

Capital put under lock-down

Heavy-handed steps to thwart opposition sit-in outrageous

WE fully understand the need to provide security to the PMO. But does it have to come by literally blockading all the major roads of the city? The government response to the 14-party plan to stage a sit-in outside the PMO yesterday betrayed nothing less than this administration's utter contempt for the interests of the people of the capital city, and by extension, the nation at large.

The official decision to essentially shut down large sections of the city, making them impassable for the everyday citizens, was a disgraceful curtailment of the rights of the general public, and demonstrated that the government is ready to go even to completely self-defeating lengths in order to quell dissent.

This mindless obstruction of the city streets, with all arterial roads blocked, in order to thwart the opposition programme resulted in massive disruption of city life and left the prime minister virtually besieged within the PMO of her own volition.

The government owes the public an explanation for this debacle. It has a responsibility to the public welfare that was shamefully abandoned yesterday when frustrating of the opposition demonstrations was given higher priority than the convenience and welfare of the public.

So many alternative solutions could have been put in place that would have been preferable. As we said earlier, the PMO is a high security zone; if need be, the immediate environs of the office could have been cordoned off and a separate area set aside for the protesters.

However, to choose to instead bring the city to a standstill with no thought to the damaging effects on everyday life showed shockingly poor judgment and unbelievable arrogance.

The government could have learned a lesson from the recent unrest in Thailand which saw massive anti-Thaksin demonstrations for weeks at a time. However, the Thai authorities were able to ensure that even while these were going on, that everyday life for the common people was not brought to a halt.

Not so here in Dhaka. Just to stop the demonstrations, the economic clock was brought to a grinding halt. The citizens' welfare and public convenience were a zero-level priority for the government and it is this attitude that will remain in the public mind long after this regrettable incident has come to a close.

We must ask the government why it feels so insecure that it cannot permit the opposition space in which to demonstrate and dissent. But even more important is the question as to how it can have so little regard for the people of this country that it can act in a manner that is so dismissive of their rights and interests.

Reuse of syringes

Criminal negligence to public health

AS medical services show increasing signs of wearing out, a photograph published in this daily yesterday showed a woman collecting used injection syringes and test tubes from garbage. And if they are a saleable commodity what purpose other than spreading infections the hospitals and clinics with no waste disposals are serving? Basically, this is utter disregard for patients' well-being.

It is another example of medical ethics being violated with impunity; we haven't yet heard anybody facing any legal action for such criminal offences. The culpability is on two levels: first and foremost, the hospital management which doesn't care to dispose of the waste; and secondly, the racket that thrives on such a serious lapse on the part of the authority.

The question is, who are running this business and who are the ultimate users of such syringes and test tubes? Obviously, clinics and hospitals are the places where these could be used again. A hospital or clinic should have its own used-syringe disposal system including a self-locking device after first use. A crushing machine is used in modern hospitals for waste disposal purposes.

Drug shop owners and hospital managers cannot put the blame on the collectors of used syringes alone. Obviously, it is they who should make sure that such deadly practices are eliminated. If they, too, are influenced by the thought of making profit at the cost of patients, there will be no end to this business. Finally, the law enforcers' role in this respect should be an emphatic one. The mobile court drives need to be extended to this area also.

The health authorities must act resolutely to stop this highly unethical and hazardous practice.

Islamic militancy and Bangladesh's strategic importance



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

It is easy to hide behind the excuse of a foreign motivator; it is easier to overlook the internal factors that have helped the phenomenon to germinate in our country. While the US policies had provided a good enough justification to whip up religious sentiments, internal developments helped no end to give their effort a fillip. Rehabilitation of religious oriented parties in our politics with alleged links to the religious extremists provided them the opportunity to establish a foothold in the country.

THIS article is in response to certain queries of a young colleague of mine presently finishing his Masters in Australia. The subject matter of a paper he is currently writing is, "The rise of Bangladesh's international strategic importance after the recent rise in Islamic militancy." And he has posed several very pertinent questions regarding the issue. However, each of the questions requires to be addressed separately, which is not possible within the confines of this column. However, I shall try to encapsulate my response to all his questions within the space available.

But before that, it will be pertinent to state that different factors accord countries different degrees of strategic importance, which is generally taken to convey a positive sense rather than a negative image about that country, which it can exploit to its advantage. One wonders whether any strategic importance has accrued to Bangladesh after the rise of Islamic militancy in the country? While strategic importance is a force multiplier in the most comprehensive sense, rise of militancy in Bangladesh may provide more hurdles in our international interactions and is likely to restrict our diplomatic maneuverability.

The first question is what are the international/regional drivers

behind the rise of militancy in Bangladesh, and whether there is any possible link between the domestic and international militants, especially militants in South-East Asia?

This is a question that dogs our minds too and needs to be addressed objectively. The religious militants in Bangladesh appear to have been imbued with the spirit of Jihad in their effort to establish Islamic rule in the country. It would not be wrong to suggest that the word "Jihad" gained currency after the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Thanks to the US for making the word not only popular but also lucrative to the Muslim youths in the region, who were motivated by CIA propaganda that it was their bounden duty to rid a Muslim country of the "heathens." The word "Jihad" was as much revered and vaunted at that time as it is despised now. Bin Laden was CIA's baby that has now turned to be a Frankenstein's monster for them.

If there were those who were motivated to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan, they went wrong in assuming that an Afghanistan could be replicated in Bangladesh. For many of them, Bangladesh was a potential grazing ground after the US occupation of Afghanistan, and to which they turned their attention after being forced by circumstance

to leave that country.

Obviously, such organisations cannot flourish without internal and external support, and they had plenty of both. However, it is still a million dollar question as to the extent of their external roots. Thus, while the motivations were there, whether the militants in Bangladesh were directly linked to al-Qaeda is something that will have to be established definitively. However, there are grounds to believe the possibility of a link between these elements and Harkat-ul-Jehad (HUJI). Mufti Abdul Hannan, who masterminded the July 2000 plot to kill the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in Gopalganj by planting a crude IED, was head of Harkat-ul-Jehad, Bangladesh (HUJI-B). He is said to be a veteran of Afghan Jihad and connected with HUJI based in Pakistan. It needs to be mentioned that there is an elemental link between HUJI and the Islamic International Front of bin Laden. One Fazlur Rahman was one of the signatories of the Laden fatwa against the West in 1998.

After 1998, Harkat-ul-Ansar (HUA), which was active in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) in India split into two, the Harakat-ul-Mujahideen (HUM) and the HUJI-Pakistan. Reportedly, it also provided training and arms assistance to the Rohingya Muslims of Arakan in

Myanmar, the Abu Sayyaf in the southern Philippines, and the Chechens.

HUJI-B, had been reportedly in operation in the country since 1992, and, according to the statement of one of its arrested members, assumed the name of JMB in 2003, perhaps after it was listed as a terrorist outfit by the US in April 2003. However it was not until October 2005 that the Bangladesh government banned HUJI-B. However, the extent and scope of the link between JMB and JMB with HUJI-B is yet to be fully established.

It is easy to hide behind the excuse of a foreign motivator; it is easier to overlook the internal factors that have helped the phenomenon to germinate in our country. While the US policies had provided a good enough justification to whip up religious sentiments, internal developments helped no end to give their effort a fillip. Rehabilitation of religious oriented parties in our politics with alleged links to the religious extremists provided them the opportunity to establish a foothold in the country.

The fact that the two major political parties were at each other's throats, provided the religious parties, and the radical elements linked to them, opportunity to consolidate their position even further.

Statements of many of those arrested in the aftermath of the August 17 bombings suggest that many of them had received their initiation in politics under Jamaat-Islami, a major component of the four party alliance ruling Bangladesh.

The next question is about the government's role on militancy till date and how the future actions of the militants may affect the international scene.

The government's role has been one of denial of any possibility of existence of the religious militants. Even after the US listed HUJI-B as a terrorist outfit in 2003, the Bangladesh foreign minister is on record denying the existence of any Islamic militant outfit in the country. At that time he said that he had not seen any "such activity in Bangladesh" adding, "The way Bangladesh is being painted with the same brush time and again, it seems that it is a conspiracy and an orchestrated campaign by some vested quarters."

There was denial in every quarter in the government including the home ministry and the Jamaat-Islami who saw this as an attempt to spoil the image of the country, till the balloon went up on August 17, 2005 when the State Minister for Home Affairs had to concede the presence of Islamic militants (JMB) in Bangladesh and their involvement in the August 17 bombings. By March 2006 the two most wanted persons were netted as also many top operatives of the JMB and JMJB.

One hopes that the arrests of top leaders of the two banned organisations, JMB and JMJB, would have sapped all the vigour of the militants and their residual members, for the time being at least. However, it would be a folly to see that militancy has reached its end in Bangladesh. While I am inclined to believe that

these two outfits have little to cause trans-boundary impact, we must remain in constant vigil, particularly of any possible activity of HUJI-B. The most important question that has been posed is the domestic, regional and international consequences of the rise in militancy.

Apart from its impact on national security and causing internal instability, militancy has imposed costs on several counts that the country has to bear while it combats the phenomenon.

Our image is one that is dealt the first blow. In our case it has suffered not because of the fact that the media had brought to the forefront the existence of militants in the country, but because, in spite of the constant denial by the establishment, their existence has been demonstrably proved, eventually. This has created a perception, internally and externally, of the government's weakness in tackling the issue.

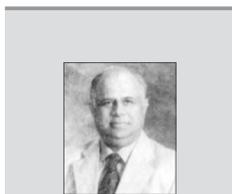
These developments have also cast a stigma and provided the ammunition for those who had been trying to depict Bangladesh as a hotbed of Islamic militancy, going down the Afghan way. Willy-nilly we are being depicted as a cog in the Islamic terrorism machine; and our biggest neighbour casts a wary eye fearing that it might also be affected by the effect of religious militancy in Bangladesh.

In short, militancy has affected the law and order and social stability, our human and economic security apart from impacting on our politics and political institutions, sovereignty of the state and autonomy of the government.

Nothing of this would have happened had the government been more forthright in addressing the issue of religious militancy.

The author is Editor, Defence and Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Preserving internal peace



IKRAM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

THREE decades (or so) ago almost to the day, on April 13, 1975, unidentified gunmen killed four Phalangists during an attempt on the life of Pierre Gemayel, founder of the Lebanese (Maronite Christian) political grouping called the Phalangist Party. Suspecting that the assailants were Palestinian, the Phalangists retaliated later in the day by ambushing a bus passing through the Eastern Beirut suburb of Ain al Roumaneh, killing more than two dozen Palestinian passengers.

This incident initiated a cycle of revenge killings that led to all-out civil war that was supposedly between the Palestinians and Maronite Christians but in fact became a religious strife between the Sunnis, Shias and Druze Lebanese aiding the Palestinians and the heavily Christian Lebanese Army (along with their heavy weapons) splitting mainly in favour of the Maronites and Catholics.

By the time the civil war ended 15 years later in 1990, many thousands and thousands of combatants (and multiple more innocent caught in the crossfire) had died in the fray. The "civil war" allowed Syria to creep in as an "arbitrator" for "peace-

AS I SEE IT

Pakistan has been successful in the "war against terrorism." While we were similarly successful during the Afghan War, complacent in the victory of the Mujahideen we did not prepare for post-war trauma. This time around we need to be prepared for the machinations of those who have a vested interest in destabilizing Pakistan.

keeping," creating a stranglehold over Lebanon that has only recently been vacated after the assassination of Rafik Hariri and the Lebanese (and world) mass reaction to Syria's suspected involvement.

Given refuge in Lebanon since 1969, the stateless Palestinians (led by Yassar Arafat's PLO) had earlier been involved in bloody civil strife in Jordan from where they were unceremoniously evicted in 1970. Attempting to evict the Palestinians from South Lebanon, the Israelis launched a massive invasion, the massacre of Palestinians at Sabra and Chatila refugee camps just outside Beirut were carried out by Maronite Christian allies of the Israelis, who remained as onlookers, intervening only after mass killings had already taken place.

While moves to end religious strife and return to pre-1975 centuries-old amity had been going on, the Hariri assassination dramatically brought the Lebanese together. The Muslim (mainly Shias through the Hezbollah party) and Christian communities have some latent tension simmering under the surface, nowhere is the peace more symbolic than in downtown Beirut in the Hariri-created "Solidaire" area.

Next to a newly built mosque and church standing together, Hariri lies buried along with all those who

perished with him in the bomb blast that destroyed his car and escort vehicles. Driver Nadeem, a staunch Maronite Christian who was our guide in Beirut, was from the mountains close to Beirut and had to move with his family to a Maronite area north of Beirut when the Druze militia made life untenable for them in 1975. He was eloquent in his praise of the late Sunni Prime Minister.

On April 11, 2006, the 12th of Rabiul Awal, a suicide bomber attacked a mosque in Karachi during Maghrib prayers, killing 56 and injuring many dozens of others, succeeded also in killing members of the Sunni Tehrik leadership. As news spread through the city, mobs hurled stones and set fire to vehicles in mindless violence. With widespread violence and shops mostly closed, vehicular traffic was almost at a standstill. Karachi remained completely shutdown on Friday April 14, the strike was partial in the other cities of Pakistan. While the Rangers and Police maintained order in the streets, the Army was called out in sensitive areas to back them up.

This is a short-term solution, are our local political and religious leaders upto it in the long-term, can they afford anarchy if things are not kept in checks? There have been

repeated questions for the past months about an internal security breakdown in Pakistan, some have opined that matters have gone beyond state control and we are already headed for anarchy. This is far from the truth, the danger is that if we remain complacent it may well take place. Without becoming unduly pessimistic, pragmatic "damage control" needs to be initiated to avoid further erosion in the situation.

Widespread Shia-Sunni strife is most glaring in Iraq where things are rapidly spinning out of control. The carnage that took innocent lives in Karachi was professionally planned and meticulously executed, it was not only Sunnispecific but was specifically meant to create a blood cycle of Sunnis reacting against Shias. A civil strife in the (at the moment) only part of Pakistan would be disaster for an economy that has only recently started to grow exponentially, the masses still awaiting for the benefits to "trickle down."

A slanging match going on between the two major parties in Karachi, the Jamaat-Islami (JI) and the Muttahida Qumi Movement (MQM) intensified after the bomb blast, both the parties need to cool it and cool it fast. Their vested responsibility to look after the interests of millions of their constituents will not

be served if civil strife breaks out. The Musharraf regime has to distance itself from any militancy, it may be of religious or ideological nature, it doesn't matter. No governing authority can afford to be allied (or even indifferent) to those who operate outside the laws of the land. No governing authority can afford to abandon its writ to the streets, a slide into Iraqi-type anarchy. With its myriad number of inherent socio-economic problems, Karachi (and Pakistan) cannot afford a Baghdad-type situation.

The other area of concern is the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). While a relentless military campaign to rid the border areas of militants, mostly foreigners, was necessary, a dramatic long-term initiative is required to get the tribals whose only means of income are both outside the pale of law, viz (1) as hired gunmen and (2) smuggling of all goods including heroin. Who can blame them if they have no means to feed their families?

The government of Pakistan must (1) stop Afghan Transit Trade and (2) Declare FATA a Free Trade Zone (FTZ), calling it a Special Tribal Economic Zone (STEZ) or whatever. Anything required by Afghanistan or the Central Asian States can be supplied from STEZ warehouses and factories. Change may not take place overnight, and it will take some time to implement the plans.

The entry of millions of our citizens, literally still in the Dark Ages, into the 21st century is at stake. Laws must be implemented to protect the interests of tribals, like in Dubai only the locals should be allowed ownership. Look at how the US protects the Red Indians reservations even now. Let the tribals

become sponsors of businesses! Taken into confidence and educated about the economic possibilities that will change their lives for the better the tribals will have a vested economic reason for ensuring the peace.

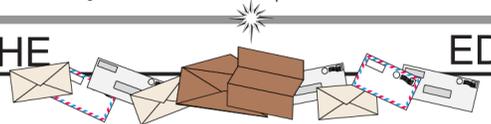
The government has done well by taking action against the tribal sardars in the Dera Bugti and Marri areas of Balochistan. There should be no negotiation with the Sardars and that too until they have voluntarily disarmed. Those captured in battle should be treated as anyone would be who causes damage to the State and its citizens. Those who followed their hereditary rulers but came back voluntarily and have not taken part in causing casualties or damage should be allowed to pursue their rightful place under the Pakistani sun, albeit under parole for good behavior for sometime.

There is no way the tribals could ever be educated, get medical assistance, education, etc with the Sardars heavily dependant upon their continued ignorance for their continued loyalty. A significant portion of the royalty/profits must go to creating more economic opportunities for the locals, towns/industrial parks being planned on the pattern of the FATA initiative.

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TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Attack on journalists

Once again the media men found them helpless victims of ruthless and unjustified police torture at the Chittagong Stadium. It is highly deplorable and despicable. It is unthinkable that the police, people supposed to uphold law and order in the country, pounced upon journalists...and that too in front of a cricket team like Australia! This will surely help in further degrading our negative image abroad.

When I saw that picture of veteran journalist Jahirul Haque being assaulted by policemen, I felt nothing but red-hot anger burning inside me. How dare people supposed to uphold law attack a senior person like that? What kind of example are they setting? Why are the government and police so biased against the media, a light shining in the darkness and our only hope of neutral news?

Time and again journalists have been victims of such torture, and even murder. It cannot be accepted anymore. The accused should be

punished to set an example to the nation. In this way we can be sure of the government's sincerity on this matter.

An aggrieved citizen
One e-mail

Uniform grading system

Recently we've been observing that the UGC has taken an initiative to have a uniform grading system in all the private and public universities of the country. And various grading schemes have been suggested for adoption. I with the experience of a past student of various disciplines, ex-chairman of BBA Program of IBA, current teacher of IBA and a general conscious citizen of the country want to put forward my opinions:

1. I do not feel that there is any need for adopting a uniform grading system for all universities in the country.
2. If any attempt is made at all, the uniformity should be made to the best system in the country followed

by IBA which is: Grade A+B+C+D+D.

Points- 4.3.5.3.2.5.1.5.1.

My opinion is based on the following arguments:

1. In the name of 'Market Economy' wholesale licences are given to anybody in any part of the country for opening private universities. Evaluation of the students should be left to the universities. The market will evaluate the universities and their graduates considering their grading systems along with many other things. UGC and the government should be concerned only about the quality of education imparted by these universities. The quality of education depends on: a. quality of input students - minimum qualification of applicants, recruitment process etc., b. quality of processing - curriculum, methodology, teaching aids etc., and c. quality of the processors - teachers and staff.

Uniformity of grading system will neither ensure quality of education nor will it help employers in their evaluation of the graduates for

employment. Employers not only have to judge equivalency of grades of the graduates of universities, they need also to judge equivalency of divisions and grades of SSC, HSC, Madrassah certificates, O/A levels and some foreign degrees besides many other criteria in their evaluation of prospective employees.

2. There should not be any fixed scores in terms of percentage for assigning grades because this is meaningless. Evaluation of a student's academic performance is very complex, difficult and imperfect, and hence judgmental. Scoring of a student in an exam depends on the nature of the subject, the difficulty level of questions and the degree of strictness / leniency of checking the scripts. These are all judgmental on the part of a teacher. So, the same script may earn different scores from different teachers for all these reasons. Therefore, it is meaningless to assign grades on a fixed scale of percentage scores.

That's why assignment of grades is based on the relative performance of a student in his/her class through-

out the world and that is what is practiced at IBA.

3. There shouldn't be too many grades (e.g., A-, B-, C- etc.) as well. Having too many grades is against the spirit of having grades instead of continuous grade points or scores. Classified data are more comprehensible and meaningful than detailed raw data especially when the data is a judgmental one like the exam scores. A student scoring A in a subject is more likely to know the subject better than a student scoring B but less likely than that scoring A- or even B+. At IBA we used to have only A, B, C, D, and F grades. We introduced the intermediate grades only in the recent past. Some teachers still do not give the intermediate grades sometimes.

Jawad R Zahid
IBA, DU

Support us

The issue is that there is only one code page (called CP1256), a Microsoft proprietary code used by its Internet Browser for processing

Arabic characters. CP1256 does not have special characters for the Holy Quran. Thus, there is no universal system for either writing or displaying verses from the Holy Quran. Instead, Microsoft developed special character sets for each Arab country. Qatar, for example, has its own, unique, Arabic character set. Again, there is no universal character set that would make the Holy Quran readily readable for all Muslims no matter what their country.

Think of the benefits to all Muslims of an easy-to-use, fully automated method for finding all verses of the Holy Quran that match one or two, typed Arabic word using the Internet, at no costs.

These features are currently available and readers can help to bring more features to all Muslims - worldwide and at no costs - by signing our petition. We invite you to visit www.readverse.com, select Arabic or English, and complete the petition that we are sending to Mr. Gates. Your prompt response can assure the success of this worthy

project. All of your information will be kept strictly confidential.

Mahmoud Elsayess
Westminster, California, USA

Dying anger

The anger, frustration against the cartoonist is dying down.

No law or regulations were passed for a permanent recourse. Other religions, what they thought as blasphemous, stopped it long ago. Our value holders couldn't reach up to the tall building in New York. Our rulers couldn't join hands. Saudis squeezed the purse of the Danes, to bring benefits to the local burgeoning state of the art, 'Guinness book of world record' dairy farms.

To my perception it is all a sorry state of thought. Thought, provoked by emotion not intelligence, all destructive actions lead to inaction and achieve nothing but frustration and hurt the common believers.

It is our belief that Islam

brought what is good for mankind. It preached and prescribed things with intelligence and logic. Because we have furthered ourselves from its basics, we are in the state of deprivation.

Islam started with 'knowledge' (iqra) but do you see much of it? Look at the state of education all around the Muslim world. Whereas we were urged to travel upto 'China' for knowledge. Flushed with cash, the whole Middle East does not have a middle class university, 50% of their women cannot read or write. Why we all are systematically lagging behind?

'Islam is a complete way of life', than where is the urge to make good living for Muslims? Muslims are labelled as tempered people, they have more frustration than their demonstrated anger. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Rioters are those whose voices are unheard."

M M Haque
Jeddah, K.S.A