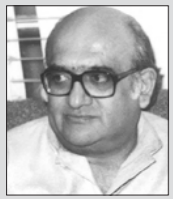


# Recapturing the spirit of the Liberation War: Secularism and socialism



REHMAN SOBHAN

[This is Part II of a 3-part series that contains the full text of a speech given by Prof. Sobhan at the Liberation War Museum on March 22.]

THE constitutional commitment to secularism was grounded in our long struggle to rescue Bangladesh from the abuse of religion for political gain. Throughout the phase of Pakistani rule, greedy, corrupt and immoral political elites quite cynically attempted to use religious slogans to mask their anti-democratic rule. The abuse of religion reached its most degenerate form in 1971 when genocide was committed on large numbers of innocent Bengalis, in the name of religion, by a leader and his forces who were totally irreligious in their personal character and motivations. The founding fathers of Bangladesh were, thus, determined that in an independent Bangladesh no scope should be provided to similarly abuse religion for purposes of political gain. At the same time, recognition was given to our plural faiths, by ensuring the equality of all faiths in the eyes of the law. Secularism, as it was interpreted in our constitution, was thus never designed to interfere with the practice of religion by any individual or community or to discourage religious education. Nor did we go so far as to discourage any

Bangladesh's two societies are characterized by the emergence of an elite which is becoming increasingly differentiated from the mass of society. This elevation of a group of people, who a little over three decades ago, were part of a shared fabric of middle class society in Bangladesh, into a far more exclusive elite, integrated into the process of globalization and operating in a policy environment which makes it possible to perpetuate themselves, has far reaching implications for the people of Bangladesh. Such an emergent elite, it is argued, goes in the face of Bangladesh's history, repudiates not just the spirit of the Liberation War but of the two-century old democratic struggle of the people of this country.

reference to religion in our public educational institutions or public sphere as is the case in the United States or France.

This attempt to discourage the abuse of religion for political gain did not prevent the post-liberation government from being slandered for discouraging religion, putting locks on the mosques or banning religious education. Even in the election campaigns of the last decade we have heard the slogan that the sound of the *azaan* will be replaced throughout Bangladesh with the sound of the conch shell.

This deliberate misinterpretation of the approach to secularism, incorporated in our constitution, led to the legal excision of this provision from the constitution by the post-1975 regime and its replacement by the constitutional proclamation emphasizing the supremacy of the religion of the majority community. The subsequent insertion in the constitution by President Ershad that Islam will be the religion of Bangladesh further emphasized the deviation from the principles of secularism originally enshrined in our constitution. These constitutional assertions of supremacy of one religion may not have derogated from the secular foundations of our constitution or legally arrogated a particular religion into a guiding principal of our jurisprudence but it severed to encourage politicians and parties seeking

political power and private material gain to shamelessly abuse religion to promote their political fortunes and slander their opponents. This same abuse of religion culminated in the genocide of 1971. Whilst this tendency has not yet led to another genocide, the recent emergence of terrorism in the name of religion has demonstrated that violence in the name of religion is once again emerging as a threat to our society. Pakistan's experience should have taught us that when ambitious politicians and generals deliberately manipulate religious beliefs to both capture power and perpetuate their anti-democratic rule, sooner or later, ideologically motivated fundamentalists will use these same slogans for imposing their beliefs on the people by terror rather than the ballot box.

Fortunately for Bangladesh we had so far only had to tolerate ambitious politicians who were cynical in their abuse of religion for political gain without themselves having any commitment to religion in their personal or political practices. This phase has now ended and the ideological zealot, armed with the bomb, has now emerged in our national arena. Vacuous references about moderate Islam will do little to reverse this tendency towards ideologically inspired terror. This trend can only be effectively challenged if the mainstream political parties collectively decide that

whilst people should be free to pursue their religious beliefs this cannot be opportunistically manipulated for political gain which divides the country into political categories of believers and unbelievers. Once we introduce such variables into political life then those who are obsessed with the conviction that they are the truest believers will feel encouraged to assert their right to annihilate not just minorities but even those of common faith who are not so convinced.

The introduction of socialism as a pillar of the constitution was intended as a metaphor for social justice. The struggle for social justice was central to every democratic struggle which inspired the politics of the people of Bangladesh from the peasant uprisings of Titumir and Nureldin, to the 6 point/11 point movement led by Bangabandhu which drove the election campaign of 1970. The dispossessed peasantry of Bengal, which constituted the numerical majority of the population, provided the support base of every major

democratic struggle. It was this same class of peasants, now joined by a nascent working class and the students of Bangladesh, who provided the vanguard for the liberation struggle. It was this class which gave the Awami League its overwhelming electoral victory in 1970 and uncompromising support to the non-cooperation movement which culminated in the genocide unleashed by the Pakistan army on March 26, 1971. It was again this same subaltern class which provided the foot-soldiers for the liberation war and bore the brunt of the casualties. It was their families which were the principal victims of the genocide, their wives and daughters who were raped and their homes which were burnt by the Pakistani army.

The incorporation of socialism into the constitution was, thus, a recognition of the debt of honour owed to the deprived majority of Bangladesh who bore a disproportionate share of the heavy price we paid for liberating Bangladesh. It was expected that post-liberation Bangladesh would put the deprived majority at the forefront of our concerns. We never aspired to build a society which recreated a privileged elite, presiding over an inequitable social order, which had characterized Pakistan. Contrary to our aspirations, mass poverty has been perpetuated in the 35 years since our liberation, whilst we have created a highly inequitable, deeply unjust, society which has graduated from the two economies which characterized Pakistan, into two societies which characterize contemporary Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's two societies are characterized by the emergence of an elite which is becoming increasingly differentiated from the mass of society. This elevation of a group of people, who a little over three decades ago, were part of a shared fabric of middle class society in Bangladesh, into a far more exclu-

sive elite, integrated into the process of globalization and operating in a policy environment which makes it possible to perpetuate themselves, has far reaching implications for the people of Bangladesh. Such an emergent elite, it is argued, goes in the face of Bangladesh's history, repudiates not just the spirit of the Liberation War but of the two-century old democratic struggle of the people of this country. The circumstances in which such disparities have emerged constitute a violation of the social contract binding the Bangladesh state and hence lacks social legitimacy thereby threatening the sustainability of our social order.

The sustainability of a social order depends on its legitimacy in the eyes of society. Those who exercise political and economic power should be deemed to do so on the basis of a freely given electoral mandate and through demonstrable enterprise, efficiency and competitiveness. Social disparities originating from such legitimized political and economic disparities enjoy a greater degree of acceptance by society. If such social power is deemed to be illegitimately acquired it remains exposed to instability because it will remain under constant question and hence challenge which can only be contained by a monopoly of force, violence and money in the hands of the elite. Such societies, founded on weak social legitimacy, tend to be more prone to crime, violence and possible social breakdown. The weak legitimacy of Bangladesh's social order derives from the questionable ways in which both political and economic power have been attained in Bangladesh.

The manifestations of injustice in our political system itself originates in the injustices in the economic order which have been accentuated by the policy regimes put in place over the last two decades. A policy

agenda based on an indiscriminate belief in the allocative efficiency of the market place, notwithstanding the structural features of an economy, or the institutional arrangements which determine the working of markets, is likely to malfunction with serious implications for social justice in any country.

In such a system where markets either do not function or malfunction due to the capacity of those with power and access to resources to manipulate these markets, justice emerges as the first casualty. Thus, those who are honest and competent have little reason to expect that either the government or even the market will reward them. The reward systems of our society, in its present configuration, depend on access to power and influence, the capacity to manipulate the system for personal or sectoral gain and to escape from accountability either in the market place or through exposure to popular or legal institutions. Where power, access and immunity from the law are distributed very inequitably, the values of a market driven system tend to aggravate inequalities and injustice.

Those who remain without land, access to adequate education and health care, cannot expect to avail of the opportunities offered by the open market. Where access to work is a privilege which lies within the patronage of those with privileged access to knowledge and resources, the system itself becomes whimsical since no competitive norms guide access to administrative decisions or economic opportunities. In such an environment those who produce outputs do so in an unprotected and uncertain environment where price behavior and foreign competition, make an already unpredictable environment even more erratic. In such a system access to capital is not based on market principles but on access and the cost of capital itself varies from person to person

depending on their power to perpetuate their defaults. Law enforcement remains a hazard rather than a source of security where access to the law is determined by who you are and what you are willing to pay so that there is one law for the rich and one for the poor. Within the rich there is one law for those with political access and another for those who compete in the market for purchasing law enforcement. The system of justice at the lower levels remains negotiable and encourages contempt for the rule of law.

Illegitimately acquired wealth and misgovernance percolates down to private crime. Defaulters in Motijheel and political leaders patronizing these defaulters, finance mastaans, who help them to contest elections. These same mastaans use their political access to buy immunity from the law to extract tolls and use crime as an instrument of private enterprise. Many of these criminals graduate into politicians and eventually into elected representatives. In such a milieu crime becomes another form of entrepreneurship as well as an entry point into politics. Such a process perpetuates the injustices of a system where the dividing line between the law enforcer and the law breaker increasingly becoming invisible.

Rehman Sobhan is Chairman of Centre for Policy Dialogue.

## Nepal readies for the big fight



PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

IN a breakthrough agreement, Nepal's seven-party Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD) and its Communist Party (Maoist) have announced a non-violent agitation to end the "absolute monarchy." Although the agreement was announced in two separate statements, it's the result of hard negotiations between Nepal's two major political blocs, culminating in success on March 19.

The big showdown with King Gyanendra will begin with a peaceful general strike on April 6, with a mass rally on April 9. This period marks the 16th anniversary of the "end of absolute rule" in Nepal.

Public anger against King Gyanendra's February 2005 power-grab and his autocratic rule has erupted in energetic demonstrations around the slogan "Gyane chor, Nepal chor" (Thief Gyanendra, quit Nepal). The near-total voter boycott of last month's municipal elections made the ARD parties confident that they can replace absolutism with a Constitutional monarchy, if not a Republic.

The March 19 ARD-Maoist understanding built upon their landmark 12-point agreement last November under which the Maoists would disarm under "credible" international supervision.

The deal was reached in India and facilitated by the Congress, Communists, and other parties. It was also endorsed by the Indian government.

The coming agitation could be the final struggle against the absolute monarchy. The King won't find it easy to repress it. The history of Nepal's democracy movement of 1989-90 shows that once the people are fired by the ideas of freedom, self-empowerment, and democracy, force becomes counter-productive. King Gyanendra risks an ignominious collapse of the monarchy if he ignores this lesson. His best (indeed, only) bet lies in a Constitutional or largely ceremonial monarchy. However, the path to democratisation won't be smooth. The ARD doesn't fully trust the Maoists although CPN(M) leaders Prachanda and Baburam Bhattarai have repeatedly declared they will have their armed squads disarmed.

The agreement became possible primarily because the Maoists radically rethought their strategy. They concluded their main enemy is the King and the best way of removing him lies in peaceful methods, not armed insurrection.

The March 19 understanding was the result of many days of talks. The US's shadow hung heavy over the deliberations.

On February 15, Washington's ambassador to Nepal, James Moriarty launched a scathing attack on the November agreement. US official Donald Camp recently told a Congressional Committee: "We are concerned that Maoists, who have refused to renounce violence, have gained a greater degree of legitimacy from their engagement with the political parties."

Although India endorses the 12-point agreement, it made no attempt to dissuade Washington from adopting a hard line towards its implementation.

Thanks to US pressure, former Prime Ministers Girija Prasad Koirala and Sher Bahadur Deuba, who lead the two factions of the Nepali Congress, were reluctant to issue a joint statement with the Maoists. They eventually came around to the "compromise formula" of separate statements largely because of pressure from their party cadres. The formula is a tribute to popular support for the 12-point agreement.

The Nepalis are fed up with the

monarchy. Under Gyanendra's rule, the economic situation has worsened, development activity has come to standstill, and corruption has flourished. Democratic freedoms stand suspended.

As much as one-third of that poor country's budget goes to the military. Textbooks have been taxed -- to buy guns.

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In recent interviews to the BBC and The Hindu, Prachanda said that although the Maoists prefer a Republic, they would abide by the verdict of a Constitutional Assembly in case that favours a nominal monarchy.

The coalition partners differ on tactics. The Maoists advocate immediate elections to a Constitutional Assembly. But the ARD would like the National Assembly to be restored first. There's a real danger that the restoration will lead to jockeying for power and produce rifts.

The King might also launch armed attacks on the Maoists, hoping that retaliation would wreck the two-bloc coalition. The parties and the Maoists will have to perform a tight-rope walk.

The Indian government, too, has to walk the tight-rope as it corrects its Nepal policy. It used to be hostile to the Maoists and supported and armed the monarchy against them. For 18 months after Gyanendra's coup, it continued to pay lip service to "two pillars": "Constitutional monarchy" and "multi-party democracy" -- even though the first pillar

was hollowed out by the monarch himself.

It's only recently that New Delhi stopped parroting the thesis. But it must go further and make a decisive break with its past approach. This consisted in clinging to the King as the best guarantor of Nepal's unity and stability -- which he's patently not -- banking on discredited politicians, while spurning the Maoists.

India's opposition to the Maoists was unduly influenced by its security forces and unreasonable fears about a Maoist-Naxalite link. There's at best a weak link between the two. Prachanda advises India's Naxalites to participate in elections!

India should acknowledge that the Maoists represent a force for positive change and reform from below, although their reliance on violence is totally unacceptable. The present moment offers the best chance to bring the Maoists fully into democratic politics. India must seize it.

India must also persuade the US to take the Maoists out of the "terrorist" watchlist. It can convincingly cite the 12-point agreement to this end.

India must counter Washington's attempt to stitch together a bogus, unviable settlement in Nepal through the King's appointment of a nominally "democratic" government. That can only prolong the cycle of state violence, insurgency and counter-insurgency.

Nepal and India have a unique relationship and an open border. India has a legitimate stake in democracy and stability in Nepal. The Nepali people welcomed India when it threw its weight behind their anti-palace agitation.

India can't play this role if the King prolongs his stay in power. The true solution lies in the 12-point agreement. India must carry it to its logical conclusion. Nepal's people deserve nothing less.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

## A Risky feud

Pakistan, which has long seen Afghanistan as being within its sphere of influence, is worried about India's cozy relations with Kabul and its growing clout. In 2003, New Delhi set up consulates in the Afghan cities of Jalalabad and Kandahar, right in Pakistan's backyard. India has also posted some 300 military commandos to southern Afghanistan ostensibly to protect its road construction crews, and extended economic aid, including fleets of buses and several used Boeing and Airbus passenger jets.

RON MOREAU, ZAHID HUSSAIN AND SAMI YOUSAFZAI

SUMMIT meetings are meant to improve relations. But two recent high-level confabs -- one in February between Afghan President Hamid Karzai and his Pakistani counterpart, Pervez Musharraf, and the other US President George W. Bush's trip to Islamabad earlier this month -- have had the opposite effect. For the cameras, both looked like the usual well-scripted, feel-good affairs -- but in fact they've laid bare a serious rift between Afghanistan and Pakistan, America's two key allies in the global war on terror.

With the Taliban staging a gradual resurgence in Afghanistan, Karzai has been sniping at Musharraf for months, charging that the Pakistani president is not doing enough to defeat armed radicals who hide out and train along the rugged Afghanistan-Pakistan border. More important, Karzai apparently won Bush over to his skeptical point of view during his brief visit to Kabul prior to the US president's arrival in Islamabad.

"After Bush's visit, Afghan officials were very happy and confident," says Pakistani author and Afghan expert Ahmed Rashid. "The Americans privately came down on Karzai's side." Indeed, Musharraf seemed visibly shaken when he stood beside the US president at their March 4 joint press conference and heard Bush say that he had come to Islamabad "to determine whether or not the president is as committed as he has been in the past" to the war on terror. According to Pakistani officials, Bush essentially lectured his host on the need to get tougher on the Taliban. "Musharraf got a big rap on the knuckles from Bush for not doing enough," confirms Rashid.

Musharraf was quick to lash back. After Bush left Islamabad, he blasted Karzai in a CNN interview, lambasting the Afghan leader for being "totally oblivious" to what was going on in Pakistan. Musharraf also said recent intelligence supplied by Kabul to Pakistan, including phone numbers and the whereabouts of Taliban officials, was "outdated," "nothing" and "nonsense." He advised Karzai to put his own house in order before criticizing Pakistan.

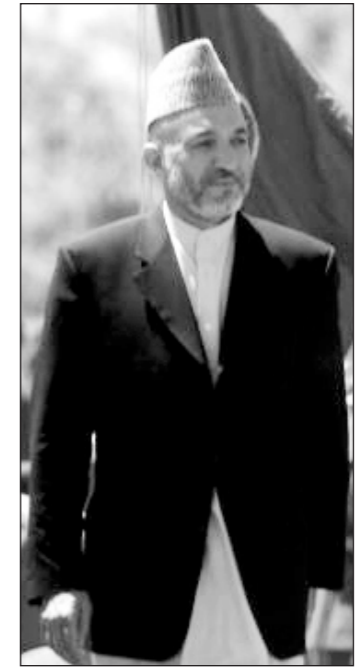
Taliban pressure, in fact, is what pushed Karzai to speak out. Since last summer, there have been some 25 suicide bombings in Afghanistan, including one early this year that killed more than a dozen people at Spin Buldak, a trading town on the frontier. That bombing and others sparked a wave of anti-Pakistani public protests. "There has been a groundswell of anger at and mistrust of Pakistan," says Rashid.

Musharraf deeply resents the idea that he is soft on the Taliban or its support network. He frequently points out that he has stationed some 80,000 troops in the tribal agencies along the border, ostensibly to prevent the Taliban and al Qaeda from using Pakistan as a base for cross-border raids into Afghanistan. Last week some of those soldiers engaged in prolonged gun battles with a force of largely local, pro-Taliban tribal insurgents that killed more than 100 people, including troops, tribal militants and civilians in and around the Pakistani town of Miran Shah.

When Karzai met with Musharraf in Islamabad, he presented him with a list of names, addresses and phone numbers of Taliban officials, including Mullah Mohammed Omar, who were allegedly living in Pakistan. He also provided details of supposed Taliban training camps and guerrilla bases located inside Pakistan. One senior Pakistani official described the meeting as "tense," adding that the two leaders largely exchanged "accusations and counteraccusations."



Whether or not Karzai's complaints are valid, his constant criticism of Musharraf is a risky move. A prolonged feud could hurt Pakistan, jeopardizing its large aid package from America. But Afghanistan might be crippled if the quarrel gets out of hand. An alienated Musharraf could make life easier for the guerrillas, and Afghanistan can ill afford to lose Pakistan's crucial economic and military support. The landlocked country's economy is weak and heavily dependent on trade and skilled laborers from Pakistan. Some 60,000 Pakistanis work in Afghanistan, among them 10,000 people who cross the border daily. Afghanistan's few legal exports, such as vegetables and fruits, largely go to its southern neighbor; its crucial imports -- including food, construction materials and other essential supplies -- come from there. "Our economic situation is not strong enough to survive a serious dispute with Pakistan," admits a senior Afghan diplomat. As things stand now, the feud's only beneficiaries could be the Taliban, who in recent months have stepped up attacks in Afghanistan. "We are enjoying and benefiting from this fight," Mansoor, a Taliban activist and former minister, told Newsweek. "May it continue, God willing."



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Musharraf didn't dismiss the intelligence data Karzai gave him. In fact, he had his powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency check it out. The spy agency reported back that the information was inaccurate. The Pakistani president was even more angered by the fact that Karzai held a meeting with journalists during his Islamabad trip and relayed to them much the same information that he'd presented to Musharraf earlier.

In an ironic turnabout, Musharraf now accuses Kabul of not doing enough to control its side of the border. He charges that Taliban fighters from Afghanistan have entered the North Waziristan tribal region to reinforce pro-Taliban Pakistani militants who are fighting the Pakistan Army. In addition, according to Pakistani intelligence sources, the ISI has intercepted radio transmissions from rebellious tribal leaders in the resource-rich Pakistani province of Baluchistan to Afghan officials, asking them for arms to fight the Pakistani Army.

These sources say the ISI believes that India, Pakistan's traditional enemy, is helping to arm the Baluchistan Liberation Army, a small, independence-minded guerrilla outfit, with the connivance of Afghan officials. Pakistan, which has long seen Afghanistan as being within its sphere of influence, is worried about India's cozy relations with Kabul and its growing clout. In 2003, New Delhi set up consulates in the Afghan cities of Jalalabad and Kandahar, right in Pakistan's backyard. India has also posted some 300 military commandos to southern Afghanistan ostensibly to protect its road construction crews, and extended economic aid, including fleets of buses and several used Boeing and Airbus passenger jets.

Washington is hoping that both sides will resume a civil and constructive dialogue; there is simply too much is at stake to let the animosity linger. Already Kabul is girding for a spring push by a seemingly stronger, more determined enemy. To avert disaster, both these newfound enemies need to start searching for common ground.

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