

General discussion on opposition allegations

Why should the opposition give a walkover to the ruling party?

THIS comes as a pleasant tidings, if not a total surprise. Speaker Jamiruddin Sircar has agreed to a general discussion in the Jatiya Sangsad on the allegations of the opposition leader Sheikh Hasina that the October 1 elections were held on a blueprint. There is no reason to think that it is a freak that has come out of nowhere. For Bangabir Abdul Quader Siddiqui in so many words had made a request for it which the Speaker granted most promptly. It has a touch of novelty in that normally the motion on such a subject should have been moved by the mainstream opposition as the complaining party. Regardless of its genesis however, we welcome the general discussion in prospect even though it might not be a debate if the opposition persisted in keeping out of the parliament.

But while agreeing to a two-hour general discussion on the opposition's blueprint-related tirade the Speaker could not resist venting out his feeling thus: "the October 1 general election was held in a free, fair and congenial atmosphere, ... none has the right to undermine the achievement." One would have expected the Speaker as the presiding authority to desist from speaking out at the very beginning once he had complied with the request for a general discussion on the subject.

Nevertheless, our general feeling is that a window of opportunity has been thrown open for the opposition to walk into the parliament and state their case to the nation. Given their strength in the parliament they cannot get any resolution passed their way for sure; even so, it will be worthwhile for them to go on record inside the parliament. The Jatiya Sangsad is the best forum for them to present their case based on the evidence, facts and figures they might have substantiated to their allegations of election-rigging. Why should the opposition give the Treasury Bench a walkover in the parliament on an issue of its own making? They might like to argue that through a series of rallies and processions they would take the issue to the people. But the audience they will get through the parliament cannot be matched by the amorphous kind that the rallies will present them with. They can reach the maximum number effectively through the televised proceedings of the parliament however selective this may be, let alone the private television channels, which can be hugely banked upon. Then the print media is there with its deep reach.

Could a formal proposal for drawing the opposition into a debate be rolled by the Speaker on to their court with a promise to allot them half the time that will be earmarked for the whole motion?

PM goes unheeded

Waste still litters city streets, no sign of garbage containers

AT a meeting on October 25, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia instructed relevant government agencies that city streets and corners be cleaned up and that garbage containers be put in their proper places within the following seven days. Eleven days on, while the roads, streets and alleyways in the city and its periphery remain littered with solid wastes, the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) is still wondering where to put the garbage containers. The process of setting up the containers is on, assured the DCC chief conservancy officer without, however, spelling out any definite timeframe.

There must have been compelling reasons for the DCC to defy the prime ministerial directive and we wonder what those could be, as it has not yet come up with any explanation in this regard. We are aware that Dhaka Mayor Mohammad Hanif has been struck down with dengue fever. It is, however, hard to believe that his absence has suspended all activities at the Nagar Bhaban, the DCC headquarters, let alone day-to-day conservancy work.

True, installation of garbage containers at different points requires either creation or channelling of funds. It is also true that allocation for a work not outlined in the fiscal budget does require authorisation from the policymaking body, of which the mayor certainly is a key part. Again, we are sure that the mayor's absence does not mean that policymaking is suspended for indefinite period. The third and possibly the most clichéd explanation could be fund constraints, which, however, is highly unlikely to be the case here, especially when it concerns a prime ministerial directive.

Overall, the DCC's failure has rendered the prime minister's directive ineffective and the promise it bore for the residents hollow. City dwellers may feel when the DCC can defy an order from the prime minister herself, their plea for a clean city, free of waste and pollution, stands no chance whatsoever. To prove them wrong, along with immediate implementation of the prime minister directive, we demand an explanation from the DCC as to why it failed to meet the seven-day deadline in the first place.

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

The garbage woman

Sometimes the unstated is more powerful than facts. A woman stands against a pile of garbage that dwarfs her, almost overwhelms her. She picks through the garbage hoping to find treasures that will provide her with something to sell or re-cycle. It's all part of a cycle where life death and garbage in-between carry the same meaninglessness of existence for millions of the urban poor like her.

What is this "trafficking" noise really all about?



AFSAN CHOWDHURY

THERE IS a South Asian consultation on sexual exploitation, abuse and trafficking on in the city. We welcome that. By bringing the problems to the notice of the world, especially the decision-makers, a big difference can be made. In the last few years, working in a number of South Asian countries, as a development programmer and a journalist, I have seen a huge interest evolve in these sectors. The top attention is hogged by trafficking followed by sexual exploitation read prostitution - and then sexual abuse. Of these trafficking remains the most complex, controversial and also maximum attention drawing. In Bangladesh and Nepal, two sender countries, interest is peaking. It's the development flavour of the era. A flavour is always a good thing.

And now for the first break in the programme In Sohrah Goth in Pakistan, we visit the Eidhi woman for destitute women. A kindly woman introduces us to the Bangladesh/Bangali girls. We meet a young girl who left her home in Faridpur to work in Dhaka after her family had started for days. Her first stop was Uttara and then from there through an agent to India and finally Karachi and Multan. She was thrown down from the second floor by her husband and broke her leg and femur. She walks with a horrible gait and speaks rustic Bangla. She breaks down seeing fellow Bangladeshis. We help

her fill forms so that she is formally admitted. We talk to other girls and we leave. There is a woman who has lost her identity and speaks in three tongues, Bangla, Urdu and Punjabi, mixing them like water in a bowl. Her home is her wheelchair. And now we return to the main programme. Life is becoming increasingly unsustainable, futures terribly difficult to secure. I cover a seminar in Dhaka for would be migrants to Canada. The lawyer, a Pakistani

with his six kids. He bought a passport+ticket+connections+delivery to Malaysia - from an agent. Malaysia didn't need him, he needed Malaysia. He was caught there six months after reaching Kuala Lumpur. After his release from jail and losing all his money, a victim of "trafficking", he begged for food money from us all till he got a job as an "trafficking agent" himself. After all he has picked up a deadly qualification. He was a returnee. He can

hired by a British charity to work as their representative in South Asia. Posted in Nepal with a special visa, I can move all over South Asia. I have everything including dollar bank accounts. I am legit. I have international connections. I can't be trafficked. I am an expat. I relocate. I feel better. Nirmal, my houseboy in Kathmandu is hoping to be trafficked. I relocated and our office manager plans to migrate somewhere away.

The unstated is spoken but not publicly. I remember asking a young girl at a rescue home in West Bengal why she had ventured out. She looks at my face and almost calls me stupid. Yes, she has been to the Bombay red light district. Yes, she can never return home. But she didn't want to be a whore. She had no other work offer. She had no option there or here or anywhere. The problem is not prostitution but livelihood, she says.

don't want the poor to come to the USA. It is possible that what bothers the gatekeepers is the type of people who migrate albeit informally and no migration itself? It seems the privileged can go upto a point but the tired and the poor, the wretched refuse from the teeming shores must stay home and not dirty other finer lands. Like the Afghan refugees in Australia weren't allowed into that country but they paid to have them set up in neighbouring Nauru.

It seems that there is some hierarchy of the population movement as well. That the better off can migrate to the developed world, the middle to the Middle East so that they may qualify for the developed world and the poor wherever they can manage but mostly remain within own land and maybe South Asia. It's migration's class structure. The poor are trafficked and have to enter into prostitution because that's what they get where they go while the well off can pump gas in the States or pick apples in Australia because that's what they get where they go.

So is the basic message is that inequity between areas, zones, countries, regions and countries are acceptable. But attempts to go to the better areas are not allowed because when the poor move, it becomes trafficking because it's unregulated and has its own system and other option is offered.

So even if we can't ensure a better world for the poor they must stay within their poor world. Just because we can't do anything for them, doesn't mean they can try to go where there is a better life. The poor must stay within borders and force isn't enough prevention programmes supported by development agencies must be supported.

What is all this trafficking noise really all about?

The author is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

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Canadian, speaks in glowing terms of Quebec.

"Can you enjoy the money here, even if you are wealthy? In Canada, we can guarantee security and education for your children. There are no mastans in Canada." The potential Canadians are well dressed and confident. They can afford to pay the lawyers, the agents, the go-betweeners, whatever is required.

"We don't mind paying extra 10,000 dollars but we must be safe. We want air tight migrations", a middle aged man says. They have the money to buy luxuries like security. Even Canada wants them. The lawyers hand me a bunch of papers. I don't look rich enough to migrate. I tell them I am just a journalist. That figures.

But Junab Ali needed such men. With his severance pay of Taka 100,000 from a UN agency, he wanted to run away to anywhere, that's how wide his choice was. He had been laid off with no prospects of another job. He needed to survive

now help others go through hell, a few maybe to paradise.

And again a short break I was being lectured in Kathmandu.

"Migration is natural but it has to be regulated and organized. We have studied migration behaviour of South Asians and know that poverty is a factor but that is not the only factor." The bearded highly educated American goes on and on with his precise data and analysis. Clearly, we have some defective genes which makes us want to migrate. Some Indians in the crowd support him. They too insist that India is becoming the new target for illegal immigrants especially from its poorer neighbors. I am shown a TV programme, which warns Assam people against hiring Bangla Muslims. The Bangladeshis and Nepalese in the audience feel very chastened. Indians don't come to us but we go to India. "Indians are hired by the US for their IT knowledge. They are not trafficked, they migrate." I feel ashamed of us. I try to mention that I have been

Let's return to the main programme again

At a prep meeting held in connection with this regional seminar, the interest of the sponsors is to focus the agenda on sexual exploitation, trafficking and commercial sex. In all the years that I have spent in the child rights sector, we have always talked about rights. But I don't hear much about rights of the trafficked except to return him or her home. It's all about building a global coalition against trafficking.

A couple of days later I discuss the matter with a leading activist of international stature. She says, "I have been feeling for some time now that the idea behind such a push on trafficking is to give any kind of unregulated migration a bad name. Trafficking is a form of migration, an unregulated, unfair and unjust form but that's the only way the poor can travel. Nobody discusses the rights of the trafficked or migrants. People have rights not just at home but where ever they are discovered, whether they have gone legally or otherwise. But that is not the priority." She shakes her head.

And now we have another break

I land in New York and am picked up at the airport by a friend and his chelas.

They have come to take me to his home in a Cadillac, a vehicle which one of the young men drives to make extra money. He is an illegal, he has filed some documents and as he waits for the documents to be processed, he goes on. As he earns money, he stows away enough to hire lawyers. He also works as an attendant in a taxi rental outfit. He is trusted, paid decently and saves his employer a lot of money. He and his employer both benefit. He said a bit facetiously, "America needs us."

We all laugh but I am not sure if that is true. I know the West needs people, migrants, but in controlled doses. They want the trained, qualified, English speaking middle classers, who are moderately well off in their own land. It's understood that people will come, that the entrepreneurial ones will come and that's fine. They just don't want people who can't hire proper agents who can flash calling cards. They

Natural gas export: Cautious steps are necessary - II

NURUDDIN MAHMUD KAMAL, SKM ABDULLAH, DR MUJIBUR RAHMAN, PROFESSOR NURUL ISLAM AND BADRUL ISLAM

ON MARCH 22, 1999 in a seminar, held in Dhaka, former US ambassador John Holzman made an interesting statement that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Opposition Leader Khaleda Zia agree on at least one aspect of Bangladesh's policy: there should be no exports of gas at the present time. The sum and substance of what the two leaders also said was that Bangladesh's gas reserves had not been accurately measured. Both felt that the gas reserves should first be used to supply power to the 85 per cent of the country's 125 million people who still have no access to electricity. Both expressed that the gas used to create jobs in industries like fertilizer and plastics. The then Prime Minister said, "The priority is our people. They should get their share. Only then we can think about export." The then Opposition Leader (now Prime Minister) Khaleda Zia said, "We cannot sell our wealth and then become beggars."

These are important policy statements and reflect the common wisdom in Bangladesh on gas export, former Ambassador John Holzman mentioned in that symposium, which was not palatable to a former Bangladesh Ambassador Waliur Rahman.

Finance Minister M. Saifur Rahman perhaps gave a second thought on what he said in his radio interview with the BBC on the night of 10th October, accordingly, he indicated to the officials of the Planning Commission and ERD on 15th October that the government may go for gas export provided that it is beneficial for the country (The Daily Star, 16 October, 2001). Admitting that there are opposite views on this issue (gas export), he explained, "We have to take a decision based on economic reality."

However, also realizing that he made an over-statement on the issue, the FM said that he cannot take the decision on his own, but did not mention who is authorized to do so as per Rules of Business of the Government. He however added, "No resource in true sense is a resource if it remains under the soil." While the internationally known energy experts say that the 21st century (at least up to 2050) is the age of natural gas worldwide, the FM reaffirmed only what the former FBCCI president Abdul Awal Mintu or former Foreign Secretary Faruq Sobhan or former Ambassador Waliur Rahman had been saying in the seminars and symposiums over the past two years: that a day might come soon when the country's gas resource would become obsolete! Earlier, on 15th May, 2001 in a meeting of the American Chamber in Dhaka, the US ambassador Mary Ann Peters recommended gas exports form Bangladesh to India for improving the lot of the people of Bangladesh. Thus, although secretly a background and preamble for gas export was in the making for the past two years, however without any success, essentially because of the resistance of the previous government as well as the people of Bangladesh. Now, it appears to the present government that one important factor is removed for initiating gas trade.

International gas trade, it may be noted, has been growing steadily over the late 1980s and the 1990s, from about 19 BCF/day in 1988 to 31 BCF/day in 1997 (Ref: British Petroleum Statistical Review of World Energy). To these figures should be added trade in liquefied natural gas (LNG), which accounts for about a third (over 10 BCF/day in 2000) of the pipeline

trade. This growth reflects the increasing preference for natural gas for power generation worldwide and recognition of its environmental and other benefits. Yet, international gas pipeline projects have proved to be politically sensitive. If we recall, M. Saifur Rahman himself stated in a seminar held in Dhaka (in 2000), that gas export to India is a no starter for many reasons. Now, he has moved poles apart.

However, for the likely importing country (India), the main issue has perhaps been security of supply. Information received so far also confirm that India, in addition to their available huge indigenous energy resources including coal, natural gas, oil and hydropower, is currently considering import of about 8 to 10 BCF/day LNG from different sources.

Interestingly, there are plans for five pipelines to import oil and gas to India from the wells of Central Asia (Turkmenistan), Myanmar, Oman, Iran and Bangladesh. Perhaps because of recent Afghan crisis, the US wants to make a better rapport with India at the cost of Bangladesh. If it is true, India would soon become one of the largest Asian importers of hydrocarbons, probably by 2006. Incidentally, India's existing proven reserves of natural gas alone is much higher than the remaining recoverable reserves gas in Bangladesh. Prospects for finding more oil and gas in the Indian on-shore and offshore are extremely high because of higher geological potential and much higher rate of exploration. Yet, like the US, India's major concern is also to conserve their own resources including natural gas from fast depletion.

Bangladesh is trying to address the most pressing problems in hand, which the IOCs and their local cronies do not take kindly. Rather, they float wild guesses on gas reserves without any valid scientific basis, which confuses the government more than a common citizen. Apparently, there is a number game, regarding gas reserves in Bangladesh, sponsored and promoted by the IOCs, purpose of which is understandable. For instance, a section of vested interest groups patronise the 50 to 100 trillion cubic feet (TCF) number although the only authentic source in the country i.e., Petrobranga estimated a (proven +probable) gas reserve from 22 fields at 24.24 TCF and recoverable (proven +probable) reserve of 15.30 TCF. Cumulative production up to June 2001 is approximately 4.30 TCF, leaving a net recoverable reserve of approximately 11.0 TCF. Based on forecast on demand supply, the reserve is expected to be depleted by 2019 (Ref: Sect oral Plan for Natural Gas Sector, September 2001).

Allegations are made that secret attempts have so far been made by the IOCs in connivance with local bureaucrats and vested interest groups to export gas in the mode and manner designed by external forces behind the curtains. Although a flurry of diplomatic communications is going on now between Dhaka-Washington-Delhi, many Bangladeshis would feel that attempts are underway to hijack the process of gas sales by the political forces in and outside Bangladesh. Nevertheless, there is an absolute necessity for immediate appraisal of all gas fields in terms of finding out gas-initially in place (GIIP) and commercially proven/recoverable reserves through internationally reputed independent certifying company as per internationally accepted practice.

However, the so-called gas-market concept has been coined by the IOCs and has been blown bigger by the gas lobbies. At times these lobbyists turn into match-

makers between the political government and the IOCs supported tacitly or otherwise by some bureaucrats, academicians. Yet, it has been generally observed that the IOCs had chosen to deny the existence of any such operations until the late 1990s. Nonetheless, it is true that civic virtue is not the motivating force that encouraged the visible onslaught for gas-export proposals. Former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina boldly faced the challenges that included internal and external political pressures. She sincerely felt that this vital national wealth couldn't be allowed to be squandered. She therefore directed that a 50-year gas demand forecast be made as part of an Energy Security Plan (ESP) prior to even considering gas export proposals. This had *prima facie* dampened the morale of the gas-hunters. And the attempts to gas-grab by the IOCs violating the provisions of PSCs failed. But we always had a hunch many will try to create a confusion for export option again without even realising that a proven/probable reserve of gas must match the demand forecast of gas in the next three decades, if not for 50 years. Nevertheless, Petrobranga has carefully estimated the demand forecast for gas in March 2001 (Ref: Natural Gas

Demand and Supply Forecast: Bangladesh FY 2001 to 2050) at 62.9 TCF including 39.79 TCF for power generation (63.20%), 4.75 TCF for fertilizer production (7.5%), 13.52 TCF for industrial purpose (21.5%), 4.93 TCF for domestic/commercial/others (7.8%).

So, what is the big hurry? Let's do first thing first i.e., make a comprehensive, estimate of reserves of gas through internationally reputed independent certifying companies and then chalk out a long-term energy plan where optimum utilization of gas would be of prime importance for the nation. However efficient a government is, one cannot conceive of conducting a reserve estimate within three weeks, let alone formulate and updating the Energy Policy, 1995, which was formulated during the tenure of the present government.

But we must also understand that there is no world price of natural gas, as there is for oil and coal; the market is so thin, and trading partners so inflexible, that each deal must be tailor-made. Second, there is an environmental premium attached to gas, which is a cleaner fuel than oil or coal. Since 1972, natural gas played a pivotal role in the country's economic development. Without an ever-

increasing supply of natural gas from the very beginning both the power generation and fertilizer production in the country would have never reached the level of growth they have achieved today. The impacts on the country's balance of payments, were Bangladesh to import urea and feedstock for electricity general, do not bear contemplation. The government spends about \$500 million annually for import of only 3.3 million tons of crude oil and petroleum products, while the use of natural gas (approximately 8.5 million tons of oil equivalent in 2000) saved about \$1.50 billion in one year.

As we all know the recent Joint Assessment by USGS-Petrobranga (February-2001) provided a statistical range of undiscovered resource not reserves, the range is 8.4 TCF (95% confidence level) to 66.7 TCF (5% confidence level), the mean at 32.1 TCF. However, mean in statistical term is very mean indeed and can be dangerously misleading. Mark Twain once commented, "Some people use statistics the way a drunk uses a lamppost not for light but for support".

Therefore, Gas Resource Assessment and Gas Reserve Assessment are two separate animals, perhaps

of the same phylum. Thus the nation is awkwardly stuck in a catch-22 situation with its limited gas reserves. IOCs backed by the donors and the foreign governments are trying their best to hasten the process of gas export from Bangladesh so that very soon Bangladesh can be turned into another Nigeria!

To conclude, we also feel that a common man generally expects that the government, regardless of the nature of the government, be enjoined to serve the interest of the people, not self-interest. It is also the right of a citizen to demand that the governance of a government should be transparent and accountable to the people. It is, therefore, of paramount importance today to objectively examine the country's gas sector's present status including an updated reserve position in the light of its past, its potential and future prospects before the issue of gas-export are formally placed before the Parliament.

This piece is the second of a two-part article. Nuruddin Mahmud Kamal is former Additional Secretary and Chairman, Power Development Board, SKM Abdullah is former Director-General, GSB and Chairman, Petrobranga. Dr Mujibur Rahman is former DG, GSB and Chairman Petrobranga. Professor Nurul Islam is with the BICET and an adjunct lecturer at a visiting professor at FNU, Faculty of Petroleum and Mineral, Saudi-Arabia.

OPINION

Communalism revisited

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

mind.

I happen to know a Hindu Bangalee family in Dhaka. Voting over on election day, the lady of the house asked her Muslim maid who did she vote for, "I voted for the BNP," the maid intoned. Curious, her mistress asked why, "Because the Awami League is a Hindu party", answered the maid.

There have been many analyses of the results of the last general election. And rightly so, even though I do not understand why they have sometimes been so morbidly called "post-mortems". The gloom implied in that term should in fact have been reserved for another phenomenon that the elections brought to the fore: communalism. Unlike the results of the elections, the nature of that phenomenon has scarcely been examined.

Press reports of the ugly resurgence of communalism have been numerous enough. They suggest an unprecedented number of incidents of violence against Hindu Bangalees all over the country. Public memory is notoriously short. But one must still remember the extent of violence against the community that erupted in the aftermath of the destruction of Babri Mosque by Hindu bigots in India in 1992. Hindus were attacked and temples were destroyed or damaged by Muslim zealots in Bangladesh in mindless retaliation. This time around, there was no incident of provocation. Yet, by all accounts, the violence against the community surpassed even its Babri Mosque level.

It is not my intention here to go into the extent of the present violence in any great length. Yet it is impossible not to be drawn to the shameful scene being enacted in the country. Press reports from impartial sources speak of a vast number of cases of assaults on Hindus by Muslim hoodlums. These reports are coming from the length and breadth of the country and are not limited to a few areas. Frightened Hindus have fled their homes to places of relative safety. In many cases they were forced out of their homes. There have been numerous instances of Hindu images of worship destroyed ahead of Durga Puja, the most important festival of the community. In one of the most recent acts of utter bestiality, reported in the Daily Star and elsewhere, a young Hindu girl was gang-raped in her own home while the other members of her family were beaten up and subdued. Many more reports of rape and mayhem have come to light. Leading groups of respected liberal intellectuals and non-government organizations have called the present spate of repression of minorities a national crisis, not a local problem. And how many such acts of barbarism have remained unreported?

One also recalls how only two years ago, in October 1999, there were widespread acts of violence against the community. It was Durga Puja season. In some dozen districts of the country, puja mandaps were ransacked and *pratinas* were damaged, destroyed or desecrated. A Daily Star editorial on these incidents is still fresh in my

mind. Of course, not everybody agrees that there has been widespread violence against the minorities this time around. Some might not even have noticed anything unusual in such violence. An advisor in the last caretaker government reportedly called communal riots a "natural thing". And the present Home Minister maintains that reports of attacks against the Hindus are grossly exaggerated and politically motivated. Most recently, the Finance Minister, on his part, has said that these reports were pure Awami League propaganda. It is strange, though, that on the very day when he was berating the League for the supposed propaganda, his government was assuring not just attackers of the Hindu community would be severely punished, in a clear admission that such attacks have indeed taken place.

Both the actual extent of the misery brought on the Hindu community and the attempt to belittle it lead, ironically, to the same overwhelming question: why? It has been almost thirty years since the ideas of secular democracy triumphed and led to the founding of Bangladesh. How is it that sectarian violence against a large section of the minorities continues to plague the nation? To be sure, the vast majority of the Muslim population of the country has no involvement in acts of hostilities against the Hindus. But it has not prevented such acts either. Which is not far removed from saying that the majority acquiesced. The machinery of Government, on the other hand, has been conspicuously lax in dealing with the recurring acts of sectarian crime.

Let sociologist and other experts as well as politicians begin such an undertaking in earnest. A layman like myself would, however, wish them to begin by recognizing some simple home truths. One such truth is that the mental make-up of the maid we encountered above is not hers alone. It is widely shared. The antipathy of many Muslims towards Hindus comes in many shades. But it does exist. It prevails among the lowest rungs of the society as well as among the highest. It runs through the simple peasant, to the educated elite, to the political leadership. One can of course be sure that Hindus fully reciprocate with antipathies of their own towards Muslims. But the huge difference in size of the two communities should leave no one in doubt where the main responsibility for redresses lies.

Much has happened over the years that tended to widen the distance between the two communities and may even have strengthened the antipathy of the average Muslim towards the Hindu Bangalee. By changing the secular character of the constitution of the country, Ziaur Rahman took the major first step in this regard. General Ershad went a step further by having Islam declared as the state religion. The democratically elected political leaders who succeeded them did little to stem that trend. In fact some of their action and utterances had the consequence of further widening the gap between the two communities.

When, for example, Begum Zia told her countrymen that to vote for the Awami League was to replace *azan* with *uhoodhwan* was clearly presenting herself as a powerful standard bearer for the Muslim majority and by implication as an adversary to the Hindus. She was of course playing to the (Muslim) gallery. But the net effect was the same. To continue with the sorry tale, when she engaged in such propaganda as to suggest that to vote for the League was to vote out *bismillah*, she was championing the Muslim community. Or when she suggested that the water that flows into Bangladesh from Farakka was not fit for *wazu* (coming as it does from a Hindu India that forced on Bangladesh an unfair water-sharing treaty), she was pandering to the basest kind of thinking among her Muslim constituents. Ordinary people take their cue from the leaders, especially if they feel that it suits them. In the absence of any counterbalancing action by the leader, there was enough in those utterances to strengthen the latent Muslim antipathy towards the Hindus. In this case, Begum Zia had no word of reassurance for her Hindu Bangalee compatriots. Neither was there the necessary preemptive warning to potential mischief-makers.

The role of the Awami League, on the other hand, would sadden any secular mind. The leaders of the party, which led the struggle for a secular democratic state, have of late been preoccupied with attempts to prove how truly Islamic they were. Sheikh Hasina wanted to look devoutly Muslim, as did many of her colleagues. Like utterances of the other major political leader mentioned above, public display of private faith can have unintended consequences. It looked as if the AI leadership was engaged in a kind of religious bidding game with the BNP and other political parties. The strategy has not worked to the advantage of the League. But, in the process, an important prop of psychological support critical to the minority community has been further weakened, making Hindu Bangalees more vulnerable.

If communal harmony is to be ensured, it is essential to separate politics from religion. To see the difficulty of that proposition in the Bangladesh context is not to deny its imperative. The BNP, now in power, offered volunteers to protect *puja mandaps* and Hindu worshippers during the just concluded Durga Puja. The government offered money and police protection to the community. There was also a report that even the Jamaat-e-Islami, in Khulna, offered volunteers to protect Hindu worshippers during the festivities. That must be considered the very height of irony in the circumstance. Not to be seen as doing less, the Awami League on its part asked its volunteers to protect Hindu worshippers during the *puja*.

It is extremely difficult to see all this as a change of heart. To create a national psyche that values communal harmony will need far more than mere gestures.

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