

Beyond the Quota Reform Movement – a nation-building in disarray

I. Introduction: Lies, Lies and More Lies

There is hardly any misgiving about the sequence of events during the ten days (roughly 12-21 July) that shook Bangladesh. No matter how many variants of lies and rumors float around, and no matter what conspiracies or misgovernance may have led to those events, return to a track of progress calls for confessions among misguided ones blinded by arrogance. In addition, there is a need to move towards purging the wrong-doers within the party in power, who enticed instability, either purposively or on account of cultural or organizational inertia. The July events and government responses exposed the poor quality of polity and power in the country. A few of the takeaways are,

(i) After 50+ years of Independence, the rhetoric around Muktijoddha (MJ) sounds too hollow, even among those who take pride in their ancestors' roles in securing Bangladesh's independence.

(ii) Hooliganism and crude muscle power of a segment of loyalists, secured by providing unregulated access to extortions to them, may have reached a limit (the AL Secretary General's frustration in ensuring workers on the street is worth noting). And, most importantly,

(iii) Political immaturity and poor acumen, as revealed in statements made by several key individuals in leadership, were found to be incoherent, suggesting that the party in power may be fragmented on several dimensions.

Thus, a lie is sought to cover up an uncalled-for action, that had to be followed by a series of bigger lies! The events remind all of the child who could see that the King was naked, while the adults were still appreciative of the (non-existent) fine dress the king was allegedly wearing. Thanks to the students and the coordinators for keeping cool and raising the spirit to dream. The cost has been extremely high on account of lives lost as well as public property damaged, and the martyrs may find peace if all segments of the society reflect to draw lessons and reorganize the structure of governance at a higher level of consciousness and compassion.

Elsewhere (in a Kalbela interview and columns), I had argued why Awami League ought to transcend beyond the initial mobilization of social segments in the name of MJ. Such a move would require filtering out wrong-doers inside the party, many of whom often wash away their sins by claiming to be a MJ. I failed to understand why the supreme leader of the party failed to extend all supports to the quota reform movement at the right time! The observers often hint at blinded arrogance and a few even apprehend densifying incense for revenge lacking compassion for thousand others who may have gone through similar personal trauma. There is a third view that mentions of continuation of the empire with 'pure blood' inheritors. The latter aligns well with the currently observed fractures within, and with the choice of persons on whom the PM appears to put trust. Unfortunately, allegiance of many with Bangladeshi roots, in spite of being descendants of MJs, have undergone qualitative changes amidst dual citizenship and intense war of foreign interests on this land. Minus the probable presence of ego and vengeance attitude, many had expected the current PM as a stabilizer in the political space that could bring progress to the people of Bangladesh! To get back on track, it is important to Confess (next section) and assess underlying currents to reconfigure the space of political governance (third section).

II. Need for Confession and humility

Almost all commentators on the AL government's handling of the situations agree that the government exhibited the highest display of arrogance and inefficiency that caused the trouble to brew. It would be befitting to confess the government's gross violations in making provocative remarks, unleashing armed cadres on students backed up by law-enforcing armed forces, all of which led to killings and injury of many innocent students and passersby. It is important to acknowledge that the space for hooliganism that followed to destroy public properties, be those planned or spontaneous, were created by irresponsible acts of important persons in power. The present display of denial and passing the blame on relatively insignificant players, is paving the way for further regimentation of the society and killing all dreams around integrity of the country and reconstruction of a state.

One expects the party in power to make critical assessment of their acts and decisions so that the party can rectify and make the first reconciliatory move to the citizens of this country. Trust is of essence, and rebuilding trust calls for several steps, some of which are listed below.

- (a) An open statement, from the Prime Minister regretting her unthoughtful remarks, can be the first step. No matter how one tries to justify, the fact remains that it reflected bad taste and had enticed the foul-players inside the administration and Party, many of whom may have been keen to appease her authority, or, used the opportunity to destabilize.
- (b) An inquiry should be undertaken into the utterances of a Minister, who is also the General Secretary of AL, claiming to do away with the odds using his cadres in Students League, and openly making statement to "kill the miscreants"! Ideally, it is important to clarify the Minister's position for the benefits of the citizens, including the parents of the students in protest. The public prosecutors may also examine the possibilities of litigation against such deadly utterances!
- (c) The above applies to the Home Minister as well, who remains responsible for all the misdeeds done by certain segments of the law-enforcing agencies. It is possible that there has been infiltration into the ranks and files of these organizations, which calls for scrutinizing all recruitments by an independent commission with individuals having clear public records on honesty, integrity and commitment to the people of Bangladesh.
- (d) Two other persons in the cabinet who made visibly significant public statements are the Law Minister and the deputy information minister. Both need to reflect on their deceiving jugglery with words that failed to appreciate the severity of the crisis. One is responsible for confusing the relative legal standings of the executive and the judiciary, paying no heed to the importance of legislature (the Parliament). The other, along with the ICT Minister, kept the economy at dark for too long with an unconvincing story to explain prolong internet darkness in this digital world. Worse still, attempts to defend the armed attacks (on students) by suggesting that the protesters made the first move by damaging public properties is a naked twisting of words hurting badly the cause of the party in power. Ironically, no remorse was expressed for stopping the economy by internet disconnection!
- (e) Specific to the case under consideration, it is important for two other segments to bring about changes in the ways the regulators and administrators serve the stakeholders and the society – (i) judiciary and (ii) education, especially, university administration that include syndicates and the Vice Chancellors. With regards to the latter, the relevant Ministry should have had the maturity to deal with security concerns, without jeopardizing education. Such choices, based on specific loyalties, and not on professional abilities of individuals, should be reviewed in all spheres.

If the PM and the (present-day) patriotic elements in AL are able to read the pulses of the citizens of this country and are able to appreciate the need to put nation-building at the forefront, this is possibly a rare opportunity to filter-out the wrong-doers and embrace the new generation and engage them in nation-building.

III. Underlying currents and the prospect of transformation within AL governance

The discussion in this section is based on the assumption that the factors inside a country (society) are the primary ones that bring about changes inside, and provide the basis for (or against) alien forces that try to drive local society and polity to realize their interests (at the detriment of local interests). One qualifier though, when the alien forces take over the nodal points in the neural network of a society or government, either a new generation CPU has to be installed for 'Matrix-like' reengineering of the system, or else, the system has to be dismantled, and the latter runs the risk of leading the society to anarchy! With an expectation that good senses will return upon recognizing that our individual interests are tied to a healthy society and polity in Bangladesh, a collective effort may be made to understand certain dynamics, some of which are highlighted below.

Outburst of the Steam, resulting from a prolong period of misgovernance that saw disregards to constitution, corruption in administration and politics, unexplained accumulation of wealth, illegal and manipulated transfer (to foreign lands) of hard-earned foreign currencies of the workers, unfavorable contracts signed with foreign companies and governments, bank defaulters going unpunished, citizens' life getting suffocated by extortions in all economic and social spheres carried out by either the wings of the party in power or the specially recruited security forces, unabated rise in prices of essentials and suffocated by repeated lies from various government agencies and politicians with little or no accountability. Ironically, the PM has remained silent, or, at most, made sarcastic remarks that implicitly endorse the actions (e.g., the 400 crores taka worth property of her peon, the self-acclaimed Personal Assistant)! For educated youth with self-respect, such gestures are unacceptable from the person who leads their country. Hopefully the PM is not being fooled by her associates and the street reactions will not be put under the carpet of 'BNP-Jamaat conspiracy'.

A Rehearsal for the Future to Come? Bewildered by the atrocities carried out by the security forces, some of the analysts wonder if it was a low-cost means to test technology, tactics and ways to counter urban insurgencies. Or, was it a free training for the police, RAB, BGB forces and for the helicopter operators, at the cost of our children's lives? There has also been allegation of alien forces on the understanding that a locally born and brought up police official could not kill a student with such brutality – a number of hypotheses on the theme remain to be verified. For the sake of trust-building, it is urgent to bring the killers within the law enforcement agencies to task, at the least, for all such killings till certain date.

Fight to Control the Turf and resist such controls had significant implications for the happenings in the campus. Controls in political space are known to have facilitated controls over other domains of income generating activities and extortions through tenders, tolls, employments, seat allocations, etc. are widely known. There have been many incidents prior to the quota reform movement, which revealed the ugly face of such patronized activities. The general students had been sick and tired of seeing those in the name of "Shadinotar Chetona" (spirit of Independence)! It is

further speculated that such controls over a student hall or an area may have had links with drug networks and are susceptible to carriers of arms & ammunitions as well. All these are believed to have raised the stakes (of holding on to occupied territories) and it may not be unlikely that the ‘compulsion’ to attack and terrorize the students in protest also came from the so-called cadres at the grassroot, and some of the (higher-up) political leaders failed to interpret the message for choosing their actions!

The factions within? A sketch of the important blocks in power

If a Master Mind is sufficiently informed and is in control of the acts of all subordinates, one could justify apparent lack of coordination (or, presence of incoherence in statements made by various actors in Power), as rationally manifested acts by design. Such a game of puppet dance, if presumed, would put all the credit as well as the blames to the person at the helm of power, or the group of puppeteers who control the movements of the puppets (dancing dolls!). Given the revealed absence of in-house expertise and crudeness in digital governance, such a setting does not appear plausible. Surely, the banking sector experienced a series of con games played out successfully, but taking those off public domain and protecting the wrong-doers by whims and brute force are not signs of finer analytical qualities one expects from a Master Mind. Thus, a fractured organization is more plausible. The differences in gestures made by various party leaders during the ‘crackdown’ on student protesters, suggest of several strands within AL leadership. Some of these are mentioned below to initiate open discussion on the future of our governance so that adverse effects of ‘palace politics’ and ‘unknown contracts’ on our destiny may be minimized. In the absence of concrete evidence, these are suggestive to serve limited purpose of initiating a discussion.

Face 1: Historically, empire building is found to have been tied to establishing bondages across different communities through marriages. The purpose is served when members of extended families find a common cause to join together and run a business or a government (i.e., form a syndicate). The ‘tragedy of the commons’ is avoided by having either a dictator or a centralized body to make decisions and ensure their implementations. The AL (Shaikh Hasina in particular) was clearly able to mobilize political forces around such a family network for more than three decades. Finer differentiation of such a network may be made across immediate (vertical) progenies, and horizontally connected members. The latter can be further differentiated across siblings, paternal linkages and across first, second, and third cousins and their progenies.

Face 2: The emperors had to depend on foot-soldiers who were kept under command through several tiers of intermediary actors. In case of political parties in Bangladesh, there is clearly a large segment that exercises muscle powers, perceived as clusters of goons that strengthen the position of the (cluster) leader in the (political) party structure. Some of them may or may not be in the cabinet, and yet, their collective position has been to exhibit show of strength on the ground. Over the years of misgovernance and ineffective electoral system, the leadership (located in Face 1) has increasingly depended on such patron-client relation. If one probes into the recruitments in government agencies since 2014, one may find many of the erstwhile street goons absorbed. While the initial intent may have been to get streets and neighborhoods free of goons, end results have been disastrous. Suspected collaboration, between those absorbed in administration and those on the streets or in campuses, made extortions a permanent phenomenon, and it provided muscle and arms to sustain power. Additional financial power to the cluster came from their control over some of the construction related projects.

Face 3: A third group includes those who had initially financed party activities from businesses in operation. The group however soon turned into extortionists from the financial system and by securing tenders for large-scale procurements. As noted in an earlier TBS interview, many of them were in industries, but increasingly moved to

trading and eventually to tendering in collaboration with partners from Face 1. Their exposure to the global financial world (banking in particular) enabled partnering with 'conmen' to develop derivative-like product packages tying in financial and real estate sectors, and siphon resources out of the country. That also enabled them to acquire ability to provide financial supports to the Party, at home and abroad!

There are two other dimensions over which important segments may be identified. First, there is a group of connectors, who liaison between the Party and important institutions, inside as well as outside the country. While relative importance of various institutions changed over the years, the connectors remain important facilitators only. The second is a large body of Foreign Citizens of Bangladesh Origin (FCBOs) who have snatched away the brand of Non-Resident Bangladeshis (NRBs) from the overseas workers. This group, under the guise of non-Constitutional entity called Dual Citizenship, has been active in political parties by making deals away from home, specific locations depending on the spatial distribution of Face 1 members.

Deepening problem of Mis-Governance

As described above, the political governance structure that has evolved over last two decades or more is a syndicate of sub-syndicates (or, sub-sub-syndicates) and hinges on the ability of the key coordinator (referred to as a Master Mind) to maintain balance between various forces through appropriate distribution of workload and benefits. [For a discussion on Syndicates, readers may consult Bonik Barta of 28th June 2024, https://bonikbarta.net/home/news_description/389261/]. In such a structure of governance, party members outside the family network usually align with one or the other powerful members in the family network, unless there is independent backing from foreign interest-groups! Viewing independent of the students' quota reform movement, one wonders what may have caused cracks to surface in this structure of governance? A number of plausible factors may be identified in this regard.

- The succession plan may have been revealed, which distanced a large segment in Face 1, as well as many in Face 2. While politically active ones in Face 3 are expected to align with potential successors, a large group in their network may find their future sidelined with the entry of a political successor with aggressive urge to extract from businesses. [A separate internet network (gateway) for businesses has already been tabled by a key player!]
- Alternatively, the uncertainty with regards to vertical succession may have increased, which opened the space for in-fighting to grab the elusive center stage.
- With economy in a poor state, dwindling prospect of securing foreign loans, and with remittance through formal channels drying out, the scope for rent extraction diminishes. With such 'prospects', while some of the political actors are expected to depart, others may fight to ensure a portion of the limited resources.

The structure of 'syndicate governance', described earlier, brought semblance of stability and hope for FDI. However, the structure increasingly failed to generate local resources. Rather, increased dependence on grassroots extortionists and other unfavorable policies shrank the business sector and thereby reduced tax base. Business as usual, the extortions will rise, be it by exaggerating project costs (e.g., repairing damages to metro rail), or by taxing the people and business further. An acceptable political solution could pave the way for natural economic recovery. Attempts to establish an alternative narrative, putting all blames to the students in quota reform movement, are likely to further deplete the trust on government and make the economy and the governance more susceptible to foreign interests.

Ironically, the narrative that blames foreign powers may eventually pave the way for more aggressive involvement of foreign forces on this land, bring disaster for all segments, inside as well as outside the Power. I doubt if that would be by design! The intelligence can find a way towards mutually gainful solution, if not blinded by ego and undue arrogance. Hopefully, good sense will prevail!

Finally, if the government is able to come to terms with a tactical retreat and reflect on their own faults (without necessarily discarding all other conspiracy hypotheses), and if we return to a setting of healthy exchanges, I would propose that provisions be made for new political parties to emerge from the student movements, who apparently do not have 'mother parties', and therefore, hold potential to change the political space in the country.

[The paper was written during 18-27 July 2024. Purposively, it abstracts from any involvement of foreign interests. The views expressed are author's own, and do not necessarily represent the those of his associates in research. sajjadzohir@gmail.com]