

CNG-driven vehicle explodes!

Points to unsafe means of conversion

It was a tragic day for the families of the thirteen people who were killed on February 10 when a CNG-driven covered van exploded as it collided with a bus on the Dhaka-Khulna highway in Faridpur's Nagarkanda area. CNG-driven vehicles are not supposed to explode when a collision occurs. This latest incident merely confirms what we have been reporting for some time now, and that is that there is no authority to check whether vehicles are being converted to run CNG in workshops adhering to proper safety standards. There have been ample cases of workshops using standard cylinders and shoddy workmanship to fit CNG kits to vehicles like the one that exploded taking away so many lives in Faridpur.

Although the initial death count was thirteen as we went to press, that count may rise as some of the injured were reported to have suffered serious injury. The question we must ask ourselves at this juncture is how many more unnecessary deaths will be necessary before the concerned authorities wake up and take notice of these moving bombs plying in their thousands on the highways and inside the cities? Every now and then a vehicle's gas cylinder explodes in the CNG filling stations and it makes the headlines. But nothing comes of the investigation other than perhaps slapping a fine on the vehicle owner. This sort of slap-on-the-wrist response will not make our streets and highways safer. We need rules of business laid out in black and white and workshops found guilty of wrongdoing need to be taken to task.

Vandalism at Taqi Mancha

Nothing short of intimidation and coercion

As if it was not horrible enough that the murder of Tanwir Muhammed Taqi, a schoolboy from Narayanganj, is yet to see justice, now even the platform that remembers and commemorates him has been vandalised. On the fourth anniversary of his murder, masked men vandalised the "Santrash Nirmul Taqi Mancha" in Narayanganj and injured at least one of the organisers.

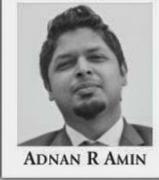
The attack is nothing short of intimidation. The organisers of the "Taqi Mancha" had just finished a sit-in and a candle light vigil demanding that justice be served to the perpetrators. Taqi's father has accused local influential people, the same who were accused of Taqi's murder in 2013, when two days after he went missing, his body was found in the Shitalakkhya river.

Surprisingly, the charge sheet for the murder is yet to be filed. The investigating agency had found involvement of the nephew of a lawmaker in the killing. And yet, the case is one of the many which, for whatever reason, the authorities seem negligent in pursuing.

The Taqi Mancha is a platform which stands for justice, and speaks out against criminal activities through the memory of a murdered schoolboy. That these "masked vandals" are now lashing out against this platform for condemning wrongs and demanding justice points to the power that they command. This is violence to intimidate and gag people from speaking out. The law enforcement agencies must step up their efforts to not only catch these vandals, but to see that the murder of Taqi does not go unpunished. His family has waited for justice for years, and now there are efforts to prevent them from speaking out. It is the safety of the family as well as trust in our justice system that is at stake.

An idea whose time has come

THE MIDDLE PATH



ADNAN R AMIN

EVERY monarch, political dynasty or order faces dissent. Dissent is an expression of dissatisfaction or opposition to a ruling individual's or group's policies. If

creationism is to be believed, then the entire universe was a result of dissent. Given time to stew, dissent is inevitable. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. To this end, I quote the venerable Margaret Mead, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

In fact, if there is no dissent in a given society, then either of the two conditions must be true: a) the ruler is intolerant of dissent i.e. (s) he is autocratic, if not fascist; or b) the people have been adequately sedated with one proverbial opium or the other: religion, warfare, competitive sports, virulent nationalism, fear of Others, xenophobia, etc.

A great example of citizens failing to arrest political devolution is how a mediocre businessman – with a bad toupée, vocabulary of a fifth grader and freakishly small hands – danced his way to the American presidency. Trump's presidential bid lasted nearly 1.5 years, and there were no significant protests during that period. The nascent, liberal reawakening in the USA is too little too late. On a sidenote, that the ban has been lifted is no reason to celebrate. This is not a win. Already, the new POTUS has fired the (acting) attorney general for refusing to defend his inflammatory, discriminatory ban. Gradually, other acts of dissent too will be strong-armed into meek submission.

And thus, the first condition for suppression of dissent comes into fruition.

This cycle is vicious and pervasive. In this era of strongman leaders, having one's opinion dominate and prevail is clearly of paramount importance. And perhaps that's why dissent is treated as though it were aberrant, traitorous and criminal. From Gezi Park (Turkey) and anti-Sisi protests (Egypt) to the Occupy Movement (USA), anti-Maduro protests (Venezuela) and anti-austerity protests (Spain) – governments have routinely cracked down on public acts of dissent.

Just two weeks ago, police lathi-charged protesters who wanted repealed the Jallikattu (Indian bovine spectacle) ban. European measures are more civilised, though no less taxing. In the name of 'public safety', anti-austerity protesters in Spain were threatened with individual fines as high as USD 670,000 (nearly Tk. 5.5 crores)!

These days, acts of dissent targeted by (legitimate) rulers are seldom existential-threats. Around 2010, Russian activists were harassed on the streets. Why? Well,

because they were protesting how government officials drove around: in convoys with "sirens, flashing blue lights, and government license plates, allowing them to flout traffic laws." During the recent protests against the North Dakota Access Pipeline, a bill was raised to effectively legalise vehicles ploughing into protesters on the road!

Bangladesh has seen its share of crackdown on protests too. While the 1991 anti-Ershad protests posed existential threats, protests against VAT on higher education, Gobindaganj Santal Protests and anti-Rampal protests have been about national issues and not about toppling governments. Yet none of these have been allowed political space; not in the way the Shahbag Movement

Compare the Rampal protests to another movement in the same neighbourhood, the Shahbag protests of 2013. Shahbag protesters were provided protection, and allegedly, food and sanitation facilities. For days, major crossroads remained closed without any notable objections from law enforcement. Then why the double standard? Why this harsh treatment? It would seem that the mode of dissent has remained unchanged. That leaves us with one inexorable hypothesis: law enforcers were violating citizens' right to question the controversial mega-project.

Is it the case then that we are allowed to disagree on certain topics but not on others? If that is so, then there is cause for concern. Dissent must not be

citizens' opinions and mandated the highest good for the ruler. This shift from focus on a moral king to a prince who clings to power by any means – signified a frightening possibility. In the Machiavellian world, there is no integrity or civility or honour – but only victories and losses. On the face of it, such a prince should not enjoy the love of the people for long. Yet the changing world order around us is certainly reminiscent of Machiavelli's writings.

My cautious parallel is not complete without one more detail about Machiavelli. He wrote *The Prince* – a veritable collection of amoral war and governance tactics – for the benefit of Florence's (in)famous Medici family. This family accumulated and wielded unfathomable wealth to go from bankers to political dynasty to royalty. Less known is the Medici's close connections to the Vatican, through which it commanded the hearts of common Christians. It seems both the Medici and Machiavelli were aware that to ruthlessly rule a people, one opium or the other was needed. Ever since, countless other rulers have followed in their footsteps, invoking divine guidance to justify worldly crimes. As you can see, dear reader, the two conditions for stifling dissent and activism are not only interrelated, but also often move hand in hand.

When viewed as an antithesis to political suppression, dissent is an indispensable social tool. There are times when we celebrate dissent that favour our political views and criminalise that which contradicts it. This view of what political dissent represents and how it is treated is heavily influenced by our sense of allegiance and loyalty to our nation state. Thus, we try to justify the treatment of dissent based on our regard for the person or group meting it out.

Yet it is important to recognise that dissent is an important social institution. It shapes the way nation-states act and how citizens interact with their state to shape such behaviour. We may disagree with the demands raised, but dissent and activism as citizens' democratic obligation must be beyond question.

While the Machiavellian tactic is to suppress dissent at all costs, there is growing evidence that rulers may actually fortify their standing by allowing public acts of dissent and protest. Correspondingly, there needs to be cognizance in the Halls of Power of the fact that most dissent and activism aim to improve the way things are done. They are not necessarily existential threats to any government. When the populace is allowed a window to interact with their state machinery, civil disobedience, violence and subversion become redundant. At the end of the day, it may be futile for a ruler to try and penalise or suppress political dissent; because, as Victor Hugo who once wrote, "Nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come."

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ILLUSTRATION: BLOGS.BERKELEY.EDU

was allowed space for example.

The treatment of environmental activists – attacked with rubber bullets and water cannons, beaten on camera and rounded up – was reprehensible. That day, dissenters were treated as plain criminals. Photos of protesters standing tall in front of water cannons, braving tear-gas shells and getting kicked in the groin flooded social media. Whether they were penalised for contrary opinions or for expressing them, will never be known. But what is clear is that law enforcement officers acted as though the very act of dissent were unlawful. Thus an intellectual challenge was answered with blunt force. The disproportionate response could easily lead one to think that the authorities just do not have a better (read: intellectual) response.

regulated; it must not be told when to surface and when to go into hiding. Spontaneous dissent is at the same time a destructive and a creative force. Besides, history has shown us again and again that simmering dissent needs to vent. It needs to let steam off. When political space shrinks, other means of expression are sought out. And usually, these others means are never very savoury.

In 1513, Niccolò Machiavelli argued that a leader who cannot force his will upon the people can never be successful. A ruler wielding only charismatic leadership or non-violent leadership can never have enduring power, he wrote. Though Machiavelli is long dead, his ideas have persevered through the annals of history.

Machiavelli's treatise elevated security and maintenance of a kingdom beyond

PATALRAIL FOR DHAKA

The nation has no alternative

OPEN SKY



BIRU PAKSHA PAUL

MY university in Upstate New York once sent all its faculty members to Raquette Lake for meditation and brainstorming research ideas. The authorities disconnected all cell phones and sent us to discover the forest so we could think deeply by interacting with nature. Much to our surprise we saw an unusually

fat deer running here and there. It was interesting to see how nature worked; while the deer's obesity did ruin its projected beauty, we also realised that it needed the extra weight to fight the future. It was October, just before the advent of the snow season when the whole lake turned into ice. The deer in the forest needed to gain the extra fat to burn it over the winter. While animals have a high sense of preparedness even though they do not watch weather bulletins on TV, we human beings are often lagging behind in that score. In Bangladesh's case, in particular, our national preparedness for an increasingly dysfunctional Dhaka is a shame.

Accolades never end for Dhaka! One of the worst livable cities on earth - a dusty megacity with the nastiest air quality and highest noise pollution; most unfriendly for walkers and women; a city with the highest traffic-jam tortures and a least amount of sleep, high diabetes, and rising hypertension – all these qualities are attributable to the invincibly growing traffic congestion due to unplanned urbanisation, bad street governance, roadside usurpation, anarchical transport behaviour, and finally, lack of preparedness for the largest growth centre of Bangladesh.

Dhaka represents 35 percent of our GDP, but that 35 percent controls the whole economy, just as the brain controls the entire activity of the body. The nation cannot energise its growth momentum with an increasingly crippled Dhaka. Rescuing the economy substantively hinges on saving the capital from paralysis. The government has done enough. Flyovers are flying almost everywhere, blocking Dhaka's landscape, roads are being built, and a surface metro rail will occupy the skyline soon. However, none of them can avert the growing urgency for a Patalrail in Dhaka. The nation has no alternative other than implementing an underground train network for a modern Bangladesh.

Dhaka will embrace 20 million people soon and then it will be a global exception for not having a subway metro with that number of people. Dhaka is

now one of the top ten megacities of the world but it will experience 53 percent proliferation in population from 2011 to 2025 – the fastest in the world, while a city like Tokyo will see as low as 4 percent growth. This information is enough to act as a wakeup call for the government to start digging the soil where land grabbers have not reached yet, indicating no chance of litigation and land disputes that inordinately delayed the four lanes of the Chittagong-Dhaka-Mymensingh route, whose construction time was slightly less than that for Taj Mahal.

How do we finance the Patalrail? The best way to fund this megaproject is to dedicate the entire sovereign wealth fund (SWF), which the government will draw from the central bank's foreign reserves of USD 32 billion. If the fund, with an initial size of USD 2 billion

stand as the next best transformative project just after the Padma Bridge not only for Dhaka dwellers but also for the whole national economy since Dhaka is the largest growth centre of the country.

Given the pace of population growth in Dhaka, the surface metro will not be able to service the rush of daily commuters. We have already witnessed many problems in deciding its route and the government had to compromise. Environmental issues will kick off even if we remain blind to aesthetic damages. We are betting on those transport projects which other modern cities are trashing ruthlessly. No 21st century city will go for partial solutions of flyovers and surface metros when the underground is unfolding boundless opportunities.

Boston drastically removed flyovers and went for a "big dig" to put the roads under the surface. The Sydney Harbor Bridge is an antique and so is the Brooklyn Bridge. Many governments are now making more under-river tunnels, thereby reducing environmental damages and improving the panoramic beauty of the cities. Why are we buying abandoned ideas just to save money? Buying a typewriter instead of computer is a complete waste, and affording these wasteful myopic projects will delay our journey to be a developed nation.

The basic Patalrail will take five years and it can be in operation in 2021, to mark the golden jubilee of Bangladesh. A primary line from the airport to Motijheel via Farmgate will roughly cost USD 5 billion, and the wealth fund can afford this easily. Patalrail will be the next focal point of aspiration and necessity not only for the government and the people, but also for international investors to see how Bangladesh can envision its bright direction. If Kolkata dreamed of an underground railroad more than 30 years ago, why can't we? In fact, we are in a better position to finance our own underground railroad with the latest technology which will not let us suffer the way Kolkata residents did with their bitter experience of open cuts.

Only money cannot make a nation rich. Even with a similar amount of oil, Middle-Eastern countries are forging different paths of development based on vision and courageous planning. The Bangladesh regime has already shown ample signs of courageous ventures and the Dhaka Patalrail must be the next by all counts. A wealth fund should create another wealth of preparedness, which the nation will use for centuries just like other modern cities of the world do.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Ekushey Book Fair

The annual Ekushey Book Fair held in Bangla Academy and the Suhrawardy Udyan gives hundreds of bibliophiles in Dhaka the opportunity to browse and buy books, and also meet their favourite writers in person. Most importantly, the fair boosts reading practices among the people.

We believe that holding this event in other cities across Bangladesh will further spread its benefits, highlighting the thriving and vivid cultural landscape of the country.

We hope that similar fairs will be held in other cities besides Dhaka. Zabed Wali, Chittagong

Tuition fees of private universities

The limited availability of seats in public universities has increased the demand for private universities in Bangladesh. Students from both elite and low income families enroll at these institutions. The surprisingly high tuition fees (almost seven to 15 times higher than public university fees), and the lack of accountability and transparency in financial management of some private universities is worrisome. Low income families are particularly affected by this.

Private universities should announce a standard grading structure and reasonable tuition fee systems highlighting their lab facilities, number of departments, students, teachers, student clubs etc. This will allow students and guardians to make informed decisions when choosing an institution for higher studies.

I request the Education Ministry and the University Grants Commission to take an initiative urgently in this regard. Md. Arifur Rahman, Anwar Group of Industries