

Make victory meaningful

Live up to the dreams of martyrs

TODAY is a day that comes with a mixed feeling. The taste of victory and joy of independence was marred, for victory came at the cost of three million lives and the dignity of thousands of our mothers and sisters. As we celebrate our triumph over the occupation force, we pay tribute to the martyrs, freedom fighters and all those who made the supreme sacrifice for our freedom. We pay homage to Bangabandhu and the four national leaders, who, inspired by Bangabandhu, led the nation to victory. We thank the present government's unflinching resolve in bringing to book many notorious war criminals.

As we celebrate our 47th Victory Day, it is also a time to look back and see how much we have done to fulfil the dreams of our martyrs. Yes, we have travelled far from when we were touted a "bottomless basket", and today this nation of more than 160 million people is self-sufficient in food. It has been elevated to second spot in manufacturing after China in the global apparels scene and Bangladesh is well on its way to graduating to a lower middle-income country.

Despite these laudable achievements, we also face challenges. Because we are a populous country, there is an ever-increasing need to create more jobs, upgrade the education system so that the workforce can be transformed from a semi-skilled to a skilled one and provide accessible healthcare for all. In terms of governance and transparency, we look forward to a peaceful and inclusive election at the end of the year resulting in a vibrant parliament that will represent all the people of this land. Only when we have achieved a society that is free of want and where everyone is equal before law and has a democratic system where voters can exercise their voting rights freely and where there is freedom of speech in the full sense of the term, will we get the true taste of victory, for which so many millions of our compatriots laid down their lives.

Where's the level playing field?

EC must act without being embarrassed

It is regrettable that the opposition candidates across the country continue to be targeted and their campaigns attacked by their political opponents—something that makes the EC's claim of a level playing field a laughing matter.

On December 14, while returning after paying homage to the martyred intellectuals, Dr Kamal Hossain, the chief of the opposition coalition, came under attack, leaving scores of people including ASM Abdur Rab injured, while the police stood by in silence. This came just days after the attack on the motorcade of Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, the BNP general secretary.

Far from taking action to protect the candidates, the police have arrested many opposition activists—including several candidates and senior leaders—in old cases, all the while many of the current MPs and ministers are still using police protection in their campaigns.

This newspaper reported that more than 40 BNP leaders and activists were injured in clashes with the police in four districts just the day before yesterday. The police, instead of ensuring that opposition candidates can campaign peacefully, are creating obstacles.

Meanwhile, rather than being proactive, the EC is ruining whatever is left of its credentials by downplaying the severity of these attacks, claiming that the number of such violent incidents isn't high enough to be worried. While the number is obviously high, the EC should measure the severity of the problem by also considering the targets of the attacks. If this continues, our hope of a peaceful parliamentary election will be dashed and the outcome of the election will be bereft of credibility.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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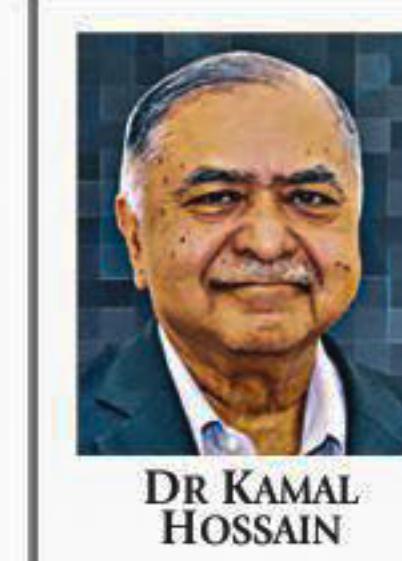


Young people should join politics

Politics remains more or less an unpopular vocation and an extremely debatable topic in our country—more so for many young people who seem generally disinclined to have anything to do with politics. But little do they realise that to affect change in society, joining politics is necessary as it brings them closer to the public and puts them in the driving seat.

I have recently come across a news story in *The Daily Star* which mentioned a 25-year-old female doctor from Sherpur-1 constituency contesting the upcoming election. I think it's a good thing that young people are coming forward to serve their country. No matter what the outcome, it inspires hope that a section of today's youth is joining politics even though most of our parents won't even let us dream of it.

Kowsar Rahman, Uttara, Dhaka



DR KAMAL HOSSAIN

BANGLADESH
47th Anniversary of Victory

We are celebrating the 47th anniversary of our independence today. Our independence was won through the sacrifices of countless lives and untold sufferings. Our people have had to overcome innumerable challenges. In the words of a popular song, no one can search and find a country like ours. We could indeed readily agree. Which state can claim that it gained independence in nine months after overcoming a genocidal onslaught that claimed millions of lives? What was remarkable was that people then framed their Constitution within less than a year. The Constitution, which bears the signatures of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and includes those of Syed Nazrul Islam and Tajuddin Ahmed, came into force on this day 46 years ago. Among the people's achievements is that after overcoming the challenges over these 46 years, the Constitution, signed by the framers, is still formally in force. A signed copy of the Constitution can be seen proudly displayed in our national museum.

The challenges we have overcome include the assassination of the Father of the Nation, within four years of independence, and the assassination of four national leaders, who were his closest associates, within a few months of his assassination. Another formidable challenge is to retain the 1972 Constitution, which came into force 46 years ago. During this period, powerful interventions took place which stopped short of the "abrogation" of the Constitution. The Constitution was "suspended" several times, but it has still survived. Some of the changes made in it through amendments, brought in after interventions by force, have since been held to be unconstitutional as a result of popular movements and court rulings.

The third challenge is the doubling of the population since 1971. Our population today is between seventeen to eighteen crores. Yet we have maintained the viability of the state, and the production capacity of our people has generated sustained economic growth.

The patriotism and love for their country by our people has been proved beyond doubt by the positive contribution they have continued to make. This has been done despite gaps in good governance and the rule of law, and despite parliament and other democratic institutions having not been allowed to function for certain periods; the protection of the rule of law and independence of judiciary were also undermined from time to time.

Notwithstanding these, we have completed 47 years of our existence as a sovereign state. We can now look forward to celebrating together the 50th anniversary of our independence in 2021. As we move forward towards 2021, it is imperative to undertake a hard-headed assessment, so that we can derive encouragement and strength from the positive achievements, but it is crucially important to know

what is still to be achieved and the challenges to be overcome if the peoples' aspirations are to be realised.

It is necessary, therefore, that during the next 14 days, before the election scheduled for December 30, citizens throughout the country remain alert and vigilant in protecting their right to vote and the process of free and fair elections. Empowerment of the people is secured through a free and fair election. The use of "black money" that is injected into the electoral process has been the biggest obstacle to realising a democratic parliament. Article 118 of the Constitution provides that the election process must be conducted by an election commission, which shall be independent and be subject only to the Constitution and any other law.

I had the privilege of being Bangabandhu's chief election representative in 1970. I set up his election office in Dhaka. It was reported by Bengali employees that senior Central Government officers had arrived

explain to convince each of the citizens of the importance of exercising their vote wisely and not to vote for those who had exploited them and robbed them of their money over the previous two decades. Our female volunteers were to convey the same message to the mothers and sisters in the houses.

We need to recall their historic role today as we move forward towards the election scheduled for December 30, 2018. We had made repeated demands to hold the coming election at least one or two months later, so as to allow us to reach the voters, but this was refused. Only an extension of one week was allowed fixing the date on December 30. This is too short a time for an adequate house-to-house and person-to-person campaign.

There is no doubt that those who fought for liberation and who sacrificed their lives never envisaged



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

with huge amounts of money and were boasting that the election would be drowned by the amount of money brought. I reported this to Bangabandhu, stating that we must fight their money by mobilising the people, as we did not have that kind of money.

Bangabandhu's instruction was that people should be told that they should take as much money as they could but be aware that this was their money which was coming back to them. They should accept the money but not vote for those who were handing out the money.

I had more than a hundred young volunteers, including university boys and girls, with whom we undertook a house-to-house campaign, during which we got to know every street of Dhaka. Our task was to

that the citizens' right to vote would be undermined by the use of money in crores of taka. It is, therefore, imperative to urge that every voter must play his or her role as owners of the state and exercise our right to vote and to ensure that the election is free and fair.

Meaningful vigilance is essential by our citizens to see that the Election Commission discharges its constitutional duty of ensuring a free and fair election and to protect the electoral process from any kind of intervention by money, muscles or manipulation. Let this be how we celebrate the 47th anniversary of our independence.

Dr Kamal Hossain is the chief of Jatiya Oikyafront.

Have we been faithful to the martyrs?

SYED MUHAMMAD IBRAHIM

On December 16, 1971, I was barely 23 years old, and a lieutenant in the second battalion of the East Bengal Regiment. I was the company commander of Charlie company of the battalion.

As one who has taken part in the Liberation War, as an armed soldier, my experience and memory is of course exclusive to soldiering. Millions of Bangladeshi suffered various kinds of oppression, torture, injury, dishonour and, finally, death for supporting the independence of our country. But active fighters with weapons were not in the millions. In the last 47 years or so, no one has tried to bring out the exact figure. However, books have been written by fighters laying down the accounts of battles and the war as a whole.

Forty-seven years down the memory lane, I recall the companionship and comradeship of the fighters during the entire nine months. A brave dear friend, Lieutenant Badiuzzaman, became a martyr on December 4 near the Azimpur Railway Station, a few hundred meters north of the Akhaura town. Badiuzzaman was the company commander of Bravo Company of Second East Bengal, as well as my course-mate or friend at Pakistan Military Academy Kakul. I lost Naib Subedar Ashraf and a dozen more soldiers in the same battle of Akhaura.

The Bangladesh Forces of 1971 lost a few thousand soldiers during the entire nine months. A few thousand Indian officers and soldiers also laid down their lives in December 1971 alone. The Indians were helping the freedom fighters; today is a befitting day to recall the bonds formed on the battlefields and to reaffirm our gratitude.

Simultaneously, it is also the time to answer a few questions honestly and courageously. Question one: why did India give us a helping hand? Question two: how do we express our gratitude towards India for their great help? Question three: what is the limit of gratitude towards India in terms of time or in terms of giving? Question four: how do we carry out self-criticism for not fulfilling the aspiration of the people before and during the Liberation War?

In 1971, India gave us a lavish helping

hand. It sheltered almost 10 million refugees on their soil for almost nine months. The refugees were not only given shelter, but food, some treatment and clothing. International charitable organisations closely cooperated with India. The entire matter was a burden on the Indian economy. India had to look for friends in the international arena. So one reason for India to offer a helping hand was of course its humanitarian attitude. Not all political leaders or statesmen are always humanitarian.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was courageous and steadfast in surmounting the local and international criticism. America was not a friend of China and Soviet Russia in 1971, yet while Russia supported India's position, China did not. In 1971, Pakistan was a country with a reasonable standing among the community of Muslim countries. Very few Muslim countries supported the aspirations of the Bangladeshis in 1971. Yet Indira Gandhi pushed forward.

There were other reasons for India's help. For India, it was a geo-strategic necessity to break Pakistan; and the opportunity came without much asking. India wanted to break Pakistan. India wanted a friendly, independent neighbouring country in the East, particularly in the context of unfriendly relations with China. In the context of numerous insurrections raging in the North Eastern provinces, India needed a friendly neighbour which could help implement policies of India's central government. So by December 17, 1971, India bound seven hundred million Bangladeshi people with laces and folds of gratitude.

Within Bangladesh, there have always been questions about something called "the spirit of Liberation War". This matter has been described differently by people with different approaches. When the war began, I was a Second Lieutenant in the Pakistani Army, with only seven months of commissioned service. Before joining the army, I was totally apolitical because of my education being in Cadet College. The first tint of political thinking in my mind came while I was a gentleman-Cadet at the Pakistan Military Academy Kakul where I could discern the anti-Bengali attitude among some Pakistanis.

After my commission, however young I may have been, I could still clearly discern the anti-Bengali attitude in the

Pakistani political arena.

As a student in the primary and secondary schools before joining the Cadet College, I had the opportunity of being fellow-mates of Bihari-Pakistanis. The attitude of the Bihari-Pakistanis was aggressive and characterised by a superiority complex. In the Pakistan Army also, the attitude of the majority officers and soldiers who belonged to West Pakistan was aggressive and characterised by a superiority complex or mind-set. It did not take long for me to become politically conscious so that before March 1971, like everyone else in the whole of East Pakistan, I was also orientated towards an upcoming struggle. Nine months passed without leaving much time to ponder on politics.

Indeed activities were so intense and battle-oriented that we hoped for everyday to be longer than 24 hours. At the end of the war, to think over the political aspect of the war was a luxury for young lieutenants and captains. Personally, I again got the opportunity to look back at the political memories of the War of Liberation only after becoming commandant of the Bangladesh Military Academy, located at Bhatiari North of Chattogram city.

In my retired life, there has been ample time to think of politics. I surmise that, the spirit of the Liberation War can best be described relating it to the causes of the war. The absence of democracy in the country, or lack of respect for democratic values by the Pakistani rulers, or undermining the democratic spirit which shined in the minds of the people of East Pakistan (much more than in the minds of the people of West Pakistan)—is the first reason which gave birth to a yearning for an independent Bangladesh.

The second reason is the alienation of the Bengali popular culture and literature by the West Pakistani bourgeois and bureaucratic rulers. The third reason was depriving the Bengali people of their genuine right to an equal or equitable share in the services and economic activities of the country. The fourth, among many more reasons, was the misuse of the religion of Islam and not implementing its true spirit in national or daily life, while passively discouraging the practice of other religions.

The cumulative effect of these four reasons and others (not discussed in this column) was two-fold. First, the quality

of life in East Pakistan was far below expectation, and second, people were disenchanted with the very concept of the state of Pakistan. The last nail in the coffin was the total and flagrant disregard for the result of the nation-wide election held in the state of Pakistan in December 1970. The military junta ruling Pakistan had no logic or reason in disregarding the results of the election, but they did. They did so partly having been coaxed by the then Peoples Party of Pakistan. In any democratic context, it was the right of the people of East Pakistan, nay the Bengalis, to opt out of the state of Pakistan. Having been denied the right to do so peacefully, the Bengali people had only one option, that is to fight and gain independence.

I want to highlight two aspects related to the spirit of the Liberation War. The first is "the spirit of democracy and respect for democratic values." Officially, democracy is being practiced in Bangladesh but the spirit is not being honoured. In other words, numbers matter, not the feeling.

The second is, or could be, the economic emancipation of the people of the country. Wealth and resources are distributed among the people in a highly inequitable manner making a mockery of democracy, fundamental human rights and social justice. It seems to me that a coterie of people think and behave as if Bangladesh is their kingdom.

Between December 12 and 16, 1971, our battalion was positioned on the bank of Balu River, in the Eastern side of Dhaka. Several minutes before 5 pm on the 16th, I received the order to withhold weapons. I was told that Pakistan had surrendered. Our battalion walked along the Demra area to Dhaka road, reaching the stadium at present day's Bangabandhu Avenue by about 8 pm. We were in the capital of a sovereign, enemy-free, independent Bangladesh. On that historic evening of December 16, the memory of losing friends and comrades was fresh and burning; it is fresh till today. I would like to conclude by recalling that we owe a lot to the martyrs of the Liberation War.

Patriotic citizens, let us pass every single day by always asking the question, "Am I being faithful to the martyrs?"

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