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The incredible feat of a brave mother

She saved her trafficked daughter, but why couldn't the state?

WE are astonished by the bravery of a mother of a teenage girl who, according to a report published yesterday, willingly got herself trafficked to India by the same trafficking gang that had tricked her 17-year-old daughter into travelling to that country, only to sell her off to a brothel in Bihar. This was a feat of great daring on the part of the mother. At the same time, however, we cannot help but ask why she had to resort to such desperate measures. Why did she have to take such a great risk, both for herself and her daughter? Was it because she didn't receive the help she needed from the authorities to rescue her child, which forced her hand?

There is no denying the great love mothers foster for their children and the sacrifices they are willing to make for them. That was on full display in this case. However, surely the mother was aware of the danger she was putting herself into and the great odds that were against her being successful in not only escaping from the traffickers once she was all alone in their hands, but also rescuing her daughter from the brothel in India. Still, she went ahead with her plan—disguising her identity from the traffickers, fleeing from their grasp once they trafficked her to Delhi, and then making her way to Bihar and rescuing her daughter from the brothel with the help of locals.

Surely, she must have thought of and tried other alternatives, if not for herself, then to better the chances of saving her daughter from her capturers. And she must have resorted to the act of being trafficked as a last-ditch attempt once everything else had failed. But why did her other attempts fail? Why couldn't she rely on the authorities to do what she did, i.e. save her daughter from these monstrous criminals all on her own?

After the story of the mother went viral on social media, a Rab team arrested three members of the trafficking gang from Dhaka and Madaripur on Monday. Ironically, the three were previously arrested for the same offence. That should have made the job of identifying and arresting them easier. Why then did the authorities fail to do so before the mother had to put herself in such a predicament? And why were these criminals out of jail, committing the same egregious crime for which they were arrested before? Surely the crime of trafficking people is serious enough to have kept them behind bars for longer. Where and why did the state mechanism fail?

Thousands of people are trafficked out of Bangladesh every year and forced into situations that are so terrible that it would scar anyone for life. The state must have mechanisms in place that would prevent traffickers from putting people in such circumstances in the first place, as well as have the means to rescue victims of transnational trafficking as quickly as possible—as chances of rescue decrease with time. To do that, it must find out where its shortcomings are. Therefore, it is crucial for the government to investigate why the mother had to put herself in the danger that she did, and why the state couldn't offer her the help that she deserved and so desperately needed.

Passing the buck for the dengue crisis won't help

City corporations must do better, undertake more effective measures

SCHELDOM does a healthcare system, beset by its already fragile state, have to cope with a prolonged pandemic, as ours has done for the last 16 months, while having to cope with another serious illness simultaneously. The spike in dengue cases has been a double blow at a time when the healthcare system has been completely overwhelmed by Covid-19, particularly in the capital. What is baffling, however, is the fact that dengue has been visiting us with increasing regularity over the last several years, and yet we were inadequately prepared for it.

According to the DGHS, as of August 17, a total of 6,321 patients have been diagnosed with dengue this year, and 221 dengue patients were admitted to hospitals in the country during the 24 hours ending August 16. All but 22 of them are from Dhaka. Thus, in an attempt to justify the inadequate and delayed response of those in charge of public health, the buck is being passed—conveniently, one may add—on to the public.

The adage that prevention is better than cure seems to have been forgotten by the two city administrations of the capital. It seems that the city administrations started their anti-dengue operations later than they should have. And we echo the opinion of the experts that instead of going for timely preventive actions, the operations, which started with fanfare, commenced after the Aedes mosquitoes had ensured the multiplication of their progeny—that is, after their eggs had been hatched and when the cases were on the rise.

Admittedly, every health crisis requires the combined efforts of the public and the authorities. However, there is only so much that individuals on their own can do. A vast swathe of spaces in the city, much of which provide the breeding ground for Aedes mosquitoes, are public spaces that only the city administrations can attend to. Evidently, the city corporations have not properly cleaned, sprayed or fogged these areas regularly.

We would hope that the city corporations would be more proactive in fighting the dengue menace before it gets even more dangerous. Certainly, people's participation in anti-dengue measures is necessary and even essential for the sake of their own health. But they should be encouraged to participate—not coerced, through fines—to contribute.

Three concerns about Taliban 2.0

BLACK, WHITE AND GREY



ALI RIAZ

THE Taliban has returned to power in Afghanistan. The spectacular fall of the US-backed government has caught everyone by surprise, although for years it was conventional wisdom that the war was lost in Afghanistan. Yet, the US continued its presence and pursued a failed policy of engagement. However, within the past weeks, city after city fell like dominoes to the advancing Taliban forces as members of the Afghan Army either surrendered or abandoned their posts. This led to the fall of the capital without any resistance. The hasty and unplanned evacuation of the US embassy in Kabul was reminiscent of another ignominious defeat of the United States—Saigon in 1975. Often referred to as the "Saigon Moment", this came to life one more time, bringing an end to the US military operation launched 20 years ago



Taliban fighters took control of the Afghan presidential palace after the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fled the country.

PHOTO: AFP

after the terrorist attacks in the US by Al Qaeda, which was hosted by the then ruling Taliban. The Taliban was dislodged from power in a few weeks and two decades of US presence began.

Since the fall of Kabul on Sunday, the events leading to the moment have been analysed in extensive detail all around the world, and there have been emotionally charged discussions in the Bangladeshi media as well. Many have expressed their delight at the defeat of the US; some praised the Taliban for their success. Since the Taliban blitz began a few weeks ago after US President Joe Biden declared the timeline of the US withdrawal, and it became evident that the Taliban's victory is all but certain, security experts and analysts of Afghan politics expressed an array of concerns.

These fears have been rejected by those who are optimistic of a new beginning

in Afghanistan and want to give the Taliban the benefit of the doubt. They are suggesting that this is Taliban 2.0. Implied in the statement is that the Taliban has transformed. They argue that these concerns are only a part of the anti-Taliban campaign on behalf of the West. These explanations and concerns warrant our attention, particularly now that Taliban rule has become the reality.

A common explanation of the Taliban's victory is that the people of Afghanistan have rejected the foreign power, as they did the British and the former Soviet Union before. Instead, they have chosen their political representatives. This characterisation of the Taliban as a nationalist force has some merit to it. To some extent, the support for the Taliban among Afghan people can be traced back to their nationalist ethos, but it is not clear whether this brand of nationalism has transcended the deep-seated ethnic divide in Afghan society.

However, nationalist ethos alone does not explain the entire phenomenon; the failure of the US-backed government in Kabul bears some responsibility. The

political disposition of the Taliban and its record of five years in power between 1996 and 2001.

Explanations of the Taliban's victory without considering its history and ideological position only offer a partial account, laced with emotion and devoid of the implications. There are those who are elated from ideological considerations, describing the Taliban's victory as a victory of Islam. Whether Taliban rule is consistent with Islamic precepts is an open question at best. The Ulama have long rejected this claim.

The concerns about the future of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan can be broadly divided into three strands. First, the nature of governance to be introduced within the country. Second, whether Afghanistan will become a safe haven for international terrorist groups. Third, whether Afghanistan will emerge as a threat to regional peace and stability.

Taliban rule during 1996-2001 was marked by the absence of inclusivity in politics and governance. The notion of citizenship was absent, let alone their consent in governance. The basic human rights of citizens were absent. The so-called code of conduct was imposed by force, women's fundamental rights were taken away, cultural activities were banned, the education system was restricted, and only religious education was given the status of education, and independent intellectual exercise was admonished. These were justified on the pretext of being distinct characteristics of Islam and Afghan society.

A particular interpretation of Islam was imposed as the only authentic and acceptable version. The Taliban did not acknowledge the presence of diversity, multidimensionality, or plurality of Islamic thought. Thus far, the Taliban has not given any indication that it would abandon those practices. This is not only a concern of Western nations, but is widespread among Afghans too. The possibility of such austere measures has already frightened people within the country. Even if the Taliban leadership make promises, is there a guarantee that their followers will not continue the old practices in different parts of the country?

It is needless to say that Afghanistan was once an al-Qaeda base and training centre. Osama bin Laden went to Afghanistan from Sudan around 1996 and under his leadership, al-Qaeda engineered and implemented attacks on US interests, in the United States and elsewhere. Although the Taliban has assured the United States, China and Russia that they will not allow Afghan soil to be used by terrorist groups in the future, experts on Afghanistan believe that it will continue to maintain contacts with al-Qaeda, and the link is "unbreakable". Dr Asim Yousafzai, a Professor of International Relations at the University of Maryland and an expert on Afghan politics and security, told the BBC that "no matter how much Taliban promises, their relations with al-Qaeda are still intact and al-Qaeda is fighting alongside

the Taliban in battles against Afghan forces".

Besides, such organisations can emerge without state support. There is no guarantee that the Islamic State or al-Qaeda will not build their bases, taking advantage of a chaotic situation and finding ungoverned spaces. This has happened in Sahel and Western Africa. Whether the Taliban will have the capacity to launch operations against such organisations is quite a valid question, as is the question of whether it will cooperate with any international initiative against such organisations. Will those within the Taliban with more extremist proclivity refrain from patronising the regional or transnational terrorist groups? These are the second strand of the concerns.

The third concern is how much will be the ideological impact of the ruling Taliban in Afghanistan on countries in South Asia and Central Asia. Harkatul Mujahideen (Huji), a Pakistan-based violent extremist organisation, came into being in support of the Mujahideen. Although the organisation was named Huji in 1988, it was already in existence for quite some time. By 1992, it had expanded into a regional terrorist organisation. Its official journey to Bangladesh began on April 30, 1992—after the fall of Kabul. The Taliban's victory will energise the followers of its ideology throughout the region. In the past 20 years, the Taliban has been able to recruit members without being in power; now, their success is likely to attract more. Pakistan's Taliban, which has helped the Taliban in Afghanistan so far, will gain further strength, and may seek return of their favour.

It is imperative to highlight and be vigilant about the use of the manufactured threat of terrorism by states in South and Central Asia to justify the persecution of opponents and silencing of contrarian voices. Authoritarian rulers of the region have been using the presence of violent extremist organisations as an excuse to consolidate their power and legitimise the use of various tools of intimidation. Two decades ago, authoritarian rulers around the world joined the bandwagon of the so-called War on Terror as it provided a *carte blanche* to engage in unlawful acts. It is necessary for the members of civil society and international community to remain vigilant and resist any kind of attempt to take advantage of the situation.

The ball is in the court of the Taliban. It is incumbent on them to behave as a responsible political actor and ensure that Afghanistan is not going back to 1996. It is also imperative to watch what the followers of their ideology are doing. And it is necessary to watch what other governments are doing under the pretext of the Taliban victory.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Is Pax Sinica Possible?



LEE JONG-WHA

FOR nearly a decade, Chinese President Xi Jinping has been promising to deliver "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." This promise—which he dubbed the China Dream—took a clearer form with the introduction of the two centenary goals: building a "moderately prosperous society" by 2021 (the centennial of the founding of the Communist Party of China, CPC) and becoming a "modern socialist country" by 2049 (100 years after the founding of the People's Republic). Now, China is one centennial down—and, according to Xi, it has achieved its first goal. Is the China Dream within reach?

While the second centenary goal specifies goals like strength, prosperity, democracy, harmony and cultural advancement, it also represents a vision of China as a global economic and political power. Ultimately, Xi seems to want to build a *Pax Sinica*, which would compete with—and even replace—the *Pax Americana* that has prevailed since the end of World War II.

These are ambitious goals. But China is no stranger to ambition—or achievement. While the CPC made serious mistakes during the People's Republic's early years, it has since led the country in a remarkable economic and social transformation. For more than three decades, China achieved double-digit annual GDP growth. Hundreds of millions of people were lifted out of poverty.

This transformation was made possible by "capitalism with Chinese characteristics"—a system that has proved far more effective and durable than many expected. The Chinese state played a central role in mobilising resources, building national infrastructure, supporting export firms, and facilitating inflows of foreign capital and technology.

China's record proves that an authoritarian political system does not preclude development and in fact can drive rapid progress. In fact, on the question of which political system—dictatorship or democracy—is better suited to economic

development, the evidence is ambiguous. Daron Acemoglu and James A Robinson have made the case that "extractive political institutions," in which political power is concentrated in the hands of a small group of people, lead to "extractive economic institutions," in which the ruling class exploits the majority. The result, they argue, is weaker incentives for most economic agents to engage in productive economic activities.

productivity growth has stagnated, and China's underdeveloped financial system does not necessarily allocate resources to the most productive uses, with unprofitable "zombie" enterprises and highly indebted local governments receiving far more than they should.

Today, China's per capita income—USD 10,484 in 2020—remains far below that of advanced economies, such as Japan (USD 40,146) and the United States (USD



Students wave flags of China and the Chinese Communist Party before celebrations in Beijing to mark the 100th anniversary of the founding of the party.

PHOTO: AFP/WANG ZHAO

Yet China's extractive political institutions have built inclusive economic institutions. Like authoritarian governments in East Asia—such as Lee Kuan Yew's regime in Singapore and Park Chung-hee's government in South Korea—China's one-party, authoritarian government used its power to implement good economic policies, thereby achieving both political stability and strong economic growth.

This does not, however, guarantee that the China Dream will become reality. As many commentators have pointed out, China faces tremendous internal and external challenges, which could hamper economic development and fuel political instability.

For starters, after decades of strict family-planning policies, China's working-age population is set to shrink by 170 million over the next 30 years. Meanwhile, rates of return on investment have fallen,

and the chances of continued rapid gains are fading. The GDP growth rate in 2012-20 averaged 6.5 percent per year—far short of the double-digit figures of the past—and it is expected to decline to three to four percent over the next 30 years.

Moreover, China's fast-growing private sector could pose a challenge to China's state-capitalist model. Already, large private enterprises are reluctant to follow government directives as they once did.

China's leaders are cracking down on those that defy them—most notably, Alibaba founder Jack Ma (for publicly criticising government regulation) and ride-hailing platform Didi Chuxing (which flouted the government by going public on the New York Stock Exchange). But, while tech giants do need to be better regulated, this harsh approach could impede entrepreneurship and stifle innovation. All of this could undermine the CPC's

legitimacy. With GDP growth flagging, widening income and wealth disparities across regions and social groups threaten to fuel popular frustration, and even political unrest. And this comes at a time when the CPC's capacity to impose its will is dwindling, largely because of the Party's own success in creating a strong middle class, which now comprises more than 700 million people, and it is growing fast, not least because of rapidly expanding education. Over the last 20 years, the enrolment rate in tertiary education skyrocketed, from eight percent to 54 percent.

According to the sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset's modernisation theory, the growth of an educated middle class often leads to democratisation, as this group demands the rights, liberties and political participation they come to realise are possible. That is what happened in Korea in the 1980s, and the same could happen in China, though it is difficult to predict what could catalyse such a shift, and when.

The external environment is not helping. To sustain economic growth—and thus the CPC's legitimacy—China must retain its position as a major global manufacturer. It needs to continue securing raw materials and intermediate goods, such as semiconductor chips, through a stable global supply chain, and it must continue exporting finished products to the US and other global markets. This will be very difficult to do, unless China can find a painless way out of its ongoing trade and technology war with the US.

Finally, to gain the world's respect, China will need to start upholding democratic values and norms, and cultivating peaceful relationships with other countries. *Pax Americana* has survived for so long, because many countries, including China's neighbours, rely heavily on the US for trade, finance, technology and security. They will be reluctant to accept *Pax Sinica*, unless China offers them something better. And that must begin with *pax*.

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