

Another case of political vendetta

A village blockaded for voting for the opposition!

FIRST a woman was raped in Noakhali for voting for BNP and now an entire village has been put under siege for the very same reason. That the village of Kolma in Rajshahi was cut off from the rest of the area around it—with nobody allowed to leave or enter, even vehicular traffic through the village barred from movement, and basic services, reportedly, disrupted for six days after the election—is reprehensible. It reflects, unfortunately, the regression of political culture in the country. The threshold of political tolerance has sagged dismally low, trickling down from the top to the grassroots also. Going against the ruling party has become a crime. This is totally contrary to the spirit expressed by the president of the victorious party, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

In the past we had seen minorities hounded from their hearth and homes for voting for candidates of their choice. Regrettably, the ugly ethos has continued, only because the state and more importantly, the political parties, have failed to deal with the errant members firmly. When there is absence of strict measures against such behaviour from the party leadership, it not only encourages repetition of such behaviour, but also makes the party hierarchy no less responsible for the act.

We fail to understand why the administration had not been able to restore normalcy in the area immediately. Compromise is well and good, but harsher action should have been taken against those who had taken law in their own hands and enforced the blockade so that the locals could go about their business normally. This amounts to challenging the administration and thereby the government.

This is a very dangerous trend that bodes badly for governance. Above all, the law of the land must be upheld and any challenge to our legal framework must be dealt with harshly.

DMCH's decision would save more lives

We hope other hospitals follow suit

THE decision by the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) authorities to set up all medical test equipment under one roof is an excellent idea and will hopefully make life much easier for patients. For far too long have patients had to run around from one corner to another to get the necessary tests done in nearly all the hospitals of our country. To have patients who are suffering from any form of ailment—particularly serious ones—endure such difficulty is simply illogical. Therefore, we are pleased to see the DMCH making this much-needed change.

In the past we have seen a number of cases where lives were unnecessarily lost because hospital staff were unable to provide patients with the necessary treatment in a timely manner. But what is often forgotten is that in many of those cases, the hospital staff simply did not know what their patients were suffering from and thus what treatment to give them in the first place. With all the testing facilities brought closer together, patients' time will hopefully be saved which could make all the difference for their treatment and potentially save lives by allowing doctors to make more timely interventions. Additionally, it should also make the running of the hospital itself more efficient by speeding up communication between hospital staff.

All things considered, we believe the initiative taken up by the DMCH will improve its healthcare services. And we encourage other hospitals to consider emulating their example so that the overall quality of healthcare provided in our country gets bumped up a notch.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Remove election posters and banners

Even though social media is said to have played an important role in influencing voters in this election, politicians still used many posters and banners as part of their campaigns. Even after the election, the posters and banners continue to be on display all around. Many of these campaign materials are water-resistant, meaning they have plastic coating. In a few days, these and the ropes that were used to hang them will begin to wear out and be left on the streets, making them messy and dirty.

The local government authorities should take steps to remove these materials. The Dhaka City Corporation authorities have already taken a laudable step in that direction. The candidates themselves should voluntarily remove their posters as well.

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devastating story for us ordinary citizens and especially for women of this country. It is hard to find words to describe the disillusionment and anguish I know I share with most of my fellow citizens that such horrendous violence should be inflicted as a twisted form of political revenge. While all the rapists have been arrested, even the man who "ordered" the 10 to 12 men to rape that woman "to teach her a lesson" for challenging him, what we cannot escape is the realisation of how far the culture of impunity of political elites and their cohorts has gone.

A former member of Char Jubilee Union Parishad was so "dedicated" to his job of making sure no one voted for "sheaf of paddy," the symbol representing his party's political rival, that he just could not tolerate the fact that a woman, the wife of a CNG driver, would dare to defy him. According to the rape survivor who is still in critical condition in hospital and in mental trauma, she had gone to the polling centre at Char Jubilee-14 Government Primary School, Suborno Char, Noakhali, around 11am on December 30. She took the ballot paper from the assistant presiding officer and went to a booth to vote. According to her, Ruhul, a ruling party associate, and his accomplices kept insisting that she vote for "boat". She refused and casted her vote for "sheaf of paddy" and this infuriated them. According to the victim, Ruhul tried to snatch her ballot paper but she didn't let him and put the paper inside the box. He then threatened her and she answered back.

She paid heavily for that act of courage. Soon after midnight on December 31, some 10-12 men carrying sticks entered her home by cutting the surrounding fence. They tied up her husband and four children with rope and dragged her outside the house and raped her. She was beaten unconscious and the rapists also looted the family's cash and gold jewellery, according to her husband. The cries of her children alerted the neighbours who called a village doctor but her condition worsened; she was



bleeding profusely and had to be rushed to the hospital where she is undergoing treatment. When the superintendent of police was contacted by a correspondent of *The Daily Star*, he confirmed that a rape had taken place but said it was nothing to do with voting. Ruhul, who is accused by the victim as being the mastermind who had instructed his cohorts to rape her, completely denied the accusation and said he had no enmity with her. In fact, after a wave of scathing criticism in social

media, the police did act; they called the husband and helped him file a case with a list of nine of Ruhul's accomplices in the First Information Report (FIR). Only Ruhul's name was left out. The victim's husband says he was asked to come to the station and sign the FIR; he explained that being illiterate, he didn't know that Ruhul's name was not on it. Eventually, amidst condemnation by rights organisations, Ruhul has been arrested as well as seven of the other accused.

We cannot imagine the nightmare this

punishment as they are very much from the "well-connected" and "politically influential" category.

This particular gang-rape has been driven by the self-destructive politics of this country that takes rivalry to the basest, most beastly levels. It is where sycophants of whichever party that happens to rule become uncontrollable, rabid hounds that stop at nothing to please their masters; they threaten, kill, maim, even rape. Because in almost all cases, the ends justify the means and achieving the goal is what matters, whatever the cost. It also means humiliating and crippling a rival, again at whatever cost, no matter how immoral, underhand or violent.

On December 31, Obaidul Quader, general secretary of Awami League, urged his party activists and leaders in a public gathering not to be vengeful towards political rivals, and that this was in accordance with the prime minister's directive. And on December 31, we had the misfortune to hear that a young woman, who stood up to intimidation and was adamant about exercising her right, had to pay a heavy price by being subjected to sexual violence. The police have arrested the man behind this horrible crime and he has been expelled from the party.

It is a cruel joke that such a deplorable, cowardly crime should be inflicted on a woman voter in the backdrop of the ruling and winning party's manifesto that promises to work for "women's empowerment". A vague term indeed and an empty promise when we consider the chilling statistics: 662 women raped, of whom 57 died, and 183 of them gang-raped between January and October 2018.

Women of this liberated country have never had to fight for their right to vote. It was a given as was the right to be equal citizens as men. For a woman to be subjected to gang-rape because she chose to exercise that right is not just reprehensible but a tragic mockery of the values of our Liberation War.

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

A Year to Act

IAN GOLDIN and ROBERT MUGGAH

LET us hope that 2019 is the year when the historical tide turns. In 2018, divisions within and between countries continued to deepen. And while geopolitical tensions and political tribalism have transformed international relations and national politics, new technologies are upending long-held assumptions about security, politics, and economics. Complicating matters further is the growing interdependence of our societies. We are all increasingly subject to forces beyond the control of any one country, city, or individual, not least when it comes to climate change.

What a difference three decades make. Back in 1989, the collapse of the Soviet bloc seemed to augur a triumph for liberal democratic principles and values. The development of the World Wide Web that year promised a new age of human flourishing and global cooperation. As recently as the 2000s, flashy catchphrases like "the death of distance" and "the world is flat" abounded.

Yet far from flattening the world, globalisation has made it more mountainous and uneven. More than ever, one's postal code determines one's perspective, lifespan, and fate. Instead of replacing national ideals with shared values, globalisation has led to rapacious competition, the decline of welfare states, and the corrosion of international institutions. And though there technically are more democracies today than in 1989, many are becoming more illiberal.

Not surprisingly, public support for globalisation has waned. The attacks of September 11, 2001, and the USD 5.6 trillion "war on terror" certainly didn't help. Nor did the 2008 financial crisis, which exposed the failure of experts and institutions to manage interdependence and technological change. A growing divide between elites and all those who have been "left behind" has poisoned politics for a generation.

Still, the disillusionment with globalisation is mostly confined to North American and Western European countries. After all, the fortunes of the emerging powers in East and Southeast Asia have risen, and most people around the world are objectively better off in the aggregate than they were 30 years ago. Outside of the West, average incomes since the fall of the Berlin Wall have doubled—and tripled in China. Life expectancy in many developing countries has increased by a whopping 15 years, and three billion more people worldwide have learned to read and write.

But there is no guarantee that this "New Enlightenment," as Steven Pinker

of Harvard University calls it, will continue delivering progress. The Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came in the wake of the Renaissance, which was a period not only of scientific and artistic revolution, but also of rising intolerance, religious warfare, and persecution of scientists and intellectuals.

The reactionary violence during and after the Renaissance owed much to elites' failure to manage the rapid change and rising inequalities occasioned by the print revolution. Today's elites should take note. The spectacular fallout from the US-led invasion of Iraq and the 2008 financial crisis profoundly damaged public trust in authorities and experts.



Anti-immigrant demonstrators wave the Flemish flag at a rally in Brussels on December 16, 2018. The Flemish nationalist party Vlaams Belang and some far-right groups organised the March Against Marrakesh to protest the UN's Global Compact on Migration.

PHOTO: AFP

What unites right- and left-wing populism is the idea that the old guard has let the people down while ensconcing itself in a cocoon of privilege.

They have a point. Flawed policies to promote globalisation have let us down and contributed to growing inequality. And now, artificial intelligence and automation are threatening to replace routine jobs and accentuate social divisions. Can political leaders and citizens muster the will to tackle common threats, or are we headed for further fragmentation? Much will depend on the steps taken in 2019. Now more than ever, we must grapple with the accelerating and interdependent

drivers of change.

To that end, policymakers must take steps to protect the most vulnerable. Social safety nets are being slashed precisely when people need them most. After the financial crisis depleted government resources and produced crippling debts, governments such as that of the US have made matters worse by cutting taxes.

More broadly, we all need to roll up our sleeves and get a handle on globalisation. That means abandoning the outdated twentieth-century paradigm that divides all politics into left and right, socialism and capitalism. The politics of 2019 is values-based, which is why traditional political parties are being

outflanked by parties appealing to national sentiment and nostalgic fantasies. Today's political revolution has so far been defined by anger and frustration. But those sentiments can and should be harnessed to serve the goal of constructive change. To achieve an inclusive globalisation, we must address rising inequality, embrace diversity, and rescue international cooperation from the spectre of unilateralism.

The stakes could not be higher than they are in 2019. When extremism, algorithms, fake news, and foreign manipulation drive politics, democracy itself is

threatened. Without more active engagement on the part of policymakers and political leaders, there can be little hope for the future. The accelerating pace of change, along with deepening international interdependence, makes it harder, not easier, to find common solutions.

It is tempting to try to stop the clock and retreat from hard choices. But the changes underway will affect us all, regardless of whether we participate in the conversation. The only way forward, then, is to improve our literacy and engage with complex ideas. To do otherwise and play the victim is to invite catastrophe. Only by shaping the future ourselves will we fear it less. Unless bold people act, the arc of history will not bend toward justice or

improved outcomes.

Three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we are again at a crossroads, and a battle of ideas is raging. The new walls being built within and between societies pose a grave threat to our collective future. This is the year to start knocking them down.

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