

Qawmi madrasa degree elevated

The process under question mark

BANGLADESH has a long tradition of madrasa education and there has been a clamour for modernising its contents in keeping with the times. Without squarely addressing that particular issue, the government has surprised us all by suddenly opting for equating Dawra degree of Qawmi madrasa with Master's degree in general education. The government has taken such an important decision without recourse to an expert opinion or having held any public discourse on the subject. Thus we wonder whether this has been done with an eye on the general election.

The government has taken a decision of enormous significance whose impact on the future of education in Bangladesh will be very far reaching. We shall reserve our judgment on the prudence of such a decision for the time being, but for now ask the government to inform us what mechanism, the modality or, indeed, the process that it had adopted, if any, in reaching the conclusion to bring the Dawra degree at par with Master's when in the case of general education, none other than the universities and some prestigious colleges are entitled to award this degree.

This is also a very exceptional decision, because, of the two types of madrasas in Bangladesh, the Qawmi has been left entirely on its own and does not allow any oversight of the government of its finance and conduct. We would like to recall here the education minister's comments not very long ago that the government had formed two commissions, separately for general and madrasa education, to bring in reforms in education. We are not aware that the said commissions have submitted their reports. Under these conditions it is only but natural to question the wisdom of drawing an equivalence between the madrasa degree and the Master's, particularly when the Qawmi madrasa is an institution whose curricula, teaching methods, duration of the course stand in need of reform. When even the government's decision to implement the one-track system of education, for justifiable reasons, has been shelved for the time being, a decision we agree with, we can hardly rationalise the government's undue haste in this regard.

There are hardly two months left to the present government's tenure, and the committee proposed by the prime minister, which will have only a month's time to frame the implementation guidelines of this decision, is yet to be formed. Thus will it be wrong to assume that the motivation that led to this decision is driven entirely by electoral consideration?

Flurry of project approvals

With an eye to election?

THE Cabinet Purchase Committee has approved as many as 17 projects, with irregularities identified previously in as many as 15 of them; according to some reports.

Some of the projects were approved and contracts awarded to parties overriding observations made by the Purchase Review Committee. Certain contracts were even awarded to comparatively higher bidder over the lowest, resulting in additional costs to the national exchequer.

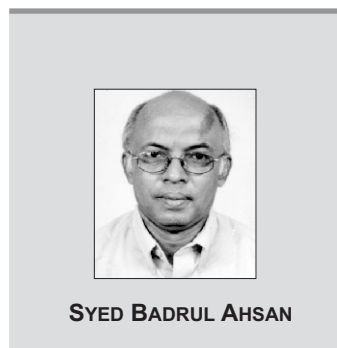
The media in the recent past had raised the issue of alleged flaws in some of these projects including violation of procurement policies. It is evident now that the administration knew of the existence of the alleged weaknesses and irregularities and yet chose to ignore the same.

One does not have to be an expert to understand that contracts approved by ministries and departments wrongfully are bound to have long-term consequences for the nation's socio-economic development.

In the meantime, we remain highly concerned about the possible motive behind approving these projects, evidently in a hurry, with the present regime's tenure, for all practical purposes, coming to an end to be handing over power to a caretaker government on October 28, leading to general election.

If one were to say that the move has been taken in view of the forthcoming national election to benefit some party cronies would one be too wrong? We cannot remember such haste in approving projects at this time of last year. We most sincerely hope that the ruling coalition would refrain from indulging in any act for the remainder of its tenure which can be even remotely be linked to partisan election motives.

Secularism and this "moderate Muslim" state



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

LAW Minister Moudud Ahmed surprised us the other day when he informed the country that the people of Bangladesh had never accepted secularism as a principle of state. And then he surprised us even more. The secularism practised in Bangladesh in the early years of freedom was, said he, a negation of religion.

Now, while we remain quite aware of the niche Moudud Ahmed has carved for himself in national politics since the time of General Ziaur Rahman through some of his swift changes in political loyalty, we surely did not expect him to do, or say, certain things that are simply untrue.

The minister, in his younger days, was close to the Awami League leadership of the time. And he was one of the millions of people in this country who watched the evolution of Bengali politics through the 1960s and well into the 1970s. It is, of course, quite normal for a political being to part company with his political peers and go looking for new places in the sun. Moudud Ahmed has done that. But when such changes in position lead to a total repudiation of history it is a whole society that goes through indescribable pain.

But let us stay away from that for now and go searching for reality as it prevailed in the years between 1972 and 1975. Moudud Ahmed has mocked secularism as it used to be in those times. He implies that

GROUND REALITIES

Religion is a matter of the individual soul. That is where the beauty of secularism lies -- in its ability to make people remember God without having Him descend to the worldly level of dealing with everyday politics. Foreign envoys stationed in this country can cheer as much as they wish the "imam training programs" in Bangladesh. But someone should be telling them that long-term orientations on secular politics would be an infinitely better enterprise to undertake.

secularism was an assault on the religious feelings of people (and such feelings applied, without his having to say so, to the Muslim population of the country). Observe, now, the facts.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and all his colleagues in the Awami League were devout Muslims and prayed as any Muslim would pray. That was surely not a negation of faith, was it? In those days, Ramadan and Eid and all other religious occasions were observed by Bangladesh's Muslims. The state did not clamp any restrictions on religious activities of any kind, or of any denomination or sect. And if the minister and his friends would care to recall, it was Bangabandhu's government which put an end to the quite un-Islamic act of horse racing at what was then known as the Race Course.

Surely such acts were not the activities of men dedicated to a sidelining of Islam in the lives of the majority of the people of this country? In the early 1970s, when true and proper secularism formed the core of our political existence, Hindus, Christians and Buddhists for the first time were able to practise their faiths without fear or inhibition of any kind. And this they were able to do because Bangladesh was a people's republic based on Bengali nationalism, which again was a dissemination of the thought that the state was for all Bengalis, that it had not been created as a homeland for the

followers of a particular faith. In other words, Bangladesh was a rejection of the pernicious two-nation theory the Muslim League had propagated in the 1940s as a justification for the creation of Pakistan, with such horrendous results.

But, of course, Moudud Ahmed and a whole lot of other people in this country today hold forth on the queer idea of "Bangladeshi nationalism." What such an idea implies is not hard to guess. When you remember how ruthlessly, and without any regard for legality, General Ziaur Rahman brought Allah into the constitution, and how crassly General Hussein Muhammad Ershad added flesh to the idea through imposing Islam on the country as a state religion, you can quite understand what the larger objective behind "Bangladeshi nationalism" was.

Briefly, it was a roundabout way of taking the people of this country back to the old idea of communalism that we had struggled against, long and hard, in our years with Pakistan. Mercifully, though, the idea has not taken hold. We still sing Tagore songs, we yet dance to the music of Nazrul and, judging by the way in which we said farewell to Shamsur Rahman last week, we remain committed to the principle that this is a land for Bengalis, that religious and sectarian obsessions of the kind which divided India in the 1940s, and then sent Pakistan packing from our land, are not part of our collective

life. But, of course, there have regularly been the men who have periodically made attempts on this secular ethos in Bangladesh.

Maulana Bhashani, otherwise an outstanding if peripatetic politician in the history of this country, threw the first stone at our secular edifice soon after liberation when he launched his Muslim Bangla movement. That was a frontal assault on a state whose freedom he had only years earlier so steadfastly espoused. Bhashani did not stop there. At a public rally in 1974, he launched a below the belt attack on the respected Phani Bhushan Majumdar by ascribing the on-going food crisis to the presence of the Hindu minister in the government.

And that was how secularism began to be ripped apart. The nationalism that had developed throughout the 1960s, one that envisaged a purely Bengali landscape, was under attack from some rather unexpected quarters. Do not forget that even leftists of the pro-Bengali brand were doing all they could to undermine the cause of the state. Men like Abdul Haq solicited, in 1974, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's assistance in overthrowing the government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It was through these men, these elements, that the deconstruction and destruction of secular politics truly began. It served as a natural corollary to what was to follow. But let the point not be missed that when secularism lay flat on its face in Bangladesh, it was not the

Bengalis who pushed it into the mud. That came by way of the coup makers of August 1975. The damage done on August 15 was nowhere more intense than in the return of the "Zindabad" factor in national politics.

To this day, the inability, or reluctance, of the votaries of "Bangladeshi nationalism" to accept Joi Bangla as the authentic national slogan has only confirmed the wider plan behind the program of banishing Bengali nationalism, and with it secularism, to the woods. When Air Vice Marshal MG Tawab, in his double role as chief of air staff and deputy chief martial law administrator, addressed a "Seerat" conference in Dhaka in 1976, he merely reaffirmed the creeping success of what was clearly revealing itself to be an anti-Bengali trend in this Bengali-speaking country. It was a moment of deep shame for every one of us.

A manifest move was under way to deprive the people of Bangladesh of their heritage. And the heritage was based on a simple fact of history -- that Bengali nationalism was based on language, that this nationalism was not so much rooted in geography as it was in culture. There was a certain malign purpose to this war on Bengali nationalism, as we were to comprehend soon enough. On the one hand, it was a subtle move to take us away from ourselves without informing us overtly that we were indeed returning to the discredited two-nation theory. On the other, it provided a secret passage through which the very elements uncomfortable with Bengali success in the 1971 war could come back into politics and eventually take centre stage.

The Jamaat, the Muslim League and such ragtag elements as those belonging to the Islami Oikya Jote should not have been doing politics in secular, Bengali Bangladesh. But "Bangladeshi nationalism" made sure that they did. We, as a

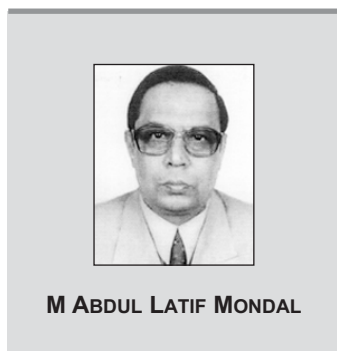
people, have been bleeding since the day Zia and his acolytes welcomed them to national politics in 1979. Ershad went many steps further. He had Islamic motifs painted on the walls of what today constitutes the Prime Minister's Office. And he patronized so-called "pirs" and assorted traders in faith.

But none of that, or anything that happened later, has yanked the Bengali away from his fundamental cultural roots. Moudud Ahmed has certainly the privilege of letting us know that secularism has never been accepted by us. We do not have to agree with him, and we do not. He and his friends in the rightwing coalition government may enthuse over repetitive American happiness about the "moderate Muslim state" that Bangladesh has become. We do not take kindly to such sinister redefinitions of ourselves as a people. Besides, whoever has told these Americans that we have actually mutated from secularism to creeping communalism? We are not amused. It does not make us happy that Hindu, Christian and Buddhist Bengalis are referred to as minorities. It is not exactly thrilling to have a ministry of religious affairs whose preoccupation appears to be helping a political process whereby the secular foundations of the state can be whittled away.

Religion is a matter of the individual soul. That is where the beauty of secularism lies -- in its ability to make people remember God without having Him descend to the worldly level of dealing with everyday politics. Foreign envoys stationed in this country can cheer as much as they wish the "imam training programs" in Bangladesh. But someone should be telling them that long-term orientations on secular politics would be an infinitely better enterprise to undertake.

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Where government ends and ruling party begins



M ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

THE Daily Star of August 16 ran a story under the headline "State offices used for BNP activities" which said: (a) Khaleda Zia, prime minister and BNP chairperson, was using the prime minister's office (PMO) at Tejgaon, Proddhan Montri Bhaban (PMB) at Sher-e-Banglanagar, and Jamuna, the prime minister's evening office (PMEO) at Hare Road, for her party activities ahead of the parliamentary election; (b) She was availing herself of government helicopters to visit different areas in the country for holding public rallies, and seeking votes for her party-led alliance, in the guise of official programs to inaugurate some development works; and (c) the BNP central office in Dhaka was sparingly used for party activities.

The report has further men-

BARE FACTS

Experiences of the past three decades or so in Bangladesh are enough to establish the need for drawing a clear demarcation line between ruling party and governmental activities to ensure transparency in government and develop moral principles among our politicians. Legal steps are necessary to give effect to such demarcation; and the political parties, in particular, the BNP-led alliance and the main opposition AL, should come forward to achieve this objective.

tioned that between December 3, 2003 and October 16, 2005, the prime minister held meetings with the senior, and grassroots level, BNP leaders at PMO, PMB and PMEo, and particularly urged the grassroots level leaders to hold more meetings in the districts, upazilas and unions to gear up party activities to face the opposition's "negative politics" politically. She also held meetings there with the alliance leaders and urged them to work unitedly to ensure victory for the alliance in the parliamentary election scheduled to be held in January, 2007.

Now, a question has been raised as to why all this has been going on. This article, therefore, makes an attempt to discuss the issue.

First, there does not appear to be any law in force that prevents the prime minister, who has been

vested with the chief executive power of the republic, from using her earmarked office(s) for discussing therein her party affairs with the leaders of her party during the tenure of her government.

Second, the prime minister and her cabinet colleagues combine in them dual functions namely, party and governmental functions, and as such they are required to use their offices, circuit houses for discharging party and governmental activities during the tenure of the government.

Third, there does not appear to exist any law that prevents the prime minister from using helicopters, or other modes of transport, to visit different parts of the country to address public meetings, or rallies, to seek public support for her party in any election before, or after, inauguration of development works in the area during the tenure

of her government.

The prime minister's (Remuneration and Privileges) Act 1975, as amended from time to time, simply states that the prime minister, and his/her family, shall be entitled to requisition any mode of transport convenient to him/her for his/her use as well as for the use of his/her family, at government cost.

Fourth, the Election Code of Conduct of Bangladesh, 1996 (notified in the official gazette on April 26, 1996) prescribes the code for the political parties, and contesting candidates, in the general election for the pre-poll period, that is, for the period commencing with the announcement of the election schedule and ending with the declaration of results, says (without mentioning the ruling party) that no candidate, or political party, or anybody on their behalf shall use the government

media, government officers, employees, transport or other state facilities following the announcement of the election schedule. Since the general election in Bangladesh is held under a non-party caretaker government, a reference to the party in power is not required here.

Fifth, it is unfortunate that in the 34 plus years of independence no attempt has been made by the ruling political parties to draw a clear demarcation line between party and governmental functions. Consequently, ruling party activities have been mixed up with governmental activities. We often see a powerful member of the ruling party, who is neither a minister nor a member of parliament, inaugurate government development works, and enjoy VIP protocol.

Last, but not the least, unlike India, the chairpersons/presidents of the political parties which have so far ruled Bangladesh have also held the post of the chief executive of the republic, irrespective of the presidential or parliamentary character of the government. In the absence of a powerful party chief, who is neither the prime minister nor a member of the cabinet, it has not been possible to develop a party watchdog that would oversee whether the cabinet members follow democratic

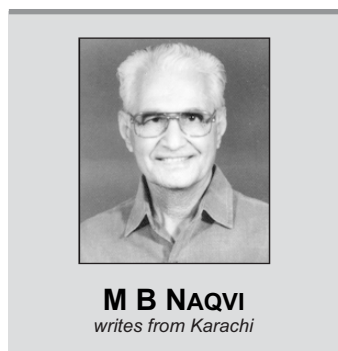
norms and moral values in running the affairs of the government.

I have discussed with some civil society leaders and knowledgeable people the question regarding the prime minister's use of state offices for party activities. They are of the opinion that the question is moral, not legal. They have suggested that, to prevent recurrence of such misuse of state facilities by the prime minister and her cabinet colleagues, legal measures have to be taken to accurately separate the activities of the government and the ruling party. This will help develop transparency in the government work, prevent wastage of public money and develop moral values in the government functionaries and political leaders.

Experiences of the past three decades or so in Bangladesh are enough to establish the need for drawing a clear demarcation line between ruling party and governmental activities to ensure transparency in government and develop moral principles among our politicians. Legal steps are necessary to give effect to such demarcation; and the political parties, in particular, the BNP-led alliance and the main opposition AL, should come forward to achieve this objective.

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Lessons from Lebanon



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

WHILE the ongoing Palestinians-versus-Israelis struggle cannot be downgraded, the Lebanese situation stands by itself. Hizbollah successfully challenged the much vaunted Israeli Defence Forces. It fought them to a stalemate. Even at the time of secession of hostilities -- mind you not "full ceasefire" -- the fighting went on all over southern Lebanon; even the villages close to the Lebanese-Israeli border saw continued fighting. Political conclusions need to be drawn from this epic war.

The US and its allies do not condemn any amount of evil conduct if the US is behind that power. Israel has destroyed the infrastructure of Gaza and Lebanon, deliberately making the civilians, men,

PLAIN WORDS

It is time for South Asia to decide whether the sixty years old quarrel will go on keeping Pakistan and India divided while being partners of America in the War on Terror. One wants to underline a possible alternative idea: should India and Pakistan end their quarrels and evolve a partnership in South Asia, of a non-military kind, that involves averting their gaze from distant horizons to conditions at home, things can vastly improve for both.

women and children suffer which is contrary to all humanitarian laws and norms of warfare. Israel is treated as a civilized democratic state by the West. Israel can apparently do no wrong. Why? Because the US stands four square behind it. Israel's "disproportionate" use of force is kosher. But what is not kosher is resistance to Israel's 40 year old occupation. The message to all is: obey the US and side with it; or else be ready to be targeted and made a victim of disproportionate use of force.

For America, the Israeli oppression, and suppression of, Palestinians is not the Middle East's central problem, whatever else it may be. Israel can use tactics like denying water, electricity and food to a besieged populace under

its occupation. That is quite alright. International law, and agreed rules of war, now mean nothing to the US and its sidekick, Israel.

That the UN took one long month in producing a resolution for "cessation of hostilities" shows that the use of "disproportionate" force by one state against another is now OK; older norms of warfare no longer apply. The Americans justify Israel in the name of fighting terror.

The major conclusion concerns the UN. It has been exposed as an instrument of the US. During the cold war it could keep up appearances, and show some evenhandedness between the two superpowers. That exigency exists no more. It is the US that orders it around.

Denial of the right to resist foreign occupation is a development that the third world should clearly note. The US now terms resistance to foreign aggression and occupation as terrorism. A US-favoured state may abuse human rights in the grossest possible manner. That worries not the US, or UN for that matter. The US wants slaves to simply obey and not revolt.

A consensus is emerging among experts that Lebanon was a proxy war between America and Iran and Syria combined. Others say it was a prelude to a likely war with Iran and Syria. The Bush administration is, however, troubled. Domestic opinion is asserting itself against the unwanted Iraq war. That can hobble the Bush government, provided the opposition shows its mettle in the November Congressional elec-

tions. The Bush administration seems committed to the neo-con vision of America, creating a new Holy Roman Empire that would last a thousand years. This empire will not be colonial in kind. It will mean the global imposition of democracy and capitalism. If America's Big Money gets more profits, so be it.

But a new difficulty is that it may no longer be easy for America to ask Israel to go and blast Iran's nuclear installations: Israel has had a sad experience in Lebanon. Its IDF's deterrent value has been degraded. Only a few think otherwise. It may not undertake a new venture soon even in Syria, let alone Iran.

Even the fear of overreaching imperial power of the US has been dented. Its strategy will be studied realistically after Iraq. But this does not apply to India and Pakistan; these two have already chosen, and they have chosen America. Indians are militarily cooperating with America in preserving the American objectives that are believed to coincide with India's own. What else is the Indian navy doing in the Straits of Malacca?

In this context, the EU has shown itself as a compliant fellow traveler of America. It fails to stand up against the US. As the recent

UNSC resolution on Lebanon has shown, it is unable to influence the US policy; it wanted an early ceasefire and didn't get it. It had to mold itself as best as it could to keep in step with the US.

The Russians have certainly shown some nerve. But they are not anxious to pick a quarrel with the Americans. The Russians are said to be flush with petrodollars and that has enabled them to resuscitate their army to a notable extent; it gives intimations of soon becoming a near superpower. It has, however, no need for premature involvement anywhere.

Similarly, China is a growing power-centre. It does not play second fiddle to the US. But China also refuses to envisage any military clash with the US. It wants to avoid war even on Taiwan. It will only fight if a war is thrust upon it. It wants to go on becoming stronger. To repeat, the ruling elites of both India and Pakistan are happy to be used by Americans. In Pakistan, it is said, only three powers count: Allah, America and the Chief of the Army Staff. There used to be doubts about who actually rules India. The people of India having been slow to assert themselves, the Big Money has advanced from simply being a patron of parties to

becoming a part of the ruling elites.

It is time for South Asia to decide whether the sixty years old quarrel will go on keeping Pakistan and India divided while being partners of America in the War on Terror. One wants to underline a possible alternative idea: should India and Pakistan end their quarrels and evolve a partnership in South Asia, of a non-military kind, that involves averting their gaze from distant horizons to conditions at home, things can vastly improve for both. What is the rationale for Pakistan being a part of the American adventure in Central Asia? Or why should India emulate Pakistan, with appropriate modifications, of course.

What makes one wonder is how large areas of Eurasia still accept American advice, while changes in Latin America and turbulence in the Middle East by Hamas, Hizbollah and the Iraqi insurgents points the other way? The Middle East was, and up to a point still is, an American redoubt. These troublesome new forces demand that the world factors them in.

Most of the Far East was dominated by the American navy. South Korea, Taiwan and Japan supported it; US-Japan alliance anchors them. Australasia is of course a US-friendly expanse. In

South-East Asia no major state opposes America. South Asia used to be outside the ambit of aggressive moves by either superpower during the Cold War, though Americans had succeeded in seducing Pakistan in the 1950s. In the new century, the Indians have partly imitated Pakistan in shaping their attitude to America. Is that the net addition to American superpowerhood? The ugly potential of the two opposing nuclear deterrents, Kashmir dispute and possible new water disputes, may spoil the ointment for America.

Then there is the Chinese factor in South Asia. South Asia poses more questions. One may well wonder if the American strategy of establishing a new Holy Roman Empire can be sustained by the American economy. The answer so far has been yes; it can blithely go on incurring more payment liabilities by importing more, by exporting capital, by spending for military adventures abroad, for buying political support abroad. All they have to do is to write cheques on themselves. But the rise of the Euro and the Yen is threatening it. However, that is another subject.

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