

Where is the opposition?

New parliament with old hue

THE 11th parliament had its first session on Wednesday with an assurance by the prime minister that the opposition would not face hindrance in the performance of its role in the parliament and that it would be able to criticise the government freely. These indeed are very appropriate articulations that underscore the fundamental requirement of a vibrant democracy and a functional parliament. But the question is: where is the opposition?

We understand that the JP(E) will assume the role of opposition in the 11th Jatiya Sangsad. And this is what makes the current parliament as unique as the previous one, because the party that will be occupying the other side of the aisle had participated under the coalition led by the AL in the election, albeit with its own party symbol. And last time it had the cake and ate it too. It held the same status in the last parliament that it has decided to take on this time, and the less said about its performance on the floor of the parliament, the better.

It bears repetition that the hallmark of a functional democracy is executive accountability, which only an efficient parliament and a vocal and active opposition can ensure. Unfortunately, in the last 10 years, we have witnessed the diminishing of the difference between the executive and the judiciary, with the latter being subtly subsumed under the former because of the very makeup of the parliament. And that makes for anything but an effective parliament and, even less, democracy in its true spirit.

However, we feel that this is an opportunity for the JP(E) to redeem itself and regain some credibility as a political party which it has lost in the last five years—tied to the government's apron string. We hope that it would fulfil its due role by imposing checks and balances on the executive in the greater public interest, and help in the legislative function through constructive, but sharp, criticism.

Loss of farmlands must end

Implement land usage policy

ONE would have thought that in such a densely populated country like Bangladesh, steps would have been taken by now to protect arable land so as to ensure food security. Sadly, that has not been the case and the country has been experiencing the loss of approximately one percent of total arable land annually, i.e. 68,700 hectares of land, that is converted for other uses, according to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) data from 2015. A recent seminar held in Jatiya Press Club brought together land activists and experts to discuss the issue.

We have seen the steady conversion of arable lands for industry and real estate over the years. To make matters worse, farmlands have now to contend with a new menace which comes in the form of removal of topsoil that is used by the thousands of brick kilns that dot the rural and urban countryside. It is mystifying that we have the National Land Use Policy (NLUP) that was formulated in 2001 but which never saw the light of day as it was never implemented. In it, there were various modalities for land zoning for integrated planning and management of land resources in the country. The NLUP also placed emphasis on formulating a zoning law, but for reasons beyond our comprehension, the policy was never implemented by any of the successive governments that have held office since 2001.

Today, Bangladesh is in the midst of unprecedented urbanisation and industrialisation. Yet, in the absence of implementation of the land usage law, the country continues to lose its precious arable lands. We will not be able to maintain sustainable growth if the country does not have enough food to feed the population and in that light, the NLUP must be updated and implemented without delay.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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A lesson for the world

The recent dam collapse in Brazil that left at least 99 people dead with over 250 people missing is truly tragic. The event has sent shockwaves throughout the world. After the incident, the issue of safety measures for workers has resurfaced. Some have said that the collapse of the dam was many years in the making. And it marked the second such incident in Brazil in the last three years.

This should serve as a lesson for the world. It is time we began telling our policymakers and businesspeople that there is no alternative to having serious safety measures in place for those working in essential yet risky jobs. Countries should also be prepared to face such situations through proper evacuation plans. The safety of countless people who are employed to build and protect critical public infrastructures should be given the utmost importance by the authorities concerned.

P Senthil Saravana Durai, By email



Vigilante justice or what?

MORE THAN JUST FACTS



ON January 17, police in Khagan, Savar recovered the bullet-hit body of a man who was later identified as Ripon. Ripon, a line chief at a local garment factory, was the prime accused in a

gang-rape case involving a female worker from his factory. There was a note attached around his neck, which read: "I'm the main culprit behind the rape." Nine days later, roughly a hundred miles south of Khagan, in a village called Baltala in Jhalakathi, another bullet-ridden body of a rape suspect was found. This body, too, carried a note which read: "My name is Shajal. I am the rapist of [the victim's name]. This is my punishment."

Both the cases have attracted much attention on social media. That ordinary people would welcome and condone what appears to be an instance of "vigilante justice" is hardly surprising—especially in a country where the legal system has not been able to evoke public confidence.

In a recent interview with BBC Bangla, Nur Khan Liton, a rights activist and crime analyst, says he believes the recent murders might have been committed by the law-enforcing agencies, citing previous precedents of them being involved in extrajudicial killings.

In April and May last year, two suspects in child rape cases were killed in alleged shootouts with police in Cox's Bazar and Satkhira, respectively. In 2014, a suspect in a case related to the abduction and rape of a college student was also killed in an alleged shootout with police detectives in Uttara.

Liton's assumption about the involvement of security forces in the deaths of alleged rapists was reinforced, most recently, by yet another incident on January 28, roughly a day after his interview was published. The online news outlet, bdnews24.com, reported that a rape suspect was killed in Chattogram—this time, by police's own admission, in a "shootout".

Indeed, not every ordinary citizen would dwell on the issue so deeply and critically. Therefore, to many people, as

indicated by their comments on news reports shared online, the murders of rape suspects bear hallmarks of "divine justice" delivered by some mysterious saviours.

To some others, even if the security forces were involved in the killing of suspected rapists, it didn't matter. Whenever rape incidents take place, some people take to Facebook calling for justice through extrajudicial means. "Take the rapists to arms recovery operations"—one Facebook user said after the news of a rape incident emerged recently, alluding to the reason sometimes cited by law enforcement agencies to defend the killing of a suspected criminal who, they claim, died in a shootout during a so-called arms recovery operation.

Such a public attitude towards the

fair trial. How can we compensate a suspect killed extra-judicially, if we later find out that he wasn't actually involved in the alleged crime? Have we not heard of the legal maxim "It is better that 10 guilty persons escape than one innocent man suffer"? Without a fair trial, how would one determine whether the suspect was deserving of capital punishment? Apart from the fact that such executions constitute flagrant violations of human rights, there are other issues too.

One may recall the early days of Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) when many of its operations were enthusiastically supported by the majority of the people. RAB proved to be extremely ruthless and efficient in hunting down criminals, militants and extremists alike. "RAB is easily the [Bangladesh government's]

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murders of suspected rapists partly stems from the horrendous nature of the crime in question, and partly because the people are tired of seeing alleged rapists go scot-free and exploit loopholes in the justice system. According to a 2017 report based on police data, the percentage of rape cases that ended in conviction over the previous five years in Bangladesh was less than two percent.

What the proponents of vigilante justice do not realise, however, is the danger of executing a suspect without a

most popular initiative in its three years in office," observed Harry K Thomas Jr, the then US ambassador to Bangladesh, in January 2005, in a diplomatic cable later revealed by the Wikileaks.

However, as soon as independent media outlets began to question the RAB's "crossfire" narrative and exposed grim details of its extrajudicial killings—especially that of the Narayanganj seven-murder incident—the public grew suspicious and eventually became disillusioned with the fantasy of having a force that would keep them safe

and summarily execute "criminals" bypassing the prolonged judicial process.

The public today is certainly more aware of the dangers of allowing the agencies to operate with *carte blanche*. Maybe that is why the "anti-drug war" launched last year, in which hundreds of alleged drug traders were killed, garnered divided support from the people. Their scepticism derived not only from their previous experiences but also from the fact that the operation was launched during an election year—and many innocent people including some opposition activists were allegedly victimised in the process, as reported by independent media outlets.

Yet, when alleged rapists were found dead under mysterious circumstances, a majority of the public again began to support the "punishment". Understandably, it is so not only because they are frustrated with the existing justice system, but also because what they perceive to be "vigilante justice" is a relatively new phenomenon in Bangladesh.

But as our past experience suggests, denunciations may be used to settle scores. And that is why such methods of dispensing justice, which undercut the system, must be rejected.

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Cost of sustainability in the apparel industry



THE apparel retail landscape has changed rapidly in recent years. While there are still some laggards in the industry, most brands want to do the right thing when it comes to sustainability, with smart brands now recognising that operating in a sustainable manner goes hand in hand with business success. It is for this reason that sustainability teams have grown rapidly with brands in recent years. Brands and retailers now boast huge sustainability teams, with employees in this vital area dotted across the globe. Even smaller brands with more limited resources have invested in this area and employ in-house and external sustainability consultants.

That is the good news. The not-so-positive news, and the area where change needs to take place, is in joining the dots. If one were to talk to owners of ready-made garment factories in Bangladesh, they would all have a similar story to tell when it comes to negotiating with Western brands. The picture can be very



SOURCE: WWW.ODISHASTORY.COM

Factory owners need to work closely with buying and sourcing teams to make them fully aware of all their sustainability work, as this is often a great selling point.

mixed, depending on which department of a brand a factory owner is dealing with—and this has to change.

As an example, when a sourcing department from a brand arrives to negotiate with a factory, the factory owner might—quite fairly—point out that it practises sustainable methods of

production and that the extra costs of doing so should be factored into end prices accordingly. In many cases, the sourcing department will reject such considerations outright. Sustainable production and best practice are viewed as a given.

The challenge here arises when you get a different message from the sustainability department of a brand. Such departments might require a supplier factory to implement certain sustainability practices, make them aware of the price implications of implementing the practices, and explain that these pricing issues will be dealt with by the sourcing department; often, the sustainability team is not authorised to discuss pricing.

It is easy to see how such a lack of coordination can lead to confusion and, at times, frustration on the part of factory owners. In fact, it is hard to escape the sense that there has to be a better way of doing things which would be beneficial to all.

Actually, these arguments are not particularly new. The idea that the "left hand does not know what the right hand is doing" is true for some brands as many in the industry are aware of, and

the problem is certainly more pronounced in some businesses than others.

Now, surely, is the time to begin addressing this lack of coordination. After all, why should progress in the area of sustainability—which the vast majority of the industry is now behind—be hindered due to this breakdown in communication?

There are a number of possible solutions to this issue.

The first is, brands themselves need to consider how best to achieve sustainability in their supply chains in partnership with factories. One option here is for brands or retailers to create a supplier index which provides a priority/point-based category system based on sustainability approaches by factories—essentially rewarding factories which implement sustainable practices within their operations.

Buying teams within brands can then be made accountable to the chief executive for what percentage of their annual/seasonal purchase is from which category of supplier. This way of doing business and embedding sustainable practices into purchasing decisions is likely to become more popular in future.

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Another solution is partnership. In fact, many brands are now partnering with factories on sustainability issues, with third parties also involved. There are many initiatives around with financial support and grants available.

A final point relates to the issue of transparency and by this we mean transparent sourcing. Brands and retailers should be encouraged to produce a cost/supply chain data index with respect to sustainability, both in specific countries and across different countries.

By doing this, and being open on this issue, end consumers will gain greater insight about the cost of sustainable sourcing. They will learn that while sustainable sourcing can be more expensive in some cases, they can also lead to savings in the long run.

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