



VISUAL: STAR

Hero Alom’s realpolitik



BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Just last week, I was telling my students to “learn why the world wags and what wags it.” The excerpt comes from *The Once and Future King*, TH White’s retelling of the Arthurian saga of a young boy’s transformation into a king under the guidance of magician mentor Merlyn. “Learning is the only thing for you. Look what a lot of things there are to learn,” I quoted White to explain the multifaceted aspects of literary studies at a time when technology and trade have usurped every other branch of knowledge, including creativity. In a world that has lost its innocence, our reading of the world cannot remain innocent. When you see a dog wagging its tail, do not assume the dog is happy or angry; find out who is pampering or threatening that dog. The world has many such wag-the-dog moments. I train my students not to accept presented facts at face value.

We question why MP candidate Ashraful Hossain Alom, better known as Hero Alom, was beaten just before polls closed. The attack on Alom exposes a lot of internal demons troubling our institutional system and society as a whole. This is especially worrying because the government had assured all watchdogs that they would deliver a free and fair election. Months before the national election, the by-election to Dhaka-17 constituency had no real significance. It was more or less a test run for the Election Commission and a warm-up match for the incumbent government. With the main opponents in the tent, Alom can at best be characterised as a bowler you invite for net practice. However, Alom’s rival did not treat him lightly. He was, after all, running as a proxy candidate for the Opposition Parties.

The other reason why Alom became a minefield for his rivals involves the location of the constituency. The political masters who have allowed the income gap to increase over the last 50 years are getting a taste of their own medicine. The so-called tri-state posh area of Dhaka is also home to slum dwellers, who form the support service sector for the upper middle class and

the elite class. With his characteristic defiance and desire, Alom became the voice of the voiceless. He was not afraid to challenge the high and mighty, as he had nothing to lose. As someone who turned from a hawkler-of-snacks-turned-CD-salesman to a TikTok sensation, he used his position to craftily expose the societal gap.

The allergic reaction to Alom is symptomatic of a culture that deems him a foreign particle in their sociopolitical body. Alom has the ability to stir up controversy by getting under his opponents’ skin. In 2017, *The Indian Express* ran a story on him when he photoshopped an image to claim that Shahrukh Khan was his biggest fan. He tweeted, “Saarukh Khan fan of me – 100% Hero Alom Bogra.....Hear, Saarukh is taking selfie with me.....love you Saarukh my fan.”

When the Indian media started trolling Alom for such “audacity,” our police officers roughed him up to “teach” him the meaning of hero. Later, in an attempt to mock the cultural elites, he sang Tagore’s song out of tune. When he decided to vote in two elections in his hometown of Bogura, he continued his battle with the windmill. But for him or his puppeteers, running in an election in a diplomatic zone is arguably the best course of action.

Soon after he and his supporters were escorted out of the polling centre at Banani Bidyaniketan School on polling day, he was attacked by a group of unruly men. The attackers wanted to send one message: Alom was not welcome to join the privy council of politics taken over by high-profile businessmen, bureaucrats, ex-servicemen, and civil society. Gone are the days when a party worker would rise up from the ranks to defend human rights or denounce social injustices. The political bandwagon is now filled with men and women with the benefits of being close to the power circuits. There are some token figures from the grassroots in parliament, all wearing party jerseys.

Hero Alom does not fit the bill. But he served his purpose nonetheless.

Alom confirmed that he would not participate in any more elections under this government, echoing others who are already in the streets. There was a tweet from the UN in his support. The State government had a press briefing reiterating their vigilance.

Alom’s explanation of why the West is supporting him is far more intelligent than the slur “mogger mulluk” (state of anarchy) that someone in authority used. What wags the Western media is their stated policy of promoting diplomacy as an export item. The country in question had to defend the benefits package it provides to us. Their Congress needs to be aware that the benefits are flowing to nations that support their policies.

Our response should therefore go beyond the oft-cited Vienna Convention. We need to remind our guests that there are some house rules if you want to stay and operate in our country. The realpolitik lies in the way you point out the obvious.

Do you remember the scene from the movie *300* where the Persian envoy offers the Spartan King Leonidas the chance to appease Emperor Xerxes in exchange for a sign of submission? Leonidas throws the messenger into the well as a response, ignoring his last words, “This is blasphemy! This is madness.” “Madness? This is Spartaaa....!” an angry Leonidas retorts.

Diplomacy is all about avoiding such madness and anger. But the theatricality of Alom unpacked another bout of madness (not without reasons). Now that the attackers have been nabbed, the government is feeling the pinch. The damage is deep-seated. We have pursued a version of democracy that doesn’t like dissent. We have grown in stature without addressing some of our foundational weaknesses. A Unicef report from 2022 tells us that only 34 percent of our third-graders achieve the desired literacy skills, while 18 percent attain numeracy skills. Yet, we have a near perfect graduation rate in SSC and HSC exams. We live in a society with inflated figures. Hero Alom can become larger than life because the large majority of his followers are driven by passion and sensation, not reason and education. Conversely, rational and educated ones do not have the sanity to accommodate the voices of dissent and adopt a healthy democracy. In the process, we create a state of anarchy that allows our guests to complain about our dirty laundry in public. And here we ask: why is the laundry dirty to begin with?

World hunger and the war in Ukraine



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On July 17, Dmitry Peskov, spokesperson for Russia’s President Vladimir Putin, announced, “The Black Sea agreements are no longer in effect.” This was a blunt statement to suspend the Black Sea Grain Initiative that emerged out of intense negotiations in the hours after Russian forces entered Ukraine in February 2022. The initiative went into effect on July 22, 2022, after Russian and Ukrainian officials signed it in Istanbul in the presence of United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and Türkiye’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Guterres called the initiative a “beacon of hope” for two reasons. First, it is remarkable to have an agreement of this kind between belligerents in an ongoing war. Second, Russia and Ukraine are major producers of wheat, barley, maize, rapeseed and rapeseed oil, sunflower seeds and sunflower oil, as well as nitrogen, potassic, and phosphorus fertiliser, accounting for 12 percent of calories traded. Disruption of supply from Russia and Ukraine, it was felt by a range of international organisations, would have a catastrophic impact on world food markets and on hunger. As Western – largely US, UK, and European – sanctions increased against Russia, the feasibility of the deal began to diminish. It was suspended several times during the past year. In March 2023, Russia’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova, in response to the sanctions against Russian agriculture, said, “[The main] parameters provided for in the [grain] deal do not work.”

Financialisation leads to hunger

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said his country regretted Russia’s “continued weaponisation

of the Black Sea Grain Initiative is indeed regrettable, but it is not the leading cause of hunger in the world. The leading cause – as even the European Economic and Social Committee agrees – is financial speculation in food markets.

It is likely that the Black Sea Grain Initiative will restart within the month. Earlier suspensions have not lasted longer than a few weeks. But this time, it is not clear if the West will give Russia any relief on its ability to export its own agricultural products. Certainly, the suspension will impact millions who struggle with endemic hunger. Billions of others who are hungry because of financial speculation in food markets are not impacted directly by these developments.

Why did Russia suspend the initiative?

To monitor the Black Sea Grain Initiative, the UN set up a Joint Coordination Centre (JCC) in Istanbul. It is staffed by representatives from Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, and the UN. On several occasions, the JCC had to deal with tensions between Russia and Ukraine over the shipments, such as when Ukraine attacked Russia’s Black Sea Fleet – some of whose vessels carried the grain – in Sevastopol, Crimea, in October 2022. Tensions remained over the initiative as Western sanctions against Russia tightened, making it difficult for Russia to export its own agricultural products into the world market.

Russia put three requirements on the table before the UN regarding its own agricultural system. First,

spare parts, and Russian ships are not able to buy insurance or enter many foreign ports. Despite the “carve-outs” in Western sanctions for agriculture, sanctions on firms and individuals have debilitated Russia’s agricultural sector.

To counter Western sanctions, Russia placed restrictions on the export of fertilisers and agricultural products. These restrictions included the ban on the export of certain goods (such as temporary bans of wheat exports to the Eurasian Economic Union), the increase of licensing requirements (including for compound fertilisers, requirements set in place before the war), and the increase of export taxes. These Russian moves come alongside strategic direct sales to countries, such as India, which will re-export to other countries.

In late July, St Petersburg will host the Second Russia-Africa



Vessels are seen as they await inspection under the Black Sea Grain Initiative, brokered by the UN and Türkiye, in the southern anchorage of the Bosphorus in Istanbul, Turkey on December 11, 2022.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

of food” since this “harms millions of vulnerable people around the world.” Indeed, the timing of the suspension could not be worse. A UN report titled “The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023” shows that 1 in 10 people in the world struggles with hunger, and that 3.1 billion people cannot afford a healthy diet. But the report itself makes an interesting point: that the war in Ukraine has driven 23 million people into hunger, a number that pales in comparison to the other drivers of hunger, such as the impact of commercialised food markets and the Covid pandemic. A 2011 report from World Development Movement (now known as Global Justice Now) showed that “financial speculators now dominate the [food] market, holding over 60 percent of some markets compared to 12 percent 15 years ago.”

The situation has since worsened. Dr Sophie van Huellen, who studies financial speculation in food markets, pointed out in late 2022 that while there are indeed food shortages, “the current food crisis is a price crisis, rather than a supply crisis.” The end of

the Russian government asked that the Russian Agricultural Bank, the premier credit and trade bank for Russian agriculture, be reconnected to the SWIFT system, from which it had been cut off by the European Union’s sixth package of sanctions in June 2022. A Turkish banker told TASS that there is the possibility that the EU could “issue a general licence to the Russian Agricultural Bank” and that the bank “has the opportunity to use JP Morgan to conduct transactions in US dollars” as long as the exporters being paid for were part of the Black Sea Grain Initiative.

Second, from the first discussions about the grain initiative, Moscow put on the table its export of ammonia fertiliser from Russia, both through the port of Odessa and of supplies held in Latvia and the Netherlands. A central part of the debate has been the reopening of the Togliatti-Odessa pipeline, the world’s longest ammonia pipeline. In July 2022, the UN and Russia signed an agreement that would facilitate the sale of Russian ammonia on the world market. The UN chief went to the Security

Economic and Humanitarian Forum, where these topics will surely be front and centre. Ahead of the summit, President Putin called South Africa’s Cyril Ramaphosa to inform him about the problems faced by Russia in exporting its food and fertilisers to the African continent. “The deal’s main goal,” he said of the Black Sea Grain Initiative, was “to supply grain to countries in need, including those on the African continent, has not been implemented.”

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This article was produced by Globetrotter.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Out of style

6 Root spot

10 Light-footed

11 West Indies native

13 Copy

14 Make amends

15 Salt Lake City player

16 Hockey great

17 Bobby

18 Tennis need

19 Vehicle in a procession

22 Last letter, in London

23 Spur on

24 Decrees

27 Less fettered

28 Writer Ricer

29 Garden visitor

30 Item of

extreme inclusion

35 Summer in Paris

36 Strange

37 Opposite of oui

38 Remove suds from

40 Gladden

42 More reasonable

43 Zellweger of “Chicago”

44 Statutes

45 Future flowers

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1 Block

2 Heartburn

3 Oven feature

4 New Haven student

5 Solves a

cryptogram

6 Muffler’s kin

7 Cereal bit

8 Magnetite, for one

9 Ancestry

12 Improved

17 Carmine

20 Early Mexican

21 Entices

24 Frauds

25 Monogram part

26 Reception aid

27 Car parts

29 Sleep spot

31 Gardeners, at times

32 Plain silly

33 Renowned

34 Dandling spots

39 Use a needle

41 Director Ang

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

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