

How To Be A Patriot

Contributed by Minhazul Shaikh
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"Brave fellows, these military intelligence officers: they abduct people under cover of night, they avoid any due process, they outnumber their target, make sure that only they themselves are armed and that their target is blindfolded, and then they collectively teach their target some lessons in patriotism. The quick formula: to be a patriot under a military dictatorship, be a good slave who keeps quiet and follows orders."

Dictators are control-freaks. They like to tell us who our friends are, who our enemies are, what ideals we should support, what type of political system is best for us, and how to behave in a patriotic manner.

When the military is in dictatorial control, the discourse of what is patriotic and what is not can get more intense, since the military thinks it is the highest authority to decide what patriotism is and how a patriot should act. Patriots don't talk back

So, my support and sympathy for the oppressed residents of Chittagong Hill Tracts may raise frowns or yawns from mainstream Bangalis, but among the military it would go much further. I will not only be considered unpatriotic, but may even be branded as a traitor.

The same thing would happen if I talked about the brutal torture and slaying of Cholesh Ritchil in the hands of military junior officers. Or if I go down history all the way to the junior officers' mass murder of the Mujib family, or their serial killing of the four national leaders inside jail.

Of course, the military has a history of tortures and kills because they are patriotic, they are our guardians and caretakers serving 'our national interest,'—but if we make as much as a squeak to protest abuse, we become traitors serving the interests of international conspiracies and 'tarnishing the image' of the country. Tasneem's follies

This ridiculous idea of patriotism was in full view in the recent Human Rights Watch report that detailed Tasneem Khalil's abduction and torture by DGFI, Bangladesh's military intelligence.

An investigative journalist, Tasneem had been writing powerfully about human rights abuses by the government. He had been on the trail of terrorism as well, and completed a piece that showed intricate connections among an ultra-nationalist part of DGFI, the rule of impunity of Tareq Rahman (son of the just-deposed Prime Minister) and his cronies, arms traders based in the Middle East, and terrorist-recruits based in northern parts of Bangladesh. It read like a spell-binder.

DGFI could not let this be published because the piece shows that DGFI is partly to blame for encouraging terrorist activity around the country. Why would a patriotic military agency do that? Perhaps to create the type of chaos that would justify a military takeover? Intriguing... but wait, patriots should not doubt the motives of military intelligence.

So in the cover of night, intelligence personnel went through the stocks of the magazine and tore out the essay. They then allegedly traced an sms that read 'say no to military rule' back to Tasneem's phone (as if they really needed an excuse), showed up at his door, and abducted him at gunpoint. I use the word 'abducted' because none of it was properly and judicially sanctioned. Patriotic lessons

The patriotic intelligence agency never has the courage for a fair fight. Its personnel descended on an unarmed Tasneem and beat him to a pulp. Brave fellows, these military intelligence officers: they abduct people under cover of night, they avoid any due process, they outnumber their target, make sure that only they themselves are armed and that their target is blindfolded, and then they collectively teach their target lessons in patriotism.

As they beat Tasneem, their mode of teaching patriotism went something like this:

'Baanchot [an abusive word], you have only reported on negative things. And you have fucked Bangladesh by your bloody anti-state reports. Whatever you have reported for CNN in all these years is all negative news. You shit on the same plate you eat, you are a traitor. You work for a foreign agency, and damage Bangladesh's image outside' (HRW: 14-15).

They kept on asking Tasneem if he came from India. They asked him how many times he's been to India. They had a square peg, the India Card, which is their definition of a traitor, and they were trying to force that in a round hole, like they always do. They asked him how much international embassies paid him, again trying to fit Tasneem in the only mold that they know, this language of treason and traitors and national security:

“Do you think that they [the diplomats] are going to come and rescue you? You met them, and passed on secret information that is threatening national security!”

The only acceptable answer to these allegations was to confess. Otherwise in between all the abuses and questions the punches, kicks, beatings, and electric shocks would continue. Eventually Tasneem wrote a “confession” exactly as they dictated, just to escape the pain. How to be a patriot, the shoe-polisher kind

So to be a patriot, you need to be a good slave, keep quiet and follow. Bangladesh’s military-led government warns that patriotic businessmen should not make undue profit. Patriotic students should not be out on the streets. Patriotic political parties should elect the government’s preferred people as their leaders. Patriotic newspapers should be quiet and approving. Patriotic TV stations should only invite talk-show discussants from a government approved ‘white list,’ and never allow talk shows to be broadcast live anyway.

In the current regime, the best patriots are the civilian (civil?) servants of the military, educated fellows who follow orders quietly, polish their masters’ boots diligently, and can be sent as soft-spoken faces to international conferences and forums to show how untarnished and pure we are as a moderate country led by brave and wildly popular leaders.

About the author