

## Fighting fundamentalism As a guarantee for regional stability

THE natural religiosity of our people is often mistaken for religious gullibility by self-serving clerics and political opportunists alike. That they are apolitically wedded to certain religious values is entirely lost on the unprincipled lot. But what one finds as the most condemnable form of monstrosity to bedevil societies in South Asia is the political use of religion. Traditionally, this has been the hand-maiden of military and semi-military dictatorships. As usurpers of power, they saw a perverse merit in pandering to obscurantism for attaining a facade of legitimisation to carry on.

This was observed in an extreme form with general Ziaul Haque in Pakistan who plunged headlong into a theocratic polity. Exceptionally, Ayub Khan, the first promulgator of martial law in Pakistan, had struck a liberal note by amending the family laws to protect some women's rights. Ironically though, it was Bhutto, who as an elected leader, began Pakistan's civilian courtship with a religious tilt in that he played it as a political card. The present chief executive of Pakistan general Musharraf tried a liberal angle with a Shariat law at the beginning but had to relent under ulema pressure down the road.

In Bangladesh, general Ziaur Rahman changed the secular character of the Constitution. And, general Ershad who usurped power from an elected BNP government was to subsequently declare Islam as the state religion of Bangladesh. These are incontrovertible facts of history.

In recent times, we have had the horrifying misfortune of seeing major political parties in a democracy either kowtowing to obscurantist sentiments or aligning with religious parties to gain a political mileage over each other. It is worth bearing in mind that even in India, a country with strong secular traditions, a party that preaches Hindutva is at the helm of affairs.

Abuse of religion in whatever shape or hue it comes about is a highly regressive phenomenon that we all need to take guard against. The just-held two-day South Asian conference on fundamentalism and communalism in Dhaka brought together eminent civil society leaders from the region to exchange views on the twin dangers to our national lives. It was a useful interaction, but one that needs to be carried forward by cutting across political party lines to build bridges across the region.

## Abyss deepens in ME Double standard must end

AS Palestinians brace for Israeli retaliation for the suicide bomb attack in a Tel Aviv nightclub that left 19 people dead and 90 wounded, it is obvious that any hope of reining in Israel through peace talks has been lost, temporarily at least. It is also clear that if the region is to be pulled back from the jaws of an all-out conflict, the United States must play an active and determined role to rein in Israel.

The peace talks were derailed as soon as Ariel Sharon took office earlier this year and reinforced his hardline approach towards the Palestinian. The US policy to disengage itself from direct involvement in the peace process, while focusing its efforts on Iraq and the other Arab countries, has sidelined it further.

But with passions running riot and violence escalating alarmingly in the last few weeks, the US can no longer play the part of a bystander. It must acknowledge the centrality of this conflict to any long term US involvement in the entire region. It must accept the critical influence it bears on Israel. Washington provides \$3 billion in aid to the Jewish state, most of it military. The F-16s that bombed Palestinian targets recently are American. Americans have also been involved in training and equipping Palestinian security forces, especially Arafat's elite personal security corps.

Some sign of a change in the US attitude, however, has been apparent since a report by former US senator George Mitchell was endorsed by the Bush administration. This report, however, placed an immediate cessation of hostilities at the top of its agenda, an objective that the newly appointed US envoy William Burns pursued in his meetings with Sharon and Arafat. That neither the Mitchell report nor the diplomatic efforts of Burns have made any headway has not been surprising, because the root of the problem, namely Israel, has not been persuaded to abandon its belligerence.

Israel has made its policy clear to the Palestinians: it will use force and force alone to 'talk' to the Palestinians. US intervention is imperative. Otherwise, the region is doomed to be set aflame.

# Great game or end game in Eurasia's heartland?



BRIG (RTD) M ABDUL HAFIZ

NOTHING much of the factors influencing a strategic situation has really changed since Mahan projected the vision of maritime supremacy and Mackinder propounded his theory of geopolitics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their notions have been most graphically illustrated in Central Asia - the historic playground of great game where the dominant powers are still locked in a bitter struggle to wrest the political control of the region which is not only the heartland of Eurasian continent but one that contains the world's richest reserve of oil and natural gas. Such endowment has imparted dual significance, both as a geopolitical entity and energy centre, to the heartland of Eurasian continent in Mackinder's theory. Which is why the struggle for its control only intensified over the centuries.

There are, however, changes in the game's character and also in the configuration of the contenders arrayed against each other. By the end of the year 2000, it was no longer just incarnation of classic 19<sup>th</sup> century confrontation of the West-versus-Russia when two imperial powers -- Victorian England and Tsarist Russia -- relentlessly

manoeuvred over the vast expanse of Central Asian steppes to out-play each other.

Now with China joining the fray in its grand strategic scheme, it has confronted virtually the entire West subsuming also Russia which, under its post-Soviet rulers, clearly opted for a return to its Christian heritage and European roots, thus identifying itself with the West. The new Chinese gambit is seen as the maturing of its historic ambition and culmination of 5000 years of its

ambitions, Beijing considered the agreement only as the manifestation of contemporary objective conditions. In coming close to Russia on occasions, China was motivated primarily by its need for advanced defence-related technology and high performance weapon system as well as cross-border containment of Vighur subversion in Xinjiang with the cooperation of Russia and the latter's CIS allies in Central Asia.

In the meantime, China is not

Russian frontier away from Eurasia's heartland, the West has the same policy also for China: to push her away from the energy resources of Central Asia. This, they want to achieve by tearing territorial chunks from China and transforming them into buffer mini-states.

China has quickly risen after the cold war. Its great potentials with regard to the energy resources in Middle East and Central Asia have inevitably become not only the object of attention but also an irritant

whelming influence in its 'near abroad' comprising all of the Central Asian oil-rich countries, it -- bereft of both technology and capital -- can hardly resist the American surge in the region's oil sector. In its quest for grabbing all the world's energy resources, it is only the end game for the Americans. No doubt, Chinese leaders have so far taken discreet steps towards realising their grand strategic objective: the revival of historic silk route which was recognised as being of crucial

PRC. The Chinese plan envisions the Pakistani-Taliban Islamists destabilising Central Asia and thus creating the imperative for the PRC to step in and consolidate its presence in the region through military and economic aid. This dynamism already started with Uzbekistan which, when under Islamist forces' assault last year, appealed to the PRC, and not its CIS ally Russia, for emergency military help. Only two months later in the year 2000, Kyrgyzstan followed in tightening military relations with the PRC in reaction to the escalation in Islamist terrorism and subversion originating from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. The upsurge and expansion of Islamist terrorism in Central Asia as of last year did not happen spontaneously. The Taliban would not have sponsored and facilitated the surge of Islamist terrorism without support from Pakistan. And Islamabad would not have embarked on such an undertaking without Beijing's patronage.

Even in its endgame the US would not sit idle and watch others filling in the strategic vacuum that exists even now in Central Asia. The US would manipulate and exploit all of Central Asia and the Caucasus in order to better control the region's vast energy resources. The US is known to have already initiated its brand of terrorism in Chechnya against Russia and in Xinging against the Chinese -- somewhat the way it armed, trained and utilised Afghan mujahideens against the Soviets. It will however take China long to play out its great game before it can, if at all, make some headway towards the treasures of Eurasia's heartland.

## PERSPECTIVES

The distinctive feature of China's current initiative is its perception of Russia as a hostile power inimical to Chinese interest in Central Asian region...but the US in its endgame would not sit idle and watch others filling in the strategic vacuum that exists even now in Central Asia. The US would manipulate and exploit all of Central Asia and the Caucasus in order to better control the region's vast energy resources.

political culture and aspirations. At the core of the Chinese initiative is a quest for the Trans-Asian axis -- the virulently anti-western and Sino-Islamist strategic alliance stretching from Korean peninsula in the east to Syria in the west with PRC, Pakistan and Iran playing key role in it.

The distinctive feature of China's current initiative is its perception of Russia as a hostile power inimical to Chinese interest in Central Asian region. It is in spite of Jiang-Yeltsin agreement codifying new relations in 1996 between the two countries. Because the Sino-Russian postures in and around Central Asia as envisaged in the agreement were perceived differently in Beijing and Moscow.

While Moscow, repeatedly rebuffed by the West, genuinely committed to new strategic rela-

unaware of its constant vulnerability to the West which has already pushed Russia northward with the separations of five independent states in Central Asia. With the disintegration of Soviet Union there is no longer any country around but energy-rich Middle East and Central Asia which have greater potential than China. Therefore, now to split China's western part, or more specifically, to split China's Tibetan region or rebellious Xinjiang province, regardless of form, is perhaps the target of the western world led by the US. It has always been the West's deliberate policy to create a political barrier between the oil-producing countries either in the Middle East or Central Asia and a potentially powerful country capable of resisting the western world's designs. After having moved the

in the West's grand strategy which aims at ensuring absolute monopoly and control over the world's energy resources. After having clipped the wings of all possible competitors for Middle East oil grab, the western alliance -- particularly the US -- obviously made its appearance in the strategic Euro-Asian corridor of Caucasus and Central Asia where lie buried under their arid surface an estimated 200bn barrels of crude oil and 800 trillion cubic meters of natural gas. The US views these resources to be the key to the economic viability of several of the countries in the region and also favours its own commercial involvement in the region's oil production and export with the intention of enhancing her presence in this vital region of the world.

Notwithstanding Russia's over-

significance to the consolidation of the Trans-Asian axis, the PRC's key to global power posture. But the means they choose to attain it is rather crude. The traditional silk route stretched in the past from the Levant through Iraq-Iran and into Central Asia and into China -- that is along the PRC's and Tehran's Trans-Asian axis. In pushing through this route the main challenge is to penetrate into Central Asia which had not only been former Soviet Central Asia, even now it is Russia's own 'near abroad' and zone of vital interest. Apprehensive of a direct face-off with Moscow, Beijing elected instead to ferment the subversion and destabilisation of the Central Asian governments through Islamist terrorism to the point of coercing these governments into compromises with the

## OPINION

# A cheating or a cheated nation?

HUSNE JAHAN

EXAMS have started and thousands of candidates are being expelled. Cheating is not new, but is it on the rise? I wonder. The population has increased is that responsible for the offence? What else can we blame for it?

I visited a school in my village recently and met the teachers. I was enquiring about the criteria for their selection of meritorious students for scholarships which some of us were funding. They told me it was difficult to select genuinely deserving pupils, because cheating was so widespread and of such magnitude that it was difficult to judge merit from exam results. They explained that it wasn't possible for them to improve this situation, because influential people of the area threatened their life, livelihood and residence, besides other hazards.

After completing his exam, the son of a colleague of mine told his parents that examinees had no trouble answering their questions, because answers were being broadcast on a megaphone outside the examination hall. Many ingenious methods of unfair practices have come to limelight in the course of years. Writing microscopically on a slender piece of easily concealable folded paper, writing on measuring rulers, inkpots, arms, dress folds have been known. Discussing in toilets, leaving written answers for others, keeping answer books open for the persons sitting on either sides or behind, are quite well known. As for multiple choice questions, pre-arranged signals with fingers or scratching specific parts of the body, indicating serial

numbers on the answers provided, are well known cheating methods.

When our son was utilising his time at the university while waiting to complete formalities to study abroad, he was seen one day struggling to improve his handwriting. When asked why he was doing this, he shocked my ethical senses by replying that he needed to improve his handwriting because five of his classmates would be copying from his answer script.

I didn't understand the significance of the number 'five' until he explained that there would be two students on either side of him and one at the back during an examination. When I expressed my disapproval, he said he needed to survive among his classmates. I was glad that soon after he left for studies in the USA.

Just how pathetic the situation has become was brought home to me when a student of mine, in reply to my query about the type of teaching he had undergone in his previous institute, confessed ignorance, as he had never attended any of his classes there. Astonished, I asked him to explain. It seemed that his teachers never checked their daily attendance, as there were around 200 pupils in each class. How did he study and pass? At the teachers' coaching centre, of course.

Recently, an investigation revealed, after some complaints and agitation, that a university teacher had taught only five classes out of a scheduled 44 for a whole semester. What did the teacher do for the rest of the time and why wasn't it reported earlier? How was this teacher rated a good one in his evaluation by the students of his

class at the end of the semester?

I asked several teachers of a national university how many classes they were required to teach every week. The response was almost the same from all of them, i.e., six. In answer to my next question, "Do you have attend the university every day?" they replied that they didn't, because they worked at home and were, of course, available on call.

Teachers were always considered to belong to the poorer strata of society even in advanced countries of the west. The image has been reversed now in Bangladesh. I was once confronted by a solicitous exploiter at an office where I had to get some work done, by this comment that if I had been a teacher all my life, I must have amassed a large amount of wealth. Such a paradox is the reality of our times.

A teacher who is supposed to be also a character builder and an ideal for students, has now changed his role into a cheater. How does he uphold his reputation and role model for his pupils when he doesn't come to classes in time and leaves much before time? And his students would learn nothing better from him. Leave aside partiality and favouritism in evaluation, which are probably sometimes beyond human control, a teacher now marks the attendance without recording the actual class attendance of students, doesn't teach classes to compel pupils to attend his private coaching classes, underrates pupils who stay away from his private tutoring, and instead of being vigilant during exams, not only allows them to resort to unfair means, but even helps them with answers.

Such immoral teachers are even capable of exposing or selling question papers prior to the exams, besides writing answers to the questions for students to memorise. It has also been reported that in return for a payment, unethical teachers allow widespread copying from prepared answers.

Do such teachers exhibit the best of moral values or any love for the nation at large? What then can we expect of demoralised students of demoralised teachers and as such, of degenerate children of these and other degenerate parents?

What then is the outcome of this mess? The youngsters who have been cheated and who are cheating themselves, have excelled in this trade so well that it has become part of their nature and they know no better way of getting things done. Or, because they never bothered to learn anything else, they are compelled to spend their lives cheating everyone else.

Thus, we find cheaters in jobs where attending to everything else but their jobs, which is their security pole to fall back upon, becomes the sole objective; cheating becomes the only way of succeeding in business; family relationships are founded on cheating and deceiving; trusting friendship is a rare commodity now-a-days; and cheating is the only means resorted to by domestic helpers, builders, contractors, engineers, labourers, technicians, in short, by people in all walks of life; and lastly, when we think of politicians, we wish we had been born on another planet and at another time. In short, cheating is a cancerous game which has invaded our bloodstream and it would

require the combined effort of the nation to cure it from our system.

Many other examples of this widespread national malaise can be illustrated to shock our wits into numbness. The first time my eyes were opened when at a government-run garden nursery, the gardeners didn't let me enter the office, saying the sale service was closed and immediately afterwards led me to buy plants from the nursery garden and pocketed the money themselves without official acknowledgement. I was very disturbed. But now I find this is a common practice at toll-gates, airport entrances, parking areas and other similar places where one can strike a bargain if one does not ask for a receipt.

In government offices, employees often appear late for work, gossip, sip tea and go out to perform other activities. Many full-time employees never upset their post lunch naps to return to their offices. Hartals and rainy days are always welcome means to evade official duties. Official transport and junior staff are unduly utilised by high-ups in offices.

In fact, we have unlimited intelligence and expertise to cheat anybody on this planet and it would become another Arabian Nights' tale if we were to list all our misguided performances.

Once I responded to an NGO advertisement for starting a course for disabled people. The NGO was funded by an outside organisation providing ample facilities to the management. I gave three-quarter half-day sittings to prepare the syllabus, besides hours spent in home work. Every time the question of payment was brought up,

either the issue was side-tracked or it was referred to my benevolent considerations of financial hardships they were undergoing. In the meantime, I was proudly shown their latest brochure listing me as one of their honourable advisors, while the question of honorarium or salary still seemed a far cry.

Needless to say, I had to sever ties with them, especially when later, I couldn't oblige their sudden decision and urgency to start classes one late evening without any prior knowledge or information. Besides, they might have again expected honorary service on humanitarian grounds.

Under such circumstances, is it justifiable to blame our domestic servants, chauffeurs, policemen, clerks, nurses, shop attendants etc., if they excel in the bold and outrageous arts of negligence, thieving, deceiving, extortion, misappropriating, illegal gratification, kidnapping, raping and even murdering? Why, they are only trying to be good disciples of their seniors in society! In this situation, if you wish to uphold your moral values, the expected outcome should be purely the satisfaction of your soul and not any earthly benefits, except perhaps a little breath of transient reputation.

So can we pinpoint specifically who are being cheated by whom, when everyone is scrambling and competing in the cheating arena more ingeniously and vigorously than others? By all this, are we deceiving and harming others or ourselves and thereby, the nation as a whole, while apparently we can only see everyone's desperate attempts at climbing the social ladder for more money and power?

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

### PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.



STAR PHOTO: A K M MOHSIN

### Underwater detectives

If you lose something in the river, all is not lost. Your valuables could be retrieve by these intrepid divers. There are other divers at Sadarghat launch terminal engaged in this unusual profession. These underwater detectives risk their lives because they dive without any scuba equipment. Accidents can take place, especially as the river beds are clogged with debris. We should clean up our rivers and encourage divers to use equipment.

### "No good mothers"

I am referring to the letter "No good mothers" (June 1) by Mujibul Haque. The letter is full of statements that are objectionable.

First, I am not sure why the writer stated "Some women claim that housewives are a mass of women engaged in house-keeping; washing dishes, cleaning, cooking, looking after the children and many, many more tasks that are unpaid." Does the writer think that such a claim is untrue?

Second, that too many women are physically abused by family members is a matter of fact. I have to say that we women, do not think of all men as rapists, and I do not know where the writer got such an idea.

For the remainder of his letter, the writer blamed the women, especially the working women, for the problems of today's youth. My question is: why should mothers, working outside of the home or not, be the only ones responsible for the proper bringing up of their children? Does the writer not think that men are smart, competent, and sincere enough to get involved in their offsprings' lives?

I refuse to accept any stereotypes, and I have faith that men too are capable of contributing to the welfare of their children. I strongly believe that the mother and the father should be held equally responsible for all parental duties. The sooner we realise and accept

this, the better off our society will be.  
**Wafa Tawfeeq**  
Dallas, USA, on e-mail

### High rise buildings and RAJUK

There are innumerable high rise offices and residential buildings in Dhaka and the number is increasing day by day.

Due to erratic electric supply and frequent load shedding the sufferings of the officials and those living in these buildings are unimaginable.

Due to want of electricity, most of the time the lifts and water pumps in these high rise buildings remain out of order.

Isn't there any co-ordination between RAJUK and PDB/DESA with regard to construction of such high rise buildings? The authorities must make it compulsory for all high rise buildings above six storeys to provide electric power generators.  
**O H Kabir**  
Wari, Dhaka

### Drains and dengue

The Dhaka City Corporation's notification in your daily suggests that as a preventive measure against dengue, one should not allow stagnant water to remain in the vicinity for more than five days.

In Uttara Model Town there is no drainage system. As a substitute to drains, each house has a ditch in front where the waste water with all

types of garbage is released. This waste water remains stagnant for days, turning the ditch into an ideal place for breeding of mosquitoes and many other known and unknown parasites, microbes etc.

Drainage system is one of the preliminary infrastructures of a housing area. It is amazing that the planners did not do anything for the drainage while developing this model town and also are sitting on their folly for decades.

It is earnestly requested that the authorities do something to reduce the health risk of Uttara residents by making a drainage system in the area. Better late than never.  
**A Uttara resident**  
Dhaka

### Nominating MPs

The general elections should be held in October this year and most of the major political parties are now thinking about selecting suitable candidates. This is indeed a difficult job as both money and popularity are needed to win an election. But above everything if a political party is genuinely interested to serve the people and the country then they should nominate such persons who will serve selflessly the cause of people and the country and nothing else.

The political parties must not give nomination to terrorists, hoodlums and loan defaulters even if these candidates have enough money and

muscle power and very close party affiliation. The interests of the country and the people should reign supreme and the candidates must attach highest priority for the economic and social development of the country.

It is known to all that the economic emancipation of the people of Bangladesh is a *sine qua non* and achieving that goal is not an easy task. To attain that goal honest, dedicated, hardworking and capable persons are needed.

It is therefore required that the political parties give nomination for MPs to those who are qualified and capable of doing good to people and not running for self aggrandisement and amassing wealth at public cost.  
**Abul Mujahid**  
Anderkilla, Chittagong

### One side of the coin

A senior minister has publicly spoken about the presence of 'terrorist' journalists in Bangladesh (May 24) but conveniently failed to mention the presence of thousands of political activists who use guns controlled by hidden political godfathers.

The press has reported a large number of such cases, including misuse of power and influence by the family members of the party stalwarts.

This one-way display of the coin will not earn the voters' trust. It needs moral courage to own up, before protecting a party activist.

**A Voter**  
Dhaka

### South Asian ties

Noted Indian columnist Prful Bidwai's commentary (May 1) on India's big-brother attitude rightly depicts the true picture of most of the residents in the region. After two generations of hostility, it is indeed time to settle the Kashmir dispute.

The Farakka Barrage has done immense harm to Bangladesh, including the increase in arsenic content in the underground waters (according to the experts), threatening the lives of millions of people.

The border alignment exercises have been kept pending for decades. The huge trade imbalance against Bangladesh is not being attended to. Bangladesh's transport links with neighbours are also limping.

No Indian neighbour is happy with its relation with India. Why does this cold war continue, and where has India taken the initiative to thaw the situation?

New Delhi needs a change of heart in approach to regional relationship. The same is the case with Islamabad.

**A Husnain**  
Dhaka