

Civil society, intellectuals and the politics of fatwa

DR BADRUL KHAN
writes from Sydney

THE escalation of Islamic militancy in recent months and the political fallout from it has sent shock-waves across the nation, bringing death and casting a dark shadow on its political horizon. All estuaries of politics, otherwise blind-folded to the issue of women are now activated to cash in from what takes place in the streets of Dhaka. Rhetoric, coaxing, violence and mendacity, some of the common attributes of politics in Bangladesh have always eluded the grasp from real life issues. Yet, it seems women's predicaments are here to inject some levity into the grim procedure of politics in this 'winter of discontent'. What is so interesting about it is never before has any social issue ever stirred our consciousness so deeply nor been contested with such vehemence as it is today. Conservative reflexes pitted so arduously against women

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and so thoroughly vindictive have taken all its veils out. This is a good sign and a good exercise though for a nation to pass through, a way of filtering our own consciousness or may be our collective guilt.

What is however depressing and sad is the whole controversy arising from the High Court's decision on fatwa is being dubbed by politics so that it has now attained a political rather than a legal or social dimension. Despite the unfathomed sea of conservatism ruling Bangladesh, which recent incidences have brought out in more animated way, the issue has duly slipped into the

uncharted street battle where wrangling and terror remain the only effective weapon of human mind. Ask anyone in the street and they would have no idea as to what it is all about and what they are fighting for. In this familiar territory, every issue melts into politics as quickly as it grows and is decided by a mind which relies on who your political enemy is and who are your friends. By all measures what it has really provided is yet another opportunity for otherwise ill-equipped political leaders sitting at the helm of the country to indulge in a fray of point scoring game.

One of the reasons why political violence has managed to take control over the sequence of events is the raw indifference of the government and its agencies to maintain order. When a member of the legislative body and his men get the privilege to fire shots publicly, kill and then get away with it, it typifies what the nature of the state power is and why one should challenge judgement and prudence of the government. The question is not how much credibility is left to this government. It is how we are fooled into believing the government and the opposition who use us as a mere tool for nemesis. Having either adroitly exploited the fear of the general public in times of crisis such as political challenge posed by religious fundamentalism or fear of Islam being in danger, both wings of the political divide have managed to salvage their dented political image.

The reason why such behaviour goes unchallenged year after year is far more strategic the incapacitated civil society with its overt fascination to act as sycophants, unable to play the role of a watchdog. At the time when civil society in many countries remains beyond the direct control of the state and economy and provides answer to many of the ills of the developing nations, particularly those concerned with good governance and participatory development, in Bangladesh it is truly vacant. Having lost weight and credibility civil society swells into a social space for political contest and in-fight. Succumbing to the grip of vast and complex problems of a purely political nature, civil society is trapped in the labyrinth of political gambles and finds itself ensnared in unending political battles. This irrational interplay of politics and the futile attempt to translate complex human desires into the language of politics leave it and its components locked in narrowly political infighting. What has resulted so far is the simplistic politicisation of everything, and for the individual citizen a monolithic or one-dimensional identity of belonging to a particular political party. Politics becomes the only cultural, the only social, and the only aesthetic reality. Whether or not it draws its legitimation from familiar religious sources such as Islam, this kind of politics itself becomes a form a self-justifying form of religion. In this sense, civic life presents itself in a political guise, not because politics dominates life but rather because life has only a

political way of expressing itself.

While ordinarily it is the intellectuals who play a major part in creating and sustaining civil society, their common intellectual formation and cultural outlook have predisposed them against contributing to its inner transformation and development. Unable to disaggregate complexities, and inclined instead to aggregate together discrete problems and issues, they have significantly lost the capacity for offering patient, closely focused and specific analyses, for hard and serious and discerning intellectual work. Lacking any appreciation of the differentiation and conditional autonomy of various social domains, with its disdain of particulars and its fascination with grand generalities, they remained arrested within the ambit of the metaphysical. In its failure to penetrate into the precincts of the common belief system that reigns within the culture of civil society and in its inability to offer specific solutions to everyday problems, this philosophical orientation has fostered a growing divergence between the world of intellectual culture and the commoners. It has encouraged among people a preoccupation with instantaneous change of greater magnitude the prospects for which are quite faint, even illusory thereby suppressing consciousness of everything real and specific that demarcates the social from the political. In its effects, their totalising or "universalising" mode of thought is a mirror image of that of the fundamentalists: by politicising everything, they deny the society its vitality and autonomy.

Politics and party liaison continue to inform the moral impetus of the intellectuals, who increasingly abandon whatever ostensible purpose they claimed disinterestedly and impartially to advance and instead refined their formal objectives in narrow, politically motivated terms. Indeed, the embrace of party politics is a kiss of death, ruining the corridors of university faculties, cultural institutions, professional organisations and legal services. The declining credibility of political parties has therefore touched civil society and the intellectuals in whom people see the mirror image of the political leaders and despise them with even more vigour as they do to the politicians. To save the country from the political Frankenstein what civil society needs is the nourishment of its own identity, away from political self-interest. Not the role of a lackey but public watchdog is what country expects of them.

IN MEMORIAM

Tawfiq Aziz Khan-- A man of starling qualities

M HARUNUR RASHID

WHAT was he? A successful sports commentator? A pioneer of sports journalism? An upbeat cultural activist? An effective and efficient manager? An amateur theatre enthusiast? An uncompromising journalist? An organizer of uncommon talent? All these put together are not going to make up the individual that was Tawfiq Aziz Khan, for he was a rare human being. Any one who had talked to him beyond the tenth minute must have felt meeting someone with a difference. He was like a shining rapier drawn from its scabbard that was the connotative edge of his personality. He was acutely conscious of his own acumen, yet he was meek, unassuming and humble. He was warm and kindhearted, yet he never failed to assert his uprightness. He had a natural sense of humour which was part of his own bearing that never lost touch with dignity. He had a rare sense of proportion that always kept its own grounds. He loved speaking to millions, yet garrulity was never one of his strong points. In fine, we are least likely to see his like in the years to come.

Born on 16th July, 1938 Tawfiq Aziz was educated at the University of Dhaka. He seems to have been cut out for journalism, for even as a student he evinced an interest for the press and became a staff reporter for the then Pakistan Observer. After graduation, he worked for some autonomous bodies (EPIDC and Titas) as a Public Relations Officer. In the mid seventies, he became General Manager of government owned Dainik Bangla and weekly Bichitra and continued there until 1990 when, on the invitation of late S M Ali, he joined The Daily Star as its first Managing Editor. This for him was a leap into the unknown from well-entrenched security to uncharted territories. But courage was his second nature. So he accepted the challenge. His sincerity and hard work paid off and the paper has become the most popular and respected in the country. Under the leadership of S M Ali, Mahfuz Anam and he made a wonderful team that has given Bangladesh her most prestigious newspaper.

Millions of people in this country would remember him as their favourite football and cricket commentator on TV and radio. He endeared himself to his viewers and listeners with his spontaneous, well-



articulated and precise commentaries in both Bangla and English. But he received the accolade of his career as a commentator when he was called in to cover live on television Bangabandhu's home-coming from Kurmitola airport. He must have found it equally enthralling to cover live the coming of the greatest boxer of all time, Mohammad Ali in 1978. He had an enduring interest in the game of tennis too and he was the only Bangladeshi journalist to have covered all the Grand Slam tournaments. No wonder he became an Associate member of Australian Tennis Media Association (ATMA). As a sports personality, he became well-known in the whole of South Asia. He was resident editor of Cricket Asia (Hong Kong) and Sports Time (Lahore). He was the founder editor of Krira Jagat, a sports fortnightly published from Dhaka.

He held other very distinguished positions. He was a life member of Bangladesh Sports Writers' Association, an organization he helped to found and had the rare distinction of being elected its president six times. He was a founder member and president of Bangladesh's first group theatre association, 'Drama Circle'. He was a member of FEMA (Fair Election Monitoring Alliance). He was also a Rotarian and was the President of Dhaka North West for two consecutive years (1999-2001). Dhaka Club conferred on him an honorary membership and he was, of course, a permanent member of the National Press Club.

Tawfiq Aziz was one of those few who, in the wake of the big void left behind by the mass exodus of Hindus on the partition of Bengal in 1947, came forward to endow our life with new significance. Just as Shamsur Rahman has found a new

language of poetry, Zahir Raihan, a new language of cinema, Qayyum Chowdhury, a colourful language for our book covers, so has Tawfiq Aziz given us a language for interpreting the world of sports.

Let me record my deep appreciation and profound regard for this man who illuminated our lives in more ways than one. The best of him was respect for and recognition of others' achievements. He had a heart as wide and endless as the sea, a heart that went out to greet others. He never told me in so many words, but he was glad that I gave a fairly good account of myself as the Director General of Bangla Academy. He was indeed glad that I was elected the President of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. He was overjoyed when he heard that the Society launched the National Encyclopaedia Project for which he assured all possible help. It is a pity he will not be there to see its publication two years hence. Before he went to Bangkok for treatment, I dropped in to see him. I gave him a copy of my book Dialogue on Islam which he was very glad to receive. The first thing that came to his mind was whether the book had been reviewed in The Daily Star.

During the last few days of his life, he lay in pain. I did not have the guts to go and face him in his agony. I have taken care of two cancer patients in my family and I knew what Suraiya, his wife, was living through. I know what it feels like when death stares you in the face and you are helpless, as helpless as an onlooker who sees his friend executed by a firing squad. No one except him who has lived through it, will ever know what it feels like when you cannot even hold out empty hope. In suffering, we humans are essentially alone. Tawfiq Aziz's death has once again reminded us of this dire truth about human destiny. His two sons have held out bravely against the storm that has devastated the warm and cozy home they used to share with their parents. Soon, the storm will be gone, and life will be back on its normal orbit. But for Suraiya and her two sons life will never be the same.

M Harunur Rashid is a professor of English at the North South University.



All health information to keep you up to date

Fact and fiction

Wet feet

If your feet get wet, you'll get a cold? May be. Wet clothing, including wet boots, shoes and socks, conducts heat away from the body so that you feel chilled and the temperature inside your nasal passage drops. Many researchers, including those at the Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine in Natick, Massachusetts, have confirmed that this drop in temperature can reduce the activity of cells in the nasal mucous membranes that ordinarily release the antibodies that protect you against cold viruses. As a result, you are more susceptible to infection. But it's important to remember that there has to be virus present; simply having wet feet in cold weather won't cause a cold.

Backache

Sleeping without a pillow will make a bad back better? Not necessarily, some people whose backache stems from muscle spasms in the upper back or the neck may feel better sleeping on a flat surface, but others with the ubiquitous lower back pain can worsen the condition by leaving neck and shoulders unsupported. Check with your doctor before chucking your pillow.

Next: Tips on tak-