

# Muslim versus Muslim

It is high time that Muslims around the globe must do some serious soul-searching. We simply must realize that humanism and Islam go hand in hand. We must realize that vandalizing other peoples' faiths and beliefs is disserving our cause and the cause of Islam. We must realize that if our hearts and minds are not free and clean, mere performing of the rituals of saying prayers and reciting the holy book regularly may not take us far, neither here nor in the world hereafter.

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

TODAY Muslims of the world are fragmented and confused, as a community it has become highly controversial and even hated by the rest of the world community, particularly the people of the developed west. It is often said that this is the fallout of the erroneous, unjust and high-handed policies of some of the rich and powerful countries of Europe and America towards the Muslims. Admittedly, there is some truth in that, but even if one were to accept that logic, it must be said that not all is well with us, either.

We have become too loud, too impatient, devoured by anger, away from the core spirit of Islam. We are too busy with the outer shell and the rituals of Islam and not its inner message and spirit. Instead

of seeking knowledge from lands as far as China we are stuck with the madrassahs whose capacity for imparting knowledge, on Islam or otherwise, is extremely narrow and limited. We are highly intolerant of people belonging to other faiths, beliefs and religions. We are locked in violent sectarian conflicts between the Shias and the Sunnis, between the Wahabis and other schools of thought, between religion and politics, so on and so forth.

We suffer from the psyche that once born as

Muslims we have the right to view ourselves as people of superior calling and certainly Allah's favourites. We are too loud and sure of the "dictates" on Jihad, but always shy away from talking about, analyzing or even bringing out in the open the many degrad-

ing aspects of our life and living today, which are contra to and have been rejected by Islam.

I am yet to come across any Muslim scholar or authority in Islam talking in public forums or the media as to how Islam seriously condemns indulgences in material comforts and acquisitions, how that cardinal principle of our religion is shamelessly violated by a large section of the Muslims living in the oil-rich countries, with Saudi Arabia leading the way. Our Prophet Muhammad (SM) himself led a life of austerity and advised his followers to follow the "middle path." Today, the champions and defenders of Islam talk of brotherhood, and yet the gap between the rich and the poor is widening between Muslims across the world.

They say that Islam is a religion of peace and yet the conflicts

between Muslims in Algeria, Egypt, Pakistan and elsewhere are not only severe but also downright deplorable. I am yet to come across any country or society where such brutal and indiscriminate killings are carried out inside the mosques as in Pakistan in the name of religion.

It is indeed unfortunate that the propagators and the scholars of Islam, one of the fastest growing religions of the world, are yet to fix its parameters and focus it in its right perspective in today's changing world. Admittedly, Muslims are being intimidated, harassed and wronged in every possible way all over the world, yet they cannot deny that they too are to blame.

One also has to consider the fact that nowhere in the world exists such pronounced conflicts and violence in the name of religion as

it does in most Muslim dominated countries. We have confined Islam within the four walls of the mosques and mazars, the various tariqas as propagated by pirs and saints. We have indeed used and abused our religion in all conceivable ways and have progressively played into the hands of our adversaries.

There may be more Muslims congregating in mosques and more people reading extensive literature on Islam available due to development of information technology, but are we in the process becoming better Muslims than before? I do not think so. We have drained out and are systematically sidelining and ignoring some of the high moral, ethical and social values as embodied in our great religion: compassion, tolerance, forgiveness, kindness, generosity, etc. To many of us, it is more important to donate to a mosque than help a poor cancer patient on his or her deathbed. To us a mausoleum for the dead (against the very spirit of Islam) has become more important than building a hospital for the sick and the living.

Take a look at some of the major Muslim countries with longstand-

ing legacy and heritage in the Islamic world:

Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Emirates and many more that are all governed by authoritarian rulers and kings, a system that has no place in Islam.

Let us not forget we also bear the burden of this legacy where two of the major Muslim countries namely Iraq and Iran fought one of the most bitter wars of modern times lasting a decade.

Just consider this: in over four decades two of the main bodies representing the Muslims of the world namely the OIC and the Arab League could not reach a consensus on the Palestine issue, such is the deplorable state of our unity and brotherhood. They often talk about the Muslim Ummah; I for one have my doubts.

If one were to be truthful and honest one cannot but be horrified at the way the protector of the holy mosque and the Kaaba is governing its people and upholding the holiest of symbols and landmarks of Islamic heritage and history. It was most degrading to see that after the death of its last ruler, how people began to congregate at the

palace and elsewhere to have a glimpse of the new ruler and have the opportunity of kissing his palm as a mark of allegiance, a practice which is tantamount to worshipping human beings, strictly forbidden in Islam. While the dead king is buried in an unmarked grave true to the Islamic tradition, the living return to the gilt-edged palaces to continue living a life of luxury and riches of unprecedented proportions.

Here in this very country our Muslim brethren raise the costs of essentials particularly during the Ramadan and the Eid festivals causing misery to millions. The life we live has very little conformity with the laid down Islamic code of conduct. While a handful of people are living in luxury, staying in houses comparable to a palace, millions of his Muslim brethren go hungry day after day.

Come Ramadan, many of our lawmakers and a section of our high profile elites get busy holding expensive "Ifar Parties" aimed at having a get-together of like-minded people engaging themselves in all sorts of discussions and negotiations on all issues under the

sun, political or otherwise. After all, they could not do it any other way, since the "sanctity" of the holy month of Ramadan has to be maintained during the day, right through sunset. Incidentally, the costs of such expensive and extended parties are met either from the so-called party funds or "other sources."

These very people are also often seen going to the holy land to perform Hajj every year with the motive of "confirming their position as good Muslims" and being "holier than thou."

It is high time that Muslims around the globe must do some serious soul-searching. We simply must realize that humanism and Islam go hand in hand. We must realize that vandalizing other peoples' faiths and beliefs is disserving our cause and the cause of Islam. We must realize that if our hearts and minds are not free and clean, mere performing of the rituals of saying prayers and reciting the holy book regularly may not take us far, neither here nor in the world hereafter.

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# McKinnon's diplomacy of plain truths

McKinnon deserves appreciation for telling the plain truth that the solution to any dispute among the major political players of the country is in the hands of its political leaderships. It was nice to hear from him that it is not the business of any outsider to meddle into domestic political matters of any country. On reforms of the CTG system, he made a subtle comment saying, "I think every system can be improved." Without making any commitment as regards reforms of CTG, which is unique in the world, he said there is scope for its improvement.

NURUL HUDA

COMMONWEALTH Secretary General Donald McKinnon has recently been in Dhaka, as it appears, to mediate between the BNP-led ruling alliance and AL-led opposition combine so that they shun the path of confrontational politics and cooperate with each other in holding the country's crucial general elections early next year with participation of all political parties.

Both the camps are also required to extend their hands of cooperation to the Caretaker Government (CTG) as well as the Election Commission in conducting free, fair and credible polls equally acceptable to both the winners and the losers.

McKinnon told newsmen on February 17 prior to his departure concluding his two-day visit, "The best solution to the problems should come from the political leaderships here."

This observation came from the Commonwealth Secretariat top boss in response to a question whether he would consider sending any emissary from his organisation like Sir Stephen Ninian, who had been here in 1995, to mediate between the government and the opposition parties to resolve pre-election tangles.

Incidentally, during that time BNP was in power and the AL was in the opposition. Despite repeated Commonwealth mediation political parties failed to reach any understanding. As a result the elections of February 1996 were held without participation of major opposition political parties, which boycotted the polls sticking to the demand for introduction of CTG as a precondition for their participation.

McKinnon deserves appreciation for telling the plain truth that the solution to any dispute among the major political players of the country, is in the hands of its political leaderships. It was nice to hear from him that it is not the business of any outsider to meddle into domestic political matters of any country. Regarding Awami League's returning to parliament, he said, "They (AL) can get maximum attention from parliament where they can address the issues they want."

On reforms of the CTG system, he made a subtle comment saying, "I think every system can be

improved." Without making any commitment as regards reforms of CTG, which is unique in the world, he said there is scope for its improvement.

Responding to differences between the country's two major political parties, he said, "It may be difficult to reduce differences, but I hope after the elections, no matter who comes to power, political parties would be able to reduce their differences and work together because the challenges before Bangladesh are enormous."

This observation is quite significant as there is element of apprehension whether the political leadership would be able to work together taking the outcome of the election results sportingly.

McKinnon had meetings with Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina and some other political leaders. He could read the minds of those with whom he had interactions. The ruling BNP has apparently turned down AL's reforms proposals of CTG and Election Commission. AL's demands also include removal of Chief Election Commissioner and two other newly appointed Election Commissioners questioning their neutrality. It is, however, known to all that removal of Election Commissioners is almost impossible unless they voluntarily quit. Thus McKinnon's apprehension has a strong basis.

It was, however, made clear in plain language that the Commonwealth Secretariat would respond positively if and when invited. Both the ruling alliance and the mainstream opposition have showed interests in welcoming election observers from the Commonwealth without inviting them any mediating role into the country's political matters.

There is nothing to oppose visits of polls observers from the European Union (EU), SAARC, Commonwealth Secretariat or any other forum like National Democratic Institute (NDI) of the USA during the elections to monitor the holding of free, fair and credible polls. But neither any self-respecting person could, welcome any outsider (whether from the EU, Commonwealth or any other organisation) to get involved in the internal matters of the country.

Bangladesh has already earned



Commonwealth Secretary General Donald McKinnon

wide acclamation holding free and fair general elections under the CTG thrice. But every time the losers tried to find some flaws in the polls as they still lack the culture of accepting defeat sportingly, which can be attributed to lack of democratic culture in our political parties. The matter will become clearer if the functioning of the major political parties and the way the leadership is chosen is examined. In most cases the decision of electing leaders at different tiers is left to the party top bosses instead of following the democratic norms.

McKinnon made a very clever observation saying, "We work quietly where we are invited, welcomed and encouraged by the governments. I am not aware of any current invitation in any significant mediation." He has indicated by this remark that his organisation has not yet received any invitation to mediate in domestic matters.

It remains unclear why Bangladesh would invite others to mediate in its internal political conflicts or confrontation. Is there any dearth of knowledgeable people in the country in any field that outsiders need to be invited?

The reply is in the negative as Dhaka has rather been sending its people including professionals, to different countries, including some of the developed countries of the world. They have been significantly contributing to the advancement of the economies where they work. A sizeable number of the country's troops have been rendering laudable services in UN peace-keeping missions in trouble-torn

African countries.

In this backdrop it is not understandable how the question is raised as regards inviting the Commonwealth or European Union to send their emissaries for seeking their help in finding solution to the country's domestic conflicts. The political leaderships of the country are there to resolve the dispute or conflicts, if any among them. The return of the AL to the parliament is seen with optimism regarding the future of the country's parliamentary practices. It is hoped that they would use the parliament as the forum for placing their demands.

The AL should bring issues like reforms of the Election Commission and that of the reforms of the existing CTG provisions to the parliament as per the Rules of Procedure. If required, they can hold behind the door parleys with their colleagues in the ruling alliance for winning their support in the passage of their proposals.

Parliament should get the importance it deserves in any democratic system of government to resolve any conflict between the treasury bench and the opposition. It is the collective responsibility of the major political parties to make parliament the platform for all debates and discussions of all issues of national importance as they had played their part in switching over to parliamentary system of democracy following the 1991 elections.

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# Top UN seat likely to go to Asia

While some reports say the United States is showing some resistance, government officials in South Korea explained that the United States was referring to the need for a general reform of the United Nations rather than doing away with the regional rotation. The first and second secretary generals of the United Nations came from Europe, the third from Asia, the fourth from Europe, the fifth from South America and the sixth and seventh from Africa. According to the UN charter, the UN Security Council nominates a candidate, who will face an approval vote at the General Assembly.

LEE JOO HEE The Korea Herald, ANN

THE race to become the next United Nations secretary general moved into high gear on February 14 after South Korea's Foreign Minister Ban Ki Moon officially announced his bid for the post. Incumbent Kofi Annan from Ghana will step down in December this year after two terms in office.

The selection process is visibly different from other elections, with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council holding a veto over the appointment. Based on the tradition of regional rotation, observers and sources say the next appointment is most likely to come from Asia. Annan said during a press conference in December last year, "On the question of the next secretary general, I think it is generally accepted among the membership that it is Asia's turn."

While some reports say the United States is showing some resistance, government officials in South Korea explained that the United States was referring to the need for a general reform of the United Nations rather than doing away with the regional rotation.

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With the five members -- the United States, Britain, China, Russia and France -- holding veto power, a candidate is considered a shoo-in if he or she manages to get their nomination.

There has never been a case where a nominee supported by all five members was rejected at the general assembly, sources said. The nomination process is undisclosed and is conducted by voting until none of the permanent members object. Sources said there are now rising calls from countries such as from Canada for the voting process to become more transparent and with less influence from the five permanent members.

Among the top contenders lining up against Ban Ki Moon are: UN insider Jayanta Dhanapala of Sri Lanka; businessman turned politician Surakiat Sathirathai of Thailand; political activist Jose Ramos Horta of East Timor; Polish

President Aleksander Kwasniewski; and Latvian President Vaira Vike Frieberga, who, if selected, would be the first female secretary general in its 60-year history.

A government official in South Korea said it is still unclear whether the nomination process will begin sometime between May and June or between August and September. The United States reportedly prefer the selection to take place earlier to allow more preparation time for the next secretary general, while France believes an early election may undermine the ability of Annan to act decisively during his remaining months in office.

To questions on the possibility of Ban Ki Moon winning the nomination, South Korean government officials remained cautious. Although some may raise the objection that a candidate should not come from a country that is still technically at war, the officials said such "logic" would only work in a Cold War era environment.

The sensitive issue of North Korea's nuclear ambitions is also being raised as a possible stumbling block. However officials say it is unlikely to influence the bid saying the world understands that all relevant countries are committed to resolving the standoff in a peaceful manner within the six-nation framework.

South Korea is also a signature case of a success by the United Nations in assisting a war stricken country emerge as democratised economic power, making it a good candidate to provide the next secretary general.

Korea joined the United Nations in 1991. It is now the 11th largest financial supporter and 10th largest peacekeeping operation financier of the UN member states. The government said by nominating Ban Ki Moon as the next secretary general, Korea will achieve a higher international status as well as enhance the nation's international position in diplomacy as a middle power.

Officials say the government is planning a low-key campaign by helping Ban Ki Moon make as many direct contacts with his counterparts of major member countries. Ban Ki Moon is likely to remain foreign minister for the time being although such a decision is up for the president to make, the officials said. They also explained that all seven former secretary-generals kept their jobs until their appointment.

The more the candidate meets



South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki Moon

representatives of other UN members, the better understanding they would have of each other, which would be an effective way for Ban Ki Moon to convince them of his suitability for the post. A possible negative effect is that Ban Ki Moon will still have to speak for the Korean government as its foreign minister rather than as a candidate for the UN post.

The five permanent member countries to the Security Council cannot nominate one of their own nationals to the post and the seat usually goes to a candidate from a mid-sized country.

The job of UN secretary general is defined as a "chief administrative officer" and is so intricate and politically sensitive that the incumbent is faced with the dilemma of having to lead 191 member countries in a "balanced way" while being stuck between the omnipotent power of the permanent five, the UN bureaucracy, and rising new powers.

The UN secretary general is entitled to negotiate with all affiliated councils and organisations and mediate for the prevention of conflict by using his "good offices" and executing "quiet diplomacy."

The United Nations is currently undergoing major reform and

challenges ahead including inter state and internal conflict in such regions as the Middle East, Southwest Africa and Northeast Asia as well as rising criticism against the effectiveness of peace-keeping operations.

Also under the purview of the UN are the problems of famine, epidemics and environment issues, as well as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism and organised crime.

Korea supports an expansion of participation by middle-sized countries and more balanced power in the decision-making processes of the United Nations.

It also backs the efforts achieve the Millennium Development Goals to fight famine, poverty, and bridge the information gap, but is more cautious on human rights issues due to the sensitive relations with North Korea.

Ban Ki Moon said in an article contributed to *The Korea Herald* earlier that, "We will also continue contributing to the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Iraq and Afghanistan as we are well aware that development is indispensable to ensure human security."

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# Pay and the price

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MOTIVATING power of pay and emoluments is universal insofar as salaried employees are concerned whether public or private. Governments in Bangladesh have never been able to provide the public servants with a satisfactory salary. The gap between the highest and the lowest pay is also high. The high officials, of course, deserve better remunerations but the plight of the lower level employees also calls for special attention. Interestingly, however, the public and private sector pay structure poles apart which further hurts the morale of the government employees.

While the government's sincerity to provide the government employees with an attractive salary remains to be studied, politics with the pay, especially with the national pay scale is very popular with the governments in Bangladesh. The governments are always eager

to reap benefits out of a pay revision no matter how much benefit it brings for the government employees. That's why governments in Bangladesh declare a new pay commission well before its real plan to declare a new pay scale. What is more, publicity is either ensured or unleashed. Speculations get increasingly intensified and the government employees get literally carried away.

The publicity on the part of the government has, however, dual objectives. One is to win the government employees' support and sympathy and another one is to provide the businessmen with a launching pad to go for a mad drive. Thus, the new pay scale turns rather anticlimactic as the wily businessmen increase the prices of commodities and essentials time and again even before the formal declaration of a new pay scale. Later on, they increase prices by phases as well since pay scale is usually implemented in phases in Bangladesh.

Consequently, the real value of pay increase gets defeated and the new pay scale fails to produce tangible betterment.

The present government has declared the 6th pay scale towards the end of the 4th year of its tenure though the pay commission was formed much ago. As noted above, new pay scale improves the living conditions little and little exception is there consequent upon the latest pay scale. There are serious allegations that in the cases of senior and midlevel employees, the salary provided by the government is spent up in just first 10 days of a month and the lower level ones virtually live from hand to mouth all the year round. But, the basic necessities are to be fulfilled somehow. Thus, service orientation makes way for corruption. This is not to mean that a handsome salary by itself a guarantee of honesty, rather it is believed to work as a potent disincentive against corruption.

Corruption is poised to mar all our achievements pushing the national image to a precipice. This avoidable malady is eating into the vitals of this country. Millions of dollars is being misappropriated annually on account of corruption depriving the national exchequer and disallowing the government from providing an attractive salary package to the government employees. It is in fact a vicious circle that plagues the corrupt-ridden countries, not least Bangladesh. Low revenue leads to low salary and low salary leads inevitably to widespread corruption. Many honest government employees thus languish in hardships and find things really difficult to cope with in this land of regular and drastic price hike.

However, many government employees in collusion with the political bosses are taking full advantage of their low salary "excuse" and indulging in wanton official corruption and embezzlement of money. It's a common knowl-

edge in Bangladesh that a good number of the government employees earn a really substantial amount through corruption and that their salary looks rather pale and tiny in comparison to their ill-begotten income. Frankly speaking, such officials can happily relinquish their salary and give that away to charity. However, our mightily well-off lawmakers could have been trendsetters in this regard. Sorry! We are paying them -- despite frequent increases -- nothing as compared to their gigantic service (!) and they need it very badly.

Billions of foreign aid has traveled into the country after independence and who doesn't know that its lion share is being distributed among corrupt politicians, dishonest bureaucrats and peripheral beneficiaries. Five years ago, the world Bank estimated that the GNP of Bangladesh would be significantly increased and per capita income would be double annually if corruption could be eliminated and

Bangladesh could very well advance into the level of mid-income countries rather than be condemned to the ranks of the lowest group. But who cares?

The bottom line is that: to keep the government employees' composure undisturbed, they are to be provided with a competitive salary. If you fail -- rather sarcastically speaking -- pay the price and pay it heavily.

The crooked ones in union with the greedy and needy (!) political incumbents will not only eat up whatever comes their way but ensure optimum use of their guiles to extort more and more from whatever sources. How much they need is not that important because "the more, the merrier" is their motto. Moreover, Bangladesh's supremacy in the realm of "world corruption" is to be maintained.

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