

# Whose purpose is being served by communal riots?



Md DIDARE ALAM MUHSIN

THE remnants of the spate of communal attacks that shook the country nearly four weeks ago is still prevalent. From discussions

away from the scene in Cumilla, was somewhat intriguing. Many feel that as the administration set up strict security cordons in Cumilla and the surrounding districts, and the mischievous group failed to take advantage of the situation, they chose this far-flung district to achieve their objectives.

However, there are some questions that are unanswered. While the OC of the nearest police station in Cumilla

organisations in the areas have been quicker to take an effective attempt to ease tensions? Could a statement have been issued by people in responsible positions on an urgent basis, in order to maintain peace and order in the face of provocation on Facebook?

There are some more frustrating aspects of this situation. Although the political and social organisations in the country—be it the government or

against the interests of Bangladesh. Is it not necessary, in such a situation, to forget political conflicts and speak with a united voice?

Another cause of concern is that, when everyone in Bangladesh is trying to restore communal harmony, the extremist forces in the neighbouring country are using the incidents in Bangladesh to create chaos there. It was quite evident in the frontier states,

security, justice and compensation for the victims of the violence (*India Today*, October 23, 2021).

Obviously, these are not auspicious signs at all. It may be worth mentioning here that the present government of India has been trying, for several years, to push a large section of Muslim inhabitants of the border states of India into Bangladesh by identifying them as illegal immigrants under various pretexts. In this context, even though the Indian government has not directly blamed the Bangladesh government for the recent communal tensions, would it be unreasonable to think that the attempts to incite unrest in the border states are part of a larger plan by some quarters to push the Bengali Muslim population there to Bangladesh as refugees? This question may arise especially because those who are trying to create communal conflict there are basically affiliated with the ruling BJP or its allies. Bangladesh is already overwhelmed with the burden of over a million Rohingya refugees who were forcefully displaced because of Myanmar's state violence. Is the country in a position to open another refugee front on the Indian border?

It is clear that communal conflict—in Bangladesh or in India—will bring no benefit to this country. Despite many changes at different times in the axis of power, Bangladesh has never deviated from the principle of "Friendship to all, malice towards none" in its foreign policy, introduced by Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Keep in mind, however, that this principle can only make sense for a country if it stands on its own two feet on a solid foundation. Only the unity of all citizens, irrespective of race and religion, can give such a solid foundation to a country. Only when a nation is united can it dare to look eye to eye at the outside world. In 1971, this nation was able to defeat the well-equipped Pakistan Army because of the steely unity of people from all walks of life under the leadership of Bangabandhu. The strength of the nation depends on that same unity today as well. Communal conflicts can only be desired by those who don't want to see this country in a strong position. The patriotic forces must always keep their eyes and ears open in this regard.

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Instead of dividing the country, the recent communal attacks on Hindus brought the entire people together to protest the heinous acts of violence. This photo was taken during a protest in Dhaka on October 24, 2021.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

was busy picking up the copy of the Quran from the spot, a person not far away was live-streaming it on Facebook. Was the OC aware of it? Wouldn't it have been wise to have anticipated the kind of reaction such an incident would incite if the video was spread on Facebook? It was necessary to arrest the man who was live-streaming right away. Could the local administration have tightened security a little quicker to neutralise the situation in the area and in the surrounding districts? Was there an opportunity to avoid the casualties in the hands of the law enforcement forces in Chandpur? Could political and social

the political opposition—expressed their strong support for communal harmony, they were also busy blaming each other. Undoubtedly, the main responsibility of maintaining peace and order lies with the government. The political opposition also needs to play a constructive role here. It is very clear, from the nature of the incident in question, that it was a well-planned conspiracy by some anti-state force, who chose the biggest religious festival of the Hindu community in the country to create a communal strife. It is not far-fetched to assume that there was involvement of some external forces

especially Tripura. Subramanian Swamy, one of the senior leaders in India's ruling party, called on the Indian government to invade Bangladesh in the wake of the recent communal violence (*The Week*, October 18, 2021). Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a right-wing Hindu organisation and a close ally of the ruling BJP, wrote to the United Nations, the UN High Commission for Human Rights, and the European Union, urging them to set up an international inquiry commission in Bangladesh to investigate the violence against Hindus, send a fact-finding mission, and press the Bangladesh government to ensure

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## How is Hong Kong strategising for 2047?



ANDREW SHENG

WHAT is Hong Kong's pathway to 2047? Since HKSAR's return to China in 1997 under the 50-year One Country, Two Systems

principle, which is due to end in 2047, Hongkongers have emphasised Two Systems, neglecting the timeline to One Country. This was a strategic failure of the first order, since Hong Kong elites should have mapped out different scenarios and pathways to 2047, rather than hoping that Two Systems can be maintained or extended beyond 2047, like a renewed lease.

Part, but not all, of the strategic failure lay in the philosophy of "Positive Non-Interventionism," which became a mantra of the Hong Kong Civil Service. Coined by Sir John Cowperthwaite in 1971, then Hong Kong financial secretary, the mindset fitted British colonial policy which saw Hong Kong as a lucrative outpost in the Far East, where non-interventionism meant minimal burden on the British Treasury, maximum freedom for business, and also least likely to provoke the Chinese Dragon. Hong Kong residents were free to develop business—provided they did not interfere in politics. The Hong Kong civil servants were trained to execute policies essentially formed by the British governor, who referred to London every day. What American economist Milton Friedman praised as "laissez-faire" made economic sense with political reality, as Hong Kong was a borrowed place on borrowed time.

From a server economy to the British mainframe, Hong Kong politicians and civil servants had to switch to autonomy under the Basic Law in 1997, but true sovereignty rested in Beijing. The Hong Kong-US dollar link fitted everyone's strategic and political goals, because the US and China were on the same side since the 1972 rapprochement. But this was where Hong Kong democrats and liberals forgot political realism. What happens if there is a US-China rift in which Hong Kong is caught in the middle?

In 1997, Hong Kong was an

economic and financial asset to China, but a potential political liability. Anyone who did simple projections of Chinese growth would have known that by 2047, China would be at least a major—if not the top—economic power, in which Hong Kong would play an important but lesser role relative to Mainland centres such as Shanghai or Guangdong/Shenzhen.

In hindsight, Hong Kong neoliberals made the same three mistakes that Singapore foreign affairs guru Kishore Mahbubani attributed to American elites on recent US-China rivalry: metaphysical, ideological, and strategic. The first is to assume that China becoming rich would become more like the US. The second draws the semi-religious line between "good" capitalism versus "evil"

not being able to reduce internal inequality because of the inability to provide cheap housing, Hongkongers felt left behind in the same way that the American middle-class felt alienated by neoliberal policies. Strategic policy drift is a disaster when the neoliberal free market promises prosperity, but it is unequally shared. What's worse, reliance on the market, when the competition has state-market partnership with the capacity to implement and execute change, signals slipping behind.

Now that the National Security Law is a reality, what are Hong Kong's strategic options to 2047?

Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Chief Executive Carrie Lam's recent 168-page 2021 Policy Address has a formidable

Instead, the last item, probably the biggest driver of citizen unrest, was addressed as "social inclusion."

The real social issue facing Hong Kong is a conflicted identity. Hong Kong has always been a Cantonese city where the elite has global pretensions, without clearly identifying with Greater China. That sowed divisions within the city which must be healed, but how to achieve that is a monumental task that must be addressed through action, rather than just rhetoric.

In the "Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities" (2018), author and Chicago professor John Mearsheimer argued that "culture alone is not enough to hold a society together. There are three other

ways to keep a society intact. One is to create a foreign bogeyman sufficiently fearful to motivate the society's members to work together to defend against the threat. Another is to unify a majority by defending a treacherous 'other' within the society itself. But the most important way societies prevent disintegration is by building formidable political institutions for which there is no substitute."

Simply put, the US is casting China as the enemy to get bipartisan politics to work together. Both parties are demonising each other to win votes, but building strong institutions to hold society together remains key. Blaming Beijing for Hong Kong's ills echoes the first trait, whereas LegCo politics creates gridlock. Alas, little has

been done to engage the youth so that they, who will inherit the city by 2047, will feel that they care and share that common future.

Delusion is vision without execution. Why has it been so difficult and slow to build affordable homes for Hongkongers? Transforming caged homes to a realised Common Prosperity is the real strategic priority and litmus test to re-heal a divided society.

That is a formidable task for any chief executive.

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A masked anti-government protester holds a flag supporting Hong Kong independence during a march against Beijing's plans to impose national security legislation in Hong Kong, China, on May 24, 2020.

communism, forgetting that the pot is calling the kettle black. Third, the US entered a strategic fight with no clarity in strategic goals, other than maintaining the Number 1 status.

Those who believed in limitless freedom and democracy did not accept the reality that no one can poke any Great Power, not least the Dragon, in the eye without any consequences. And with gridlock at the LegCo (Legislative Council of Hong Kong) level, there was no way that the Hong Kong authorities could implement any policy to compete at the economic and technology levels against the Mainland cities that are roaring ahead with state-market partnership. And

list of proposed actions and programmes, without spelling out clearly the strategy and philosophy behind the address. The address focused rightly on three priority aspects: national security; integration spatially with the Greater Bay Area through the Northern Metropolis and synchronising with the National Five-Year Plans; and addressing citizen well-being by investing in net zero emissions, housing, education, healthcare, youth, and a liveable city.

The priorities and sensitivities in the address can be seen from 28 mentions of the term "National Security," seven for "climate change," and zero for "social inequalities."

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