

The language of protest in the Islamic world

What is the way out? Reformist Islamic scholars around the world are asking for a serious attempt at "ijtihad" -- reasoned struggle and rethinking -- within Islam to seek answers to the problems facing the contemporary world. We need a liberal society that think rationally and interacts with the rest of the world peacefully. Peaceful protests are possible only where democratic culture is nurtured. Until that happens, violence will be the only language of protest in the Islamic world.

AIR CDRE ISHFAQ ILAHI
CHOUDHURY (RETD)

THE publication of a series of cartoons of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in a little known Danish newspaper in September last year has snowballed into outburst of protest from the Muslim community the world over. While the reaction of the vast majority of the Muslims to this despicable event has been one of utter disgust and contempt, they are not on the centre stage. Their peaceful protests do not get the media attention. What the world is watching is the burning down of western embassies and business houses by angry demonstrators.

In many countries, extremist elements of the society are trying to create a law and order situation under the cover of religious fervour. In Iraq, Nigeria and Pakistan, the minority Christians have been attacked and killed and their churches have been burnt down. This was despite the fact that the Churches of all denominations have roundly criticised the cartoon episode. In Bangladesh too, where the Christians are a small, docile minority, a Church in a rural community was attacked. To someone who is not a Muslim, these events and images would only confirm their apprehension that the Muslim

community is prone to violence and anarchy. These highly visible acts would further alienate the rest of the world from Islam and the Muslims.

The chain of events over the last few years is threatening to widen the gap between Islamic world and the rest. Many are arguing that Prof. Samuel P. Huntington was right, after all, when in his seminal paper "The Clash of Civilizations" (Foreign Affairs, Summer 1993) the Professor predicted: "The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future. Conflict between civilizations will be the latest phase in the evolution of conflict in the modern world."

While there were serious objections at that time from the intellectuals and politicians on all sides against such a dire and simplistic conclusion, it now appears that we are indeed heading for such an Armageddon. To many on both sides of the civilizational divide, the clash between Islam and the West is already "on."

While we condemn in the strongest terms the demeaning act of publishing the cartoons, we shall have to remember that acts of violence only bolster the hands of those who want to

prove that Islam, as a religion, is violent and dysfunctional in the 21st century. This issue is especially critical for Bangladesh. Our international image is already tarnished due to the activities of religious extremists of various hues. The spate of bombings by JMB, an underground pseudo-religious terrorist organisation, has left an indelible mark on the national psyche.

Any act of violence on western life or property will further erode our international standing. We have, over the years, built up a strong economic and political relationship with the West that is of vital interest to our continued growth and prosperity. Especially, the government and the people of Denmark have been a development partner of Bangladesh since its birth. I remember the first RO-RO ferries that arrived from Denmark soon after the Liberation in 1971, and those played vital role in restoring our war-damaged surface communication systems.

Denmark is one of those few developed countries that had been spending 1 percent or more of its GDP on foreign aid. Although its aid package is not as large as those of Japan or the US, it is aimed at addressing core issues of poverty alleviation and job creation thus ensuring

improved standard of living in the recipient country. DANIDA, the Danish aid agency, is a name synonymous with successful rural development, poverty alleviation, irrigation, river training projects that had benefited millions in Bangladesh. Danish investment, although small, has created new jobs and opened up new avenues of growth. We value our friendship with Denmark and an incident of sheer irresponsibility by a section of the press should not hurt the relationship between the two states and their people.

While the saner elements in the society try to defuse and contain the situation, it is also important for us to do some serious soul-searching. We need to ask questions as to why we opt for violence so often, so quick. Why we cannot argue peacefully and logically in a manner that would be emulated by others?

It is interesting to note that although the cartoons were printed in September 2005, there was hardly any reaction till January 2006. Just when people were accusing the Saudi and Egyptian governments for their gross failures in the Mina Stampede and the Red Sea Ferry disaster, respectively, the cartoon incident came as a respite for both. The media shifted its focus from the thousands who



died needlessly to the cartoons that hardly anybody had seen.

It has become a daily routine in various Muslim countries for the demonstrators to engage in violent confrontation with the security forces, ending up with few deaths and extensive damage to public and private properties. To top it all, a religious leader in Pakistan declared a bounty on the heads of the cartoon artists. Incidents of this nature only strengthen those who claim that there is a violent streak in Islam.

Take the case of Amina Lawal of northern Nigeria, who gave birth to a child outside marriage in 2002. Sharia court ordered her to be stoned to death for adultery and the punishment would be carried out only after the child has grown out of suckling. This verdict was turned down by the appeals court after a world-wide outrage on this issue. Surprisingly, there was neither a street protest in support of the victim nor a Muslim lawyer of international repute available to defend her. Recently a minor girl named Nazneen has been ordered to be hanged by the Islamic court in Iran for allegedly killing a male assailant. There is a world-wide campaign launched to save the little girl's life. Meanwhile,

stoning to death, amputation of limbs, and beheading in public goes on in many Muslim countries at a time when the rest of the world is challenging and re-evaluating the whole concept of crime and punishment.

Over the last few years, a human tragedy, many times larger than Iraq or Palestine, has been going on in Western Sudan's Darfur region. Hundreds of thousands have been killed, thousands of women have been raped, and millions have been made homeless and facing starvation and death -- all because the victims are black Muslims, former slaves of Arab masters. Sudanese militia of Arab descent were systematically carrying out an ethnic cleansing unknown to the outside world until BBC, CNN and others got the news and flashed it to the world.

What has been the reaction of the Islamic world? Benign neglect -- to say the least! The OIC proved to be impotent to deal with the situation. The UN had to step in with peacekeepers. The UN, along with the western relief agencies, such as Oxfam, is feeding the starving Muslims in Sudanese camps. In Iraq and Pakistan, the Shias and Sunnis are killing each other in the hundreds by bombing each

other's mosques, schools, and even funeral prayers. There is an on-going campaign in Bangladesh to declare the Ahmadiyya community as non-Muslims. The Ahmadiyyas are being socially ostracised and often physically abused. What are the cumulative effects of all these?

Today, the outlook for the Islamic world is bleaker than ever before. As the antagonism between the Islamic world and the rest increases, the access to high-tech knowledge will be shut on our face. Investment and technical cooperation from the West as well as East might decline. Migration, whether in search of job or education, might be increasingly difficult for the Muslims. Of all the major religious communities of the world, the Muslims are the poorest, most backward, and least educated, and consequently least prepared to face the challenges of the 21st century. Among the emerging powers in the world, there is not a single Muslim majority state. Along with the US and EU, the destiny of the 21st century will be shaped by countries such as Russia, China, India, and Japan. Where will the Islamic world be? Will it be in the abyss of violence and anarchy, ignorance and backwardness?

Shall we be the pariah shunned by the rest of the world? The onus is on the educated and enlightened Muslims to turn the tide.

Who would be the beneficiaries if the Muslims remain backward? The beneficiaries would be the despotic rulers and the tradition-bound clergy. The two would rather keep the populace backward so that they would be easier to control, manipulate, and exploit. Under tight socio-political and theological control, liberal, modern thoughts are throttled, and conservative, obscurantist ideas are patronized. Democratic traditions cannot flourish under such conditions.

What is the way out? Reformist Islamic scholars around the world are asking for a serious attempt at "ijtihad" -- reasoned struggle and rethinking -- within Islam to seek answers to the problems facing the contemporary world. We need a liberal society that think rationally and interacts with the rest of the world peacefully. Peaceful protests are possible only where democratic culture is nurtured. Until that happens, violence will be the only language of protest in the Islamic world.

The author is Registrar, The University of Asia Pacific, Dhaka.

The risk of bird flu in live chicken markets

In the next six months, the government needs to completely phase out the sale of live chicken in Dhaka, Sylhet, and Chittagong. This may seem like a major undertaking, but it is far easier to accomplish than getting rid of cycle rickshaws. There are only a few thousand wholesalers and retailers who control the live chicken business, as opposed to lakhs of rickshaw-wallahs. Any inconvenience now is nothing compared to the huge public health risk we will face from live poultry markets when bird flu finally hits us.

ZEESHAN HASAN

NOW that bird flu is in India, we have to admit that an outbreak in Bangladesh has become very likely. Sooner or later, through movement of wild birds or smuggled poultry, the infection will cross our extremely porous border. The only question is when that will happen. Even if the Indians manage to control the current outbreak in Maharashtra, there is still the prospect of millions of migratory birds returning from China and Central Asia in September. As recent outbreaks in European countries has confirmed, migratory birds have indeed become carriers of the virus. So it is essential for the government to start planning how to lessen the damage a bird flu outbreak will inflict.

Firstly, we should bear in mind that bird flu is primarily a disease of chickens, not of humans. While the virus has the potential to mutate into a form that will easily spread from human to human, the low number of human infections in India and elsewhere indicates that has not happened yet. It is still comparatively difficult for people to become sick. Usually, the people who are infected are poultry farm workers and shopkeepers who sell live poultry, since these people who are always in contact with live birds. It is much less likely that consumers will become infected, since they have far less contact with live birds. Research has found that cooking rapidly

kills the virus, so there is no danger to the consumer from eating cooked chicken.

For most people, then, the point of vulnerability is not in the home, but in the market. All over Bangladesh, most of the chicken sold is live. This represents the greatest danger to the country in terms of spreading bird flu. Even if consumers ask shopkeepers to dress the chicken before bringing it home, just walking into a market full of live chickens during an outbreak could expose them to infection. The virus is spread through droppings, traces of which will always be on the ground in an unsanitary live market. So people leaving a live chicken market are likely to carry the virus on their footwear. The density of population in major cities like Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet means that potentially tens of millions of people could be exposed to bird flu through live chicken markets in these cities.

There is only one way to prevent this. We have about six months in which to act between now and September, which is when the real threat from migratory birds will appear. In the next six months, the government needs to completely phase out the sale of live chicken in Dhaka, Sylhet, and Chittagong. This may seem like a major undertaking, but it is far easier to accomplish than getting rid of cycle rickshaws. There are only a few thousand wholesalers and retailers who control the live chicken business, as opposed to lakhs of rickshaw-wallahs. The private

sector has already begun the transition away from live chicken by selling large numbers of dressed chickens to the upper and middle classes through supermarkets like Agora and Nandan. Supermarkets do their dressing in outside slaughterhouses, so no live chickens ever enters their premises; thus they will be the only safe place to buy chicken if bird flu hits. A bird flu outbreak will thus wind up being a blessing in disguise for supermarkets, as it means they will take over a much bigger chunk of the retail industry as people lose faith in the safety of the traditional kacha bazaar.

The supermarket strategy of separate slaughterhouses and dressed chicken delivery to shops is clearly the best in terms of public health. Unfortunately, by the time people catch on to this it will probably be too late; hence the need for government intervention. In Dhaka, city authorities need to immediately implement progressive zoning of chicken markets to force them to transition to dressed chicken. The transport and retail of live chicken in up-market areas like Gulshan, Banani, Baridhara, Dhanmondi, and Lalmatia must be banned. This will be comparatively easy, as these areas are already well-served by supermarkets. Similar measures should immediately be taken in the corresponding areas of Chittagong and Sylhet. The government should then declare its intention to ban all transport and retail of live chicken in Dhaka, Chittagong, and Sylhet within the

next six months. This gradual implementation will give allow chicken retailers and traders enough time to set up slaughterhouse facilities, cold transportation and in-shop refrigeration.

There will certainly be some complaints from the public as well as much protest from live chicken shopkeepers and wholesalers if this is attempted. However, these complaints and protests must be over-ruled. Shopkeepers will complain of the cost of installing refrigerators and freezers for sale of dressed chicken; but the reality is that they will probably not have to pay for it. Once the government makes a clear policy decision to gradually ban live chicken from cities, large poultry companies like Akij Group, Aftab, Brac, and Kazi Farms will have an incentive to supply refrigerators to shops in order to sell their products. The public health argument is even more compelling. The shopkeepers' move from live to dressed chicken will result in the need to set up large commercial slaughterhouses and refrigerated trucks to deliver to all these shops. These facilities and trucks will become the only means by which bird flu can be transmitted to the cities, and will be far easier to monitor for disease in the case of a bird flu outbreak. Any inconvenience now is nothing compared to the huge public health risk we will face from live poultry markets when bird flu finally hits us.

The author is director of one of the largest poultry hatcheries in Bangladesh.



IN MEMORIAM

Professor Muhammad Shamsul Huq (1910-2006) as I knew him

He was a decent man with intellectual rigour and capacity. He instilled confidence and respect among the officers. He was a tireless worker and a perfectionist. He was unfailingly polite, courteous, and a perfect gentleman. He never raised his voice, even if we made mistakes. He was calm but his demeanour registered his thoughts and feelings and we were aware of it. Professor Huq by nature believed in work backed up by written presentations. He did not approve of haphazard work. He was methodical and always wanted both sides of an issue/argument to be presented before him.

HARUN UR RASHID

NATIONAL Professor Muhammad Shamsul Huq passed away on February 23 at 5 pm at his residence in Eskaton Garden in Dhaka. He has been ill for some time and he died due to complications of old age. We all sadly mourn his loss.

He was an eminent educationist, and greatly invested his time and energy in the field of education. He was held in high regard both within and outside the country and brought prestige for the country.

He began his career as a teacher in Calcutta Islamia College in 1936. Later he switched to the inspection wing of the education department. In the mid 50s, he was Educational Attache of the Pakistan Embassy in Washington. Steadily by his sheer merit and hard work, he rose to hold the high positions of DPI, East Pakistan, and Vice Chancellor of Rajshahi and Dhaka Universities. He was Minister of Education during Pakistan time. He was also a visiting scholar at the East-West Centre in Hawaii.

In March 1977, he began a new career when President Ziaur Rahman appointed him first as an Adviser and later Minister for Foreign Affairs. He held the position until March 1982. Professor Huq was fortunate to have three successive Foreign Secretaries, namely, Tabarak Husain, Shah AMS Kibria and Humayun Rasheed Choudhury working with him during his tenure of five years.

As the Director General, South Asia & South East Asia desk of the Foreign Office (1976-79) I worked closely with Professor Huq. Later I worked with him when I became the Deputy High Commissioner in Calcutta and Ambassador of Bangladesh in Nepal. He used to call me to Dhaka very frequently for consultations.

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Professor Huq by nature believed in work backed up by written presentations. He did not approve of haphazard work. He was methodical and always wanted both sides of an issue/argument to be presented before him.

In July 1978, I accompanied him in a helicopter to Chittagong Hill Tracts to see the refugees of Myanmar who had taken shelter in Bangladesh. I became air sick in the helicopter ride and I was touched that he personally attended to my comforts during and after the trip, although it was not necessary for him to do so. There were about 200,000 refugees (Rohingyas) from Myanmar by 1978. As Foreign Minister he thought his duty to visit and speak to the refugees. Later when he returned to Dhaka he held a press conference on the condition of refugees and initiated a proposal to resolve the refugee problem with Myanmar. The repatriation commenced on August 31, 1978. In his book *Bangladesh in International Politics* (1993), he described, among others, his personal account of the issue of refugees.

During his time as Foreign Minister, he can be credited at least with two most important events in Bangladesh foreign policy.

The first one was his unique contribution to the establishment of Saarc and secondly to the successful election of Bangladesh in the UN Security Council for the year 1979-80, defeating Japan from Asian quota.

When President Zia conceived the idea of Saarc some time in

1977, it was Professor Shamsul Huq who provided the idea with intellectual content in a paper that was later circulated to all the capitals of South Asian countries.

His arguments in the paper were logical, lucid and pragmatic for the setting up of Saarc. He was one of the advocates of Saarc within the region. His tireless work on Saarc became fruitful, when in 1985 in Dhaka hosted its first Saarc Summit.

With regard to the election of the UN Security Council, he scrupulously commenced background work at least 18 months ahead in a systematic and planned way. He was very meticulous and maintained a rigorous schedule. He mobilized a team of officers in the foreign office and assigned each one of them a particular responsibility. He regularly supervised their work and contributed greatly to this work.

Bangladesh joined the UN in 1974. After Professor Huq's sustained campaign, he was truly happy to find that Bangladesh was elected as a member of the Security Council in 1978. It was a great and proud moment for Bangladesh. It was his hard work and devotion that brought such a great honour for Bangladesh in the international arena.

His other contributions are manifold, but I write of a few particular cases which come to mind. In early 1981, a hot political issue with India was the disputed ownership of Talpatty Island. He was able to contain the issue with his diplomatic negotiations with Indian leaders. It was he who again prepared a white paper (Official document) on the issue and presented it to the Parliament. This paper I believe is one of the best written presentations of Bangladesh's case for Talpatty Island and it has now become a reference material for the government.

Professor Shamsul Huq during his tenure also witnessed the successful conclusion of the 1977 Ganges Water Agreement, the first agreement between Bangladesh and India on the Ganges.

It was Professor Shamsul Huq who brought a delicate balance in Bangladesh foreign policy at the time of the Cold War. He was immensely respected in neighbouring countries for his integrity and honesty.

In May, 1979, I accompanied him to Myanmar and we had a rare private meeting with General Ne Win, the elusive leader who generally would not meet ministers. It was a two-hour exchange of views between Ne Win and Shamsul Huq. I found Professor Huq providing a rare exposition of his depth and knowledge of history of South and South East Asia to General Ne Win.

Although he immensely contributed to the nation as Foreign Minister, at his heart his love was for education. At one of the meetings with India's Prime Minister Morarji Desai, he was modest enough to introduce himself as a teacher.

From 1989 to 1991, he became one of the three persons on a UN Committee for the award of humanitarian work on behalf of a Japanese humanitarian organization. Every year he used to visit Geneva for this purpose and I again became close to him during those years. Although he was in his eighties, Professor Huq made his mark at the UN and officers at the UN used to often inquire whether the Professor was coming or not. They greatly valued his prudence and judgment.

Professor Shamsul Huq contributed to the country and I was glad of the opportunity to work with him. We offer our deep condolences to his sons, Khaled and Tariq Shams. Professor Huq's wife Yateba Huq predeceased him. We pray his soul may rest in eternal peace with Almighty Allah.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.