

# Must everything be politicised?

## Shun the habit

EVERY time an incident of militancy or extremist violence occurs in the country, the matter enters the realm of politics with the predictable mutual blame game between the AL and BNP. One accuses the other of either complicity, or commission or act of omission, for the incident. This time too, very soon after the attack on Dr Zafar Iqbal, the BNP General Secretary accused the AL of fishing in troubled waters. The AL general secretary retorted, terming the BNP as patron of the plotters. In turn, the BNP attributed the attack to what it called the misdeeds of the government.

Both the comments are outlandish at best in their substance. Can anyone rationalise why Dr Iqbal, the unfortunate victim of a heinous attack, should pay for whatever wrongs the government has done? And it seems that the AL general secretary is steps ahead of the investigating agencies in identifying the masterminds of the attack.

When the investigating agencies have their finger on the likely group behind the attack, and the prime minister confirms that in her statement, such statements diminish the gravity of the matter. But not only that, politicisation of a serious matter such as this attack also detracts the investigating agencies from their primary task of investigation and arrest, and protects the actual perpetrators.

In the past, every time a major incident occurred, it was followed by a spate of mutual recriminations, accusations and allegations, much before the investigating agencies have had time to even start their job. If BNP was accused of patronising militancy, it in turn blamed AL for capitalising on it. The habit of politicising everything that happens in the country must stop, particularly, making uninformed and out-of-turn partisan comments regarding a serious issue like militant violence. If politicians cannot understand the ramifications of such comments, who will?

# Mosquitoes are back with a vengeance

## Inefficiency of Dhaka City Corporations

IT defies logic that every year we have to editorialise on the onslaught of mosquitoes before the rainy season begins. The puzzling lethargy of the city corporations in taking pre-emptive measures to tackle the mosquito menace makes it seem as if it is a new phenomenon. But we have all learnt the bitter lesson of allowing mosquitoes to breed—through the continuous epidemics of dengue and chikungunya that have wreaked havoc on the city-dwellers the last few years. So with such a bitter experience, should we have not learnt our lesson?

A recent report in this paper has found that mosquitoes are proliferating everywhere—in homes, slums, hospitals, airports, and open spaces. This despite the hefty budgets—Tk 25.6 crore for DSCC and Tk 20 crore for DNCC—of the city corporations to procure chemicals and machines to combat the breeding of this deadly insect. Instead, our reporters have found that major water bodies and drains are infested with mosquitoes, and households are at their wits' end trying to combat the onslaught with sprays and mosquito coils that are proving to be ineffective, not to mention harmful to health. So what have the respective city corporations done with these budgets in the way of fighting these killer pests? So far it seems precious little.

It is now the beginning of the “mosquito season” and city-dwellers are already very anxious about how they will be spared of mosquito bites that may cause those dreaded diseases that have also led to some fatalities. There seems to be a total collapse in the municipal facilities of the city corporations. We, therefore, demand that the respective city authorities take up this task immediately and adopt effective measures—with chemicals and extensive cleaning of water bodies and drains (which they should be doing anyway) to make this city mosquito-free. We can hardly aspire to be a middle-income-country with our major city being in the grips of this insidious insect.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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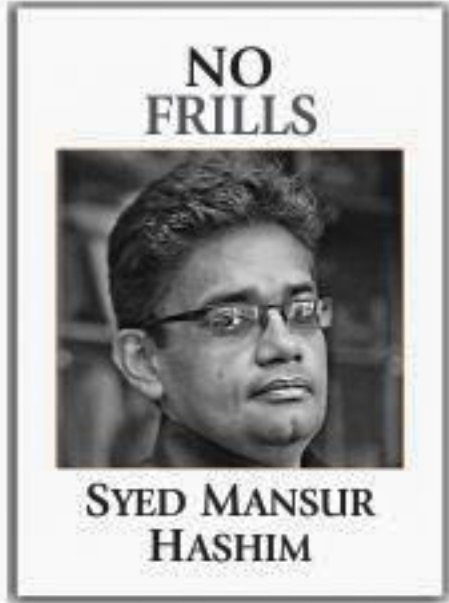
### Protesting a report on Turkey

I have read the news piece titled “Turkey raids pro-govt forces in Afrin, kill 36: UN points to likely war crimes in Ghouta” published in this newspaper on March 4, with great disappointment.

The Reuters article is about Turkey's counter-terrorism operation in Afrin, which is located at our border in north-western Syria. In order to clear our borders from terrorist elements, the Turkish Armed Forces have launched “Operation Olive Branch” to ensure our border security, neutralise terrorists in Afrin and thus, save the brotherly Syrians from the oppression and cruelty of these terrorists. The operation is carried out on the basis of the international law, in accordance with our right to self-defence, as outlined in Article 51 of the UN Charter and the relevant Security Council resolutions and in full respect of Syria's territorial integrity.

The Turkish Armed Forces have taken all necessary precautions to avoid collateral damage to the civilian population. The black propaganda run by the terrorist elements in the field has been proven to be based on fake news and predicated irrelevant photos.

Devrim Ozturk, Ambassador of the Republic of Turkey to Bangladesh



dependent on highways to connect the capital city with the rest of the country to get goods transported. The present government has been investing heavily on infrastructure, which is good news. The bad news is that the quality of our roads and highways is seriously questionable, which means hours wasted



Hundreds of trucks, buses and small vehicles are seen lined up on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway to a long tailback.

navigating badly maintained highways, driving up costs for traders and producers and hassle for passengers who must travel between districts.

According to a report published in *Prothom Alo* on March 3, we have spent Tk 40,000 crores on important road links and bridges over the last 8 years, but the principal highways are in a state of

disarray. According to World Economic Forum 2017 data, Bangladesh has the second worst-maintained road links in the region, only Nepal is worse off than us. National highways constitute 3,438km (out of a total of 18,210km of important district road links) and their situation is hardly commendable. What we are seeing today is of course a better situation than yesteryears. Back in 2012, 38 percent of these highways were ill maintained. In the previous year, the figure of badly maintained highways was 55 percent.

Dhaka, the capital city remains the principal hub of economic activities in the country. Hence, when highways coming into Dhaka or going out of Dhaka are in a state of disrepair, we have a major problem on our hands. We

bulk of RMG goods have to be transported to Chittagong for shipment. The slow traffic increases both cost of doing business and shortens lead times for factories, adding yet another headache for producers. Importers face the same music since Chittagong port is our biggest port.

The above is just one example of the troubles on the highways. Potholes, ditches, washed away asphalt, etc., end in a dilapidated road communication network and despite repeated assurances from policymakers, nothing much has changed over the years about doing something about maintaining the minimum standard for highways. We have seen the enthusiasm in awarding contracts to companies that have either been found lacking in constructing such

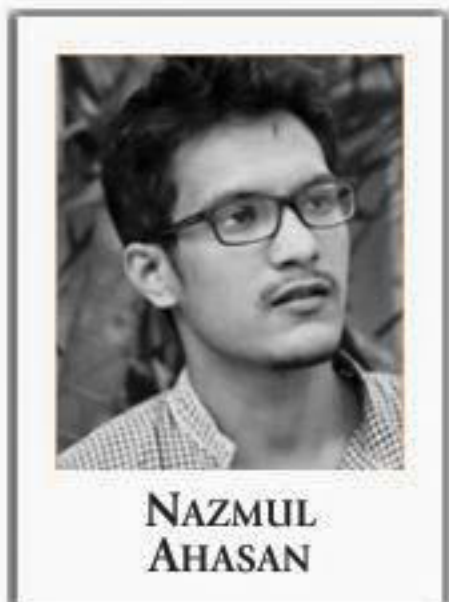
in good condition have always fallen short of what is needed. The refusal to fund major repair is not without reason. Given that we have a chequered past (and present) in monitoring the quality of our public works and the over-enthusiasm of certain departments to engage in piecemeal repair work which does not last more than a month, let alone a season, one cannot but agree that pouring money into a bottomless pit is terrible value for money. But is anyone counting the cost? It does not seem so, otherwise some of these bad practices would have been rectified over the last seven or eight years.

The arguments set forth by the anti-graft body ACC which has recently sent a letter to the Cabinet Division with 21 recommendations point out several irregularities in the tendering process even after the introduction of the electronic system (e-tendering). A report in this paper on March 5 highlights the difficulty in proving corruption allegations as the matters are technical and require evaluation. Allegations have surfaced that there is collusion among influential persons, consultants and government officials in obtaining a contract. Similarly, allegations have surfaced on the usage of sub-standard bricks in road construction. One of the recommendations by ACC is the formation of a monitoring committee with BUET teachers, civil society members, road experts and honest engineers of RHD to look after these matters. If these recommendations are heeded, then we can, in the foreseeable future get value for our money in road communication infrastructure development.

The national exchequer is spending billions of taka every year for much-needed infrastructure development and we are basically throwing away billions and setting back completion dates, not months but years. The government's grand vision to make us a middle-income country will not bear fruit if we continue to treat the matter of infrastructure development so lightly. It is high time we took cognisance of the fact that it is time to tackle graft seriously and put in place checks-and-balances to hold faulty parties accountable.

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# Rural social fabric shattered by politics



community. The last time it was unbelievably quiet—everyone seemed fearful, terrified by the presence of an unknown being.

Incidentally, I went home the night before February 8, the day when the verdict on Khaleda Zia would be delivered. Even in a remote village so far away from Dhaka, the tension of the moment could be felt, with all shops closed and armed police personnel deployed in our tiny bazaar. An eerie silence dominated our neighbourhood for the next few days. Throughout my entire weeklong stay, I missed some familiar faces. They happened to be involved with BNP.

A particular incident left me shocked. One of my friends was talking to a “Boro Bhai” with whom we used to play cricket even a few years ago. The Boro Bhai wasn't sure of my political allegiance, which was enough for him to deliver a threat to me through my friend. “Ask him (me) to not come out of his home so often,” he told my friend. When I got the message, I wasn't frightened. I was overcome with sadness. I didn't realise that the political climate of my village had turned so toxic.

In Dhaka, you may not know who your next-door neighbours are, but in a village, everyone knows everyone. Not many urbanites regularly meet with their friends, relatives and acquaintances, but there are multiple occasions and places in a village—mosques, tea stalls, local bazaar, playfields, etc.—for people to meet and chat. It's entirely normal for them to pay their neighbours a visit without any prior notice. They quarrel, but they also take care of each other like family.

Dhakaites may not feel a deep attachment to those around them, but

the feeling is strong among villagers. Theirs is a cohesive community, which, sadly, has been affected by petty political rivalry.

In the days leading up to the elections of 2014, a keen observer of Bangladeshi politics must have noticed how prominent international think-tanks regularly published analyses and articles, expressing grave concerns about the growing polarisation in Bangladesh. Back then, multiple factors were identified as responsible for stoking tensions in Bangladesh's politics. This

“polarisation” when one of the poles appears severely weakened.

However, the ruling party isn't convinced yet that its arch-rival has exhausted all its energy. This is not to say that Awami League still fears a comeback by BNP so forceful that it would reverse the current equation of power; the government simply does not want to take any chances. This explains why the police so aggressively clamped down on a BNP initiative as harmless as a black-flag protest on the flimsy ground that the party had not taken permission to do that beforehand.

however, is what this could cause to rural Bangladesh.

Beyond our Dhaka-based bubble, across villages and mufassil towns, the extremely polarised politics has left a profound and toxic effect, which has shattered the social fabric—a glue that holds a society together—of our rural communities.

There is no data to measure how our rural cohesion has been affected by politics but it is safe to assume that the situation that I saw in my village is more or less the same elsewhere. Many people



Will politics destroy this harmony?

year, with only months to go before another general election, there's been hardly any hue and cry about this “polarisation” phenomenon.

The issue, it seems, has been settled. Or has it? As of now, the ruling party appears to have decisively won in its battle against the opposition parties, entrenching its root so deep into the system that the two are now almost indistinguishable. Meanwhile, with its chief in jail, it is hard to predict how BNP will recover from this blow. Many people seem to think that Bangladesh may witness a change in its ever-divisive two-party system. Hence they find that there is no point in talking about

The critical fraction of the civil society and intelligentsia has not been spared either. The civil society has always criticised those in power regardless of which party runs the government. Now, the ruling wparty's “you are either with us or with them” mindset hinders how civil society functions.

The government has set a noose-like boundary beyond which BNP—or any other party or organisation not supported by the ruling party—is not allowed to go. What such restraints will cause to our country in general is pretty clear. What hasn't been explored,

had to leave their ancestral home because they had a different political view as to who should govern the country. Righteousness and wisdom of the elders no longer carry any value. Political affiliation will earn you a position in the places of influence such as in committees of schools, mosques or bazaars. In the process, the faith that people have traditionally held in informal institutions is on the wane. And we can only imagine what would happen if the common ground, which no longer exists in our mainstream politics, disappears from our rural society, too.

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