara shopping mall without any casualty. The evacuation plan and crowd management during the incident have also been impressive. However it has left us worried, as it is a reminder of the extent to which fire can pose threat to the lives and property of the ordinary people when living in or frequenting high rise buildings.

There is an underlying apprehension about fire safety in large establishments, especially in the shopping malls. This is especially true for the large structures that have mushroomed without adequate safety mechanism. A good number of them remain congested at the entrance and exit as it is, making them vulnerable to stampedes and other fatalities in case of any eventualities. More susceptible are large open malls like the New Market, Gausia Market and Bangabazar, where there is no fire fighting equipment. Also their presence in a heavy traffic-prone area and the lack of source of water / fire hydrants in the immediate vicinity make fire fighting more troublesome.

It is essential that the lacunas are addressed immediately so as to minimise the likely casualties and risk to life. The National Building Code, which sets certain parameters for fire safety, has to be strictly enforced. RAJUK must take the lead in conducting an audit of errant shopping malls and enforce the code with remedial measures. On top of it all, the Fire Service should focus on conducting fire drills at a regular interval to inform people and the shop owners about appropriate fire drills. Fire safety cannot be allowed to take a backseat.

Shaping a bright future

Leaders of tomorrow need to be cultivated today

AT the fourth Youth Leadership Summit held recently in Bangladesh, dignitaries unanimously concurred that youths were key to achieving the new United Nations sustainable development goals and shaping a bright future. The belief was reiterated by experts at a roundtable discussion and is supported by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics which estimates nearly 45 percent of Bangladesh's population to be 15-29 years of age.

Whereas demographics clearly show that the changes of tomorrow will be accomplished by the youths of today, what they also show is the need now to mould them to face that challenge. And while we as a nation have repeatedly emphasised that point verbally, what and how much have we done to shepherd our youths down the right path of success? We do have a Ministry of Youth and Sports dedicated to ensuring the future hopes of our nation, but how much are we investing in them?

By the look of things, it is evident that we must do more. The authorities must devise comprehensive strategies to provide better training, education and equipment to youths equally across the board. Society too has a role to play in guiding youths through the likely challenges and must recognise the crucial role of the family in developing young people with strong characters also.

Overall, all of these factors should, instead of supplanting each other, supplement each other, in creating strong young leaders and peoples who, with our assistance, can successfully bear the light of our future hopes and sculpt a future for our nation and world to eagerly look forward to.



SYED MANSUR
HASHIM

THE people of Bangladesh have always been religious and yet very tolerant and inclusive. The extremism we are witnessing today is a much more recent

phenomenon. Indeed, we can trace it back to roughly the last one and half decades when the first signs of organised religious extremism started manifesting itself in the political landscape. The debate is still on as to the identification and roots of those who committed the attack on July 1 on the Holi Artisan bakery; with the government claiming them to be purely home-grown terrorists with no foreign links, while foreign media state that some of these groups owe allegiance to foreign entities like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. However, what we are experiencing today has much to do with the fight between secularists and religious extremists and the attack on the Gulshan bakery merely brought to the fore, the deep ideological divides that fracture the political landscape of the country.

The Shahbagh movement saw the birth of a new young voice of the secular forces and pro-liberation elements in support of the war crimes trial. But their demand of nothing short of death penalties for the accused, the confiscation by the State of all properties and business interests owned directly (or indirectly) by JI took many by surprise. However this worked towards the government's advantage. A backlash came in early February 2013 with the assassination of blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider who was a known figure in the Shahbagh movement. Indeed, this started off a long line of assassinations of writers, bloggers and freethinkers. The

State failed to respond decisively at the time. Because it had a bigger problem at hand with the appearance of a little known group known as Hefazat-e-Islami that marched on Dhaka with a congregation of some 100,000 people. The leadership of the group put forth a 13-point demand that included amongst others, the quashing of the Shahbagh movement. Hefazat-e-Islami was chased out of Dhaka. However, in time the night vigils at Shahbagh that had become the rallying point for people supporting the war crimes tribunal was effectively broken up and allowed to dissipate.

The Hefazat incident was a turning point which effectively showed that the

killed many such writers and went after publishers too. What was perhaps not expected was the slow response from the government in apprehending the killers. Instead the secularists and the free thinkers that Hefazat wanted silenced because they were deemed to be "anti-Islam", were asked to show restraint in their writings that were deemed to be hurtful of religious sentiments. It was a major setback for not only those who had been witness to the war of liberation but the generations of people who had come after '71 and were imbued with their Bangali identity. The Shahbagh movement being decimated, the State found itself between a rock and a hard

development is the discovery of bomb making material and knowhow amongst some of those arrested. The advent of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) point to a serious escalation in terrorist plans and begs the question: Are our forces equipped to combat this threat, and more importantly are they trained to fight this type of warfare?

Placating the militants will not help; there cannot be any deal with extremists because of the simple fact that they believe that ideas like democracy is blasphemy. The war crimes trial may have contributed to some of the events we see unfolding, but definitely it was not the main cause, which is rooted in history of the Middle East and western machinations. The fight against terror requires a strong response. Awami League needs to reach out to the huge segment of the population that is not part of the party that includes the intelligentsia, professionals and civic society amongst others.

The other reality is that the BNP, being the second largest party in Bangladesh cannot be left out of the process if the government is serious about launching an all-out anti extremism drive. However, for that to become remotely possible BNP has to sever its links with JI. The formal electoral alliance between these two parties goes back to the national elections in 2001 which the AL lost and JI for the first time in its history, had seats in the BNP-led coalition cabinet. Precisely what political dividends does BNP hope to gain today through its association with a party that is widely regarded by the majority of the electorate as having participated in the killings of millions during the war of independence and where some of the most violent jihadi groups active today on Bangladeshi soil are offshoots of JI? The threat posed by jihadists is real and pragmatism dictates a new chapter in politics be written.

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

The information being gleaned from suspects and their laptops is that there is external finance being funnelled in through informal channels such as hundi. But the most worrying development is the discovery of bomb making material and knowhow amongst some of those arrested.

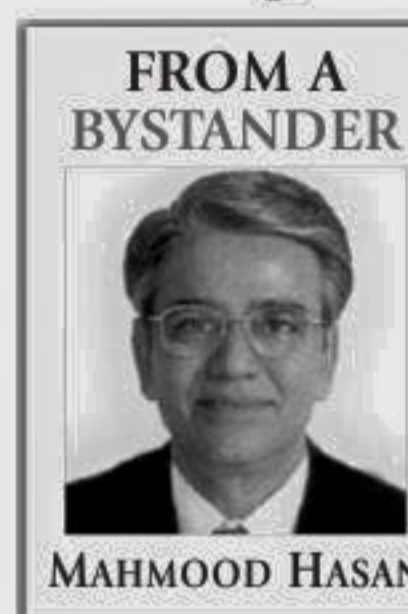
State could be challenged and that secularists were not as powerful as had been thought to be. Chasing Hefazat out of Dhaka was the only option for the government as the group had squatted down in the middle of the business district with some 100,000 people with the world watching. But, the decision to placate Hefazat by giving in to their demands on the question of the Shahbagh movement proved costly. Secularists were flabbergasted when the State failed to go after the murderers of the so-called "atheist bloggers" who were being picked off one by one with impunity. Indeed, in the following months and years, religious extremists

place, unable to please either the secularist camp or the increasingly belligerent extremists who were and remain bent on not just the removal of the government, but to wipe out the secularist nature of the State.

It is in this backdrop that Bangladesh today faces a major terrorist problem. We are learning about new outfits every day and operatives are being caught with sophisticated weaponry. What is disturbing is that foreign nationals are also being nabbed. The information being gleaned from suspects and their laptops is that there is external finance being funnelled in through informal channels such as hundi. But the most worrying

THAILAND

Referendum, a new Constitution and bombs



MAHMOOD HASAN

FROM A BYSTANDER WHEN the "Land of Smiles" was celebrating Queen Sirikit's 84th birthday on August 11, 2016, eleven bombs went off in five popular tourist towns in southern

Thailand, killing four locals and injuring dozens, including foreign tourists. The coordinated blasts shocked the nation and panicked tourists ran for cover. Police detained several people, though no one claimed responsibility for the attacks.

Police seemingly downplayed the incident, ruling out the involvement of international terrorists or Muslim separatists. Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-Ocha (former army chief) hinted that it was the work of political opponents to undermine the military government. Incidentally, on August 7, Thailand went for a referendum on the new military-drafted Constitution, which was opposed by several political parties, including the dominant Democrat Party and Pheu Thai Party.

In the past 84 years, i.e. since 1932, when absolute monarchy was abolished, the country had 19 coups and 19 constitutions. The referendum passed the 20th Charter with 61 percent votes, on a turnout of 59 percent. The new constitution, having 279 Articles, was drafted by a non-civilian committee appointed by the junta, known as the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO).

The junta had actually made all the arrangements to obtain a "yes" vote in the referendum. The Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) is said to have distributed one million copies of the new Charter for Thailand's 40 million voters. There was no open debate about the provisions of the Constitution. The Referendum Act, which provided for up to ten years in jail, actually dissuaded the media from making any criticism of the Constitution. Yet, dozens of people and some journalists were detained and a TV channel banned for supporting the



Thai rescue workers attend to an injured victim after a bomb exploded in Hua Hin on August 12.

PHOTO: AFP

ousted Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. No political meeting or rallies were allowed. However, a summary of the Constitution was released to the media. A majority of Thais was not really expected to understand the ramifications of the provisions of the new Constitution. Clearly, people voted in the affirmative in favour of the junta-established stability.

Certain provisions of the new Constitution have come under severe criticism from the political parties. Most importantly – (i) NCPO shall appoint (not elect) 250 members of the Senate now called National Legislative Assembly (NLA). (ii) Creation of 23-member "National Strategic Reform and Reconciliation Committee" (NSRRC) within the NLA, in which chiefs of the army, navy, air force and national police will be automatic members and shall have executive and legislative powers. NSRRC is supposed to steer the yet-to-be-defined reform process. (iii) The NLA can pass a no-confidence motion against an elected government. (iv) The NLA can select a Prime Minister who is not necessarily elected or even a politician – it can choose even a serving or retired military officer. (v) The

NCPO can also issue emergency decrees without parliament's consent – meaning the military will not only control the NLA but also extend its role in the next government. (vi) Politicians charged with "corruption" will be barred from elections – i.e. former PMs Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra of Pheu Thai party cannot run for parliament seats.

The new Charter ostensibly has several aspects – it is an anti-corruption mechanism, and strives to ensure national security as well as stability in the Thai economy, which is has not been doing well recently. The military wants to "reset" the political order of Thailand. Political parties, therefore, will have to learn to adjust and probably realign to the new fundamental law of the land.

The referendum on the new draft gives the junta pseudo legitimacy that it has been seeking since overthrowing the elected government in May 2014. The "yes" vote of 61 percent also gives legality to the new Constitution. The military will now have a say in almost every aspect of functioning of the next elected government.

There is an interesting similarity between the military-led governments in Thailand and neighbouring Myanmar. The junta in Myanmar called itself State

Peace and Development Council (SPDC); in Thailand the military is known as the National Council for Peace and Order. Parliaments of both countries have unelected military members with enormous legislative powers.

Indeed, the military in both Myanmar and Thailand have become political parties. Instead of taking orders from elected people's representatives, the generals in both these countries are giving orders to the elected representatives. The Constitutions of both Thailand and Myanmar have formalised the role of the military in politics, thereby leading to a travesty of democracy.

Thai politicians in high positions have been frequently accused of massive corruption, which had led to serious political conflicts in the past. The street battles fought between the "red shirts" and "yellow shirts" in 2010 had actually forced the military to intervene. Clearly, Thai politicians have failed democracy. It is interesting to note that Thai politics is stuck in a circular turnstile – party democracy and military rule taking turns in holding state power.

But critics and human rights organisations have strongly criticised the new Constitution for its anti-democratic provisions. The recent bombings clearly seem to be a loud protest against the undemocratic structure of the new Constitution. Though Thailand's political situation remains frayed, the country's socio-religious stability emanates from the revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej (88), the ageing monarch, who has endorsed the new Constitution.

The process to return to elected government has been delayed, as the now defunct National Reform Council rejected the earlier draft Constitution in September 2015. After obtaining people's verdict through this referendum, Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-Ocha said the next general election in Thailand will be held in 2017. The new Constitution has definitely strengthened the military's position in Thai politics. One wonders whether Prayuth Chan-Ocha will lead the next elected government.

The writer is former Ambassador and Secretary.

COMMENTS

"Justice in long wait"

(August 21, 2016)

Akteruzzaman Chowdhury

To bring an end to terrorism, we need to find its root first.

Amina

It's good to learn that the court may deliver the verdict at the end of this year.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Socialisation and Recreation: the perspective of a person with disability

You may call us differently-abled, persons with disability, specially challenged, or physically challenged. Whatever name you use, at the end of the day we are all human. We have dreams and hopes; we have the capacity to do something. People with disabilities continue to prove themselves on many fronts. We are students at Dhaka University, we are lawyers, we hold various professional jobs. And yet in Bangladesh, people with disabilities are treated like a burden on the society. Getting the basic rights like healthcare and proper education is very tough for us. We hardly even dare to think of asking for opportunities for

recreation and socialization! People may wonder why we would need such opportunities, but as a person with a disability I assure you that recreation and socialisation are essential for our wellbeing and they are our rights as citizens of this country.

When I became blind I was only eight years old. From then on I hardly visited a park. Now that I have grown up, I want to roam around alone, but it is not possible because in Dhaka city most of the parks do not have the facilities or accessibility for people with disabilities. Most of the park gates are not accessible. A wheelchair cannot

go through these gates because they are specially built to stop motorcycles. How ridiculous it is that to stop a few erratic and irrational persons who fail to understand that motorbikes do not belong in parks, we are depriving members of the disabled community from having easy access to parks. Even if we can get in, how friendly are the parks once we are inside? There are no facilities like tactile walkways, wide smooth paths without steps for wheelchair users, or special swings for those with autism.

We want to see parks where people with disabilities can roam around, experience

and enjoy the park, without sacrificing their freedom and without requiring the help of others. By making our parks – including reaching the park and entering it – accessible, not only people with disabilities will benefit but also our larger society. A more diverse society is a better society. People have much to learn from those different from themselves, and the opportunity to interact with people who face special challenges will help others to gain perspective on the problems they themselves face. When people learn that those with disabilities are, after all, just like themselves, they will also be more

accepting of our role in society which will make life easier for all of us.

One small change can make a big difference in the society. Make an accessible park and very soon you will see the differences. When small children roam around and share space with people with disabilities, then I am sure they will realize what the real meaning of life is. I hope people will understand the importance of accessible parks and make necessary renovation to make our existing parks accessible and pleasurable for all.
Rifat Pasha
On e-mail