

Freedom Under Siege The ‘Special’ Room

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IN the light of recent events, to think that we can freely speak our minds would be a grave mistake.

Abrar, a sophomore at Buet, was beaten to death by some BCL students. His last Facebook post had been a brief commentary on the river distribution crisis developing between Bangladesh and India. As if his grieving family's pain wasn't enough, his brother was allegedly beaten up by the police amidst the chaos. Later, Abrar's brother's Facebook account, where he condemned the police, was reportedly taken down.



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN/STAR
Students near the TSC of Dhaka University reenact the violence on campus as part of their protests at the killing of Buet student Abrar Fahad.

A CCTV footage, which shows how Abrar was taken outside after the beating, has been circulating on Facebook. That is enough proof to persecute the perpetrators. But we have to wait to see what actually happens. Conversations are blooming online, making us wonder how student politics has yet to make significant improvements. Condolences are being shared, words of grief pouring all over, crowding our newsfeed.

truly fulfilled its purpose? Does education only mean memorising information, formulae, regurgitating them, securing top scores, passing with flying colours in the BCS examination? If education did fulfil its purpose, we would not be seeing “students” taking up arms to carry out violent acts, we would not see violent attacks on free thinkers.

Abrar's chapter will go down in history as yet another tragic event. And perhaps we will reach no

solution. Perhaps, the exercise of free speech will keep resulting in fatal consequences. Perhaps, there will be no room for criticism. Perhaps our collective psyche will keep getting wounded and more wounded.

We will go on with our lives, our voices stifled and censored heavily. We will trade our voice for safety and stability. But Abrar will not return to life. Nor will Sagor, Runi, Avijit, and many, many more unfortunate souls.

It is relevant to say that in this day and age, the written word is important. It has become necessary more than ever. It is powerful, enchanting, persuasive. An ecosystem of freedom will fail to thrive without it. And that is why, it is feared by those who feel threatened by it and have things to worry about. They call such freedom “incendiary”, “seditious”, “provocative” or some other negative term.

The written word can get you in jail or even killed. It has killed Jamal Khashoggi, put many on trial. The persecution of Turkey's novelists, publishers, Saudi and Hong Kong based activists and booksellers serve as clear examples.

It is as if the written word can only work its charm when a price has been paid. *Dearly*. And we do not want to welcome a world where that is the trend, where there is a warfare on how we think, what we think, where we are “seditious” just because we have valid concerns.

In this world, the fate of free speech appears bleak. It means we have to keep persevering, maybe shed more blood. But for how long? Life is precious. Nobody wants to lose it.

Is shedding blood easy? Is persevering, too? As our hearts remain suffused with questions, longing for answers, we need to take a moment to salute those who speak up, those who resist, those who do not bow down to injustice and deceit, even when the consequences are deadly.

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The writer is a university student.



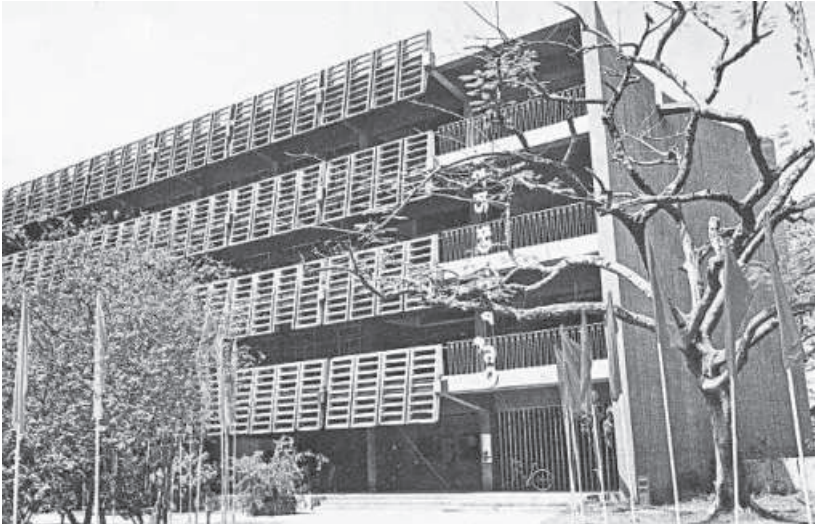
being hit with direct sunlight (remember, the skies were clearer in those days with less pollution) and the furnace underneath. It is also the west most facing room, so, even with the sun eventually tilting to the west, there is the western wall and the glass window to ensure the furnace transforms, at best, to a greenhouse.

But it is a special room, for many a would be engineer comes here for one thing—its steady supply of Fuji Noodles (the predecessor of the now omnipresent Maggi), a water boiling coil and a pan—all one needs for a midnight snack. The chit chat then veers to advice on GRE and TOEFL, for the inhabitant has recently aced both these standardised tests and is waiting to get the daylight out of the never-ending last semester of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) to head off to the US.

The roof of “Boiler”, aka, Nazrul Islam Hall of Buet, is also special. When there is a power outage, the inhabitants of the hall make a bee line for the roof to engage in a battle of illustrious cussing against the equally, if not more, cerebrally adept future doctors of Dr Fazle Rabbi Hall, Dhaka Medical College. Imaginations and the choice of words run wild as the colourful verbal volleyball continues till the collective “ah!”, followed by laughter and applause, as the area gets back its electricity. Engineers, architects and doctors, back to the books.

These are not the only “special” places/rooms in the halls. Rashu's

ROOM 429 is probably the furnace of the boiler. For it is on the topmost floor, thus a few inches of concrete in between the roof above



The Department of Architecture building at Buet.

room at MA Rashid Hall promises live running commentary of cricket, no matter where the match is being played. It is only audio, through crackle, static and noise, received through short wave, analogue radio signals. For some reason, we rarely see Rashu vertical. Perhaps due to his physical build, he is in an eternal horizontal state, eyes closed and dozing off, not without slight snoring. However, he wakes up with clockwork precision immediately upon the fall of every wicket and not only that, gives a thorough analysis of the three prior overs leading to the fall of the wicket with precision and depth that would put every commentator on the radio broadcast fearful of his job security.

The same hall has Ershad Ali's room, known as the “source” (as opposed to us all being “loads”), where the source (of knowledge) would often escape from his own room so that he would not be bothered by the loads looking to be downloaded with explanations of the toughest microwave theories.

Shere-e-Bangla Hall has the special room, the abode of Ruhul, known as the Bhupen Hazarika of Buet. For

the fried brains would always find solace through the unplugged ballads of the cover singer, whom we lose on the last day of our classes before graduation as he sang his last song on “rag day” while lamenting: “I am filled with sorrow as today is the last time I will sing here at my beloved Buet”.

And there is the Venturi, the narrow space between the library and the café where the bohemian few would sit to observe the bulk of the student traffic—class to café, hall to library...you name it. It is called the Venturi for proving the Venturi Effect of increased wind flow due to the narrow wind passage, learned at the hair losing Fluid Mechanics class.

And finally, the Shaheed Minar area, for roasted peanuts and people watching.

So, it's not that Buet didn't have its “special” rooms, nooks and corners. But I suppose, times have changed...
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Kurds - betrayed again



comes as no surprise given the litany of backstabbing the Kurdish people have suffered over the decades.

On October 7, US President Donald Trump tweeted, “I was elected on getting out of these ridiculous endless wars, where our great Military functions as a policing operation to the benefit of people who don't even like the USA.” This came following his phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the night of October 6.

Turkey and the Kurds have a long history of animosity. The Kurds, finding themselves in a no-man's-land between four nations: Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, have over the decades made multiple attempts to find for themselves a home, often fighting against the Turks. Therefore, America forging an alliance with the Kurds to fight off IS, has been a bone of contention between the two countries. But why did the US form an alliance with the enemy of its ally?

Not that the country did not explore alternatives. The US first looked into local Syrian options, including moderate rebel groups, and according to *Foreign Policy* invested USD 500 million in a train-and-equip programme which yielded limited results: only a small group fighting near the American al-Tanf base in southeastern Syria.

Then America turned to Turkey to find alternative fighting groups. The result again was fruitless, because the forces trained by Turkey was inadequate and would require more expansive and proactive involvement of US military.

This led to the US joining hands with the Kurds who formed the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), with the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia to fight the war against the IS. In over four years of fighting, according to CNN, SDF lost nearly 11,000 of its fighters, but freed millions of civilians and hundreds and thousands of square miles of landmass from IS control. And the result: the defeat of one of the most notorious terrorist forces in the world. Whether this defeat is ultimate or temporary is another matter.

Soon after, cracks between the US and Turkey started to become deeper, especially with Turkey regarding YPG as an extension of the designated terrorist group the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Over the last few months, Turkey has raised concerns about the security of its southern border with Syria, where the Kurds are active and the country has threatened retaliation against them.

All the while, the US has been trying to assuage its NATO partner with plans of joint patrols of the border areas, which

unfortunately was not good enough for Turkey. Erdogan's aggressive rhetoric has only intensified in the last few weeks, culminating in the phone call with Trump and the US troop withdrawal from the region.

In the face of severe bipartisan opposition at home, Trump tweeted, “We may be in the process of leaving Syria, but in no way have we Abandoned the Kurds, who are special people and wonderful fighters.” But his actions suggest otherwise. And although Trump has threatened to punish Turkey if it goes off-limits—“if Turkey does anything that I, in my great and unmatched wisdom, consider to be off limits, I will totally destroy and obliterate the Economy of Turkey (I've done before!)”—he tried to wash his hands of his ally by saying that

As Turkey's operation rolls on, if SDF has to mobilise troops near the border areas to fight the Turks, and flee for their lives, one wonders what would happen to the IS prisoners and their families. There are fears that the distraction caused by the Turkish offensive could easily create conducive circumstances for the IS prisoners to flee, and perhaps to regroup and re-emerge?

With the defeat of the IS still seen as fragile by military experts, one wonders, if it was the right course of action for Turkey, or America for that matter. In a recent tweet Trump said, “The U.S. has done far more than anyone could have ever expected, including the capture of 100 percent of the ISIS Caliphate. It is time now for others in the region, some of great wealth, to protect their own territory.

have been killed since the beginning of the recent Turkish operation along with “dozens of fighters from the Kurdish-led SDF and pro-Turkish factions”. Turkey says it has “neutralised” 399 YPG fighters; the Kurds put the figure at 29. As per UN estimates, the Turkish offensive in northeast Syria endangers the lives of 1.7 million people. Various humanitarian groups have estimated that the attack puts 300,00 people at the risk of displacement.

The Kurds have been used by the US in brewing trouble in Iran, Iran and Turkey, and conveniently been left to their own devices when being nerve gassed by Iraq in the 1980s and slaughtered by Iraqi military in the 1970s. In fact, during the reign of Abdel Karim Kassem, the US had armed the Kurds because the country was having trouble controlling Kassem.



PHOTO: DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP
Syrian Kurds protest against a threatened Turkish military invasion next to a US armoured vehicle in Syria's Hasakeh province on October 6, 2019.

the Kurds “didn't help us in the second World War, they didn't help us with Normandy for example”.

But more than the domestic and partisan backlash, Trump or America, along with the rest of the world, have another major concern in the face of the current Turkish offensive: around 12,000 IS fighters (*Al Jazeera*), almost one-third of them foreign nationals who have been held captive in seven prisons by SDF near the city of Raqqa. And the thousands of family members and relatives of the IS fighters kept in different camps in the areas that fall within the “safe zone” that Turkey wants to create to accommodate some of the displaced Syrian refugees.

THE USA IS GREAT!”

But if SDF is not able to endure the attack of Turkey—reports of plumes of smoke rising into the air and people fleeing in panic, fear of displacement in the region are frequent, especially in towns of Ras al-Ayn and Tal Abyad near the Turkish border are already making the rounds of international headlines—who will prevent the IS fighters and their families from slipping out?

The French President Emmanuel Macron is perhaps right in fearing that Turkey's attacks run “the risk of helping Daesh [Islamic State] rebuild a caliphate”.

According to BBC, at least 11 civilians

And with the fall of Kassem in the 1963 coup, according to *The Intercept*, America backtracked on its policy towards the Kurds, cut off the aid and supplied the new government with napalm, which inevitably was used on the Kurds. Given this history of betrayal, one wonders why had the Kurds not considered the possibility of their new-found alliance turning sour again?

In the midst of this chaos, one can only hope the tenuous defeat of IS in the region is not just a brief interlude in another bloody and senseless chapter of our history.

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HERBERT BAYARD SWOPE
(1882-1958)
American journalist
I can't give you a sure-fire formula for success, but I can give you a formula for failure: try to please everybody all the time.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Dance move
5 Seaport setting
10 Radio part
12 Truman's home-town
13 Extreme
14 Bowl
15 Long of "Soul Food"
16 Toe count
18 Jar part
19 Kind of tap
21 Belongs
22 Charcoal kin
24 Pacific island group
25 Buffet quantities
29 Composed

30 "Forget it!"
32 Pendulum path
33 Middle: Abbr.
34 Gardner of film
35 Play place
37 Essential
39 Corroded
40 Lesson leader
41 Winter weather
42 Theater prize

DOWN
1 Astounds
2 Dutch export
3 Involve
4 Individually
5 Big family
6 Galley item
7 Reformer Bloomer

8 Marbles, so to speak
9 Catches
11 Machine gun sound
17 Tin or titanium
20 Twangy
21 Swindle
23 Encouraging phrase
25 Doorway
26 Find
27 Crude shed
28 Get for less
29 Lawyer's jobs
31 Bird on a court
33 Minimal change
36 "My word!"
38 Bolt's partner

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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