

## Say 'no' to corrupt candidates

*A resounding word from anniversary event*

**S**PEAKING at the 15th anniversary celebrations of The Daily Star on Saturday Dr. Yunus observed that despite the persisting bickering by political parties and the presence of a volatile environment, the country has registered a healthy growth in its GDP. There are also some positive signs of growth in the socio-economic fields. He felt that the forthcoming elections are of vital importance to keep the momentum going, so that that we can make a big leap forward.

We are of the same opinion that in order to ensure continuity of the emerging positive factors in our national development paradigm, the holding of timely, corruption-free and fair elections has no alternative. Yes, the way to achieve the desired goals of national development is to nominate only honest candidates for the election. This can only be done with the proactive participation of the people at large from the very beginning of the process. People in their respective constituencies should vote for only those candidates who are honest and committed to the cause of the people. That's why they themselves should come forward and put forth names on their own initiative to the political parties by way of ensuring that candidates who are corrupt and not worthy of public trust do not get the ticket.

Dr. Yunus went on to suggest that if the politicians do not entertain such moves of the people they should go to the extent of submitting blank ballot papers as a mark of protest. We also find merit in the suggestion that if need be the list of proposed nominees should also be forwarded to the media, for the general attention of the public. A list of "good and honest" candidates should also be compiled with the full participation of civic groups, farmers, and women representatives.

The key factor in ensuring a significantly better future for our country lies in the eradication of corruption from our electoral process and getting such people elected who are honest beyond any shadow of doubt. The rest will simply follow.

## Concern over Tipaimukh

*It needs to be allayed by New Delhi*

**I**T is with disquiet that we learn the news of India having floated international tenders towards its planned construction of Tipaimukh multipurpose project on the confluence of Barak and Tuivai rivers in Manipur by 2012.

The Barak is a feeder for the Surma, Kushiyara and Meghna, the last-named being one of the three arterial streams in the river system of Bangladesh. Now, if India should be building up the massive barrage project, Bangladesh has justifiable fears that the consequent withdrawal of waters or water flow regulation upstream would hurt her. The supposedly planned Phulertal barrage, if it eventuates, is likely to have a direct bearing on the Meghna river.

We would naturally expect a formal communication from the Indian side over the reported development, seeking to remove misgivings of Bangladesh about it. India has given Bangladesh to understand from time to time that she would consult Dhaka before going ahead with the multipurpose project.

Let's recapitulate the assurances given by New Delhi from very high level functionaries to Bangladesh about keeping the latter posted of any move India might take on the project including satisfactorily addressing her genuine concerns. The former Indian Water Resources Minister Priya Ranjan Dasmunshi had said in the Dhaka JRC meeting, "We will present Tipaimukh's planned design to Bangladesh when it is prepared." India has promised to provide Bangladesh with the detailed project report (DPR) of Tipaimukh before going for its implementation. In fact, New Delhi has been assuring Bangladesh of not diverting Barak waters upstream of the Meghna river.

It seems incredible, therefore, that India being a friendly and highly valued neighbour of Bangladesh, could see fit to have adopted the project without engaging Bangladesh in a consultative process. The last JRC meeting in Dhaka ended on a positive note of understanding on the question. And, as Bangladesh takes up the issue in the next session of the JRC we would only hope that India respond positively to the recurrent concerns of Bangladesh on the Tipaimukh dam project. Meanwhile, we would urge New Delhi to put the matter in its latest perspective through a written communication to Dhaka in a strongly reiterated spirit of good neighbourliness.

# Brinkmanship of those on the brink

## PERSPECTIVES

**A somnolent opposition with wide internal chasm is apparently unable to come out with a bang and is always on the retreat. There have never been more ingredients for a mass upsurge of the scale of 1969. But where are those intrepid soldiers to spearhead it? The people lashed by spiraling prices of the essentials and driven by disdain for graft and terror are groping for direction. There is no one to set the compass for them. The action-packed programs, not the rigmaroles, are the staples for mass movement.**



M ABDUL HAFIZ

**T**HE alliance government's brinkmanship over the demands for an electoral reforms has cast a fresh gloom over our politics, and we are presented with a national terrain of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety. In an unusual move, the government has appointed two more controversial

members in the Election Commission, ostensibly to strengthen the position of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) bent upon pursuing his own agenda, disregarding High Court rulings on voter list.

It was an injury or insult for the opposition which has been agitating for an impartial and neutral CEC. In a quick riposte, AL-led 14-party opposition declared its resolve not to participate in any election conducted by the present Election Commission. The public is keeping its fingers crossed because it seldom bodes well when the country's two behemoths lock their horns.

It was, however, hoped that to head off an impending crisis, some middle ground will be struck by the establishment for the sake of a credible election due in the begin-

ning of the next year, if not earlier. It did not prove charitable enough to do the favour to the nation. Notwithstanding some perfunctory gestures for dialogue, the alliance government seemed to have taken a hard line with regards to demands put forward by AL-led 14-party opposition and gave a damn to the reform proposals broached by it.

It is not without reasons. Pledging an end to corruption and terrorism that proliferated during the previous regime, the BNP-led four-party alliance was swept into power in the last general election. While the expectations ran high on these counts, now after four and half years of alliance rule, both are raging in full fury and have taken an epidemic form. Never before the nation witnessed a horror of the scale either of August 21 or the current wave of bomb terror.

Neither has it experienced such an unfathomable sleaze in the financial conducts at all layers of the government. So much so that it became a buzzword of sorts with the donors. Over and above, there has been an unprecedented scourge of uncontrolled price hike of the essentials.

The alliance has sensed that in a free and fair election an alienated public will no more endorse their rule. However, in the meantime the alliance has developed a high stake in power. The religious parties allied with the BNP have, for the first time, tasted power, with the elixir of which they are now intoxicated.

As for BNP, it was born when in power and has ruled this country together with Jatiyo Party (belonging to same ideological fraternity) for 27 out of 35 years of Bangladesh. Their unease out of power is understandable. Indeed, it appears innocuous if they instinctively try to force a verdict in their favour particularly when they have all the tools for doing so in their hand.

It is against this backdrop that the AL and its allies have fear that the next election under the present dispensation staunchly reluctant to reform will be manipulated in favour of the alliance government, call it "election engineering" or by any other name. Their fear is reinforced by the arcane conduct of the CEC

and the brutality meted out to them by both law enforcement agencies and the BNP/Jamaat cadres in the streets. The position is virtually unable to pursue any of their political programs. Yet Bangladesh is a supposedly democratic polity!

The opposition's doubts and anxieties about a free and fair election are nevertheless shared by the representatives of EU troika and US Assistant Secretary of States, Ms Christina Rocca both of whom imposed, during their recent visits conditions for legitimacy of the election: the participation in the election by all of the country's political outfits worth the name. The Western countries particularly the donors are genuinely concerned over whether or not the AL can be made to participate by meeting its demands of electoral reform.

The government behaviour under the present circumstances is a familiar phenomena. All failed governments or alienated regimes even in the past resorted to repressive measures and brinkmanship to hold on to power. Their schizothrenic steps did not rescue them from collapse and they were hounded out at long last.

Those who are privy to the country's political process right from the days of pre-independence period did witness how a redoubtable Ayub Khan's citadel of power or Ershad's ramparts of dictatorial

authority were assailed by the angry public. But that needed a spark and a band of intrepid political activists.

Can AL-led 14-party opposition pick up the gauntlet thrown by the establishment? There are few signs of the opposition taking the challenge. All it has so far demonstrated are humbug and hyperboleseldom backed by action programs at organisational level.

A somnolent opposition with wide internal chasm is apparently unable to come out with a bang and is always on the retreat. There have never been more ingredients for a mass upsurge of the scale of 1969. But where are those intrepid soldiers to spearhead it? The people lashed by spiraling prices of the essentials and driven by disdain for graft and terror are groping for direction. There is no one to set the compass for them. The action-packed programs, not the rigmaroles, are the staples for mass movement.

Bangladesh never showed bright prospect for anything positive, even in the past. But its future has seldom looked as bleak as it does now. We are awaiting the arrival of another messiah who would free us from the tunnel of despair we are stuck in.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

# Freedom of speech or hate speech?

## LETTER FROM AMERICA

**Denmark cannot have it both ways. It cannot enact the most draconian anti-Muslim laws, do little to discourage anti-Muslim bigotry, insult Islam's holy prophet, and when Muslims complain, shut them up by saying they are simply practicing "freedom of speech."**

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED writes from Princeton

**I**N the West after 9/11, every slur against Islam, its prophet and its holy book has been justified in the name of "freedom of speech." Last September, Denmark's biggest-selling newspaper, Jyllands-Posten, published twelve cartoons, one depicting Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in a bomb-shaped turban with the fuse burning, another showing him wielding a cutlass, and a third showing him complaining about the shortage of virgins for suicide bombers in heaven, all in the name of "freedom of speech." (Incidentally, seventy virgins for suicide bombers is a figment of the suicide bombers' imagination; there is absolutely nothing in the Qur'an, or the tradition of the prophet, the Hadith, to support it).

To express solidarity with Denmark, and to show a united western front, newspapers in Norway, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, and even in New Zealand have recently reprinted the cartoons. It is scary that this united western front of nations, many of whom possess the nuclear bomb and have dropped it on human beings, are now referring Iran to the UN Security Council for sanctions and telling Iran that it cannot be trusted with the nuclear bomb. The purpose of a united western front of nations is to publicize how intoler-

ant Muslims are of freedom of speech. The majority opinion of a panel in Fox News channel (which showed the cartoons) and five letters published in The New York Times (which did not publish the cartoons) on February 4 is typical: Arabs and Muslims are hypocrites; they caricature Jews all the time.

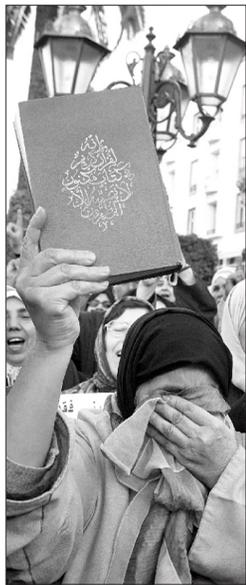
Funny they should mention it. While that may be true, it should quickly be added that in the western print, radio and television media and in Hollywood movies, lecherous or terrorist Arab men with beards and beaked noses are caricatured far more than any other ethnic group, without eliciting adverse reaction from the Arabs. What the defenders of Denmark knowingly ignore is that there is a huge difference between caricaturing an ethnic group and insulting a religion's prophet. That is why there is outrage over the publication of cartoons insulting Islam's holy prophet not only in the Arab Muslim world, but also in all Muslim nations from Turkey to Indonesia.

Because it could lead to idolatry, Muslims consider mere depiction of Prophet Muhammad to be blasphemous. To make fun of the prophet in cartoons is beyond sacrilegious. To Denmark and the West, "freedom of speech" may be God; to Muslims only God is God. Freedom of speech cannot be unlimited. It cannot extend to freedom to insult the religious

sensibilities of others. As the Vatican correctly pointed out while criticizing the cartoons: "The right to freedom of thought and expression ... cannot entail the right to offend the religious sentiment of believers." Once that line is crossed, freedom of speech transforms into hate speech.

Muslims do not insult the founders of other religions, such as Prophets Moses and Jesus (peace be upon them), Buddha, or Rama. If the cartoonists of Jyllands-Posten are equal opportunity insulters, why don't they lampoon the religious figures of other religions? Regretting his country's lack of civility, former Danish foreign minister Uffe Ellemann-Jensen commented, "We have a right to speak our mind, not an obligation to do so." Civilized people do not attack the core beliefs, religious figures or historical injustices suffered by others. Will Jyllands-Posten dare to make fun of the Holocaust?

Apparently, the freedom of speech and action apply only when western interests are at stake. Freedom of action does not apply to the Muslims. When Muslims of the Middle East spontaneously started boycotting Danish goods, the European Union threatened Saudi Arabia with dire consequences if it encourages such boycott. The Saudi government said that they were not encouraging such boycotts. So, while Muslims must suffer the consequences of the



West's "freedom of speech," the Muslims do not have the economic freedom to choose not to buy goods from Denmark and Europe!

Before Denmark is allowed to claim the moral high ground, let us examine its recent history. According to The Economist: "The cartoons were even condemned by many in Denmark's liberal-minded intelligentsia, not because they favour censorship but because they see they see the drawings as part of an increasingly xenophobic tone that has infected all Danish dealings with foreigners. (Denmark is) a country where a member of parliament can liken Muslims to 'cancer tumours' and still not lose her seat."



As reported in The New York Times, Denmark has pushed through the toughest anti-immigration law on the European continent. To prevent first-generation Muslims from bringing spouses from their native lands, Denmark has enacted a law "preventing Danish citizens [of] 24 or younger from bringing spouses from outside Denmark." To quote Marcellus in Shakespeare's Hamlet in a completely different context: "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark."

Denmark cannot have it both ways. It cannot enact the most draconian anti-Muslim laws, do little to discourage anti-Muslim bigotry, insult Islam's holy prophet, and when



Muslims complain, shut them up by saying they are simply practicing "freedom of speech."

This is reminiscent of President Bush's advocacy of "freedom of speech" on one hand, and the reported plan to bomb Al-Jazeera television network for doing exactly that, on the other!

Well wishers of Denmark would like to remember Denmark not for its current government's hypocrisy in using "freedom of speech" as a shield for its anti-Muslim racism and bigotry, but for the delicious Danish biscuits and dairy products, the soliloquies of Hamlet, and the genius of the Danish intellectual Olympians, such as physicist Niels Bohr.

# A Goliath called David

## BYLINE

**The nuclear policy of India is not, and has never been, the policy of one government. It is national policy, and therefore non-partisan. It must be conducted with care, consultation and support from all sides of the Indian Parliament and the Indian people. In government, you always have to juggle with the ball, and drop it at your own risk. When you juggle with the nuclear ball you drop it not just at your own risk, but at the risk of the nation as well.**



M.J. AKBAR

used to be the big bogey on Kashmir. Delhi was constantly haunted by the ghost of CIA wandering through the Kashmir valley, and the body of diplomacy chasing the ghost. American policy now has much more to do with how India can help America strategically than with how the Indian arm can be twisted by means gentle or harsh. That, I believe, is why we might be missing the point of American ambassador David Mulford's recent remarks to Indian media.

Not being privy to the inner dynamics of the Mulford mind, I can suggest four theories about why Ambassador Mulford rang alarm bells on the nuclear deal prior to President George Bush's visit to India in early March.

No. 1: Mulford is a businessman, sent to Delhi in a grace-and-favour posting because he is a friend of Texas's principal patriarchs. Like the famous protagonist

of Gone With the Wind, the ultimate in American-South fiction, frankly, my dear, he doesn't give a damn.

No. 2: Mulford is tired of the job. He is not particularly young, and there are personal problems that he would rather attend to at home in the US of A. Such remarks are one way of reminding the State Department that any arbitrary spray of verbal bullets would be far less damaging in America because they wouldn't travel very far.

No. 3: This is a nuanced play, crafted by someone very clever in the Bush office, a sophisticated variation of good-cop-bad-cop and a new dimension to the Ugly American syndrome. In this theory, if Mulford mucks up the atmosphere really badly expectations are lowered, which sets the stage brilliantly for Bush. After Mulford, anything that Bush says will sound better and positive, and everyone can claim that the Bush visit has been a grand

success despite lower fulfillment levels.

No. 4: Mulford is telling the truth. Pardon me for sounding naive, but I have a feeling that the last is correct. Mulford is doing no more than telling it like it is.

Ever since Dr. Manmohan Singh returned from his last visit to Washington, clutching a piece of paper in his hand, the Delhi establishment has set about trying to convince India that there is indeed something called a free lunch in international affairs, that Washington has accepted India as a virtual sixth nuclear military power, and an ally, if discreet, in the emerging confrontation with China. Implicit in this conjecture was the assumption that America would no longer treat Indian and Pakistan nuclear military power as equal realities; that India would be permitted to float into superpower category and Pakistan dealt with after the new equations had been formalised with Delhi.

It is not difficult to buy the services of drums in Delhi, and a few free airplane tickets are sufficient to generate a lot of noise. The orchestra plays to the baton of the administration and to an audience heavy with media, for dissemination is crucial. The great thing about Indian democracy, however, is that you can never buy off everyone; and critical analysis finds its way into the intellectual space and public discourse with a persuasive power that can never be matched by pur-

chased voices. And so the first optimism of a great leap forward in US-India nuclear relations has been slowed by reality checks: the leap is sort of frozen in mid-air, uncertain whether to travel forward, return to base, or simply descend to ground at the point where it is frozen.

Such self-congratulation always seemed fantasy-driven, if not amateur. Ambassador Mulford may have been publicly provocative to those who did not want to hear the facts, but he was only restating the facts that any honest reporting from Washington could have confirmed to the foreign ministry. Nuclear policy is not controlled by the White House alone, and while the White House, which is the executive wing of government, must of necessity use gloss to shade the difficult parts, there is no evidence that it sees the future of India in quite the same way as the ring around Dr. Manmohan Singh.

Did the Delhi establishment hear nothing from Senator John Kerry, who was in India only days before the Mulford remarks? Senator Kerry is a Democrat, and the man who might have been President if a few people in Iowa or Ohio thought so too. Kerry was not in Delhi because he had nothing else to do or because he needed a winter vacation. He was in Delhi, with the full knowledge of the White House, to deliver a specific message: that the questions being raised were bipartisan, and, when you took the

pretty phrases out, they were essentially about just one thing: fissile material.

Look at the conundrum from another perspective. Suppose India had not been a nuclear military power, would there have been any fuss at all? If India had a nuclear power plant in every city of the country, dedicated only to peaceful purposes, there would have been a queue of merchandise merchants sitting outside 7 Race Course Road hawking their wares without much regard for the views of the White or Green or Saffron House. The core issue is the military arsenal, and the basic message from Washington is this, cold and simple: separate military facilities from energy facilities; open the latter for continuous inspections so that they cannot ever be used for military purposes; and then freeze the capabilities of the military plants to levels that we can monitor now and reduce later. This is the project in simple English. Translate into any language you fancy. For reference, check why the discussions between Nicholas Burns and Shyam Saran failed in December.

America has double standards on nuclear arsenals in the case of only one country, Israel, and is beginning to pay a credibility price. Iran has made a few things clear in its confrontation with the United States and many Western nations over nuclear power.

Iran's preamble might be self-

serving: example: We have not attacked another nation for two hundred years. So what? That does not guarantee that you will not attack another nation in the next two hundred years. President Ahmadinejad's destroy-Israel rhetoric is unacceptable and counterproductive, but its core argument is finding echoes across the world. The Saudis, surely the best ally America can hope to have in the region, have said quite categorically that Iran's nuclear potential cannot be divorced from the reality that Israel is a major nuclear military power, and unilateralism is not going to be permanently acceptable. This is why the big powers who sat in London and Vienna to discuss referral of Iran to the United Nations suggested that Israel could also be mentioned. The United States has rejected the idea, but the idea did not come from America's enemies.

It was inevitable therefore that America would make Iran the test of India's ability to compromise. For the moment, the government has bought peace with the Opposition by arguing that an international consensus is developing on Iran, but this is only the beginning of the story. John Negroponte, National Intelligence director, accepted in a rare appearance to the Senate Intelligence Committee that Iran had not developed nuclear weap-

ons yet, and was still years away from any realistic ability to do so. There is time for the arguments to develop, and more than one case to be made. Caution is a far better weapon than self-congratulation.

Pakistan is critical to American interests. In fact, as a wise former diplomat in Delhi pointed out, Pakistan should keep quiet and wait: whatever deal was finalised with Delhi would become a fact with Islamabad as well. This seems much more realistic than the wish that America would rubberstamp India as the only nuclear power in the region.

Ambassador Mulford's term will get over, and he will go. He will be only the first; in a couple of years, none of the authors of the present arrangement, if it becomes law, will be in power. But the problems will not go with them.

The nuclear policy of India is not, and has never been, the policy of one government. It is national policy, and therefore non-partisan. It must be conducted with care, consultation and support from all sides of the Indian Parliament and the Indian people. In government, you always have to juggle with the ball, and drop it at your own risk. When you juggle with the nuclear ball you drop it not just at your own risk, but at the risk of the nation as well.

MJ Akbar is the Editor of Asian Age.