

Why is Bangladesh such a troubled country?

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The people of Bangladesh do not have any peace of mind these days. All sections of the people, rich and poor alike regardless of their political affiliation, suffer from a sense of anxiety and concern about escalating crime, political uncertainty and the dismal economic situation. Even those who supported the BNP-Jamaat alliance and voted them to power are uneasy in their mind. A pervasive sense of unease and lack of security prevails everywhere. A lot of people spend sleepless nights because the prospects for the future seem so bleak. Many people believe that the country has not seen such a situation since the days of the Liberation War in 1971. Headlines in the newspapers on murder, extortion, rape and other atrocities greet them every morning. Does the unrest and the sense of foreboding stem from just the rapid increase in crime? Admittedly, the crime rate has greatly increased in recent months. But the underlying reasons for the sense of insecurity and unrest are deeper and more complex. In fact, an objective and unemotional analysis of the current political, economic and social situation is necessary to fully appreciate the basic reasons for the unrest, political instability and economic stagnation in the country.

Few people could even imagine that the within the span of a brief seven months the country could plunge to such depths. However, in my view, the nosedive in the country's political, economic and security situation actually started earlier, when the caretaker government assumed power in July 2001. Perhaps people have not forgotten that Justice Latifur Rahman and his associates had done almost everything that could possibly be done to render the civil administration disorganized, chaotic and ineffective. In the name of free and fair election these individuals went on a transfer spree, moving thousands of government officials. These transfers, dictated by Hawa Bhaban, unsettled and practically destroyed the morale of the administration. The rapid increase in violence and lawlessness started from that time. (Like the French king Latifur Rahman perhaps said to himself, "After me the deluge" and went ahead to enact a special law to give himself special physical protection!)

A demoralized civil administration

Unfortunately, the BNP-Jamaat alliance government, instead of restoring law and order and a sense of security in the country, intensified the process of repression on the opposition and the minorities. They also started a sort of inquisition against thousands of government officials for having taken part in the "Janatar Mancha" that was set up in 1996 to voice the people's protest against the voterless fake election of February 15. In the name of identifying Awami League sympathizers, the government started a witch-hunt and harassment of thousands of officials. If the government were not totally blinded by hatred for Awami League they would have appreciated the foolishness of the repressive measures against so many officials. They ought to have reflected on the circumstances in 1996. The popular discontent against the so-called election on February 15 was so widespread that virtually the entire civil administration revolted against the

government that was formed by Begum Zia. All the secretaries went to the President to make it known to him that they did not want to serve under a government that did not enjoy a valid popular mandate. Officials at the district level also registered their protest. All the officials who took part in these protests, whether they physically appeared at a specially set up Mancha or not, must be apprehensive about their job security. The government has in fact opened a Pandora's box by taking punitive measures on unsubstantiated and flimsy allegations of involvement in these activities in 1996. The discipline and motivation of the civil administration has been seriously compromised by their attempt to draw a dividing line that runs parallel to the party line. It is a demoralized administration that is proving ineffective in tackling the deteriorating security situation in the country. The BNP-Jamaat government is using the police force for partisan purposes but this is a short-sighted policy. The same police force may be used against them in their turn. This is a dangerous and unwise policy. The use of the security forces for robbing a major segment of the population of their security is a perverse policy that will surely backfire.

12 thousand criminals released from jail

In the midst of the spate of reports on murder, robbery and rape, one lost sight of a major policy decision by the BNP-Jamaat government after they assumed office. They ordered the release of 12 thousand criminals from the jails. The dramatic deterioration of the law and order situation started from that point. These prisoners were in jail on charges of murder, extortion, rape and other heinous crimes but all of them claimed to be members of either BNP or Jamaat or one of their youth or student wings. Was it wise to release all these criminals simply because of their alleged party affiliation? Ordinary law abiding people may ask the government: after releasing all these known terrorists from jail why are you now complaining about an increase in crimes? A criminal is not a criminal and has a right to be free, according to this government, if he belongs to BNP or Jamaat. Was it not proved once again in the City Corporation election? The nomination of 32 listed terrorists wanted by the police for various crimes clearly showed that the criminal record of a person is of no concern to them as long as such persons are deemed useful to sustain the BNP-Jamaat power structure. According to newspaper reports, another 26 thousand prisoners are about to be released from jail on the basis of recommendation of the district officials. These officials, obviously, have no choice but to follow the dictates of the local BNP-Jamaat leaders.

Out of 23 top terrorists in Dhaka for whose arrest the police announced cash rewards only one has been arrested. A section of the press has given it the same importance as a victory in the battlefield. Actually it seems his father handed him over to the police on the advice of friends. Who are those friends? According to Kamal Pasha, the top terrorist with numerous major crimes in his record, he returned from India on the advice of Nasiruddin Pinto, MP. "He has secret contacts with Pinto in Dhaka." What can one expect when BNP leaders give shelter to top terrorists and criminals? The so-called anti-crime campaign in Dhaka city was nothing but harassment for ordinary citizens who were prevented from going about their daily business by the police.

Campaign of terror and repression against the Awami League

Impartial observers will surely agree that the main reason for the sense of unrest and insecurity in the country is the pre-meditated campaign of terror and repression against the Awami League leaders, activists and even supporters. In fact, one saw something after the October 1 election that has never been seen before. The winner in the election falls upon the loser as if Awami League as a political party must be wiped out. Attacks on the AL leaders and workers took place right in front of the Police. When Awami League members and their houses were attacked, houses and shops were looted and the female members of their household were raped, the police refused to go in their aid. What is even more serious, the Police refused to register criminal cases against the ruling party musclemen. In a strange twist of sense of justice, the police often registered cases not against the attackers but those who were attacked. Such atrocities against innocent men and women were seen only once in our history-in 1971 when the Pakistani occupation forces unleashed a reign of terror to terrorize the nation into submission. Do the BNP-Jamaat leaders expect to destroy the Awami League for ever? Let us look at some of the press reports. The daily Prothom Alo is certainly not regarded as particularly friendly towards the Awami League and yet this paper, in a report on 23 May wrote," In the special campaign that started on May 11, they have arrested and taken into custody under the Special Powers Act 112 activists of the Awami League, Juba League and Chatra League at the thana and ward level. The police stations have no record of any cases against most of them. Police sources said, under the instructions of the government they have to prepare lists of the leaders and workers of the main opposition party. As a result they are also embarrassed." Yet another report on 25 May in the same paper (Prothom Alo) was published under the headline, "BDR 's campaign in Narayanganj in the houses of Awami League supporters. 15 were arrested, beaten and handed over to the Police Station: Police administration is unaware of these actions." The report said in detail how the troops searched Awami League and Juba League leaders and tortured them before sending them to the Thana. Those who saw the men in the TV were horrified. Why such cruelty and brutality?

Rape as a political weapon

Rape is regarded in every civilized society not only to be a crime but a most reprehensible crime. It is against the moral values in which people in this country have been brought up. Yet this crime does not seem to trouble the conscience of the BNP-Jamaat ministers and political leaders when the culprits happen to be cadres of the ruling alliance. They do not find words to condemn the criminals who caused the suicide of Mahima and Fahima and other girls. Rape seems to have been chosen as a political weapon by the BNP-Jamaat cadres to punish those families that dared to support the Awami League in the last election.

Attack on the Minority communities

Attacks on the minority communities are certainly one of the main reasons for the sense of unrest and insecurity in the country. These attacks were not confined to Hindus only- Buddhists and Christians were also the victims. Some intellectuals and journalists who wear their mask of neutrality with great diligence, were happy to remark that the massacre of Muslims in Gujrat did not provoke any retaliatory attacks on the Hindus in Bangladesh. They try to cleverly suppress the fact that the post-election attacks on the minority communities in Bangladesh started well before the carnage in Gujrat. In fact, during the two weeks, immediately after the October 1 elections, the Hindus were virtually at the mercy of the BNP-Jamaat cadres who physically assaulted them, looted their houses and shops and raped their girls. All this was done to punish them for their support of the Awami League. The plan seems to be to make sure that these Hindus, Buddhists and Christians will not dare to support the Awami League in future elections. Of course the government is concerned about its image. After the murder of the Buddhist senior monk in Chittagong two BNP ministers went there ostensibly to make enquiries about the murder but actually they were there to threaten the local Buddhists into silence. When the local Buddhists complained that the police was trying to direct the enquiries into wrong directions, they were angry. They did not want the incident to further tarnish the image of the government. They seem to think that in this age of internet and electronic communications, all kinds of atrocities can be perpetrated against the minorities quietly and these incidents will remain secret. They are insensitive to the sense of insecurity that today prevails among the minority communities in Bangladesh.

Government's thoughtless statements erode business morale and confidence

The morale of the business community and the general political and economic environment of the country are inextricably linked. In order to understand the current situation one must examine the BNP-Jamaat government's direct role in destroying their confidence. It may be recalled that after the October election the business community was looking forward to a period of peace and progress. Despite widespread complaints about the elections businessmen expected that the new government would restore normal conditions in the civil administration and boost the sagging economy. In reality what did they see? To their horror they saw the Prime Minister addressing the nation to tell them that the economy was in ruins. It was a strange and baffling phenomenon. The people of Bangladesh knew that the economy, in July 2001, was growing at 6.2%, inflation was a mere 1.53%, exports were growing at 11 % and the food production had exceeded all previous records. In fact, the country was self-sufficient in food for the first time in more than half a century. Yet the Prime Minister announced, perhaps to emphasize the point, "We have become poor." This ridiculous statement was made solely to blacken the economic record of the Awami League period. Little did she realize that in the process of tarnishing the image of the Awami League she was also destroying the confidence of the nation in the strength and soundness of the economy. Her Finance Minister Saifur Rahman went further and declared that the Awami League had destroyed the macro economy of the country. He went on making a series of public statements highlighting the weakness of the various sectors of the economy. Common people's experience and

what he said did not match. For example, ordinary people knew that for five years not only was there high GDP growth with low inflation but the essential items of daily life such as rice, pulses, salt, oil, fuels, clothing remained stable and within their reach. They have noted that the prices have started shooting up after BNP-Jamaat came to power. Saifur Rahman must not assume that the common people are too dumb to understand when it hurts them.

The Finance Minister is prone to intemperate statements. After meeting the leaders of the Bangladesh Economic Association in a pre-budget consultation, he was so depressed that he reportedly exclaimed that, “ this country has no future.” Such comments, reported in the newspapers, will certainly not lift the sagging morale of the business community. The people now know that the IMF will not give the loan, that the donors will not give aid, that the export earnings are falling and that no new foreign investment is coming in. Under the circumstances, the overall climate of insecurity and hopelessness is exacerbated by the grim prospects in the economic field.

One thousand crores allocated for production of goats

According to a newspaper report, the Finance Minister has allocated one thousand crores in the ADP for increasing the production of goats. Is this going to be the highest priority sector in our fight against poverty? Is the Finance Minister losing his common sense or acquiring a sense of humour? Such ill-considered decisions, perhaps calculated to flatter the Prime Minister, will further increase the sense of desperation in the country. The affairs of the country, the ordinary people might conclude, are not in safe hands. A destabilized and demoralized administration, the near collapse in law and order, BNP-Jamaat cadres on the rampage, repression of the Opposition and the minorities and mismanagement of the economy- the list is indeed long.

Can the BNP leadership save the nation from anarchy and economic collapse?

In my view, Bangladesh is today a troubled country because the people can see that in less than a year the BNP-Jamaat government has brought it close to virtual anarchy and economic collapse. The question that is in everybody's mind is: Do the BNP leaders have the wisdom, foresight and patriotism to recoil from the precipice and change direction?