

An ugly show of police excess

Where is the democratic space?

WE are appalled at the way law enforcers disrupted a peaceful sit in by the BNP on Thursday by brutally swooping on a Chhatra Dal leader they wanted to arrest. During the scuffle the Chhatra Dal activist was manhandled by the police and his clothes torn off. Other members of BNP were hurt in the tussle. What could possibly warrant such violent behaviour from those whom we have entrusted to be protectors of law and order?

First of all, the sit in by the BNP was a peaceful one hence there was no reason for any kind of police force to be employed. Secondly, if it is to arrest a BNP party man because he had cases against him, why did it have to be at that particular venue when the main opposition was holding a sit in?

Clearly the police action was politically motivated and aimed at foiling the opposition's programme.

We are dismayed and concerned to see the increasing tendency to diminish the country's democratic space. In a democracy it is a given that opposition parties will have the right to assemble and carry out political programmes. But what we have seen is that every time the BNP has tried to hold a programme it has been disrupted in one way or another by state forces. The government has denied permission to the BNP to hold rallies while allowing its own party to hold them without any objection whatsoever. Even protests or rallies by other groups have been clamped down upon with unnecessary force. These are anomalies in a democracy and contradict the very principles upon which our constitution is based.

If indeed the government is serious of living up to the claim of being democratic it must fulfil basic prerequisites. Allowing opposition parties by giving them the space to hold peaceful programmes is a primary one. Political intimidation is hardly conducive to holding a free and fair election, something that the ruling party has promised the people.

A losing battle?

Failure to cut child marriage unacceptable

THE news of Bangladesh's failure to reduce its child marriage rate is deeply disturbing. According to Unicef, the rate of child marriage in Bangladesh is now 59 percent, the fourth highest in the world. Far from improving on our 2011 figure which was 52 percent, the quality of our performance has declined steadily. On the contrary, the South Asian region, on the strength of performances by countries such as India, registered an impressive performance bringing the rate from 50 percent ten years ago to 30 percent. The global figure is also quite inspiring. So, what went wrong in Bangladesh's case? This should be a subject of deliberation at the highest level of policymaking.

One cannot help but notice that there is an abject lack of action on the pledges made by the government to end marriage of girls under the age 15 by 2021 and under 18 by 2041. One particular reason behind this failure is the existence of loopholes and exceptions in our legal system, including the special provision of the Child Marriage Restraint Policy, 2017 which allow marriages of underage children under special circumstances. There is also a lack of implementation of the existing rules and regulations as well as a lack of awareness in the rural areas, where the majority of child marriage cases take place. Also, the rise in such cases can be associated with a lack of security—both financial and physical—for girls, which often forces even unwilling parents to marry them off earlier than the permitted age.

Bangladesh cannot forge ahead in this fight without removing all these barriers. The legal and institutional barriers that are there need to go first, but more importantly, we need strong political commitment without which steady progress in any social indicator would be impossible.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Holocaust in Myanmar?

It would be wrong to simply use the term "ethnic cleansing" when referring to the atrocities that Myanmar's security forces and Buddhist extremists have carried out against the Rohingya people. It should, in fact, be termed a holocaust.

Every sensible individual would condemn the holocaust that Hitler had carried out against the Jewish people. Every sensible person would express solidarity with the Jewish victims of Nazi Germany and their families. Similarly, the campaign of genocide that Myanmar's security forces have carried out against the Rohingya people should be roundly condemned by every sensible individual in the world.

MA Hossain, By e-mail

First woman chairman at Janata Bank

According to a report in *The Daily Star*, Luna Shamsuddoha became the "first female chairman of a state bank," when she was appointed as chairwoman at Janata Bank on March 1. The state-owned bank is currently riddled with scandals and controversies in regard to loan disbursement.

So while she deserves to be congratulated for her achievement till date, she does have her hands full at the same time as chairwoman of one of the largest state-owned banks in the country which is already struggling. We hope she will be able to improve the bank's fortune.

Deendayal M Lulla, By e-mail

A monumental display of moral depravity



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

LIKE many millennials who grew up reading Muhammed Zafar Iqbal's coming-of-age novels *Hatkata Robin*, *Dipu Number Two*, *Amar Bondhu Rashed* and his sci-fi books, I was once fascinated by every word that he wrote. Reading him sucked you into a vortex of fantasy, a make-believe world full of colourful characters that kept you on your toes with their bizarre activities. It seemed as real as the first girl you had a crush on, or the first cigarette you had had between stolen glances in the backyard of your school. But the effects of your childhood fantasies begin to wear off as you embrace adulthood.

But Zafar Iqbal was not one to fade into the background noise of our adulthood. For children like us, he was a fascinating writer. But as adults, we also felt his formidable presence as a teacher, an inventor, a promoter of science education, a voice of reason in an otherwise insane sector, a secular commentator, and also a political activist of sort. And like any creative, articulate person of multiple identities, he drew as much adulation as criticism, for he expressed his views openly and without mincing words.

So the first thing that struck me when I got the news of Dr Zafar Iqbal being attacked was the sheer absurdity of it, the notion that someone should try to stop a man from expressing his opinion simply because it contradicted his own. It's a bit like killing a character in a TV drama series because it doesn't fit into the story arc or because it didn't earn positive audience feedback. Only in real life, you don't get to make that call because it's not yours to make.

In a diverse society such as ours, we are more different than alike even though 90 percent of the population belongs to the Islamic faith. Often how we react to a situation depends on what ethnic, linguistic, cultural, social, and—increasingly in recent years—educational background we come from. So it's okay to be different and

have a different opinion. It's okay not to be a big fan of someone however popular or powerful. It's okay not to worship, love, respect, or like him. It's even okay that you hate someone and wouldn't like to have anything to do with him. What's not okay—morally, religiously, and legally—is to act on that impulse and harm, or wish harm to, that person in any way physical.

The beauty of diversity is one usually more appreciated by the intellectual class. In her anecdotal biography *The Friends of Voltaire* (1906), the English

experience, watching my newsfeed fill with their stream of vitriol and nonsense. From the look of things, it appears a hate campaign is underway to discredit Zafar Iqbal, who is no stranger to such vitriol, partly to counter the overwhelming messages of love and support that he received since the attack. Some of the hate posts that appeared in the media are outrageous; there were also comments that were, quite frankly, unprintable. On the opposite side of the fence, some people who condemned the attack also sought to overextend themselves,

enormous contributions in children's literature or science education, for which alone he deserves credit and our sincere gratitude. If you find yourself at variance with him on any issue, just know that there is always room for an alternative viewpoint. And you are perfectly welcome to try yours, using intellectual means, and with the minimum decency expected of an educated person. But using violence and physical force to counter someone is a cowardly act, to say the least, and failing to acknowledge that cowardice is a moral and intellectual



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Dhaka University teachers protesting the attack on eminent educationist and popular writer Professor Muhammed Zafar Iqbal.

writer Evelyn Beatrice Hall beautifully wrote that: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it" (a quote often misattributed to Voltaire himself). So what I found particularly disturbing about the March 3 incident is that not only did someone choose to act on his feelings of hatred and stab Zafar Iqbal in the head, labelling him an "enemy of Islam," it also found explicit or implicit support from people quite intellectually capable—simply because they didn't like his views.

Some of these people I happen to know personally. It was a disillusioning

providing their opponents with even more ammunition.

Ideally, a sad occasion like this shouldn't have been a time for a battle of ideologies, but here we are, divided into different camps, pursuing our own petty agendas, while the politicians are scuffling among themselves over who was culpable for the attack. Importantly, aside from the fact that the incident has brought religious extremism under renewed scrutiny, it also presented us with an opportunity to reflect over our attitude to diversity.

The fact is, whether you like him or not, there is no denying Dr Zafar Iqbal's

depravity of a very dangerous kind. In any case, when you fail to extend moral support to a victim of violence—or an assassination attempt as in the case of Zafar Iqbal—you forfeit your right to ask for the same. It's really that simple.

Contrary to what some people believe, it is our difference of opinion and our openness to it that makes us strong as a society. As someone once said, "Our diversity is our strength. What a dull and pointless life it would be if everyone was the same." Indeed!

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Did Trump start a trade war?

Why tariffs and quotas are not good recipes for a sound trade policy



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

plans to impose tariffs on steel and aluminium imports from Europe. "We must show that we can also take measures. This cannot be a unilateral transatlantic action by the Americans," he emphasised. Other countries in Asia have echoed similar sentiments. There is an increasing sentiment everywhere that US is going it alone and fomenting a trade war.

Unrestricted free trade is the cornerstone of economic growth and global prosperity. However, recent measures adopted by the Trump Administration has raised concerns among America's trading partners. US protectionist actions have also created an intense debate in academic circles. Many of my fellow economists have started to question the gains from international trade, a dictum we held close to our hearts since graduate school. Another fallout from US policies and actions, including its adversarial performance at the recently concluded WTO meetings in Buenos Aires, is the fear that all this could derail global economic recovery. *The Wall Street Journal* on January 24 declared in a headline, "Global Trade Tensions Rise" and warned the Trump administration of possible retaliations following the recent round of tariffs and threats to impose tariffs. "Despite a positive world economic outlook at the outset of 2018, rising trade friction between the US and some of its key trading partners, notably China, is one of the key risks to the global economic outlook," said Rajiv Biswas, Singapore-based chief Asia-Pacific economist at IHS Markit. Condemnation has come from other sources too. On the other side of the globe, *The Irish Times* ran a headline "Trump angers trade partners with protectionist tariffs." So the question is: what is the driving principle behind current US trade policy?

International trade theory is not a very difficult subject to master. By and large, free trade is good for all, but how do we get there? Unfortunately, there is hardly a single country in 2018 that allows free

import and export of goods without any tariff or quota restrictions; we currently have a "managed trade" regime. Some countries allow trade more freely than others, but since tariff and quota are dirty words, all governments restrict imports by various means, including licenses, permits, trade enforcement actions, or other subterfuges. For example, China restricts imports of big cars from the USA by imposing a hefty 30 percent tax and calls it consumption tax or sales tax. Likewise, the US subsidises its agricultural sector and that puts agricultural exports from developing countries at a disadvantage. Most of the USD 25 billion agricultural subsidies go to big conglomerates which grow a handful of crops, including wheat, corn, soybeans, rice and cotton. However, the farm lobby

years. For President Trump, who had promised to cut the size of US deficits to win elections, the surging trade deficit presented a dilemma. On the one hand, his advisers note that US economy is very strong, more so after he came to power, and the stronger US economic growth in 2017 enabled US consumers to buy more imported automobiles, household appliances such as dishwashers and televisions, and electronic equipment. On the other hand, "As a candidate, the president promised to reduce the trade deficit, end China's cheating, stop unfair trade in steel and aluminium, and reverse the tide of lost jobs due to trade," said Leo Gerard, president of United Steelworkers, a strong supporter of Trump's policy.

Thus, President Trump's anti-trade



EU President Jean-Claude Juncker warned the US that EU will retaliate in kind if President Trump follows through with his plans to impose tariffs on steel and aluminium imports from Europe.

PHOTO: AFP

is a strong presence in many states, and in collusion with lawmakers in Washington, it managed to torpedo the Doha Round, even though the World Trade Organisation (WTO) had judged that America's cotton subsidies were illegal.

There are many reasons why countries interfere with free trade, but only a few of them, including the "infant industry" argument discussed below, can claim legitimacy. If a country's trade balance is negative and out of control, it can curtail imports, but that by itself is not a very good reason to impose tariffs, as USA is doing now. Admittedly, US trade deficit on goods and services with the rest of the world jumped to USD 566 billion in 2017, a 12.1 percent increase over the previous year and the highest in nine

agenda is by and large a political act and not really meant to save jobs as he claims. Since taking office he has targeted trade pacts (TPP, NAFTA), and now he has turned his attention to rectifying trade imbalances with specific countries, particularly China, Mexico, Canada, Japan and Germany. However, the course he is following is erratic. For example, Trump was warned by his advisors that pulling out of TPP would damage American relationships in Asia and give China a diplomatic coup. Trade relations are an important tool in global diplomatic games and US will not win any new friends if it continues on the current course geared towards trade-busting.

What about the recent round of tariffs

and quotas against solar panels and dishwashers? On January 22, 2018, USA imposed a 30 percent tariff on solar panels and this has been mocked as the first instalment of an "America First" tariff. The US president approved four years of tariffs that start at 30 percent in the first year which falls to 25 percent after a year and then 20 percent and 15 percent each year after that, before phasing out entirely. However, not everyone in the US is happy; tariffs, whether on solar panels, washing machines, steel or aluminium are not a free lunch. US consumers and industries that use imported raw materials will see their prices go up. "Tariffs have costs, benefits for makers of steel, aluminium", as *The Wall Street Journal* reported. The Solar Energy Industries Association has projected tens of thousands of job losses, 23,000 according to one estimate, in a sector that employed 260,000. From a more benevolent perspective, the tariffs are designed only to warn foreign governments and exporters to play it fair and may be part of a broader strategy to get US and foreign companies to shift production to the US and thus boost US employment in manufacturing. However, we know that solar plants are not "infant industries" and went out of business because of their higher cost of production. GATT and WTO rules allow protection of domestic industry in the face of "unforeseen competition" if temporary protection will enable the domestic industry to make adjustments to meet the competition. "There is hardly a single soul in the US who believes that US appliance manufacturers such as Maytag or Whirlpool companies will become competitive against sources in Malaysia and Vietnam."

More than three decades ago, President Reagan, an ultra-conservative like Donald Trump, railed against protectionism, which Trump has now resurrected. Reagan was facing pressures from many sides to raise tariffs to save jobs. But he came out swinging and appealed to the American people, "I may need your help in resisting protectionist barriers that would hinder economic growth and cost America jobs. Protectionism becomes destructionism; it costs jobs." Reagan knew a thing or two about good economics!

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