

Abrar's death: The inevitable outcome of a series of unfortunate events

SUDIPTA SAHA and YAMEN HOQUE

AS straightforward as it may seem, the death of Abrar Fahad raises deeper questions about our society as a whole. While it may be looked at simply as the latest violent by-product of campus-based politics, it further reflects how the space to express differing or contrarian opinions has been rapidly shrinking in Bangladesh. The threat of violence towards someone because of his/her views has become the "new normal" in our society. As distasteful and tragic as the circumstances of Abrar's killing are, we believe this gives us an opportunity for introspection, and opens up the door to a difficult two-fold discussion: firstly, on the culture of politically motivated abuse on campuses across the country, and secondly, on the nearly established (and accepted) culture of suppressing thoughts and viewpoints under the pretext of "hurt sentiments".

Imagine this scenario: Abrar had somehow escaped death at the expense of some broken bones. The chances are quite high that then this would have hardly caused a ripple in Buet, let alone in the wider society. The details of the incident would never make front-page news, and a majority of those "in the know" would swallow the event as part and parcel of your run-of-the-mill politically motivated abuse in campuses. At best, some online-based human rights activists would publish posts in Facebook condemning the torture; maybe some conscious student groups would form a human chain out of moral integrity and that would be that. In a few days, everyone would lose interest, the Buet authority would continue not taking any action (as has been their norm for far too long), the goons responsible would get off scot-free, and a similar incident would happen again.

Also, to get ahead of the curve and stem any possible protests, the perpetrators would try to find something in Abrar's social media activities that could be construed as being controversial, and then use it to make the claim that he was engaged in subversive activities on behalf of organisations like Chhatra Shibir.

However, Abrar losing his fight for life and passing away, during his torture at the hands of the killers, disrupted this regular cycle of events. Similar crimes have been committed again and again by the same culprits. Some students who tried to blow the whistle on these insidious practices did not get any support from the Buet administration. Furthermore, they were later harassed and assaulted for having the "temerity" to speak up, and the Directorate of Student Welfare (DSW) office, which is designed to prevent such incidents, failed to protect them also. The constant bullying, combined with the inaction of the relevant authorities, helped to perpetuate a culture of hopelessness in which students were forced to accept that such abuse was the norm and that it is not worth protesting.

We can see this mentality in the testimony of Abrar's roommate, who knew as soon as Abrar was called away to meet with "Boro Bhai" that he was in trouble, yet he treated it as business as usual. He did not think even once to

notify the Buet authorities or consider asking for help from the law enforcement. Even when one of the goons returned to ask him to provide fresh clothes for Abrar, he thought nothing of it, because the prevailing environment in Buet had conditioned him to accept that sometimes clothes may get ripped apart when a student is being tortured. It was only when Abrar failed to return after hours—and by then the news of his demise broke—that his roommate realised the enormity of what had transpired. This is how an abominable culture of fear under the guise of "student politics" has engulfed the entire campus, and the monsters created under such a culture could feed on the fear and grow to the extent that they did. A death like Abrar's was a matter of time, and the inevitable fate of such a dismal state of affairs.

Let us now shift our focus to the second part of our talking point. So what had Abrar done to merit such a terrible fate? The general consensus is that it had to do with a Facebook post he

done little about it. Rather, some engaged in victim-shaming, justifying the killings and attacks as inevitable given their "audacity" to opine against religion or other centuries-old cultural norms and practices. Even among the few who did speak up, there were those who engaged in the "moral equivalence" fallacy, in that they deemed both the killers and the victims to be equally responsible. As if there could ever be any logical equivalency between the "perceived hurt" caused by the pen and the very real threat of a machete!

The government and law enforcement administration, sensing the lack of interest from the general populace in seeing justice done in these cases, also handled the investigation and judicial processes very lackadaisically. In several instances, high-ranking government officials also engaged in victim-blaming. In some cases, progressive bloggers were the ones who were arrested and imprisoned for "disturbing the peace and hurting religious sentiments".

home to roost. When someone like Rajib Haider, Dr Avijit Roy or Xulhaz Mannan was being brutally hacked to death, the common reactions were apathy or at best muted because their writings or activism did not mesh with this society's "sensibilities". However, now that even people whose opinion and standing sit well with the majority are coming under threat, the same society is demanding that the space for one's right to express their opinion without prejudice be ensured. The paradigm shift that a majority of the citizens had contributed to is now shaking them in a different way!

Be that as it may, perhaps it is better late than never. Let Abrar's death not be in vain, and not just for reforming the role of student politics in our country. Let it also provide light to the dark corners of our mind-set and allow us to finally engage in some difficult conversations about respecting differing viewpoints. Let this incident help us be united against the suppression of free thinking and writing.

Cut out the red tape

Lion's share of Chinese fund yet to enter the pipeline

THREE years after China promised to provide around USD 20 billion to Bangladesh, only one-fourth of the amount has been released for use. As per the initial agreement in 2016, 27 projects are supposed to be funded with the USD 20 billion. But until last July, only seven projects involving USD 5.4 billion were signed and USD 981.36 million was disbursed.

Although the speed of project implementation in Bangladesh has sometimes been sluggish, and projects must get approval from several committees which further slows down the process, lengthy bureaucratic procedures in China have also contributed considerably in impeding the process. For example, for a minor clarification which can be sought over so many fast means of communications that are available today, files are sent back to Bangladesh for the process to begin from scratch. Certain limitations of China's Exim Bank have also resulted in funds being released very slowly.

Projects in Bangladesh often takes longer to complete than initially planned. If the flow of funds takes so much time, how and when will these tasks be completed? The amount of fund that China had pledged is significant for a country like ours. It is mainly because of that reason that this delay should not be taken lightly.

The recent decision by the two sides to form a joint working group to probe the slow progress is an encouraging development. A similar working group formed with India had previously borne some fruit; and we expect similar results with China. But the Bangladesh side should press for the urgent release of the remaining funds and we hope our Chinese partners will do everything necessary to ensure that it happens.

Exploding ambulances!

Discourage use of improvised vehicles carrying patients

EXPLOSION in CNG-run vehicles is a frequent phenomenon in Bangladesh. This occurs due to faulty cylinders storing the compressed natural gas (CNG). And some of these vehicles happen to be improvised ambulances. It is ironic, to say the least, that patients must lie on beds that are placed on CNG cylinders in ambulances to take them to hospital. These are ticking time bombs and accidents are waiting to happen. Indeed, three members of a family died and three others were injured when they were travelling home from hospital in Chattogram's Anwara upazila on October 17. Two people died on the spot, while another died in hospital.

This incident highlights a very worrying trend. As most hospitals in the country do not have proper ambulances, people are forced to use privately-owned ambulances to get to hospitals and on their way back. And most of these are microbuses converted to carry patients with makeshift beds and oxygen cylinders. Given that the passengers—both patients and attendants—have to sit or lie on beds that are situated directly on the CNG cylinders, it can hardly be considered safe under any circumstances.

We suggest that the use of makeshift ambulances be discouraged and the government considers removing or reducing taxes and duties on imported ones. Also given that more than 500,000 vehicles are using CNG as the primary fuel to power their vehicles, isn't it time we had a law that would ensure that CNG cylinders are checked for safety once a year? Earlier this year, the BRTA proposed that showing of documents by drivers of CNG-run vehicles be made mandatory, as well as putting forth the requirement that CNG cylinders should be tested and certified before being allowed to refuel. That proposal is still waiting for the government's nod!



Let Abrar's death provide light to the dark corners of our mind-set.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

had published before his death, a post that some people deemed to be anti-government. It is necessary to discuss the merit of what Abrar had written. But that is beyond the scope of this write-up, nor is it relevant here. However, the circumstances do call into mind something that probably should have bothered us collectively as a society a long time before now. Over the last few years, Bangladesh has witnessed a number of murders of bloggers, writers and activists. They were specifically targeted because of their progressive, liberal and free-thinking beliefs—beliefs that they were not scared of sharing with others and engaging in the sort of dialogue that a majority of people in Bangladesh are uncomfortable with.

As these bloggers and activists were being attacked and hacked to death, as many others with similar ideologies were forced to flee their beloved motherland and seek asylum abroad, the society has

Even prominent cultural personalities and organisations at times refused to provide any sort of practical or moral support. With their voices being silenced systematically, be it through the threat of violence or legal proceedings or social ostracising, there are now precious few activists and writers who feel safe enough to write or opine about such matters openly in the country.

After the Abrar killing, the country is in an uproar. The country, it seems, is united in expressing shock, anger and demanding justice for this senseless killing. But it makes us wonder if the society recognises how the "icons" of iconoclastic words get redefined. The killers were members of the student organisation affiliated with the ruling party. They viewed any criticism of government policy and action as akin to heresy, something to be stamped down with extreme prejudice. The intolerance to contrarian opinion is finally coming

We end by paraphrasing the words of the German pastor Martin Niemöller. The original verse was a reflection on the German society's culpability in the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust. Change a few words, and it holds deep relevance for us as well:

*"First they came for the atheists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not an atheist.
Then they came for the minorities, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a minority.
Then they came for the opposition, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not the opposition.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me."*

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Cruelty on birds and animals continues

A report published in *The Daily Star* on the occasion of the World Animal Day, titled "Sale of wild birds rampant on Dhaka-Sylhet highway", caught my attention. It describes how traders are selling herons and other species of birds captured from the haors of Nabiganj upazila.

Unfortunately, wildlife markets exist in many locations across the country, mainly because we have failed to implement the Wildlife (Conservation and Security) Act properly. What is worse is that we continue to violate the rules and regulations of the Act, and easily get by.

Even though the authorities continue to fight poachers, hunters and smugglers, it seems more needs to be done. It is regretful that many tourists who visit the scenic locations are also the buyers of the wild birds. Don't they realise that the wild birds they purchase play a vital role in maintaining the environment?

Immediate measures need to be taken to educate the citizens about the importance of birds and other wild animals and the roles they play in the ecosystem. It's a shame that such a demand for wild animals still exists in our society, especially from the well-off yet negligent customers. Mother Nature has suffered tremendously already and if we do not act now, the impact of this despicable practice on our environment will be huge.

Mehedi Hasan, Barishal



PROJECT SYNDICATE

Will Trump be removed from office?



ELIZABETH DREW

FOR the first time, reasonable people in the United States have begun to speculate that President Donald Trump could be convicted by the Senate and thus removed from office.

The likelihood is still low, but Trump's position is weakening, and opinion polls are steadily moving against him. It is widely assumed that the House of Representatives will vote to impeach him, sending the question of his presidency to the Senate, where a two-thirds vote is needed and Republicans hold a majority.

Trump has been behaving nearly hysterically in public, his language increasingly reckless and vulgar. And he's made major foreign-policy errors that have enraged members of his own party. Trump's agreement, in a late-night call with Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to remove US troops in northeastern Syria incited a calamity there (not for the first time that America betrayed its Kurdish allies). Turkish troops have now entered northeastern Syria, and Syrian forces are advancing there as well. ISIS prisoners have escaped from some prisons once guarded by Kurds.

Russia, no surprise, is once more at the heart of Trump's foreign policy and is benefiting both from Trump agreeing to Erdogan's request and his allies' pressure on Ukraine. Trump tends to believe any fantasy he is told, in particular conspiracy theories about the 2016 election—in this case that the real culprit wasn't Russia, which has been proven to have helped Trump, but Ukraine.

Trump wanted Ukraine's new president, Volodymyr Zelensky, to investigate a myth put in Trump's head by his personal attorney Rudolph Giuliani that Ukraine helped his 2016 rival, Hillary Clinton.

Giuliani's role in the Ukraine scandal has been coming to light in the US, and an army of reporters is now trying to track down what else he's been up to that affects US foreign policy and domestic politics, as well as who his other clients are—and who is paying him in his supposed role as Trump's private attorney. Giuliani, once the much-admired mayor of New York City, has become a macabre figure of national mirth, seemingly out of control in his numerous television appearances. It's known that he had business interests of his own in Ukraine—including in the highly corrupt natural gas industry, in which Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden, sat on the board of a company at a time that his father was vice president and charged with cleaning up Ukraine's widespread corruption. (No misdeeds by either Biden have been found.)

And then, two Russian-born clients of Giuliani's, who had been living in the US and were also involved in Ukraine's energy industry, were arrested at Dulles airport outside Washington, charged with having made illegal campaign contributions of USD 630,000, beginning in 2016, to Republican candidates and political action committees, including USD 325,000 to a pro-Trump PAC. Trump denied that he knew the two men, despite photos of the three of them at a White House dinner. "I have a picture with everybody," Trump said. This money is believed to have been provided by a Russian oligarch.

These donations included a large one to a Republican congressman whom they successfully pressed to demand the dismissal of the US ambassador

to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch, who had been pursuing an anti-corruption agenda. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo fired Yovanovitch in May, though a State Department official told her she had done nothing wrong. Despite White House objections, Yovanovitch testified behind closed doors before a House subcommittee. But she did release to the public her opening statement, which emphasised the "hollowing out" of the State Department during the Trump presidency.

State Department personnel have reportedly become all the more demoralised by Pompeo's role in carrying out Trump's political agenda, in particular his perceived failure to protect Yovanovitch, a respected career Foreign Service officer. Pompeo is known to have presidential ambitions and has been careful not to alienate Trump or his followers. Several department officials were also troubled by Giuliani's foreign-policy freelancing, and Giuliani is now under criminal investigation for violating lobbying laws.

Trump's colossal blunder in agreeing to Erdogan's request to pull US troops out of the way, so that Turkey could invade Kurdish-controlled territory in northeastern Syria, has worsened his political situation considerably. The Kurds enjoy bipartisan support for their loyalty to the US in Iraq and Syria, and now the US was selling them out. Trump came under searing attack even from Senator Lindsey Graham, one of the few Republican politicians to defend Trump's approach to Zelensky. Also, most unusually, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell was critical. "A precipitous withdrawal of US forces from Syria would only benefit Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime," McConnell said. "And it would increase the risk that ISIS and other terrorist groups regroup." Trump's

defence of the decision was truly bizarre: the Kurds hadn't helped the US during the World War II Normandy invasion. A bipartisan congressional group prepared tough sanctions to be imposed on Turkey. Trump imposed some that were weaker.

Trump recently lost a string of court cases, including one on whether he must turn over his tax returns to the House Ways and Means Committee chairman, and another on his declaration of a national security emergency in order to divert military construction funds to pay for his infamous wall. Now, he has threatened to sue Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Intelligence Committee chairman Adam Schiff for trying to impeach him. Trump has a long-time habit of making such threats and not following through. But Trump did have his White House counsel send Pelosi a letter asserting that the impeachment inquiry is unconstitutional and vowing that the administration will not cooperate with it at all. Trump's defiance of Congress virtually guarantees that he will be impeached for obstruction, among other possible charges. Further testimony damaging to Trump is expected this week.

Assuming the House ultimately votes to impeach Trump, the fact remains that there are far fewer votes in the Senate than will be needed to convict him and remove him from office. But the willingness of Congress—including the Senate—to continue tolerating his dangerous conduct in office, including threats to US national security, is now truly in question.

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