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Shahbag Square: Bangla's DNA

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The huge protest gatherings at Shahbag Square in Dhaka demanding capital punishment for the 1971 war criminals, and the growing call for banning the Jamaat-e-Islami (JEI) reaffirms that the future of Bangladesh is in secure hands.

These are young men and women, students, and professionals, cutting across party lines and non-party citizens who have realized at what cost and sacrifice the country's independence was won and are determined to ensure that the ideals of the war of liberation are not lost. The most encouraging aspect of Shahbag Square is that political colour is absent and national sentiments are in the forefront.

Honestly speaking, there was a real fear that the war of liberation had become a distant and vague issue in the minds of the young generation. No efforts were spared to obliterate the incident when three million innocent men, women and children were killed, and around two million women raped by the Pakistani army. They were more than adequately assisted by the Jamaat in the form of Al Badar, Al Shams and the Razakars. According to Pakistani army eye witnesses, these people even misled the Pakistani army to attack and kill old men, women and children. In fact, these people, by some accounts, were more blood thirsty than the Pakistani soldiers. Abdul Kader Mollah was one of them.

What, perhaps, shocked the youth of Bangladesh were the happenings during BNP-JEI led government in 2001-2006, which are unravelling in the courts of the country currently. Witnesses and indicted officials of that era are beginning to speak. Fingers are being pointed at BNP Chairperson and then Prime Minister, Begum Khalida Zia by no one less than Director General of Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), Brig. Gen. Rumi. In one of Rumi's statements to the court, Khaleda Zia is implicated with knowledge on the attempt of Awami League President Sk. Hasina's life in 2004. Many other terrorist related incidents and plans, involving BNP and JEI leaders have begun to

come out. Finally, few in Bangladesh can forget the August 2005 simultaneous bomb blasts in 63 of the country's 64 districts. The ensuing climate was such that if a man went out in the evening there was no surety that he would return alive. Terrorist group Jamatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB) was dismissed by Prime Minister Khaleda as a creation of media imagination. All those denials have come crashing to the ground.

All these and more contribute to the reawakening which is Shahbag Square. No one wants to live under those dark days. Hawa Bhavan in Dhaka, the office of Khaleda Zia's elder son Tareq Rehman became the power centre in the country. Political murders and corruption were directed from Hawa Bhavan as were important promotions and postings in the army and the bureaucracy.

The routing of the BNP and the JEI in the December 2008 elections stood as a testimony to people's feelings. First time voters, around 40 per cent, wanted no more of this political situation where development was brought to a standstill. More first time voters will participate in the December 2013/January 2014 elections. They have demonstrated their will at Shahbag Square.

The JEI and its students wing, the Islamic Chatra Shibir (ICS) are, however, a formidable force. After their political rehabilitation in 1978 under military President Gen. Zia-ur-Rehman, they enjoyed an open field to grow unhindered. They built a network of madrassas, schools and technical colleges, hospitals and clinics, banking and financial institutions, and social assistance NGOs. The Islamic Bank is one of them, which facilitated foreign remittances to terrorist organizations. The Jamat-Shibir cadres are well-indoctrinated and trained for violence.

For any expert or student of political riots and camouflaged terrorism, the Jamaet-Shibir's hit and run tactics is a lesson. They appear suddenly, do their job, and vanish. Their number is not insignificant. From all accounts, they are preparing to unleash a blood bath during the rest of the year, to stop the war crimes trials and enforce an emergency situation to delay elections.

The JEI had created some sort of an international support or sympathy base against the war crimes trial and the Awami League. But this seems to be waning. All important western countries including the USA, UK, Germany and France supported the war crimes trials recently. The Arab Gulf countries decided to stay away from them as, at a certain point, support may tend to encourage terrorism and be perceived as interference in the internal judicial work of a sovereign country. The trials must go on and come to a conclusion, and those found guilty must be punished.

The majority of the people are unhappy with the life sentence on Kader Mollah. They feel that it is too lenient a sentence, given the evidence against him. The recent amendment to the laws gives an opportunity for appeal from both sides, but ensures that appeals, are not stretched by clever lawyers. Sixty days is the maximum limit for appeals to be finally disposed.

Banning the JEI now is a question to be thoroughly debated and dissected by the government. If the ban after 1971 was not lifted by BNP founder Gen. Zia-ur-Rehman, it was a natural process. The fact is that banning the full blown JEI at this moment needs other

considerations. The minds of the cadres and members cannot be changed overnight, given their resources, dedication to the cause, and numbers. They will remain in the country.

The JEI anti-liberation platform is very much alive. A possible way is to “crush the serpent’s head”. Eliminate the leadership according to law and transparently. The government and the leaders must not be seen in any way to be influencing the judges of the two tribunals, emotionally or politically. The Jamaat’s financial, social and educational establishments must be brought under governmental scrutiny – functions of the Islamic Bank, the Ibn Sina Trust, the Madrassas and all.

The BNP, Jamaat’s main ally and which gives them a national political face, finds itself on slippery grounds. The BNP cannot win an election without the Jamaat. Yet, it cannot stand with the Jamaat publicly at this point of time. Two of BNP’s senior leaders are also facing the trials. The BNP, which has supporters and members from a few nationalistic parties, like Dr. B. Choudhuri, must think deeply to rid themselves of the old Jamaat baggage and begin a fresh second innings.

The government, itself, must resist from being carried away by an euphoria. They have to prove that they are different, and stand for the people. The biggest stigma they carry is corruption. Can they move against their own members who have brought a bad name to the Awami League, like in Padma Bridge case, or the Destiny case and others? At times, ruthless action is demanded. This is no time for filial piety!

The Post-liberation history of Bangladesh is well documented but without critical examination. Some journalists have written critical pieces, but not enough. Historians must go much deeper and unravel what really made the narrative post 1971. If the Awami League made mistakes, like the one party BAKSAL, it must own it. The actions of some of the military freedom fighters must be looked into. Were they genuine freedom fighters, or did they “act” as freedom fighters as they were caught in a war zone East Pakistan? Why did Zia-ur-Rehman do what he did after 1971? In Sk. Mujibur Rahman’s assassination, rejuvenation of the JEI, judicial killing of Col. Abu Taher, giving sinecure posts to Sk. Mujib’s killers, and many more?

Things have begun to unravel. The nation is in the mood. Hesitation to follow up may leave holes in an otherwise perfect weave of a Dhakai sari.

All major righteous political movements in Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) were led by the youth. Sk. Mujib was a student and youth leader.

The move to break away from Pakistan was visible as early as 1948. Muhammad Jinnah's demand that Urdu must be the language for Bangladesh too, indicated to the Bengalees they had been betrayed, that their language and culture would be held "inferior" to West Pakistan's'. The birth of Bangladesh gave the lie to Pakistan's claim that religion was the binding factor between East and West Pakistan.

This is February 2013. No one in Bangladesh can forget "Ekushay February" (February 21, 1952) when young Bangalees were martyred by the Pakistani administration for demanding Bengalee language as the mother tongue for the province. This martyr's day or the language movement snowballed to the birth of Bangladesh in 1971.

Every February 21st, one can hear the song:- "***Amar Bhaiyer Roktey Rangano Ekushey February, Ami Ki Bhulitey Pari ?***" (Can I ever forget the 21st of February, soaked in the blood of my brothers) This hymn to the martyrs is heard all over the country on 21st February. Garlands are placed at martyrs' memorials to commemorate the event.

It is a coincidence that Shahbag Square happened in February. It is, however, not a coincidence that young Rajib Haider, a leading blogger who encouraged the Shahbag gatherings, was stabbed to death in front of his house on February 13 by Jamaat and Shibir cadres. Rajib is the new icon for the youth of Bangladesh.

The story is being re-enacted by the Jamaat-Shibir.

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