

PRESIDENT ABDUL HAMID

Our lucky 7?

The Daily Star

 FOUNDER EDITOR
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Don't hold people hostage

New Market traders' road blockade

THE residents of Dhaka were stranded for hours on the streets on Monday as the traders of New Market were protesting the Dhaka South City Corporation's plan to turn the market into a two-storey building by blocking the capital's Nilkhel intersection for around four hours. Whatever may be the merits of their demands, holding people hostage in order to extract them is totally indefensible.

People had to go through indescribable suffering as the blockade created long tailbacks in almost all the major thoroughfares of the city and hundreds of people had to walk to their destinations. The worst sufferers were the critically ill patients who had to wait for hours on the street to get to the hospital. But as it seems, the organisers just couldn't care less about public suffering. And it was only after the local lawmaker assured them of taking steps to meet their demand that the organisers called off the blockade. While we believe that it is the traders' right to ventilate their grievances, we also believe that this could have been done without causing public suffering.

Also, we wonder if the organisers took permission from the law enforcement agencies as well as the city authorities before holding such a big programme. If they did, then the question is, on what grounds did the authorities give them the permission? And what steps did the police take to ensure that the programme would not cause public suffering?

Considering the pains people go through because of these programmes, we believe that blocking roads as a means of protest must be stopped once and for all. And the city authorities as well as the law enforcement agencies must play their due role in preventing such programmes.

We expect action, not excuses from police

Why no case filed yet?

WE are confused by the statement made by the Additional Deputy Commissioner (ADC) who has been put in charge of the three-person probe committee to look into the violent clash that took place in Narayanganj on January 16. Precisely what he meant by politics playing a part as there has been no case filed by either side in the mayhem—both photos and videos show ruling party people brandishing weapons in public—is unclear. What has stopped the police from taking suo moto cognisance of the matter?

An entire week has passed by in the absence of any case being filed. Why hasn't the police stepped up and pressed charges? We understand that from a legal point of view, the police can file a case without waiting for anyone to do so. Such a case, if filed, could formally open the door for the law enforcement agency to launch an investigation into what happened on that day.

The clash injured at least 50 people including the city's mayor Selina Hayat Ivy. The probe committee's deadline for submitting its report is today and according to the ADC, there will be a call for an extension to facilitate the investigation. Given the manner in which the police is going about the investigation in the absence of any case, and where the agency itself seems to be unsure how to proceed, we wonder whether the whole incident will be allowed to fade from collective memory through an absence of action. The evidence that the police seeks about who brandished what has been captured on camera. Indeed, this paper has published pictures of individuals waving weapons in public and during the clash. We expect action, and not excuses, from our law enforcers, and statements like "Politics at play" do not inspire much confidence or hope.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Enough is enough

Apparently, the entire Dhaka city was in a state of gridlock on Monday. People going towards Uttara, Mirpur, Dhanmondi, Farmgate, etc., suffered for hours on end—up to five hours in some places.

How much longer are we going to live like this? Are the authorities so helpless that even after all these years, they have been unable to bring a semblance of order in our streets? We hope that our ministers and lawmakers, who enjoy the privilege of shutting down vehicular movement because of their VIP status, are taking note of Dhaka's worsening traffic problem so that they can take steps to bring us some relief. Dhaka-dwellers have had enough.

 Tarannum Tasneem, *By email*

Involve the PSC

Bangladesh Bank has cancelled the recruitment examination for eight state-run banks, following a demonstration by the candidates who could not sit for the MCQ test. Nearly 1,80,000 candidates from all over the country thronged Dhaka to appear at the examination, but the gross mismanagement of the management department of Dhaka University nipped many applicants' hope in the bud.

Four to five students had to sit on a single bench built to accommodate only two. There was no seating plan in the room, allowing some students to collaborate with each other to solve questions.

Fortunately, the Bankers' Selection Committee cancelled the exams. The committee should take help from PSC, a public agency tasked with holding many public recruitment exams, instead of a department of a university while conducting such large-scale recruitment exams in future.

 Md Golam Azam, *Nature*


SHAKHAWAT LITON

PRESIDENT Abdul Hamid is a lucky president for many reasons. He is set to complete a five-year term next April without being mired in any controversy. And he is likely to get re-elected in a

month for another term setting a record in the history of Bangladesh. None of his predecessors in the past have had such luck.

This article focuses on his predecessors of the last 27 years, since restoration of our parliamentary democracy following the fall of the autocratic Ershad regime in December 1990. The previous 15 years since 1975 have been excluded in this analysis as the country did not have democracy in that period.

Among President Hamid's predecessors, Iajuddin Ahmed was the most controversial president due to his biased and bizarre activities including sudden assumption of the office of the chief advisor of the caretaker government at the end of 2006, violating the constitutional provision. As the caretaker chief he was a nightmare, engaging in unilateral and controversial activities that served to further deepen the political crisis. That resulted in the declaration of a state of emergency in January 2007 that lasted around two years.

Abdur Rahman Biswas was elected as the first president after restoration of democracy in 1991, but initiated an acute political crisis in 1996 by sacking the then army chief during the election-time caretaker government. It was Justice Habibur Rahman, the then caretaker chief, who saved the country from chaos by demonstrating his sagacity.

Biswas' successor Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed took the presidency to a new height. He emerged as a statesman and pragmatist, calling a spade a spade. Justice Shahabuddin was also acting president for around a year after the fall of Ershad and his government was successful in holding a free and fair parliamentary election in 1991. Parliamentary democracy was restored following that election. He then returned to the office of the chief justice. After his retirement as chief justice, he was elected as president in 1996. Unfortunately, he was dragged into political controversy at the fag-end of his five-year term for his neutral role during an election-time caretaker government.

Shahabuddin's successor AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury was most unlucky as he was forced to resign from the presidency after seven months of his five-year term. That resignation brought fortune for Iajuddin Ahmed who stayed in the presidency for around two extra years after his term ended as election could not be held due to the state of emergency.

Seasoned politician Zillur Rahman's election to the presidency brought an end to Iajuddin's period in February 2009. Zillur, who was elected as the fifth president, died in office in the final year of his term in March 2013, opening the doors of Bangabhaban for Hamid, who was speaker of parliament at that time.

As President Hamid's tenure nears an end, the current Jatiya Sangsad will elect the next president within a month according to the constitutional provision which says the election will be held between 90 and 60 days before his tenure expires. Hamid took office on April 24, 2013, and his five-year term expires on April 23. This means the election should be held by February 22. The election may be held on February 19.

The ruling Awami League, according to media reports, is likely to nominate President Hamid again as its presidential

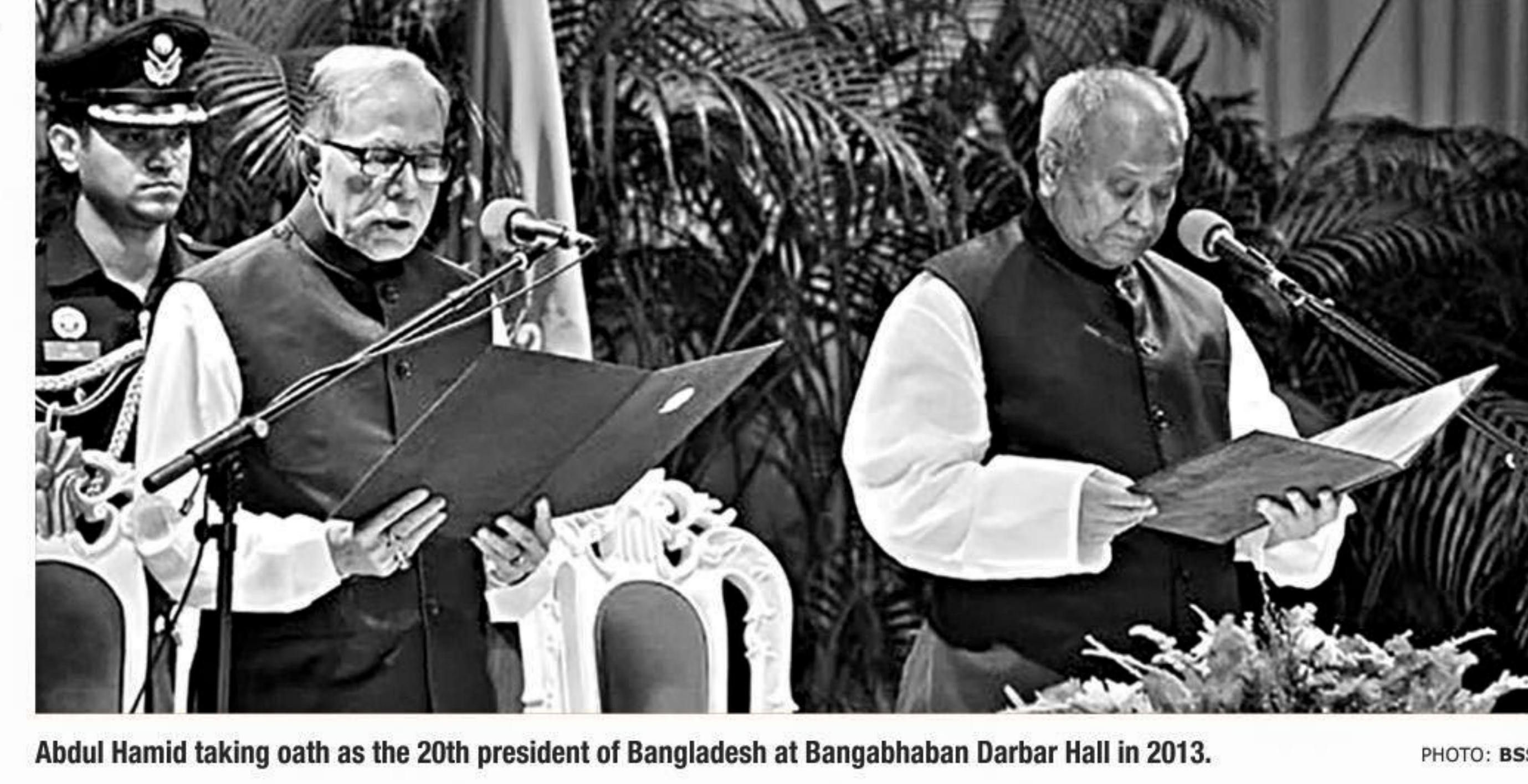
Chief Khaleda Zia and some eminent citizens separately met President Hamid in November 2013 urging him to take steps to resolve the political crisis. President Hamid was quoted by his press secretary as telling the opposition leader Khaleda Zia, "No government has incorporated any provision in the constitution that allows the president to take steps to overcome a critical situation." Eventually, he did not take any step to resolve the crisis.

This time around he is set to get re-elected in an unusual political situation. We have never witnessed such calmness in politics since the restoration of democracy in 1990. In the last two years, the government had the upper hand over the entire political scene. There was little street agitation. The hand-picked main opposition in parliament, Jatiya Party, did not cause any discomfort to the government. The BNP has been shattered

defence of an inability to again take any steps to resolve the political stand-off will not help the president to retain people's confidence in his office. The people always look up to the presidency to find a way out when the country faces a major political crisis.

As guardian of the State, the president may always exercise his moral authority to protect and preserve the constitution and to save his people from political danger. Constitutional experts believe a man of high stature, integrity and experience holding the office of the president can exert great influence on the executive government by way of advice and counselling. The president can also play a role in building a bridge between the government and the opposition to strengthen the parliamentary democracy, they observed.

If re-elected, President Hamid's



Abdul Hamid taking oath as the 20th president of Bangladesh at Bangabhaban Darbar Hall in 2013.

PHOTO: BSS

candidate. Upon his election, he will also be the first politician in the history of independent Bangladesh to get re-elected as president after completion of the first term.

Amidst all the smooth sailing, there is one little blemish to his re-election. Although he and all his predecessors in the last 27 years were elected by parliaments formed through largely free and fair elections, the formation of the current parliament was different. The current parliament was formed in January 2014 through a one-sided election with more than half of its MPs elected unopposed.

If re-elected, he may witness almost the same political crisis as the one faced in 2013. Amid growing political turmoil centring the January 2014 parliamentary election with escalation of violence, he was elected as the president following the death of President Zillur Rahman. BNP

after it boycotted the January 2014 parliamentary election and enforced the three-month-long non-stop nationwide blockade in early 2015 during which unprecedented violence was seen. It could not go for any strong agitation programmes. What the party did in the last two years is hold some rallies in the capital on some occasions with permission from the police. Many of its leaders, including its chief Khaleda Zia, are entangled in numerous cases.

But fear of political turmoil is growing because of unresolved issues over the mode of the government during the next parliamentary election. Citing past parliamentary elections, some political analysts have termed the present calm as the lull before the storm. Therefore, the president may again be urged to take measures to resolve the political disputes between the two rivaling camps.

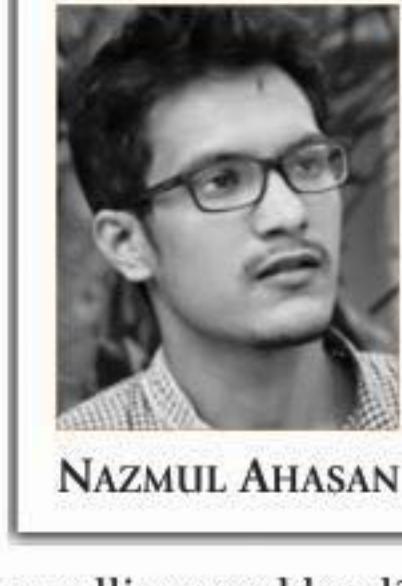
Citing the constitutional provision in

image as being free from controversy and his acceptance among the public may be his major strengths to exert authority on the rival political camps to come to a solution to the political dispute over the mode of the election-time government.

If re-elected, Hamid will be the seventh elected president after restoration of democracy. Seven is universally considered a lucky number. Seven is the most significant number across religions and cultures. People expect that the seventh president will do something magical that contributes to removing the uncertainty over a participatory free and fair election. If that is the case, it will further brighten the image of the presidency and President Hamid will truly be a lucky president.

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Enabling political bullies



NAZMUL AHASAN

LAST week, a video went viral on social media of a protest rally by a group of students at MH Samorita Medical College. They were protesting against the alleged fee hike by the college. They also demanded a pay raise for intern doctors. The demands had merit. After all, how is it that an intern doctor is paid less than Tk 15,000 for their

gruelling workload?

Mockbul Hossain, the college's founding chairman, did not find these demands acceptable. Rather than discuss these with them, he chose to confront the students and scare them away. In the face of his threatening tactics, the students doubled down and resolutely claimed that they were not alone. "All students expressed solidarity with us," a protester shouted. "And, I've got the government on my side,"

Mockbul retorted. Pointing towards some police personnel standing nearby, he warned, "Make trouble, [they] will blow your head off."

That is how the former Awami League MP, in the blink of an eye, brought back memories from 20 years ago when he was known for being a terror in Mohammadpur. Once convicted in a corruption case, Haji Mockbul, as he is better known, reportedly fled the country after the last caretaker government's takeover. Following a long hibernation, he returned to the country after Awami League won the 2009 election. In the years since, he has been relatively sidelined and could not secure party nominations in the last two elections.

Coming back to the protests, *Prothom Alo* published a video footage of the incident and a huge outcry followed on social media. By the afternoon, the college authorities accepted the students' demands and the protests ended. Everyone seems to have forgotten the incident by now. As the media portrayed



Students and interns of MH Samorita Medical College and Hospital sit in protest. Interns demanded a pay raise while students were protesting fee hike every year, among other issues.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

him as a "former" MP, the ruling party felt no obligation to respond. No one seems to notice that Mockbul is a member of the ruling party's central advisory panel, the second highest level of the party hierarchy, according to the party's website.

Just one year after Supreme Court scrapped Mockbul's acquittal in a corruption case, Awami League chose him as one of its advisors who include senior figures like Tofayel Ahmed and Abul Maal Abdul Muhith. The ruling party condoned his behaviour in the past, and that may have encouraged him to repeat his impudence. Therefore, the onus should be on the ruling party, Mockbul's party, to take action against one of their senior figures, but what we have heard so far is only deafening silence.

About the same time, we saw two factions of Narayanganj Awami League engage in a violent clash. As reported by this newspaper, at least two men were seen brandishing guns during the attacks on their opponents—the supporters of Mayor Selina Hayat Ivy. Both the gun-bearers are reportedly close to the local MP and an Awami League heavyweight.

Neither the party nor the police has taken any action against the gun-wielding men as yet. All that we have been told is that the party was "irritated" because the timing of the clash was sensitive given that the election is nearing. Such a message certainly emboldens them, because it implies that had the incident happened at any other time, it would have been entirely okay.

Even more worrying is the tendency to play down the significance or gravity of the incident by arguing that no bullets were fired (according to media reports, blank rounds were used) or that the guns were legal.

Even if the police launched an investigation to determine whether the arms were legal, the use of legal arms is restricted to self-defence only. According to the arms policy of the government, the use of legal arms to intimidate people is prohibited. The photos that the media have published so far indicate that the prohibited use of arms—even if they were legal—took place on that fateful day. The fact that no actions have been taken against the gun-wielding men sheds doubt on the government's commitment to public safety.

The impunity that AL leaders like Haji Mockbul and other party men have enjoyed has been their biggest enabler. Unless the government considers it as a serious law and order issue rather than an incident that only tainted the party's image, such brazen acts will be repeated in the future.

Nazmul Ahsan is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.