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The mayor, the media, and me

E-paper



A man of immense stature - RAJIB DHAR

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Annisul Huq, who was quite possibly the most dynamic, popular, and even successful mayor of Dhaka, passed away recently. It was in August this year that I received a call from his wife, Rubana Huq, asking me to arrange transport at London's Heathrow airport for the late mayor, as he was feeling rather unwell. Afterwards, the mayor himself told me that he did not like wheelchairs and that a bogie car was preferable. Being a close friend to the couple for many years, they would often call me up whenever they planned to visit London, not for official assistance exclusively, but often to simply join them for lunch or dinner. He was never one for

maintaining protocol or anything, as far as the Bangladesh High Commission in London is concerned, anyway. Since I would be away on that date, I asked a colleague of mine to welcome them at the airport. It was my colleague from whom I learned just how unwell the mayor was. Annisul Huq's primary reason for visiting London was to be present for the birth of his granddaughter, and then to get a medical check-up. He was admitted to one of the world's best neuro hospitals -- he collapsed during the check-up days after his daughter gave birth to her baby. The news of his hospitalisation spread like wildfire, and the media in Bangladesh wanted to keep track of his health down to every little detail. His wife did not want to make a daily statement. Of course, this is natural for any family in such extreme distress. But I repeatedly urged Rubana for some information for the hungry media, who loved Mr Huq deeply. Thus, we tried to do that for several days until I was asked not to speak on the issue by the high commissioner for reasons unknown to me.

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Mr Huq finally passed away and the media apparently got the news that they have been asking for since mid-September. But, a day later, I was horrified when a journo suggested that he may have died several days before it was made public

I obeyed, since I feared that there might be yet another complaint lodged against me for trying to do things I felt were right. Sadly, even then, my media friends kept on asking “Is he dead?” where they should have been asking “Is he improving?” Then, rumours about a “political conspiracy” started to spread when Mr Huq was in a sleep-induced coma. Mr Huq finally passed away, and the media apparently got the news that they have been asking for since mid-September. But, a day later, I was horrified when a journo suggested that he in fact had died several days before it was made public. When the rumours were at their peak, I sent a message to his elder son Navid. He wrote back to me: “Uncle, salam. Only prayers and nothing else. Abbu will be leaving us soon.” That was the time (9:54pm, Dhaka time) when the doctors gave up. We failed to understand the sensitivity, privacy, and agony of Mr Huq's family. And I am all the more ashamed for it. But I am glad to be back as the “happy bachelor” who could never stay away for too long abroad because of homesickness. I am proud of my country, of my city, despite its traffic jams and its pollution. But my friends in the media were unkind to me at a time when I was unable to speak out to defend facts or give correct information as a government official. The reports greatly pained me. My colleagues in the Bangla media in London ignored those reports (except one, whose editor hates me) because of not only their friendship with me, but because they understood how it happened and refrained from commenting. I am grateful to them. My friends, there will be the deadlines and competitions, but at the same time we have to be responsible and assess each situation as they happen before

reporting them. May my very dear Annis bhai, a man of immense stature and a good friend, rest in eternal peace in heaven. My condolences to the Huq family. *Nadeem Qadir is a UN Dag Hammarskjold Fellow in journalism.*

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