

Bravo Yunus: You have made the nation proud

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SYED MUAZZEM ALI

MUHAMMAD Yunus: you have done it. You have made the nation proud. The great news comes at a time when the nation has been passing through uncertainty due to the political crisis that threatens the holding of the next parliamentary elections.

Your victory is a victory for yourself, for the Grameen Bank that you founded, and for the millions of members who have benefited from it and continue to benefit from it.

It is also a ray of hope for all the poor countries and the poor people around the world. The Nobel Prize Committee, while conferring this award to you, had rightly noted that: "Across cultures and civilizations, Yunus and Grameen Bank have shown that even the poorest of the poor can work to bring about their own development."

Millions of your admirers at home and abroad had been waiting for this day for the last 14 years. I remember that the American magazine Rolling Stone, in its issue of September 17, 1992, carried a detailed interview of Bill Clinton, at that time the governor of Arkansas and a presidential nominee, who had emphatically proposed your name for the Nobel Prize.

The interviewer William Greider had been intrigued that an American politician was familiar with the Grameen Bank and its micro-credit program. Bill Clinton had clarified that he had first heard your name through his wife Hillary's room-mate at college, and that, thereafter, he and Hillary had invited you to Little Rock, Arkansas, to discuss how micro-credit lending programs could help some of the poor rural communities in his state, which is one of the poorest in the United States.

Late Mr SM Ali, the founding editor of The Daily Star, had been so excited about the Rolling Stone story that he had written an article entitled: "Proposal for Nobel prize for Yunus: Clinton suggests a radical approach to development based on Grameen Bank model," in the daily on September 19, 1992.

All had pointed out that: "It won't be that unusual a choice as some may think," and had recalled that American agriculturalist Norman Borlaug had won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 for his work "in producing the high-yield variety of wheat that rescued Asia from famine and paved the way for a green revolution."

They were "geared to the grass-roots development in the Third World by changing the realities which poor farmers and people with hardly any income had been taught to accept for generations."

It is gratifying to note that the committee has finally accepted this view. They have acknowledged that the Grameen Bank and its micro-credit system have worked not only in Bangladesh but also in other parts of the world, including the richest countries of the world.

Micro-credit, as you have yourself acknowledged, is not a panacea for all poverty reduction problems. It is the beginning to an end, and not an end by itself. Yes, Grameen has revolutionized the lives of so many and yet we, as a nation, have so far made only minuscule progress towards poverty-reduction and social development.

Poverty is a curse which diminishes an individual's faith in his capability and, in turn, perpetuates inequality. The inequality threatens the social fabric, and



jeopardizes peace and security in any society. Lasting peace cannot be achieved in any country unless the largest segment of its population is given the opportunity to break out of poverty. This award is a great opportunity, and a responsibility, for Bangladesh. The Nobel Prize Committee has given us this unique recognition, and we must meet their expectations by eradicating poverty from our country.

have achieved less than desired results. Yet, you have shown that Grameen not only works but can also adapt to the changing world. Grameen alone cannot achieve sustainable poverty reduction in a country like Bangladesh where more than half the population lives below the poverty line. This is a challenge for the whole nation.

Syed Muazem Ali is a former Foreign Secretary.

From 2001 to 2006

The list of differences is longer than the similarities between the two governments. In fact, they both showed great hostility toward each other during their last year in power. In terms of differences, however, it remains to be seen what role the media and the president play during the rest of the election season.

MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

FRIDAY, October 13, 2006, far from being unlucky, was the sweetest of all Fridays for Bangladesh since its birth in 1971. Professor Yunus and his Grameen Bank won the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize on this day.

The honour accorded to Professor Yunus and his Grameen Bank makes the Bangladeshi nation proud. In the local media, however, the event was well summed up: "Another victory for Bangladeshi nation, after the liberation war in 1971." Good for you Professor Yunus. We wish you a long and healthy life.

For such an emotion-choked nation, I wonder, is it the right moment to dwell on politics? However, the dust will settle soon and the nation has to go back to its original position of anxiety and chaos of the present mess.

In all democracies, rich and poor, holding general elections successfully is one of the major prerequisites for a meaningful democracy. More importantly, both the incumbent government and the opposition parties during the election year take extreme care in engaging with the electorate.

In the election year, in particular, the performance of the incumbent government comes under sever scrutiny by the voters. This is why, in all the mature democracies, the incumbent tries not to mess around with the people, but tries to bribe them either by providing financial incentives with tax cuts or making provisions for other kinds of election-winning sweeteners.

In Bangladesh, however, the experience has been quite the opposite. In 2001, AL was in government and this year BNP-led alliance is in power.

On both the occasions, the incumbent governments seemed indifferent as regards making the

voters happy. On the contrary, they had been found to be more interested in self-indulgence. In being so, surprisingly, there have been more differences than similarities between the 2001 and 2006 election seasons, in terms of devising new strategies for robbing people.

Similarities

In 2001, the AL government, in spite of having numerous achievements under its belt, suffered a severe blow in the election for failing on the law and order front. The most important among them was a sudden rise of Islamic fundamentalist activities, for example, Udichi bombing in Jessore, bombing of CPB meeting at Palltan, bombing at Narayanganj office of the AL, and bombing at Ramna botomol on the morning of Pahela Baishak (Bengali new year).

This year (election season again), the BNP-led alliance government, having some achievements initially in the area of environment (eradicating poly bags from the market and introducing CNG-driven three wheelers in Dhaka city), they have miserably failed to control the price hike of essential goods and services and have also failed to provide adequate power supply to the nation.

Differences

A piece by Nazim Kamran Chowdhury in 2001 predicted that the incumbent AL government would lose the next election with a huge margin against then newly formed 4-party alliance led by the BNP. Subsequently, the prediction of Mr. Chowdhury came true.

A recent piece by the same author (DS Oct 6) on the subject of poll prediction for the next general election has given birth to intense interest in the media. The prediction suggests that, out of the total population surveyed, less than half of the

population has already made up their minds on voting for the next general election. The rest remains undecided. Out of the survey results, Mr Choudhury this time predicted a landslide win for the AL with more than 180 seats. One wonders why.

People are pretty much unanimous in their view on at least four areas where the incumbent has failed although there were immense opportunities for progress during the last five years. These areas are: failure in controlling prices of essentials, rampant corruption in the government, alleged interference from outside (government within a government), extra-judicial killings, and last but not the least, the failure in executing the death penalty inflicted on the leaders and activists of the JMB.

The media (electronic and print) played an important role in influencing public opinion in 2001 general election. This happens in all democratic societies. The media rightly or wrongly support a party/alliance in the general election. In 2001, an influential section of the electronic media humiliated the AL government with a program called "Shabash Bangladesh."

Many commentators were of the opinion that this TV program was highly successful in influencing the voters in deciding against the then incumbent government led by the AL. In the case of print media, almost without exception the popular newspapers sided with the then BNP-led opposition in writing editorials and directed the voters to vote for the 4-party alliance to bring down then AL-led government.

This year, at this moment, it is too early to detect any such direction of the print media. However, one can guess from various editorials of the popular Bangla and English dailies in recent months that they are very disappointed in the incumbent with regard to the four issues mentioned above. It remains to be seen this time what kind of direction the popular newspapers have in store for the undecided voters.

head of the state. During the present regime led by Begum Zia, she appointed two presidents who were closely associated with her party (one of them was the founder secretary general of the BNP). Dr B Chowdhury, however, after becoming the president, wanted to be a neutral man with his newfound wisdom which the constitution desires. The rest of the story is well known. The present president was closely aligned with BNP politics in the past, but it remains to be seen what role he plays in the next election.

In conclusion, of course, the list of differences is longer than the similarities between the two governments. In fact, they both showed great hostility toward each other during their last year in power. In terms of differences, however, it remains to be seen what role the media and the president play during the rest of the election season.

Mr. Kamran Chowdhury's survey suggests more than half of the voters at this stage are undecided. Certainly, this huge number of voters are likely to be the makers of the next government, if the election is held in a free and fair manner.

Finally, I must say that, in my opinion, it was wrong on the part of the media in 2001 to direct the voters to go for an alliance that comprises the Islamists and their goons for governing the nation. Certainly, the nation has had to pay a high price. I hope the media have the courage to recognize their mistakes. The observers are watching the media with great interest to assess what role they play this time in moulding people's perceptions and beliefs.

The author is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Lailat-ul-Qadr

SYED ASHRAF ALI

WE celebrate Lailat-ul-Qadr on the auspicious night of the 27th Ramadan. But nobody knows definitely on which particular night in the holy month of Ramadan did the Great Revelation come down to the benighted world.

Abu Sa'id al-Khudri said: "God's Messenger spent the first ten nights of Ramadan in devotion, and spent the middle ten nights in devotion in a round Turkish tent, after which he raised his head and said, 'I have spent the first ten nights in seeking this Night, then I spent the middle ten nights in devotion and after that I had a heavenly visitant and was told that it is in the last ten: so he who was engaged in devotion along with me should do so during the last ten nights, for I was shown this Night, then was caused to forget it, but I have seen myself prostrating in water and clay on the morning following, so seek it among the last ten and seek it in every night with an odd number'."

It was on the auspicious Lailat-ul-Qadr, the Night of Power or Honour or Majesty that the holy Quran, the most blessed and perfect of all revelations, was vouchsafed to the benighted world. By revelation, of course, is meant the first revelation

because the holy Quran was revealed in portions during twenty-three years. The real merit of this blessed Night has been expounded in the holy Quran.

Lailat-ul-Qadr occupies a unique position in the Islamic calendar. It was this blessed Night of Majesty which first witnessed the shining of the divine light which was destined to illumine the whole world. This night of grandeur or greatness, better than a thousand months, is indeed a night of great wonders and divine blessings.

"Peace" indeed is the chief distinction of Lailat-ul-Qadr. This "Peace" comes to the hearts of the devotees in the form of a tranquillity of mind which makes them fit to receive Divine Blessings. When the Night of spiritual darkness is dissipated by the Glory of Benign Providence, a wonderful peace and a sense of security arise in the soul.

All jars are stilled in the reign supreme of peace. "And this lasts on", in the words of Maulana Yusuf Ali, "until this life closes, and the Glorious Day of the new spiritual world dawns, when everything will be on a different plane, and the chequered nights and days of the world will be even less than a dream".

Lailat-ul-Qadr, the blessed Night in the Great Revelation of the Most Gracious and the Most Merciful Allah "broke through the darkness of the human soul" and the holy Quran, the perfect code of human life, reached mankind as message of "Mercy from the Lord".

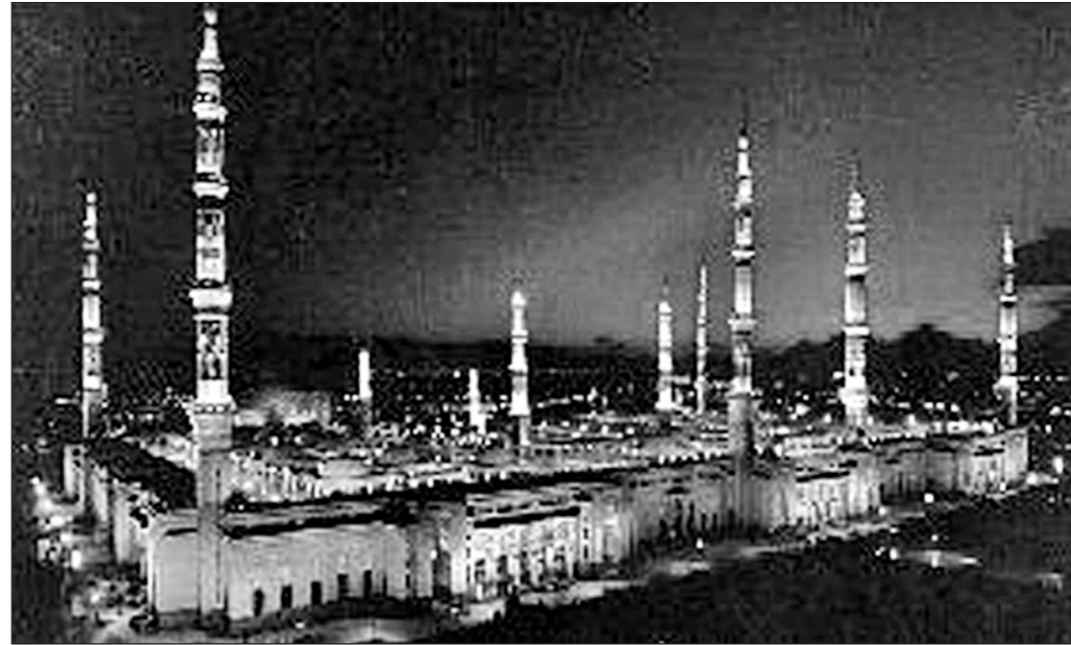
Blessed indeed is this Night of Power. The divine importance of this Night of Grandeur is so great that the holy Prophet (peace be upon him) himself declared, "He who spends the Lailat-ul-Qadr through prayers, in full faith, shall have all his previous sins and guilt forgiven".

It is not, however, the worldly pleasures and physical comforts that one should ask for on this holy Night. What a man should pray for in this blessed Night is forgiveness and Allah's forgiveness alone. Nothing can be more pleasant, nothing can be more beneficial, nothing can be sweeter than the Glorious Mercy of the Most Gracious and the Most Merciful Allah.

Hazrat Ayesha Siddiqua (RA) said, "I asked the holy Prophet (peace be upon him) what to say during the Night on the assumption that I knew it was the Night."

The holy Prophet (peace be upon him) replied, "One should say: 'Lord! You love forgiveness, so forgive me.'"

Syed Ashraf Ali is former DG of Islamic Foundation Bangladesh.



The night of honour

KAZI AULAD HOSSAIN

AL QURAN was revealed unto the holy Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (peace be upon him) for the guidance of the mankind. But what was the time when Merciful Allah was graciously pleased to reveal the Quran unto the holy Prophet (pbuh)? The time of revelation of Al Quran suggestively was Shab-e-Qadr -- the 27th night of the lunar month of Ramadan, and we must remember that this particular Night of Honour is the greatest of all nights in the Islamic calendar.

In this connection, we may refer to five Ayats (verses) of Sura (Chap-

ter) Qadr (or honour) of the Holy Quran as indicated below:

Ayat 1: "We have indeed revealed this (Message) in the Night of Honour."

Ayat 2: "And what explain to thee what the Night of Honour is?"

Ayat 3: "The Night of Honour is better than a thousand months."

Ayat 4: "Therein comes down the angels and the Spirit by Allah's permission on every errand."

Ayat 5: "Peace ... This until the rise of morn'."

It may be mentioned here that we observe the Night of Salvation or Shab-e-Barat in accordance with the instructions given by our holy

Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (pbuh) and the position of Laila-tul-Qadr (or the Night of Honour) is unique and without any parallel.

We must take fullest advantage of important Sura Qadr through offering of special prayers and recitation of the Holy Quran during the sacred night of Laila-tul-Qadr and supplicate Merciful Allah for forgiveness of our sins and also for salvation of our souls. Let us observe this sacred night with due solemnity.

Kazi Aulad Hossain is a retired govt high official.

Understanding Islam and Quran

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

THE Quran, revealed by Allah, is the light to guide one toward becoming a civilized man or woman, but one should study and understand its meaning in the proper perspective, not haphazardly or half-heartedly. In the Quran, one can find a code of life which was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in the month of Ramadan. The Quran itself is the constitution for Muslims. Its sayings are applicable even in this technologically developed modern world.

The foundation of beliefs and practices of Islam lies in the Quran, the revealed words of Allah, and in the sunnah, the sayings and teachings of Allah's messenger Muhammad (pbuh). Therefore, the Quran and Islam are synonymous. The names of twenty-five prophets have been mentioned in the Quran. Of them, Abraham, David, Moses, Jesus Christ and Muhammad are significant as they received revealed books, i.e. Torah, Zabur, Bible (Ingil) and Quran from the Creator of this universe, Allah, to convey His messages to mankind from time to time.

If one recites the Quran with correct intonation, one can feel the miraculous style, the artistic and literary beauty which are

The article of faith in Islam is tolerance. Allah himself commanded mankind not to quarrel amongst themselves about who is better or superior. As stated in Sura Baqarah, Allah alone will judge on the day of judgement. In the same Sura it has been stated: "nay, whoever submits his whole self to Allah, and does good works shall be rewarded by his Lord, he shall have nothing to fear or to regret (Quran 2.111)."

unparalleled. In the Quran Muslims have been commanded to believe in previously revealed books, and show honour to other prophets. The Quran says: "say [O Muslims], we believe in Allah and that which is revealed to us and that which was revealed to Abraham and Ishmael, and Isaac and Jacob, and their children, and that which Moses and Jesus received. We make no distinction between any of them and unto Him we have surrendered (Quran 2.136)."

Let me quote from the book Islam by Karen Armstrong (a British nun), one of the world's foremost scholars on religious affairs, who points out that the Quran insists strongly that there shall be no coercion in matters of faith, and commands Muslims to respect the beliefs of Jews and Christians, whom the Quran calls abul-kitab, a phrase usually translated as "people of the book," but which is more accurately rendered as "people of an earlier revelation."

Allah has emphasized the need for peace. As a matter of fact, the word 'peace' has been mentioned 58 times in the Quran. In the Quran understandable guidelines have been given

which relate to all facets of one's personal, family and civic life. Islam also does not encourage war, rather it eliminates almost all reasons that normally incite war, and abolishes all wars for unjust gain and oppression. Islam and Muslims do not condone the killing of innocent people even during the period of war. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) had set many examples of saving innocent people and children, including prisoners of war.

Islam does not absolve the killings of innocent persons, nor does it encourage suicide, or for that matter suicide bombing to kill people. Let us look at what the Quran has to say about suicide: "Do not kill yourselves. God is merciful to you but he who does that through wickedness and injustice shall be burned in fire. That is enough for Allah (Sura 4: 29)."

In the Quran understandable guidelines have been given

Muslim faith. Islam is a liberal religion which caters to the needs of every individual. Muslims are ordered to convey the message of Allah, but cannot force others to embrace Islam. In the Quran it has been stated clearly that: "let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from error (Sura: 11.259)."

There is a misconception about the word jihad. The struggle to establish the sovereignty of God on earth is called jihad according to the Islamic scholar, Sayyid Qutb, who was sentenced to death on August 29, 1966, by the order of Egyptian President in spite of strong protests from all corners of the Muslim world. He further added that jihad is achieved by giving men the chance to emancipate themselves from their oppressors, and to restore the human rights granted by God to all mankind. Allah says: "the true believers fight for the cause of Allah, but those who reject faith fight for the devil (Quran: 4.76)."

Allah does not love aggressors which is clearly written in Sura Baqarah. It says: "fight for the sake of Allah those that fight against you, but do not attack

them first (Sura 2: 189)."

Generally Muslim scholars refer to jihad as the inner struggle of the believer, not to physical confrontation. Quoting the Hadith [sayings of Prophet Muhammad] the scholar says that after returning from the battle-field Muhammad [peace be upon him] said "we are returning from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad". This greater jihad implies the jihad against oneself or jihad al-nafs.

The article of faith in Islam is tolerance. Allah himself commanded mankind not to quarrel amongst themselves about who is better or superior. As stated in Sura Baqarah, Allah alone will judge on the day of judgement. In the same Sura it has been stated: "nay, whoever submits his whole self to Allah, and does good works shall be rewarded by his Lord, he shall have nothing to fear or to regret (Quran 2.111)."

Muhammad Amjad Hossain, a former Bangladesh diplomat, writes from Virginia.