

Unabated persecution of Rohingyas

Issuing statements is not enough

In the latest statement by the United Nations, the world body has castigated the Myanmar government, particularly its leader Suu Kyi for hiding behind subterfuge and helping perpetuate the regime of persecution on the Rohingya minority. What one gets to know of the horrendous goings-on in Rakhine State are from reports trickling down from refugees fleeing the oppression because no foreign media or UN agencies are allowed in that area.

It is shocking to see the world community doing nothing more than issuing statements on the issue when what is needed is concrete and substantive action that would persuade the regime in Naypyidaw that ethnic cleansing of a religious minority shall not go unpunished, that a political solution is indispensable to resolve the matter that has been exacerbated by Myanmar's policy of excluding and disenfranchising the Rohingyas.

Contrary to what Suu Kyi says, the situation is not under control, and her saying so despite the reality on ground is rather shocking. On the other hand, José Ramos-Horta, former Timorese president, Nobel laureate, and special UN envoy, sees in the situation in Rakhine the hallmarks of past tragedies like that of Bosnia, Darfur, Kosovo and Rwanda.

Suu Kyi's position on the issue is an encouragement to the military to carry on with the rape, plunder and torture of the Rohingyas. Setting up a commission under a military man is merely a ploy on her part to bide her time and skirt the issue. Enough words have been dispensed. The international community must bring to bear on the Myanmar regime direct pressure to compel it to desist from the violence it is perpetrating on the Rohingyas.

Suspension of Aleppo evacuation

Human misery continues

It is a matter of grave concern that the evacuation of the last opposition-held areas of the Syrian city of Aleppo was suspended only a day after it had started, leaving thousands of Syrians trapped and uncertain of their fate. The operation to remove fighters and civilians which began on Thursday under a deal brokered by Russia and Turkey came to a halt on Friday amid recriminations from all sides. The government blamed the rebels for violating the terms of the accord by trying to smuggle heavy weapons and hostages from east Aleppo while the latter accused the pro-government Shiites of opening fire on a convoy carrying evacuees from east Aleppo and robbing them. Syrian military sources deny the accusation.

The Syrian conflict has drawn in major global powers, supporting and opposing President Bashar al-Assad and the myriad rebel groups ranged against him. But everyone seems to have forgotten the human cost of the war that has seen more than 300,000 people killed, over half the population displaced, with millions becoming refugees. Against this grim backdrop, an advance by the Syrian army and its allies regained control over most of the territory in Aleppo in a matter of weeks, raising expectations that this would give some respite to Syrians from the suffering. But we are deeply concerned to note that the opposite has happened with reports of opposition forces being killed and now the evacuation being stalled.

Aleppo continues to bleed while international politics fails to come to a consensus on how to end the stasis in Syria. It is the greatest humanitarian crisis of our time. All stakeholders should hold talks to bring an end to the human misery in Aleppo.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedadlystar.net

Let Syrian civilians be free!

Syria has turned into the greatest catastrophe of our time. Over the past five years, Syrian victims have been subjected to chemical and gas attacks, starvation, air strikes, barrel bombs, and so on. According to the UN, up to 400,000 people have been killed since the conflict began in March 2011, and more than half the population has been displaced. 15,948 children and 10,540 women have been killed, as per reports of Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR). Aleppo has been a key battleground in the war between forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad and rebels who want to overthrow him. Millions of Syrians have fled abroad in search of better conditions as almost 275,000 people remain trapped. Eastern Aleppo is running out of food, electricity and pure water. Children affected by the Syrian conflict are at risk of malnourishment, diseases and abuse, and are forced to drop out of school.

Syrian civilians no longer believe in the UN or any international community. They are simply desperate for freedom. What will it take for the East and the West, for the global community at large, to show an ounce of humanity to these people?

Selim Reza Mridha
Department of Anthropology
Chittagong University

What the 'Do Not Want to Reveal' response actually revealed



ALI RIAZ

DEMOCRACY International (DI) has recently published its latest Bangladesh Opinion poll. A quick look at the results provides good news for the ruling party. The opinion about the direction of the country is a case in point. However, the most comforting news for the ruling Bangladesh Awami League (AL) is that support for its arch-rival seems to have completely withered away. In a predictable response, the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) spokesperson rejected the poll results.

The survey conducted in late October (with a sample of 1,453 citizens) has given a clear thumbs up to the present regime ('Key Findings: Bangladesh Computer Assisted Telephone Survey October 2016', Democracy International). A staggering 70 percent of the respondents feel that the country is moving in the right direction, a dramatic turnaround from April 2013 when only 14 percent were so optimistic. Earlier surveys were conducted by DI in April 2013, July 2013, January 2014, January 2015, and July 2015. As for the direction of the country, the percentages of optimistic populations were 14, 37, 29, 53 and 58 percent respectively. Evidently, the positive trend began in January 2015 and is holding, according to the latest poll.

The number that has raised eyebrows of many people on the one hand, and provided cause for celebration among the ruling party supporters on the other, is the infinitesimal support for the main opposition party, the BNP. The survey result shows that the ruling AL has the support of 38 percent of respondents while the BNP has the backing of only five percent, the lowest ever share of popular support in any opinion poll. This should be of great comfort to the AL, for it has been questioning the *bona fide* of the BNP for the past years, put the BNP leadership under enormous pressure and has subjected the party activists to harassment. These, in conjunction with the strategic mistakes of the leadership, have put the BNP in disarray. As such, the ruling party, taking

the survey at face value, may conclude that its tactics to decimate the opposition are succeeding.

The reason that the number has raised some eyebrows is that, if true, this represents a tectonic shift in Bangladeshi politics. For decades Bangladeshi politics has been characterised by a two-party system. The BNP had 35 percent support according to the DI survey in October 2014. The number was quite consistent with its earlier survey of January 2014. Immediately after the controversial election boycotted by the opposition parties including the BNP, the DI survey asked respondents, "If the election of January 5 was fully participatory, which

away? Perhaps we can find the answer if we look elsewhere.

The poll shows that 35 percent of respondents didn't want to reveal who they would have voted for if the election was held today. The number is astounding since almost two years ago, in December 2014, the number was only five percent. Besides, 14 percent in 2016 said they 'Don't Know' compared to only one percent in 2014. Intuitively, we can say that the BNP supporters have moved to the 'Don't Want to Reveal' column. But of course we cannot say that with certainty. At best we can only suggest that they are the 'secret BNP voters' akin to the 'hidden Trump voters' who eluded pollsters in the recent U.S. presidential

While the ruling party may take comfort in the 'diminishing support' for the opposition BNP, there is a message for it too: its support hasn't increased but instead declined between January 2015 and October 2016. A simple majority of the respondents who didn't reveal their preference can sway the result if a free and fair election is held.

political party would you vote for?" The support for BNP was 35.1 percent. Therefore, unless we accept this as one of the outlier surveys, which is not unusual in the realm of opinion polls, we have to conclude that in less than two years the BNP has lost almost all of its support.

A pertinent question then is, where did the BNP supporters go?

The support for the AL, as per the recent survey, is 38 percent, the exact share it had in October 2014. But in the January 2014 poll, 42.7 percent of respondents said they would have voted for the AL. These results show that between January and October of 2014, the AL lost about 4 percent support. The variation is quite reasonable. As for the BNP supporters, have they just withered

election. I must acknowledge that this is sheer speculation and must caution that the BNP shouldn't consider it as a 'consolation trophy.' Can these respondents be the supporters of the Bangladesh Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), the Jatiya Party (JP) or the AL? Given that the JI is facing an adverse situation it is a plausible explanation, but lest we forget, the JI has lost only one percentage point between these two surveys. The likelihood of them being the supporters of the JP or the AL is slim to none, because both are at the helm of power and neither made any substantial loss in their support base – the JP has lost three percentage points while the AL has maintained its base solidly.

Speculations aside, it is my understanding that the 'Don't Want to

Reveal' category is quite revealing. It is not revealing their choice of a party but of the prevailing situation in the country. That more than one third of respondents do not want to reveal their preference between legitimate constitutional political parties in a country which claims it to be democratic and insists that dissent is tolerated, is a message in itself. One doesn't have to read between the lines here. It is loud and clear that a sense of fear is prevailing which precludes citizens from expressing their opinions. Similar results were found in a survey conducted by the Asia Foundation between October and November of 2015 ('Bangladesh's Democracy: According to its People', Asia Foundation, March 2016). It reported that "a third of respondents did not feel free to express their political opinions or were unsure." The DI survey informed us that 38 percent of respondents have said that most people in the area where they live do not feel free to express their political opinions. The response to a similar question in the 2015 Asia Foundation survey revealed that 30 percent of the respondents said people in their locality felt the same way. The Asia Foundation survey summarised the prevailing atmosphere saying, "Freedom of speech has (sic) declined significantly since 2006."

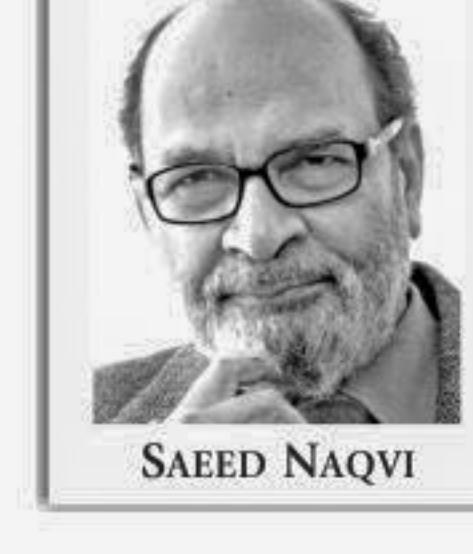
While the ruling party may take comfort in the 'diminishing support' for the opposition BNP, there is a message for it too: its support hasn't increased but instead declined between January 2015 and October 2016. A simple majority of the respondents who didn't reveal their preference can sway the result if a free and fair election is held.

(Postscript: The latest DI survey used Computer Assisted Telephone Survey System or CATSS. Randomly generated mobile phone numbers were used as a sampling frame. Discussion on the sampling method is a matter of different discussion).

The writer is Professor and Chair of the Department of Politics and Government at Illinois State University, USA. His recent publication is titled *Bangladesh: A Political History Since Independence* (London: I B Tauris).

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How authentic is the western media?



SAEED NAQVI

SINCE I had been to the region some time ago, a school invited me for a talk on Syria, particularly Aleppo, and why Assad was killing his own people.

"This is not true," I said. "Why do you have this impression?"

"Because this is what we read in our newspapers," one said.

"Even in the Hindi newspapers which my grandfather reads," chipped in another.

Teachers were worse. Their minds were more firmly made up. They had seen it all on TV, and next day's newspapers confirmed what they saw at night.

How does one cope with this challenge? I agree that world affairs are not the staple in hundreds of thousands of higher secondary schools in India. But the occupation of Afghanistan, Iraq, war in Syria, bombing of Gaza, the post-Qaddafi mayhem in Libya, Ukraine, Trump's shock victory, Europe bolting from the stable of liberalism, are all events that must, willy-nilly, come into everyone's focus, even in schools, the better ones certainly. And they will all come through western filters. And on all these issues, a large segment of the western media has been woefully misleading. I shall never tire of repeating myself: now is the time for an Indian, global, multimedia network.

The students I addressed were 17 and 18 years old. Their worldview was being shaped by what they watched on TV and read in newspapers. Since there has never been an Indian journalist, let alone an Indian news bureau, in any of the live news theatres listed above, we are witness to an entire generation in the thrall of the only sources they have for information on global events.

In fact, the worldview on show in that school hall is not a casual inclination towards a way of looking at the world. It has solidified over generations.

The new TV channels, creatures of globalisation, were brazenly imitative of the way the western media covered the war on terror. As I have said earlier, western coverage created a distance between nations – Western and Muslim. Indian coverage distanced 180 million Muslims with a distinct nuance on the war on terror. It strengthened majoritarianism.



Upto the 90s, BBC World Service News and Reuters were the routine sources of world news. The hegemonic embrace of the global media began in 1991 when Peter Arnett of the CNN inaugurated the new, invasive age of the global TV. He beamed live images of Operation Desert Storm in February of that year. This was the first time that a war was brought into our drawing rooms.

This was also the first time when the BBC was beaten by cousins from across the Atlantic. I still remember John Simpson driving around Baghdad with his satellite telephone for BBC World Radio. BBC World Service TV was born later.

The televised coverage of western triumphalism divided the world into two hostile audiences – the victorious West and a humiliated Muslim world. This was the base on which hostilities simmered. 9/11 detonated an almighty explosion – the war on terror, which ostensibly brought the West into conflict with many Muslim societies on varying perceptions of terrorism.

Parents of those I was addressing in the school had been fed on this media diet for its understanding of world affairs.

An important fact is often overlooked. Operation Desert Storm and the subsequent Information Order coincided with new economic policies bringing India in line with globalisation, then on a gallop. The World Is Flat, declared Thomas Friedman in his bestselling book. He was treated like a local hero by Bengaluru's IT pundits.

The neoliberal economic policies rapidly augmented the ranks of the Maruti-plus middle class. To cater to the burgeoning consumerism this class brought in its wake, came the mushroom growth of electronic media.

Both the media and the new middle class found themselves out of sync with another reality. The country was gripped by unprecedented social disharmony after

the Babri Masjid was pulled down by BJP volunteers on December 6, 1992. This was the period when Manmohan Singh, as Prime Minister, PV Narasimha Rao's Finance Minister, was promoting new economic policies.

The new middle class was looking at the stars. A bonanza was writ on the horizon. He was impatient with the conflation in his mind of the war on terror and social disharmony in India. The Muslim was spoiling the game.

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I am not for a moment suggesting that all the western media dissembles. They do, however, see the world from their own perspective. For us to swallow everything doled out to us by these sources will cause us to lose sight of reality.

"What nationalism?" taunted a scholar recently in London. "You don't allow travel between yourselves and a neighbouring country you helped create." I thought this was the usual harangue about a Pakistan policy we have grown accustomed to. But his punch line was devastating:

"And your entire elite, without exception, aches for a Green Card for its progeny, to be parked permanently in the United States of America – what nationalism?"

The writer is a senior Indian journalist, television commentator and interviewer.