

Hypocrisy of mourning in Bangladesh

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The husband of Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Dr M A Wazed Miah, passed away on May 9 at the age of 67. Wazed Miah, whose reputation as an eminent nuclear scientist went beyond his family's political spectrum, had been suffering from heart problems, diabetes and other ailments for the last few months.

The death of a loved one is always sad for family members, relatives, friends and well-wishers. Wazed Miah surely had a large number of well-wishers at home and abroad to mourn his death. Many Bangladeshis as well as foreigners expressed their sorrow and condolences after learning of his death. However, it is not clear how many among those who sent condolences in fact had motives other than the sense of great loss felt by the family.

In the weeks since Wazed Miah's death, a segment of the country's politicians, including top policymakers, have been busily using this opportunity to participate in mourning rituals almost every day. Ministers, parliamentarians, senior government officials and public servants have been mourning in public under the banners of various sociopolitical and public institutions.

It appears that the death of a relative of the most powerful person in the government has created an opportunity for political parties—especially the Bangladesh Awami League, the current ruling party—to compete with other parties in displaying their shock and grief. Many leaders hope to get their names in the prime minister's good book by arranging “mourning” activities across the country.

In the midst of this political mourning, Cyclone Aila struck the coastal and southwestern parts of Bangladesh. At least 150 people died as high waves surged onshore from the Bay of Bengal, and the homes of tens of thousands of people were destroyed.

Thousands of people, who have been homeless since the cyclone hit on May 25, are suffering without food or drinking water, as corruption competes with relief work in the affected areas. The people who lost loved ones in the cyclone have had no chance to mourn their deaths.

Only victims living in easily accessible places are getting small quantities of relief on an irregular basis. In an attempt to show the nation that it is taking care of the victims however, the government has been creating video footage of relief distribution to a small group of affected people.

Apart from cyclone survivors, there are many people in Bangladesh who have been unable to properly mourn the deaths of lost relatives. These include victims of extrajudicial killings by state law-enforcement agencies. When the Rapid Action Battalion, the police and the armed forces kill people, they have only to label them “criminals”, even though they died without any trial for their so-called crimes.

In such cases, law enforcers routinely intimidate family members of those who are killed, warning them not to tell anyone, especially human rights defenders and journalists, about the death. In most cases the perpetrators also cordon off the home and burial place of the deceased, barring relatives from speaking out.

Out of more than 1,000 such cases, not a single one has been investigated by a credible authority since the practice of extrajudicial killings was adopted. Ironically, the government keeps pledging to stop extrajudicial killings and bring the perpetrators to justice, claiming “zero tolerance” for this particular practice.

And yet, the ruling political party—unable to create a stable society in which ordinary citizens can mourn their dead—remains busy mourning the death of the prime minister's husband. This marathon mourning by political leaders is nothing but hypocrisy; it contributes nothing to a nation and people that have so many urgent needs.

The politicians should realize that the practice of extrajudicial killing, which has been institutionalized by successive governments regardless of their political and non-political identities, should be resisted and prosecuted. And if people are killed under unfortunate circumstances, their relatives should be allowed to conduct mourning rituals without intimidation.

Unfortunately this does not happen, because the relatives of victims of extrajudicial killings cannot benefit the politicians as a powerful person like the prime minister can.

All the institutions related to the rule of law—the police, criminal investigators, prosecutors and courts that try criminal cases—lack credibility in Bangladesh. State institutions have been surviving on arbitrariness and impunity instead of equality and justice. The people do not trust these institutions. Thus, what the Bangladeshis really have to mourn is the death of rule of law in the country.

If the leading politicians are not inclined to share in this mourning, they have two options. They can think about how to bury the institutions, so there is no question of legality. Once they have established unhindered lawlessness, the citizens will no longer expect lawful actions in the country.

The other choice is for the government to think about reforming the rule-of-law institutions into genuine, functioning bodies that the people can trust. This has long been an urgent task for the nation.

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