

Time to make politics difficult



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THAT politics would be made difficult is the now-famous utterance attributed to Late General Ziaur Rahman, founder of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the political outfit which is now firmly entrenched in power. His detractors or political adversaries whatever one may call, who utilise every opportunity to portray him as an usurper, make pointed reference to the ominous portents of the above utterance in our body-politic. According to this group's thinking, the political process of Bangladesh was corrupted by the Late General who, while denigrating and vilifying established politicians of the day provided political space to opportunists and fortune-seekers to come to prominence. Curiously enough, nothing very significant is known about the background and circumstances which prompted such a loaded remark from the Late General, who during his lifetime did not quite elaborate on the substance and ramifications of such an utterance.

It may be left to the academics and the erudite members of the civil society to analyse and find out if the above mentioned remark was caused by the good old soldier's disdain of traditional politicians of the sub-continent variety or a calculated design to effect substantial changes in Bangladesh society's power structure or just a straight comment without much thought. However, ground realities regarding the imperatives of astute political management of the affairs of Bangladesh deserve serious consideration. It is in the background of such a scenario that concerned Bangladeshi citizens will sincerely hope and pray that indeed politics truly becomes difficult so that increasing number of brats and the non-entities do not occupy the centre-stage of our political horizon. Such concerned citizens and the well-meaning folks of our country earnestly desire that politics become the art of wise and patriotic people and is effectively salvaged from the clutches of the insensitive.

One may notice a sense of despondency in the above obser-

vation. While there may be some truth in that, there is no denying that in spite of our adopting a lofty constitution, we do not have the ability to keep it. Equally true is the fact that while we are the proud inheritors of a rich and vibrant culture we do not have the wisdom to cherish it. The compounding tragedy is that our resilient people have to suffer and endure in patience without the perception of their innate potentials.

Strengthening the judiciary

Our political arena will prove to be the difficult turf for the undesirables if our institutions do not falter and our supreme law, i.e. the constitution's inviolability is ensured through the vigilance exercised by the apex judiciary. The quality of our life is to a large extent determined by the availability of the basic human rights and civil liberties, which are placed in the chapter on Fundamental Rights in our constitution. Our constitution-framers have been very far-sighted in guaranteeing these fundamental rights because without them the quality of life would be gravely impaired. We need to increase our sensitivity towards the quality of life.

The arrogance and irresponsibility of the executive organ and the politicians can be tamed and chastened by an upright judiciary wherein we must have people who have the courage never to submit or yield. They should have the capability to effectively pronounce on all spheres of public life. On a more specific reference, our judiciary must firmly ensure the observance of our electoral laws so that the doubtful elements -- both financially and criminal records wise -- find it difficult to venture into public life. For that to materialise fully, the appointment to judicial posts at all levels must not be clouded by political preferences. The political process will remain ever vitiated if judicial integrity and uprightness is not ensured in the first place. This has to be part of a minimum agreement arrived between the political parties. The voluntary and ungrudging observance of this requirement

STRAIGHT LINE

When we have committed ourselves to live in a democracy, we have agreed to live in hazard. Surely there is no particular mercy in that. Our perceptive citizens have to cooperate in running the country and that means payment in taxes, time and thought. If they lead, other people will volunteer to undertake the safety of democracy and the country. In such a scenario, politics will indeed be difficult, to the relief of patriots.

will be the test of a civilised and mature polity. We cannot afford to fail.

Additions in electoral laws

Many in Bangladesh would admit that the greatest source of corruption in public life is the total immunity of political parties from accountability while the small shopkeepers and grocers are expected to keep accounts. It is but fair and equitable that political parties should be disciplined by the same requirements of law which apply to citizens at large. In order to make politics difficult for the bad hats, can we demand that no political party should be recognised by the Election Commission unless the party is willing to maintain audited accounts of all its receipts and expenditure? This demand can be accommodated by the addition of a section to the existing law on Representation.

How about prescribing some minimum educational qualifications for those who seek election to parliament? One cannot fail to be struck by the grim irony of our situation where the one job for which one needs no training or qualification whatsoever is the job of legislating and governing a sizable democracy. To steer the lives and destinies of more than 140 million people our politicians are not required to have any education or equipment at all. It is clearly anomalous that we insist on high qualifications for those who administer or help in administering the law, but none for those who make it except that they are elected. Surely, the law-giver requires intellectual equipment, the capacity to take a balanced view of things, and to act independently.

Ensuring neutrality of the services

We need to have a merit-based administrative system to ensure pragmatic and balanced behaviour of the politicians. There is a belief that for politicians it would be easier to control officers with average merit rather than meritorious officers. Pliable officers with a low morale cannot put a brake on the unbridled ambitions of the arrogant half-wits masquerading as politicians. The

services need to be protected from the high-handed actions of the political executives and their pernicious political links have to be sapped. In fine, it has to be realised by the politicians and the civil society that it is not at all conducive for a strong and mature political government to have a public service about whose integrity and efficacy the society at large entertains grave doubts. Surely, we do not want the political government to be displaced by dangerous brats.

Widening the political horizon

We need to ask ourselves if the apathy of the citizens -- particularly the elite who have almost opted out of the democratic process -- is responsible for the corruption, incompetence and inefficiency that we see all around? We have to admit that as a nation we have paid substantially by our follies in leaving the governance of this country largely to the professional politicians, for many of whom politics is merely bread and butter, a means of livelihood, or worse, a means of personal enrichment. The reality is that the myriad problems facing our country can never be solved by professional politicians, few of whom are equipped for the task. The corrupt and inefficient administration can be toned up by politicians with integrity, ability and knowledge. We need good managers with vision and political understanding of the ways in which the wealth of nations is created. Our public services without purposeful political leadership may continue operating to guarantee societal inertia.

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Muhammad Nurul Huda is former Secretary and IGP.

The EU, Turkey and Cyprus



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

AS negotiations continue for the membership of Turkey in the 25-nation powerful European Union, Turkey has come forward and unveiled her plan recently for removing the political obstacle posed by Cyprus (South). Although the plan has been initially rejected by Cyprus and her mentor Greece as 'old wine in new bottle' the 10-point Cyprus Plan of Turkey is an interesting initiative to break the logjam.

We may recall that after hard bargaining during the last European Union (EU) Summit it was decided that a date was set for the start of serious negotiations between Turkey and the EU. The idea is that EU will thoroughly examine the progress of Turkey in all possible fields which includes human rights, the state of the economy and related matters. Turkey should be considered to have achieved a standard at par with other member states.

If we travel further back we may note that Turkey has been waiting at the door of the EU for more than four decades. There has been ups and downs, mostly downs, but it speaks something for Turkish tenacity that they have hung on. They got some mileage from joining the Customs Union in the early nineties. This opening ajar the door for duty-free entry of all kinds of goods within the territory of Turkey has not been without pain. Turkey made a major breakthrough in 1999 at the Summit in Helsinki, the capital of Finland, when she extracted the promise of membership. Turkey has continued to struggle and it is only last year that she was given a date for start of serious negotiations. Turkey crossed that major hurdle by carrying through sweeping breathtaking reforms, leaving the entire EU members in awe. Those reforms forced the doubters to offer a date for start of negotiations.

Those negotiations have started in right earnest from 1 January 2006. Nobody expects, least of all the Turks, an early conclusion of these negotiations. The prediction is between 10 and 15 years. Nobody should doubt the tenacity of the Turks to bring to a successful conclusion these

THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

Since joining the EU Greek Cyprus has been campaigning for access her trade and movement of people in Turkish Cyprus and she has sympathetic ears among many. On the other hand when Greek Cyprus was included in the EU the organisation promised the Turkish Cypriots that their burden would be eased. The latest 10-point plan aims at finding a way out. It would be worth the effort to move forward since all are set to gain.

negotiations. True there are critical voices here and there. Yet the Turks are a determined lot and membership of the EU has become a National issue for Turkey. There were hesitations in Turkey and within EU that the new Government of Turkey led by Recep

Tayyipp Erdogan, may not be enthusiastic as his predecessors. The argument was that Erdogan's Government of the Justice and Development Party with its Islamic leanings would be more prone to lean towards the Islamic world of the East than the EU of the West. Prime Minister Erdogan proved the doubters totally wrong as he plunged headlong for reforms with a view to achieving membership of the EU. A cursory glance at the history of the Turkish people will demonstrate that they have always moved west. Thus the mighty Ottoman Empire, which ruled in Europe, the Middle East and the Balkans, went to the Arab world strictly as rulers. The Turkish people irrespective of the shade of opinion they may hold has always felt a strong attraction for the West. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, creator of Modern Turkey gave a mighty push in the direction of the West by importing wholesale the judicial system, education

system and the alphabet. The powerful Turkish Army stands as the sentinel of Ataturk's reforms.

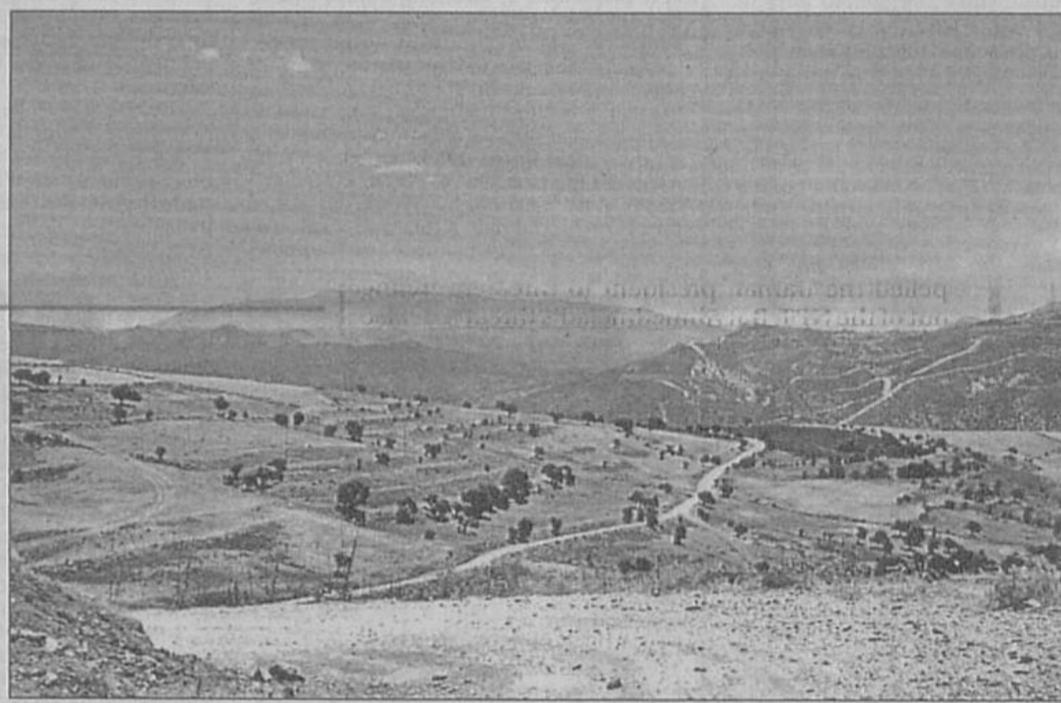
The 10-point Action Plan, which was recently presented by Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, to the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, calls for simultaneous lifting of all obstacles on free movement of goods, persons and services in the context of the Cyprus issue. We may recall that the question of Cyprus has been hanging for more than three decades between Turkey and Greece and Turkish State of Northern Cyprus and South Cyprus. The island was divided between the two sides following military action by Turkish troops, which itself was triggered by a military coup in Greece leading to near annexation of Turkish Cyprus by Greece and South Cyprus.

Since Greece's attitude was crucial to Turkish membership of EU, by patient diplomacy Turkey has virtually normalised her relations with Greece. The only sticking point is Cyprus. Interestingly on the basis of the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's plan a referendum was held on the two sides of Cyprus recently and belying all forecasts Greek Cyprus rejected the Annan plan whereas Turkish Cyprus accepted it. Greek Cyprus has

since joined the ten new entrants and has a veto power.

Greek Cyprus is out to extract her pound of flesh from Turkey. She wants that Turkey should lift restriction of flights in Northern Cyprus and lift embargo on entry of Cypriot ships in Turkish Cypriot port. Turkish Cyprus has been the victim of a world embargo since 1974. In order for Turkish Cyprus to open her port and airspace to everyone including Greek Cyprus, Turkish Cyprus rightly demands that special arrangements for its practical inclusion as an economic entity, into the EU Customs Union should be made. Also steps must be taken for unhindered direct trade between both sides of the island as well as with the outside world. Since joining the EU Greek Cyprus has been campaigning for access her trade and movement of people in Turkish Cyprus and she has sympathetic ears among many. On the other hand when Greek Cyprus was included in the EU the organisation promised the Turkish Cypriots that their burden would be eased. The latest 10-point plan aims at finding a way out. It would be worth the effort to move forward since all are set to gain.

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Idyllis Cyprus: A difficult issue.

Freedom of expression and multi-culturalism

LETTER FROM EUROPE

Democracy also means respect for the rights of the minorities. They should be aware of different sensitivities. Freedom of expression is, no doubt, cherished by every human being, no matter whether he is a Christian, a Muslim or a Hindu. But every right has its limits. One's right to exercise freedom of expression ends where it violates the freedom of others. If one is not careful, freedom of speech can easily turn into hate speech.



Protests turned violent in Beirut.

minister refused to see them on the ground that the press had merely exercised its democratic right to express freely. The Muslims were not satisfied. In November, while visiting Denmark, Mr. Tayyipp Erdogan, prime minister of Turkey refused to hold a joint press conference with the Danish prime minister as a mark of protest for his attitude on this issue. Mr. Rasmussen

remained unperturbed.

It was at this point that the Muslim community in Denmark decided to internationalise the conflict. Al Yazira picked up the issue and started giving wide coverage to it. In December, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed the UN's concern and wrote that the cartoons violated the religious sentiments of others

and therefore, unacceptable. At a summit of 57 Muslim countries held in Mecca in December, the leaders expressed "concern at rising hatred against Islam and Muslims.....and condemned the use of the freedom of expression as a pretext to defame religion." On January 10, a Norwegian newspaper published the caricatures in an act of solidarity which led many Muslims in other parts

of the world to believe that Islam was definitely under attack in Europe.

In the Middle East and elsewhere, people started holding protest demonstrations. Realising their economic power, many Muslim countries in the Middle East started boycotting Danish products. After violent demonstrations in early February, Danish legations in Damascus and Beirut were attacked and subsequently burnt by angry Muslims. At the time of writing this letter, demonstrations are still raging across Europe and the Muslim world. Several demonstrators have already been killed by the police trying to protect Western interests. Despite all this, Mr. Rasmussen remained adamant. On February 9, he reiterated that there would be no Danish apology for the cartoons.....and asserted that: "We are on the right track" (See International Herald Tribune, February 10, 2006)

While I mourn for the loss of life and regret the acts of violence perpetrated against the Danish and Norwegian legations in the Muslim world, I feel that because of the West's hegemonistic assumptions and euro-centric attitudes, most people in Europe are rather insensitive to other cultures and civilisations. A false superiority complex is so ingrained in them that they do not even feel the need to acquire a little more knowledge about the world outside Europe and North America except perhaps the bare minimum, which is often slanted. Monotheism is one of the fundamental tenets of Islam. In the seventh century, Arabia was populated by a number of warring tribes and clans. They worshipped a variety of different gods. Idolatry was common and the country was full of pagan shrines. Prophet Muhammad unified all these warring nations into one single nation under the principle that there is a supreme being called Allah, who is omnipresent and omniscient and "there is no god but God". The existing idols were destroyed. In order to ensure that the Muslims did not revert to idolatry, images of all prophets including that of Prophet Muhammad was prohibited. After so many centuries, that prohibition still remains in effect. That is why most Muslims feel very strongly about this issue.

These are politically sensitive times for Europe. Because of globalisation and the West's colonial past, Europe has now become a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious continent. Europe must accept the fact that there are more than 25 million Muslims who live in this continent and that they are not going to disappear. Therefore, the media and the governments have a special responsibility to be knowledgeable about other cultures, ethnic groups and religions. Mr. Rasmussen's behaviour in this crisis has been lamentable. He has behaved as a fundamentalist zealot, who is firmly convinced that he is in possession of the absolute truth. This, in my opinion, is not in conformity with the best European tradition of enlightened thinking. It is difficult for me to understand how taking a cup of coffee with eleven aggrieved ambassadors would have compromised his so-called democratic principles. The media and the government cannot afford to be self-righteous and indulge in waving their brave democratic credentials at every opportunity to justify their actions or inactions. Democracy also means respect for the rights of the minorities. They should be aware of different sensitivities. Freedom of expression is, no doubt, cherished by every human being, no matter whether he is a Christian, a Muslim or a Hindu. But every right has its limits. One's right to exercise freedom of expression ends where it violates the freedom of others. If one is not careful, freedom of speech can easily turn into hate speech.

The West's colonial aggressions in Muslim countries for the last three centuries, its unconditional support for Israel, its insensitivity to the prolonged suffering of the Palestinians, its double standards on the issue of nuclear weapons and more recently its efforts to control the oil resources of Muslim countries through massive military interventions and regime changes etc. have created a sense of frustration, anger and humiliation among the Muslims all over the world. They see the so-called democratic values of the West as an exercise in hypocrisy. All this resentment is naturally projected into the Muslims of Europe. It is against this backdrop that one must examine the publication of the caricatures and the subsequent Muslim reaction. One should never forget the ignominious days of recent European history, when under a democratically elected government, anti-Semitic caricatures fed the Holocaust. Today, the Europeans and the Americans take extreme care not to offend the sensitivities of the Jews. Is it that difficult to extend the same consideration to the Muslims as well?



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FOR those of us, who love adventure movies and fairy tales, Denmark has always occupied a special place in our hearts for its being the land of the Vikings and, of course, that of Hans Christian Andersen. In recent times, it became famous for its civilised lifestyle, tolerant social habits, high standard living and generous social benefits. From an ethnic point of view, until the 1960s, it was a remarkably homogeneous society. True, there were small communities of North Europeans and Jews, but they more or less belonged to the same culture. Things started to change in the sixties when rapid economic expansion forced the Danish government to invite guest workers from countries like Turkey, Bosnia (then part of Yugoslavia), Pakistan, Iran, etc. who belonged to a different culture. But the government and the society, in general, were tolerant towards the immigrants because they were needed to sustain the country's economic growth. They also hoped that the guest workers would eventually leave. But they did not. Even then, until 2001, the relationship between the host community and the immigrants were, on the whole, peaceful.

The 2001 election changed all that. A coalition of conservative parties with a strong anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic bias

came to power. Since then a series of xenophobic measures have been taken by the government to make the Muslims feel unwelcome in Denmark. The Danish participation in the American invasion of Iraq and deployment of troops in Afghanistan did not please the Danish Muslims. Recent public statements by Danish leaders -- some of them quite important in the political hierarchy -- have not only shown their ingrained arrogance but also their contempt for Islam and the Muslims. Some of them have gone so far as to describe Islam and the Muslims as "cancerous tumours", which in any civilised country would be considered as hate speech.

It was in this politically tense climate that in September, 2005, a conservative newspaper called Jyllands Post published a series of cartoons mercilessly lampooning Prophet Muhammad which angered the Danish Muslims further. One of the cartoons showed Prophet Muhammad wearing a bomb-shaped turban with the fuse burning. Another showed him complaining about the shortage of virgins in heaven to an impatient line of suicide bombers. These cartoons are not only offensive to hundreds of millions of Muslims around the world but also unnecessarily provocative. With a view to lowering the tension, the representatives of the Islamic community in Denmark first collected 17, 000 signatures and talked to the paper but could not get any satisfactory response. Instead, it accused the Muslims of being "undemocratic and intolerant". Later, to show their concern over the deteriorating situation, ambassadors from eleven Muslim countries tried to have an audience with Mr. Rasmussen, the Danish prime minister. They were snubbed by him. The prime