

A very merry
Christmas!

A time for inter-faith understanding

As the world celebrates Christmas, it is with dismay that we witness the most brutal of wars being fought along sectarian lines with inter-faith relations hitting an all-time low. Here we would like to express our deepest condolences to the families of victims of last week's Berlin Christmas market truck attack that killed 12 people. It is difficult to find words to condemn this heinous attack where unsuspecting people were ploughed down by a truck on a festive Berlin market by a misguided 24-year-old Tunisian young man. We find such acts of barbarity totally unacceptable and yet such violence is being perpetuated in the name of a religion that advocates peaceful coexistence of all citizens regardless of religion, race or ancestry. The message of both Christianity and Islam adhere to some basic principles that advocate peace among humanity, preaching love for everyone and rejection of hatred and acrimony.

Sadly, that message is not being heeded by a section of people who profess the exact opposite of what is laid out in the holy scriptures. In Bangladesh, like many other countries around the world, we have failed to provide the peace and tolerance for all communities according to the spirit of our Constitution. We can only hope that as a nation we can bring back the sense of security among all the Christians in the country so that they may celebrate their big day with joy and peace of mind. With the help of our government we must all join hands to root out the blind hatred of extremists who have twisted religion to justify heinous crimes against certain groups. This would require greater harmony among the communities which can happen if we decide that this nation belongs to us all where people of different faiths have lived in peace over thousands of years. Let that be our pledge on Christmas day.

BCL men halt RU
recruitment examsA stark contrast to the restraint
we saw in Narayanganj

As the Awami League was garnering praise from all quarters due to the exemplary behaviour of the ruling party members during the Narayanganj city elections on Thursday, we were given a glimpse of how a democracy could function and peace prevail when ruling powers rein in its people. Sadly, just yesterday, we witnessed the polar opposite, as Bangladesh Chhatra League men wreaked havoc on the recruitment test at Rajshahi University.

With demands to give jobs to party men, the RU unit of BCL stopped the recruitment test. Around 3,308 job seekers, who had travelled from all parts of the country to sit for the examination, were forced out of the premises. When some protested, they were beaten up, their admit cards torn, while most just chose to leave knowing the consequences. To top it off, the president of Rajshahi city AL supported this "movement of locals, AL leaders and activists" citing "ulterior motives" for holding the recruitment exams. But what the BCL did was completely illegal and cannot be justified with any argument.

Sadly, this is the status quo. Last year, the General Secretary of Rajshahi AL had assaulted RU Vice Chancellor demanding jobs for ruling party men. Examples from this year, when BCL men were involved in hooliganism, are rife.

This sense of entitlement is only one part of the problem. Impunity from the AL leadership perpetuates this culture of 'might is right.' We hear the AL leaders speak of enemies of AL, referring to external forces or political rivals, but it is the enemy within the party that needs to be tackled. Otherwise shining examples like the Narayanganj election will be obliterated by the smudges of misdeeds carried out by members of the ruling party.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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Merry Christmas and a happy
New Year

We sincerely wish a merry Christmas and happy New Year to our Christian citizens, friends, relatives, associates and well-wishers all over the world. May the Lord grant them, along with all other communities, the highest divine blessings and continued progress and happiness in the days to come. On this occasion, let us take the vow to seriously maintain the existing religious fraternity and communal harmony and work together to the best of our ability for the development of the country and prosperity of the nation. May the love of Christ be bestowed on all people.

K.Z.Huq, Kathalbagan, Dhaka

Congrats Fizz!

We offer our warmest congratulations to Mustafizur Rahaman, one of the most favourite sensations of the cricket world, on becoming the ICC's emerging player of the year for 2016.

In the voting period between September 14, 2015 and September 20, 2016, he picked up eight ODI wickets and 19 T20I wickets that won him the award.

Since the inauguration of the ICC award in 2004, it is the first time that a Bangladeshi cricketer has won this prestigious award, making Bangladesh proud. Undoubtedly, it is a great achievement for Bangladesh cricket.

Since his international debut in April, 2015, the cricket fans at home and abroad have been enthralled by the youngster's mesmerising performance, especially his cutters and slower deliveries alongside his shrewd cricketing brain.

Finally, we urge the Bangladesh Cricket Board to ensure proper care and treatment of this cutter master.

Juel Rana, University of Dhaka

The limits of war images

NO OFFENCE



NAHEELA NOWSHIN

Susan Sontag, novelist, essayist and critic, and one of the most intriguing figures of the 20th century, writes in *On Photography*, her seminal piece of work: "To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. To photograph someone is a subliminal murder." Sontag describes how photographs shape our perception of reality and "alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at." Most insightful, however, is her analysis of the image as a control mechanism used to exert a constructed perception upon the viewer and the camera as a tool to that end.

Photographs justify. A photograph alleviates doubt about whether something happened. It holds more power in that regard than the written word and other mimetic objects. Even if one is doubtful about the authenticity of the photograph, there is always a presumption that the subject in the photo exists. While the photograph was considered a fragile, ephemeral object in the past, since 1839 when the inventory began and the photography process became public, the digital age made it possible to immortalise snapshots.

The testament of the power of the photograph as a means of control, as Sontag puts it, is perhaps most profound in times of war when public perceptions are in a flux and innocent lives at stake. This makes for a powerful tool for states to manipulate and rally public opinion during times of crises, which they have done unapologetically and unabashedly since WWII when photography as a mechanism of propaganda first reached its peak.

The Wehrmacht, Nazi Germany's military, recruited 'propaganda photographers' to advance the Nazi cause. These photographers were given the task of taking innocuous pictures and were strictly forbidden from capturing 'taboo' photos such as dead German soldiers or SS officers liquidating Jews. Some soldiers took

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cameras along with them and secretly photographed scenes of horror. These photos were retrieved by Red Army men from the pockets of dead German soldiers and later used as evidence in the trials against German war criminals.

There are, of course, instances of organic, honest photography that exposed the human costs of war, such as Nick Ut's Pulitzer Prize winning photo of the fear-stricken napalm girl during the Vietnam War and the 1985 iconic portrait of the Afghan girl with arresting green eyes in a refugee camp in Pakistan. However, it isn't long before such photos too are exploited by

Emergency Briefing on Syria, directly addressed Assad and his allies: "Is there no act of barbarism against civilians, no execution of a child that gets under your skin, that just creeps you out a little bit?" The video spread like wildfire on social media. Many, however, were quick to point out the hypocrisy (and rightfully so) of an American representative rebuking foreign leaders for their moral depravity. One wonders, why don't photos of destruction of homes and hospitals left in the wake of NATO airstrikes in Afghanistan and Syria have the same effect? Would Samantha Power ask US and its allies if they are "truly incapable of shame", as she did



A member of Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) looks inside a damaged building at the MSF hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan, October 16, 2015. The hospital was bombed by US and NATO forces killing 42 people.

governments and their mouthpieces to mould public opinion for self-serving interests to aggrandise and prolong conflicts. And herein lies the tragedy: even when war photos depicting the suffering of civilians garner global attention, they are used and abused by state powers to shape the narrative according to their needs. Here, Sontag likening the photography of people to violation is perhaps most apropos as the 'powerful' camera takes on the 'powerless' victims of war and conflict—individual tales of pain, grief and loss frozen in frames used to score political points by world leaders at the expense of the nameless.

The harrowing images coming out of Syria are no different. The viral photo of a bloodied, ash-covered five-year-old Syrian boy Omran Daqneesh who was injured in an airstrike in the rebel-held area of Aleppo in August 2016, had supposedly "sparked international compassion", just like the picture of a drowned Aylan Kurdi on the shore of a Turkish beach a year earlier. More recently, with the Syrian regime gaining total control of Aleppo, photos of traumatised, helpless civilians being evacuated began pouring in. Samantha Power, in a scathing speech at the UN Security Council

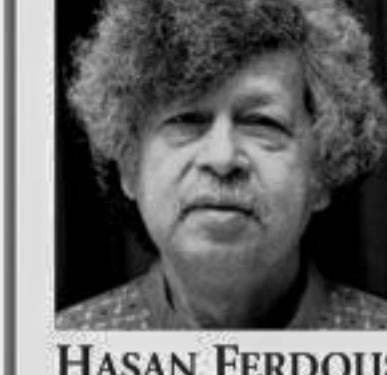
following Assad's capture of East Aleppo?

The truth of the matter is that the images of the Syrian war, no matter how gut-wrenching they may be, are nothing more than a pawn for the warring states to claim moral superiority and demonise the enemy. At the end of the day, images of the Omrants and Aylans of the conflict—that sees no end in sight—are hijacked by the same powers responsible for destroying millions of innocent lives. The public outrage expressed by world leaders and dignitaries every time an image surfaces symbolising the Syrian tragedy has proved to be hollow time and again as the thirst for power and greed overpowers the moral urgency to put an end to the conflict.

Sontag's sagacious assertion of photography as a form of mind control to reconstruct public perceptions rings truer every day. As history dictates, images of war and war of images, at many points in time, have failed to guide the moral conscience of state powers for whom the story of the subject in the photograph means nothing.

The writer is a member of the Editorial team, *The Daily Star*.

Let's talk polls and politics

HIGH NOTES
LOW NOTES

HASAN FERDOUS

HERE is some very good news for Bangladesh's ruling party in a poll conducted by the US-based Democracy International. More about that later. Let's for a moment focus on the value of opinion polls.

After what happened in the US elections, the stock of public opinion polls has hit rock bottom. According to every single credible poll taken before the elections, including one taken on the day people went to vote, Hillary Clinton was cruising to victory. *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* both gave Hillary's chances of becoming the next President somewhat close to 90 percent. Even the vaunted Nate Silver of *fivethirtyeight.com* thought Hillary was a shoe-in. Well, we know the results, and there is no reason why anybody should take opinion polls seriously anymore.

It is not just in the US. Polls also failed to predict the Brexit results. They also failed to correctly predict Britain's Labour Party's debacle in the 2015 elections. The results were nowhere near the neck-and-neck contest that the polls had suggested. Ditto for the last Israeli elections where polls had written off Bibi Netanyahu.

If polls are no good in telling us the future turns and tumbles, why should we even bother to pay attention to them? It turns out polls aren't supposed to pick a winner. They only give a broad overview of how the people polled feel about a specific issue or issues. Gallup, the world's best known polling organisation, has an interesting take on the value of opinion polls. It says polls do not explain why respondents believe as they do or how to change their minds. Instead, polls can be useful because they give the people a chance to speak for themselves instead of letting vocal media stars speak on behalf of all. In short, it allows the people to have a voice on matters they have little control over.

In recent years, polls have gone wrong mainly due to change in technology. Most polls are still conducted via land telephone at a time and in an age when most people carry a cellular phone. Heavy dependence on land phones gives lopsided results as pollsters are able to reach only much older people who are

still holding on to their old Graham Bell phones. Of course, there are other reasons too. A lot depends on the questions asked. Another reason why polls fail is the internal contest among polling organisations to reach consensus results. Pundits call it "herding mentality".

Polls on their own are meaningless unless policy-makers and institutions act on the results they provide. In the case of US elections, pollsters correctly diagnosed the malaise afflicting the US: widespread discontent among white voters on a whole range of issues,

excellent or good job in preventing extremist attacks. A paltry 16 percent people think corruption is a problem. Fifty-four percent of respondents say they feel free to express their political opinions.

Far more telling was how the people feel about the country's two leading political parties. Thirty-eight percent of respondents say they support the ruling Awami League, while only five percent support the opposition BNP. The two other opposition parties, Jamaat and Jatiya Party, barely registered any support: two and one percent respectively. In



including the economy and social values. The Democrats misread them, preferring to stick with their identity politics. Thus, it is not the polls, stupid!

Now let's return to the Democracy International poll on Bangladesh.

The USAID-funded poll – conducted in the last week of October 2016 using a computer assisted telephone survey system – finds that an overwhelming majority of people in Bangladesh – a solid 70 percent – think the country is heading in the right direction. Even a higher number of people – 77 percent – think the government is doing a

2014, Democracy International informs us, BNP had held onto a solid 35 percent support. How does one explain BNP's fall from grace? Clearly, the ruling party is dominant, but can it be so dominant that the next three largest political parties together are able to muster just eight percent of popular support?

I am not sure what a computer-assisted telephone survey is and how seriously one should take its findings. However, if these are broad indicators of the country's political trends, something

political scientists need to pay closer attention to the new political dynamics they reveal. Obviously, the ruling party benefits from a strong and unified political leadership, but functioning democracy also demands a meaningful opposition. Is the oft repeated claim – echoed by the US State Department – that the space for democratic opposition is shrinking the reason for BNP's reversal of fortune? Or is the malaise deeper?

A closer look at the polling data could give us a clue to the malaise. A stunning 35 percent of respondents say they don't want to reveal the party they support. Another 14 percent are in the "don't know" column. Thus, if "Undecided" was a political party in today's Bangladesh, it would register the largest number of votes. This cannot be a cause for comfort for those in political power.

Another broader issue has been revealed in an unrelated political survey. Yascha Mounk of Harvard University and Roberto Stefan Foa of the University of Melbourne have caused a tempest in a teapot with a new survey that shows democracy is in decline in many countries. A growing number of people under thirty – the so called Millennials – don't think it is "essential" to live under democracy. The support for democracy is especially soft in countries with strong political leadership. In these countries, the young are more open to having a "strong leader." In Russia, with a semi-autocratic Putin in total control, as many as 26 percent of young people think having a democratic system is bad for their country. In the US, long the bastion of Western democracy, 23 percent of Millennials share the same feeling. Similar trends exist in advanced Western democracies, such as UK and Germany. On the whole, in these countries, there is a growing support for populist views, both from the left and the right.

Two political scientists in a recent article in the *Washington Post* also elaborated on similar findings.

Both polls call for closer scrutiny and some soul searching. Democracy is all about institutions that nurture and protect the values that make it an ideal to be cherished. If one third of the voting age population turn away from democracy or remain unengaged politically, we need to pause and ask ourselves: are we failing our young?

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