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Bangladesh Situation

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Guest Column by Kazi Anwarul Masud

The very fact that the agitation of the opposition political parties combine has been reduced to terrorism and the traffic jams one faces at Dhaka and other major cities around Bangladesh reflect peoples' disenchantment with the "hartal" and "aborodh" calls against the government.

Most of the people who were roasted alive by petrol bombs and their families left to a future of abject poverty are because the victims belong to poor or lower middle class in our society.

Opposition political leaders' obstinacy in continuing their political agitation can only spell further disaster on the nation which was on the cusp of being promoted to a group of 12 nations with development promises after the BRICS.

As Margaret Macmillan (Oxford University International History Professor-Rhyme of History) had pointed, albeit in a different context, that people have to pay dearly for the mistakes of their leaders. An example can be found in the mistake of Mao Tse Dong, the great transformational leader of China, by insisting on his aim to catch up with the Western industrialized world in 10 to 15 years after the end of the Korean War—an ambition unfulfilled but causing starvation death of an estimated 38 million rural people who were left to fend for themselves and forbidden to move to the cities as urban population was assured of food security. Sidney Rittenberg, Mao's interpreter for many years, wrote in his memoirs that while Mao was a great leader in history "he was also a great criminal...His wild fantasies led to the deaths of tens of millions of people" (Wikipedia).

One can also cite the attacks by Napoleon and Hitler on Russia—one leading to the Battle of Waterloo and the other to the suicide of Adolf

Hitler and his defeat in Second World War. In our case one may wonder whether Muslim League would have been decimated in the 1954 elections if Khwaja Najimuddin had not repeated Mohammed Ali Jinnah's words at Dhaka that Urdu and Urdu alone would be the state language of Pakistan thereby sowing the seeds of rebellion in then East Pakistan and eventual war of liberation and emergence of Bangladesh.

But then on deeper reflection the whole concept of the partition of India into two based on religion appears to have been a mistake. There are many Arab states all professing Islam and speaking the same language-Arabic- yet retaining their independence. Efforts by Gamal Abdul Nasser to create United Arab Republic with Syria and Sudan did not last nor did the appeal of Pan-Arabism. But like Czechoslovakia the parting of ways was peaceful though both profess Christianity. This is ample proof, if proof is needed at all, that religion alone cannot be the bond of nationalism.

In Bangladesh most of the population being Sunni Muslims and inter-religious conflicts being rare we have centuries old tradition of tolerance in our societal behaviour which appears to be on the wane. Cause for worry may be that ISIS has recently announced the formation of a wilayah (province) in South Asia—Khurasan—without specifying the boundaries. It is, however, believed that ISIS would for the present concentrate on Pakistan and Afghanistan to establish its concept of monotheism or Salafism in contrast to what ISIS describes as “Polytheism” .

The alleged use of terrorists by the opposition political combine, albeit denied by them, can only spell disaster for Bangladesh by opening up a space for the recruitment of fellow travelers of ISIS, Taliban, and others. In this milieu a foreign country's involvement is suspected for giving financial assistance to the terrorists enabling them to carry out their acts of death and destruction.

Undeniably Bangladesh is a majority Muslim country but endowed with a tradition of living in peace with people of other faiths. Bangladeshis in general do not subscribe to the so-called purist conception of Islam that would stand in the way of achieving Millennial Development Goals and defying in the process Walt Rostow's linear progression of development. Some in the opposition are trying to create the impression that their aim is to consolidate sovereignty of the nation which they find to be “threatened” by India's “expansionist designs”. Such a notion is not only absurd but is also counterproductive if one considers that economic development today is not possible in isolation and regional cooperation is essential to expedite the process of development.

The most shining example is the gradual development of European Coal and Steel Community to the existing European Union where member states have ceded some of their powers reserved for the State's Parliament to the European Commission, European Council, and European Court etc. Far from a replacement for states, the European Union rather "pools" important aspects of their sovereignty into a "supranational" institution in which their freedom of action is constrained. They are no longer absolutely sovereign. They are sovereign in governing defense, but not in governing their currencies, trade policies, and many social welfare policies, which they administer in cooperation with EU authorities as set forth in EU law.

Absolute sovereignty was thought to be quintessential to modern sovereignty. But in recent decades, it has begun to be circumscribed by institutions like the EU, the UN's practices of sanctioning intervention, and the international criminal court. Besides the opposition's argument presupposes that Awami League government is not conscious of state sovereignty as supremacy with a defined territoriality. Such an absurd notion can only be entertained by a group totally unaware of the changes from the Westphalian concept of sovereignty to post-Westphalian concept that implies that nation states have lost much of its usefulness and that problems of security and welfare must be found in transnational structures, global or regional.

The compulsion of globalization forces nations to enter into military alliances (NATO) or economic groups (EU, BIMSTEC, ASEAN, etc). In the case of the European Union hasty absorption of newly freed nations of former East Europe is demonstrative of the willingness of these countries to cede some of their sovereign rights to a supranational entity.

In our part of the world deepening of politico-economic relations of all SAARC nations with India as the catalyst should be pursued in earnest. Such cooperation would face obstacles due to opposition politics in Bangladesh that has now degraded to alleged opposition inspired terrorism that apart from causing death by fire to about hundred innocent people has cost the economy Taka 2274 crores every day or Tk. 136620 crores from January 6-March 6 (The Daily Star-6-3-2015) coupled with lost investors confidence who want long term stability.

Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) recently expressed optimism about Japanese companies shifting to Bangladesh from China due to low wage rate here and Price Water House's projection of Bangladesh acquiring a trillion dollar GDP in 2030 and over three trillion in 2050 may have to be revised as a result of alleged opposition inspired terrorism. On 5th March British Foreign Office Minister Hugo Swire urged an end to the last 60 days of violence and disruption in Bangladesh "which has had such an impact on the livelihood, education and security of so many Bangladeshi people. There is no place for this in a democratic Bangladesh". He urged all of Bangladesh's political parties, the Government and others in society, to take the confidence-building measures necessary to stop the violence, to reduce tension and to ensure an inclusive and participatory political process.

The question that arises is whether the government can engage in political discussions with parties they believe to be directly behind the current wave of terrorism. Besides the opposition combine includes a party which opposed the liberation war and many of whose leaders

have been tried or are being tried for crimes against humanity. It can be argued that non-acceptance of the 5th January elections was a challenge to our constitution as the elections were held to ensure the continuity of the constitution and non-participation by some political parties was their voluntary decision which on reflection appears to have been a mistake and cannot be undone by terrorism costing lives, destruction of property, keeping the nation hostage, disrupting students' examinations pregnant with distortions in the lives of the future generations, and no less importantly destroying the economy's present and future.

From a literary point of view one wonders if the opposition combine can be seen as John Milton's Satan and his fight with God (read good governance) as he thinks himself to be rightfully deserving the Throne of Heaven. But after defeat Satan is thrown into Hell from where he conspires revenge through underhanded means of corrupting humans and thereby introducing sin into mortal universe. Descending from ecclesiastical universe to earth the editorial in The New York Times (5th March) would of relevance which referring to the murder of blogger Avijit Roy described the ongoing trial of war criminals of some leaders of "Islamist Jamat-e-Islami" and observed that the government needs "to do far more to protect writers and to send a clear message that it will not allow free speech to be silenced by murder".

Often political parties in developing countries yet to graduate to the stage of mature democracy do not clearly distinguish between power and violence. Eminent American political scientist Hannah Arendt had said that violence can destroy the old power but it can never create the authority that legitimizes the new. Violence is therefore the poorest possible basis on which to build a government. "To substitute violence for power can bring victory, but the price is very high; for it is not only paid by the vanquished but it is also paid by the victor." She considered this particularly dangerous because "The means ... of destruction now determine the end -- with the consequence that the end will be the destruction of all [legitimate] power".

In Bangladesh terrorists wear the protective mask of opposition political combine whose stated mission and real practice are quite different. How long can a government, unless it is willing to be branded as a failed or fragile state, can tolerate such destructive behaviour? Both the US and Pakistan made the mistake of overlooking the gradual emergence and consolidation of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) because they were busy with Afghanistan situation while TTP assassinated the tribal Maliks and replaced them with TTP commanders. True we do not have the feudal system of Pakhtunkhwa.

The point made here is the possible cost of inaction or delayed action that may be irreparable. One also has to consider the spillover effects of resurgent Islamist movement to neighboring countries already suffering from state sponsored terrorism. Already some countries and their diplomatic representatives have expressed concern over the current situation in Bangladesh. Bangladesh politics now has the Sisyphean look condemned to roll the stone up the hill only to see the stone roll down the mountain and start all over again. The difference is that while Sisyphus was deceitful people of Bangladesh are being punished by destructive politics by some self-seeking politicians' ambition to conduct public affairs for private gains.

The present government is in the horns of a dilemma between using hard power to root out the terrorism and arrest the unfolding tragedy of

every day of death, destruction and loss to the economy. Sooner the government acts in the belief that any compromise with terrorism is bound to fail in the long run and the international community also looks back to its track record of uncompromising attitude till the terrorists mend their ways and stands by the governmental actions, the better it will be for the people of Bangladesh.

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