

# Which way to Mauritania?

Reading so far, you might have been wondering if it could happen here. You can safely put it out of your mind. You see, there are no similarities with the situation in Bangladesh. Absolutely none. We have a thriving, flourishing democracy where regimes are changed via a unique system of holding elections. These elections have all been free and fair. How do we know that? Didn't Jimmy Carter say so? Ah, you are wondering, why, if it has worked so well, do we need to amend this excellent system?

**FARID BAKHT**

**M**OST people have never heard of the West African state of Mauritania and do not want to, either. See how you feel at the end of this article. The information contained here comes from a memo written by an US ex-Ambassador and Assistant Secretary of State for Africa. Last year, the military overthrew the president after two decades of shambolic rule. He claimed he was a democrat, having won the elections in 2003. The African Union condemned the coup. So did the US State Department. However, cracks appeared in this show of unity. Representatives from the African Union were invited to talk to ordinary people in the capital. They found the coup had (apparently) widespread popular support. However, the constitution of the African Union forced it to suspend Mauritania and they intend to do so until free and fair elections are held. The Americans were in a similar predicament. US foreign aid is governed by the Foreign Assistance Act. Section 508 requires "the suspension of all US foreign aid in a country that has had a military coup against a democratic government," according to Herman J Cohen, the aforementioned ex-Ambassador.

**Guess what?** Those elections in 2003 were monitored by US democracy organisations. They did not give their seal of approval to those

elections. This meant that the US government was able to ignore Section 508 since they could claim the government had not received a democratic mandate. This enabled their military to continue their intimate relationship with Mauritania's military. Nevertheless, as champions of democracy, something had to be done. The US ambassador was recalled as a sign of displeasure at the coup. Nevertheless, the Mauritanian military had done their homework. They set up a junta of 17 senior officers. They are now running the country via a transition civilian government. The civilians come from Mauritania's civil society, namely lawyers, professionals, economists, etc. The military officers in the junta have declared that they will not run in any future election. The next one is going to be free and fair because it will be held under UN supervision, within two years. They have agreed that the previous regime's president, his family and cronies will not be harassed. All political prisoners have been released. All, that is, except for "Islamic militants." That last point perhaps gives us a clue. Had not the coup occurred, there was a perception that there would have been an Islamic takeover a few years down the road. Now it makes sense why an overstretched US military would be bothered with a small African army. The answer lies in their extensive support to

Mauritania, Mali, and Niger against the Islamic guerrillas. So, which is more important? Democracy or the War on (Islamic) Terror, now renamed as the Fifty Year Long War?

**Points to ponder**

1. The military officers were able to find civil society leaders willing to play this charade of being in power. Did they discuss this before or after the change in regime?
2. Does "transition government" sound at all like "two year caretaker government"?
3. An underlying Islamic threat seems to have sidestepped the rock-solid defence and promotion of democracy. Hmm.
4. Disaffection with the status quo and popular relief at military intervention seems to have justified events too. How do they measure this feeling and is the survey scientific? How many people did they talk to?

**Not in our backyard**

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Why are the opposition and some other friends so keen on this even if it paints the government into a corner? Why make the whole process controversial and open to boycott and doubt? Good point. I am stumped. What about the people? Are they not frustrated with the shambles? Are they not "disaffected" and willing to ditch democracy? Do not believe those scare mongering newspapers. Our people are resilient. They understand that the abnormally high price of food is only a temporary blip. You might think four years is a long time for a blip. Then again, did not a senior minister say that the arrival of the winter vegetables would bring down those prices? That must have passed me by. Since then we have been perplexed by the blockades of highways by farmers demanding supplies of fertilizer, diesel and electricity. There is no crisis, according to the cabinet. Load shedding will be solved by next summer, so why bother to surround electricity corporation offices and make such a fuss? Even the "Islamic militant" top honchos are being arrested. Are George W and C Rice watching from next door? Does that not spoil the scenario of an imminent Islamic challenge? Isn't it how amazing how they did not exist, then they did exist, and how now they are gone? I wonder when they will be back.

Farid Bakht has written his first book, Arrival or Departure: Bangladesh in Dangerous Times and spends his time between London and Dhaka.

# A glimpse of election year politics

I instantly realised how remote many "national issues" were from most of the people. Jostling among the prospective party candidates was hurting the farmers. I could see the lines of worry on their faces and the visit had convinced me that digging of this canal and many more public utility projects must be kept above inter and intra-party bickering. The four affected unions of Mirsarai upazilla comprising 50,000 people would vote for anybody who excavates the crop-saving canal for them.

**BRIG GEN JAHANGIR KABIR, NDC, PSC (RETD)**

**I**n my last visit to the countryside I could see many colourful posters of the prospective national assembly candidates. They were also lining up people for election campaign, doling out cash and kind. But even at this late stage there was a marked difference between the needs of the people and the vote-seekers' understanding. I was literally dragged by the farmers to a canal which needed immediate digging. The local BNP leaders were opposing the sitting BNP MP and backing another prospective candidate of the ruling party due to some internal feud. The sitting MP had determined not to excavate the canal which he thought could help his opponent. In absence of effective local self-government, the MPs have become virtually the chief executives of the constituencies. The last amon crop perished as the silted lower Ichakhal canal could not drain the heavy rain water away in time. After promising to write for them, I casually asked an elderly farmer, what did he think of the caretaker government? He retorted, rather impatiently: "Will the caretaker government dig the canal for us?" I instantly realised how remote many "national issues" were from most of the people. Jostling among the prospective party candidates was hurting the farmers. I could see the lines of worry on their faces and the visit had convinced me that digging of

this canal and many more public utility projects must be kept above inter and intra-party bickering. The four affected unions of Mirsarai upazilla comprising 50,000 people would vote for anybody who excavates the crop-saving canal for them. There are few days left for any major changes in our system. If changes have to come anyway, we might as well think of going back to the presidential system with bicameral legislature and independent judiciary in the American style. Without the minimum culture of patience and tolerance, the Westminster democracy is severely handicapped in Bangladesh. With a party president and with unicameral legislature, the unitary government is the worst kind of dictatorship. Concentration of power in the capital Dhaka is not the fault of the ruling alliance but the system fault of our constitution. It must be decentralised to more power centres so that politics can thrive on the banks of canals and mud roads where most of our people live. Nibbling at the edges of reform will not help. The rural people are getting increasingly disillusioned about the Dhaka-centric politics. Upazilla elections should become a national agenda and must be held within the first year of the parliamentary elections so that newly elected MPs do not have enough time to gang up against it. One vote in five years for a unicameral parliament to form a steel-framed unitary

government is not democracy — it is cheating by constitution. Both the election commission and caretaker government reforms are eyewash, at the most, beating about the bush. As the opposition do not have to raise taxes, provide services, maintain law and order, and adjust prices of essentials, they could well be very generous, harping all the time on the needs and wishes of the people. If they had been in the parliament and grilling the weaknesses of the government, the people would have got at least a trickle of a better deal. If the watchman was not on duty when the vault of the people (as they say) is looted, the watchman is also an accomplice and must be tried for the crime. Drawing pay without duty may not be illegal because the lawmakers have done it, but it is utterly immoral and tantamount to defrauding the people. First thing first, excuses can come later, they should return all the cash and kind that they have drawn for duties while absenting themselves from parliament. There have been failings of the government, some of which even the sitting ministers have gracefully accepted. But I fail to perceive how the BNP which struggled fearlessly and uncompromisingly for years to remove a military dictator, adopted parliamentary system as per wishes of the people, and finally went for the caretaker system to make the elections impartial and transparent could be compared with Hitler or Louis XIV. There are many instances

where elected government could not live up to the wishes or promises. But comparing them with despotic monarchs and ruthless dictators is unkind and distorting facts. The opposition politics remain stuck in the non-cooperation strategy of colonial days. People by now are tired of "gadi charo" (quit power) politics. Scepticism has not helped the opposition. The government and mandate is not permanent. Time has come to pronounce judgement on the performance of the government as well as the opposition. Resignation from the parliament by the opposition in the dying days may well boomerang. Most people don't know the merits and demerits of the caretaker government. Power and diesel, law and order, and price of essentials are the real politics in Bangladesh. It is not the caretaker government, but the constitution itself which needs to be redrawn to decentralize power so that the people have more say in their affairs. Prospective candidates have started visiting the electorate more frequently than during the last four years. The alliance government must be in high gear for the election and busy drafting a customary election year budget. Is there enough time left for the changes? Let the political parties and alliances make these as election issues. If people vote for them it will be a referendum which must be implemented immediately. If not, please don't call the election bad -- work on the people for another five years. For God's sake, do politics but avoid anti people hartals.

The author is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

# Unwelcome home

## A Brit-Pak-Ahmadi spends Eid in Pakistan

The experience of Pakistan, however, shows that branding the Ahmadis non-Muslim will not be enough. Each concession leads to ever greater demands. In Pakistan, appeasing the mullahs has horribly backfired. And putting the genie back into the bottle is a task that no government in Pakistan, democratic or otherwise, has managed to do. Today, not only Ahmadis but Ismailis, Christians, Hindus and even Shi'ites and Sunnis are open targets in their places of worship. Places which, in all but the most barbaric societies, are supposed to be sanctuaries. During my trip, I met a surprising number of ordinary, practicing Muslims who were genuinely ashamed of the way Ahmadis are treated. By not speaking out however, those who know better in Pakistan

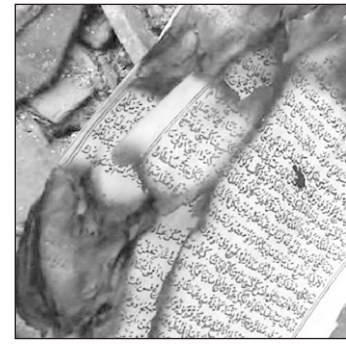
**KIRAN MALIK**

No dome, no minaret, no call to prayer, just an unmarked house in a secret location. This is Eid prayers for the Ahmadiyya Muslim community of Karachi, Pakistan. As our taxi turns the corner, my mother recognises the "place of worship" by the obvious blank space where its signboard once was. She says nothing as we drive past it, then asks the driver to drop us at the end of the road. At the gate, a man asks us who we are, where we're from, who we're related to. Satisfied, he lets us in. He is right to be suspicious. The Ahmadiyya Muslim sect -- of which I am a British Pakistani member -- was recently described as, "one of the most relentlessly persecuted communities in the history of Pakistan" by the BBC's Aamer Ahmed Khan. In 1974, following riots orchestrated by Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami party, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto caved into pressure from the Mullahs and passed a motion to declare Ahmadis non-Muslim. Ignoring warnings from prominent judges, human rights activists and academics, Bhutto argued that appeasing the Mullahs would put an end to sectarian problems. But more than 30 years on, Pakistan's Muslims are in a state of civil war. As well as the persecution of Ahmadis and recent attacks on the minority Ismaili sect, extremists from Pakistan's dominant Sunni and Shi'ite sects are intent on destroying each other. **Mosques and mullahs** As we enter the mosque, a small television in the corner plays MTA, the television channel run by the Ahmadis out of London. On it is a re-run with the Pakistani poet Obaidullah Aleem exchanging humorous couplets with the third Caliph of the Ahmadi Jamaat, Hazrat Mirza Tahir Ahmad. Although watching MTA in your own home is not forbidden under the Pakistani law, this seemingly innocuous action has led to targeted attacks on Ahmadis all over Pakistan. The Khutba is on the importance of giving charity and helping others. There is no mention of Ahmadi persecution, no demand

for rights, no cries for vengeance. At the end of the Khutba our Caliph asks us to pray for those killed in the earthquake which took place a few weeks earlier. He also asks us to remember those Ahmadis killed in an attack on an Ahmadi mosque around the same time. That's it. We say our salaams and wish Eid Mubarak to those around us. If caught, we would face a minimum of three years in prison. **Freedom of expression** During my two weeks in Pakistan this January, I come across four articles citing recent anti-Ahmadi propaganda. All report inflammatory speeches from various mullahs describing the "Qadiani problem" (Qadiani is what detractors call Ahmadis) as "the greatest problem facing Muslims today," nearly all compare Ahmadis to Jews and insist they are agents of Israel. One Mullah, not satisfied that Ahmadis are legally forbidden from calling their places of worship "mosques," from giving Azan, from voting and from calling themselves Muslim, insists on a social boycott of all remaining "Qadianis" -- "Anyone who speaks to Qadianis will be considered an agent of the Qadianis and deserves to be punished." In another speech quoted by The Herald, a local mullah insists it is a good Muslim's duty to "wipe Ahmadis off the face of Pakistan." Another allegedly tells his audience at Majlis-e-Khatm-e-Nabuwat that Ahmadis are "non-Muslims who deserved to be killed." In light of recent events, when Muslim groups in Pakistan and the world over have urged the media to consider practicing freedom of expression with responsibility it seems ironic that for Pakistan's mullahs, freedom of expression is a one-way street. Ifan Hussain, a columnist with Pakistan's Daily Times and Herald magazine, is one of the few voices maintaining pressure on the Pakistani administration to resolve the Ahmadiyya issue. He argues that Musharraf's policy of enlightened moderation is ineffective until the will to change is passed through the entire system. A system which, under Zia-ul-Haq, was progressively Islamised.

The mullahs don't agree. They see Musharraf's modernisation drive as a sinister plot to create a "Qadiani state." Their criticisms would be laughable if the repercussions were not so sinister. One rant: "Musharraf is giving the Qadianis free reign, they are saying Assalamo-Alaikum with impunity. We have evidence that they are praying in the Muslim way and many have the Kalima in their homes." In fact, according to figures published last November, 756 people have been booked for the "crime" of displaying the Kalima -- which carries the death penalty, 404 for "posing as Muslims," and 27 for celebrating the Ahmadiyya Centenary in 1989. More than 1,300 others have been charged under similar provisions of this law -- all facing punishment ranging from three years and a fine to life imprisonment or the death penalty. In one case, Nazir Ahmad Khoso, a seventeen-year-old Ahmadi boy from Sindh, was charged with "injuring the religious feelings of Muslims," and other related blasphemy charges and sentenced to 118 years in prison. And the entire population -- 35,000 people -- of Rabwah, a town built by the Ahmadis -- was charged under "PPC 298-C" in 1989. The crime -- having inscribed the Kalima Tayyaba and other Quranic verses on their graves, buildings, offices of the community, places of worship, and business centres. They were also charged with having said Assalamo-Alaikum to Muslims, for having recited the Kalima Tayyaba, and for having repeatedly indulged in similar Islamic activities. Of course, I haven't researched any of this as I make my way to Rabwah -- the centre of the Ahmadi community in Pakistan. **Hours and bureaucrats** On the face of things, Rabwah is an ordinary town. Unusually clean and well-ordered compared to its surrounding area perhaps, but ordinary in every other way. Flanked on one side by the river Chenab, it is built on land purchased by contributions from the community's faithful. But Ahmadis have not even been able to find peace here. Local government bodies, from which Ahmadis are excluded, have

maintained an incessant campaign of harassment against the townspeople. In 1985, eleven years after declaring Ahmadis non-Muslim, the Punjab Assembly ruled that the town be declared an open town, and forcibly changed the name to Chenab Nagar. Prior to this, in 1976, local mullahs took over Ahmadi-owned land on the eastern part of Rabwah as police and local government forces looked on. Ahmadis petitioned the Lahore High Court, and, unusually, the court upheld the Ahmadis rights to the land. Despite this, numerous mullahs and their acolytes are still in illegal occupation of the land and have established a mosque, a seminary, and a "Muslim Colony" there -- with government support. "Muslim Colony" is flourishing and the various Mosques set up in it take every opportunity to use their loudspeakers to spew hatred filled sermons at their "Qadiani" neighbours. Ahmadis are, of course, legally prevented from using loudspeakers in their own "place of worship." And during my trip, the District Housing Committee Jhang, a government body, advertises empty plots in Rabwah on the riverside in the press. In direct violation of the Lahore High Court hearing, the text of the advert reads: "Plots will be sold by auction, but only to those who believed in 'complete and unconditional end of prophethood' and who is not a disciple of anybody who claimed to be a prophet in any sense of the word or was an Ahmadi/Qadiani/Mirza/Lahori." And a few weeks earlier, local authorities shut off Rabwah's water supply for four days, leaving "citizens groping for drops," according to a Lahore-based newspaper. This, under Musharraf's policy of enlightened moderation. As we drive to my grandmother's grave, my mother tells me about the university graduate she met on a train who insisted he had seen naked hours dancing in the Ahmadi graveyard in Rabwah. My mother politely suggested that this was maybe hearsay, but the man was adamant he had seen them "with his own eyes." Disappointingly, no such visions



of loveliness greet us at our arrival to the Chiste-Mukhbara, where my grandmother is buried alongside other practising Ahmadis. Instead, an ordinary graveyard, with two old men acting as guards. As we are guided to my grandmother's grave we walk past hundreds of graves which have had the Islamic inscriptions written on them scraped off. Even in death, there is no respite. I come across one positive story though. A family friend tells us of how a teenager was arrested for saying Assalamo-Alaikum to a military man. Apparently, after the boy had offered the greeting, the man asked him if he was "Qadiani" to which the boy replied truthfully. This admission of "guilt" was then used to drag the boy to the local police station. Apparently, the police officer on duty that particular day saw the absurdity of the charge and admonished the boy saying, "Did you have to wish Salaam on this man? If you had just told him to go to hell I wouldn't have to arrest you." **Preaching and PR** After Rabwah, I go to Lahore where I meet up with an uncle who has just come back from the earthquake zone. A trauma surgeon at Chicago's Cook County, he is one of 60 American Ahmadi doctors who came to help following the earthquake in northern Pakistan. Like other overseas Pakistanis, Ahmadis have been active in the earthquake effort and the community's charity has donated over 286 tons of Aid and helped over 50,000 earthquake survivors. Yet they are unable to disclose who they are in the region, for fear of being accused of missionary activity. In the meantime, the earthquake region has turned into a PR battlezone for Jamaat-e-Islami and other extremist parties -- each loudly claiming its role in helping the citizens of Pakistan and no doubt recruiting members as they go. Another positive story (kind of). I meet a lady in Lahore whose cousin died in an attack on an Ahmadi mosque the day before the quake. Seven Ahmadis were gunned down and 21 injured after gunmen attacked the mosque in

Moong, near Mandhi Bahuruddin. She tells me of how local Sunnis rallied round their Ahmadi neighbours at the time, and were the first to condemn the attacks: "Relations between Ahmadis and other Muslims had always been good in Moong," she says. "It was trouble-makers from outside, they came on motorcycles." **Ahmadis, Ismailis and the rest** Back in Karachi, it hits me that this rage and spirit of sectarianism doesn't stop with the Ahmadis. As we drive past a KFC in my uncle's lower-middle-class neighbourhood of Gulshan-e-Iqbal, my cousin tells me of how it was rebuilt only months ago after it was burnt down by protesters in May last year. The protestors were not the usual anti-US suspects, but an enraged Shi'ite mob that not only torched the building but prevented emergency services from saving the workers trapped in the building. Four were burnt alive and another two froze as they hid from the rabble in the freezer. They were victims of a revenge attack after three men from a militant Sunni group, including a suicide bomber, stormed the local Shi'ite mosque during evening prayers. It wasn't the first time violence flared between the two largest sects and the latest Shi'ite-Sunni clashes in the NWFP show that it isn't likely to be the last either. And last year, a new group was formed. The Difa-e-Islam Mahaz: "Front for the Defence of Islam" purports to protect Islam from the "evils" of the "Aspostate Ismailis." They do this by burning down charitable schools and hospitals built by the Aga Khan Foundation, which is patronized by the spiritual leader of the Ismailis, the Aga Khan. While Pakistan's Shi'ite and Sunni clerics continue to war amongst themselves, police collusion and government apathy make Ahmadis an easy target. In a country where Ahmadis are not allowed to defend themselves through legal means (any defence of Ahmadi beliefs constitutes missionary work and is thus a jailable offence), they reject violent resistance. And the persecution of Ahmadis in Pakistan, codified in

law and completely institutionalised, takes far more insidious forms than the killings that make the news. There are tragic stories of forced conversions, of people who keep the truth about their beliefs secret from their neighbours and colleagues and of other Muslims who have been forced to cut all links with Ahmadi friends and family after threats of violence. In one particularly obscene example, a Sunni doctor was brutally beaten after tending to an Ahmadi child. This is the state of tolerance in Pakistan. **Hatred at home and abroad** In Naem Mohaiem's recent film, Muslim or Heretics (muslimsorheretics.org), an anti-Ahmadi protester in Bangladesh raises his hands up to the sky as he prays, "Oh Allah! We are happy to live side-by-side with our Ahmadi brothers, as we do with Hindus and Christians, but that they call themselves Muslim, this we cannot bear!" The experience of Pakistan, however, shows that branding the Ahmadi non-Muslim will not be enough. Each concession leads to ever greater demands. In Pakistan, appeasing the mullahs has horribly backfired. And putting the genie back into the bottle is a task that no government in Pakistan, democratic or otherwise, has managed to do. Today, not only Ahmadis but Ismailis, Christians, Hindus and even Shi'ites and Sunnis are open targets in their places of worship. Places which, in all but the most barbaric societies, are supposed to be sanctuaries. During my trip, I met a surprising number of ordinary, practicing Muslims who were genuinely ashamed of the way Ahmadis are treated. By not speaking out however, those who know better in Pakistan have allowed those who shout the loudest to hijack the political agenda. There are a few brave exceptions, but most of the Pakistani media has moved on -- Ahmadi persecution has become mundane. And Ahmadis themselves seem resigned to their status as second-class citizens. Many fear

that rocking the boat could lead to more problems for those who live there. When I suggested making a documentary about the treatment of Ahmadis in Pakistan, an Ahmadi Imam warned me against it saying: "Pakistan is not Bangladesh, doing something like that here is almost impossible." This indictment of Pakistan is a tribute to Bangladesh, where the battle against fundamentalist forces is far from over. As for Pakistan, some argue that the country -- which has the dubious honour of being the birthplace of the term "secticide" (the systematic destruction of a religious sect) -- is too far gone. They say it is only a matter of time before the rest of the country follows the NWFP into Talibanisation. Others are more optimistic, and point out that the Islamic parties garnered less than 5 per cent of the vote prior to the US "War on Terror." They believe it is not too late to roll back to Jinnah's vision of a secular and democratic state of Pakistan. After years of repression, dissenting voices are few in Pakistan. Let us hope that the example of Bangladesh will inspire Pakistani progressives to once again speak out. And let us hope that this time, the Pakistani administration has the will -- and the guts -- to listen.

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