

What constituents expect from MPs

Ramu probe reports remain unheard

Six years on, people wait for justice

It is unfortunate that some of the worst incidents of communal violence that erupted in Ramu of Cox's Bazar in 2012 are yet to be brought to the notice of the High Court (HC) for hearing. One of the three reports furnished on May 16, 2013 singled out failure of local administration, intelligence and law enforcement agencies to read the signs that communal forces were fanning hate against the Buddhist community. The mob violence designed in four phases resulted in the destruction of 12 pagodas and more than 50 houses on September 29, 2012.

One of the committees had identified 298 people for the attacks and recommended that competence of local administration be improved along with strengthening oversight on social media posts. While improvements have been made on surveillance of social media posts, we see little progress on the court hearings on the violence that ripped through Ramu six years ago. And while the court system being overburdened with cases and the reconstitution of HC benches have been cited as prime reasons for a lack of progress on the case, we would like to point out that unless the communal nature of the violence is addressed, it will embolden those who wish to misuse religion of the majority to incite mob violence against the minorities of a different faith.

In the meantime, most of the accused in the Ramu cases are out on bail. We have a general election approaching at the end of the year and the ramifications of a lack of movement on a case as sensitive as this simply cannot be overstated. We would urge the authorities to constitute a separate bench to hear this case and bring those responsible to justice. It is crucial to impart the message that Bangladesh is a country of tolerance and not of bigotry and all its citizens, regardless of creed, enjoy the State's protection.

A village without the basic minimum facilities

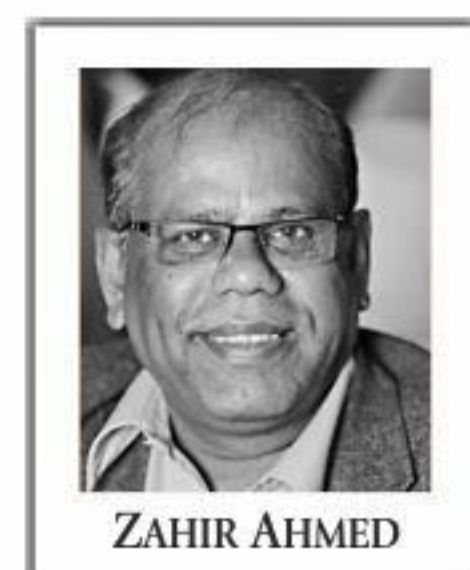
Ensure indigenous peoples' rights

At a time when the government is continuously propagating its achievements in terms of the development works they have done, it is frustrating to learn that there are still villages in the country where there are no primary schools. One such village is Rangamati's Barkal upazila's Koiturkhil Marma Para, home to about 50 Marma and Chakma families. And it is not only that there is no school in the village; the villagers are also deprived of basic amenities such as electricity, safe drinking water and even healthcare.

The situation of the village goes to show our indifference towards the indigenous communities living in the country's hill districts and plain lands. Why are they still deprived of their basic rights such as the right to education and health, which are constitutionally granted to them? And having no school in an indigenous village simply denies indigenous children their right to learn in their mother tongue, as stated in our National Education Policy 2010.

Bangladesh aspires to become a developing country soon. But can that dream be achieved when a section of its people still lag behind in many aspects of national life?

We urge the government to set up a school in the village on priority basis so that over 100 children of the village do not have to go to a distant school just to get primary education. Since the villagers have already given a piece of land for the school and all the paperwork has been done, this should not take much time. In addition, it must be ensured that the village gets all the basic facilities that other villages enjoy.



ZAHIR AHMED

I have been engaged in carrying out research on representation and MPs' work with citizens in their constituencies since the 90s. This has led me to write this piece on understanding whether our MPs' roles and responsibilities are truly rooted in constituency service or cultural and societal aspects. I now find myself constantly on a journey—as a researcher, continually developing my own thoughts and practices.

With the upcoming parliamentary election a little more than a month away, now is a good time to talk about the issue—and I can share my experiences here. I cannot vouch for the verifiable truth of statements or comments made but I can vouch for the reliability of the MPs and constituents who shared their thoughts with me.

Not all MPs are the same; they have diverse interests and commitments which vary with their sex, age, and political background. Although the proportion of women MPs has increased (to around 20 percent) in the Bangladesh National Parliament, the powers of 50 of them are constrained due to them being appointed rather than being elected (of which there are only 22).

Interestingly, elected women MPs show a tendency to get more involved in public engagement in constituency service compared to male MPs. Some women MPs I interviewed were constituency based and living in their own residences with some of them seldom staying in their parliament dormitories in Dhaka. Many women MPs (irrespective of party alliance) did not take a liking to the word "reserved" (i.e. appointed to a seat reserved for women). As one woman MP told me: "In my opinion, we should become MPs through election. It can be best solved by giving us a seat in every upazila and having one of us in every district. Whatever happens, I would rather not be labelled as a 'reserved' woman MP."

Age also makes a difference but in complex ways. Newcomers to Parliament of both genders are keen to be seen spending a considerable amount of time on constituency service because they want to show that they are dedicated and attentive in their service; it is also a way of preparing for the following election. On the other hand, some older popular MPs, who have been elected more than four times, also visit their constituency frequently. These older MPs have less ambition. I found that for newcomers, a degree of certainty with respect to re-nomination as candidates in the next election could make a difference for engagement in service. At the same time,

some of the older MPs, who have been elected many times, visit their constituency frequently as well because ties and obligations have already been established. These ties then continue onto the next generation.

When I asked one MP about visiting his constituency, he began by describing his specific circumstances: "I'm not only the MP of my constituency. I'm also a practitioner of the Dhaka Supreme Court, and so, I spend four days a week in the capital, and throughout the rest of the week, I stay at home which also happens to be my electorate." But then he also referred to his family background. His father was an educationist who was known in the neighbourhood as a devoted promoter of literacy; it was him who advised his son to be a

philanthropist. The MP went on to say, "It was my father's teaching to be benevolent since we were financially solvent. This is why I embarked on a journey to be at people's service. In the process, I met an old man who inspired me to remain as honest as my father did and to do my best to serve the citizens."

Just as MPs vary, so too constituents' views about even the same MP; these views have a range across a moral spectrum. As one MP told me, "You cannot satisfy all and it is a really hard task. Some people will always be critical of you, nothing to do." To give an example, some of the party workers at the local level of an MP complain about being neglected by the MP, while others want him to stay away because he has a bad temper and regularly insults people.

However, some constituents reported that he shows immense kindness, relating a story about how he noticed children being paid in food rather than proper wages so he gave them some of his own cash. MPs ignore their own party workers at their peril; but if they give them too much attention they are accused of cronyism. Female constituents often reported that male politicians never give women anything significant and although the influence of gender (of the elected) on representation in practice deserves more systematic research, this is yet another example of the general point that MPs are not only different, but the responses an MP evokes vary too.

MPs have diverse interests and powers. The constituents have made it clear that to win political support MPs in Bangladesh

citizens through informal conversations, etc. It is seen as culturally insensitive if political leaders do not recognise and acknowledge the pains and pleasures that citizens face in their everyday lives. They do not have the luxury of dismissing some issues as out of their remit; in this context, MPs are forced to deal with any and all problems brought to their attention.

In the upcoming parliamentary election our political parties will nominate those MPs who cultivate a reputation as community leaders in their "home areas" and serve their people (jonogoner sheba). We want MPs who will go to great lengths to be seen as bestowing benevolence on the constituents, and avoiding giving the impression that they have forgotten about their constituents as soon as votes have



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PHOTO: KARL ERNST ROEHL/WIKIMEDIA

been cast.

It is quite revealing that the everyday life of an MP at work in reality is a radical departure from an idealised fantasy of representation. It begs the question: What does representation by an MP mean if s/he colludes with special interests, in order to please others in his or her constituency? An MP once told me, "It's all about how you connect with the people. Whether or not you have the vision to represent them via parliament sessions, your reputation will boil down to how well you physically communicate. And the more people you deal with, the better reputation you will have."

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The old demons are back



JOHN NERY

In Paris, the ceremony to mark the centenary of the end of World War I was stately and moving. It featured such grace notes as students reading from letters written a hundred years ago, when the news about the armistice broke through. "My darling parents," a British soldier wrote. "Today has been perfectly wonderful." The pealing of the bells of Notre Dame cathedral last Sunday, at the exact time the armistice stilled the guns on November 11, 1918, was perfectly wonderful too, a filling sound that was a joy to hear.

But the ceremony—convened by France, which bore the brunt of the fighting in the four years of the war, and where almost 1.4 million soldiers and 300,000 civilians died—was tempered by a sense of danger, of imminent threat. I thought that the seating arrangement at the Arc de Triomphe, the magnificent arch conceived by Napoleon after the Battle of Austerlitz, was telling: In the centre sat the leading representatives of the European project, Germany's Angela

Merkel and France's Emmanuel Macron. Flanking them immediately were the two leaders who actively undermine that project, and the spirit of multilateralism the project represents: Donald Trump of the United States and Vladimir Putin of Russia.

(The Republicans who voted for Trump wanted the opposite of Barack Obama; turns out they also got the

course again and compromise our hope of peace. Let us vow to prioritise peace over everything."

Later in the afternoon, at the launch of his ambitious initiative, the Paris Peace Forum, Macron offered a slightly different metaphor. Referring to the unusual image of dozens of heads of state or government walking down the Champs-Élysées to the Arc de Triomphe earlier in the day,



Russian President Vladimir Putin, Brigitte Macron, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, US President Donald Trump, first lady Melania Trump (hidden), and Morocco's King Mohammed VI attend a commemoration ceremony for Armistice Day, 100 years after the end of the First World War at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, France, November 11, 2018.

PHOTO: BENOIT TESSIER/REUTERS

the Paris Peace Forum, and in remarks made in the run-up to these events, Macron attacked the right-wing nationalism that Putin practises and Trump embraces. At the Armistice centenary, Macron, with his eye both on world opinion and domestic politics, gave a pithy definition of the crisis as he saw it: "Patriotism is the exact opposite of nationalism. Nationalism is a betrayal of patriotism. In saying 'our interests first, whatever happens to the others,' you erase the most precious thing a nation can have, that which makes it live, that which causes it to be great and that which is most important: its moral values."

Earlier, he had told *Ouest-France*: "In a Europe divided by fears, nationalist assertions and the consequences of the economic crisis, we see in an almost methodical manner the re-articulation of everything that dominated life in Europe from post-World War I to the 1929 crisis."

Merkel, formally launching a forum teeming with earnest projects and candid talk, spoke also with a sense of foreboding: "The concern I have is that blinkered nationalist views may gain ground once again."

She denounced the "national vaingloriousness and military arrogance," including her country's, that caused so much "senseless bloodshed," not only in the first but also the Second World War. At one point, she made a startling confession. She pointed to the sterling example of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which marks its 70th anniversary next month, and then said: "I ask myself often, imagine we, the international community today, would have to establish such a declaration on human rights. Would we manage that? I fear, not."

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Voices of the youth missing in politics

Throughout our history, young leaders and activists were the vanguard of all nationalist movements that eventually resulted in the independence of Bangladesh. Most of those who participated in the Liberation War of 1971 were under 40 or 30 years old.

Yet, as writer Syed Abul Maksud recently expressed in one of his opinion pieces, young people have nearly vanished from the political landscape today. He also wrote of his disappointment towards the older political leaders who are understandably reluctant to welcome young blood for obvious reasons.

In all major political parties, young leaders are not considered for influential positions. In the recent much-awaited dialogue between the governing party and opposition parties, most of the participants were between 60-70 years of age. On the other hand, the age of nearly 70 percent of our population is below 34.

Therefore, unless there is proportionate youth representation and participation in politics, voices of those from the largest age group in the country will be left out. When we have representatives of such a large section of people missing from the political landscape, what hope do we have? Md Tarek Aziz Bappi, University of Dhaka

In his speech, Macron sounded the alarm: "Old demons are resurfacing. History sometimes threatens to take its tragic course again..."

opposite of Woodrow Wilson, who electrified a weary world's imagination at the end of the so-called Great War.)

The reason for the seating arrangement escapes me, unless it has nothing to do with the alphabet or with the role their respective countries performed during the so-called Great War and everything to do with Macron exercising his host's privilege to make a point, and form a visual metaphor. Today's standard-bearers of democracy are surrounded.

In his 20-minute speech at the ceremony, Macron sounded the alarm: "Old demons are resurfacing. History sometimes threatens to take its tragic

Macron asked: "History will no doubt retain an image of 84 heads of state and government united... but what remains uncertain for the future is the way that will be interpreted, this image. Will it be the brilliant symbol of lasting peace between nations or on the contrary the photograph of a last moment of unity before the world sinks into a new mess?"

As it happens, two leaders did not take part in that walk; both Trump and Putin, asserting security protocols, drove straight up to the Arc de Triomphe. In his speech at the ceremony, officially the International Ceremony for the Centenary of the 1918 Armistice, and at