

**DHAKA FRIDAY SEPTEMBER 8, 2006** 

# An auspicious night

### Pray for collective wellbeing

AILATUL Baraat, the night of prayers and penance is before us. Muslims throughout the world will tonight spend hours on the prayer mat seeking divine blessings for the future and forgiveness of the Almighty for any wrong done, wittingly or unwittingly, in the year gone by. For, we believe, there is a divine value judgement of what we did in the preceding year and how our destiny is going to be shaped for the next year. It's also a night when we pray for personal and collective wellbeing, better guidance for our mundane lives and salvation of the souls of the dead. Allah's doors to benevolence and mercy are open tonight to the supplicants.

Lailatul Baraat, popularly known as Shab-e-Barat, also marks the prelude to the holy month of Ramadan. It's a preparatory 15-day interlude between Lailatul Baraat and the month of self-abnegation. So, in a way, it heralds the triumph of the spirit over matter.

The essence of the occasion will be lost on us if we should confine our observance to lighting candles, displaying fireworks or distributing halwa and roti in a merrymaking extravaganza of rituals. In fact, bursting crackers could mean physical hazards and should therefore be avoided.

Only prayers bereft of righteous action cannot lead to mankind's salvation. In keeping with the spirit tonight, we must resolve to cultivate consideration for others, swathed in a spirit of fellow feeling and camaraderie; be prepared to share not just wealth but also poverty with others; and work for common good through peace and rejection of violence in all forms.

The Muslim world is going through a challenging time. There are concerns for Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Kashmir -- the list can grow longer. On the other hand, there is a fanatical view of religion being fed on misrepresentation of Islam which is raring to erupt in violent forms. One of its ramifications is the political use of Islam. At the other extreme, while armed militancy is preached and practiced by a minuscule minority, it is through this keyhole that Islam is seen by many in the West. Which is why it often gets misunderstood, profiled and stereotyped. All this has to go.

## Mounting police highhandedness

#### We must see an end to it

HE police brutality unleashed on Wednesday on the

demonstrators during the opposition-called siege programme was shocking and outrageous, however much the authorities might try to justify it. The police action was so unbridled that they went as far as to severely beat up Saber Hossain Chowdhury, political secretary to the leader of the opposition and ex-member of parliament, even after he had revealed his identity to the men in uniform. This makes us wonder whether the police were acting under some political diktat.

Demonstration, siege, rally etc. are widely accepted opposition programmes in a democracy. In Bangladesh, the ruling party BNP had declared similar programmes when it was in the opposition. But once in power the party members seem to have grown extremely intolerant of the democratic norms and principles remaining steadfast in thwarting all avenues for the growth of a pluralistic polity in the country.

We have observed that whenever opposition politica



ZAFAR SOBHAN

POLOGIES. I know that you are here as head of the NDI delegation and not in your capacity as a former Senate majority leader or indeed as a leader of the Democratic Party, but this is the capacity in which I am writing to you.

Over the next four days I would imagine that you will be meeting with dozens of knowledgeable experts and officials, all of whom will be keen to share their opinion and assessment of the credibility of the up-coming elections with you, and I most likely will not have much to add to your understanding of the situation on the ground here.

But it is not often that I get the chance to write a column that might reach the eyes of an influential (still presume) member of the Washington establishment, and so I propose to make the most of this opportunity. No offence to your distinguished colleagues in the delegation, and no disrespect intended to the delegation's mission.

Here goes. Bangladesh isn't the only country with crucial elections coming up. This November, there are Congressional elections in the US, in which the Democratic Party stands a fair chance of retaking control of both the House and the



This is a mistake, and a real opportunity for the Democratic Party. American policy visa-vis Bangladesh can be used as a good synecdoche for what is wrong with US policy in the Muslim world as a whole. Democrats need to make the argument that the US has nothing to gain and much to lose from refusing to take an uncompromising stand when it comes to terrorism in countries like Bangladesh.

Senate

Come what may, it is true that President Bush will remain in the White House through 2008, but the possibility of wholesale change at the Congressional level, and the potential repercussions for the 2008 presidential election, make the up-coming elections the most interesting and important mid-term polls since 1994

An open letter to Tom Daschle

If President Bush's Wednesday night speech, in which he asked Congress to authorize military commissions to try 14 high-ranking terror suspects now in CIA custody who are being transferred to Guantanamo Bay, is any indication, the Republicans once again plan to make the elections about security and hope to paint the Democrats into a corner.

Once again, the Democrats will be portrayed as soft on terror if they attempt to oppose the legislation sent to them by the president proposing new rules for these commissions, even though the proposed rules contain many provisions that are questionable from a civil liber ties and due process perspective.

You know as well as anyone how easy it has been for the Republicans to demonize the Democrats as soft on terror in the past. For what it's worth, here is an idea as to how the Dems might want to play the terror card in November:

Don't waste your time talking are some portions that I would take about the legality of NSA intercepts exception to, it is certainly worth a or Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay look or disappeared Muslims. It may be Let me back up a little further and the right thing to do, but it won't win start with my thesis: When it comes you any votes. Doing so will only to the war on terror, the Bush reinforce the popular notion that administration has pursued a policy

Muslim countries.

foreign policy, though, crucially, I

would argue that they are anti-

Republican, not anti-American per

simply more comfortable with the

more right-wing elements in these

countries. But while this was fine

The Bush administration is

that has made Americans less safe, Republicans care about keeping America safe, while Democrats not more care about the constitutional rights of terrorists But, you know, there is another way of countering Bush when it

comes to the war on terror, one that might resonate better with the American public. Try it on for size: Bush, and by extension the Republicans, is soft on terror, and

his policies have made America weaker, not stronger Now, this is an argument that the Democrats have never explicitly tried to put forward, despite the fact that it has the virtue of both being true and also stakes out a position

to Bush's right on the war on terror. which is not a bad place to be if the idea is to connect with the American voter And, interestingly enough, Bangladesh is a good case study to

during the Cold War, there's a new help make this point. war on now, and it is time for Let me back up a little and begin America to update its play-book. I by drawing your attention to an quess it is hard to switch mind-sets article written by Selig Harrison in the Washington Post on August 2. I am not sure if you have had a chance to read it, but, while there

time for such action is long overdue. Also, of course, there is the conventional wisdom that, at least in the Arab world, the liberal democrats are all losers who have no popular base, and the Bush administration's anxiety not to appear to

be anti-Muslim. For this reason, all over the Muslim world, the Bush administration has failed to join hands with the real democratic reformers and continues to do business with retrograde and reactionary forces and regimes who are playing the US for fools (see, e.g., Pakistan). Now, Harrison makes the point that in Pakistan, the US may not have a better option, but in Bangladesh it does.

Let me be perfectly blunt: the The Iraq war is only the most principal problem when it comes to spectacular example of this, but the terrorism in Bangladesh is that truth is that the entire Bush policy there are links between elements in on terror, such as it is, has been the ruling alliance and the extremmisconceived from the beginning. ists, including international terror The problem is that the Bush networks, and it is under four-party administration remains uncomfortalliance rule and with the support able with the liberal democrats in and shelter of elements within the One, these alliance, that the extremists have liberal democrats are usually far too been able to establish themselves left-wing for them, and two, they are in Bangladesh. viscerally and vocally opposed to Don't get me wrong. I do not Bush's hawkish and unilateralist

mean to suggest that the entire Bangladesh government is soft on terror. Far from it. In fact, during your time here you will meet, or perhaps may already have met, many people of good conscience from within the ruling alliance, who would like to see tougher measures taken against terrorism, and privately fret that the administration's approach to fighting terror is insufficient

Some Democratic and moderate and suddenly turn on groups and organizations that the US has been Republican congressmen and funding for decades and who until women have periodically raised the 9/11 seemed like loyal allies, but the issue with the Bush administration.

but it seems clear that the Bush administration has no desire to put pressure on the Bangladesh government to clean house

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The benefits would be two-fold: One, it could help create a terror-

free polity in Bangladesh, which is surely the goal of every person in the country, as well as of all our well-wishers in the international community.

Please note that this need not be seen as taking sides in a partisan conflict, as there is no shortage of embattled members of the ruling alliance who would like to see stronger action taken against those with connections to terror, and would be grateful for a helpful hand.

Two, the issue could be expanded into the beginning of a Democrat strategy for the war on terror, conspicuously absent at present, that stakes out a position to the right of the Bush administration (and, by extension, the Republican Party), and emphasizes that the current US policy when it comes to tackling terror is anything but sound and uncompromising

It's worth a shot.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star

**Dialogue of the deaf** 



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

• OMPARE the government to a driving license, and it expires on October 27, 2006. The license can be renewed in the next election, but in the meantime we need somebody to take us around. But not everybody is happy with the temporary appointment. Some of us believe we have got the right man. Others don't wish to ride with him.



For this nation, that storm had come and gone in 1971. And the politicians have been sniffing on each other ever since then. Everybody talks, nobody listens. Many discussions, but no conversation. Lots of voice, not enough choice. The French have a name for it. They call it dialogue de sourds. In English, it means dialogue of the deaf. Only the people can break this deadlock. They need to start talking. The politicians will not care if the people get hurt unless the people also start hurting them.

opposition has warned that there will be no election until their demands are met. The ruling party is also behaving like a stick in the mud. No reforms in the caretaker government, no changes in the Election Commission, and the voter list is as good as it gets. Take or leave it, the underlying message from the ruling party clear. Either go to the polls on these terms, or go to hell That takes politics back to the shaggy-dog story. In the next few weeks, the government is going to handover power to the caretaker government. The opposition will try to resist it. The ruling party will push for the election. Again, the opposition will try to resist. Perhaps in the midst of blood and thunder, we shall be back to square one, once again confrontation being our besetting sin.

is trapped in the liar paradox. Let me explain what it means. For example, let us say a politician says that all politicians are liars. What he says shouldn't get credence because the speaker himself is a politician.

So what is the moral of it? Wel simply says that when politicians attack each other, they in fact countervail themselves. When one liar

government is the latest example of how the politicians are always eager to find the cause for a fight, not so eager to find the fight for a cause. They either believe in the fight or in the cause, but seldom in both at the same time. In all fairness, the fight over the caretaker government, and then the subsequent arrogance of both sides leading to the current stand-off, are the clear signs of dysfunctional politics. The opposition leader made her case in the parliament and then left without waiting to listen

The controversy over the caretaker

Commission, the playing with fire in politics hasn't changed over the Kansat, Shonir Akhra, and Phulbari, and the dog and pony show with a former dictator, chipped away the credibility of politicians. If we think of both sides on the political divide, the misdemeanors are equally shock-

Yet each side claims to have the people with them, each side having showdowns of popular support in strikes, demonstrations, political meetings, and rallies. Even more, each side has intellectual minds defending their story. Read newspapers, watch TV, listen to seminars, workshops and roundtables and see how intelligent people eloquently debate in support of their political footholds.

years. Even today, it looks for confrontation, not for compromise. because we have failed to separate the belly from the heart. Once, we saw the caretaker government as a keeper. Now we

see it as a usurper. Why? It is because we couldn't come out of the liar paradox. There is a story about why the dogs sniff each other. Many years ago it was customary amongst the dogs to leave their tails outside the doors before they went to sleep at night. One night a storm came and mixed up the tails. That explains why one dog sniffs on another. He wants to find his own lost tail.

parties declare a programme on the roads, police invariably resist the demonstrators with the use of force that is disproportionate to the level of opposition activism. Besides, demonstrators are never armed like the police.

The high-handed approach of the police on the roads during political programmes leaves the question in the mind: Is this the only way that the police are trained to control crowds -- by mercilessly beating up unarmed people, including women?

In a democratic set up, demonstrations are part of bonafide political activities and therefore there must be acceptable methods of handling the same. Examples may be taken from other countries, especially Thailand in recent times, where the police handle high-pitch demonstrations with calm and great effectiveness.

We have to keep in mind that expression of dissent is a necessary feature of democracy and this has to be given a proper channel of outlet.

That, in a nutshell, is a quick overview of the political controversy surrounding the caretaker government, which is to be headed by the immediate past chief justice. Throw in other complications. The reforms in the caretaker government, the dispute over the Election Commission, the unreliable voter list, then the idiosyncrasies of our political leadership. What we have is the recipe for disaster. We are hopping from crisis to crisis.

Now that two sides have locked their horns, the future looks iffy. The

It tells us that there is lot of fat in the fire of politics. In fact, our politics

blames another liar, the lie gets bigger and more confusing. It's simple arithmetic that negatives add up into larger negatives. That is what has happened for thirty-five vears. Negatives piled up and nothing came out of it.

The contradiction is that year after year our politics has reorganized its molecules but maintained the status quo. It has been the same undiminishing imbecility that bluffs people into an organized frenzy and then thoroughly disgraces their trust reposed in politics. It has been the same old story again and again.

to what the leader of the parliament wanted to say. It was surely a breach of parliamentary courtesy. Then the farcical exchange of letters, followed by all that buffoonerv over the protocol of meeting. turned the whole thing into a circus. But the freak shows on the side have made things worse. The clownish acts of the Election

is it possible? The HOW Japanese have a word, haragie, It refers to the hara, the belly, which is in Japanese culture, what the heart is in the Western tradition. Haragei therefore, is the art and politics of the gut. The point is that people get involved in politics for two reasons and two reasons only. Either they are driven by the grumble in their bellies or the rumble in their hearts. Compare these two streams to deaf

two rivers and you come to think of Heraclitus. He said 2,500 years ago that you cannot put your foot into the same river twice. What he meant was that every moment the water flowed, it was a different river. It is unfortunate that we have put our

both feet in the stagnant water. Our

For this nation, that storm had come and gone in 1971. And the politicians have been sniffing on each other ever since then Everybody talks, nobody listens. Many discussions, but no conversation. Lots of voice, not enough choice. The French have a name for it. They call it dialogue de sourds. In English, it means dialogue of the

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Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker

# No, not through religion



KULDIP NAYAR writes from New Delhi

HOEVER advised Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to have a meeting with Muslim religious leaders did not serve him well. One, there is no recognised religious leader in the community. There are only a few institutions ploughing a lonely furrow. Two, the influence of religious leaders is more negative than positive. They issue too many fatwas which evoke controversy, not consensus.

Yet the verv idea of a secular polity, mixing religion with the law and order problem, has serious repercussions. The prime minister's meeting has established a court of appeal of sorts. Unwittingly, the exercise has put the entire Muslim community in the dock,

# BETWEEN THE LINES

The fact is that there are chinks in our pluralistic policy. We must analyse where the nation has gone wrong, and why some Muslims have become so desperate that they have opted to become part of the network which they had shunned in the past. We should also find out how the contamination began, and when. Some say it was after the demolition of the Babri masjid while some attribute it to the happenings in Gujarat. Both arguments may well be true. I think they are contributory factors. The real reason is economic. Muslims' share in the cake has been very small. They have been left to fend for themselves.

while the Mumbai bomb blasts was it a move to win over the Muslims? the handiwork of only a few. Manmohan Singh was, however,

If terrorism is the determining on the right track when he factor the government should have addressed state chief ministers and had a meeting with Sikh religious advised them "to treat the commuleaders when Punjab was burning. nity with sensitivity." This was long overdue. The Muslim community is Similarly, Nagaland is all Christian. No religious leader has been assotreated indiscriminately and the sins of Pakistan still visit them. ciated with the talks on the question of autonomy for the Nagas. When True, the nation has been shocked Manmohan Singh resisted a meetto find terrorists among Indian ing with religious leaders in the past Muslims because the impression -- it was to discuss the anti-America so far has been different: they were praised for not responding to the feeling among the Muslims following the visit of President Bush to Taliban's call for iihad in their fight in India -- why did the prime minister Afghanistan and the community agree to meet them this time? Was was appreciated for having kept

themselves away from the happenings in Kashmir.

To put the blame on the Muslim community, or to pick up "Muslim suspects" at random, as had been done after Mumbai blasts, is not to deal with the problem squarely. This is, in fact, what the al-Qaeda wants so that it may recruit, from the community, the innocent who go through untold indignities and troubles at the hands of the police almost daily

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have become so desperate that they have opted to become part of the network which they had shunned in the past. We should also find out how the contamination began, and when. Some sav it was after the demolition of the Babri masiid while some attribute it to the happenings in Gujarat. Both arguments may well be true. I think they are contributory factors.

The real reason is economic Muslims' share in the cake has been very small. They have been left to fend for themselves. Lack of education explains a lot about the backwardness of Muslims. But when the affluent from among them left for Pakistan after partition, the

artisans, craftsmen and the like stayed behind because they did not want to leave the land of their forefathers. They could not afford education for their children who were also extra hands to add to the meagre income. The government

Unfortunately, education was not on the priority list of postindependent government. Special attention to the minorities was not even considered pertinent. I do not know why India's first education minister, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, could not have his way when

he reportedly proposed some "weightage" for Muslims. Besides education, there are many other fields where Muslims have felt discriminated against, particularly while finding accommodation. They have to live in certain localities where they are bound to acquire the ghetto mentality

Even in the redress of grievances they find the authorities treating them with disdain. That the community has been used as a vote bank is nothing new. This has happened election after election. Promises made to them were mere promises. On the other hand, the Muslims who were on the defensive for nearly four decades have begun to speak up. They were held responsible for the partition which the majority community felt had brought all the ills. But their argument now is that two generations had paid the price, if that was what was sought to be exacted. In any case, the youth believe that the "sins of their forefathers should not visit them."

#### Why should they be denied their due?

Whenever Hindu-Muslim riots have broken out, the Muslim community finds that the authorities are generally on the side of Hindus and,

at some places, the police even help them. Many commissions have pointed this out in their reports but no action has been taken against the erring policemen or their superiors. All this is true and probably more. The Muslim community has every right to feel bitter. But the betrayal of the country by some of its members is unthinkable. Some Hindus also have done so but seldom in the name of reliaion. The blasts at Varanasi,

Bangalore, Delhi, and now in Mumbai have not only tarnished the image of Muslim community but have made the BJP and other Sangh parivar members say: "We told you so." The RSS efforts to convert pluralistic India into a theocratic state was strengthened. The problem with the parivar is that it has not yet appreciated the pluralistic ethos of the country and it goes on communalising every facet and field of India The few Muslim terrorists remind

me of Sikh terrorists who were able to spoil the peace in Punjab for many years. Bhindranwale was a symptom, not the disease. Still, the entire community suffered terribly That was India's saddest period. I want to offer the same advice to

the Muslim terrorists as I did in the case of Sikh terrorists long ago, During my recent trips to the US and the UK, I repeated it. The few Muslims who have been driven to terrorism because of the "circumstances" should realise that the government and the country are two separate entities. Mistakes of one should not visit the other. Governments can be changed through the ballot box as we did in 1977 and defeated the mighty Indira Gandhi. But the harm rendered to the country is irreparable.

Likewise, the Muslim community should realise that their grievance is against the government which can be changed through the ballot box. Any harm to the country is indefensible. As Jawaharlal Nehru said: "Who dies if India lives and who lives if India dies?" Our forefathers sacrificed all to free the country from bondage. Now it requires peace and unity for economic development. By indulging in killings and destruction, we only stall its progress.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.