POINT * COUNTERPOINT

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The kind of Election Commission we want and need

All the controversial decisions it took during the past year and a half -- from the preparation of the electoral roll to half-hearted implementation of the court's judgment on disclosures of antecedents of candidates running in national elections -- only further eroded its prestige. Only time will tell whether Justice Aziz's going on leave, and Justice Mahfuzur Rahman's hurriedly becoming the acting CEC, even before the names of the two new appointees are announced, will shore up public confidence in it.

BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

UR Election Commission (EC), a constitutional body created for holding free. fair and impartial elections has, in recent years, become a largely

discredited organization, and there is now widespread demand for reform to make it strong and independent. Drawing upon the experiences of neighbouring India, let me give the readers a few examples to illustrate the functioning of a powerful EC which is held in high esteem by all concerned. These examples indicate the kind of FC we want and need to clean up our criminalised political system

Prior to the 1990s, the Indian politicians. like in Bandladesh at present, largely ignored their electoral laws, and India had, as one commentator once said, "the best democracy that muscle and money could buy." The situation changed drastically with the appointment of

the legendary TN Seshan as the CEC in 1991. He greatly invigorated the EC, and almost singlehandedly curbed the manipulation of the electoral laws and rules by

politicians. Mr Seshan forced , candidates to abide by the electoral laws and code of conduct, and strengthened the EC's supervisory machinery.

For example, in state assembly elections of 1993 in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Sikkim, he succeeded in getting candidates to adhere to the election spending limits by deploying 336 audit offiand to disseminate the information. cers to keep daily accounts of the candidates' election expenditures. ing BJP, rejected the Court direc-He was also able to greatly control violence in elections. In the assembly elections of Uttar Pradesh of 1993, for instance, only two persons were killed as compared to the appeal with, minor modifications, in May 2002, and directed the 100 in 1991. He was able to achieve this by enforcing compulsory EC to implement the judgment within two months.

deposit of all licensed fire-arms, and banning unauthorised vehicular traffic during the elections. This is an example of how committed leadership and the single-minded determination of an individual can shape an organisation.

A second example illustrates the assertiveness of the Indian EC. In December 1999, a group of professors from the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, filed a

court on the pretext that the government had called an all-party meeting to formulate a joint strategy against the Supreme Court judgment. In response, the EC told the ministry that it did not need any extra time to implement the court directives. and the latter should approach the Supreme court, if it so desired, for public interest litigation before the Delhi High Court, seeking disclothe extension. sure of the antecedents of candi-

frame the necessary rules. The

Ministry refused to do so, and asked

the EC to seek an extension from the

What transpired as a result of this row was that neither the minisdates running for national office. try nor the EC sought the extension, The Court promptly directed the Indian Election Commission to and the EC unilaterally went ahead collect from candidates, in the form in June 2002 to implement the of affidavits, information about their judgment. It issued an order asking educational qualification, criminal every candidate contesting in records, assets and liabilities etc., elections to Parliament or State Legislature to file an affidavit along The major political parties, includwith the nomination paper, disclosing fully and completely the infortives, and the Union of India, the mation mandated by the court. In Congress party and Samata party spite of this unilateralism, the appealed the judgment. The ministry did not dare to raise a peep Supreme Court of India dismissed against the commission.

The Indian EC also showed its unwavering firmness in implementing the Supreme Court judgments -there were two judgments -- on disclosures to give the voting public the opportunity to make an informed choice, even though the judgements included no consequence for noncompliance. For example, during the Rajya Sabha election in 2004, two candidates of the ruling Congress party failed to did not enjoy. Consequently, the file affidavits and, consequently, Indian EC requested the Ministry of their nomination papers were Law, Justice and Company Affairs to cancelled. The opposition BJP

fielding candidates in elections candidates were declared elected unopposed. It may be noted that 115 Lok Sabha members are now identified as "tainted MPs" with criminal records as a result of the disclosures, and there is now a growing movement in India to throw them out of the Parliament.

It may be recalled that Bangladesh High Court passed a similar judgment on disclosures in May 2005. Like the Indian Supreme Court judgments, our High Court judgment also did not have provision for consequences for noncompliance. However, unlike its Indian counterpart, our EC, led by CEC Justice MA Aziz, termed the judgment by our High Court as directory rather than mandatory and failed to fully implement it. With Justice Aziz on leave, can we expect the reconstituted EC to do better to promote public interests? A more recent example. During

the assembly election of Bihar held last year, 140,000 criminals were put behind bars at the behest of the EC. As a result, fair elections were held for the first time in Bihar, a state well known for criminalisation of politics. The arrest of the outlaws broke the back of leaders like Lalu

Prashad Yaday, and his party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, consequently lost the assembly elections. The Indian EC also shows firmness in taming the errant political

parties. Unlike in Bangladesh, any association, or body of individual citizens of India, calling itself a political party must be registered under the EC, and political parties

have to abide by the electoral laws and code of conduct. The EC goes aggressively after offending political parties for any violation. For example, prior to the last Lok Sabha elections, the EC issued a showcause notice to BJP. the dominant partner in the ruling coalition, for an incident in the constituency of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee where 22 impoverished women and children were trampled to death during the free distribution of saris. The EC directed the Uttar Pradesh state authorities to charge Lalji Tandon, a senior BJP leader and Vajpayee's prospective campaign manager, with election bribery, and to bring criminal charges against those organising the event. Similarly, the EC in January 2005 charged the Haryana state government for violating the "model code of conduct," and the concept of providing a level playing field, by publishing a special newspaper supplement with pictures of the chief minister and finance minister detailing the achievements of the government

The Indian EC has also took the initiative to institute far-reaching reforms of the electoral system. In July 2004, the EC proposed a bold 22-point agenda for reform. The proposal called for, among other things, simplifying the procedures for disgualifying candidates found guilty of corrupt practices, limiting each candidate to contest in only one seat, providing for negative voting, strengthening the provi-

sions for registration and reregistration of political parties, requiring compulsory maintenance of accounts by political parties and audit of such accounts, making false declarations in connection with elections an electoral offense, and so on.

Through these and other similar initiatives and actions the Indian EC, over the years, has emerged as a really powerful institution championing the cause of the ordinary citizens. In doing so it has commanded the respect of all concerned, and the fear of political establishments. Recently this author had first-hand oppurtunity to observe the image that the Indian EC actually enjoys. Last September I had the opportunity to visit Dr SY Quaraishi, a distinguished member of the Indian EC, and some of his colleagues, and during the visit I came to realise the standing of the EC in the Indian polity. While visiting them, I saw them dealing with a request from the Indian Public Information Bureau (PIB), a governmental entity under the Ministry of Information, for permission to hold a seminar for a group of journalists at a location in one of the northeastern states.

The reason the PIB sought the permission was that a by-election was to be held at a constituency located about 25 kilometers away from the place of the seminar at around the same time, and the organisers wanted to make sure that the EC had no objection. The

without discrimination:

properly:

rate:

Whether the procedures for

identifying who is eligible to vote

are reasonable and conducted

Whether the voters list contains

only the names of people who

are eligible to vote, and that this

information is current and accu-

Whether people, political parties

and civic organizations are

provided a sufficient opportunity

to scrutinize the voters list for

Whether sufficient opportunity is

provided to people, to political

parties and to civic organizations

to make claims and objections

for names to be added, deleted

Whether claims and objections

are processed properly, and

appropriate changes are made

Whether political parties and

civic organizations are provided

with copies of the preliminary.

revised and final voters list: and

Whether the voters list used at

polling stations is identical to the

final voters list, and officials use it

or corrected on the voters list;

errors or omissions:

to the voters list;

EC gave the assent verbally, but the PIB still insisted on a written "no objection." The EC officials told this author that the PIB did not need the Commission's permission, and the EC also had no authority to tell PIB what not to do. Nevertheless, the PIB would not go ahead with the seminar without the blessing of the EC because of the esteem the latter is held in by all concerned.

Our EC, by contrast, suffers from a serious image problem. To many citizens it is a partisan body composed of individuals with questionable competence and integrity. All the controversial decisions it took during the past year and a half -- from the preparation of the electoral roll to half-hearted implementation of the court's judgment on disclosures of antecedents of candidates running in national elections -- only further eroded its prestige.

Only time will tell whether Justice Aziz's going on leave, and Justice Mahfuzur Rahman's hurriedly becoming the acting CEC, even before the names of the two new appointees are announced, will shore up public confidence in it. We are hoping for the better. However. we strongly feel that without significant reforms mere reconstitution of the EC would not effectively serve public interest, public interest being de-criminalised politics and clean aovernment.

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Arbiters of morality: France and the Armenian genocide

VINAY LAL

HE French have long believed in themselves as one of the supreme arbiters of the moral history of humanity, as exercising a unique civilizing mission on less fortunate parts of the world, and the ardor with which they cling to an exalted vision of themselves as moral legislators has clearly not diminished over the years

On October 12, the French Assembly approved, by a vote of 106-19, legislation that would make it a crime in France to deny that the mass killings of Armenians which took place between 1915-17 in Ottoman Turkey constitute "genocide." The Senate vote is still awaited, but following in the wake of legislation from 2001 under which the mass killings of Armenians are recognized as genocide, the present legislation seems headed for approval.

France has nearly 500,000 rmenians more than any othe country in Western Europe, and it would be idle to pretend that politicians do not court minorities. However, Turks too number over 300,000 in France, and one can be certain that the recent legislation will aggravate their mood of discontent. Whatever the appeals to the Armenian-French constituency, this legislation must clearly be located within the vortex of a more complex geopolitics.

growing tensions within the Muslim ummah, and the wave of Islamophobia which has swept European countries. The bill will doubtless convey to Turks the message that they have not yet attained that state of enlightenment which might warrant their admission into the European Union.

Among the critics of the French legislation is the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk, who last year admitted in an interview that Turkey should be held responsible for the genocide. He was put on trial for, in effect, insulting the nation and denigrating "Turkishness," but immense pressure, largely from the European Union, contributed to his

acquittal by the court. It is altogether likely that the bill may have been partly motivated by the desire to strengthen the hand of Turkish secularists and "moderate Muslims," such as Pamuk, who are viewed as being locked in battle with Muslim extremists and nationalist hard-liners. Pamuk none cized the French legislation as an attempt to stifle freedom of speech and as a betraval of the ideals championed by France for over two centuries. In Pamuk's critique, framed very much by the parameters of Western liberal thought, when two or more interpretations vie for attention the more sound position always prevails. In 1972, France passed a law which makes it a crime to deny the Holocaust. Though the Holocaust is far from being the only genocide in a violence-filled century, it occupies in the West a singular status as furnishing the paradigmatic instance of genocide and crimes against humanity. The obsession with the Holocaust has, so to

speak, obscured the recognition of other equally horrific atrocities. The Socialist legislator, Christophe Masse, in his defense of the bill described it as helping to "ease the unhealthy rivalry that exists among victims of genocides and that is fueled by their inequality before the law'

The implementation of the judg-

ment required modifying the nomi-

nation paper in order to include the

affidavit part of it. This, in turn,

required framing of new rules under

The Representation of People Act

1951, an authority the Indian EC,

unlike its Bangladesh counterpart.

Ironically, this, the only defense of the legislation of any merit that one might invoke, is also the one that will be categorically rejected in Europe and the Anglo-American world, and even adduced as an expression of support for anti-Whatever else might Semitism. be permitted in the West, any interpretation of the Holocaust which merely questions its canonical status as the ultimate form of victimhood opens itself to vicious attack and ridicule.

That a genocide of Armenians took place under Ottoman Turks is beyond question. Succeeding Turkish governments have not only fudged the numbers, but claim. astoundingly, that Armenians died

Commission of Inquiry gathered insurmountable evidence of the massacres and it became part of the official record. If the Turkish government of that day set an example to the world in creating the model for war crimes trials, the present Turkish government has unfortunately chosen to make a foolish spectacle of itself by its denial of the genocide.

But what of France? The history of French colonial rule in Algeria, Indochina, Haiti, the Ivory Coast, Congo Brazzaville, and elsewhere is littered with corpses of colonized people. The assassinations of Algerians settled in France remain unpunished more than four decades after Algeria's declaration of independence, and it is no more shocking that the French National Assembly in February 2005 passed a law requiring school children to be taught "the positive role of the French presence overseas, notably in North Africa."

As the unrest of recent years

Fixing the voter list

ZAHID HOSSAIN

INCE the next parliamentary election is due in January 2007, the existing faulty, inaccurate, and highly motivated voter list prepared by Chief Election Commissioner Justice MA Aziz and his associates, violating the guidelines of the higher courts, needs to be monitored and updated before the polls for ensuring a free, fair, and credible election. An accurate and updated voter list is really essential for national and international acceptance of the poll results. Therefore, our Election Commission, with a new acting chief election commissioner, will have a chance to show its

work Voter registration, during which ndividuals eligible to vote are identified and listed, is an integral part of an electoral process. Election officials must identify all eligible voters and create a list of their names and other information relevant to the voting process -- a complex task that requires considerable time and organizational skill on the part of the electoral authorities.

worth and capability through this

The voters list is organized into units that correspond to geographical and administrative divisions. such as blocks and districts: it is then typically divided into sub-lists containing only the names of those people designated to vote at each individual polling station. Voter registration can serve many purposes: To guarantee that those legally

society about the qualifications to be eligible to vote. Such criteria should be in harmony with the rights recognized in the country's constitution and with obligations defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other applicable human

rights instruments. A properly registered voters list should contain the names of all known persons who are eligible to vote in a particular election. During the process of creating the voters list certain procedures should, as far as possible, be undertaken: • Displaying publicly the voters list

- for inspection: Providing the voters list to political parties and civic organizations for scrutiny;
- · Making additions, deletions, or corrections to the voters list based on filed claims and objections; and

· Resolving disputes lodged by political parties, civic organizations, or citizens concerning the inclusion or exclusion of particular individuals from the voters list.

In many countries, people who are eligible to vote will not be permitted to cast a ballot on election day if their names do not appear on the voters list, while other countries have procedures that enable such individuals to vote after adding their names to "supplemental lists" on election day, or to vote with a "tendered" or "challenged" ballot.

The foundation of a good and fair election is grounded on a proper register of voters. A good register is one that, as far as humanly possible, includes the names of all eligible persons and correctly places them in their respective constitu-

ency or polling area. The personnel who are charged with the preparation of such a register need, obviously, to demonstrate impartiality, efficiency and skill to ensure that the interest of democracy is served, and confidence in the electoral system is enhanced. To do this both the letter and the spirit of the electoral laws must be strictly

enforced. The presiding officers, their assistants, and others associated with the process must, therefore, ensure that the voting population as a whole has a fair and easy access to the registration process.

It should always be kept in mind that there cannot be any question of free and fair election in the absence of accurate and reliable electoral rolls. A study by the Administration and Cost of Elections (ACE) undertaken by IDEA (Institute for Democracy & Electoral Assistance), JN, and IFES has suggested that

Among the considerations that weigh most heavily, one must number the strained relations between Turkey and the European Union, the suspected alienation of Muslim minorities from the dominant European cultures amidst which they find themselves, the mainly on account of war, disease, and hunger. In Turkey, by way of contrast with France, the admission of an Armenian genocide can lead to criminal prosecution. However, not only is there overwhelming evidence to establish that the death of Armenians was the consequence of a policy of deliberate policy, but the Turkish government at the conclusion of World War I itself court-martialed, before the world, the Young Turks (or CUP leaders) by whose orders a genocide was perpetrated.

As Peter Balakian has so amply demonstrated in The Burning Tiaris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response (2003). the government-appointed

suggests. France's treatment of its own North African minorities leaves much to be desired. If France wished to be daring, it might consider enacting legislation that would make it an offence to denv French colonial atrocities. That is exceedingly unlikely. Colonizing nations can be stripped of their colonial possessions, but they find it exceedingly difficult to shed their past and their habits of evasion of responsibility. The passage of the recent legislation on the Armenian question, far from signifying any enlightened view, is the most decisive indicator of France's inability to own up to its wretched colonial past.

- entitled to vote are able to do so; To prohibit ineligible people from voting; and
- To prevent people from voting more than once.

Thus, voter registration brings individuals into an election process. and protects the weight of their vote. The efficacy of the voter registration process is, in part, dependent upon there being consensus within a

These factors sketch an outline of the overall voter registration process, and point to potential problems that may occur. Monitoring of voters list, therefore, should consider several key issues:

Whether the criteria for voter eligibility meet national constitutional requirements and international standards;

Whether the process of identify ing who is eligible to vote provides a sufficient opportunity for all people to register to vote

properly to permit people to vote Monitoring the voter registration process and verifying the quality of the voters list provide mechanisms for political parties to ensure that their interests are respected, and for civic organizations to guarantee the rights of individuals. This results in fewer human errors, reduces the likelihood of fraud and builds confidence in the voter registration process, electoral authorities and the overall political system. Monitoring the voter registration process helps prepare political parties and civic organizations to monitor voting. counting and tabulation of results on

election day. It also serves to

enhance their organizational capac-

ity and further develops their human

resource base.

be guided by certain principles: namely, they should be complete current, accurate, inclusive and responsive to local conditions. We all know that time is very short, and for that the Election Commission must take up the job very earnestly and sincerely. At the same time the care-

all voter registration systems should

taker government should also extend all possible help and assistance to the Election Commission for completing the job in time specially to issue necessarv instruction to the field administration for extending all out help and

cooperation in updating the voter list.

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How much more blood will be spilled in Iraq?

True, the ordinary Bangladeshi Muslim doesn't have any hand in this, but he can at least shout out, make himself heard about the deviation from his faith, the hijacking of his creed for the vilest of purposes. Muslims don't go about killing Christians and Hindus, do they; so why would they systematically kill people of their own faith? The more religious among us can, of course, pray for Iraq. Pray that the people of Iraq and the soil of the Khalifas can find some peace, and is wetted, not any more by blood, but by water.

MONWAR HUSSAIN

sometimes wonder why our hearts don't break over Iraq, or perhaps, as I am rather sure they do, why we do not express it. Maybe it is because we do not understand the conflict in Iraq. Maybe we are unsure how a conflict, which first started as an insurgency against the Americans, turned on its own people, transforming itself to a devastatingly brutal and potent sectarian bloodbath.

Mavbe, as most Bangladeshis are moderate Muslims converted by liberal Sufi theologians, they do not understand how Sunnis and Shi'as can kill each other so brutally over such trivial (to them) differences. Maybe we are too pained to even talk about it. Maybe those of us who have studied history, and hold in mind the image of Baghdad, the city of Harun al Rashid, as the golden capital of Islamic civilization. are devastated by its demise into a slaughterhouse and are reluctant to explore this issue openly Maybe we are too content to let

(dis)credit for this, and hide our heads under the desert sand, like the fabled ostrich. Maybe we are beset by our own troubles, dramatically produced by our political parties, with the attached 'oborodhs," and resignations and all that. Or maybe, we just don't care.

Whatever the reason, we Bangladeshis aren't voicing our concerns about this, at least not verv loudly. Perhaps we should, if for the mere reason that we claim ourselves to be civilized human beings, and civilized humanity cannot let such astounding slaughter go by without protest. Please do not be fooled into thinking that Bangladeshis do not have stakes in Iraq. Rising oil prices are just one example of how we cannot escape unscathed from Irag. The modern world is way too intertwined for that. It's not like it was not premedi-

tated. It didn't come completely out of the blue. Even casual browsing through Iraq's history should be enough to show the seething ten-

sions between its myriad clans, the Americans have all the sects, races and alliances. True, Saddam's iron hand did not allow open sectarian violence, but it never was much below the surface. After all, Saddam did kill Ayatollah Muhammad Sadig al Sadr (father of Mugtada al Sadr) with his own hands after the 1991 Shi'a uprising against his minority Sunni govern-

ment, though his Ba'ath party wore a decidedly secular quise. But there was never a lack of

interested parties to bring it back after the 2003 invasion. Iraq is a country of stakes, as I said earlier. Sometimes it seems as if the whole world has a stake in Iraq, for so many different reasons. With its glorious history, and as the seat of the Islamic Caliphate for centuries, it wasn't much of a surprise when Abu Musab al Zargawi, in his letter to bin Laden and al Zawahiri, mentions this in his "work plan."

"Our fighting against the Shi'a is the way to drag the [Islamic] nation into the battle. I come back and again say that the only solution is for us to strike the religious, military,

and other cadres among the Shi'as with blow after blow, until they bend to the Sunnis. Someone may say that, in this matter, we are being hasty and rash and leading the [Islamic] nation into a battle for which it is not ready, [a battle] that will be revolting and in which blood will be spilled. This is exactly what we want, since right and wrong no longer have any place in our current situation. The Shi'a have destroyed all those balances. [...] Let blood be spilled, and we will soothe and speed those who are good to their paradise."

And blood was spilled, and the ensuing Shi'a hunt and beheadings gave al-Qayeda such a PR shock that even Zawahiri was known to have rebuked Zarqawi for his extremism.

Not that people did not foresee it. Most Middle-Easterners knew of the explosive mix in Iraq, and how ideological differences have a tendency to stoke them. The Jordanians foresaw what was coming (and Zarqawi's statement worked as a catalyst) and gathered the Wahabis (Salafis), the Shi'as, and most other Islamic sects to produce this statement:

"Whosoever is an adherent of one of the four Sunni Schools of Jurisprudence (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali), and the Ja'fari (Shi'a) School of Jurisprudence [...] is a Muslim. Declaring that person an apostate is impossible. Verily his (or her) blood, honour, and property are sacrosanct.

But to no effect. Violence sped, first against the Americans, and then, with Zarqawi's declaration, the bloodletting reached cataclysmic proportions, averaging more than 120 deaths a day in October. His death did nothing to stop the flow of blood. The fuse was lighted, and the bombs started to explode. The situation became so desperate that the Iraqi clerics gathered in Makkah in October to produce the famous Makkah declaration, explicitly prohibiting the sectarian bloodbath with the support of Quranic verses

"[...] These fundamental principles apply equally to the Sunnis and the Shiites without exception. The common grounds between the two schools of thought are many times more than the areas of difference, and their causes. Any differences between them are merely differences of opinion and interpretation. and not essential differences of faith, or on the substance of the Pillars of Islam. From the Islamic Shari'a viewpoint, no one follower of either school may excommunicate, hereticate, or in any other way cast aspersions on the faith and fidelity of a follower of the other

school To have such a declaration sponsored by Saudi Arabia, which adheres to the Wahhabi branch of Islam that was historically negative toward Shiites, is considered a conceptual revolution. But it didn't result in a practical revolution. In

fact, it had seemingly no effect on the sectarian extremists. The bloodbath continued, unabated.

In such a situation, it is rather easy to reach the conclusion that either, firstly, the extremist elements have won over the moderate elements of the Islamic religion and culture (at least in Irag), and fatwa after fatwa from the highest authorities will make no sense to these people or, perhaps, something more than religion and culture is connected with this issue. I prefer the second notion.

Iraq's minority Sunnis perceive themselves to be under the threat of being mistreated by the Shi'ite majority; their long hold on power, established first by the Sunni Ottomans and continued by the British, is loosening. The new federalism can easily shut them off from oil revenues, and they bore the brunt of Shi'ite revenge after Saddam's fall (most Ba'athists were Sunnis). Add al-Qaeda and extreme Takfirism to the mix. along with the flawed American strategy and the Shi'as' irresponsible behaviour, and you'll start to understand Iraq, if ever so slightly.

It is amazing to see how naively the Americans behaved after invading Iraq, and how they so incompetently set up the stage for this violence to begin. It is not without reason that many people accuse only America for this situation, though that is an oversimplified and inaccurate judgment. Again, it is America which has raised people's expectations of a solution, and the onus is certainly on the Americans to design a decisive strategy, implemented with full force, so that they can leave Iraq in much better shape than it ever was. As we now know they have utterly failed to do

So far we have also said nothing about the neighbours of Irag, who have a direct hand in this conflict. In trying to benefit at the cost of Iraq they have nearly destroyed that country, and have actually increased the chances of this conflict spreading to their nations. For example, a recent statistic released by the US army showed that 70% of the al-Qayeda suicide bombers in Irag are Saudis. Shiite parties like SCIRI (Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq) and militias like the Badr Brigade have direct Iranian links, and the Shiite death squads and parts of the Mahdi Army also supposedly have links with Iran. Syria and Jordan, more or less intentionally, allowed fighters, weapons and explosives from all over the Arab and Iranian world to pass through its territories, to say nothing of Israeli trainers in Kurdistan. The harm that Iraq's neighbours have done to it far outweighs the bene-

fits. Iraq's troubles today are a direct result of greed, interference, and religious misinterpretation and fanaticism, along with American stupidity, indecisiveness, and complacency. It is an extremely

complex mix, and look at what it has produced, one of the most violent conflicts of our time. The Lancet study has already calculated nearly 700,000 deaths in Iraq. Migration to surrounding countries has also reached record levels. Only to Jordan, the yearly migrations reach over to a million. At this rate Iraq, with a population of 24 million, will

be vacated in a decade. Is this why the US conquered

Iraq? Is this what we want? Isn't it a shame for all of us that this kind of brutal, harrowing violence and ethnic cleansing is happening in the 21st century? Isn't it doubly shameful for Muslims that it is mostly happening in the name of the religion of peace, Islam?

True, the ordinary Bangladeshi Muslim doesn't have any hand in this, but he can at least shout out. make himself heard about the deviation from his faith, the hijack ing of his creed for the vilest of purposes. Muslims don't go about killing Christians and Hindus, do they; so why would they systematically kill people of their own faith? The more religious among us can, of course, pray for Iraq. Pray that the people of Iraq and the soil of the Khalifas can find some peace, and is wetted, not any more by blood, but by water.

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