

Hasina's *ulu dhoni* moment

Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold. Ten years from now, there may be no Hasina, Khaleda, Tarique, Joy, Jaiil, Bhuiyan. There may be a whole new set of players -- who may be vibrant new jacks, or the same liquid in a new bottle. But the one sure thing is that the Islamists will be much stronger. Today they are kingmakers, tomorrow they will be kings.

NAEEM MOHAIEEM

I hate giving people a chance to say, "I told you so." So imagine the chorus after reports of an AL 5-point "understanding" (soon to be denied as "misunderstanding") with the Khelafat Andolan gang emerged. In one swift move, the party rolled over and handed on a platter every major Islamist demand of the last five years. Whether BNP or AL wins in the next election, the patient, cunning Islamists are the big winners in symbolic and real terms.

A friend wrote: "Don't worry, our politicians do *beimani* (dishonesty). They will do *beimani* with Khelafat Andolan as well." But for those of us who have lost interest in the why, how, or where AL (or BNP) does anything, the motive for these electoral chomoks (displays) is irrelevant. What really matters is the manner in which every Islamist party, demand, and agenda is slowly but surely penetrating into every artery of the national body politic and infrastructure.

For the last five years, the BNP-Jamaat coalition's ferocious attacks on secularism, and aggressive push for an Islamist agenda has had an unexpected side effect. As BNP's enemy, AL has automatically received the mantle of defender-of-secularism, without doing a single thing to protect it.

During the last three years'

attacks on the Ahmadiya community, I spent a significant time with the Ahmadiya mosques for my film Muslims or Heretics. I was struck by the quiet faith many Ahmadiya supporters had that AL would never allow these things to happen. In all the time that Ahmadiya property was burnt, books were seized, mosques attacked, and imams killed, the AL never raised a voice, or joined a rally. But because the BNP was actively tolerating Khatme Nabuwat, all of us presumed that AL would not do the same!

But just read a few items in the MOU with Khelafat Andolan.

- To not accept Prophet Mohammed as the last Prophet is forbidden.
- Blasphemy will be a punishable offense.

If these items sound familiar, it is because these have been demand number one and two on every single flyer given out at Khatme Nabuwat rallies. Having spent time at many KN rallies documenting their speeches, I am struck (but not surprised) by the manner in which the AL has now reproduced in toto the entire text and sentiments of anti-Ahmadiya forces.

After the 2001 elections, BNP-affiliated thugs went on a revenge spree in Hindu villages, attacking, raping, and looting, all to target presumed AL supporters. The tragedy for Hindu Bengalis is that they are getting the long pole from both ends. Beaten to a pulp

for voting AL, and abandoned by AL when they are in power. But AL never has to do any work to prove their credentials. Whether minority or majority, anyone who wants a secular state is afraid to vote BNP because of its clear stance against secularism.

Khaleda Zia once said: "If Hasina gets elected, there will be *ulu dhoni* (ululation) in the mosques of Bangladesh." That is all it took to get AL branded secular, even while the party took a half dozen steps in the opposite direction. From *lok-dekhano* (just to show) *umra* and *mathae kapor* (covering head) to Bismillah in election posters, the AL has been playing the Islam card for a while -- confident that the secular vote is always theirs.

It was Hasina's infamous meeting with Golam Azam that led Farhad Mazhar to write an essay titled: "Sheikh Hasina has insulted Jahanara Imam's memory by touching her coffin." But faced with the larger embrace of Jamaat by BNP, we who are so desperate for even a minute sign of secularism have forgiven AL those past sins. Yes, Hasina sat with Jamaat, but she did not bring them into a cabinet. But at the rate things are going, can we trust that will never happen?

I wonder what Suranjit Sengupta and other minority members of AL are thinking right now. I wonder how they can keep a straight face when Sheikh Hasina talks about "secularism"

to Bangali Christians on the same day that Jaiil announces an MOU with Shaikhul Hadis. Like Marie Antoinette, AL thinks "let them eat cake," cutting a Christmas cake with our beleaguered Christian citizens. That is the dessert to choke on, a monument to opportunism.

When Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury was defeated in the OIC election, he blamed a global campaign alleging that he was a 1971 war criminal. Chief focus of his ire was the AL. In a furious press conference, he threatened to "Islamicize" Suranjit Sengupta's nether regions.

I remember being horrified, but now I feel that it is better to face SaQa Chowdhury -- at least he lays his cards on the table and you know exactly where you are. The problem with the so-called defenders of secularism is that they will smile to your face while running the knife very deep into your poor, unprotected back. Surely we can do better than this?

Some ask why AL gets so much hate for allying with Islamists, but the same does not happen for BNP. It's because BNP is being consistent -- they have never said they are interested in secularism. Since their founding years, BNP has been committed to a project of Bangladeshi not Bengali, Allah Hafez not Khoda Hafez, India as permanent enemy, and the gun not the carrot for CHT Paharis. If BNP sits with Jamaat, it is consistent with that vision -- they have always been the "*Islam bachao*" (save Islam) vote (as if our religion is so weak it needs Bangalis to "save" it). It is only the AL who has ever profited from the secularism vote (and by the way, not just minorities, but also thinking Muslims -- and we are legion --



want religion separate from state).

Most young people are bored by the 15-year serialized soap opera of BNP vs AL. A retired official says: "*Shob chor*" (All are thieves) and it's hard to argue with his nihilistic mind-set. But what does matter is the perma-

nent damage being done to the secularism project (which is never anti-religion, but simply asks for separation of religion from politics). From Zia to Ershad to Khaleda to Hasina, the players change but the Islamist project grows mightier as every party makes concessions to religious

politics -- whether by an inch or a mile.

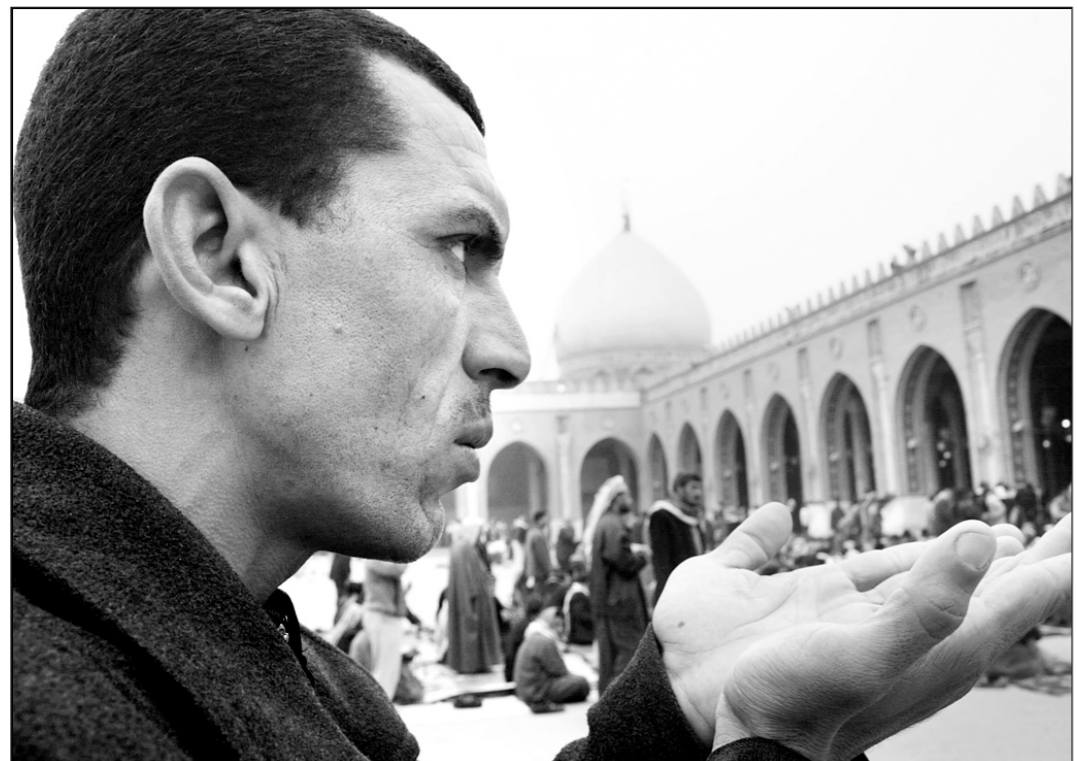
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liquid in a new bottle. But the one sure thing is that the Islamists will be much stronger. Today they are kingmakers, tomorrow they will be kings.

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An "Islamic Civil War"

Iraq is already the theatre of this "Islamic civil war." Last July, one of the aims of the Israeli destruction of Lebanon's civilian infrastructure was to spread this sectarian war to Lebanon. That gambit failed miserably. Now, Saudi Arabia is threatening to expand its support for Sunni insurgents in Iraq and destabilize Iran by raising its oil production. More ominously, some of its Wahhabi clerical allies are trying to rouse both, Arab fears of Persian domination and Sunni concerns about the ascendancy of the "heretical" Shias.



M SHAHID ALAM

THE war that Western powers -- primarily the US, Israel and Britain -- began against the Islamic world after September 11, 2001, is about to enter a new more dangerous phase as their early plans for "changing the map of the Middle East" have begun to unravel with unintended consequences.

Code-named "the war against terror," the imperialist war against the Middle East was fueled primarily by the US and Israeli ambitions. Britain's participation is mostly a sideshow. The US and Israel have convergent aims in the region. The US seeks to deepen its control over the region's oil. Israel wants to create regional conditions that will allow it to complete the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.

As a first step, both objectives would be served by removing four regimes -- in Iran, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan -- that still resisted US and Israeli ambitions in the region. Once these regimes have been removed, the US and Israel would carry the war into Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to dismember them into smaller, weaker client states.

Iraq and Afghanistan were chosen as the first targets -- the easy points of entry into the war. They had been ravaged by years of war, weakened by internal divisions, and, in the case of Iraq, hollowed out by sanctions. It was believed that occupation would be easy. With friendly regimes in power, the US could start working on regime change in Iran and Syria.

Occupation was indeed a cakewalk. But little else has been easy. The Sunni-led insurgency that began within weeks of the fall of Baghdad has succeeded in derailing US efforts to stabilize Iraq. Indeed, as Iraq has moved closer to a civil war over the past few months, pressure for an American pull-out is mounting within the US. In Afghanistan, too, after a period of initial stability, a Taliban resurgence -- operating from liberated areas in neighbouring Pakistan -- now threatens Nato forces through much of eastern and southern Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, the US-led war against the region has changed the map of the Middle East, but in unsettling ways. Not only has Iran gained deep influence over Iraq and Afghanistan, it can leverage this

influence to raise steeply the cost of US occupation in both countries. In the meantime, with help from Russia and China, Iran has built a military capability that can threaten US clients on the Arabian peninsula, shut off the Hormuz Straits to shipping, and launch missiles that can reach Israel. In addition, last summer, Hizbullah demonstrated a new form of guerilla war -- with low-tech rockets, anti-tank weapons, and sophisticated intelligence gathering -- that neutralized a determined Israeli offensive.

The Iraq Study Group has described the situation in Iraq as "grave and deteriorating," and recommended a quick withdrawal of US forces. It is unlikely that the president will take that advice. Instead, the US, Israel and Britain have for some time been working on an alternative plan when it appeared that their initial plans were being derailed. They are now working to incite a civil war between Sunnis and Shias across the Middle East. As Jonathan Cook puts it, taking a leaf from Israeli experience in the West Bank and Gaza, they expect to create "controlled chaos" in the entire Islamic world.

The battle lines in this civil war

have been drawn. The principal American-Israeli surrogates in this "Islamic civil war" showed their colours last July when Israel launched devastating air attacks against Lebanese civilian targets in response to the capture of two Israeli soldiers by Hizbullah. Almost instantly, Cairo, Riyadh and Amman condemned the Hizbullah action. On the opposite side there is the crescent of resurgent Shia power stretching from Lebanon, through Syria and Iraq, into Iran.

During his recent meetings with Israeli leaders and Sunni Arab potentates, according to a headline in NY Times, British Prime Minister Tony Blair was working to lay the groundwork for an "alliance against extremism." His plan is to erect an "arc of moderation" against the Shia Crescent, with Iran as the principal "strategic threat" to Western imperial ambitions.

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The determining factor in this war will be the Sunni populations under the thumbs of the Arab potentates. It is doubtful whether the anti-Persian and anti-Shia rhetoric of the Arab potentates will succeed in swinging them around to support governments they have long hated, especially now as their alliance with Israel becomes overt. There is also the risk that in fuelling the Sunni insurgency in Iraq the Saudis will strengthen al-Qaeda and their allies who are sworn to bring down the US-friendly Arab potentates.

Moreover, if there is a real war in the region, the pseudo-Arab states in the Gulf have no fighting ability that they can bring to this conflict. In the event, does the US have the forces to occupy Iraq, and also defend its Arab clients in the Gulf?

Paraphrasing Prime Minister Tony Blair, the NY Times writes: "[T]he fate of the Middle East, 'for good or ill,' would be felt around the world." It is unlikely that adding an "Islamic civil war" to the dynamics of the region will work for the "good" of the US, Israel or Britain.

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Tsunami 2004: The aftermath

According to a leading geologist of the Geological Survey of Bangladesh (GSB), Mir Fazlul Karim, Bangladesh survived the effects of the tsunami on December 26 because of the natural barrier of its continental shelf stretching 200 km into the Bay of Bengal.

RIPAN KUMAR BISWAS

IT was a beautiful sunny afternoon and I was waiting to cross the street at 28th street and Park Avenue, Manhattan, New York. A city bus moved in front me. The bus was carrying a commercial advertisement for a tv series titled: "Tsunami: The Aftermath" which is now running on HBO (Home Box Office).

I remembered that beautiful morning of December 26, 2004 just after Christmas. Everyone was still sleeping. Suddenly a magnitude 9.0 earthquake occurred about 100 miles west of the Indonesian island of Sumatra. In the aftermath of the quake resultant tsunami waves killed over 280,000 people in towns and villages along the coasts of the Indian Ocean. Over 3 million survivors had their livelihoods destroyed. India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Maldives, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Somalia were affected.

Inspired by true accounts, this HBO mini-series focuses on a group of fictional characters caught up in the harrowing aftermath of the tsunami that devastated the coast of Thailand. This melodrama has already been nominated for "Golden Globes Award 2006" in the categories of best performance by an actor, an actress, and an actress in a supporting role in a series, mini-series or motion picture made for television.

"Tsunami: The Aftermath," a tale of personal loss, survival and hope, follows a group of fictional characters whose lives are irrevocably transformed by the cataclysmic natural disaster. Among those whose stories are followed are: a young couple searching for their child; a Thai survivor who loses his family and tries to prevent developers from seizing the land his village was built on; an Englishwoman whose husband and son are missing; an ambitious reporter; a relief worker; an overwhelmed British official whose faith in the system is torn apart; and a leading Thai meteorologist, whose earlier report detailing the inevitability of a tsunami hitting the affected area was ignored.

According to a leading geologist of the Geological Survey of Bangladesh (GSB), Mir Fazlul Karim, Bangladesh survived the effects of the tsunami on December 26 because of the natural barrier of its continental shelf stretching 200

km into the Bay of Bengal.

The gift of nature, the continental shelf, was formed on the Gangetic delta with billions of tons of sediment carried down by the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. Bangladesh survived with God's mercy, and that natural barrier.

Although there is no system for predicting the earthquakes or tsunamis, Bangladesh is yet to be out of the woods as danger is always lurking. It needs to develop a system of early warning against more powerful sea surges.

As we can't stop tsunamis we need to install necessary warning systems like seismic observatories in the region to detect an earthquake and send data to the Central Tsunami Warning Center. If the earthquake is in the sea, and above 7.5 on the Richter scale, an initial "tsunami watch" alert is sent out and data from monitoring stations deep on the seabed near the earthquake's epicenter are checked for signs of a tsunami. If a tsunami is detected warnings are sent out via national systems which have been set up in several countries. We have to be ready with proper medication, plans for rehabilitation, and many other necessary steps.

Because of ignorance, lack of awareness, and inexperience in handling an earthquake emergency situation, Bangladesh can hardly manage such a big natural disaster like a tsunami.

Although Bangladesh runs a high risk of being hit by an earthquake and tsunami, it has little

preparation to combat those natural calamities. According to geologists there are some geological faults that can cause strong earthquakes in the country. One of them is Dauki fault at the bordering area of Sylhet-Meghalaya, and the other one is Sitakunda-Teknaf fault in the Chittagong coastal area. Besides these, Bangladesh has many seismic faults which can cause earthquakes in the plains around Dhaka and the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Moreover, there is a 600 km long seismic gap (that indicates possibility of earthquake) stretching from the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal to Teknaf where there is no record of an earthquake which could turn into a tsunami if it occurred under the Bay of Bengal.

Bangladesh can't gather everything within a very short time for post-natural disaster management like Japan or US. But managing emergency underground water reservoirs, food, portable toilets, smooth traffic plan to clear streets for fire engines and ambulances, coordinated teams of engineers and doctors are not too difficult task.

Bangladesh Meteorological Department, GSB, Space Research and Remote Sensing Organization, as well as Bangladesh Navy and the Air Force who use satellite data, sit together to develop a tsunami warning system with available resources.

In addition, development of a rapid seismic observatory system including hydro-acoustic sensors,

sea height buoys, and modern tide gauges as an integral part of early warning system for tsunami is very important. Above all, Enhancing people's participation in disaster management and upgrading coastal embankments for greater safety can help to reduce aftermath of tsunami.

Bangladesh has been included in the Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System for the Indian Ocean within a Global Framework of the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

So far, twenty-four tsunamis have caused damage in the United States and its territories during the last 204 years. Just since 1946, six tsunamis have killed more than 350 people and caused a half billion dollars of property damage in Hawaii, Alaska, and the West Coast.

The 2004 tsunami is the deadliest in recorded history. Prior to 2004, the deadliest recorded tsunami was the result of an earthquake near Awa, Japan in 1703 that killed 1,000,000. As a tsunami nears the coastline, it may rise to several feet or, in rare cases, tens of feet, and can cause great loss of life and property damage when it comes ashore.

Tsunamis can travel upstream in coastal estuaries and rivers, with damaging waves extending farther inland than the immediate coast. A tsunami can occur during any season of the year and at any time, day or night. Bangladesh should beware.

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