

Plight of the Ahmadiyyas

Bashing of the Ahmadiyyas on grounds that they are not Muslims should be stopped forthwith. It is a bad precedent and a legacy in the making that may bring about disastrous consequences for the country. Today, it is the Ahmadiyyas, tomorrow it will be the Christians, and then the Buddhists, so on and so forth. Let us learn the lesson from Pakistan, where Muslims are killing their fellow brethren right inside their places of worship even to this day.

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

No one can truly belong to any religious faith that is engaged in burning and plundering the places of worship of other fellow human beings and threatening to kill them. I have often tried to imagine as to how would I feel if I had to live under threat in my own house and my own country where I had been living for generations. After all, this is where I was born. This is where my parents were born, this is where many of us are buried and then almost all too suddenly I am being hunted down on the grounds that I am not a Muslim. Also consider as to how am I supposed to feel when I have all

along been a law abiding and peaceful citizen of the country. Islam says: 'I to mine and you to yours.' I live with my religion and you live with yours. I am really scared. Now that the entire body of law enforcement agencies is engaged in nabbing religious terrorists all over the country, I have this fear that I may be forgotten. I keep asking myself, are not these religious bigots yet another kind of terrorist? To my mind, they are terrorists of a more heinous nature. Yes, you have rightly guessed, I have tried to portray the kind of lives the Ahmadiyyas are presently leading in Bangladesh. They are living under perpetual fear of losing their property and lives. For over a century Ahmadiyyas

had been living in this country as most peaceful and law-abiding citizens. Have the religious bigots been all too suddenly struck by lightning with the message that the Ahmadiyyas are non-Muslims? We often pride ourselves on our secular traditions. I wish to ask, is this then the stamp of our secular traditions? The Nazis did this to the Jews, and see what that legacy has driven us into. As a citizen of Bangladesh, I am simply appalled and ashamed. A nation's treasures are its peoples and not bridges, highways and fancy shopping malls. Our administration is busy hunting down terrorists all over the country, whereas yet another group of religious terrorists are carrying on with their unlawful and

vicious acts. The issue is not whether the Ahmadiyyas are Muslims or not, the truth is they are citizens of this country just like the other Muslims, the Hindus, the Christians, or the Buddhists, whose safety and security are guaranteed by the Constitution. I would like to ask each and every citizen of this country as to how he or she would feel if someone were to ban the religious books of the mainstream Muslims and persecute them in their own country? Admittedly, of late there has been some cause for concern, since in many countries of the West there is a growing sign of discrimination against the Muslim community but there has never been any threat to their lives and property, including



the Holy Book. Besides, that is happening in some foreign lands. If it is a question of being non-Muslims, then why not ban the religious books of the Hindus, the Christians, and people of other religions living in this country? You cannot, since you are afraid as they represent greater strength in the international community. It is this kind of mindset, combined with several factors, which are continually widening the gap of understandings and misgivings about our religion in the minds of the people of the West and people belonging to religions other than



Islam. Being tolerant to peoples of other faiths is also a core element of our religion. It is indeed sad to see as to how we have dragged our great religion to such a degrading state. It is my belief that the Muslims of today are doggedly and systematically digging their own graves like none others. Islam is a great religion but the people who are its self-styled custodians, at least in this country, are certainly poor human material. Bashing of the Ahmadiyyas on grounds that they are not Muslims should be stopped forthwith. It is a bad precedent and a legacy in the



making that may bring about disastrous consequences for the country. Today, it is the Ahmadiyyas, tomorrow it will be the Christians, and then the Buddhists, so on and so forth. Let us learn the lesson from Pakistan, where Muslims are killing their fellow brethren right inside their places of worship even to this day. Ahmadiyyas are a small community in this country and until now have never been known to be anything but a group of people who believed in peaceful co-existence. This sudden rise of a particular group of religious bigots is clearly



being carried out under the explicit support and endorsement of the present regime. Putting a halt to this blatant discrimination against the Ahmadiyyas should therefore be not a problem. The government should take appropriate measures and halt this menace forthwith, both for its own sake, and for the sake of the nation and its image. We have indeed fallen so low that had the Prophet (SM) been alive today he would weep to see us. Shamsheer Chowdhury is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

The Nepalese imbroglio

The reasons behind the Maoists and the seven party alliance to reach an agreement are not difficult to fathom. The Maoists must have realized that total military victory over the Royal Nepalese Army is not possible, and even if it were possible it would have united the rest of Nepalese forces to band against the Maoists.

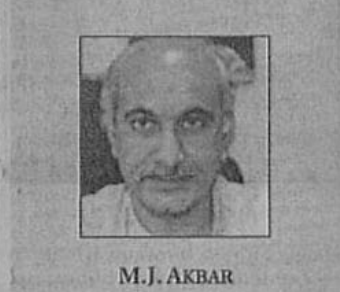
KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

The primarily militaristic policy followed by the Royal administration in Nepal to combat the Maoist insurgency does not appear to have succeeded in removing the Maoist threat to the monarchy. The impact of continuing violence has been of varying degrees on key actors in the turbulent Nepalese drama, namely, the Monarchy, the Maoists, the political parties, the Nepalese people, and the international community (mainly India, US, EU, and the UN). Last February's Royal coup, a continuation of the monarch's power grab since October 2002, has resulted in incremental decline in the support from the Nepalese people and the international community to the King. Political activists and the students continue to agitate against what they call the autocratic monarchy. Popularity of the monarchists power primarily based on the army and is unable to deliver either security and economic development to the impoverished peoples declining. Political parties and civil society are getting more and more convinced that the Royal putsch was more directed at destroying the democratic institutions than fighting the Maoist insurgency.

Such pronouncement from the head of a political party known for its social conservatism and desire to maintain socio-economic status quo and himself a former Prime Minister shows the chasm created by the Palace's implacable policy to marginalize the political parties and subvert the democratic process. It would, however, be fallacious to assume that Koirala (and the Nepali Congress) has opted for republicanism. The 12 point agreement reached between the Maoists and the seven party alliance in Delhi in November vowed to establish "absolute democracy by ending autocratic monarchy." To Koirala, absolute democracy may mean a political construct less than a republic and "something akin to ceremonial monarchy. The current position of the other major political party, United Marxist Leninist Party, led by Madhav Kumar Nepal can be found in one of his policy statements that the "only choice before the people is ceremonial monarchy and a republic" with UML, opting for a "democratic republic."

appears to reflect a shift away from the policy of "twin pillars" constitutional monarchy and multi-party democracy being essential for stability in Nepal. That the Delhi meeting could not have taken place without Indian acquiescence, if not blessing, is to state the obvious. By allowing the meeting to take place on Indian soil, New Delhi has ensured that it will continue to influence political developments on Nepal. Additionally India cannot be happy over the reported decision of the Nepalese monarch to buy arms from Pakistan and China. It also reflects Indian unhappiness with the King for not seeking a political solution of the crisis in Nepal as advised by Delhi. The American attitude continues to reflect the US conviction that solution of Nepalese crisis should be found in joint efforts of the Palace and the political parties a conviction which appears hollow and overtaken by events. The EU appears to agree with the perceptible Indian shift from the "twin pillars" concept and is unlikely to chart any policy independent of India. One has to bear in mind the strategic partnership which both the US and the EU have established with India, recognizing India as the most important power in South Asia.

The Bangalore virus



M.J. AKBAR

If you manage to get surprised by HD Deve Gowda, then you have not been in touch with his astrology. On the scale of political mistakes, that is the full twelve inches of the ruler. The Congress, which was shocked rather than surprised when Gowda brought down the coalition government in Karnataka, has itself to blame. Anyone with an ear open in Delhi or Bangalore knew at least a fortnight back that Deve Gowda had placed his hands firmly on the carpet and was going to pull it from under Dharan Singh's chair. Our newspaper had suggested as much in the political diaries we publish, and we were hardly alone. But ever since it came to power, the Congress has been floating in a delirium. It is hard to see clearly with eyes wide shut. Five questions sum up the breadth of news: What, When, Where, Why, and How. The breadth of politics is spanned by a single question: Why? What, When, and Where become largely irrelevant because you can hardly undo the past; and How helps with the gossip but does not interfere with facts. "Why" is crucial because its answer is the only means by which you can try to preempt a similarly unpleasant surprise in the future. So why did the former Prime Minister of India sabotage his own coalition with Congress in Bangalore? The easy answer is: to satisfy the ambitions of his son, HD Kumaraswamy. That is correct as far as it goes. But that proposition

BYLINE

The political map of India is a stack of coalition governments: a straight line of coalitions from Delhi to Bengal via Patna and Ranchi, followed by a straight line from Kolkata to Trivandrum via Bhubaneswar and Chennai and back again to Mumbai via Bangalore. Andhra may not look like a coalition government, but it is one. The Congress is in power on its own strength only in small states like Punjab, Haryana, and Assam. There is always the danger of a virus moving from one stack to another.

makes two assumptions. The first is that the Congress would not have been amenable to making Kumaraswamy chief minister if pressed. As post-mortem flutters indicate, any deal would have been a better alternative to Congress than life in arid wilderness. The Congress is ready to accept Mr Kumaraswamy as the new leader even as I write. But a deal is unlikely, even in the name of secularism, which brought the two together after the elections of 2004. Instead Gowda and BJP MLAs are off on the familiar countrywide package tour (a resort outside Bangalore for a day, then to the comparative safety of Jayalalitha's Chennai, before onalward to the protection of Fort Jessa Jaipur, under the pleasant but beady watch of Mrs Vasundhara Scindia) to keep them together, and out of reach of any possible enticement from the Congress. The second assumption is that we are only dealing with the hopes of a son. You also have to factor in the ambitions of the father. It is perfectly logical that those who became Prime Minister through the good graces of fortune should be confident that the astrologer who was, quite against the odds, right the first time should be correct again when he predicts a second successful tilt at the windmill. I don't know who Deve Gowda's personal astrologer is, but he would not be worth the sandal paste on his forehead if he had not studied the stars and predicted that Deve Gowda would become Prime

Minister again. It is now established that the way to Delhi is through the states. Deve Gowda has set in motion a process that, he hopes, will not only make his son chief minister of Karnataka but also make him either Prime Minister or at the very least deputy prime minister in Delhi. Hope is not quite the same thing as fulfillment but it is the first step towards achievement. Any coalition in power has two principal strategic objectives. The first obviously is to keep the existing coalition together. The second, no less important, is to prevent the emergence of an alternative coalition. Very often the survival of the first lies in the success of the second. Untouchability plays an important part in the psychology of coalitions. For a long while the Congress was treated by most smaller parties as untouchable. The riots in Gujarat gave Congress its opportunity to turn the BJP into the untouchable. Mrs Sonia Gandhi used the chance, with remarkable finesse, to put together a rainbow partnership that was very effective, electorally. Such was the pressure of success that Deve Gowda, who had not aligned with the Congress before the 2004 elections, was forced to join a Congress-led government after equilateral results made it possible for any two sides to keep the third in Opposition. In neighbouring Andhra Pradesh, Chandrababu Naidu broke his partnership with the BJP. In less than two years, Deve Gowda has quietly undermined that

untouchability. That process may have started when Nitish Kumar stuck with the BJP in Bihar, and proved that he could still get at least a part of the Muslim vote. But Deve Gowda has taken it a decisive step forward. To return to the basic question: Why? The Congress has not made any serious political miscalculation or appropriated too much more than it deserved. One could argue that it is hitting above its weight in Delhi, keeping all the key centres of power, but that is a reality which junior partners know they have to live with. The problem is not the present, but the future. The smaller parties in the coalition know one indisputable fact, that the Congress can grow in their states only at their expense. This is glaringly true in a state like Maharashtra, and only marginally less valid in Karnataka. There is only one point on which Mulayam Singh Yadav and Mayawati are agreed in Uttar Pradesh, that they would rather be defeated by each other than be defeated by the Congress. Chandrababu Naidu has only the Congress to worry about, which is why he cannot be in a Congress-led coalition. Nor can Om Prakash Chautala in Haryana. The Left is less worried because it is confident that it will defeat the Congress in both Bengal and Kerala. Others cannot be as sanguine; and the Left might try a quick look over the shoulder just in case there is a de facto understanding between Congress and Mamata Banerjee in Bengal during this summer's Assembly election. This is the fundamental prob-

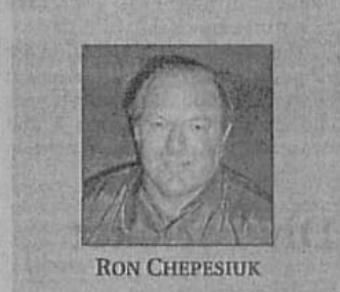
lem before the Congress, whether its leaders formally address it during the Hyderabad AICC or not. They might content themselves with pretty slogans rather than real issues, because an AICC has now become the Christmas party of a political party, a happy jamboree of sentimental reunions fuelled by pretty good food. The logic of a coalition permits no encroachment. The logic of power demands encroachment. The history of the Congress demands it as well. That is the dilemma. Successful politics is the combination of personal ambition with unsentimental reality. Deve Gowda and Kumaraswamy's decisions will be influenced by what they want now as well as what they want ten years later. If the price of power now is elimination in the next elections, they will seek other options while they can. One reason why the Left Front works in Bengal is because the various partners have, over two decades, established their territories: the Forward Bloc, for instance, knows that it will get these many seats in any election. The Congress-led coalitions are new; and no one knows what they will get in any future seat-sharing arrangement. Nor is it possible to know, for all political parties are personality-oriented. The presence or absence of the leader becomes a huge variable. The political map of India is a stack of coalition governments: a straight line of coalitions from Delhi to Bengal via Patna and Ranchi, followed by a straight line from Kolkata to Trivandrum via Bhubaneswar and Chennai and back again to Mumbai via Bangalore. Andhra may not look like a coalition government, but it is one. The Congress is in power on its own strength only in small states like Punjab, Haryana, and Assam. There is always the danger of a virus moving from one stack to another. We are in a transition phase of Indian politics, and 2006 could be so transitory it might even bypass Deve Gowda's astrology. MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

The attitude of the Palace towards the political parties remains uncompromising, though Nepal Congress President GP Koirala and some other political leaders have been freed from house arrest. The Palace's view about the political parties was reflected in the comment of a former chief of the army that the political parties be declared "anti-national elements." The army, which constitutionally has remained beyond civilian control, is basically a feudal army, its primary function being that of shoring up the monarchy. Personality traits of the assassinated King Birendra and those of the present monarch are believed to be different. The late King who was immensely popular had appointed his younger brother Dharendra (also killed in the 2001 Palace massacre) the point man for secret dealings with the Maoists. This was revealed after the Palace massacre by Dr. Baburam Bhattarai, the Mikhail Suslov of the Maoist Communist Party. The army under the present monarch has refused to reciprocate the unilateral ceasefire declared by the Maoists and desired by the people who are tired of the violence which has become the landscape of politics in Nepal. Contrary to the belief of the hardliners in the administration, the ceasefire reportedly reflects the strength and not the weakness of the Maoists, as the vast swath of rural Nepal remains under their control, while the government troops are forced to garrison inside the towns and other urban areas. The unpopularity of the monarchy can be gauged by the fact that the national convention of Koirala's Nepali Congress held in August-September last year dropped adherence to constitutional monarchy from the party's political program. In a recent mass meeting held at Baktiarpur, Koirala ruled out any possibility of compromise with the King. He warned that if the King "continues to go against the inter-

ests of the people, the future of the monarchy will be at stake." Such pronouncement from the head of a political party known for its social conservatism and desire to maintain socio-economic status quo and himself a former Prime Minister shows the chasm created by the Palace's implacable policy to marginalize the political parties and subvert the democratic process. It would, however, be fallacious to assume that Koirala (and the Nepali Congress) has opted for republicanism. The 12 point agreement reached between the Maoists and the seven party alliance in Delhi in November vowed to establish "absolute democracy by ending autocratic monarchy." To Koirala, absolute democracy may mean a political construct less than a republic and "something akin to ceremonial monarchy. The current position of the other major political party, United Marxist Leninist Party, led by Madhav Kumar Nepal can be found in one of his policy statements that the "only choice before the people is ceremonial monarchy and a republic" with UML, opting for a "democratic republic."

In the whole Nepalese imbroglio, the Indian stake appears to be most critical. Apart from Indian obligations under the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, Nepal is in India's backyard and neighbours several insurgent-infested Indian states. The report that the idea of starting a people's war in Nepal had been hatched in a joint meeting that took place in India in July 1995 between Indian Communist Party (M-L) (People's War) and Nepalese Maoists lends credence to suspicion of links between Nepalese Maoists and Indian insurgent groups. In the case of ascendancy of Maoists to power in Nepal there is no guarantee that the existing links would not be broadened and deepened. India, therefore, has to act responsibly if it is to be recognized as the preponderant regional power status Pakistan refuses to recognize and Bangladesh finds difficult to accept. That India is the third largest economy in Asia and hopes to join the ranks of developed economies in a decade, complemented by sizeable military strength, continues to elude the policy makers of these two countries. In the case of Nepal, open Indian endorsement of Maoist insurgency, unless the Maoists join a transparent and multi-party democratic process renouncing violence and come to power through free and fair elections, could be regarded as irresponsible behaviour, unsuitable for a country aspiring for permanent membership of the UN Security Council. While there is nothing inherently wrong for the communists to come to power (after all Chile, Brazil, and Venezuela have voted in leftist presidents), the process through which they acquire power has to be fully democratic. This is the lesson the international community has learnt from the turbulent century which has just gone by. Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Muslim Charities in the US



RON CHEPESIUQ

HOW are Muslim charities in the US doing nearly four and half years after 9/11? If you recall, in the wake of that traumatic event, the Bush administration moved to crack down on several U.S.-based Muslim charities it suspected were aiding and abetting terrorism. In November 2003, about two-dozen FBI agents raided the headquarters of the Illinois-based Global Relief Foundation, then the country's second largest Islamic charity. The agents didn't have a warrant, but they removed the foundation's records and froze \$900,000 of its assets. In 2004 the US based Foundation Centre stated that the charity was one of three Islamic charities that were forced to close before they were formally declared "specially designated global terrorists" as part of the US government's campaign to deprive terrorists of money. In the same month, the Bush administration designated the Dallas, Texas based Holy Land Foundation (HLF) a terrorist organisation. According to the Muslim Public Affairs Council,

INSIDE AMERICA

Despite the intimidating environment, Muslims in America are still rising to the occasion when need be. For example, after the big earthquake struck the Kashmir region of Pakistan and India last fall, Islamic Relief USA, the largest US Muslim international aid agency, raised \$3 million in donations for earthquake relief.

President Bush made this move four days after a request from Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. The HLF was designated a terrorist organisation because it was providing assistance to Hamas in the Occupied Territories. The US government has designated Hamas a terrorist organisation. The HLF challenged the US government's action in court, but lost. It appealed, lost again and then appealed to the US Supreme Court, which refused to hear the case. Today, the pressure is still on the Muslim charities. In fact, a Muslim charity can be apparently cleared of any wrong doing and still remain a target. In 2004, the US Senate Finance Committee announced that 25 Muslim charities in the US were under investigation. One of those was the Ohio-based KindHearts, whose mission is to support needy Palestinians in Lebanon, the Gaza and West Bank. The charity had become one of the country's largest Muslim charities, collecting more than \$4 million annually in donations. But being successful has raised KindHearts profile, and its activities have come under close government scrutiny, worrying the group's officials. Last December,

Jihad Smalli, a lawyer for KindHearts told Reuters: "Donors and charities have a lot of things to fear. It's not just fearing unsubstantiated accusations that a charity may be connected to a terrorist group, but also fearing the mere suspicion of a witch hunt." Smalli said that KindHearts has been very careful of its moves in charity giving, but testimony before the Senate Finance Committee showed that the group had made what Smalli conceded were "mistakes." One of the mistakes involved working with the Islamic Association for Palestine, a group that has been rendered civilly liable for Hamas's shooting of an American citizen in the West Bank. The Senate Finance Committee heard testimony from KindHearts and other 24 Muslim charities being investigated for possible links to terrorist groups. Last November, the committee made a statement, declaring that it "did not find anything alarming enough that required additional follow up beyond what law enforcement is already doing." Two weeks later, the committee reversed its decision. Senator Charles Grossly (R-IN), the com-

mittee's chairman, indicated that the committee had finished reviewing the financial rules it requested two years previously. But he added: "it does not mean that these groups have been cleared by the committee." Why the about face? It's not clear, but being put in a state of legislative limbo had frustrated many US Muslims who complain that the suspicion has hampered them from fulfilling their religious obligation to perform the charitable acts of "zakat" and "sadaqa." Muslim groups have asked the US government to provide a list of approved groups so they can make charitable donations abroad without fear that they will become suspected of having terrorist ties. Rabiah Ahmed, a spokesman for the Center for American-Islamic Relations, told the Associated Press: "Many Muslims are giving to local mosques because it's easiest to know how the money is used, but there are really needy people overseas who are also easily affected by this cloud cast over all Muslim charities." Despite the intimidating environment, Muslims in America are still rising to the occasion when need be. For example, after the big

earthquake struck the Kashmir region of Pakistan and India last fall, Islamic Relief USA, the largest US Muslim international aid agency, raised \$3 million in donations for earthquake relief. In comparison, the American Red Cross raised \$1.2 million. Worshipers who gathered at one San Francisco mosque for Ramadan evening prayers last October 12 raised \$152,000 in 15 minutes! But four and half years after 9/11, the Bush administration needs to move to make it easier for Muslim charities to fulfil their mission. It can be done without compromising national security. In the wake of 9/11, the Bush administration made much of the closing down of the Global Relief Foundation and the Benevolence International Foundation, another prominent Chicago based Muslim charity, touting the move as a victory in the War on Terrorism. Yet the 9/11 Commission has stated in one of its reports that the closing of the two charities "raises substantial civil liberties concerns." No one associated with either group has been found guilty of a terrorism related crime, but they remained closed. The 9/11 Commission findings beg an answer to an important question: why is the Bush administration, in the name of the War on Terrorism, still abusing the civil liberties of some Muslim charities and making life difficult for most of them as they try to do good works? Daily Star columnist Ron Chepesiuk is a Visiting Professor of Journalism at Chittagong University and a Research Associate with the National Defense College.

