

Grotesque nexus between political and state power

The brutal killing of Nusrat

WITH more and more reports of the brutal and coldblooded murder of Nusrat Jahan Rafi appearing in the media, the depth of the odious link between the politically powerful and the law enforcers is being exposed. There cannot be a worse situation than when those entrusted and paid with public money to enforce the law, choose to violate the law in collusion with the wrongdoer(s) in the most contemptible manner to protect a person. In this case, the latter happens to be the head of the institution that Nusrat studied in and who was behind bars for allegedly sexually harassing her.

We wouldn't be remiss in suggesting that the killing of Nusrat is a fairly good representative of the order of things that prevail in the country insofar as law and order is concerned. The sorrowful account of events that led to her death is a common narrative related to instances of similar breach of law that appear in the news with very alarming regularity. And in many cases, the nexus involves the alleged criminal, his political mentor, and the police as in this case, who believe that grovelling to the ruling party is the only way to advance one's career.

We feel that this is the time to bring in reform in the police that is long overdue. So long as the law enforcers think that their job depends on patronage of the powerful, deliberate violation of the law by the police will become the norm rather than the exception. We are surprised to see the shoddy oversight, if there is any oversight at all, exercised by the police hierarchy that allowed the OC of Sonagazi to trample the law in so many ways. We also feel that it is time to consider whether the *madrasas* are being run as they should be, and whether or not there is need for urgent reform in the system.

Workers' safety blatantly ignored

If govt. can't ensure a safe work environment, who can?

IT is unfortunate that within two days of the death of an electrician who fell off a pole of a traverse at the Carriage and Wagon Workshop of Bangladesh Railway (east zone) at Pahartali in Chattogram, at least nine workers of the same workshop fell sick due to inhalation of toxic gas. One of the victims is now in critical condition. Reportedly, a fire broke out at the workshop due to friction created while cutting a wagon. And when the workers tried to douse the fire using a fire extinguisher, they fell sick because they had inhaled the toxic gas emitted from the fire extinguisher. In a similar incident at the workshop on March 27, some 13 workers had fallen sick inhaling poisonous gas which leaked out from a pipeline. The recurrence of similar accidents at the workshop only shows the indifference and negligence of the workshop authorities in ensuring the safety of their workers.

Although the authorities have said that they have provided the workers with the necessary safety gear, reportedly, in all three cases, the workers were not wearing any. But isn't it also the responsibility of the workshop authorities to make sure that their workers wear safety gear? Furthermore, there remains confusion as to what exactly caused the fires in the two abovementioned incidents. It is simply not understandable why a fire extinguisher would emit toxic gas, meaning that the fire extinguisher was never tested for its contents. What is the point of having a fire extinguisher if people fall sick while using it? Instead of trying to put the blame on the workers, the workshop authorities must find out the real reasons behind these accidents and take necessary precautions in order to stop the recurrence of such incidents. In addition, they must ensure better treatment of the affected workers and compensate them as per the existing law.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Students not safe even in educational institutions!

An educational institution is the holiest place for students. It is considered as a safe haven for students as it is a trusted space for learning and sharing knowledge. But what we have been witnessing recently in the country makes us question as to how safe educational institutions are for students. The murder of a female student, Nusrat Jahan Rafi, who used to go to a *madrasa* in Feni, is the latest example of the lack of safety of students in educational institutions, especially girls. What is so shocking is that it was the head of the *madrasa* who is allegedly responsible for her death. If these sorts of incidents continue to happen, teachers will eventually lose the trust and respect of students in educational institutions as such occurrences will instill fear among all.

It high time that the government took serious measures to punish those who behave in such a disgusting manner (like the head of Nusrat's *madrasa*), undermining the right of students to learn and their safety as well.

M Shahinul Islam Sagor

Member, Jagannath University Journalist Association

Marching towards economic and social progress

But first, we need to ask some tough questions

MUNIR QUDDUS

By all accounts, Bangladesh has done exceptionally well over the past two decades.

This is true for both economic and social progress, where the internationally accepted indicators have placed Bangladesh at the forefront of nations in the developing world in terms of reducing deep poverty and improving the lives of tens of millions of its citizens. This is especially true for its positive impact on women, particularly in terms of education for girls, women's employment, and improving the quality of their lives.

Bangladesh is a relatively young nation—not quite 50 years old. The country has emerged from the shadows of abject poverty and famines to evolve into a nation where rapid and sustained economic growth has benefitted a broad segment of society, moving tens of millions out of extreme poverty to the lower-middle-class over the past 20 years. No, the economy of Bangladesh has not yet replicated the double-digit growth attained by China in its early years of growth spurt, but we have done sufficiently well so that the economic and social development in Bangladesh can be described as somewhat of a “miracle”. This sterling performance has definitely proved Mr Henry Kissinger and other pessimists wrong, and has brought a smile to those who had believed in the potential and promise of this young nation...

The case for the future development of Bangladesh is strong. I would like to shed light on the challenges and threats Bangladesh faces both internally and externally, but overall I remain very optimistic. The people of Bangladesh have demonstrated many times their ability to work hard, and be resilient in the face of numerous threats and challenges, including severe natural disasters.

The secret behind the success of Bangladesh is the Bangladeshi people. It is the entrepreneurs and the millions of women who left their village homes to work in the RMG factories. It is the NGO leaders such as Brac and Grameen Bank; it is the farmers and the millions of hardworking Bangladeshis overseas who send their incomes each month to their families; and, of course, those in the public sector—the government (and the opposition too)—who love their country.

There is much to celebrate about this nation of 165 million people, where nearly 50 percent of the population is under the age of 24. In recent years, GDP growth as high as 7.9 percent powered by RMG exports (which have reached nearly USD 35 billion annually) has pushed the economy up from LDC status to lower middle-income status (2015). Extreme poverty (those living on less than USD 1.90 a day) has been reduced from 44 percent (1991) to under 10 percent in 2018.

However, as we celebrate these successes, it is our obligation as scholars and citizens to ask tough questions to the policymakers and politicians in government. The following is my list of top five questions.

One, why are foreign businesses staying away from investing in the Bangladesh economy? What can we do to attract a decent level of foreign direct investment (FDI)? The FDI has increased in recent years, but pales in comparison to what Vietnam and other nations are receiving. Fortunately, the country maintains a healthy reserve of foreign exchange because of two sectors: the dynamic RMG export sector and remittance from hardworking expatriate workers sending their incomes back to their families.

Two, what can we do to reduce corruption? On the widely recognised Corruption Perceptions Index by

Transparency International, Bangladesh fared poorly in 2018. Its ranking as one of the world's most corrupt nations went down six notches from 143rd out of 180 to 149th out of 180. This is embarrassing to say the least, but also detrimental to social and economic development. Who knows what the GDP growth would be without this endemic corruption? Perhaps, we are losing two to three percentage points annually in GDP growth for our inability to reduce corruption. Every economist and political scientist who has studied the subject will agree that corruption is largely corrosive to development. It undermines the rule of law and makes the playing field uneven. It destroys morale and perpetuates the inequities in wealth and income distribution.

Three, what policies can we pursue to achieve what can be called a “zero-poverty society”? Despite lifting tens of millions of people from extreme poverty, nearly 12 million remain trapped in extreme deprivation. This is likely to be the most difficult group for policymakers to address in order to lift these people

worth pursuing.

Some may consider this next question frivolous, especially in a discussion on heftier issues such as GDP growth, poverty reduction, and emancipation of women, but I will ask it nevertheless. My final question is: why is it that a nation of 165 million people has not been able to win a medal in the Olympics? Surely, with adequate training and financial support, our talented athletes are perfectly capable of winning medals at the next Olympics, which would undoubtedly make the nation proud. The success of Bangladesh's cricket team shows that we should not underestimate the significance of success in sports at the national and international level for the nation's psyche and self-esteem. Developing self-confidence as a nation is an essential ingredient for development, in my view.

Of course, this is not a comprehensive list of challenges. Extremely high and ever-increasing inequalities in income and wealth distribution, and the negative impact of catastrophic climate change



PHOTO: SANDEEP MM/FICKR

out of deprivation. However, as a nation, we must not leave behind anyone as we march out of the LDC camp to the MIC (middle-income country) camp of nations. We must build a strong safety net so that all citizens get a share of the nation's prosperity. This was certainly the dream of Bangabandhu and other founding fathers of the nation.

I hope readers agree with me that my fourth question is not a partisan one: why is it that we have not been able to build a democracy that compares favourably with our outstanding success in the economic arena? We are justifiably proud of Bangladesh's economic success. We should also build a democracy that we are proud of. These two goals should *not* be mutually exclusive. A democracy that works for all means that as a nation, we are working together, drawing from a bigger pool of ideas and talent in leadership, governance and administration. The future challenges Bangladesh will face are steep. Our chances of success would be much greater if we work together as a nation. Perhaps this is a dream, but it is

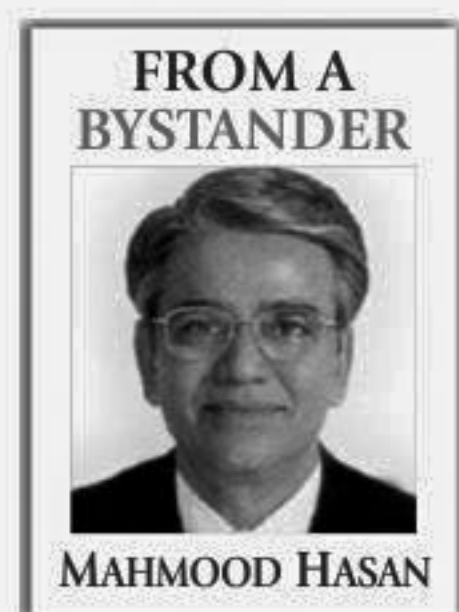
remain major concerns. We must address these issues before it is too late. I hope these questions provide some food for thought as we plan our future steps to strengthen our social and economic progress on the path to becoming a more prosperous and democratic nation, that will improve the lives of its citizens, especially the future generations. I remain optimistic that the people of Bangladesh along with those in leadership in the government (and in opposition), the private sector, and the dynamic expatriate community will work together to build a Bangladesh that the founding fathers and the freedom fighters fought for, and which millions of its citizens aspire for and deserve.

(This article draws from the author's welcome remarks at the recently concluded International Conference on Bangladesh organised by Bangladesh Development Initiative (BDI) at Yale University, in association with the Yale MacMillan Center.)

Dr Munir Quddus is Professor of Economics and Dean of the College of Business at Prairie View A&M University, Texas, USA. He serves as the president of Bangladesh Development Initiative (BDI), a non-partisan Research and Advocacy group based in USA. He can be reached at munirquddus@gmail.com.

INDONESIAN GENERAL ELECTION

Will Joko Widodo win a second term?



MAHMOOD HASAN

SOUTHEAST Asian economic giant Indonesia will be holding its fourth presidential election today. Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, is the third biggest democratic country after India and the United States. This multiparty election will also see the election of a vice president, 711 members of the two houses of People's Consultative Assembly, governors of provinces, mayors and district heads. Indonesia's president is both the head of state and head of government. Direct elections were introduced after the fall of strongman Suharto in 1998 and the first presidential election took place in 2004.

Incumbent president Joko Widodo, first elected in 2014, is running for a second term. Widodo, also known as Jokowi, was the first Indonesian president who was not from the elite political class or from the military. A member of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), he came to prominence as governor of Jakarta and became popular for his development projects and reducing corruption. He had reinvigorated Jakarta politics. Jokowi is said to have a clean image.

The presidential race is actually a rematch between incumbent Joko Widodo and his 2014 rival General (ret'd) Prabowo Subianto of Gerindra Party. Subianto, considered to belong to the elite class, had contested in 2009 and 2014, but failed to get the top political slot. He is now running for the third time with the support of five parties.

Jokowi has already secured endorsements from 31 out of 35 provincial governors. He has also obtained the support of 9 out of 16 registered political parties, which include two Islamist parties and Golkar.

Jokowi's running mate Ma'ruf Amin is supposed to be an influential Muslim figure in Indonesia. Amin is a senior Islamic cleric from Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation and also chairman of the Indonesian Ulama Council. Jokowi shrewdly nominated Amin to deflect criticism about his Islamic credentials. This nomination is expected to boost Jokowi's prospects by bringing in votes from devout Muslims. The flipside is that Amin supposedly isn't very well-known among Muslims at the grassroots level. The second largest Islamic organisation Muhammadiyah has given support to Subianto. Candidates coaxing senior Muslim clerics speak of growing religiosity and intolerance among conservative Muslims. Voting along religious lines may have an impact on the results.

Subianto has nominated Jakarta Deputy Governor Sandiaga Uno of Gerindra Party as his running mate. Uno is said to be a rich businessman and is helping Subianto's campaign financially.

The election is seen as a referendum on Jokowi's past five years. According to polling organisation Indikator Politik Indonesia, Jokowi currently leads by 55 percent to Subianto's 35 percent. However, according to some observers, Jokowi remains vulnerable to attacks from Subianto over his economic achievements and Islamic credentials.

However, during intense campaigning, Jokowi has been highlighting his economic achievements: new infrastructure projects, new tax holiday schemes, streamlining business permits

and encouraging FDI, highly subsidised healthcare through national health insurance schemes, etc.

The economic condition of a country is always the most hotly debated issue among politicians. Jokowi is seen as foreign-investor-friendly and pro-business but it hasn't quite worked well for him, economists say. After a volatile 2018, the rupiah has come under pressure—falling from 11,000 rupiah to nearly 14,500 rupiah to the US dollar.

The main reasons for the decline of rupiah are Indonesia's huge external debt and growing imports. In addition, the ongoing trade war between US and China, the two most important trading partners of Indonesia, has directly affected Indonesia. Indonesia's oil revenues also declined in recent years. Jokowi has not been able to stem the tide. Though the economy is expected to grow at around five percent in 2019, it remains weak and Subianto has attacked Jokowi for the “endless weakening of the rupiah” at a TV debate. “It is becoming a burden on our national economy and for the most vulnerable of Indonesians...” he argued, saying, “Our economy's fundamentals are weakening...” He has promised to lift poor Indonesians out of poverty by creating more jobs and promoting industrialisation.

On foreign policy, Jokowi ardently supports Asean. His major success was to get Indonesia a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council (2019-2020). Indonesia seems to be in a dilemma on how to handle US and China. Jakarta does not want US to pull out from Southeast Asia; rather it wants balanced relations with both China and US. Subianto, who has never held any senior government position, is unlikely to change policies towards these two superpowers.

Interestingly, nearly half of the voters are millennials, whose votes may play a deciding factor in the results. Social media is being used by supporters of both candidates to court voters. In a country with high mobile phone penetration but dismal levels of digital literacy, fake news can spread like wildfire. Circulation of misinformation about opposition candidates has been rampant despite government crackdown on these nefarious acts.

Post-Suharto presidential elections have been characterised by flow of money. “Money politics” has become a tradition. The practice of political horse-trading among members of parties supporting the two candidates is well-known. Small parties may end up gaining ministerial seats by helping to form majority in the parliament. Interestingly, no single party has managed to get simple majority in the parliament so far. It is a coalition of parties that supports the president and helps him enact laws.

Archipelagic Indonesia has over 17,500 islands spread over a vast area of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean and is inhabited by 260 million from over 300 ethnic groups. A record 245,000 candidates are running for over 21,000 different posts in this complex one-day election. Issues determining the presidential election may not be the same across the board for deciding who the winners will be.

More than 192 million voters will decide who will eventually prevail in this two-horse race. It is difficult for psephologists to make predictions—though some opinion polls show that Jokowi is in the lead. But opinion polls cannot always be trusted.

Mahmood Hasan is a former ambassador and secretary of the Bangladesh government.