

Police intervention at political meeting

It amounts to political intimidation

We are extremely disturbed by the police interference at an informal political meeting on July 13, called by Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) President ASM Abul Rob. There is no logical explanation why a police sub inspector would go to the JSD president's residence where the meeting was taking place two times in the evening and ask him first, to not have the meeting and then tell him to wrap up the meeting quickly. This incident begs the question: Why did the police intervene in a meeting that as far as we know, does not violate any law? The meeting was attended by members of legitimate political parties, none of them from any banned organisations. Then why this kind of intimidation?

The way the police behaved makes us wonder: Are we under an emergency or military rule? What happened to our fundamental political rights, one of which is to be able to assemble and hold meetings? The meeting in question was being held at someone's residence and there was nothing illegal about it so why the need for such highhanded behaviour from the police?

It is worrying to note that such intimidation tactics have been employed regularly against opposition parties especially the BNP which has been refused permission to hold rallies innumerable times. There have even been random raids and closures of the BNP Chairperson's office. These are ominous signs for our struggling democracy and clearly contradict the basic tenets of our constitution. The police must come out with a public explanation, especially as to who ordered the police action on July 13 and under what law since the police in question claimed to have had 'orders from above'.

Is it an early indication of what is to come before the elections?

We hope Thursday's incident will not be repeated at other such meetings of political parties. A democracy is based on the pluralism of ideas and thoughts and the protection of fundamental rights. There is no justification for any government action that impinges on the right of political parties to hold meetings.

Another oil spill!

How prepared are we?

We are confronted once again with an oil spill of at least 50,000 litres of diesel and petrol in the Kirtankhola River in Barisal on July 14. The head on collision between two marine vessels caused a crack in oil-laden MT Fazal and hundreds of people have been busy collecting the oil spill with buckets, which is hardly an effective way to tackle an oil spill. This is a common enough occurrence on our rivers and going by government data published in 2015, there are approximately 7,000 small and medium size water vessels that run on Bangladesh's coast and inside rivers and canals. We have experienced some major spill in the last few years. The most acute of these occurred on December 2014 when an oil tanker carrying 357,000 litres of furnace oil capsized in the Shela River inside the Sundarbans. That spill killed a huge number of animals and wildlife including dolphins.

It is accidents like these that have many people worried about such spillages in the Sundarbans if the Rampal power plant starts operating as it will inevitably result in the traffic of tankers to intensify in the waterways of the Sundarbans. It is understood that a draft contingency plan has been formulated that talks about a separate entity that will lead the response to future oil spills. The reality however is that only the coast guard has the access and capacity to work along coastal areas. The plan should be expedited so that we have one authority that can be equipped to handle such spills and there can be provisions to seek technical and logistical support from other countries in the region.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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Utility services for slum dwellers

This newspaper ran a report titled "Korail Slum: Goons eating up public resources" on July 10, 2017. It is apparent from the report that the goons are operating due to the absence of the state. The solution therefore lies in providing utility services to the slum dwellers, rather than blocking their connections. The state has for too long refused to acknowledge the needs of the slum dwellers. They should have affordable access to water and food, the deprivation of which violates the Right to Life acknowledged in our constitution through Article 32. A discriminatory approach by the state in this regard will keep creating the vacuum that allows goons to make economic profits.

Namia Akhtar, Heidelberg University

Stop child labour in university campuses

It is shameful that we accept child labour in a place like a university, where we are supposed to be trained in becoming socially and morally conscious citizens. It is particularly troubling when the practice occurs in a place like Dhaka University, which claims to be the most prestigious higher educational institution in the country. Many children who have dropped out of school are working in the various stores, canteens and residential halls of the university. Most of them have been recruited from different parts of the country by the canteen and store authorities. These children are being deprived of their basic right to education and health. The authorities should take measures immediately to put a stop to child labour in university campuses.

Md. Tarek Aziz Bappi, University of Dhaka

RANGAMATI LANDSLIDE

Rebuilding lives using indigenous wisdom

MD ASHRAFUL HAQUE

IT'S been a month since heavy torrential downpours caused a landslide and mudflow in the hill districts of Rangamati, Chittagong and Cox's Bazar that took 160 lives and destroyed homes, roads and highways. Thousands of people both indigenous and Bengali are still homeless. They are currently living in government offices and schools that were turned into shelters after the disaster with little hope of returning home anytime soon.

I spent a week in Rangamati after the disaster. In the Rangapani area of the town, I met Ratan Chakma (38) and his 70-year-old father Dibendra Prasad Chakma, who were working hard to remove the piled up mud from inside their home. The mudflow was so strong that it tore apart two side-walls of the building and filled up to five feet of all the rooms to literally bury the furniture. This is what the mudflow did to a full-fledged building. Just beside Ratan's home, two other buildings went under four to five feet deep mud, killing two sisters from the Chakma community and their three children and one unborn baby. About a mile away in the Vedvedi Muslim Para, behind the Loknath temple, at least 60 tin-shed houses were washed away by the flood, killing 26 people. In Shimultoli, Vedvedi and Rangapani areas of the town, bits and pieces of houses can still be seen here and there. Some houses are half buried in mud.

Ratan Chakma and his family have rented a house close to their original residence. However, not all the landslide victims could afford such amenity. At least 2,500 people have been sleeping in the 19 makeshift shelters. While many of these people have completely lost their homes, many others have left their houses fearing further landslides. According to an estimate by the district administration, 1,231 houses were completely devastated and 9,537 houses partially damaged by the landslide.

As the victims continue living in the government buildings hampering their operation, a more permanent housing solution is yet to be in sight. The additional deputy commissioner of Rangamati, Prakash Kanti Chowdhury, informed me that until the rainy season is over, it is highly unlikely that the affected people will be able to return to a place they can call home. The number of people living in the shelters rises up to 3,600 when there is a heavy rainfall. Although the educational institutions used as shelters have reopened after Eid, the administration can't close the shelters yet, nor can they go for a more permanent solution until the rain stops, said the ADC. After the landslide hit the CHT, many

in the media and civil society representatives concluded that hill-cutting was responsible for the disaster. While hill-cutting did trigger such landslides in the past, especially in Chittagong, this was not the case for the Rangamati landslide. In fact, this theory, widely discussed in television and print media, caused significant irritation among the local people of Rangamati, since most of the affected hills were uncut and even untouched for years. This is indeed a case of extreme weather event, aggravated by a loss of forest cover and the comparatively new phenomenon of living dangerously on

the recorded rainfall in the whole month of June 2016 (513 mm) and in June 2015 (540 mm). The hills just melted and turned into rivers of mud that engulfed houses and croplands located in the cleavages of the hills.

Goutam Dewan, president of CHT Nagorik Committee, gave me new insights into the disaster. He pointed out that with Rangamati being overpopulated, more and more people nowadays are building houses under the hills, and along grew the vulnerability. He said a good distance must be kept between the houses in the hills, but the new inhabitants did not follow this norm.

the Chittagong-Rangamati highway was completely destroyed, there is a thick teak plantation and it could not stop the landslide, possibly because of the fact that teak trees hamper undergrowth by acidifying the soil beneath, so the soil is mostly exposed to rain despite the plantation. Apparently, nothing less than a dense natural forest cover can protect the hill people from the onslaught of such heavy rains. We have destroyed enough of our natural forests in the CHT, it's high time we regenerated it. Besides, a more prudent housing practice must be enforced. For example, traditional platform houses built by indigenous



At least 2,500 people have lost their homes or left them behind, living in 19 makeshift shelters, as a result of the devastating landslides.

PHOTO: STAR

the cleavages of hills.

The amount of rainfall recorded at the Rangamati weather station located in Vedvedi, which is incidentally the most affected landslide zone, was extraordinary. About 343mm of rain was recorded in 24 hours starting from 6am on June 12, leading to the landslide. A senior observer at the station, Kaychingno Marma, told me that he did not record such a great amount of rainfall during his 10 years of service in Rangamati as well as the earlier 10 years in Cox's Bazar. The total amount of rainfall on June 12-14, 2017 was 542 mm, which was greater

With the climate changing globally, such extreme weather events are well predicted by the scientists at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). As rainfall has visibly increased in Bangladesh in recent years, we need to prepare for more such hazards. Torrential rainfall can't be stopped, but we can stop deforestation and hill-cutting. Altering the natural environment of CHT for profiteering has been going on for decades. The reprisal of nature is turning out to be deadly. Even teak monoculture on the hills could not stop the landslide. In Sapchhari, where

communities allow mud water to flow through the pillars while modern houses just block it and eventually get devastated.

While it's a great tragedy to lose so many people due to landslide, it also prompts us to rethink the idea of development and perceived economic benefit at the cost of natural environment, and pushes us to rebuild better and safer, using indigenous knowledge and in harmony with nature.

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Faster than a Speeding Congressman

ROBERT HARVEY

IT'S a bird! It's a plane! No, it's Supra-politician. But, unlike a cartoon hero, when Supra-politician arrives in power, he or she probably won't save the day. The emergence of such leaders is a relatively new phenomenon, one that is reshaping politics across the West. Today, two largely dissimilar presidents, Emmanuel Macron in France and Donald Trump in the United States, are its leading avatars.

Until a few decades ago, democratic leaders had to climb the electoral ladder, rung by rung, acquiring a place in the political system. In the US, that meant that virtually all presidents had either served in Congress or as state governors, with the only modern exception being Dwight Eisenhower, whose background as an Army general stood in for political experience.

In Europe, French politicians moved up the parliamentary ladder in the Fourth Republic, and could aspire to climb to the presidency in the Fifth. German leaders since World War II have risen through state and federal political structures. In Italy, postwar leaders have had to navigate the byzantine political maze created by the now-defunct Christian Democrats. Even in Russia, leaders have risen through the ranks of party or state hierarchies.

Of course, political parties always had their "talent scouts" on the lookout for individuals with exceptional leadership potential. But even a figure like British Prime Minister John Major, who was fast-tracked to the top, served as a junior social services minister, foreign secretary, and chancellor of the exchequer before taking over the premiership.

Things began to change with Tony Blair's government. Blair had served in Parliament, and performed smoothly as the Labour Party's home affairs spokesman. But, after the unexpected death of his mentor, the skillful machine politician and Labour Party leader John Smith, he was catapulted to the top, as though by divine right. More recently, David Cameron served just one term in Parliament before being chosen as leader of the Conservative Party.

In the US, Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama, was another such a "fast-tracked" politician. In 2004, the relatively unknown Illinois state senator delivered a spellbinding speech at the Democratic National Convention. Four years later, he was in the White House.

With Trump, the rocket to the top fired on all

boosters. In just over a year, Trump went from reality-television host and showboating property magnate to leader of the world's most powerful country, leaving the Republican Party establishment with whiplash.

The closest precedent for Trump may be Italy's former prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, who was a well-known media mogul before deciding to take advantage of the disintegration of Italy's postwar party system in the early 1990s to create his own political movement. Another Italian supra-politician, Matteo Renzi, also enjoyed a meteoric political rise, becoming prime minister without ever serving as an MP, holding national office, or building a political coalition.

Finally, there is Macron, a former banker and (briefly) economy minister, who had never entered the

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slog of democratic politics before the recent election. Without backing from an established party – like Berlusconi, Macron created his own movement – he surged from relative unknown to President of the Republic in a matter of months.

Clearly, supra-politicians do not subscribe to a particular ideology or cultivate a particular appearance. And there are specific factors that fueled each individual's rise. Cameron was supported by financial interests determined to resurrect the Conservative Party. Trump's business background and "outsider" status helped him to appeal to the newly dispossessed.

But these leaders do have some features in common, beginning with their use of modern media. Prior to the twentieth century, leaders were remote figures who

rarely made direct contact with the masses. Then came the age of the orator, when figures like David Lloyd George and Ramsay MacDonald spoke directly to large crowds. Leaders from Adolf Hitler to Winston Churchill did the same, with the aid of the microphone.

The advent of television called for a more personal and understated presentation – brilliantly grasped by John F. Kennedy – and was more conducive than ever to the rapid takeover of public discourse and consciousness. Blair and Cameron may not have been good orators, but they knew how to present themselves on TV. Obama expertly blended oratory with a relaxed, TV-optimal persona.

What Trump lacks in rhetorical skill, he makes up for with his ability to manipulate an audience, with Twitter as his favorite tool for connecting to the masses. Renzi and Macron are masters of the sound bite.

Of course, getting the right TV coverage takes some effort. Trump courted Rupert Murdoch, just like Blair and, to a lesser extent, Cameron had. Macron assiduously cultivated French media interests. Berlusconi's own companies dominated the Italian airwaves.

But there is another, more troubling commonality among supra-politicians: they tend to crash-land, owing largely to their lack of political skill. Blair couldn't reconcile his neo-conservative principles with those of his own party – a situation that came to a head with his disastrous support for the US-led war in Iraq. Cameron's desperation to win votes spurred him to call a referendum on Britain's European Union membership, the result of which forced him to resign.

Renzi's leadership, too, was brought down in similar fashion: by tying his political fate to a referendum on much-needed constitutional reforms, he turned the vote into an assessment of his government. Trump's cluelessness has been on display since day one, undermining the confidence of US allies and impeding the Republicans' ability to enact their agenda.

The question now is whether Macron – who went on to secure an unassailable majority in the French National Assembly – can break the mold, or whether he will provide further proof that media savvy is no substitute for experience in the political trenches.

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