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Untangle the mystery behind Cumilla councillor killing

The attack points to a precarious law and security situation

THE shocking murder of Syed Ahmed Sohel—a ward councillor of Cumilla City Corporation—and his associate Haripada Das, has left us deeply concerned about the current state of politics in the country, especially at the local level. So far, we have little concrete information regarding the killings, but the implications of such a daring attack are likely to be far-reaching. According to a report in this daily, masked gunmen, dressed in black, stormed into the ward councillor’s office on Monday and started firing almost immediately, killing the two men and injuring five others, before making a quick getaway on their motorcycles. While the reasons behind the killings are not yet known, it is clear that the attacks were premeditated and planned extensively.

This is not the first time that Cumilla City Corporation has witnessed such violence. According to a *Prothom Alo* report, in November last year, a Jubo League leader who had contested in the 2017 city corporation elections as a councillor candidate was hacked to death; and in November 2018, a Chhatra League leader, who had also contested in the same elections, was shot dead in the streets. While there is no indication yet from law enforcement regarding whether these deaths are in any way related, we hope the authorities will, during investigations, take into consideration the fact that those killed in recent years were all connected to the city’s local political administration in some way.

According to anonymous sources, there was a rivalry between Sohel and another group over establishing supremacy in the area, which was directly linked with the control of the area’s drug trade and extortion rackets. Although *The Daily Star* was unable to verify this claim independently, the almost professional style of Monday’s murders means the involvement of organised crime cannot be discounted. Media reports have also suggested a potential link to intra-party conflict and the struggle to establish dominance in the area. Most recently, Sohel’s name came up after the communal violence in Cumilla during Durga Puja, since the man who was accused of provoking the attacks by placing the Holy Quran on a puja mandap was a tenant in one of Sohel’s houses.

There are clearly a number of elements at play here, and we hope the authorities will do their utmost in untangling this web of mystery and getting to the bottom of Monday’s horrific murders. The fact that such a brazen attack could be conducted in broad daylight, and against members of the political administration, raises serious questions about the law and security situation in Cumilla city, which must be addressed urgently. At the same time, we urge the government to investigate any alleged links of local leaders in criminal activities like drug trafficking and extortion, and to ensure that party rivalries and power politics do not lead to situations where lives are lost and the safety of the general public is threatened. Such contemptible activities put the very fabric of political life at risk, and strong steps must be taken to ensure they are rooted out from politics.

Preventing party rallies is undemocratic

Shrinking of political space is even more glaring now

WE notice with a deep sense of consternation the rapid constriction of political space of the opposition, which has by now become a constant phenomenon, principally for the major opposition BNP, but by and large for all those that venture to express their disagreement with the policy of the government. Once again, the BNP’s plan to organise countrywide demonstrations and rallies to ventilate their frustration and to call on the government to allow the party chief to go abroad for treatment, was thwarted in many places in the country.

But such an attitude from the government is not new. It is the manifestation of the government policy to keep the BNP off the streets since the ruling party assumed the reins of the administration in 2009. Since then, the opposition has been forced to remain indoors and any attempt to take to the streets has been blatantly foiled by the law enforcing agencies, on most occasions. This time too, as reported in this paper, most of the planned rallies were scuttled or prevented from being held to begin with. Even rallies in front of BNP’s party offices did not meet with police approval. The common refrain of the police is that the BNP was blocking the road or they had attacked the police first.

We agree that no political programme should cause public inconvenience, but BNP is not the first or only party to do so. Often, we find important intersections of the city blocked by protesters for hours on end with the police doing little to disperse the crowd and clear the area for resumption of traffic movement. We believe that political activity has not been banned in the country. In that case, holding of political protests, demonstrations, rallies—peacefully and within the bounds of the law—is a constitutional and fundamental right which, when curtailed arbitrarily or selectively, diminishes the image of not only the party in power but also of the country. The result is that the country’s democratic credentials are called into question by international watchdogs.

We regret to say that the ruling party’s image as a democratic party has been taking a beating over the last several years, primarily because of its inability to countenance dissent and its iron-fisted treatment of the opposition. It pains us when the country is classified as having an “authoritarian regime,” as has been done by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, a Sweden-based intergovernmental organisation, in its recent report.

To permit or not to permit Khaleda Zia to proceed abroad for treatment is entirely for the government to decide. But to prevent her party’s men and women from expressing their feelings politically is uncalled for.

A plea for life and progress in harmony with nature

Our survival is entirely dependent on protecting nature and biodiversity



Two high-profile environmental conferences—the UN Biodiversity Conference under the Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD) and the UN Climate Change Conference under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)—were held recently in Kunming, China and Glasgow, Scotland, respectively. The biodiversity conference recognised that change in land and sea use, overexploitation, climate change, pollution, and invasive alien species are the main drivers behind biodiversity loss worldwide. Following that recognition, world leaders pledged to reverse the current trends of biodiversity loss by 2030

nature and biodiversity is necessary to tackle climate change, thereby vital for our survival and existence.

Now that we realise the importance of conserving nature and biodiversity, we also face the challenge of conserving them while meeting our developmental needs. This is because development often involves clearing forests or natural areas, while conservation actions demand that forests and natural areas remain intact. So, how do we deal with these conflicting interests? One of the ways to do that is to find a balance between development works and conservation. Rightly so, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has emphasised building a developed and prosperous Bangladesh, but at the same time, building it green and climate-resilient. That is, the government’s policy is friendly to both development and nature conservation.

That being said, our development and conservation-friendly model faces a significant problem in practice. Policy

tree felling in Sylhet in the name of development work. The action directly conflicts with protecting greenness and climate resilience. Second, a letter of concern was published in the *Science Magazine* that Padma Bridge would threaten the Sundarbans. That concern directly conflicts with development and prosperity. The first case illustrates the short-sightedness of development workers, while the second case demonstrates exaggeration from conservationists. This type of debate usually takes place on an emotional ground, rather than on scientific understanding, which is somewhat frustrating and does not serve the country’s best interest. What is needed the most is that policymakers and activists take both the ideas—not just the one that suits their own individual interests—by heart, argue scientifically, and look for the overall sustainable development of the country, instead of sectoral development. At this point, we must appreciate the

of “net zero deforestation.”

The very first step towards achieving the goal of net zero deforestation is changing our mindset. Our conservationists still adhere to traditional attitudes and focus merely on forests, ignoring nature beyond forests, such as urban areas and riverbanks. The assessment of conservation success also pays little attention to biodiversity and ecosystem services, focusing mainly on restoring or preserving forest areas instead. The Forest Department has a specialised branch named wildlife and nature conservation circle, but the circle is still in its infancy. Its focus has so far lied on the conservation of charismatic animals, instead of plant diversity or the diversity of non-charismatic animals. Thus, it is not uncommon that some forests in our country are characterised by a lack of vegetation cover or single-species plantation—that is, they represent nature of poor quality and poor biodiversity. On the other hand, we traditionally measure development success through the extent of infrastructure developed—including roads, bridges and buildings—with minimal regard to their costs on greenness or climate resilience. I suggest that it is time to move on from our traditional ideas of conservation or development. We should embrace newer ideas, such as: a) nature conservation is more than just protecting forests, and it is about saving biodiversity and ecosystem services within forests and beyond; and b) greenness can be incorporated within the development plan, as illustrated by the Pudong model of development in China.

I, therefore, urge the relevant authorities and experts to minimise the development-versus-conservation dilemma by broadening the scope of nature management and promoting green development. That is, we should (a) keep our natural forests intact; (b) improve the quality of our forests—by paying attention to biodiversity and ecosystem services; and (c) bring our city spaces, urban areas, and riverbanks under nature management to improve greenness. Relevant and applicable development projects must be eco-friendly, cautious about greenness, and planned away from natural forests. We must keep in mind that we cannot survive without nature—neither can we stop the wheels of development. So, we should coordinate among the stakeholders, including political leaders, and adapt to the modern approaches that can save nature, promote development and improve the quality of our living, leading to a modern and climate-resilient Bangladesh.

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There needs to be a balance between development work and conservation of nature; the two ideas cannot be at odds in this day and age.

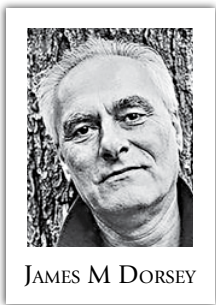
FILE PHOTO: STAR

and envisioned living in harmony with nature by 2050. In this context, it is vital to note that saving nature and biodiversity is the key to solving climate-induced socioecological problems. Rightly so, the UN climate conference has emphasised reducing deforestation by 2030. Climate scientists and activists have also called for saving nature and utilising nature-based goods and services to tackle climate-induced problems—popularly known as “Nature-based Solutions” (NBS) to climate change. These conferences, ideas, and pledges suggest that conservation of

implementers and activists often take one of the two ideas that suit their interests more. On the one hand, conservationists often emphasise the idea of a green and climate-resilient Bangladesh and protest against any project near the forests, even if the project is vital for the country. On the other hand, development activists often emphasise the idea of a developed and prosperous Bangladesh and push for any project, even if that could potentially cost greenness or climate resilience. Take these two examples: first, there have been news reports recently regarding

pace at which Bangladesh is currently developing. Many development projects are now in progress, with more in the pipeline. However, we are also among the top-ranked climate vulnerable countries globally, in need of more climate adaptation and resilience efforts and measures. Although essential, setting aside a vast chunk of land purely for nature conservation or climate change adaptation is becoming increasingly challenging. So, we must offset the potential loss of nature by creating new nature around our dwellings, and achieving the overall goal

A new world: The Middle East tries cooperation alongside competition



JAMES M DORSEY

JUST in case there were any doubts, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu demonstrated with his visit to Lebanon last week that improved relations between Middle-Eastern rivals would not

bury hatchets.

On the contrary, improved relations shifts the battlefield away from potential armed conflict, allowing rivals to compete while enjoying the benefits of trade and economic cooperation, as well as lines of communication that help prevent disputes and conflicts from spinning out of control.

With his visit, Cavusoglu was stepping into a breach. He sought to fill a vacuum after Turkey’s geopolitical and religious soft power rivals, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—together with Bahrain and Kuwait—imposed an economic boycott on Lebanon and withdrew their ambassadors from Beirut.

A one-time middle-income country, Lebanon is teetering on the brink of collapse due to endemic corruption and an elite willing to protect its vested interests at whatever cost. As a result, the United Nations estimates that three-quarters of the population have descended into poverty.

Aggravating Lebanon’s predicament, the boycott intends to loosen the grip on the country of Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed militia and political party, which has become a part of the elite. A Hezbollah protest in October, demanding the replacement of a judge investigating last year’s devastating Beirut port explosion that killed more than 200 people, descended into sectarian violence reminiscent of Lebanon’s 15-year-long civil war in the 1970s and 1980s.

Cavusoglu travelled to Beirut in advance of a one-day UAE-Turkey business forum in Istanbul and a visit by UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed—the first in 12 years. Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu met in Rome with his UAE counterpart, Saif bin Zayed Al Nahyan,

days after the Beirut visit on the sidelines of the Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly.

Turkey and the UAE have been at loggerheads because of Turkish allegations that the Emirates had funded a failed 2016 military attempt to topple President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Emirati objections to Turkish support for political Islam—particularly the Muslim Brotherhood.

Turkey and the UAE have fought military and/or political proxy battles in Libya, Syria, the Eastern Mediterranean, and France, where they were on opposite sides of the divide. Moreover, Turkey supported Qatar and expanded its military presence in the Gulf state during the

travelled to Tehran a day before arriving in Beirut. In Tehran, he sought to bolster his position as a potential mediator in Lebanon, manage Turkish-Iranian tensions in the Caucasus along the Azerbaijani-Iranian border, and find some common ground in Syria where the two countries are also at odds.

“If there is anything that can be done for the issue (in Lebanon) to be resolved as soon as possible, we are ready to carry it out,” Cavusoglu said.

Despite improving relations between Turkey, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, it was unlikely that the Gulf states would loosen their stranglehold on Lebanon or that they would trust Turkey to be an



Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, left, and his Lebanese counterpart Abdallah Bou Habib hold a joint press conference in Beirut, Lebanon, on November 16, 2021.

PHOTO: AFP

3.5-year-long UAE-Saudi-led diplomatic and economic boycott of Qatar that was lifted in January this year.

Similarly, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have been seeking to tone down their differences with Turkey at a time of uncertainty over the United States’ security commitments in the Middle East, and the need of all Middle-Eastern states to focus on some combination of economic reform, diversification, and expansion as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the demands of climate change.

Against that backdrop, Cavusoglu

acceptable and unbiased mediator. At the same time, Turkey appeared to be further drawing regional battle lines not only with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but also with Southeast European states as well as Russia and Iran, with which it simultaneously competes and cooperates.

It did so in a recent gathering of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States in Istanbul. The council groups Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, Turkic-speaking states in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Turkmenistan, the only other Turkic-

speaking nation, and Hungary have observer status.

The Istanbul gathering restricted membership and observer status to Turkic-speaking countries. The decision bars not only other Southeast European countries from associating themselves with the council, but also Iran, where Azeris—the country’s largest ethnic minority—account for 15 percent of the population, and Russia with its Turkic minorities.

Add to all of this the diplomatic impact of the recent arrest on espionage charges and the subsequent release of an Israeli tourist couple for taking pictures of Istanbul’s Dolmabahce Palace, one of the city’s major tourism attractions. The palace, on the shores of the Bosphorus, served as the administrative headquarters of Ottoman sultans in the 19th century and the place of death of Kemal Mustafa Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey, in 1938.

The couple’s release prompted the first phone call between Erdogan and top Israeli leaders in nine years, with President Isaac Herzog and Prime Minister Naftali Bennett phoning the Turkish president separately to thank him. Israel has until now cold-shouldered Turkish efforts to improve long-strained relations between the two countries.

Beyond the fact that Erdogan does not want the incident to scare off badly needed tourists at a time of severe economic crisis, it also provided an opportunity to break through to Israel and reduce the UAE’s geopolitical advantage in maintaining close ties to the Jewish state. Erdogan expects the Turkish move to be reciprocated. That is precisely what Israeli conservatives fear.

“Ankara’s accusations of ‘espionage’ and apparent threats to raise the price for the detainees show that it was using hostage diplomacy involving innocent tourists. This is how Hamas, which is backed by Ankara’s ruling party, has also behaved... Normal regimes don’t detain innocent people,” thundered Seth J Frantzman, the right-wing *Jerusalem Post’s* Middle East correspondent.

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