

Protect Religious Freedom

In a shameful exhibition of religious intolerance and bigotry the Masjid complex of the Ahmedia sect was set ablaze. Fifty persons were injured including women and children and, most importantly, copies of the Holy Quran were burnt. According to the eyewitness report of this paper's correspondent, the Masjid compound was strewn with shredded leaves of the Holy Quran. Bangladesh, in spite of severe economic and social problems, had set a remarkable example of sectarian harmony and religious tolerance. Given such a tradition of respect for everybody's faith, last Thursday's attack on the Masjid of the Ahmedia sect is a matter of serious concern. This newspaper condemns this exhibition of religious intolerance in the strongest of terms and calls upon the nation as a whole to guard against those who take upon themselves the task of declaring who is a Muslim and who is not.

The rather intriguing aspect of the attack was that it was carried out without any sort of provocation that usually precedes such outbursts. Nothing had happened in the days before to warrant any attack on the peaceful and numerically small Ahmedia sect. Conclusion that one is forced to come to is that the attack was premeditated. The question that naturally follows is, why? And why now, at this very moment? The leaders of the Ahmedia sect have given their own answers. They have accused the Jamaat-i-Islam party and its students' wing the Islami Chhatra Shibir for the attack. In a press conference held on Saturday they have provided their own reasons for the accusation. Government must examine the evidence and carry out a thorough investigation of the Thursday's incident and not only bring the perpetrators of this heinous crime to book, but also expose to the public the people behind the scene who may have been involved with organising the incident. This is our Constitutional obligation. We will be committing a grievous mistake if we fail to understand the long-term implication of these events.

A type of religious bigotry is being imposed on the people of Bangladesh which is contrary to the tradition of tolerance and openness that has been nurtured here over the centuries. Recently a scholar was condemned to be hanged because of expressing an opinion that was alleged to be not so laudatory about the Muslims. The religion taught to us by our Prophet has survived for the last fifteen hundred years through many turmoils and adversities and has grown from strength to strength. There is absolutely no reason for us to fear any dissenting opinion that may be expressed. In fact the reason for Islam's meteoric rise was essentially due to its openness to, and tolerance of, divergent views. For those among us who advocate death by hanging for holding and expressing views that are different from the run of the mill are advocating a brand of Islam that is not the one taught to us by Prophet Mohammed (SM).

We would like to express our deep concern, in no uncertain terms, at the rise of religious intolerance expressed through these two recent events. We must condemn these developments and never forget for a moment that rise of such trends will throttle freedom and independence and stifle creative thinking. In freedom there will always be some who may misuse it or use it in a manner which is at odds with the majority. But that is the beauty and the very soul of freedom. And it is on that freedom that true democracy is ultimately founded. So when today somebody threatens the religious freedom of another — however small that community may be — he or she threatens freedom of us all.

Localised Anarchy

It was only kilometres away from Barisal city, the cleanest of towns in Bangladesh now dazzling with the goings on of the BM College centenary celebrations. And it was only past mid-day at the Kalashkathi Bazar. And again it was Saturday — the *haatbar*, the weekly market day there. The three hundred and odd shops were brimming with the *haatbureys* — the sellers and buyers. The local branch of a bank was having the busiest day of the week. Everything was so placidly reminiscent of S Wajed Ali's immortal piece 'Bharatbarsha.' Then something happened — and in a few moments' time made the place so typical of today's Bangladesh.

Some fifty gunmen threw a cordon around the market place, exploded hundreds of crackers, to begin with, following that up with reports of blank rifle-shots by the score. When the resulting panic has traumatised the whole human presence there — they looted all the shops, slashed at and beat up the less cooperating ones and shot the cashier of the bank. They made a clean sweep of an important village *haat* — which is where all the wealth of the vicinity piles in a heap. And they went away triumphantly, bursting joyous volleys of crackers. No one has been nabbed so far and so much for the anti-terrorism ordinance's effectiveness. The hardly well-advised ordinance, certain to become regular law any moment now, has totally failed as a measure of deterrence. And it cannot deter, and remains only as a means of harsh punishment, cursed is the society that would accommodate such malaise consumptive of whatever is healthy in the body social.

Terrorism very nakedly dares state power and the authority of law. And in finer ways it gobbles up social norms and cultural values and traditional mores. The exact synonym of terrorism should be localised anarchy. Nothing happened in Kalashkathi if it was not anarchy — unabashed, blatant, unadulterated. We do not think state is the best agency to go on the warpath against anarchy in haats and specially and more frequently on the Bay of Bengal. The harshest of laws can only underscore the farce of the approach. While police must go after the Kalashkathi culprits, if this state is to be saved from serious undermining that is, social action must be mounted to make of the society a community of civilised co-operating moral men and women bent on how best to be useful to the others.

THE debate in the Parliament on 19 and 20 October on the situation arising out of Operation Push-back by India was significant in many respects. The debate focussed attention on the basic facts surrounding this complex issue. It also highlighted the link between Operation Push-back and the Joint Communiqué issued after our Prime Minister's Delhi visit in May this year. Surprisingly, it was only after the Opposition drew attention to this communiqué that the nation had an opportunity to take a close look at this important document.

Predictably, the Parliament was unambiguous in expressing its opposition to India's attempt to push-in to Bangladesh a large number of people alleged to be our nationals. Other than the fact that these people speak Bangla as their mother tongue, there is no reason to believe that they are the citizens of this country. In fact, they are Indian nationals. Many of them possess ration cards and other evidence of permanent residence in that country such as inclusion in the voters list. This high-handed policy violates humanitarian principles as well as the norms of good neighbourly relations. It was only natural, therefore, that the response from both sides of the House was a rejection of the Indian policy.

Indian contention that a large number of Bangladesh nationals have infiltrated to India is not new. In the late seventies, this became a major issue between the two countries. In those days, the Assamese nationalists were at the forefront in pressing this issue. They were afraid that the Bangla-speaking people who had settled in Assam over

hundreds of years will outnumber them in certain border districts. However, Indian census figures did not support this view. These records showed that the number of Bangla-speaking population in Assam had actually decreased in recent years. Naturally Bangladesh took a firm stand on the issue and denied that any Bangladeshi citizen had migrated to India after the country came into existence.

The issue has been revived by India recently in a big way, this time reportedly under the pressure of BJP. It is a part of BJP's campaign to weaken the so-called vote bank of the Congress party. The campaign is, therefore, ostensibly against Bangla-speaking people but its communal character is barely concealed. It is interesting that the States most directly involved such as West Bengal are not enthusiastic about this inhuman policy. The sight of poor Bangla-speaking families being pushed around the border by the Indian Border Security Force is not exactly flattering for the government in Calcutta. Mr Jyoti Basu is reported to have taken a moderate position at the high-level meeting convened by the Indian Home Ministry on September 28 in Delhi. He requested the central govt. to consider the problem against its historical background. He has also reported to have urged them to take a humanitarian approach. His is not the only voice in India which has been raised against this policy. But all this has been in vain. Whether it is the BJP pressure or some other factor that is unknown to us, the govt. of India has decided to embark on this policy. What can possibly be the reason for this inflexible attitude? Surely India desires friendly relations with

Bangladesh. If so, how can it unilaterally adopt such a policy? After studying the question and reflecting on its historical background, one cannot escape the conclusion that India has not abruptly or suddenly adopted this push-back policy. Indian leaders have carefully prepared the ground over a period of time before embarking on this operation. In fact, there can be no doubt that it is the Joint Communiqué of 28 May signed by our Prime Minister which is the basis on which India has built up its case for Operation Push-back. To facilitate further consideration of the question,

committee that would encourage the refugees to return. The Indian side assured that its authorities would cooperate fully in the process of repatriation.

I invite the attention of the readers to the fact that, according to para 11, the large-scale illegal immigration has already taken place and therefore the two Prime Ministers were merely taking into account a *fait accompli*. The Foreign Minister and others who spoke for the government in the debate in the Parliament offered interpretations of para 11 of the Joint communiqué which do not stand careful

scrutiny that our Prime Minister had accepted in para 11 the Indian contention that there were, in fact, large number of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in India. In one stroke, our Prime Minister has undone a policy which has been consistently held by Bangladesh for two decades. How did she accept such a claim by India? Does she possess any evidence? When did such 'large-scale' emigration from Bangladesh take place?

Those who defended the government in the debate referred to the words 'their borders' in para 11 and tried to suggest that the illegal immigration refers to movement in both directions. Certainly the language of para 11 suggests this; but then one is justified in asking: Where are the large-scale immigrants from India? Are there any camps of Indian immigrants in Bangladesh? No one seems to have heard about them. The sad fact, one has to accept with regret and much concern, is that the Prime Minister and those who advised her, committed a big mistake in accepting an Indian contention which has been consistently denied by the government of Bangladesh for the last twenty years.

Reference was made to some comments which the Prime Minister reportedly made to the press on her return from Delhi that there were no Bangladeshi nationals in India. If this is what she really believed, why did she then accept paragraph 11 in the communiqué? One can understand that the Prime Minister may have unwittingly taken this contradictory position due to lack of knowledge about the historical context of this issue. However it was surely the duty of the Foreign Ministry to pre-

vent such a serious mistake. Whether the inclusion of para 11 in the communiqué was a conscious decision or a mistake, we have conceded a point which is both untrue and potentially dangerous for Bangladesh. It would be seen that from the Indian point of view Para 11 provides the rationale for Operation Push-back. The link between what the Prime Minister had formally conceded and what the government of India is doing is so obvious that she cannot escape the responsibility even if the most indulgent view is taken of her commitment in the communiqué. It is undoubtedly a diplomatic debacle for Bangladesh.

It is quite clear to all those who desire durable peace in the region and harmony between India and Bangladesh and a friendly border between them that the question of migration between the two countries, if re-opened at this time, will unsettle settled issues and destabilize a situation which has taken several decades to stabilize. Besides, it carries grave risks of reigniting communal discord. Bangladesh takes legitimate pride in having maintained communal peace and harmony despite many provocations from various quarters. It is a top national priority for this country to maintain communal harmony as a prerequisite for peace and progress. We have, therefore, no viable option but to resist the pressure that is being put on us through the so-called Operation Push-Back. I have no doubt in my mind that the whole national will stand united on this issue.

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ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

let me reproduce the three relevant paragraphs:

Para 11. Taking into account the problems being caused due to large-scale illegal immigration of people across their borders, (the two Prime Ministers) expressed their determination to stop illegal movement of people across the border by all possible means including the strengthening of existing arrangements and mutual cooperation in this regard.

Para 12. Both sides resolved to take effective measures in order to maintain peace and tranquillity all along the border and to refrain from unfriendly activity.

Para 13. The two Prime Ministers agreed to arrange speedy repatriation of all Chakma refugees to Bangladesh in full safety and security. In this context, the Bangladesh side agreed to set up a representative political-level

scrutiny. A close look at the three paragraphs will clearly show that Para 11 does not deal with the Chakma problem. It is a separate issue and quite correctly, it is dealt with in para 13. In fact, para 12 is a general paragraph which completes the consideration of the border issue. Thus, there is no logical link between para 11 and para 13.

If Operation Push-back by India is an 'unfriendly activity' then India can be certainly accused of violating both the letter and spirit of para 12 of the communiqué. But how does India view the issue? Would India accept the allegation that it has committed an unfriendly act by launching its campaign for sending Bangla-speaking people across the border? It would be interesting to know their position. It would be clear to all those who have some familiarity with the language used in such commu-

POLLS AND PERSPECTIVES

The British General Election: Issues Involved

by MT Haq

I spent the spring and the early part of the summer this year in UK, staying in a town called Luton, once best exemplified as the location of the British hat-making industry. At present Luton is a medium-sized town inhabited by some 250,000 people and it takes only about 25 minutes to get there by train from London's Kings Cross Station.

The period of my stay at Luton turned out to be at the most opportune time, quite unexpectedly. Margaret Thatcher (now a Baroness) resigned after serving as the British Conservative Party Prime Minister for more than 11 years due to some differences within the Party on some domestic and Common Market issues. John Major took over the leadership of the Conservative Party and became Prime Minister. The General Election was declared and was held in April, 1992. Neil Kinnock was the leader of the Labour Party during the Election. This event created for me an exciting situation and gave me the opportunity to watch the British General Election after several decades — a most fascinating experience in a country which has been the home of parliamentary democracy and is famous for its inventiveness and leadership in modern technological civilization which started with the Industrial Revolution. Incidentally, I stayed in the USA during the last Presidential Election and watched the electioneering process there very carefully. This also was a very stimulating experience for me.

During the period of electioneering, both parties presented their cases on the basis of their respective programmes very able before the British people. The poll forecasts were favourable for the Labour Party, at times, rather marginally; but eventually, it is the Conservative Party which returned to power, though with a substantially reduced majority. Many thought that it was time for Labour but it did not happen that way.

Dominant Issues

There were dominant issues like investment, taxation, education, environment, income distribution, economic growth and inflation, employment, unemployment, national health insurance, housing and so on. One reasonably familiar with the philosophies of the two main political parties in Britain — the Conservative Party and the Labour Party — would realize that Conservatism is inclined towards the vested interests for economic and social development, whereas Labourism is inclined towards the welfare of the people as a whole for the same purpose. The Labour Party lost the election, but its achievement lay in the fact that Neil Kinnock's party increased impressively the number of seats in this election compared with that in the previous election, whereas John Major's party lost quite a number of seats. It is interesting to note that even Mr Chris Patten, the then Chairman of the Conservative Party, lost his seat in the election. He was subsequently sent away to Hongkong as its Governor.

Broad Strategies

Briefly put, the broad strategies of the Conservative Party have been the freedom of free enterprises, low taxes and less governance, almost exactly those followed by the Republican Party of the USA during Ronald Regan's regime. There is no Thatcherism or Majorism about these strategies which are the essential elements of Conservatism. The operation of these strategies in both countries during the regimes of Ronald Regan and Lady Thatcher demonstrated that the small rich section of the countries have become richer and the large poor sec-

A veteran economist and a former Industrial Adviser to the United Nations, Dr Muhammad Tujammal Haq had the opportunity to watch the last British General election very closely. He discusses his experiences, in a two-part series, on the eve of the US Presidential polls.

tions have become poorer. The US policies under President George Bush also have been no different from those under President Ronald Regan. It may be that at least some explanation for the present world wide economic recession which has affected these two countries so badly, could be found in this sort of laissez-faire policies which were discarded long ago. The economists already warned the world about the present long recession, one of the main reasons for this being Protectionism.

The strategies of the present Labour Party are also of the nature of the three elements as mentioned above, with 'the difference that in certain areas, there would be less freedom of private enterprises, higher taxes and more government control in the public interests. The extent of state control in economic and social matters for optimum results is of course a matter which is difficult to define and determine precisely in practice and will depend on the special characteristics of the concerned activities or sectors, but the techniques for this purpose are to-day well-developed for application by the specialists.

Inflations

A second election issue which the Conservative Party rightly highlighted was its anti-inflationary policy. There is no doubt that this was a very laudable policy; but this must not be achieved at the cost of employment and through deflationary measures to an unacceptable extent. It is well-known that both inflation and deflation are bad, but of the two, the latter which is associated with unacceptable levels of unemployment is worse, as late Lord Keynes himself indi-

Unemployment

Brief comments on only a few election issues are in order here. Let me first take the case of unemployment. I noticed that the Conservative Party rarely mentioned it during the electioneering period, whereas for the Labour Party it

was a dominant issue. The conservatives were satisfied by giving the simple explanation that the British economic recession was part of a world wide recession and unemployment in Great Britain was a part of it. While this may be partly true, the British situation is particularly severe in this respect. The Labour Party of course considered unemployment to be a dominant issue as it should be. It must be recognized by the state that unemployment is one of the worst possible economic and social evils, because it creates misery and misery generates hatred, sooner or later, as it was said by the competent exponents of the concept of a high and stable level of employment even before the end of the Second World War (1939-45). Sir William Beveridge was one of them. The bitter memories of the 1930s were there in the minds of the people. Beveridge's book Full Employment in a Free Society (1943) is well known.

Another issue centred round Britain's position within the Common Market. The European Common Market involving 12 countries has progressed so impressively and successfully ever since it was established. Experience has shown that regional cooperation in the economic, social and technological fields can go a long way, as the Common Market developments in Western Europe and elsewhere in the World have shown, but there are perhaps limits to the growth of such regional integration in the sense that some member countries may not go to the extent of surrendering their political and financial sovereignty to a Supra-national Authority, as the recent developments in some member countries of the Community have shown, in respect of the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty and of the European Monetary system involving the ERM in particular. The debates during the General Election showed the differences in this respect not only between the two major political parties in Britain, but also within the Conservative Party itself.

Lady Thatcher's views not favouring this Treaty weighs quite a lot and probably seems to be the right course for future action. The concept of a United States of Western Europe may not quite work out in practice in all its political, economic, social, cultural, financial and military aspects. Even close regional integration of the Western European style seems to have its limits. Incidentally, in the light of this experience, the top policy makers and the negotiators of the concerned countries should not put their expectations too high about the SAARC type regional cooperation which may be effective, step by step, only to a limited extent. (To be concluded tomorrow)

A third most controversial issue was the poll tax question. The old rate system was replaced by a poll tax under which an annual tax was imposed on each resident in a house. This tax varied considerably locationwise. The tax became so unpopular eventually that it was one of the issues on which Lady Thatcher, had to step down and a decision was taken to abolish the system even before the election time, though with effect from the next year (1993). This system has been very unfair and pro-vested interests. The tax was applicable to the owner of a house as well as to the residents or the tenants in that house, on a per capita basis. The Labour Party of course has consistently opposed the system. I have noticed that the authorities concerned are cur-

rently busy collecting this tax still with rather ruthlessness. Common Market. Another issue centred round Britain's position within the Common Market. The European Common Market involving 12 countries has progressed so impressively and successfully ever since it was established. Experience has shown that regional cooperation in the economic, social and technological fields can go a long way, as the Common Market developments in Western Europe and elsewhere in the World have shown, but there are perhaps limits to the growth of such regional integration in the sense that some member countries may not go to the extent of surrendering their political and financial sovereignty to a Supra-national Authority, as the recent developments in some member countries of the Community have shown, in respect of the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty and of the European Monetary system involving the ERM in particular. The debates during the General Election showed the differences in this respect not only between the two major political parties in Britain, but also within the Conservative Party itself.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

'Black-gold' of Cox's Bazar

Sir, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia had formed a national committee on 'black-gold' of Cox's Bazar with Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources Dr Khondkar Muzharraf Hussain as its convener in August 1991. She desired that a report on the minerals of Cox's Bazar should be submitted to her within one month.

Our Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources, however, did not pay much attention to Prime Minister's order. The Minister and many others made rough edges of sarcasm and laughed at me on

my claim that huge deposits of valuable minerals were available in Cox's Bazar.

At last the Minister along with the Chairman of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission and the members of the committee on Cox's Bazar 'black-gold' physically visited and inspected the different mineral deposits at Cox's Bazar and Teknaf on 27-8-1992 and 28-8-1992 for the first time. They were all taken aback and became dumb founded to see the huge deposits of valuable minerals lying uncared for and unutilised for decades together.

The Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources is now putting one unreasonable ar-

gument after another for the development, exploitation and commercial utilisation of the valuable minerals.

I would humbly request the Prime Minister to kindly personally visit the mineral deposit sites in Cox's Bazar and made a correct assessment of our mineral wealth in the coastal areas.

I would also request her to send teams of MPs, both from the treasury and the opposition benches, mineral experts, scientists, geologists, delegations from different chambers of commerce and industries and journalists to the sites and seek their opinion, views, and suggestions for the development, exploitation, industrial and commercial utilisation of the millions of tons of valuable minerals like Zircon, Rutile, Ilmenite, Leucocoxe, Kyanite, Garnet, Magnetite and Monazite etc.

O H Kabir
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Indo-Bangla confrontation

Sir, SAARC member India has allegedly 'captured' a piece of Bangladesh landmass when the promotion of their 'neighbourliness' is underway and the ramifications of Gulf War have still kept all experts at bay.

A candidate for superpower position, NAM pioneer India is undoubtedly majestic in the new world order that has caused worries lately to her neighbours as much as a concern to the peace-loving earthlings who anticipate her expansionism in the near future.

If such an aggressive move from anywhere can materialize any blue-print as easily as that, then all the weak states must have strong reasons to work out dependable strategies against any unexpected assault especially from a hegemonic superpower or from an ally even.

As history suggests, one or

another event can lead to undermining the progress of the humanity and can even destroy the civilisation altogether.

From the lessons of recent historic showdowns over Korea, Vietnam, Falkland Island, Kuwait, Afghanistan, and Yugoslavia, the normal-bound peoples have learnt how to stand up for what is just.

The global community has also repeatedly condemned unjust occupation of alien property. The Iraq-Kuwait affair exemplifies the territorial integrity of a sovereign state, regardless of physical or economic status, as endorsed by the UN charter.

Now what SAARC pioneer Bangladesh is up against is a precarious situation impelling her to a number of choices that include offensive bilateral diplomacy before taking defensive position at the world assembly or maneuvering with the international statutes.

M Rahman
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Foreign missions of Bangladesh

Sir, Bangladesh is maintaining a large number of missions abroad with a huge foreign exchange cost. But commensurate benefit is very little. Many of the missions are redundant. There is hardly any need to maintain missions in places where we have little commercial and political interests.

With a little imagination and planning huge amount of valuable foreign exchange can be saved. What may be at stake is promotion prospect of foreign service officers. But they should keep it in mind that among all the cadre services their promotion prospect is maximum. Hence I suggest that the Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Ministry should go into the matter and recommend to the Government which of the missions should be abolished.

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury
Dhaka Cantonment