

## Hostility will only lengthen political deadlock

Authorities must prevent violence and legal intimidation targeting BNP activists

Amid rising political tensions since BNP's declaration of a one-point movement for the government's resignation in favour of an election under a non-party interim administration, we're alarmed to see efforts that will further inflame tensions. On Wednesday, about 11,000 BNP supporters were reportedly sued over clashes between the former and the activists of Awami League and police personnel. The cases were filed in Dhaka and seven other districts where the clashes took place during BNP's road march on Tuesday, which saw the death of one of its activists. There were more clashes the following day, so more cases may follow. And in typical fashion, there were thinly veiled threats of retaliation and resistance in equal measure.

All this is a chilling indication of what awaits the country should things continue along the current trajectory. But we must ask: since both ruling and opposition camps claim to be serving the interests of the public, how "served" should the latter feel after a week of heated exchanges, ominous threats and violent confrontations? Besides the death of Sajeb Hossain, a Krishak Dal activist, hundreds of people were also injured during BNP's two-day road march programme. Public properties were vandalised in many areas. People on the streets endured unimaginable suffering. Who will take responsibility for all that?

The combination of attacks and legal intimidation that the ruling camp appeared to endorse in a bid to weaken the BNP's street campaigns is a potent but dreadful tactic, one that violates its right to peaceful assembly. Often, violence was instigated after police, followed by overenthusiastic ruling party activists, swooped on BNP marches in the name of preventing public suffering. We have seen this tactic used many times before. Continuing along this line is not only detrimental to the democratic process, but will lengthen the present political deadlock and push any chance of reaching consensus on the composition of the election-time government further away. This is totally unacceptable.

The political parties, especially Awami League and BNP, owe it to the public to give dialogue and debate – not violence or other forms of intimidation – a chance to resolve their issues. Awami League in particular, as the party in power, must show its willingness to participate in a peaceful process to find solutions. We don't have much time ahead of the national election. And the country cannot continue to be in a state of fear and uncertainty. So it is high time the political parties found their way back to the negotiating table. Meanwhile, any harassment of the opposition leaders and activists must also stop.

## Three decades of ineptitude cannot be excused

DoA must preserve 200-year-old twin temples in Mymensingh

If the present is hostage to the inefficiencies of our policymakers and bureaucrats, one can easily guess how safe the past – or all that is left of it – must be in their hands. Take, for example, the woeful state of the Shree Anandamoyee Shiva and Kali Mata Mandir – also known as "Dhaksinashar Mandir," or "twin temples" – in Mymensingh's Muktagacha upazila, which are on the verge of collapse due to decades of neglect by the Department of Archaeology (DoA). According to a report, weeds and bushes have overtaken the once magnificent premises built in the 1820s, while cracks have developed on the structure's roof and walls, making it unsafe for the devotees to perform their rituals inside the temples.

It is inconceivable that a cherished heritage site and a marker of the local community's religious and cultural legacy have been left to rot by the authorities, with the temple's management committee at a loss as to how to address its deteriorating condition since it is now under the jurisdiction of the DoA.

The DoA authorities took over the temple in 1993, citing it as an archaeological site, with the intention of preserving and renovating it. However, three decades later, the authorities apparently are yet to even approve the project for renovation. What can explain such apathy of the DoA, whose primary responsibility it is to ensure the preservation of our dwindling archaeological and heritage sites? If three decades of neglect are any indication, it is that we, as a nation, have failed miserably at recognising the value of our own culture, traditions, and history, as well as at preserving them for posterity's sake. We have given the crucial task of their preservation to an institution whose very foundation, at this point, seems weaker than that of centuries-old monuments.

Whether it's the 300-year-old temples in Jasore, or a 600-year-old shrine in Dinajpur, or the Mughal architecture of Old Dhaka, heritage sites across the country are in ruins or under occupation of influentials, despite the grandiloquent rhetoric from the government about preserving the past. Whatever little we still have left of our past must not be allowed to be ruined permanently. We urge the government, and the DoA high-ups in particular, to fulfil their promises and mandates, and take urgent steps to preserve the twin temples in Mymensingh.

# Our political culture: You reap what you sow



THE THIRD VIEW

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The ruling Awami League is reaping what it has sown and paying the price for what it has allowed to grow in the name of party loyalty over almost 15 continuous years in power – arrogance, disrespect for the law, disdain for dissent, and demonisation of the opposition.

It all begins with the mindset of arrogance that is cultivated within the party – that anybody who opposes the party cannot have the country's best interest in their heart and hence must be an "enemy" of Bangladesh, or that such a person is at best someone whose patriotism needs to be questioned. There is nothing good and everything bad among those who criticise the Awami League. In fact, there is an implicit assumption that no one but the AL – the party that led the country during the Liberation War – has the right to rule this country. The role of the people and that of the Mukti Bahini, and of other political parties (however small), are never fully evaluated and as such recognised or honoured. This was starkly evidenced in the way the 50 years of our independence was celebrated. It is all and always about the AL, which is hardly a recipe for the development of democratic values and a tolerant culture.

Let's take for an example the case of the attack on Ashraful Hossain Alom, better known as Hero Alom. It is quite possible that no party directive (or even a lower level message) to attack him was conveyed. But the local cadres thought it their duty to "teach a lesson" to someone who dared to challenge the party, even if it is his fundamental right. So ingrained is the party's political culture of intolerance that every cadre of any level can decide on his own to assault a political opponent, in the full confidence that not only will they not be reprimanded, but they may even be praised or rewarded for their "courageous act."

In December 2012, we had an early instance of BCL's gruesome activity in the hacking to death of 24-year-old Bishwajit Das in broad daylight in Old Dhaka's Shankhari Bazar. The court later sentenced eight people to death and 13 others to life imprisonment. Then, there was the case of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) student Abrar Fahad, who was tortured on October 7, 2019 by the university's wing of Bangladesh Chhatra League (the ruling party's student front) so mercilessly and over such a long period of time that he died as a result. It was discovered that the faction had turned one of the rooms – 2011 – of the Sher-e-Bangla Hall into



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PHOTO: SAJJAD HOSSAIN

a "torture cell" where students who did not show sufficient obedience and loyalty to the BCL and its high-ups were punished. Twelve members of the BCL and eight of their followers were later sentenced to death in 2021. We know that only the highly meritorious get admission into Buet. So what sort of a political culture could have turned these 20 top-notch students into such monsters?

Earlier, in 2018, we saw the emergence of the "helmet bahini" (gang) consisting of BCL cadres, during the Road Safety Movement of school students. This group recklessly and relentlessly attacked school-going students just for demanding safe roads – something that every citizen wanted. We saw them again during the agitation concerning quota for government jobs, dishing out the same sort of violence.

Despite public condemnation, such gangsterism was patronised and used to subvert the emergence of any movement by the opposition or spontaneous ones by ordinary students, the youth, or by citizens. Whenever the students protested – for example, against VAT being imposed on private universities or the like – the BCL and the aforementioned bahini were used to suppress them. When the BNP was in power in 1991-1996 and 2001-2006, no BCL-affiliated student could live in the Dhaka University

only two parties – AL and BNP – have enjoyed power and ruled us. The biggest harm that these two parties have done to our politics is their aversion to opposing and divergent views, and their hostility towards individuals or groups who challenged them. When the BNP ruled, it was intellectuals, writers, academics, and journalists of their political hue who got recognised, honoured, promoted, funded, and placed in crucial positions. When AL came to power, the same things happened but for a longer time. The list of honourees for the Ekushey Padak (Language Movement Medal) and Swadhinata Padak (Independence Day Medal) more than prove our assertion. This has severely compromised the independence and stature of our intellectuals and, to our great detriment, politicised them.

Once again, we are about to hold an election, and once again, all the flaws in our political culture are out in the open. We all want a free and fair election, but don't know how to realise it. The opposition's demand of a caretaker government which, in other words, is asking Sheikh Hasina to give up power, will not happen. That's where we have been stuck and that's where we are likely to remain. As we have no precedent for a negotiated agreement of relinquishing of power – except by Gen Ershad in December 1990 – we have no chance of this

Sadly, even this understanding also seems unlikely. The fact that the ruling party announces their rallies on the same dates as the BNP's clearly indicates that, on every occasion, the AL wants to match the BNP's show of strength. This is quite absurd and is most likely to lead to violence and, possibly, deaths. Already, one person has died and scores have been injured. This could easily have been avoided if the AL had held its programmes on a different date.

After 32 years, we should have cultivated some values of democracy and tolerance, and incorporated those into our political culture. No occasion is missed in reprimanding the media for "spoiling" the image of the country. But does the image of the country not get spoiled when our two biggest political parties – both of which have enjoyed power – shout instead of talk, accuse instead of understand, and constantly introduce pre-conditions before starting any negotiations, proving over and over again that they don't have the maturity to make desperately needed compromises, the absence of which threatens social peace, economic stability, and democratic evolution?

Our people, but for whose hard work, sacrifice, and love for the country we would not have come where we have, deserve better.

## Is health an individual or collective responsibility?



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Lose weight. Stop smoking. Get more exercise. Avoid sweets. We receive all kinds of tips about what we should do to stay healthy. When we fall sick, we are told to go to the doctor and to take drugs.

In other words, it's our responsibility to stay healthy and the responsibility of the medical establishment to cure us when we're sick. But what about a shared responsibility for our health across society, with individuals, the community, and government working together to achieve a positive outcome?

The importance of government policy, not just individual motivation, for health becomes evident when we consider the behaviours needed for a person to stay healthy. The biggest risks to our health are non-communicable diseases like cancer, stroke, heart disease, and diabetes. The major risk factors are tobacco and alcohol use, unhealthy diet, lack of physical activity,

and air pollution. Other than pollution, the risk factors may appear to be within our control. But are they really?

If tobacco is inexpensive, we are inundated with ads for tobacco products and most places allow smoking. So, more people use tobacco than if strong policies were in place. When unhealthy foods like sugary drinks, chips, and fast food are widely available, heavily advertised, and cheaper than healthy foods, it is no wonder that people consume them in excess. When streets are dominated by motorised vehicles, parks are few and far between, and little to no good infrastructure exists for walking and cycling, most people will not get enough physical activity.

Governments need to pass good policies, not only within the health sector but for transport, urban planning, industry, environment,

education, and so on. They need to carry out communication campaigns to help people understand what they can do to stay healthy. No matter how successful such efforts are, government hospitals and clinics will still be needed. Working on both to make it easier for people to stay healthy and to cure them when they fall ill is a huge responsibility.

Fortunately, there is no need for it to be entirely the government's responsibility to ensure initiatives, policies, services, and infrastructure to keep the population healthy. Many other countries have established a health promotion foundation, usually semi-autonomous from the government, to carry out some of those roles while leaving the management of government health care operations to the health ministry.

Typically, a health promotion foundation carries out a number of important roles. In Thailand, for instance, ThaiHealth identifies gaps, then commissions research, engages stakeholders, ensures collaboration, advocates for supportive policies, carries out communication campaigns, and provides funding to institutes, universities, and organisations to improve population health.

Sounds great, but who would fund

all that? The budget of ThaiHealth is roughly \$120 million a year. Most health promotion foundations, including ThaiHealth, are funded directly from a dedicated tax on tobacco and alcohol. The money goes straight to the foundation, rather than through government revenues, and thus is not susceptible to annual budgetary negotiations.

Is the idea of establishing a health promotion foundation that can carry out important functions to help Bangladeshis stay healthier, funded through a dedicated tax on unhealthy products, relevant here? Are there any potential downsides to investing more money and energy into helping people stay healthy? Surely, as we transition into a middle-income country, health should gain emphasis. As the need for curative care expands exponentially, good options for reducing costs while improving services are needed.

Establishing a health promotion foundation will not be a miracle cure to all that ails us, but it could play an enormous role in assisting people throughout the country to live a healthier life; even without the assistance of a nagging doctor or friends proffering well-intentioned but unwelcome advice.