

A start of sorts

Outcome doesn't match expectations

THE result of the 14-pary Oikyafront talks was an anti-climax, and the only positive that one could take away was the understanding between the two that the opposition would be allowed to conduct political activities without being hindered, although that is guaranteed by the constitution and a given in any democratic setup, but not in ours. It was also encouraging to see that despite the continued differences in respective positions on several issues there was no rancour or acerbity in the statements of either side following the conclusion of talks.

It was indeed disheartening to see anything of real substance emerge from the talks. If anything, the non-committal stance of the AL was very evident and even more palpable was its effort to hide behind a screen of “cannot go beyond the constitution” argument betraying its denial mode. Vagueness still persists on several sticky issues and we are not sure how the moot point, of credibility and probity of the election process would be ensured. If AL considers the constitution a bar to any action, it is for the party, being in the driving seat, to suggest alternatives remaining within the constitution, to overcome the impediment.

The opposition for its part could suggest options, remaining within the constitution too, to address the various demands, and offer its own solutions. In this regard a joint expert committee could be set up to study the issues and come up with doable answers without breaching constitutional provisions. Given the various points at issue, one would expect the ruling party to engage the major opposition in more than just a one-off meeting.

A loss of great leaders, 43 years ago

In mourning, let us remember what they stood for

FORTY-three years ago, on this day, the nation lost four great leaders, who as trusted lieutenants of Bangabandhu had steered the Liberation War in 1971 to its successful conclusion. It was only a few months after the Father of the Nation was brutally killed along with most of his family on August 15, 1975, former Vice-President Syed Nazrul Islam, former Prime Minister of Bangladesh Tajuddin Ahmed, Captain (Rtd) Mansur Ali, and former Home Minister AHM Quamruzzaman were brutally gunned down in a high-security prison.

As people closest and most loyal to Sheikh Mujib, and undoubtedly great leaders, these four were killed in a most systematic manner. The Jail Killing Day was the second biggest attack on the democracy we fought for, and was used to consolidate the attack on our democracy that started with Bangabandhu's killing. The killers had wanted to deprive the nation of capable leaders who embodied the values Bangladesh's liberation stood for. Even in the political crisis in the days following August 15, 1975, these brave men remained loyal and preferred death to disloyalty.

Today, we mourn their untimely deaths. We recall their exemplary leadership during the crucial war-period, and the devotion and dedication with which they served the fledgling nation. We commend the Awami League for its role for initiating the trials of the killers and its efforts to bring them back to face justice. The killers, of both Bangabandhu and the four, were allowed to escape the country after committing the murders, and some remain at large. We hope the government would ramp up its efforts to track down the killers who have so far eluded justice for the murders of our leaders in 1975. More pertinently, the nation today must reaffirm its commitment for the values and integrity these leaders personified.

SYED MANZOORUL ISLAM

AROUND midnight of November 3, 1975 a number of army personnel entered the Dhaka Central Jail where the four national leaders, Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmad, M Mansur Ali and AHM Quamruzzaman had been taken only a week after the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. They ordered the jailor to bring the leaders from their cells to a room where they waited impatiently, and as soon as the leaders were brought and seated, they opened fire. The jailor could only watch with numbing disbelief and horror, for neither he nor his men had the power to intervene, as the killing squad apparently had the consent of the President who, ironically, was as powerless as the jailor to influence even matters of daily governance. He of course knew, just as most witnesses of the post August 15 events knew, or suspected, that the four leaders would never be allowed to leave the jail alive, but the inevitable end was hastened by the events that unfolded in the turbulent few days preceding November 3. The killers of Bangabandhu, led by Colonel Faruque and Colonel Rashid had lodged themselves in Bangabhaban, the President's official residence, ever since the horrific events of 15 August, and were running the affairs of the state. They had broken the army's chain of command which frustrated many senior officers, among whom was Brigadier Khaled Mosharraf. The Brigadier, a man of principle and courage, according to people who knew him, was also angered by the brutal killing of Bangabandhu. So he decided to act.

The counter coup that he led unsettled the killers who decided, before fleeing the country, to complete their unfinished agenda. There was no doubt in the mind of anyone who was trying to recover from the grief and trauma of August 15 that the killing of the four national leaders—who had played key leadership roles in our war of liberation—was high on that agenda. The jail killings—as these cowardly acts came to be known as—were certainly no blind acts of rage, but a calculated act of revenge, just as the August 15 assassinations had been. If the killers of Bangabandhu were “disgruntled” by some of his actions that didn't sit well with them and his opponents, then there was no reason for them to eliminate the entire family of Bangabandhu except his two daughters who were out of the country. There was also no reason to kill Sheikh Moni and his wife or Abdur Rob Serniabat and some members of his family. The assassinations of August 15, as political analysts and historians have pointed out, were a calculated move on the part of the defeated forces of 1971, and orchestrated by their supporters operating under various disguises to eliminate Bangabandhu and others who they considered responsible for their defeat. Khondakar Mushtaque was very much a part of the plan to replace pro-liberation leadership with a pro-Pakistani one. He even described the killers of Bangabandhu as “SurjaSantan” (Sons of the Sun—whatever that means) and happily proclaimed the “Indemnity Act” of September 26, 1975 (dictated, no doubt, by those who wielded real power) which justified the killings as a “historical necessity” and gave protection to the killers from any legal action.

The gruesome jail killings of November 3 were thus no random acts of revenge. When Mushtaque assumed

the title (but no real power) of President, he put into place a cabinet where many of Bangabandhu's close associates found a place. They preferred ignominy over dignity and thus lost an opportunity to claim a place in the history of courage (one can only imagine what could have happened to them if they refused the invitation from Bangabhaban). But it was their personal choice, and we should leave it at that. What frustrated Mushtaque and the “rebel” officers were the refusal of the four national leaders to join the cabinet. That they would be taken to task for that refusal was a foregone conclusion; what was left to public conjecture and experts' calculation was when that would happen, and how. What shocked the country and the civilised world was that the killers chose the central jail for the place of execution. A prison is no free space, but it at least is supposed to protect its inmates from harm coming from the outside. The world was further shocked by the ease with which the armed killers carried out their mission.



The four national leaders, Tajuddin Ahmad, Syed Nazrul Islam, M Mansur Ali and AHM Quamruzzaman, who were killed on November 3, 1975.

In a recent interview with *Dhaka Tribune* (October 31, 2018) Simeen Hussain Rimi, daughter of Tajuddin Ahmad regretted that if only the jail authorities “had shown courage”, the killings could have been averted. Perhaps. But the climate of fear that the new regime created effectively silenced dissenting voices and turned government functionaries, including the prison authorities, into mere followers of orders.

The seeds of both the August 15 and November 3 killings were sown in the eventful final days of 1971 when the freedom fighters faced the Pakistani forces and their local collaborators on a daily basis. When it became clear to the Pakistani sympathisers that they were going to lose the war, they decided to bide their time, prepare the ground, and strike when things were ripe. The killing of prominent scholars, professionals and public intellectuals on December 14, 1971 was a manifestation of the desperation of the pro-Pakistani forces and an indication of what their plan

involved. They believed that with the elimination of the country's think tank, its progressive social activists and political leaders, no one would be left to mobilise the people and organise a resistance. In retrospect, I tend to believe that in our euphoria of newfound freedom, we chose not to look for either the plans these forces were putting together, or the actors. We allowed our belief in the transforming power of freedom to cancel out our fear of any harm coming our way from among our own people. Even if we knew that the collaborators of 1971 had not hung up these guns or mended their ways, we allowed ourselves to be lax on our vigilance.

The four national leaders were in the crosshairs of their killers for a long time because of their deep commitment to Bengali nationalism, liberal humanism, secularism and democracy and their lifelong opposition to the authoritarian regimes that exploited East Bengal and denied its people their rights. They had been at the forefront of all progressive

political and social conduct. The principled stand they took on many issues (the latest being their refusal to join the Mushtaque camp) quickly became a thing of the past. The regimes that ruled the country after the assassinations of Bangabandhu and the four leaders encouraged the practice of double standards, lies and deceptions; cronyism and sycophancy and promoted personal interest over and above that of the country. Ideals that spurred us to wage the war against the Pakistani forces were not only forgotten, they were condemned to oblivion. The darkest and the most sinister chapter of our post liberation history unfolded when members from the party which was a close ally of the Pakistani army during 1971 were given ministerial positions in a BNP led government and given the right to fly our national flag in their residences and vehicles, a flag that was earned at the cost of so many lives and so much suffering.

Fortunately for us, the chapter came to a close when the pro-liberation

forces united and mounted a challenge. The regime change that followed signalled a new engagement with history, one that attempts to rediscover and restore the truths that had been so systematically suppressed. The arrival of the electronic visual media allowed the youth to revisit 1971 and all the other moments of our history and discover for themselves what really happened and who the heroes and the villains were. Without being dictated by anyone they put together their own archives, which no state entity can challenge, let alone erase.

As Carlyle said, no great man lives in vain. Our four national leaders led full and active lives and now they are being evaluated for their heroic role in the country's independence and are being followed. Their deaths have not been in vain; they are there to lead our youths in our march through time.

Syed Manzoorul Islam, a retired professor of Dhaka University, currently teaches at ULAB and is a member of the board of trustees of Transparency International Bangladesh.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Use of firearms in financial institutions

An issue that was raised in your paper on Tuesday, October 30, 2018 titled “Firearms law flouted at will” is a matter of grave concern.

Being a frequent visitor to banks, I have seen private security guards on duty with arms but never cared to know their credentials. I hope that the relevant authorities pay heed to the matter and take necessary rectifying steps and implement proper regulations as set by the central bank before an innocent life is lost or affected.

The government should simplify the procedure to allow banks to recruit professional security guards instead of complicating the issue by involving different departments. Even though Bangladesh Bank regulations instruct financial institutions to get their own gun licenses, the process is time consuming due to bureaucratic hassles and huge costs.

The fact that banks use security agencies to have gunmen is not ethical. True, the supply of gunman does not coincide with the growth of the banking network. Not all



gunmen are ex-servicemen and they are not bound to fire their arms except for self-defense.

After reading the abovementioned article, I have also noticed that private security gunmen being used in carrying cash which is even more alarming. In many countries such as the UAE, Singapore, etc. it is essential for an individual to obtain a security guard license from the law enforcing authorities before he is cleared for a security job.

In this tech savvy and uncertain times, the world has progressed far ahead in terms

of security. Men do not require to stand guard; a well-placed functional CCTV can do his job at one third the price with 24/7 efficiency. I commend *The Daily Star* for bringing this issue to light and hope it does not fall on deaf ears.

Sami-Al-Islam, By e-mail

Drug addiction is a disease, not a crime

The Daily Star published an opinion piece titled “Drug abuse must be treated as a

public health issue, not a war” on October 31. As a psychiatrist, my reaction is as follows.

There was a time when people used to explain drug addiction on the basis of moral theory which considers the habit as a crime rather than a health issue. With the advancement of brain research, it has been proven that addiction is related to a pathology of brain circuits. American Psychiatric Association (APA) named it “Substance Use Disorder” in its diagnostic manual (DSM5), essentially defining drug addiction as a disease.

Yet, Bangladesh's Central De-addiction Centre is under the ministry of home affairs, not the health ministry, which in my view is the expression of insufficient knowledge on part of policymakers regarding the issue. Law enforcement agencies should deal with illegal drug traders instead of addicted users.

Mental health literacy reduces the vulnerability to develop drug dependence. Such education should be provided in schools.

The issue of drug addiction should be dealt with through the ministry of health. We should meticulously handle the situation in light of relevant scientific

evidence rather than replicating illogical, inhumane and counterproductive interventions to solve the crisis.

Md Saleh Uddin, Assistant Professor, BSMMU

We expected more

From what seems to be the outcome so far, it has to be said that the meeting between the Awami League and the Oikyafront was a big let-down for the people of this country.

Once it was announced that the two sides had agreed to meet, many people had their hopes up that it would produce some meaningful results. This is because meetings between our political parties is a rarity in and of themselves.

The fact that the two sides were willing to meet and not resort to derogatory statements prior to the meeting had raised a lot of hope.

However, it turned out to be an eye-wash above anything else which simply goes to show that political parties in our country are more concerned about themselves, instead of democracy and the people.

Nasiruddin Ahmed, Dhaka