

# The Daily Star

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## Day when govt turned terrorist

*Changed our politics forever*

ON August 21, 2004, our government became a terrorist organisation. In what followed, the state itself became accessory to that terrorist act. Some rogue elements may have thrown the grenades but when all the branches of the state—the executive, the judiciary and the legislative—collectively worked to save the criminals and divert attention elsewhere then the state itself became complicit. What was most disconcerting is that the type of grenades used in the attack showed that inroads had been made into the army itself.

We agree with the prime minister when she says that such an attack in broad daylight couldn't have happened without the support of the government of the time. The destruction of the evidence, the lack of seriousness in investigating the crime and the political effort to downplay the tragedy all indicate complicity of the government and the ruling coalition.

The attempted assassination of Sheikh Hasina dealt a severe blow to the prospect of democracy-building in Bangladesh. The two-party system—the AL and BNP alternating in power—which should have been a boon for a stable democracy, became a life and death contest for eliminating each other, not through public support but through violence as BNP-Jamaat's actions proved. The two parties, always bitter contestants for power, now became bitter enemies with the incumbent ready to resort to political assassinations to stay in power.

What could have driven the BNP leadership of the time to choose to kill their political opponent? A total disregard for democracy and constitutional politics. Nothing reveals their lack of commitment to democracy better than this incident. Whatever their protestations may be, the so-called debates in the parliament, the sham of a one-member judicial inquiry commission, and the repeated government assertions that the attack was due to internal factors within Awami League proved beyond doubt that the BNP-Jamaat government of the day had no intention to unearth what really happened, let alone dispense justice.

It happened 17 years ago. But its impact still reverberates in our politics. After the brutal killing of Bangabandhu and the killing of the four national leaders in jail, the August 21 grenade carnage, in which 23 AL leaders and activists died, including Ivy Rahman, wife of veteran AL leader and the future President, Zillur Rahman, remains as the most tragic example of politics of killings and assassination. It is truly a miracle that saved the present prime minister and the then opposition leader's life.

We must never allow the events of August 21 to ever occur again, and we must learn from that experience to strengthen our democracy.

## Covid-19 vaccines being embezzled in the black market

*Better planning of the special vaccination drive could have prevented this*

IT appears that the peddling of Covid-19 vaccines on the black market—something we have feared to be an inevitability since February—is finally underway. According to a report published recently in *The Daily Star*, police arrested a 37-year-old man in the capital's Dakkhinkhan last Wednesday for selling Moderna vaccines at Sheba Clinic in the Chhalabon area. This is in contradiction to the government's order of allowing all eligible vaccine recipients to only get jabs from designated government facilities, free of cost. The arrestee was supposedly employed as a volunteer at an Uttarkhan vaccination centre during the special vaccination drive earlier this month. He had been inoculating people for Tk 500 a dose.

We agree with experts such as Be-Nazir Ahmed from the National Immunisation Technical Advisory Groups (NITAG), who told this newspaper that mechanisms of the vaccine drive need to be examined and loopholes in the entire vaccine supply chain system need to be identified. Otherwise, this could be only the beginning of more and more vaccines being administered out of the government's line of sight.

There have also been incidents of influential people, such as Rajshahi City Corporation mayor and four of his family members, getting the jabs at home, apparently unaware that this was not allowed. The mayor claims that the inoculations had taken place "about three months ago", though how that could excuse the incident is beyond our understanding. Even more bizarre is the fact of a Cumilla City Corporation councillor administering shots to over 100 people herself in her office on August 12.

While these irregularities regarding the country's vaccination drive are underway, so is the usual blame game that different arms of the government play against each other during such mishaps. The deputy commissioner of Uttara division police told our reporters that the Dhaka North City Corporation has been requested to check for missing Covid-19 vaccine ampoules and for details on the aforementioned vaccine peddler. But while the DNCC mayor said the police would have the city corporation's "full assistance", he also said "they would not investigate the matter themselves." Health officials from the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), on the other hand, fully blame the centres operated under the city corporations during the special vaccination drive for all the recent anomalies and irregularities. "Whatever" the case may be, we would urge concerned authorities and the government to prioritise the free and safe vaccination of citizens above all else. We understand the need to inoculate as many people as possible, as quickly as possible. However, we believe the quality of service while administering Covid-19 vaccine shots cannot be compromised in a bid to reach a certain goal number of people vaccinated.

# There are no secrets in the world

BLOWN' IN THE WIND



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

I was watching a movie on Netflix. Suddenly, the voice assistant of the laptop, Siri, got activated and said, "Siri aha?". Then after a pause the colour bubble of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) ventriloquised

to add, "I didn't get that. Could you try again?" Normally I would have ignored such a minor glitch. Then I remembered the same thing happened the day before when I reached a particular spot of the movie that I had resumed watching. Intrigued by the *deja vu*, I stopped the player and moved back the time-slider by 10 seconds. There it was: Siri popped up again in an inquisitive tone. I noticed that the appearance of Siri coincided with a dialogue that contained the compound word "serial killer." The actor's enunciation of "serial" with a dropped letter 'l' made Siri interpret "serial" as

culture, particularly in speculative fiction, we have seen the use of a trigger phrase as a post-hypnotic suggestion. For instance, a deep-cover agent can be activated to do something once they hear a certain word. This trigger can practically be anything, even a piece of music. It's like a coded command specifically programmed into an individual to make her or him do certain things. In Steven Spielberg's 2001 movie *AI: Artificial Intelligence*, a trigger phrase was used for an android child to love the speaker permanently and unconditionally. In *Zoolander*, Derek was programmed to kill the prime minister of a country once he had heard the song "Relax".

My Siri experience led me to a blog of a consumer watchdog. The article essayed the Orwellian future that is already here. It says, "the gadgets eavesdrop on everything from confidential conversations to your toilet flushing habits". Google's "OK, Google" and Amazon's "Alexa", for instance, have the potential to convert all our voice data for massive information gathering and intrusive digital advertising. These devices

us complacent over the confidentiality issue, allowing business organisations as well as law enforcement agencies to derive information from smart devices. Then there are the hackers and identity thieves; they are the hustlers who thrive on this information highway.

The moment you use the voice assistants to search the web, launch apps, and use other interactive functions, Google can go for trigger recording. One such transcript, mentioned in the watchdog blog, shows Googling capturing this conversation: "If you ever get booked down to my house for some reason, the key safe for the back door is 0783." The user had unwittingly given away the passcode to his house while chatting with a friend. Just this morning, while watching a suggested video on Facebook, I heard one recently nabbed actress apparently giving her statements before the secret service. Now how a YouTuber sitting in North America would access the conversation is anybody's guess: we do not need artificial intelligence to demystify it. The fact remains, we are living in a world that does not like secrets.

German sociologist Georg Simmel was one of the forerunners to reflect on secrets. Secrets for him are all about ownership. It creates a relation between the secret's owner and the other who does not know it. Sometimes, we need to maintain secrecy to forge relationships. The fallacy of a Facebook fraternity is a case in point, where we create false impressions to make our "friends" like us. Social media also gives us the impression that we can be free by joining the masses.

*In light of the fast changes in digital society, we need to rethink how we view secrets, especially in relation to our freedom.*



The advent of technology has increased the enthusiasm of governments to gather, share, and cross-reference more and more data about its own people.

"Siri aha!" After solving the mystery of my "serial killer" (read, spoiler), I was happy to return to the thriller on serial killers. Then again, it made me eerily aware that I was not watching that movie alone; the AI embedded in my device was watching it with me.

It is not only Siri, other voice assistants are also known for remaining "awake" and listening to everything we say, hear or do. The digital assistants are designed to react only when they hear a supposed "wake-word". In the case of my laptop, Siri was the trigger-word. In popular

start tracking the moment they are turned on and keep on building profiles of the users as potential customers.

Say, for instance, an algorithm in the device identifies statements of interest, e.g. "I love tea", and the company will target the speaker for related advertising. While there is comfort in knowing that the Internet of Things (IoT) can be used to help us remotely manage our smart TVs or ACs with the sound of our voice, the reality is that these devices are snooping on us to draft a pattern of our activities. The convenience aspect of it often makes

There are human and non-human trackers out there to make us all "transparent citizens" or automatons without freedom. Is it a good thing for an individual, even for a state, to be in a system that has no secrets?

Adam and Eve did not have to worry about their secrets; the moment they had one, they had to hide. When Robinson Crusoe was marooned on an island, he did not have to worry about his secrets. But we do not live on an island; we live on continents with multiple territorial, social, political, and cultural borders.

Our availability as well as our willingness to make ourselves revealed out in the open has allowed external agencies to feed on us. In an information society, individual secrets, state secrets, and the secrets of technology, however, got intertwined.

The advent of technology has increased the enthusiasm of governments to gather, share, and cross-reference more and more data about its own people. The state encroaches on our private lives in the name of security. We share our secrets with the state—through the biometric ID cards, bank chips, TINs—thinking that it is our duty to be transparent citizens. We lose control of our freedom so that the State can take control of our lives. Unfortunately, the use of such data by the other categories is shrouded in mystery. State secrets often assume the aura of control, if not an abuse of power.

The myth of security often makes us forget that our secrets are but manifestations of our freedom. In light of the fast changes in digital society, we need to rethink how we view secrets, especially in relation to our freedom. With more and more of our lives being monitored and controlled online, the future of secrecy is anybody's guess. For Simmel, "the secret is one of man's greatest achievements." But now it seems, more than ever, with no control over our secret lives, human beings are less likely to remain either free or sane. The nexus of digitisation, secrecy, privacy, and transparency is going to impact our freedom and our essential humanity. Otherwise, only machines will be on cloud nine!

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## The sinister carnage of August 21, 2004

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

IN the unfortunate annals of our political history, the month of August perhaps witnessed more macabre incidents than others. While the tragedy of August 15, 1975, when Bangabandhu

along with most of his family members were brutally done away with, has indelibly made a deep imprint on constitutional and orderly political progression, the gory misdeeds of August 21, 2004 when clearly Sheikh Hasina was targeted for murder had very ominously impacted our political discourse. Sadly, we have to recollect that in the suspected conspiratorial attack on August 21, more than 20 persons were killed and 200 suffered painfully persistent crippling injuries. For many, it was a deliberate attempt to wipe off all the senior leaders of the oldest political party of the country.

It would not be an exaggeration to observe that the corroding contours of our confrontational politics were ominously exposed in the mindless violence of August 21, 2004. There is also a premonition that, aggravating such a scenario was the suspected State complicity in the perpetration of organised acts of violence and the inordinate delays in providing relief to the victims. The alleged authoritative connivance and condoning of the failures of law enforcing agencies in carrying out the statutory duties is definitely a worrying blot on the ethos of public service.

We have to unfortunately "recollect that the investigation of the above incident was not taken in right earnest that it deserved and the first indication of that was the unpardonable failure to protect and preserve the scene of occurrence. There was allegation that physical evidence was tampered with and destroyed. The field units did not act with desired speed and circumspection." The suspicion is, were they acting so at the behest of someone or a quarter very high? Quite clearly, the culpability of all concerned need to be fixed and proved. One needs to know whether sworn officials had hesitated to enforce the law and if so why.

Unfortunately, a judicial enquiry into the incident by an honourable judge of

the apex court was done perfunctorily and reportedly pointed the accusing finger to an agency of a foreign country without presenting credible supportive evidence. The initial criminal investigation that was marked by the "Joi Miah" charade was a most disgraceful act in that it raised doubts about the very integrity of investigators and the reliability of a vital organ of the State.

As a mark of its probity, the then government brought some foreign experts

government. One has to admit that this was, quite clearly, in poor taste and had an abysmal lack of sensitivity.

It is also a sad commentary on the politics and politicians of Bangladesh that like the tragedy of August 15, 1975, the slaughter of August 21, 2004, also did not stir the national conscience until a favourable political scenario emerged. It would thus appear that the guarantee of fair play and justice in our country has to wait for regime change. We may have

violence? Is not the undermining of civil society by the encouragement of politics based on division and acrimony, a pathetic and deplorable sight?

The nation will not witness a repeat of August 21, 2004 if our politicians inculcate a temper which does not press a partisan advantage to its bitter end, can understand and respect the political adversary, and feel a unity between all citizens. They are expected to demonstrate that democracy depends



Awami League leaders and members of Sheikh Hasina's personal security wing shield her during the grenade attack on an AL rally in the city on August 21, 2004.

COURTESY: MAYOR MUHAMMAD HANIF FOUNDATION

to assist the investigation but it was too little too late as vital physical evidence was allegedly destroyed and the local investigators reportedly were found less than proactive.

Indiscreet acts and irresponsible utterances in the political circles were no less complicit in confounding a tragic incident that demanded swift remedial action and compassionate response from colleagues in the art of politics. Sadly, people in high positions in the then establishment put the blame on Awami League leaders by insinuating that they had caused the grenade attack on the rally to discredit their opponent in

to admit that extreme actions leading to annihilation of political adversary, though reprehensible, were a sad reality of our society in the not-too-distant past.

The question is, do we have to agree with the cynical observers of our political scene who say that there is a functional utility of violence for politicians? Do most acts of violence characterising Bangladeshi society at all levels have an irreducibly political context? Must not Bangladeshis feel ashamed as politics, apparently, has started acquiring a pejorative connotation by the allegation of its manifest association with conflict and

upon habits of consent and compromise which are attributes of responsible society. The spirit of moderation has to prevail to protect us from degenerative division and hatred.

The events of August 21 will undergo judicial scrutiny and those culpable would be punished bearing in mind that the actual fact or truth may not always be provable in a court of law. For democracy to strike a firm root in Bangladesh, the narcissistic and fascist proclivities lurking in many hearts in the political arena have to be tempered in public interest.

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