

Growing Shia discontent

A major challenge to US authority

SHIA in Iraq are challenging the occupying US forces. The unrest that has alarmingly spread across several cities bears an ample testimony to the community's growing disenchantment with the present situation. The upheaval in Baghdad and other cities have claimed many lives of both Iraqis and coalition soldiers. Especially, the gruesome murder of several coalition soldiers and western aid workers in the city of Fallujah must have come as a thunderbolt to the US administration. And the subsequent events have prompted the US government to rethink its strategies in Iraq, even considering the option of reinforcements in the wake of recent violence.

But it was not supposed to be like this. The Shias were presumably the people, the US and Britain came to liberate. They were the ones, who, it was oft-repeated, had suffered the most under Saddam Hussein, even though they were the majority population. So, what went wrong? Many may like to argue that this is not a general Shia uprising; only a handful of them supporting the radical young cleric, Moqtada Sadr, are involved in the violence. But even then US could have avoided it, because the protests were actually triggered by the closure of Sadr's al-Hawza newspaper a week ago on the ground that it was inciting violence. Can the coalition forces now prevent the discontent over their extended presence in Iraq from spreading? After all, the hand-over of sovereignty to a new Iraqi government is planned for July. Are they going to stick to the timetable?

Perhaps the coalition might seek intervention of moderate Shia leaders like Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani who believes in peaceful opposition to the US. Meanwhile President Bush is under increasing pressure to persuade Americans that his Iraq policy would still work. It's high time he found a tangible solution to the escalating violence and resentment among the Iraqis and allow them to live in peace. An effective UN involvement holds the answer.

World Health Day

Focus on road safety

THIS year's World Health Day theme is: *Road safety is no accident*. What could be a more powerful statement on the dire need for prevention of road mishaps? The message rings loud and clear: we must pool all our resources -- government, private sector, community and NGO -- in a massive effort to contain road fatalities and traffic injuries which have been wreaking havoc on life in this planet.

WHO statistics speak for themselves. Road accidents, the 9th leading cause for disability-adjusted life years lost in 1998, seem set to notch up the third position there in 2020. What's clearly disquieting is that traffic injuries constitute the number one cause of death among young people aged 16 to 24 years.

Coming to Bangladesh, she has one of the highest fatality rates, higher than 73 deaths per 10 thousand. This accounts for a whopping loss of Tk 15 billion every year. Such deaths often ruin whole families and the maimed and crippled ones barely exist (not live) on the margins of society and economy. Even the statistics may not reflect the true magnitude of this epidemic of the new century almost rivaling the HIV affliction. This apprehension comes from lack of documentation and underreporting of accidents.

We are adept in compiling and disseminating statistics, but apparently not in acting on them. Perhaps, we like to rest content with sharing the urgency that the data analysis brings to the fore thinking that our commitment has been demonstrated after all. This attitude must go. There must be a hands-on approach, as distinguished from an academic one, on the part of national governments to enhance road safety by all possible means.

We have to make the right start in preventing road accidents. Do we realise that 53 per cent of road accident victims are pedestrian and that could go up to 70 per cent in the near future? It is a daily sight for anyone in the street that pedestrians and vehicles pass each other by whiskers. So, all street users have to be sensitised about adhering to road safety rules. The recommendations of action research relating to inclusion of traffic safety precautions in school curriculum, capacity building in NGOs and communities, and the launching of an awareness campaign on a sustainable basis, merit attention and implementation.

NATO and its new seven members from eastern Europe

Why did they join?



HARUN UR RASHID

ON 29th March, NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) signed up seven new countries in Eastern Europe in a historic expansion that takes military muscle to the Russian border. The Prime Ministers of former Communist states, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia deposited "the instruments of accession" to the NATO's founding the 1949 Washington Treaty and brought the number to 26 from 19. All the seven states became full members of NATO from 1st April, 2004. It is noted that three of them were members of anti-NATO Warsaw Pact, one was a part of former Yugoslavia and other three Baltic states were part of former Soviet Union.

President Bush met the leaders of the new members at the White House and seized the opportunity to highlight the US war on terrorism. The President knows what he wants from these new member-states: troops for Iraq. Colin Powell, the US Secretary of State welcomed them and said, "I say to you and to your people: Welcome to the greatest and most successful alliance in history... NATO is determined above all to prevent aggression. Now it is determined to promote freedom, to extend the reach of liberty and to deepen the peace."

It is an epoch-making event because NATO was set up in 1949 as a mutual defence alliance to contain Communism and prevent the Soviet aggression on its member

states. As the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and all European states have rejected communism as their political ideology, seven former Communist countries have joined NATO and Albania, Croatia, and Macedonia also wished to join NATO.

NATO and Warsaw Pact of the Soviet Union kept uneasy peace during the Cold War era for 45 years. Both NATO and Warsaw Pact were defensive pacts. That meant that in the case of any armed aggression, the countries of NATO or Warsaw Pact would fight jointly against the aggressor. Each superpower (US and Soviet Union) knew that any

only. At present, reportedly under US request, NATO troops have been stationed in Afghanistan and it is very likely that after 30th June when "sovereignty" is transferred to Iraq, NATO troops will be sent to Iraq to oversee security situation, replacing substantial number of 130,000-strong US troops in Iraq.

The question is: why have the former Communist states joined the NATO? Many factors -- both domestic and external -- have played a role but five in particular deserve mention.

First, the former Communist countries watched the new role of NATO in former Yugoslavia. These

up to the US and Western Europe. They want to improve upon their economy with the active cooperation and assistance of the US and the participation in NATO will enhance the consolidation of their relations with the US. Many new members of NATO sent their troops to Iraq and reaffirmed their continued stay irrespective of violence in Iraq to be in the "good books" of the US. Furthermore, it seems that in the domestic scene, the leaders may obtain political dividends from their electorate on the ground that they became closely associated with the superpower.

Third, the new emerging threat in April 2nd that Russia's Parliament proposes to pass laws that would ban demonstrations in most public places, reversing one of the most important rights won as the former Soviet Union came to an end. Russian Liberals branded the proposed law a blow against democracy after Putin won a second term in office in a landslide. Meanwhile, Russia has been increasingly gaining its economic strength, primarily due to the current price of oil and gas, the highest in the last 15 years.

Political observers believe that Russia may seek the old glory of Soviet Union by bringing together at one point of time the former Commun-

concerned about the inclusion of three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania). All were at one time Soviet Republics, part of the Soviet Union. Now these states could provide a base for NATO troops (including US troops) on the Russian border. Furthermore NATO air defence patrols over the Baltic States could start straightforward.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Yakovenko said in a statement issued before the Washington ceremony: "Without doubt, NATO's expansion touches Russia's political, military and to a certain extent, economic interests". Furthermore the Russian news agency Interfax quoted Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Chizhov as saying: "If we feel that this expansion poses a threat to us that demands a military response, this response will follow." These are quite tough words indeed.

NATO's Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer (former Foreign Minister of the Netherlands) acknowledged that there could be some problems for Russia and he is expected to visit Moscow in April to soothe the concerns of Russia. To placate Russian leadership he said: "NATO needs a partnership with the Russians. It's in NATO's interest and at the same time it is in Russia's interest that we have a strong partnership".

Conclusion: The military equation in Europe has dramatically changed with the expansion of NATO. Now it extends from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Russia in the context of the new military environment has to find a way to secure and maintain its strategic interests. It will be interesting to watch how Russia in the future meets NATO's muscles to its border.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

BOTTOM LINE

The military equation in Europe has dramatically changed with the expansion of NATO. Now it extends from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Russia in the context of the new military environment has to find a way to secure and maintain its strategic interests. It will be interesting to watch how Russia in the future meets NATO's muscles to its border.

attack would be met with devastating retaliation, possibly with nuclear weapons.

Currently NATO does not serve its original purpose because there is no communist threat in Europe. NATO is no longer a defensive organisation. It had to re-invent itself after the collapse of Communism in Europe. In November 1991, NATO issued a Declaration and announced its new strategic concept. It recognised to meet the needs of the changed Europe.

The first visible indication of the change came to light when in 1999 NATO attacked former Yugoslavia to prevent genocide and "ethnic cleansing" in Kosovo. West European countries could not tolerate such barbaric activities in their backyard. NATO for the first time since 1949 turned into a pro-active military alliance to restore peace and security in Europe.

After the attacks of the September 11, NATO is not confined to Europe

newly democratic countries are fragile in their political institutions. There exist parties of old Communist guards in their countries. Many older generations had been used to free accommodation, free health care and subsidised food under the Communist regimes and they cannot forget their good time.

By being a member of NATO, any threat from old Communist guards will be adequately contained. NATO will come to aid to maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist any security threat from within and outside. It is worthwhile to cite the core Article 5 of the NATO Treaty that provides that "an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America, shall be considered an attack against them all". That means an armed attack on any single new member of NATO will be considered an attack on all NATO members.

Second, under the former Communist regimes, these states looked

Europe is terrorism by Islamic militants. President Bush elaborated the same theme while addressing the seven leaders in Washington. He said: "Today our alliance faces a new enemy which has brought death to innocent people from New York to Madrid. Terrorists hate everything this alliance stands for." The seven states can now count on NATO to fight any terrorist attacks on their soil.

Fourth, all the former Communist states including the seven appear to have a lurking fear from Russia. They cannot forget the Soviet occupation more than four decades. The scene of rolling of Soviet tanks on the streets in Hungary in 1956 and in former Czechoslovakia in 1968 to crush opposition to the dictatorial Communist regimes cannot be easily forgotten.

Furthermore, they closely watch that Russia under President Putin has been transforming itself into an authoritarian state. It is reported on

nist states within its sphere of influence to counter the US power in Europe. The seven countries by joining NATO appear to have preempted the possible Russian move and can now resist any political, military or economic pressure from Russia.

Finally, the membership of NATO is partly symbolic in nature as well. It signals the final stage of the process of conversion from former Communist states into democratic ones. It also gives a clear message to Russia that they are independent from its control and fully competent to join the NATO Club, despite Russia's uneasiness. It is the assertion of their independence that underscores the significance of their joining NATO.

What is the reaction of NATO expansion from Russia?

It appears that Russia has not taken kindly the expansion of NATO to its borders. It expressed disquiet over the biggest increase in NATO since 1949. Russia is particularly

Religion and politics: How far the two can go together?

MONIRUL I KHAN

THE question or issue of religion and politics although settled long back at the time of enlightenment in Europe, has not been the same in many countries including Bangladesh. In a sense it was also settled in the constitution of Bangladesh (not perhaps in the society) in the wake of independence, but the issue opened up again with the removal of 'secularism' from the constitution. The focus of this essay is to examine how far religion can mingle with or dictate politics in modern times.

What religion is about: In a socio-logical sense religion comprises of a set of ideology and rituals. Ideology circumscribes various things what may include the mystery of universe as well as how to behave with a neighbour. But there is not one religion in the world so ideological difference in interpretation is a natural consequence.

Meeting the functional needs of society is an important dimension of religion but one cannot judge the matter without referring to history. We are sufficiently informed about the emancipation roles of different religions in different societies at different periods of time. In Bangladesh a number of peasant and tribal struggles were mobilised under banner of religion. You may recall 'Fakir Bidroho', 'Sanyas Bidroho' or the 'Munda Bidroho' in the colonial phase of Indian history. The ideology of brotherhood propagated in Christianity weakened largely the divisive social fabric of slavery. Certainly, there is also dysfunction coming from the fold of religion. For example, communal violence is closely related to the social implications of religious division. In the words of radical thinker Karl Marx, religion is akin to false consciousness as it robs off the revolutionary vigour of the suppressed class.

Relative status of politics and religion: Radical thinker like Karl Marx took a very clear-cut position by saying that religion, politics are parts of the superstructure. He assigned the primacy to the production relations with the claim that the nature of politics or the importance of religion will be determined by the necessity of the production process.

In the functionalist sense which was much popular in the parlour of Western Sociology (a la Parsons), it may be shown that religion provides normative inspiration to politics as secularism may also do the same.

As a part of culture religion may supply information in the ideological sense that may wheel the politics. However in a cybernetic relationship politics may also supply input to culture including religion. For example, political conflict between two religious sects requires change in the ideological contour of a culture.

Idiology and politics: If by politics we mean (in a minimal sense) achieving certain socioeconomic goals then you have the relevance of ideology. For example, what kind of resource distribution pattern we

are opting for or how much opportunity will be allowed for free thinking may be a part of ideological goals. The role of the state, the rights of the citizen, role of bureaucracy or the modes of the transfer of power all are issues central to political thinking and one cannot provide universal standards in this regard. For example, in monarchy the transfer of power takes place in hereditary rules while in democracy the people choose it. In socialism it is altogether a different concept. There is a role of ideology in politics and in this process religion will be a candidate. Now we have to examine what is the practical and theoretical implication of a situation where religion dictates politics.

State, religion and capitalism: We

The emergence of Calvinism, the separation of state and church are all the products of the development of capitalism. In the opinion of some sociologist (e.g., Srinivas) British colonialism brought a number of changes in the religious structure in India previously not possible in a pre-capitalist framework.

Democracy, religion, market and the legitimacy of power: In Bangladesh or for that matter in the Indian sub-continent the advents of democracy, as a political ideology was an outcome of colonial politics. In other words, the objective need (e.g., market economy) for democracy did not arise in the society although democratic institution (e.g., parliament) was implanted here. And this is one of the major

is the case with religion. Most religions are based on strong beliefs, which are not open for questioning. As far as religion remains within the boundary of personal beliefs it does not create any problem but once you bring it into public forum and particularly in politics such rigidity is not possible in democracy. Since politics deals with the earthly matters continuous criticism is an integral part. It does not matter how superior is your ideology you have to serve the demands of the people and again it is closely related to the cultural development of the people.

In a capitalist society as you have the working class, you have also the middle class. There is class effect on the charter of needs. For example, freethinking is not a number one

practices (e.g., violence) of the religious parties in Bangladesh to establish their constituency. Once the religious parties behave the way other parties do people cannot distinguish between the two segments. The problems lie in the fact that it is some people who are engaged in the implementation of religious ideology in the domain of politics. They are not above human limitations (e.g., greed, jealousy, lust) and the mistakes committed by the non-religious parties are also committed by them. Sometimes it is worse than that. Just review the role of the religious parties in the liberation struggle of Bangladesh, because of religious commitment they aligned with the discredited Pakistani regime endorsed their atrocities and became a partner ignoring the popular demand of the time.

Cultural pluralism: Assumed superiority of a religion does not end the existence of other religions. On the other hand a new debatable premise emerges when the claim of superiority is made.

Using rational indicators it is not possible except resigning to blind faith. Now if the blind faith is the basis for the claim of superiority then you cannot bring it into the realm of politics, based on rational indicators judging the merits and demerits of the political ideology and the performance of the actors. You have to accept cultural pluralism. Even it is true that religion has a function in providing spiritual space its relevance to public sphere is not so prominent, what politics is. Against the background of cultural pluralism it is to be examined how far removal of secularism or making Islam the state religion in Bangladesh has increased the social cohesion

or the efficiency of the state to deal with the global culture in an effective manner. The emergence of global culture will release further pressure on monolithic thinking and will provide more and more the utility of cultural pluralism dissociating religion from politics.

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in the body of religion it is also there in politics. The issue of religion comes into attention when you deal with the ideological part of the politics, which we would deal with in one of the following sections.

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factors why religion often comes into the centre stage to dictate politics. We have to understand why market economy cannot adjust with the sectarian politics of religion. Market economy means the market of labour, capital and commodity. It cannot afford to be choosy about the religious background of labour, capital or commodity while making an economic plan. Take the case of Indonesia and Malaysia, they could not afford to allow the religion dictate the labour migration and hence women labour from these two countries visiting abroad to fetch income. On the other hand, Bangladesh has imposed different types of restriction on the movement of women labour abroad. It has happened because we have not been successful to settle the issue of religion vis a vis capitalistic development. Strong dilemma is still surfacing in the policy making process.

In democracy any ideology is open to questioning including religion. In a democratic milieu one can also raise a question on the merit or demerit of an ideology, its logical basis. For a religious ideology to be acceptable in democracy it has to pass the above tests. But if an ideology does not allow such scrutiny then it becomes incompatible with the democratic framework and transform into autocracy. Such

priority in the agenda of the working class, for them the establishment of economic rights is an immediate priority. But the middle class may feel more suffocated when you deny them the right to free thinking. History shows that the movement against autocracy has been spearheaded by the middle class and one of the reasons is their displeasure with the absence of the right to free thinking. We should not forget that modernity begins with a number of features that include enlightenment, positive thinking, market economy as well as democracy. We can provide a host of examples on the functional flexibility of the bourgeois ideology, for example the invocation of welfare state all over Europe or the establishment of the Frankfurt school of critical thinking in Germany. Unfortunately religious regimes do not have the permissiveness to interact with the critical appreciation.

Another fundamental contradiction between democracy and religion is this, while religion claims its legitimacy in divine source, democracy in people and reality. In modern times you cannot demand immunity to criticism being blessed with the divine ordain. Now performance matters. Once religious ideology is brought to the mundane world, its sanctity is diluted. Just think the

OPINION

A sign of hope in despair

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A WAMI League deserves appreciation and recognition from all sensible people for the most well organised nature of political protest in the country in recent months, perhaps years. Although I do not support the agenda based on which the human shield/chain was created. On the other hand the ruling alliance should also be recognized for its positive attitude by not being unduly aggressive and refraining from the traditional police actions etc. Let us now hope that the