



FILE PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

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The politics of betrayal and trauma



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Be-tray-al
: violation of a person's trust or confidence, of a moral standard, a contract, etc.

Bangladesh has experienced a dramatic series of events in recent weeks. An interim government has been formed, and we await fair and transparent elections. But we would do well to remember the cycles of betrayal and trauma that have shaped the politics of the country and to resolve that they are not repeated again.

Underlying the mass agitation that eventually led to the downfall of the previous government is a deep sense of collective betrayal. The Awami League government betrayed the most fundamental of public trusts: the expectation that the state will not wilfully kill one's children. "My son was murdered," said Shopna, the mother of slain 18-year-old protester Rahat Hossain. "And not by civilians, but by law enforcement officers under government orders. My son was killed by a bullet bought with my tax money."

What began in early July as peaceful protests by Bangladeshi university students against the quota system in government job recruitment faced a full-scale government crackdown as the police, the military, and border guard paramilitaries were deployed to quell the unrest. An Awami League government that shamelessly clung to power for 15 years through rigged elections and persecution of the opposition unleashed its punitive might on student protesters and citizens. A curfew was declared, and internet and mobile phone networks were shut down.

Betrayal has many faces, shapes and forms. At its core, though, is the experience of violation and trauma. The psychological effects of betrayal include anger, loss and grief, self-doubt, and preoccupation or an inability to let go of the precipitating events. Human beings do not compartmentalise these feelings. Emotions

seep into political cultures where they have the potential to alter the course of a society.

In the wake of the police brutality, student organisers of the quota reform movement asked then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to apologise for what happened. It is easier to heal after betrayal when the responsible party takes ownership for what has happened. Regrettably, the Awami League government devoted its energies to denying responsibility, to pointing fingers at everyone but themselves.

The politics of betrayal in Bangladesh is painfully familiar to me. I am the daughter of the late Shah AMS Kibria. After joining the Awami League in 1992, my father was the finance minister of the government led by Sheikh Hasina from 1996 to 2001. Following that, he was a member of the opposition in parliament and a vocal critic of the rise of militancy, persecution of religious minorities, and state-sponsored political violence in the country.

On January 27, 2005, Shah AMS Kibria was assassinated by a grenade attack during a public meeting at his constituency in Sylhet.

Following her husband's killing, the late Asma Kibria fought hard for a full and transparent investigation conducted independently of the BNP-Jamaat government of the time. I am reminded of her indomitable spirit when I hear Shamsi Ara Zaman, the mother of 27-year-old Tahir Zaman, a freelance photographer who was killed on July 17 when he went to film the protests, "I want justice. As a mother I will do whatever is necessary to get justice for my son."

When the Awami League was elected in 2009, we, the family, rejoiced. After four long years, we would get justice for my father's murder. Who more so than a government led by the political party that he had loyally served could be motivated to address the questions that had been haunting us since that fateful day in 2005? Who ordered the grenade attack

on him? What was the source of the grenades?

For 15 years, the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina has held the reins of government in Bangladesh. For 15 years, we have not seen a complete investigation and trial into our father/grandfather's murder. For 15 years, the crucial questions of motive, intent and plan remain unanswered.

It is of great sorrow to me that my mother never saw the justice that she sought. She died with the trauma of betrayal. "Where can we get justice," she said, "if even those he trusted the most do not have the will to find and punish his murderers?" Her trauma is now mine, to be passed down through the generations of our family.

Growing up, my parents instilled in me a deep appreciation for the ideals of the 1971 Liberation War and the sacrifices of those who gave their lives for the independence of Bangladesh. Over the past decade and a half, I have watched with dismay as the Awami League—the political party so closely tied with these iconic events—chose to politicise and weaponise this glorious history, using it to divide rather than unite the nation.

When I watched the terrifying footage of Abu Sayed, a student shot and killed during the quota reform protests, I felt the sting of many betrayals, one top of another and another. How could the government authorise the use of deadly force against unarmed student protesters? How could a government led by the Awami League, a party founded on principles of self-determination and democracy, turn on its own people? There is a sense in which I am grateful that my father is not around to see the moral degeneration of the party he served with dedication.

Bangladesh is now at a political crossroads. The country, I believe, can only heal from the trauma of betrayal if there is a concerted building of trust in public institutions and those who serve in them—whether it is a policeperson directing traffic or a clerk at the passport control office or a Supreme Court judge. The politicisation of our institutions must stop. After all, in the end, it is very easy to be betrayed by a political party or a political leader. But if we know that our public institutions are there to serve all of us, regardless of who is in power, it may not matter so much.

After all, as Shah AMS Kibria used to say, "We Bangalees can never be put down for long. We sacrificed our lives for freedom once and we will do so again if necessary."

RIGHT TO INFORMATION Time for the sunshine law

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The seismic changes in Bangladesh in three fateful weeks—from mid-July to early August—were a powerful testament to people's power. The induction of an interim government led by Nobel laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus has been a harbinger of hope for the country's Right to Information (RTI) Act. This law can help meet the nation's cry for systemic change in governance.

Over the years, this column has lamented that a powerful law like the RTI Act has not been utilised to its full extent. More than a handful of activists and individual citizens have used it, but Bangladesh's civil society, known for its stand on public issues, has largely stayed away. One reason for this was the fear of possible reprisal by the authorities facing information requests on sensitive matters that may expose their misdeeds.

Under the country's changed circumstances, it is time for all, particularly our student community which led the recent uprising, to turn their attention to the law.

RTI is popularly called the sunshine law, as it is meant to shine light on a government's activities. The RTI Act, 2009 provides a legal framework for all citizens to access relevant information from government offices relating to their responsibilities. The idea is that by doing so, they can assess if the offices concerned are performing their duties under the laws of the land. The preamble to the act proclaims that by applying the law, "transparency and accountability of all public ... institutions ... shall increase, corruption of the same shall decrease and good governance of the same shall be established."

Unlike most other laws, the RTI Act requires all public offices to promptly respond to citizens' information requests and, where delinquent, face sanctions. This is a powerful way to hold public officials accountable and make them responsive to the people. It's a step towards establishing transparent and accountable governance, the two most essential elements of democracy. While this law establishes a right, it also lays the responsibility on citizens to hold their government accountable.



FILE VISUAL: STAR

Prof Yunus's call to the nation to unite and help establish peace, justice, freedom, non-discrimination and equality in the country—all very important elements for democracy—resonates well with the primary objectives of the RTI Act. By resorting to it faithfully, our youth can promote systemic changes in the country's governance culture. Their demonstrated skills in organising and achieving their goals in recent times will be invaluable in this new endeavour.

To begin with, they must fully grasp the potential of the RTI Act and learn how to use it to advance their goals. Once that is done, they must develop a specific strategy to achieve them. Therefore, understanding the law's substance and the processes involved in its application is important. Towards that end, we focus below on a few of its salient elements.

An important attribute of the RTI Act is fostering interaction between citizens and public officials. By seeking pertinent information from public offices, citizens establish contact with the officials and simultaneously remind them that they are under public scrutiny. Such interaction was impossible under the Official Secrets Act, 1923, a remnant of colonial times, which prevailed before the enactment of the RTI Act.

The RTI Act serves as a bridge, connecting citizens with government bodies meant to serve them. Any information request from a citizen to a government unit's designated officer (DO) requires a prompt response. Preparing the response, which involves consultation within the office unit, establishes a direct connection between the citizen seeking information and the relevant government office.

To illustrate the process, let us use the quota system for government jobs, which ignited the recent student protests, as an example. Suppose a citizen, whether curious or aggrieved, wished to know how the application of the quota system affected the selection of candidates for public jobs and sent an information request to the DO of the Public Service Commission (PSC). The request asked for lists of candidates who sat for the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) exams in a given year, were selected for government jobs, and benefited from the quota system.

The DO could provide the information faithfully if they wished to abide by the law. Another option would be to disregard or bin the request if there was something to hide or if the office felt uneasy about responding. The law, however, provides for an appeal, and if that does not lead to a satisfactory response, a complaint could be filed with the Information Commission. So, the DO and their colleagues must consider what option to take. If they took the first option, the information could be publicised and become a subject for discussion, leading to whatever action is considered necessary by those affected. This is the main objective of the law: drawing public attention to official actions affecting the public.

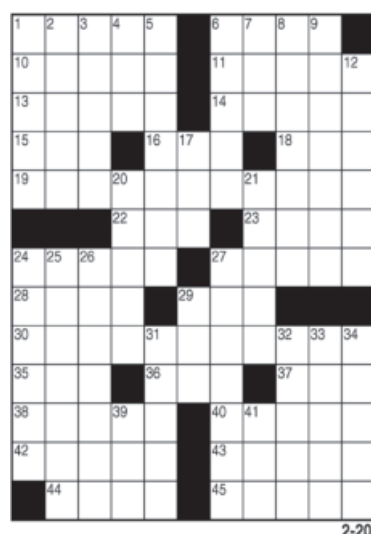
If the information was not provided or only partially provided and the applicant was dissatisfied, an appeal could be filed with a higher authority in the office. If that, too, was found unsatisfactory, then a complaint could be filed with the Information Commission. The latter would then have to call the two sides and decide on the respective claims, including a directive to provide the information and even sanctions against the delinquent officials. Or the commission could decide against disclosure of the information, in which case the applicant could file a writ petition with the High Court. Thus, a citizen's request for information would have led to national attention to an issue of public interest, alerting the office concerned to be at least careful about how it went about its work. Just imagine if this happened on many other national issues.

When six coordinators of the quota reform movement were picked up, social media pressure forced the authorities to reveal their whereabouts. There was widespread concern in the country about their well-being. RTI could have been used to seek such information from the police, as the law provides for a response within 24 hours if it concerns citizens' human rights. But very few knew this.

Now is the opportunity for our youth, with their courage and sense of national responsibility, to lead us in using existing laws to build a better country. We have faith in the younger citizens' capability to apply the law and oversee the system as a whole, including the role of the Information Commission and the selection process of the commissioners entrusted to safeguard such an important institution. We can only go forward from here.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
1 Storybook elephant
6 Alan of "M*A*S*H"
10 Nimble
11 Sheds tears
13 Like some secret messages
14 Make suitable
15 Mine yield
16 Corn serving
18 Early auto
19 First lady of the 1980s
22 "It's a mouse!"
23 Medicine amount
24 Instrument panel features
27 More mature
28 Lake near Buffalo
29 Work wk.'s end
30 First lady of the 1990s
35 What's more
36 Poker prize
37 Take to court
38 Pageant topper
40 First lady Michelle
42 Diner patron
43 Wild party
44 Waiting room call
45 Hägar's dog
- DOWN**
1 Burger topper
2 Old market
3 First lady Jill
4 Saloon order
5 Overnight flights
6 In the know
7 Was a pioneer
8 Greg Kinnear movie
9 Placate
12 High fellow
17 Noah's boat
20 Star
21 Improvise on stage
24 Campaign event
25 Hormuz native
26 When a show is shown
27 Public speakers
29 To and —
31 Isolated
32 Grammar topic
33 Ancient Mesopotamian region
34 Body pump
39 Writer Stout
41 Outlaw



SATURDAY'S ANSWERS

