

It's over, finally

We're relieved that BNP rally ended peacefully

We're quite relieved that BNP's rally at the Golapbagh playground in Sayedabad, Dhaka has ended peacefully, with the party putting behind a dramatic build-up to the event to announce fresh programmes as well as a 10-point demand to the ruling party. Any tension arising from the acrimonious circumstances prevailing over the last few days was largely contained. Although a law-and-order approach to a political problem is itself a problem, we must acknowledge that finding common ground on the necessity of peace, for however brief a period, is also an achievement.

But peace or lack of violence, in this case, was not lack of suffering. As reported by the media, the ruling camp's response to the rally, putting the capital literally on hold, caused great misery for ordinary commuters. There was no public bus available, while obstruction to the movement of rickshaws, CNGs and private cars was reported in various areas. Many commuters, both within the city and on roads leading to it, reported being stopped and harassed. The city was gripped by fear. The irony of the government's argument for not allowing the BNP rally at Naya Paltan – to avoid disruption to public life – was inescapable.

The same argument, however, was conveniently forgotten when ruling party leaders and activists occupied the streets and held rallies of their own there. What this shows is how, despite all the lip service to public interests, those mean little to the ruling party.

We must be apprehensive about the outcome of the BNP rally, too, which completed its months-long programme of 10 divisional rallies in the country. As was anticipated, seven MPs representing the party at parliament have announced their resignation, saying they were barred from speaking time and again and hence there was no point in staying in parliament. Public interests were again overlooked, for MPs represent not just their party but their constituents as well. Their mass resignation is an affront to the people who voted for them and trusted them to speak there on their behalf. BNP's 10-point demand – including dissolution of parliament, formation of a non-partisan caretaker government, etc. – represents key points of contention between the opposition and the ruling establishment, which are unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. From the look of things, the fierce resistance to these demands will continue, making peace further fragile. This is deeply alarming.

However, despite everything that happened over the last week, we must acknowledge that the impressive showing at the rally, with a large number of supporters from around the country staying overnight to make it a success, is a powerful statement by itself, which should not be lost on the powers that be. The message that it sends is: there are legitimate, long-simmering grievances that cannot be ignored anymore. If political parties could find common ground on peace, we hope they can do the same on other priorities of the public, including an end to their economic woes, respecting their inalienable human rights, and creating the ideal environment for free and fair elections.

Too few shelters for domestic violence victims

Why has the state failed to provide a safe space for them?

We are utterly disappointed that the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, enacted 12 years ago, has not had the desired impact due to a lack of proper enforcement and in the absence of necessary institutional support for victims. According to a report published in this daily yesterday, victims and survivors of domestic violence in the country can hardly access shelters, psycho-social counselling and medical services, let alone seek any legal redress for the crimes committed against them. In the absence of a proper support mechanism, a majority of the victims are being forced to live with their abusers.

Reportedly, we currently have only around 36 shelters in the country – among them 15 are run by NGOs – for over 80 million women and over 64 million children. Most of these shelters are located in the metropolitan areas, which is difficult for women from the grassroots level to access. In addition, the process of admission to a shelter is very complicated, as victims need police referrals or court orders to get access to Victim Support Centres or One-stop Crisis Centres being run by the state agencies. But most victims of domestic violence are unable to immediately file cases with police or go to courts. As a result, when women want to get out of an abusive relationship or want to leave their abusive in-laws' houses, they often face the threat of homelessness. More often than not, they are forced to stay back or keep enduring torture.

Another factor that hinders women from seeking justice or getting out of an abusive relationship is the social stigma surrounding domestic violence, and the age-old practice of regarding these psychological and physical abuses as one's "personal matters" that should not be talked about. A joint research by Action Aid Bangladesh and Jatiyo Nari Nirjaton Protirodh Forum in 2018 found that 72 percent of women who faced intimate partner violence never disclosed it to anyone. It is alarming that such a large number of women are being subjected to torture in their own homes and are denied their right to a safe and dignified life on a daily basis.

The law has some very important provisions to support abused women and children, including protection orders for women, right to reside in the marital home, temporary custody of children, and recovery of personal assets and assets acquired during the marriage. However, it is the state's responsibility to address the loopholes in its implementation and enforce the law effectively. To begin with, it must dramatically increase the number of shelters (in partnership with NGOs if necessary), and build their capacity to provide survivors with the help and guidance they need, including psycho-social counselling and economic support. The process of accessing these services must also be made easier – we must provide victims shelter first, and ask questions later.

Neither party is upholding the spirit of the Liberation War



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MUJAHIDUL ISLAM SELIM

The Awami League and BNP are making a great deal of noise about controlling the streets, but they are unaware of the historical fact that the streets belong to the working class and they are the ones who will decide the future of the country.

It is a tragedy for our country that politics has now been trapped within the two poles of these two parties. Both groups have looted our country, strangled democracy, and worked as servants of forces inimical to the values of our Liberation War. They are both complacent to imperialist and hegemonic forces. And because these forces have been in power, the rulers have changed but there has been no organic change in people's fates. The infighting that is going on right now about the sharing of the loot has to be transformed into the fight of the oppressed against the oppressors – that is what I think should be our primary goal.

The current government has devalued democracy, individual rights, and the right to free speech just to consolidate power. It has even taken away the people's right to vote. BNP tried to do this too and succeeded once or twice, but could not get away with it because it lost in the political competition. We are now witnessing a repetition of that competition. However, BNP should

Although AL is in power for the third time in a row now, it is currently in power through questionable elections. They appear to be afraid to face the people. That is why they are striking hard at dissenting forces. They are forcibly holding on to power. People have not forgotten that BNP has done the same before.

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PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

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ideology. Whoever is in power, they should never oppress the opposition party – We said this when BNP was in power too.

In order to make the next election free, fair and participatory, the election system should be thoroughly reformed, including introducing a proportional representation system. We have been carrying out a movement on this for a long time. What is paramount now is creating a conducive atmosphere for the upcoming national elections to take place. We all know that elections are never fair under a partisan government. The AL and BNP both know it. If they bargain, collude and decide upon how many seats to take each, we will not be a part of that.

We strongly condemn the attacks on BNP and the killing of a BNP activist,

to vote during Ayub Khan's rule. We fought for the same rights during Ershad's rule and we are having to fight for the same rights now.

Our people did not give their blood for this – they gave their blood for a socialist economy. They fought for democracy, secularism and to give our nation a sovereign dignity following non-alignment. And we will continue that fight. That is where our contradiction lies with AL and BNP, who are acting against the spirit of the Liberation War. AL gives lip service to this spirit, but in reality they are not following it. They have enacted a market economy instead of a socialist economy. They have appeased Hefazat-e-Islam. They are giving shelter to looters and money launderers. People

BNP has not been able to provide any organic solutions to the problems of the people. They are proposing a market economy. They will increase facilities for businesspeople. They say they will control the price of commodities but they have no plan as to how they will do it. We have had this since the Liberation War. We are not saying anything new. AL has moved away from the economic, social and political philosophy of the Liberation War and is now prescribing the same policies as others.

If we talk about the immediate future, the competition for power will continue and there may be more bloodshed, until people come behind a leftist alternative to both AL and BNP and bring them to power.

The strategy of intimidation may no longer be working



NO STRINGS
ATTACHED

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AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

Traffic is always a little light on Saturday mornings with schools, universities and most offices being closed. Yesterday morning, however, the streets were emptier than usual. Strategic roads were cordoned off and the presence of police at numerous points was eerily similar to the days of political confrontation of the past.

People have been apprehensive of what would happen on December 10 ever since BNP announced it would hold its rally in Dhaka on that day, and indicated that it would be the biggest one so far. But the ruling party's aggressive suppression of opposition party members in all the other rallies and pre-rallies (including the killing of an activist by police firing on December 7) and BNP's apparent determination to carry on no matter what repercussions they face – all this has led to the fear that Dhaka's rally would spawn unprecedented violence. While no major incident of violence was reported when the rally was going on, the positioning of AL men in various points in the city ready to confront their opponents was a cause of worry.

Meanwhile, with two of its stalwarts BNP secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir and standing committee member Mirza Abbas

being sent to jail and hundreds of others already incarcerated, the BNP had enough fodder to create a real ruckus. In fact, seven BNP members of parliament announced their resignations from a parliament where they were "barred from speaking time and time again" according to BNP MP Rumeen Farhana, though this may not have been a wise strategy in the long run.

So far, whatever the ruling party has been doing is going in favour of the BNP. Indiscriminate arrests of hundreds of BNP members and supporters on the flimsiest or obviously false grounds, sending them to jail, attacking rallies, excessive police action on rally participants, engineering transport strikes wherever BNP rallies were due and checking mobile phones of people coming out on the streets before the Dhaka rally – these acts of unnecessary aggression have proved to be counterproductive to AL's goal to prove BNP to be a weak and unpopular political force. Instead, it has revealed its own weakness of taking too many extreme steps to crush its opponents.

AL's strategy towards the opposition may well have landed it into quicksand, one that it is finding increasingly difficult to come out of. The more repressive means it adopts to

neutralise the BNP, the more sympathy the BNP gains. In a scene where people are feeling helpless because of the punishing cost of living and the growing mistrust in law enforcing agencies as well as the legal system, blaming the government is inevitable.

Not that the ruling party has not helped to create such resentment. With stories of corruption in all the crucial sectors doing the rounds – in banking, energy, education, health, law enforcement, pretty much everywhere one looks – people may find the BNP's rhetoric about such issues, a little comforting. It may even make them forget the undemocratic regime of the military government

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of its founder Ziaur Rahman, the corruption during the Khaleda Zia-headed BNP governments, the institutionalised corruption of Hawa Bhahan orchestrated by Tareq Zia, the communal attacks after BNP's 2001 win and worst of all, the horrific incidents of arson on the streets in 2014 with the assistance of Jamaat that took so many lives.

Bangladeshis have a short memory and the volume and consistency of catastrophe they face every day make

them focus on present miseries rather than the ingloriousness of the past. Ordinary Bangladeshis are more concerned about what is happening to them now, especially why they must suffer such financial hardships and such paralysing fear from the protectors of law and order, when thousands of crores of taka are being looted by groups affiliated with the ruling party elite and the crimes of the politically connected go on unabated with total impunity.

The AL is therefore in an uncomfortable position of its own making. The year ahead looks uncertain, ominous and difficult for the ordinary citizen, as the economy is expected to continue to take hard hits and the politics of violence is expected to escalate around the national elections.

It is high time the AL abandoned the losing strategy of force, intimidation and politicisation of public institutions. While it focuses on bolstering the economy, it must stop the financial haemorrhaging carried on by political cronies. Local industries must have uninterrupted power. Efficient businesses must be supported. Loan defaulters have to be made accountable and be compelled to pay up. Food security has to be ensured. The police, election commission and legal system must be allowed to function independently, without influence or coercion.

By forgoing the strategy of violently suppressing its opponents and concentrating on supporting people in every way possible during the financial crisis, the AL can show itself to be a mature political party that is confident enough to compete and maybe even win, fair and square.