

Violence is no solution

Govt must avoid confrontation, allow BNP to exercise its constitutional rights

After Wednesday's deadly violence at Naya Paltan, there is only one direction in which the ruling establishment can look – inward. What could it possibly gain from a heavy-handed confrontation and raid on the central office of BNP? Was it to orchestrate a situation that would paint the party in a bad light? Was it a message that a mobilisation of this scale at the heart of the capital will not be tolerated? Was it to suppress BNP's months-long movement? Whatever the motive was, it's unlikely to work in the long run. If anything, the ruling camp has come out from the whole exercise looking flustered and rather desperate in the face of a resurgent opposition.

The government, therefore, must look inward before it moves forward on this issue. True, given how BNP has promoted its December 10 rally as the culmination of a "mass upsurge" against an "anti-people" government, it has the potential of reaching a flashpoint. But rallies held by BNP in the build-up to December 10 have been mostly peaceful, meaning that any objection to its holding one at Naya Paltan has less to do with law and order than politics. After all, BNP has reportedly held some 11 small and large gatherings in front of its central office over the last three months. If police were not bothered about a gathering there before, why are they now?

BNP must look inward, too. After all, it could have softened its stance on its choice of venue – which ostensibly led to Wednesday's chaos. It could have chosen Suhrawardy Udyan, regardless of the restrictions it says this might put on its rally, or shift the venue away from the city, as it did before the Faridpur rally. But the stringent conditions imposed on its venue selection make any compromise look like a defeat to Awami League, a fact validated by the latter's toughening of its anti-BNP stance even after the Naya Paltan mayhem. Police have declared the area a "crime zone". Meanwhile, more than 1,900 BNP leaders and activists have been sued, while about 300 have been arrested. The media has also noted various forms of disruption to movement around the city, like those reported during previous rallies, potentially to discourage participants.

What all this shows is how the prospect of peace is getting dimmer by the hour. Still, as a newspaper that has always stood for democratic rights and freedoms, we feel duty-bound to call for an end to this unsavoury display of confrontational politics. Our appeal may well be unheard, but we must still stress on the importance of allowing BNP to hold its rally where it wants, unimpeded. Any lingering of tensions in this regard serves none of the parties involved, certainly not the public. We must remember that any pursuit of peace through violence or heavy-handedness is nothing but a political dead end, which we can ill-afford given how high the stakes are ahead of the next election.

Why is RHD hiring firms with poor records?

Important road development projects should not be in incompetent hands

We are disappointed at the way the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) has been planning and implementing its road improvement projects across the country, with a majority of them having to face time and cost overruns. Far from trying to rectify this abysmal track record, the state-run agency has now decided to give the job of implementing a part of the Dhaka-Sylhet highway expansion project – a Tk 16,918.59 crore undertaking to turn the 210km highway into a four-lane one – to two contractors who, reportedly, also have a questionable record in project implementation.

One of them, Sinohydro Engineering Bureau 8 Corporation Ltd, a subsidiary of Chinese firm Sinohydro, earned a bad name for its work on the Dhaka Chatogram highway expansion, while the other, Toma Construction & Company Ltd (TCCL), a local company, was accused of being reluctant or extremely slow in implementing several projects in the past. Now, the first company is going to be awarded a Tk 576.05 crore contract and the second, along with a Turkish company, is going to be awarded a Tk 896.81 crore contract. These two companies are among the 13 contractors being assigned for the project.

The question is: why would the RHD authorities choose two companies with proven records of incompetence for this important work? While the director of the project claims that the tendering process is being conducted following the guideline of the Asian Development Bank, we think the government should investigate the authenticity of their claims as well as potential irregularities. Another question that we must ask is: why have they decided to implement the project under six packages? Apparently, the tendency to divide project work in "small packages" eventually benefits the influential, non-professional contractors. Did the RHD think it through before making such a decision?

One may recall that, in 2018, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) had sent a letter to the secretary of Cabinet Division with 21 recommendations to prevent institutional corruption in the Roads and Highways Department. At the time, the ACC pointed out several irregularities in awarding tender, and observed that some syndicates were choosing the contractors for the RHD projects. In its investigations, the ACC also found that a number of engineers and other officials of the RHD were building sub-standard roads to misappropriate public money. It revealed that these officials acted in collusion with politically influential persons and contractors to violate the terms of tender.

We, therefore, urge the RHD authorities to remain cautious while selecting firms for its projects, and ensure that only competent firms with good track records get the contracts. This, however, is only one of the many problems that are plaguing the RHD projects right now. In order for this vital department to implement all its projects on time and within fixed budgets, it needs to eliminate corruption, inefficiency and mismanagement and also make the reforms necessary going forward.

A competition of errors

BNP's insistence on rally venue is a mistake, but AL's violent opposition to it is nothing less



THE THIRD
VIEW

Mahfuz Anam
is the editor and publisher of
The Daily Star.

MAHFUZ ANAM

After 51 years of Bangladesh's existence and 32 years of unbroken democratic rule – however flawed – we are proving to ourselves and to the world that we, as a polity, have not matured enough to settle even minor disputes peacefully with those who oppose us. An otherwise simple issue of where BNP should hold its rally has transformed itself into a situation where the public is in full uncertainty as to how the immediate future will unfold.

Simply put, uncertainty is in the air, and all because BNP will not budge and the government will not relent.

Is our government – which has been in continuous power for 14 years and has had time to shape the bureaucracy, law enforcement, intelligence agencies, and other related bodies in ways they wanted – so weak that a proposed public meeting threatens it? Are our law enforcement agencies so ineffective that they have to resort to killing a demonstrator and injuring many instead of trying to contain the meeting? Is physical assault the only way our police know how to manage a crowd? Does the ruling party judge itself to be so isolated from the people that it feels threatened at the prospect of a big public gathering in the capital? The answers to all the above counts, in our view, should have been no. However, from the ruling party's reaction, the reality is obviously not so.

Has the Awami League forgotten its own days out of power when it organised street gatherings without permission, held demonstrations at will, called hartals at the slightest pretext, and blocked street corners almost as a daily affair?

Of course, Awami League did so to promote and protect democracy and the BNP is doing so to destroy it. Only the Awami League reflects the voice of the people and the BNP makes them suffer. Awami League is nothing but an epitome of everything that is good and the BNP is the pits – and so on and on. However attractive such a narrative may appear to the ruling party, as to whether this is believed by the people in general is a question to which we not only don't know the answer, but one we cannot even try to find out, as political opinion survey is hardly possible under the present



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

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circumstances. The motive behind any negative outcome will be questioned, its methodology challenged, findings thrashed, and the survey organisers investigated as to whether they harbour any political connection. If none is found, then they will be under surveillance henceforth. So no one else ventures in the same direction.

Returning to Wednesday's incident, what we had warned against, desperately hoped wouldn't happen, and pleaded with all concerned that they should avoid, has happened – an opposition activist was killed due to police firing. Did we need to lose a precious life? Did the police really need to open fire? How big and threatening was the crowd? Was the age-old practice of police firing warning shots before firing to kill followed in this instance?

Going by media reports, the answer is a resounding no.

So why did the police act so? Was it to intimidate the opposition workers from desisting to hold the rally tomorrow (December 10)? The

weakness than strength.) They have been doing so for years, some of them quite massive.

Why is the government bent upon denying BNP its chosen venue? There hasn't been any clear explanation except police citing public inconvenience, which we have already shown to be a hollow excuse. And why is the BNP so adamant about not holding their rally at Suhrawardy Udyan? Again, the case is not clear. Our guess is that the historic distrust between our two biggest political parties has reached such a state that both think there is a hidden agenda in whatever the other says and does.

There is a serious public question that the BNP will have to answer: couldn't it have held its rally at Suhrawardy Udyan? What is the basis of its objection? And is it serious enough to put its leaders and workers in danger, that has already caused one death, several injuries, and thousands of arrests? One of the BNP's initial objections to Chhatra League's convention preceding their own

on Naya Paltan as its venue, Awami League did nothing less by insisting that it cannot be anywhere else.

Given our political culture, which more often than not sympathises with the underdog – Awami League always enjoyed such sympathy whenever out of power – violence against the BNP is more likely to benefit the BNP than the other side. The government's handling of the situation so far appears more and more arbitrary, illiberal, high-handed, and arrogant. The legal position and constitutional rights of political parties for peaceful assembly is being ignored – a fact not lost on the politically conscious Bangalee psyche.

The Awami League leadership is not fully accessing the anti-incumbency factor in today's politics. Bangladesh has never had one political party continuously enjoy unlettered political power for 14 years. How the anti-incumbency factor is and will play out is totally an uncharted territory for us. It will be wise for the ruling party to think about this.

How can the land of Hafez, Sa'di, and Rumi be so cruel?



Dr Sayeed Ahmed
is a consulting engineer and the CEO
of Bayside Analytics, a technology-
focused strategy and management
consulting organisation.

SAYEED AHMED

"Listen with ears of tolerance. See through the eyes of compassion. Speak with the language of love."

– Jalal ad Din Muhammad Rumi,
13th-century Iranian philosopher-poet

Nayereh Jalali, a grieving mother, kept looking for the graves of her children. She carried a photograph of six young smiling faces, including one of a woman with shiny black hair. Also known as Mother Behkish, Jalali would frequently visit the Khavaran Cemetery in southeastern Tehran until she died on January 3 this year in her Tehran home. She was one of the "Khavaran Mothers" – those whose children were killed in shootouts or executed en masse in the 1980s, often with a summary or no trial. These mothers search for any sign of their loved ones – an unmarked grave, a bone, anything. The authorities used the Khavaran Cemetery to dispose of the bodies of perceived communists, leftists, political dissidents, and the Baha'is.

Mother Lofti was another such woman. Once, while visiting the cemetery with flowers, she heard her sister scream, "What is that hand

doing there?" It was sticking out from a shallow grave. All the mothers in the cemetery started to wail and scream in unfathomable grief. The term "Khavaran Mothers" has since become a generic name for all such mothers. Cemeteries like this sprang up in many cities. They are collectively known as "Khavarans."

Men and women who the authorities suspected had any affiliation with the political parties not aligned with the ruling clerics were hung from cranes, four at a time, for a few minutes, and were then hurriedly dumped in mass graves, often still alive. Sometimes, groups of six were hanged on the stage in an assembly hall or shot by the firing squad. By mid-August in 1988, thousands were murdered in such gruesome manners – without trial, without appeal, and utterly without mercy. Sometimes, women were whipped five times a day until they died from the wounds. (Geoffrey Robertson, *Mullahs without Mercy*, Random House Australia, 2012.)

Sadly, these tortures and killings continue to this day.

Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish

woman, was just one of many to meet such brutal and violent deaths. About to start university, she had gone to Tehran to visit her relatives. On September 13, as she was getting out of the Haghani underground station, the notorious Morality Police arrested her because she was not wearing her headscarf properly, a mandatory requirement for women in Iran. After three days, she died in police custody from a "violent blow to the head," according to her family living in Iraq. Her a CT scan of her skull showed bone fracture, haemorrhage, and brain oedema, supporting the family's narrative. The state coroner, however, denied the claim, saying the death was the result of a cardiac arrest.

How could the ruling clerics be so repressive and brutal in Iran, a beautiful country with millennia of rich heritage and a deep-rooted Sufi tradition? It is the land of Jalal ad Din Muhammad Rumi (1207-1273), Sheikh Sa'di (1210-1291), and Hafez Shiraz (1315-1390), the philosophers who taught the power of love, compassion, and empathy to the entire world. Persian culture is owed to the benevolent Sufi philosophy of these poets and other philosophers that also influenced the world in myriad ways. These poet-philosophers knew how to express the fundamentals of the human condition and the power of love, and to encourage faith in a higher purpose and meaning in life. Have the merciless, brutal, absolutist Iranian rulers lost touch with their roots?

Nevertheless, the street protests are going on unabated across Iran. It's not an anti-hijab protest – it is

an expression of the Iranian people's legitimate anger towards their loss of freedom. It's not only women, but many men are also supporting and taking part in the protests. As public anger rages on, Tehran has reportedly disbanded the Morality Police, though the government has denied any such report. Some say it is too good to be true. Recently, authorities demolished the home of rock climber Elnaz Rekabi because she competed abroad without the mandatory hijab.

But Iranians must not lose hope. Sa'di wrote in his most famous work, *Goleshtan*: "Created from one essence, people are members of a single body. Should one member suffer pain, the rest shall, too. You who feel no sorrow for the distress of others cannot be called a human being."

During his time, Iran was going through the most turbulent period of history. The Mongol army, led by Genghis Khan and his grandson Hülegü Khan, tore through Iran three times between 1220 and 1256, laying waste to cities and slaughtering all the inhabitants. Rumi fled the Mongols and travelled from Balkh westwards to save his life. Attar of Nishapur (1145-1220), a mystic poet, was murdered by the Mongols. Sa'di could well be another such victim of violence, had he not left his hometown Shiraz as the Mongols began their massacre in eastern Iran. But still, Sa'di never lost faith and hope in humankind. Today's Iran shouldn't either.

We do hope that good sense will prevail in Iran, and this great country will find its own way forward.