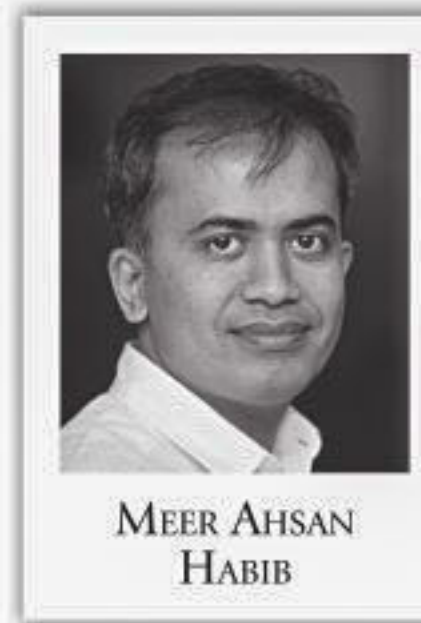


# ABRAR KILLING

## When democracy fails to deliver



MEER AHSAN HABIB

THE beauty of democracy is that it provides space to anyone; irrespective of the social or economic status of a person they

can assume power and with it can do an enormous number of good things that can benefit the society as a whole. But it has a dark side as well: it allows anyone, despite their flaws, to rise to positions of influence and power. This has been evident in the recent turmoil within the student and youth wings of the ruling party. Starting from reining in on the top bosses of the student wing and dismantling the gambling network led by the leaders of its youth wing, the ruling party is trying to get rid of the disease it has allowed to fester all these years. But it had other wounds and nobody had anticipated they would manifest in such a dreadful way—the killing of Abrar, a student of the Electrical and Electronic Engineering department of Buet. It is widely believed that his critical Facebook post on the Feni River deal cost him his life.

Nothing can console the bereaved parents who raised their son only to be killed in such a brutal way. He always stood first in the class and his mother never had a problem in raising him this far. But the democracy we live in was at odds with Abrar! It had no space for criticism of the system

and took his life. The incident is not an isolated one and there are ample shreds of evidence that democracy has no space at all for freedom of expression and criticism.

The tragic death of Abrar took me 18 years back when I was waiting to appear for the last exam of my master's degree at Jahangirnagar University (JU). It was a near miss incident where I narrowly escaped death! It was early September in 2001; a usual night, nothing uncommon about it. Everything was in order except for the heat of the upcoming National Election which was about to take place on October 1. Just a few days back the council of JU unit of Bangladesh Students' Union was held and I stepped down from the position of the General Secretary.

Around 11pm, when I was studying with my classmates in my room, we heard a commotion outside—a group was chanting my name and shouting "kill him". They stormed into my room and began the beatings. All I can say is, I somehow survived the ordeal to share my experience; my parents were lucky that they did not lose their son that night. I had no memory for two days and I owe my life to my friends and comrades who rescued me from that attack. So far as I can recall, I never had any direct confrontation with any of the attackers who were academically junior to me and belonged to the JU unit of Bangladesh Chhatra League. One might ask, what prompted the attack? After all, we were being ruled by a democratically elected government. There were no problems apart from the fact that we



Students of Buet protest demanding justice for their fellow Abrar Fahad.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

as a left-leaning student organisation had different political views and stance on many issues.

If one takes a careful look at the recent recorded history of Bangladesh, they will find quite a few instances where democracy and its institutions have more or less failed to deliver on its promises. The biggest problem is that some people who rose to power were not quite the kind of people who should have been entrusted with power. They not only came to power

but also corrupted the institutions and its people. Their lust for power correlates with negative personality traits like brutality, ruthlessness, corrupt practices and lack of empathy. In a democracy, people who perhaps have the strongest desire for power are likely to acquire these negative traits to strengthen their power and position with scant regard for the welfare of others.

After the death of Abrar, people from different walks of the society,

the media and the students, in particular, have voiced their concerns and demanded justice. This daily ran several stories with titles like, "Buet student beaten to death: Critical FB post costs him his life?", "2011: a room of horror and dread", "Abrar laid to rest in Kushtia", "Organisational, administrative actions taken against killers of Abrar", "Buet student murdered after 'BCL men grilled' him", "Killing of Abrar: BUET students demand justice". Nobody needs

to venture into the reports as the headlines clearly narrate a miserable picture of a failed governance system.

Perhaps, justice will be delivered in one way or another but nothing can bring Abrar back among us. But his death could have been averted if the Buet administration had taken appropriate measures to make sure that Room 2011 stayed as a mere dorm room. The government high ups as well as the law enforcement agencies should have had advance knowledge about the unscrupulous BCL leaders and curtailed their wings. But sadly, nothing happened. This is not the first time that a promising youth became a victim of political lust. The brutal killings of Biswajit Das, a tailor, on December 9, 2012, Zubair Ahmed, a student of Jahangirnagar University, on January 9, 2012, Nusrat Jahan on April 10, 2019, Rifat Sharif, an internet service provider, on June 26, 2019, are only a few names in a very long list.

It is high time that our policymakers understand that power should be taken away from psychopaths and narcissists, and be bestowed upon accountable and more humane individuals. Only a true democracy can do so by automatically barring the individuals or groups from power who have a strong desire for it. But this would entail massive changes within the institutions of democracy and its people; it would also result in massive decrease in abuse of power and coercion, and make the country a much safer place for freedom of expression.

Meer Ahsan Habib is a communication for development professional. He can be reached at meer.riyadh@gmail.com.

## Let girls realise their dreams



LAILA KHANDKAR

ALL over the world, we are seeing more and more girls raising their voice for their rights. From stopping child marriages to standing

up against gender-based violence and demanding action to address the climate emergency—girls are refusing to be ignored. From my work in South Asia and West Africa, I have been profoundly inspired by girls who are determined to claim their rights and create a better future for themselves and their communities—from walking for hours to reach schools each day to forming groups in their communities to raise awareness on children's rights.

And real progress has been made. More girls are attending and completing school than ever before. Fewer girls are getting married or becoming mothers while still children themselves, and more are gaining the skills they need to be employed and excel in work.

But there is still a long way to go. Each year, 12 million girls are married before they turn 18 years of age. Based on current progress, the world will miss the deadline to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 5.3 to end child marriage by 2030. The girls who will be married are more likely to be poor and living in countries affected



Child marriage is a serious violation of girls' rights.

PHOTO: STAR

by conflict or humanitarian crises.

Child marriage is a serious violation of girls' rights. It is one of the biggest reasons for girls dropping out of school and marks the end of their childhood. Married girls are exposed to gender-based violence and face the risks associated with early pregnancy and social isolation. Adolescent mothers are more vulnerable to suffering from birth

related complications than adult women. Married girls are not usually able to participate in decision making of their families, and so patriarchal norms continue.

Poverty, lack of education, vocational skills or development opportunities for girls, natural disasters, and weak enforcement of law are some of the main contributors to child marriage.

Moreover, in many societies women are not viewed as individuals with rights to realise their full potential. The lower status of girls and women in societies and the social acceptance of child marriage are two of the reasons why the practice continues in many places even when laws exist against it, and both must be addressed to help end child marriage.

Feminist thinker, writer, and social reformer Begum Rokeya (1880-1932) wrote the following in "Motichur" in 1904, "We shall do whatever is needed to be equal to men. If we have to earn independently in order to gain independence then we should do that ... Why shouldn't we earn? Don't we have hands, legs, and intellect? Can't we engage in business with the amount of energy that we spend in household work in the husband's place? ... Why are we crying if the girls are not married off. Educate your daughters properly and let them enter the workplace; they can earn their own livelihood."

Begum Rokeya challenged the societal norms regarding the role of girls and women in society through her writing and pioneered girls' education by establishing a school for girls. One hundred years later, her observations are still relevant.

As the world prepares to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and after 24 years of Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action on advancing women's rights, action on preventing and responding to child marriage needs to be stepped up. Governments should invest in integrated strategies that address its root causes, and be held accountable for making progress. This will involve strengthening the economic resilience of families, increasing access for adolescent girls to education and sexual and reproductive health services, and supporting child protection systems

where communities themselves protect girls from child marriage.

We must help parents and communities understand the rights that girls have to education, healthcare and protection, and to treat boys and girls equally. Men and boys should be involved in creating a society based on gender equality.

And we all must listen to girls about the decisions affecting their lives. Communities, governments and international agencies must guarantee space and support for girls' leadership and participation in local, national and international accountability and agenda-setting processes and their follow up.

During a mass gathering in Dhaka, adolescent girls protested against the special circumstances provision (that would allow marriage below 18 years) of Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017, along with child and human rights activists. I still vividly remember a placard that the girls had brought—"No to child marriage; we want to be equal citizens". Girls in all regions of the world are demanding equality. They have beautiful aspirations and are capable to contribute to society in a meaningful way. It is our responsibility to ensure that they grow up in a safe environment where they have opportunities to be educated, and realise their dreams. Parents, communities, governments and the international community—all will have to play their parts in this journey. Are we doing enough?

Laila Khondkar is Head of Advocacy and Policy—Child Protection, Save the Children International.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	33 Greek X	7 A party to
1 Pago Pago	34 Day in	8 Get off the
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6 Referred to	36 S&L offering	9 Brings to bear
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16 Starting bids	43 Wheel part	28 Himalayan
18 Pot fill	44 Love affair	guide
19 Golf goal	45 Less loony	29 Snap
20 Devoured	46 Airs	31 European
21 Goals		capital
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cathedral city	2 Come to	35 Chance to hit
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hope	5 Man of morals	42 Aussie
30 Nile serpents	6 Party worker	runner

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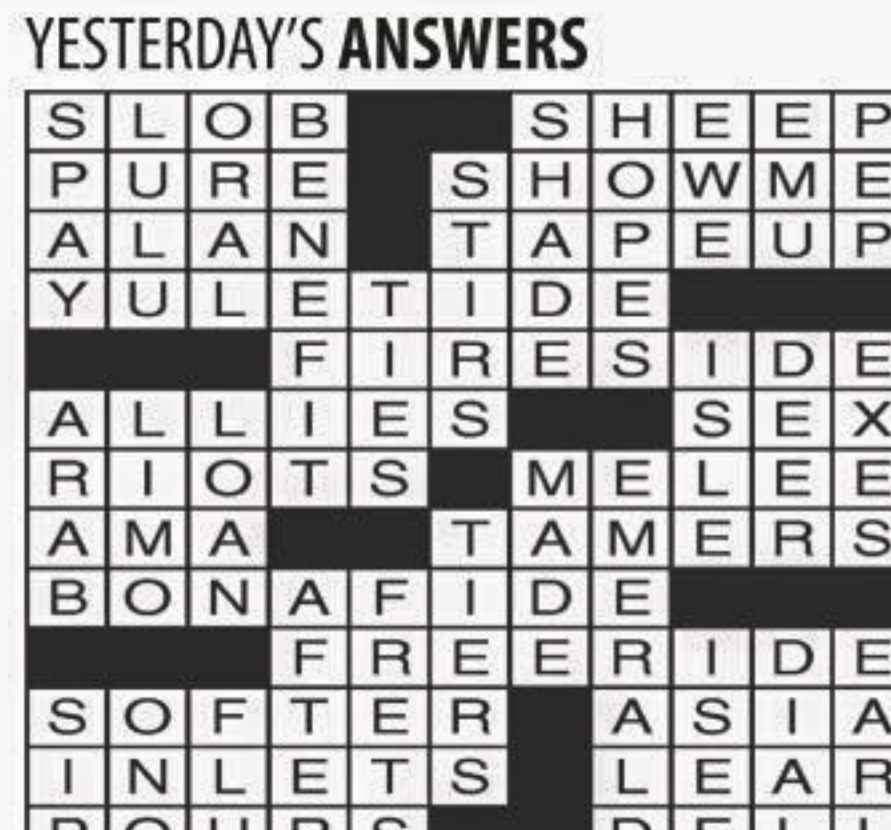
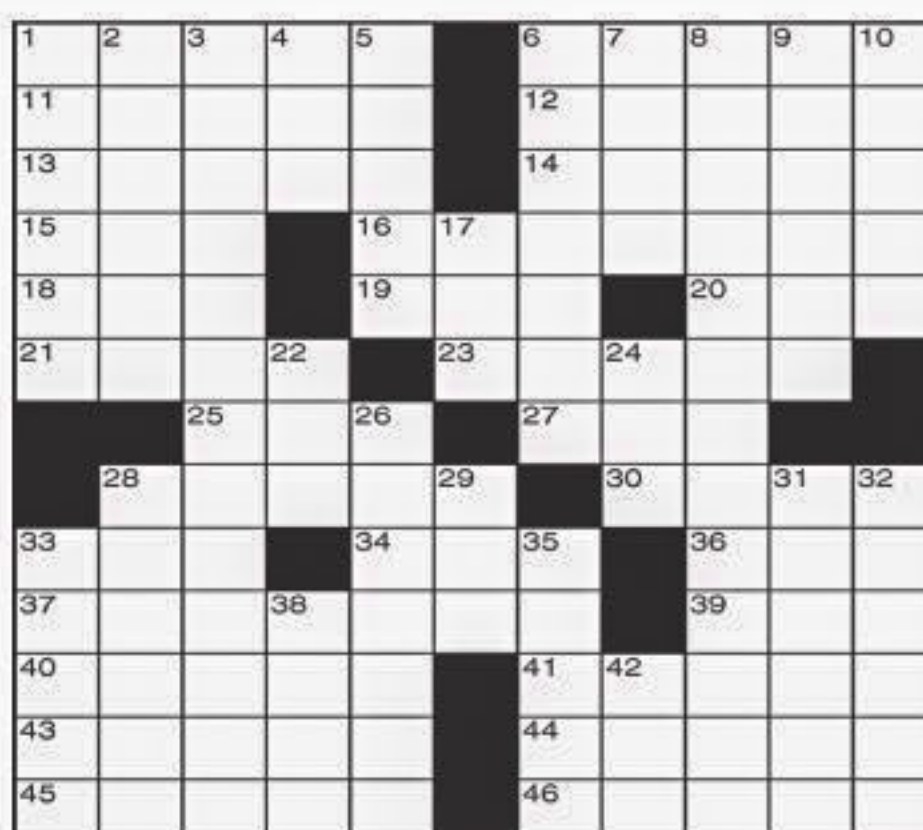
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