

How long for a functional ACC?

Govt credibility in question

WHILE we commend the ADB for taking active interest in seeing the fledgling ACC functional, we wonder why it was one of our development partners and not the government from which the initiative had to come for a stocktaking of the ACC's role thus far. ADB must also be thanked for its commitment of continuing support to the ACC.

It is a pity that the ACC has not even started to operate in the way it should have, even after almost fifteen months of its setting up. The finance minister's comment following the meeting, that comes almost as an ultimatum, to sort out their squabbles in the next seven days betrays a lack of insight of the type of issues that all the commission. How, might one ask, will it be possible for the ACC to resolve the problems, that have lingered over one year, in seven days? And that is why we are constrained to suggest that either the government is not fully conversant with the nature of the problems that beset the ACC, or, even worse, it has no intention to see the commission function properly. After all, it is not the ACC that should take all the blame.

What should not escape the notice of the concerned persons is that it is not the internal conflict only that has prevented the commission from being fully functional. Much of the problem that has stood in the way of the ACC's efficacy is that of its manning, its organogram and the rules of procedure, among other things. These are matters that respective ministries should have addressed by now, instead of allowing the commission to drift almost listlessly for most part of its existence. The fact that those ministries responsible to see the proper functioning of the commission have not identified the problem areas as yet displays the administration's apathy towards the commission.

Given the benefit of doubt to the ACC, that it did not receive the fullest support that it ought to have had from the relevant quarters, what is beyond our comprehension is that internal squabbles would hamper the functioning of an organisation whose highest echelon is manned by three persons who are distinguished in their own right. While differences of opinion are only but natural we cannot believe that between men of repute these differences are irreconcilable.

No amount of round tables or meetings would see a vibrant and functional ACC if it is not backed by the full commitment of all concerned.

What an anti-environment orgy!

The UNO must answer for it

AN irreparable damage has been done to environment at Manohordi in Narshingdi, at least for some years to come. Our angst is boundless at the rain tree felling spree ordered by the Upazilla Nirbahi Officer (UNO) concerned on a self-invented ground that the species is harmful to environment.

In a meeting with 11 UP chairmen, he passed an edict for having all the rain trees in their respective areas felled. The leaves of this variety of tree was alleged to be acidic defertilising land, and therefore, the habitats had to be shorn of it. So the sermon went impelling the household owners to comply with the UNO's orders. A countless number of rain trees were sawed down.

There are strong reasons to believe that the whole operation has been staged-managed to let the saw mill owners, wood traders and furniture manufacturers reap windfalls out of the misery of hundreds of house owners.

The thing is, rain tree is hugely environment-friendly; it's fast growing, its huge foliage is shade-giving and it helps the environs cool off with a balmy breeze. Besides, its dried out leaves are actually organic manure.

The question that inevitably arises from the pernicious action of the UNO is: how was it possible for him to carry out the destructive mission for long eight months with the forest department, and his higher-up the deputy commissioner, remaining completely in the dark about it? Why was he not stopped on the track? Whereas the prime minister of the country has been untiringly stressing the point, "plant tree, save the environment, and tree is our friend" -- the UNO has done something which is the exact opposite of what the chief executive of the country wants.

He must be held to account for the action while he is directed to do compensatory plantation in the standard ratio of three trees, inclusive of two fruit trees and one rain tree, for the one tree lost.

What is behind Saudi Arabia's overture to India?

BOTTOM LINE

The Saudi proposal ushers in a new phase of relations between Saudi Arabia and India. Both countries are poised on the threshold of a new partnership. Whatever may be the reaction of Pakistan, it cannot avoid that India is a regional power. The emergence of India as the regional power with economic and military muscle has its own dynamics in international relations. Saudi Arabia has recognized the need to strengthen its relations with India.



HARUN UR RASHID

KING Abdullah bin Aziz of Saudi Arabia, the country of the birth of Islam, was the chief guest at the India Republic Day on January 26. After an interval of 51 years, the King paid a four-day visit to India. Before his arrival to New Delhi, the King was in China. The visit to both the non-Muslim majority countries is highly significant.

The wide-ranging political and strategic implications of his participation as the chief guest on the Republic Day ceremony in New Delhi has not been lost in South Asia and outside.

It is reported that the King proposed that India should be given an observer status to the Jeddah-based Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and the proposal appears to be founded on pragmatic considerations of the present day realities of international relations.

It has been reported that the Saudi monarch also indicated that it was desirable that Pakistan should endorse India's observer status because it could play a significant role in achieving the objectives of OIC. One of the objectives of the OIC is to strengthen cooperation

in economic, social, cultural and scientific fields among countries within the OIC.

His proposal was made in the light of the fact that Russia, Central African Republic, Republic of Ivory Coast, and Thailand are currently observers to the OIC.

There are several reasons for this proposal and some of them deserve mention below:

First, the observer status is ordinarily given to a country where there exists a substantial Muslim population. Whether the countries are Muslim-majority or not, it is argued their presence in the OIC as observers helps toward a greater understanding of Islam and the Muslims, thus helping to dispel the perception of Islam as a religion of "backwardness and terror."

Second, the Islamic world, regrettably, has an image problem, partly because of its structural weakness and partly because of its failure to curb Islamic militancy.

With India as one of the observers of OIC, it may be able to dent this negative image. Furthermore, OIC may build up its strength and relevance in international order, in particular, the Western world will take notice of its views to the current issues of the world because of India's presence. On the whole, India is perceived to act as a moderating influence on the activities of the OIC.

Third, it is believed the OIC needs the support of the vibrant democratic India that stands in the middle of South Asia, and at the centre of the Indian Ocean, that reaches out from the sands of Egypt to the Straits of Malacca, for its profile that will secure its role in international relations. Sir Olaf

Carow, steward of the British Raj, once said: "It is impossible to see Gulf problems in correct perspective unless the view includes India."

Fourth, India is emerging as an industrial power. Markets in India are undergoing tremendous economic and social development. It is reported that Asia's share of exports has increased from 23 per cent to 38 per cent from 1985 to 2002. Within decades, India's role in international relations will be increasingly felt.

India has been an active player in the era of the information technology for decades. Its scientific progress including nuclear science by Indian scientists has been splendid and world class. It is the cutting-edge knowledge that provides India an edge in this scientific and technological world among Asian nations. Naturally Saudi Arabia sees India's role in OIC as constructive and beneficial.

Fifth, India is the fourth largest trading partner of Saudi Arabia. It is reported that Indian companies have set up 82 fully-owned companies in Saudi Arabia and there are around 49 Indo-Saudi ventures in India.

There is an "oil factor" for Saudi Arabia's overture to India as well. India is hungry for hydrocarbons (oil and gas) and Saudi Arabia seeks to get an access to a safe and huge market for export of oil to India. The Western countries including the US do not want to heavily depend on the volatile Middle East for oil and have been looking for other sources, such as Russia and littoral states for Caspian Sea oil.

Sixth, many political observers suspect that Saudi Arabia has tabled the proposal at the "wink" of



Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud gestures as he speaks with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh after signing a joint declaration on Economic and Energy cooperation agreement during a meeting at Hyderabad House in New Delhi, January 27.

the US. The Bush administration is reportedly not happy with Pakistan at its efforts to capture Osama Bin Laden and his number two man Al-Zawahiri who are believed to be hiding in Pakistan with the support of some sections of military personnel. Otherwise how could these two men elude their capture since the events of 9/11?

In the broader context of global strategy, the US has entered into a strategic partnership with India in economic and defence fields so as to make India a strong regional power as a counterweight to China's growing military and economic dominance in Asia Pacific. It makes sense that India also plays a role in the OIC as it does in the Non-Aligned Movement and in the Commonwealth.

Seventh, last year, India entered into a strategic partnership with the Gulf countries (GCC). In this context it is reasonable that Saudi Arabia wants to have stronger ties with India. There is an increasing possibility of defence cooperation between the two countries.

Eighth, science is weakest in the lands of Islam. The impact of this weakness is felt in the survival of a society that depends directly on science and technology in the present age. Nobel Laureate late Professor Abdus Salam once wrote:

"The Gulf Arabs -- awash with money -- could have taken themselves a duty to spend that money to build science within the Islamic world." India in this context can inject rejuvenation and vitality between scientific thought and Islamic theory and practice.

What about the impact on Pakistan?

In 1969, it was Pakistan which succeeded in getting India out of the OIC when it was established in Rabat, Morocco. It was successful primarily because India was represented at the conference by an ambassador who happened to be a Sikh. Pakistan was believed to have fully exploited the presence of a Sikh leading India's delegation at the Rabat conference.

Pakistan has always considered itself the champion of the Islamic cause and it is the only Islamic country that has nuclear weapons. Pakistan must have thought that it has been successful to keep India at bay from the embrace of key Arab Muslim countries and OIC.

Pakistan must be surprised by the King's proposal. Furthermore, his visit to India and not to Pakistan has added a new dimension of Saudi Arabia's policy. It is reported that Saudi Arabia is keen to boost defence ties with India that will have an access to modern weap-

onry from the US. The shift in Saudi Arabia's policy towards India is a bolt from the blue. It may rock the balance of power in South Asia. The King seems to be aware of this fact and to calm down the concerns of Pakistan, has said that its relations with India are not at the expense of its relations with Pakistan.

India is one of the largest Muslim populated countries (between 135-40 million Muslims) in the world. If other non-Muslim countries where there is much less Muslim population, such as Thailand and Russia are observers of the OIC, the King's proposal has the merit.

The Saudi proposal ushers in a new phase of relations between Saudi Arabia and India. Both countries are poised on the threshold of a new partnership. Whatever may be the reaction of Pakistan, it cannot avoid that India is a regional power. The emergence of India as the regional power with economic and military muscle has its own dynamics in international relations. Saudi Arabia has recognized the need to strengthen its relations with India.

Barister Harun ur Rashid is a Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

In defence of the media

In view of the government's reported attempt, a very legitimate plea to the government: Please do not enact any law so as to restrict the freedom of the media and deprive us of our fundamental right. Even if such a black law is enacted, non-compliance should be the best compliance or else the very liberty of the people is bound to be jeopardized.

KAZI S.M. KHARUL ALAM QUDDUSI

ADMITTEDLY, our political leaders have failed -- and failed miserably -- to give democracy an institutionalized shape. Even elementary democratic values are alien to them and the promised democracy is still crying in the wilderness. However, many others including the civil society groups are showing genuine activism. In my opinion -- I believe millions in Bangladesh echo my conviction -- the media, especially the print media stand out. The print media as a whole haven't failed the nation, if not anything else.

A decade or so ago, a portion of the print media used to bring out motivated news and act as playthings of some political parties. Their impact was so profound that the masses had to remain confused as to many news items. Political

mouthpieces are still there but the conscious readers and commoners are now enjoying heyday as to their "right to know" thanks to the print media.

There was such an observation among many that the media were a lot more effective than the opposition parties as a whole in highlighting the misdeeds of the party leaders and thus had a key role in AL's debacle in 2001. To be candid, such was the strength of the then 4-Party Alliance that they couldn't even threaten the AL government, let alone dislodge it. However, one will fool himself if one considers that stance of the media as anti-AL.

Interestingly, the same media are now equally vocal against the wrongdoings of the present government and leaving no stone unturned to let people know what is happening overtly and covertly. Sincere efforts are also there to persuade and alert the government. But the present government,

like its predecessors, seems not set to pay heed. Maybe it need not bother because it will either remain in power forever or come back to power after a respite of only 5 years!

Now, I just want to refer to a few phenomena -- though the list is selective and comprises rather recent ones -- about which the understanding is fairly clear:

- Militants were nonexistent and media creations in the eyes of the government policy makers even a few months back. It is the government that will have to bear the brunt of the liability for its initial denial and subsequent mishandling which reinforced the militants. However, the damage militancy has done to our national image will no doubt take a long time to heal. Have the media warnings not delivered?
- Admittedly, anti-adulteration issue was brought to fore by the media. Later on, policy makers and officials showed keen inter-

est. Did the media not facilitate and supplement things in the government's anti-adulteration campaign as well?

- Killings in Crossfire got started and a temporary lull in law and order situation was claimed. And such killings are on. Is Crossfire not sort of a jungle law in a civilized setting? In the backdrop of such killings, is there any room for rule of law, constitution, legal system, and human rights? Did the media not put things in perspective on the question of legitimacy of the killings?

- What is being heard about Public Service Commission? The government seems to enjoy and exacerbate predicament of millions of unemployed yet qualified youth in the country. Did the media not try to stop the rot by persuading the government to mend things?

- Unprecedented anomalies have been resorted to by the government in management of personnel functions, thus tearing apart the morale of the civil service. Did the media not send wake-up calls time and again?

- Our State Minister for Home Affairs discovered a Hindu militant. It could well have taken the shape of an unprecedented com-

munal oppression had Yaddab not been acquitted of the charge. Did the media not play a crucial role in finding out the truth?

- Like PSC, Election Commission (EC) has gone literally crazy. The media people have even been mistreated in the process and turned out to be scapegoats. Have the media really put things out of context?

- Last but not least, price hike has become the order of the day. The government cares little about its impact on the people, especially the marginalized millions. Ironically, the people have nowhere to go for remedy. Does the government not have the mechanism and machinery to put a hold or does it have a vested interest in drastic and regular price hike? Did the media not warn about the present and future effects of unabated price hike?

While many of our intellectuals capable of guiding the nation as well as the state machinery cringe to the political leadership of their leanings so as not to miss out on licking whatever trickles down from the latter and just cannot rise above partisanship and shy away from speaking the truth lest the

leaders get cross with them, a bunch -- not, of course, all -- of dedicated media people are outstandingly true to their job despite all the odds.

The media people are persistently being termed as media terrorists, pen terrorists, and what not. Is it mere hyperbole that Bangladesh has turned out to be one among the most dangerous countries for journalists? To crown it all, Bangladesh government is now contemplating on moves to tie up the media, especially the print media and that too, under the auspices of legal provisions. Motive behind this move is nothing other than throttling the people's freedom of information.

Hence, in view of the government's reported attempt, a very legitimate plea to the government: Please do not enact any law so as to restrict the freedom of the media and deprive us of our fundamental right. Even if such a black law is enacted, non-compliance should be the best compliance or else the very liberty of the people is bound to be jeopardized.

Kazi SM Kharul Alam Quddusi is Assistant Professor, Department of Public Administration, University of Chittagong.

Does the US favour maximalist democracy?

Even One God, Islam's ultimate source of instruction, is generously maximalist. God allows Satan to compete fully and freely in God's universe and challenge His conception of virtue and good life. Muslim nations should institute maximalist democracy for launching a free competition between secular and religious forces. Whether the US will consistently support an all-inclusive democracy is an unsure bet.

DR. LIAQUAT ALI KHAN

IN its crusade to democratize the Muslim world, the Bush administration faces the challenges of maximalist democracy -- an all-inclusive conception of democracy that generates free and full electoral competition among parties with diverse political platforms.

Maximalist democracy loathes diminishing universal suffrage, banning political parties, or restricting political platforms. In the Muslim world, maximalist democracy requires that both Islamic and secular parties be allowed to organize and compete in general elections, and form government upon winning.

At present, a few Muslim nations practice maximalist democracy. Despite military coups, Pakistan and Bangladesh have hung on to maximalist

democracy. They allow parties of diverse ideological stripes -- Islamic, secular, and communist -- to freely compete with each other in the general elections.

Iraq's constitution drafted under American occupation has adopted maximalist democracy as well. The constitution permits religious and secular parties to freely participate in the political process. Iraq's maximalist democracy, however, is the inevitable outcome of complex forces that occupation and insurgency have unleashed.

After deliberately sensitizing the Sunni and Shia separateness, the US had no option but to allow religious parties to compete for power. The Iraqi example, therefore, furnishes little proof that the US is committed to maximalist democracy.

It appears, though, that the Bush administration, despite its

fierce rhetoric against Muslim extremists, is willing to accommodate political Islam. In Afghanistan, the US made no effort to ban religious candidates from running in parliamentary elections. The Taliban were disqualified for their alleged support of terrorism and not for their religious orientation.

The Bush administration has not opposed even Hamas, a militant Islamic party designated as a terrorist organization under US laws, in contesting parliamentary elections in Gaza and West Bank. Bush policymakers may have concluded that allowing Islamic parties to participate in electoral competition might in fact moderate political Islam -- a goal that the US is determined to pursue.

How the US will deal with a Hamas government, now that it has won the elections, remains to be seen. Notwithstanding these conces-

sions to political Islam, the US does not promote maximalist democracy as a matter of principle. Consider the US attitude toward Turkey and Iran, two Muslim nations that repudiate maximalist democracy from opposite viewpoints.

The Turkish constitution embodies irrevocable secularism. And the Turkish army is opposed to political Islam. Political parties that propose to change the Republic's secular characteristics are banned under the constitution. Turkish democracy is open only to secular parties. In recent years, Islamic parties have made some headway, as evidenced by pro-Islamic Erdogan's rise to power, but they must still publicly declare their commitment to constitutional secularism.

The US is unlikely to pressure Turkey to change its secular constitution to make room for maximalist democracy where Islamic parties may contest elections on the basis of their religious, rather than secular, political platforms. Lack of pressure aside, no US administration has criticized Turkey for instituting a secular monopoly.

Ironically, though, the US is quick to vilify Iran for repudiating maximalist democracy. This is because Iran is a democratic theocracy. Its constitution establishes a fusion state under which all civil, penal, financial, economic, administrative, cultural, military, political, and other laws and regulations must be based on Islamic criteria. This principle applies absolutely to every aspect of law.

As such, no political party that challenges the fusion of state and Islam is allowed to participate in the electoral process. The Council of Guardians screens candidates for their commitment to the fusion principle. Maximalist democracy requires that Iran change its constitution and allow secular parties to contest elections. Even though the fusion provisions of Iran's constitution are theoretically amendable, the ruling clerics would not allow maximalist democracy to challenge the Republic's theocratic monopoly.

When the Bush administration praises Turkey but condemns Iran, its commitment to maximalist democracy seems arbitrary, even

anti-Islamic. In praising Turkey, the Bush administration contends that Turkey has successfully combined Islam and democracy. This admiration of Turkey suggests the US favours secular democracy, which allows the people to freely practice their faith, but refuses to accommodate political Islam.

In condemning Iran, US officials leave no doubt that Iran fails to meet the standards of maximalist democracy, even though Iran has successfully held periodic presidential and parliamentary elections. "The regime in Teheran must heed the democratic demands of the Iranian people," says Bush, "or lose its last claim to legitimacy."

From these conflicting reactions to political monopolies in Turkey and Iran, one might conclude that the US favours secular democracy but opposes political Islam. This conclusion, however, does not explain the US policy in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine, where the US has allowed political Islam to participate in the democratic process.

It appears the US prefers that Muslim nations adopt secular liberal democracy. Pragmatism

dictates otherwise. The Bush administration seems to have accepted political Islam as a reality. Accordingly, it is prepared to allow Islamic parties to compete with secular forces, particularly in nations where political Islam has slim chances of major victory.

This pragmatism, however, does not champion political Islam. When a Muslim nation excludes Islamic parties from the political process, the US is unlikely to vouch for political Islam, although the US may pay lip service to the human rights of the excluded Muslim groups. For example, the US may criticize Egypt and Algeria for mistreating the members of Islamic parties, but it is unlikely to press for maximalist democracy.

In my book, A Theory of Universal Democracy (2003), I have argued that Fukuyama's secular liberal democracy cannot be the end of human history, simply because we are not at the end of human intelligence. Diverse nations have every right to construct new conceptions of democracy, which respond to their religious, economic, and social needs. While secular liberal democracy has served many

nations well, it cannot be universalized.

No view of democracy must force Muslim nations to oust their religious traditions from the parameters of law and state. Muslims have every right to institute a fusion state that combines rather than separates law and Islam. Exercising this right, however, Muslim nations must protect the fundamental liberties of religious minorities. An Islamic system is most acceptable when it embraces maximalist democracy, allowing secular parties to challenge the official ideology, something that Iran does not permit.

Even One God, Islam's ultimate source of instruction, is generously maximalist. God allows Satan to compete fully and freely in God's universe and challenge His conception of virtue and good life. Muslim nations should institute maximalist democracy for launching a free competition between secular and religious forces. Whether the US will consistently support an all-inclusive democracy is an unsure bet.

Ali Khan is a professor of law at Washburn University School of Law in Topeka, Kansas.