

## The majesty of democracy

India rejects religion-based politics

**I**n a stunning reversal of fortunes, the BJP-led NDA coalition government in India has been voted out of power. It has conceded defeat to the opposition Congress and the transition looks like being a matter of formality. The Congress is well-poised to form the next government with the express support of the Left which has bagged around fifty seats. Together they have moved within the striking range of mustering the magic figure of 273 in a 545-seat strong Lok Sabha.

The Congress victory from the rear has been a stunner. It has proved wrong the forecasts of exit pollsters, media projections of likely scenarios, and even the trading of claims and counter-claims between major political parties in the fray. The arm-chair urbane calculations missed out on the typically low profile internally heaving rural psyche of anti-incumbency. The benefits of the new boom economy didn't reach the poor masses who felt left out in the so-called near double-digit growth figure. Thus, despite the slogans of "shining India," the Razzmatazz India, by BJP, it is the real India living in its villages that has spoken. The BJP's "slightly saffronised" electoral campaign strategy didn't pay the desired dividend, because it didn't match with its playing of the *Hindutva* card during its actual incumbency. The unsettling effect of the Gujarat carnage on Hindu-Muslim equation, the BJP's position on the highly sensitive Ayodhya mosque-temple tangle, the party's failure to distance itself from the extremist philosophy of RSS, Bajrang Dal and Shiv Sena, and the changes made in the history text books impacted negatively on the BJP's fortunes beyond its hard core vote banks.

It is thus as much a triumph of the rural poor as a victory of the secularist forces. The Congress and the Left have registered a strong showing, something that eluded them in the previous elections.

Ever since BJP came to power, secularism was on the wane in India, feeding fundamentalist forces in the region. Through this election, the Indian masses can be said to have rejected religion-based politics and dealt, hopefully, a fatal blow to religious fundamentalism, prejudice, and the culture of intolerance.

We pay a tribute to the leadership of Sonia Gandhi and the intrepid campaigning by Congress leaders. It is a true measure of Sonia's success that despite the controversy over her foreign origin and the virtual writing of her political obituaries by many, her leadership has received such resounding public acceptance.

We congratulate the people of India on their speaking out in such a decisive fashion, the election commission for conducting such a gigantic election with the least of violence, the maturity of the political parties, especially the BJP-led alliance, for accepting the defeat gracefully.

Let's not forget, BJP remains a strong factor in Indian politics with its tally of seats in parliament as a single party. Its providing a stable government in India for nearly five years, its push to economic growth next only to that of China, and Vajpayee's ground-breaking initiative in improving ties with Pakistan remain the hallmarks of the past government, which the new government should build on.

We welcome the new Indian government in advance, and look forward to closer and rewarding relations with the new leadership.

## AL's return to parliament

Let it not be one off

**I**t was good to see the opposition Awami League back in parliament. Now we hope it will not just be a token attendance to save their membership of parliament. Instead, it will ensure their continuing presence and participation in the JS sessions. For god's sake, don't let go of the opportunity to bring public grievances up for debate on the floor of the House and make the government answerable for these.

One thing must settle in the opposition's mind that there cannot be a better forum than parliament from where to hold the government accountable for their actions. In fact, had they attended the parliament earlier on, the government would have been put on the spot in regard to such important issues like mass arrest in April, biggest-ever arms haul in Chittagong and the abject failure of governance over all. Their absence, in effect, allowed the government to get off the hook easily.

The lively debate on the murder of Awami League MP, Ahsanullah Master on Wednesday explains clearly what we have been trying to say. They were able to bring the grisly murder of their colleague at the forefront and extract a commitment from the government for a neutral inquiry into the murder. At the same time, they could also press for a withdrawal of the official press note after the killing. People would like to see more of such pro-active opposition role in parliament.

## Playing with fire



ZAFAR SOBHAN

on Humayun Azad -- we shrug our shoulders and say that it wouldn't be right to point fingers and affix blame to a certain party when the facts remain unclear.

In cases where the culpability of extremists has been determined or is openly admitted by them, we comfort ourselves by saying these are merely the actions of a marginalised and unpopular minority with no support among the general public.

Sure, religious parties now hold

ceeded in convincing the government to ban Ahmadiyya books, and the persecution of Ahmadiyyas around the country is on the increase.

But this is nothing to worry about, we tell ourselves. We are a tolerant and moderate people and the more extreme strains of Islam will never take root here.

There may be reason now, however, to begin to doubt this conventional wisdom that has held sway for so long.

sign in Bangladeshi politics in recent months is the emergence of the underground group Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh that is intent on enforcing its own brand of militant Islam.

The JMJB, which has been active for the past six years, came to public attention in April, with its vigilante campaign in the northwest.

The four districts in which the vigilante campaign is being conducted -- Rajshahi, Naogaon,

under which anyone who opposes the group is accused of being an outlaw and dealt with accordingly.

In addition to kicking off a movement to rid the region of those it deems outlaws, the JMJB is also intent on establishing its own brand of Islam. To this end, JMJB operatives are reportedly forcing men to grow beards and women to wear burkas, and have painted women with their navels exposed with black.

The group, which is headquar-

ters such collaboration.

Both the DIG and the minister stressed that no one would be permitted to take the law into their own hands and that the police were keeping an eye open to ensure that there no excesses are committed.

But this is a dangerous game that the government is playing. Its collaboration with the JMJB is encouraging and validating both vigilante justice and religious extremism. The alliances of convenience that it has entered into will only make the extremists stronger and give them more legitimacy.

The banning of Ahmadiyya books has provided a real boost to the extremists, who have used the ban to drum up hatred and intolerance, and have seen their numbers swell as a result. Since the enactment of the ban, the movement against the Ahmadiyyas now has the imprimatur of official respectability.

And the official backing for the JMJB's campaign in the northwest can only serve to further consolidate their power and prestige.

Make no mistake about it -- the extremists are in the ascendency and it is the government that is enabling this. In the long run, the end result of this alignment with extremists will be to empower them to such an extent that in the not too distant future they might be the ones calling the shots.

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But that could never happen in Bangladesh, right?

Right.

Zafar Sobhan is an Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

## STRAIGHT TALK

**T**HERE is a long-held and deeply cherished conviction among Bangladeshi Muslims that we are a tolerant and moderate people. We tell ourselves again and again that there is no history of religious extremism in Bangladesh, that we have lived side by side with our Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist neighbours for generations without incident, and that there is no fear of the emergence of a Bangladeshi Taliban any time soon.

We are not concerned when religious extremists gain in power and popularity around the world from Iran to Indonesia. We tell ourselves that this kind of thing could never happen here, and dismiss out of hand suggestions that there are al Qaeda cells operating in the country or that we are a haven for international terror.

There have been any number of atrocities perpetrated over the years that can credibly be attributed to religious extremists. But we are slow to rush to judgment and even-handed in our condemnation.

If guilt cannot be determined -- as in the case of the recent attack

seventeen seats in parliament, up from two in 1996, and indeed control important cabinet positions and ministries due to their partnership in the ruling alliance.

But these people are democrats, we tell ourselves. They respect the rule of law and contest elections. They do not wish to turn Bangladesh into a theocracy, but merely to bring much-needed morality back into the public sphere.

Sure, extremists are campaigning around the country for the passage of a blasphemy law and to have the government declare Ahmadiyyas non-Muslims.

Sure, they have recently suc-

The first indication that perhaps we are not quite as moderate and tolerant as we like to believe is the recent ban on Ahmadiyya books.

If we are so moderate and tolerant, how come there has not been more of an outcry? If the extremists are such a minority, how is it that they have succeeded in getting their way?

The banning of Ahmadiyya publications shows us that numbers are not everything. Even a small minority can get their way if they make enough noise and if they are the tacit backing of the government and are not opposed forcefully by the public.

But surely the most ominous

Natore, and Bogra -- have long been the stomping grounds for the outlaw Purbo Bangla Communist Party, and the campaign that the JMJB is undertaking is to combat PBCP cadres, or Sarbarahars, as they are popularly known.

The JMJB are operating with the support of the local police and have reportedly killed seven people and assaulted hundreds of others in their drive against the Sarbarahars that began on April 1 this year.

Not only is the group accused of operating a detention centre where suspected Sarbarahars are tortured with impunity, but locals speak of a reign of terror

tered in Dhaka and has bases all across the country, claims that 4,000 Sarbarahars men have surrendered to it since the start of their operation, and that the group's nationwide membership numbers 300,000 and is growing every day.

Could the JMJB be the future of Bangladesh?

It is telling that the JMJB is operating with the full support of the authorities in the northwest. The divisional inspector general of police in Rajshahi division confirms that he has asked local police to work together with the JMJB, and the state minister for home affairs has said that he

responsibility. President Bush has refused to let go of his Defense Secretary and praised him for doing a good job. Last Monday, he even visited the Pentagon to underscore support for his buddy. Vice-President Dick Cheney came to the defense of the Defense Secretary and asked his critics to back off and leave alone one of the best Defense Secretaries in the US history.

Perhaps Bush and Cheney have a stake in Rumsfeld like all conspirators have in each other. But one would question the honour of these men as more people are convinced that liberation of Iraq was an occupation indeed.

Larry Eagleburger, the former US Secretary of State, made a cocky statement on CNN last week. He said that the reaction to prisoner abuse was too much of nonsense and that the two hundred years of reputation of his country could not be tarnished by the acts of a few men.

Nations are not different from people, in case Eagleburger did not learn in his years as a bureaucrat. It often takes the spark of one silly scandal to destroy hard-earned reputation. What happened in Abu Ghraib has scandalised America. And it cannot be erased with apologies and compensations. Some one has to take blame for it. Under monarchy it could have been passed to the soldiers. But in democracy it has to be the leaders.

Fire Rumsfeld. Else, George Bush, you owe Saddam an apology for taking his country to do what he was doing better.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## Firing Rumsfeld would show Bush is sorry



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

**G**EORGE Bush has said sorry for the obscene treatment of Iraqi prisoners at the hands of US soldiers in the Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad. He has offered an apology to the victims and their families for the un-American like behaviour of his soldiers. I am not convinced this apology was enough.

It sounded like a smaller version of a wishful subjunctive. What if Osama bin Laden had said sorry after the destruction of the Twin Towers? Would that have helped the Americans with their outrage at the despicable act that cost nearly

3,000 lives and shook the very foundation of their homeland security?

The US soldiers have by now killed far more than 3,000 people in Iraq and Afghanistan to prove the dictum that the conquerors exact

their revenge at a usurious price. The Romans crucified six of Spartacus's slaves for every Roman master they had slain.

Already some disturbing photographs of that usurious revenge have emerged, showing disgusting behavior of US soldiers. Donald Rumsfeld, the US Secretary of Defense, told the US lawmakers when he testified before them last

week, that they should be bracing for more photographs and videos in the coming days, depicting perverse humiliation of the Iraqi detainees and physical violence done to them.

One photograph, already seen, shows a young woman in baggy pants holding a leash attached to a naked Iraqi man lying on the prison floor. Another picture shows the same woman offering a thumbs-up with one hand, while pointing the other at the genitals of a prisoner who is wearing nothing but a black hood over his face. The report prepared by Major General Taguba of the US Army says that

the same week these photographs flashed on TVs and newspapers across the world, that it was his impression that some abuse had taken place, which was different from torture.

An Iraqi man would suffer flogging and starvation, but the real torture

for him is to live in the shame of

being stripped in the presence of others. In case Rumsfeld did not know, that is true for rest of the Muslim world, where honour is

more precious than life.

Rumsfeld has apologized profusely, so did everyone in his

chain of command. The US law-

makers and media expressed their outrage and repeatedly said that what was done in Abu Ghraib was against the nature of the American people. I would like to believe them, because I have lived and gone to school in a wonderful country where human dignity is of utmost importance.

Until, the Bushies came to power and tossed things around. If the prisoners in Abu Ghraib were treated like animals, it is because, as Senator Hillary Clinton pointed out in the Senate hearing of Rumsfeld, the juice of wanton behavior flowed from the top. After

the soldiers conquered a country under false pretense. Who should know it better than them who went to find WMDs, and saw nothing? They also knew about the utter disrespect of their President and the Defense Secretary for the Geneva Convention.

I do not buy the apology, because it rings hollow. The Bushies went to war to destroy WMDs, and they found nothing. They went to war in Iraq because Saddam was linked to al-Qaeda, but they could not prove it. They went to liberate Iraq and bring democracy, the moral high ground, which was

their last shelter, now lost in Abu

Ghraib in the tears and blood of Iraqi prisoners whose bodies were used like a bunch of Lego toys.

Here is what George Bush said recently to justify the Iraq war, while his Defense Secretary and military commanders were already struggling to cover up the explosive stories of prisoner abuse.

He said that removing Saddam Hussein put an end to a series of evils. "As a result," Bush said, "there are no longer torture chambers or rape rooms or mass graves in Iraq." If you believe what the International Red Cross said earlier and the pictures depict

under his watch. In India, there is precedence of Railway Ministers resigning in Delhi for rail accidents, which took place in faraway provinces. The Minister of Human Rights in Iraq has resigned in protest of the prisoner abuse in his country.

That is because in democracy, every man is on his honour. And that honour requires them to behave in responsible manners.

Perhaps that sense of honour is shifting at least in the White House, if not in the rest of America, where loyalty and friendship prevail over accountability and

particularly adept in legitimising their murderous deeds by linking them with international conflicts (such as the Palestinian Intifada, the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, the brutal suppression of Chechrenians in Russia) that elicit widespread sympathy and support among Muslims across the world.

The burgeoning professional literature on religiously inspired terrorism offers some interesting clues. A Cornell University scholar, Mahmud Mamdani, has argued that Islamic terrorism can be largely traced to a strategy by the US to support low-level insurgencies by private armed groups in various countries to fight global communism. This led the US to support a pan-Islamic front to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan that ultimately spawned the Al-Qaeda.

Rohan Gunaratna is widely acknowledged as a world authority on Al-Qaeda. He makes it clear that Osama Bin Laden and his faithful followers have been

particularly adept in legitimising their murderous deeds by linking them with international conflicts (such as the Palestinian Intifada, the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, the brutal suppression of Chechrenians in Russia) that elicit widespread sympathy and support among Muslims across the world.

Others who have studied religiously inspired terrorism concur with this view. John Voll of George Washington University makes the point that it would be a mistake to regard Al-Qaeda as religious fanatics. Jessica Stern, a Harvard scholar and a leading expert on global terrorism, also observes that it would be a grave error to treat Al-Qaeda as merely a band of murderous mullahs with a fixed agenda.

As an organisation, it has demonstrated a remarkable agility to evolve into self-governing affiliates and adapt to changing circumstances. As if to vindicate these observations, the reputed

Saddam, have now become a regular feature in that troubled country coping with the burden of a US-led occupation?

In sum, the view that the United States is a superpower seeking to save the world from the scourge of malevolent terrorists is a comforting argument that only serves to obfuscate the complex issues that underpin the ideology and strategy of global terrorism. While the despotic deeds of Al-Qaeda and their fellow travellers must not be condoned, it is nevertheless important to understand their strategic logic. Otherwise, the world will be trapped in a self-fulfilling prophecy of an endless "war on terror."

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Harvard Law Professor Alan

## CROSS TALK

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