

Netting the absconding JMB cadres

The vigil must go on

THE nation has surely heaved a sigh of relief at the news of the arrest of the last two Shura members of Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). Once again it was contingents of RAB that effectively synchronised the operations in Dhaka and Chittagong to flush out the two diehard armed cadres of the outlawed group from their hideouts. Though success came after some failed missions carried out all over the country in the past months, it demonstrated government's determination to remain focused on the serious issue. With the arrest of the last two top order cadres the law enforcers have veritably smashed the ring of JMB ideologues.

What remains to be done at this point of time is to ruthlessly uproot the power base of the organisation. And there is a common perception among the political analysts that it would be possible once the main financiers are identified and the conduits of supply are sealed off. The imperative of questioning local politicians who have allegedly provided support is being discussed with due seriousness in open forums. The argument that is being generated tends to point at facts that unless the entire network is obliterated within the shortest possible time the spectre of terrorism in the name of religion will not totally disappear from the country. We have to keep in mind that the JMB operatives had penetrated deep in society to recruit members through infusing the so-called jihadi spirit and turning the young people in to self-destructive mindless monsters.

There obviously is no room for complacency with the grounds covered so far. On the contrary, there is all the more reason to carry forward the terrorist counteroffensive. The curtain on the sordid affair will drop only when the accused will be put on trial and given exemplary punishment. Until then, the government must keep the bridge-heads well fortified to avert any eventuality.

Spare the media

It is just doing its work

CHIEF Election Commissioner Justice MA Aziz has joined the chorus of media bashing originally set afoot by some ministers apparently chagrined at what they deemed to be adverse publicity but in journalistic parlance it is reporting plain truths. Seemingly, trying to grandstand as the key speaker at the AmCham luncheon Tuesday he waxed critical, rather incoherently, against some vested interests and the media as a whole berating them for all the negative news that tended to bring down the country's image, in his view.

There are two things that instantly come to mind: one, he appears, unsurprisingly perhaps, to have gone with the trend of media grilling by a section in the government. Secondly, it is not without significance that he chose a forum with some international audience to say what he had to. There are such misgivings about the way the election commission has been functioning that most people would like to hear him out given the crucial importance of the next general election in our national life.

We wonder where did the media go wrong? It's a question of perception how the mainstream media work is evaluated. We would have thought that by honestly reporting on terrorism, corruption and dysfunctional Anti-Corruption Commission, among other things, we have done service to the nation including the government by keeping it informed from a neutral perspective where its pitfalls lie. That can't be image spoiling. As a matter of fact, much of the good name the country has earned is because of the objective media which has responsibly mixed accolades with warnings where due.

Let's focus on the CEC. His being catapulted on to the centre of public controversy has been his own doing. He did not sit with his two just-retired former colleagues for months together to iron out his differences over the question of electoral roll preparations -- whether it will be revised or a fresh one -- with the result a messy delay is occurring in presenting the nation with a credible voter list. Enter two newly inducted commissioners, he holds a meeting with an assured majority but still keeps the other two commissioners from the important conference. What did the feuding inside a statutory body like the EC which should have worked as a team signal to the people at large? Certainly not a credible image for either the CEC or the EC. If one were to say the CEC has been singularly responsible for eroding his image would he be too wrong?

DR. LIAQUAT ALI KHAN

THE book titled "Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World," questions just about everything Muslims believe as historical truths. It challenges the common belief that the Quran was revealed to Prophet Muhammad over a period of 22 years (610-632) in Mecca and Medina. Instead, the book contends that the Quran was composed, possibly in Syria or Iraq, more than fifty years after the Prophet's death, projected back in time, and attributed to the Prophet.

The Quran, according to the book, was fabricated during the reign of Caliph Abdul Malik (685-705) to legitimize an expanding empire. The book also contends that the word Muslim was invented in the 8th century to replace the word Muhajirun (immigrants), which was the original name of the Arab community that conquered Palestine and built the Dome of the Rock.

The book itself prescribes a new name for early Muslims. It calls them Hagarines, that is, the biological descendants of Abraham by Hagar. This racial naming of early Muslims is employed to distinguish them from Jews, who are the descendants of Abraham by Sarah. Hagarism, the book's title, is a quasi-pejorative, and possibly a racist, label to describe the historical phenomenon of early Muslims.

Running out the clock

STRAIGHT TALK

But the opposition should understand that protecting its vote is only half the game. Eventually it will need to win an election to come to power. Thus, at some point, it will need to come to the table to negotiate the reforms necessary to ensure good elections. And it is unclear that the caretaker government will have either the mandate or the authority to institute such reforms.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

IS there anyone who believes that either the BNP or the AL are sincere in their efforts to come to some kind of agreement with respect to election reform? If so, I have some prime real estate in the middle of the Buriganga that you might be interested in.

Let us reviewed the evidence of the past few months.

The AL returned to parliament after an absence of seventeen months on February 12 and with much fanfare placed its slate of reform proposals before the house.

The proposals were then batted back and forth for over two weeks before the PM on February 28, the last day of the parliamentary session, counter-proposed the formation of a bi-partisan committee to

take up the issue.

The two sides kicked this idea around for another two weeks until on March 15 the AL requested a written proposal for talks from the BNP.

On March 21, the BNP wrote to the AL asking for names for the proposed committee. The AL responded by asking for further clarification from the BNP on the modalities of the dialogue.

The BNP chewed on this for another two weeks and on April 1 finally sent its official proposal for talks to the AL.

No sooner had the BNP complied with its request for an official written proposal outlining the modalities of the dialogue, then the AL announced that it would not sit in dialogue with any member of the

Jamaat.

This position was conveyed formally to the BNP on April 6 after a seven-member committee had apparently toiled for five days on the response.

The BNP mulled this over for the next five days before replying on April 12 that it would choose whoever it wanted to sit on the committee from its side.

On April 16 the AL named its five members for the committee. Since then, nothing.

Are you kidding me? The entire procedure has been like some kind of political kabuki theatre: an elaborate, stylized, ritualized charade. These are not the actions and responses of men and women who sincerely wish to sit together to discuss reform.

Get rich, if you wish

CROSS TALK

A rich man is the exploit of all his exploits as if held on the ransom for as long as he spends. Check the website of the New Internationalist. A Bangladeshi wears diamonds worth \$3 million on his shoes. The per capita income of the country is \$360, which means more than eight thousand lives adorn his feet. Get rich, if you get the kicks, and your feet can be heavy with vanity.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IT is fatuous to ask if you want to get rich, since everybody wants to get rich in this world. They know money cannot buy everything in life. They know the best things in life are free. Yet they want money, because it is fun to be rich. Money defies the gravitation of grief, lifting a man above his earthly needs. No worries for three square meals, roof over head, or falling sick. Being rich brings the true taste of freedom. It puts the mind at ease.

But exactly how much money do you need? Three ultra rich men have assets that exceed the combined gross domestic product of 48 least developed countries. Then come 225 super rich people. Their combined wealth is equal to what

half of the world's population makes annually. What do they do with their money?

Forbes magazine gives some clue. The most expensive yacht costs up to \$300 million to buy plus 10 percent annually to run it. Give three of those yachts to a rich man. Assuming that each one sinks after five years, this will cost him \$270 million a year. The most expensive car is something called a Bugatti Veyron, costing \$1 million. Give three of this car with full-time drivers and frequent maintenance. The cost is around \$4 million a year.

Then give the rich man a roof over his head. Prince Ahlwaleed bin Talal Alsaud has a palace that cost \$130 million. It would be struggle to hit \$100 million a year if one owns five of these houses, including

payments for maintenance, air conditioning and condo fees. Say, one of the houses is on a private island. The most expensive island for sale was listed at \$39.7 million. Give him a new island every year. Then he flies a private jet to the Bahamas every weekend. Calculated at \$40,000 per week, the yearly total roughly adds up to \$2 million, if he does not have a house in Bahamas, put him up in the best hotel. He cannot spend more than \$1 million in 52 weeks.

Throw in a bunch of personal assistants and the protection of the British-trained security agents. The annual bill comes to slightly over \$400 million. An average billionaire is worth \$3.3 billion, which could be gone in less than a decade. But about 90 percent of that is boats and

It is patently apparent that neither side has much real desire to sit down at the negotiating table and actually engage in the difficult task of discussion and compromise to come to a workable resolution acceptable to all.

But is this a wise game-plan for both sides?

On the face of it, the BNP's reluctance to enter into reform discussions seems more understandable. With its popularity plummeting all over the country in response to its woeful record, it is not keen to face the opposition at the polls, so the proposition of an opposition boycott of the election has its attractions.

In addition, to knuckle under to the opposition's demands and be brought to the negotiating table would be seen by the party high command as a loss of face, and, more importantly, runs the risk of creating the perception that the AL is in the ascendancy and that the BNP is losing control.

But the AL's apparent reluctance to enter into discussions to implement its slate of reforms is harder to comprehend.

After all, the opposition needs elections to come to power, and it needs to have at least some of its reform proposals implemented to secure the level playing field that it

has long claimed is necessary to bring this about.

Perhaps the AL is taking cues from the people's power movement in Thailand that successfully unseated the Thaksin government without participation in an election that the opposition had denounced as compromised.

But for this tactic to work, the AL would have to transform its anti-government agitation into a truly national movement, which has not happened yet (though, if the government continues to act as high-handedly as it did in Kansat, it could).

In addition, the risk to the opposition in this strategy is that there is a chance that too much unrest could provide the government with an excuse to impose emergency rule or worse.

But there is more to the opposition strategy than merely hoping the government will implode or be forced to step down through people power.

The main reason the AL remains wary of entering into elections, is that even if the reforms that it has proposed are put in place, it remains unsure that it will be able to protect its voters and secure its votes.

The opposition feels that it must demonstrate that it is capable of

projecting sufficient strength to protect its voters, and this is the reason it has taken to the streets.

Even if people want the government gone, they are not going to stick their necks out and vote them out of office unless they believe that the opposition has the strength to ensure a fair election.

If the government cannot control the streets then it will be unable to control the election, and this is why the opposition feels that it is so necessary to demonstrate its strength on the streets.

But the opposition should understand that protecting its vote is only half the game. Eventually it will need to win an election to come to power. Thus, at some point, it will need to come to the table to negotiate the reforms necessary to ensure good elections.

And it is unclear that the caretaker government will have either the mandate or the authority to institute such reforms.

Running out the clock until the caretaker government thus might ultimately work more to the advantage of the government than of the opposition.

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People's victory in Nepal

MATTERS AROUND US

Undoubtedly, people of Nepal can justifiably boast of conducting a successful movement to restore democracy compelling the King who clearly was hell bent on clinging to power. However, it still remains to be seen how things take shape in the aftermath of the people's victory.

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

A remarkable democratic victory has been accomplished in Nepal, convulsed by a long-drawn people's agitation demanding restoration of representative government. In a significant climb down, King Gyanendra finally agreed to reconvene the elected parliament which he dissolved in 2002 in utter disregard to democratic norms.

Embroided in the months long intense movement marked by weeks of street agitation against his autocratic rule, the beleaguered King initially offered olive branch in the form of asking the seven-party political alliance to name a prime minister since he "intends" to give back power to the people. This went totally unheeded and consequently, he denounced reconvening of the dissolved parliament on the eve of a massive demonstration that looked like threatening the royal palace itself.

Fortunately, belated wisdom

dawned on him and the latest announcement helped quell the exacerbating conditions. That he is calling the parliament for a session on Friday and win go back to ceremonial monarchy expectedly triggered wild celebrations.

The Himalayan kingdom, which so admirably introduced Westminster type democracy in 1990 ending more than two centuries old effective monarchy, but was later robbed off democracy, seems now reverting to people's rule. Indeed, it is a great achievement not only for Nepal, but all democratic forces all over the world. But this has been made possible at a huge cost of lives, much of which definitely could have been avoided had the King realised the gravity of situation a little earlier.

Former prime minister Girija Prasad Koirala, president of the Nepali Congress, which enjoyed maximum seats in the parliament, has been logically named as future prime minister by the political parties. A people's agitation has obviously propelled him to power once

again. But aging Koirala faces a daunting task of putting the nation on the trail of a smooth democratic governance despite its riding on the crest of popular upheaval. Evidently, he faces two main challenges. First, the fate of monarchy, which even as the ceremonial constitutional head, has been reversed, but undeniably lost much of the respect because of the present King's dealing with the affairs of the nation. The parliament session which is expected to announce national elections for a constituent assembly, is faced with the task of deciding the fate of monarchy, and its scope and powers if this is to be retained in Nepal.

The seven-party alliance carried out the anti-King movement in collusion with the ultra leftist "Maoists", who are totally opposed to the existence of monarchy in any form and want to turn the country into a "People's Republic". The political parties are largely at variance with the radicals on this issue. However, the conditions have also changed

by this time and all political parties may not see eye to eye on the monarchy issue even as constitutional head in the aftermath of recent happenings. The monarchy debate poses a big challenge since some people feel the country may continue with the "Twin pillar" of constitutional monarchy and elected government in line with Britain or Japan and many others strongly feel that the "Monarchy concept" must be scrapped altogether.

The second main challenge for the new government will be the sensitive issue of dealing with the "Maoists", who were partners of the seven-party alliance in the agitation, but now striking a different note in their attitude to the King and present situation. They kept themselves away from any celebrations in the wake of King's capitulation to the people's demand as they feel much remains to be done. They have even threatened to impose a blockade in the capital if their views are not taken into account by the new government. By this time the ultras have developed a strong army and control large areas in the countryside. How to deal with the "Maoists" and their policy towards the King is a matter of great significance for the new government.

The new prime minister has also to remember that the brief spell of democratic rule was also marked by political infighting, rampant corruption and revolving-governments that

had largely eroded people's faith in their quality of leadership, which might have encouraged King Gyanendra to step in with absolute powers. Politicians need to take care about their own credibility and refrain from squabbles that earlier caused instability. Koirala's own party Nepali Congress itself was divided when former prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba had led a faction. Deuba was the premier when the King dismissed the elected government on February 1, 2004, in an action that was seen as the last nail in the coffin of democracy in Nepal.

The Nepali Congress does not enjoy a good rapport with the Maoists while the other main political party the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) has better relations with the radicals even though they differ on many matters. The armed actions of the Maoists is not supported by the most political parties and the level of their ties with the ultras may prove to be a very sensitive issue for the democratic government. However, they are aware that they all share the glory of success against the rule of the King and are expected to chart their course with great degree of circumspection. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen how all those involved in the people's movement conduct themselves in the changed scenario while basking in the pride of the success of a landmark agitation. International community particu-

larly two big neighbours, India and China, are believed to have great interest and stakes in Nepal. Democratic India has been supporting the political parties, but also made it known that it favoured twin pillars of ceremonial monarchy and elected government in the Himalayan country. Now India also says that it is up to the people of Nepal to decide on the monarchy itself in the aftermath of the recent developments. China seems to maintain that it would work with the friendly country of Nepal regardless of who is at the helm. It also dismissed any links with the "Maoists" named after the late legendary Chinese leader.

Undoubtedly, people of Nepal can justifiably boast of conducting a successful movement to restore democracy compelling the King who clearly was hell bent on clinging to power. It is expected that the politicians must fully utilise the gains achieved with colossal cost for strengthening democratic edifice and present a spectacle of good governance along with pragmatic steps to resolve the country's myriad problems. The task is difficult, but not impossible. However, it still remains to be seen how things take shape in the aftermath of the people's victory.

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Hagarism: The story of a book written by infidels for infidels

THE book titled "Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World," questions just about everything Muslims believe as historical truths. It challenges the common belief that the Quran was revealed to Prophet Muhammad over a period of 22 years (610-632) in Mecca and Medina. Instead, the book contends that the Quran was composed, possibly in Syria or Iraq, more than fifty years after the Prophet's death, projected back in time, and attributed to the Prophet.

The book itself prescribes a new name for early Muslims. It calls them Hagarines, that is, the biological descendants of Abraham by Hagar. This racial naming of early Muslims is employed to distinguish them from Jews, who are the descendants of Abraham by Sarah. Hagarism, the book's title, is a quasi-pejorative, and possibly a racist, label to describe the historical phenomenon of early Muslims.

In the authors' own words, the book is written "by infidels for infidels." Attacks on the Quran's authenticity, the Prophet's integrity, or Islamic history are not new. The Quran itself acknowledges similar attacks the unbelievers made while

the Quran was being revealed. For more than a thousand years, Western scholarship has been determined to expose what it considers to be the "fraudulent foundation" of Islam. In this sense, Hagarism is yet another book in the large dump of attack literature.

However, what distinguishes this book is the fact that its authors, Michael Cook and Patricia Crone, no longer subscribe to its critical findings. On April 3, 2006, I had a phone conversation with Michael Cook and we talked about Hagarism. He said to me the following, which he later confirmed by means of an email: "The central thesis of that book was, I now think, mistaken. Over the years, I have gradually come to think that the evidence we had to support the thesis was not sufficient or internally

consistent enough."

On April 6, 2006, I interviewed Patricia Crone, as well, to see what she now thinks about the book. She was even more candid in repudiating the central thesis of the book. She agrees with the critics that the book was "a graduate essay." The book was published in 1977 when the authors lived in England. "We were young, and we did not know anything. The book was just a hypothesis, not a conclusive finding," said Crone. "I do not think that the book's thesis is valid."

Many Western scholars, Christians and Jews, have dismissed Hagarism as a "thin argument" rather than "credible research." One historian, however, who appears to admire the book is Daniel Pipes, who has taught at Chicago and Harvard universities.

Pipes, an embittered Zionist known for his ugly utterings against Islam and Muslims, argues that while Western scholars like Crone and Cook "in the role of termites" are eating away at the magnificent Islamic edifice, Muslims are "acting as though the beams and joints were as strong as ever." Even Pipes, however, describes the book as "wild." Notwithstanding scholarly repudiations, Internet websites continue to rely on the book to malign Islam, assuming that the book's thesis is derived from credible research.

Even online Wikipedia features the book, citing a large quotation from Daniel Pipes. The article concludes: "Although this line of research is discounted by Islamic traditionalists, Western scholars have generally applauded Crone

and Cook's advances in tracing the origins of Islam." When I insisted that Wikipedia provide a source to support the above conclusion, the editor added "citation needed" to the conclusion. As of today, no citation to support the conclusion has been furnished.

Part of the confusion arises from the fact that Cook and Crone have made no manifest effort to repudiate their juvenile findings in the book. The authors admitted to me that they had not done it and cater no plans to do so. Repudiating scholarly work is not easy because sometimes errors are intertwined with valid findings. No scholar is obligated to rewrite books to correct errors. Scholarly decency, however, demands that the authors officially repudiate a scandalous thesis, one in which they no longer believe and

one that maligns the faith of more than a billion people.

It appears however that the authors do not wish to discount a book that launched their careers and brought to them contacts and fortune. Patricia Crone teaches at the Institute for Advanced Studies, the academic home of Albert Einstein, an institute that proclaims itself as "one of the world's leading centers for theoretical research and intellectual inquiry." Michael Cook is a chaired professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, who in 2002 (a few months after 9/11 terrorist attacks) received \$1.5 million Distinguished Achievement Award from the Mellon Foundation "for significant contribution to humanities research."

One needs no brains to write against Islam in the Western world. After 9/11, anti-Islamic literature has

become a big business that even acclaimed academics have generously exploited for self-promotion. In this milieu, repudiating even a false anti-Islamic book will be condemned as apostasy. We need not burn the book. Crone and Cook themselves must muster the courage and put out the brushfire they started three decades ago, albeit in youthful excitement.

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