

Welcome move against extremists

Govt shouldn't have belittled media reports

FINALLY, after months of procrastination, the government in a welcome move has banned the two militant Islamic organisations JMJB and JMB and arrested some of their leaders accusing them of a series of bomb attacks and murder with a view to creating anarchy. We are heartened by the State Minister for Home Babar's claim that the government acted 'out of its own sense of responsibility' and not due to any external pressure. The question we would like to raise now is how far is the government willing to go now that it has suddenly awakened to its 'own sense of responsibility'. We cannot emphasize enough the importance of this move and how serious it is for the future of Bangladesh. We cannot permit any group, whatever its public profile may be, to create anarchy through terrorism. We cannot allow any force to destabilise our democracy and our way of life.

Now that the government has finally made its move we suggest a very vital accompanying step. These militants are trying to present themselves as proponents of Islam and those who speak and act against them as acting against Islam. This propaganda must be effectively countered. They not only do not represent Islam in any real sense but in fact distort a religion of peace and progress as a militaristic theology given to wanton violence and intolerance. This is precisely the image of Islam that its enemies would like to project. These groups have hijacked a glorious religion and are using it as a cover to achieve their own political agenda. These people will have to be exposed for what they are, and not be allowed to exploit the religiosity of our people.

We would also like to suggest that the government would have been much better served if it took the hundreds of media reports on extremists' activities a little more seriously instead of accusing the media of lies and exaggeration. From the very beginning the government went into a denial mode wrongly concluding that any other course of action would affect our image of being a tolerant society. The truth is, it is because we are tolerant the extremists are so active. We expect the government to learn a fundamental lesson from this experience -- that it should have greater respect for the independent media and take what we report not as figment of our imagination.

A final word. Let not this be a one off step but the first of a genuine attempt to not only curb but in fact completely uproot extremism from our midst. We have already lost a lot of time.

Identifying rich tax evaders

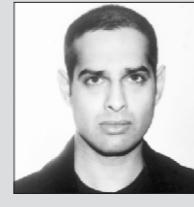
Welcome, but examine revenue officials' role, too

THE National Board of Revenue (NBR)'s initiation of a process to identify tax dodgers among rich businessmen and professionals couldn't have come a day later. It is no secret that a large number of taxable incomes remain out of the collection net. And, taxpayers in collusion with officials resort to corrupt practices in order to evade paying amounts due to the government.

While commanding the NBR's decision to home in on the many dodging taxpayers, we cannot fail to see that the issue is more complicated than mere identification of the evaders. There is a general impression that unless a section of tax officials played a part in the unholy business of tax evasion, the latter wouldn't have happened, not at least on a scale being currently witnessed. It is alleged that tax officials cut deals with dishonest people in the high income bracket thereby nullifying the force of rules and regulations of the revenue department. Now, the nexus between the evaders and taxmen must not only be discovered, but also demolished for the sake of enhancing the efficiency of the tax administration and raising the collection levels.

The decision-makers should not also be oblivious of the allegations often brought by honest taxpayers that they face harassment while submitting returns and paying taxes. The procedural complications arising out of the tax officials seeking out this or that paper or statement can indeed be a disincentive for conscientious taxpayers. There is no doubt that the credibility of the tax department is at a low ebb and it needs raising for any marked improvement in the revenue collection figures.

Tribal loyalties



ZAFAR SOBHAN

television. So why do so few people seem to think that we are facing a serious crisis?

It's an interesting question and I think that the answer lies in our collective national psyche and the pathologies that dwell therein.

One answer might be that they don't believe that anything will happen to them.

But there might be another reason as well. Call it cognitive dissonance. The inability to think or realise something that causes you discomfort or clashes with some of your most cherished

punish bad. Performance to a large extent is meaningless. We live in a system of patronage and so the logical thing is to stick by your tribe through thick and thin as that is the only means to ensure one's continued share of the spoils.

Of course this is not true for the many of those who are shut out of the patronage system and thus have no stake in who forms the government other than that of a citizen who wants the most effective and responsive government possible.

country?

This one is pretty simple really. It is not corruption. It is not poor governance. It is not higher prices. It is not our balance of payments. It is not unemployment or education or health. It is not our foreign policy or our relationship with India. It is not even law and order though these all remain huge issues.

Don't get me wrong. All of these things are of crucial importance. In a different time these would be exactly the issues on which I think that the people should base their allegiances.

STRAIGHT TALK

MY sense is that too many people don't look at the situation through the prism of the threat to democracy any more than they look at politics through the prism of economic issues. Too many people look at the political and security situation through the prism of their tribal loyalties and see only what they want to see. I don't believe as a nation that we can afford such shortsightedness.

beliefs.

Most people I come across are from the middle and upper-middle classes and live in the capital. They are, by and large, supportive of the government and so I have a strong suspicion that they simply tune out information that doesn't speak well of the government and that might cause them discomfort.

They have internalised the idea that to worry or to voice concern about such things is to speak ill of the country or at the very least to speak ill of the government. Most of these people unfortunately have more or less tribal loyalties when it comes to politics, and nothing -- certainly not anything as inconvenient as the facts -- is going to cause them to rethink their belief system.

The question for me then becomes how come so many of the people I see and interact with on a daily basis are not equally alarmed?

They live in the same country.

They read the same newspapers.

They watch the same news on

This is why both the BNP government of 1991-1996 and the AL government of 1996-2001 were unceremoniously removed from office by the voters at the first opportunity due to their poor records.

But the available statistics indicate that among the more moneyed and privileged classes -- the classes that enjoy the patronage of one party or the other -- there was and is relatively little shifting of allegiances.

But surely the time has finally come for us to move beyond our tribal allegiances and look squarely at the crisis that the country is in and to try to figure out how best to retrieve the situation.

Let's look at the political situation right now and ask the question: what is the pre-eminent problem we are facing right now in the

But today in Bangladesh the pre-eminent issue is the fact that some one or some group is systematically trying to subvert the democratic process by targeting the senior opposition leadership for assassination.

Basically, today we no longer enjoy the most fundamental of freedoms -- the freedom from fear. If you cannot even go to campaign in your constituency without fear for your security -- if you cannot hold a political rally for fear of death -- then where can you go and what kind of politics can you engage in?

Meaningful participatory democracy has been stopped in its tracks. We are now in danger of moving from democracy to a system where whoever has the greatest capacity for violence gets to call the shots. That's the real problem we are facing right now as a country.

Kamal Hossain.

We do not know if there is any connection between the unknown terrorists who have been causing so much fear and insecurity and the known anti-democratic elements who have been equally if less murderously active.

But there can be no question that the main problem this country faces today is the steady unravelling of the democratic consensus.

To my mind there is no greater threat to both our short and long-term stability and security than that the democratic process seems to be breaking down and that the respect for democracy that has sustained and enriched us for the past decade and a half seems to be in retreat.

To my mind this is the prism through which our choices should be viewed. Not the prism of the

economy. Not the prism of foreign policy. Certainly not the prism of our tribal loyalties.

We need to be looking at our choices through the prism of democracy.

This should be something everyone can agree on. We all want democracy. We all want democratic space. We all want the freedom from fear. We all want free and fair elections. No one wants to be ruled by the gun.

Establishing democracy in 1991 was the greatest achievement of our recent history. The movement brought out the best in the country and even demonstrated that the different political parties and groupings could cooperate when the stakes were sufficiently high.

For all the ills and discontents of the past decade and a half, democracy has served us well and is the only guarantee we have against tyranny and terror. Let us not be so quick to abandon our fragile democratic heritage.

But my sense is that too many people don't look at the situation through the prism of the threat to democracy any more than they look at politics through the prism of economic issues.

My sense is that too many people look at the political and security situation through the prism of their tribal loyalties and see only what they want to see.

I don't believe as a nation that we can afford such shortsightedness. I would suggest that it is time to look again. The question I have for every conscientious citizen of the country is: what exactly would it take to reconsider your tribal loyalty to one party or another.

The fate of the nation and the future of democracy lie in the answer.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

The range of change



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

the earth revolved around the sun was condemned as a heretic. Many who spoke of God and religion were burned at the stake. Prophets were persecuted, reformers ridiculed, heroes heckled, and rebels reviled; yet everything happened to bring about change.

There is, however, a sad side to it. Change proves that nothing lasts forever, what is dear to one generation is despised by another. What change reveals is the hypocrisy that is buried in the destiny of mankind, unfolding like a play in

is right today, what was sin is sunshine, what was ugly is beautiful, what was evil is good. Parents hope their children will drink but never get into drugs. People don't mind if politicians make money so long as they do some good work.

The society is more worried about safe sex than fornication and adultery. Poverty is not an issue because it is perfectly all right to become filthy rich. Same-sex marriage is spreading like goodwill.

Challenge is the sapling of change. Believe in Hegel, believe

centuries brought the dizzying speed and whisked the world from local, to national to international stage and from agriculture to industry to technology to information age.

Change is good, change is godly as the old yields place to the new, yesterday, today and tomorrow, childhood, youth and old age, the sequence of time, which gives you the sense of motion within the parameters of fixed destiny.

Hence, nothing stays put as life moves on, the fleeting mood of

increasingly important. Work was separated from leisure, which led to development of spectator sports like cricket and football, and the rise of music hall entertainment for the new working class.

The close-knit rural communities disappeared and the middle class started to emerge since 1812. It was found in 1851 that the attendance of the eligible population at church service on Sunday was falling. It was every man for himself, which was the ethos of the Age, and Charles Darwin's

demented. There was a time when brothers could marry their sisters. There was a time when people owned the lives of other people, buying and selling them like cattle.

Time flowed, and changes followed. Many of those changes removed inhibitions, prejudices and superstitions to break the shackles of human minds. It brought freedom, it brought tolerance as human endeavours paved the way to higher civilizations. But higher civilizations brought higher decadence as the increased freedom sharpened itself to moral oblivion.

This is where it stands now, when keeper is usurper, ignorant is wise, guilty is innocent, loser is winner, milk is slime, the moral regimen of right and wrong locked together in inverted positions. So we are living in the age of contradictions, casting pearls before swine, decorating monkeys with medals of honour, our conceited heads bowing before contemptible men.

Lord Alfred Tennyson once exclaimed, "Forward, forward let us range/ Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change." Such is the fate of men that he must charge ahead in the course of depleting himself. Looking back where he started, it is quite a change. The substance is gone, while the style remains. The man has vanished, while his vanity stands.

To talk about it, slime and milk look the same. That is the range of change, a long and arduous journey from inane to inane.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

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progress, one act at a time. Another heir to the British throne once abdicated because he wanted to marry outside the royal line. But the rules have been bent this time and everybody is okay with it. There will be a civil marriage, subsequently blessed by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Camilla Parker Bowles will not become the queen, and she will not use the title Princess of Wales. Never mind if the future King of England, the Defender of the Faith, may have lived in sin, seducing another man's wife, cheating on his own, and perhaps committed adultery.

But the question is how big is the piece of the string? How much change is granted? How much change is good? Change is the heaving breath of eternity as lives move, events occur and history shifts. The man who claimed that

in Marx, that challenge comes by the way of a dialectic method, thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. So order is challenged by chaos, virtue by vice, honesty by eccentricism, everything by its opposite, jarring loose the social fabric so that it can be woven into a new pattern. Change is evolution, change is revolution, it happens all of a sudden, and it also takes time.

More change has happened in last two centuries than in the preceding millenniums. Physical evolution of man, learning how to make fire, developing tools for hunting, wearing clothes, building houses, satisfying basic needs for plain and simple subsistence, took forever. Then the 19th and 20th

century working through the fickle mind of individuals as human condition fluctuates in the passage of time.

The irony is that while change endured, it evicted man, turning him hollow within his shell.

Modern man is more glamorous, but he is also more glutinous, he is more independent but he is also less confident. This transformation is best reflected in the Victorian Age.

It was a time when horizons were limited and life was slow, the fastest thing on earth being a galloping horse. Then came the steam engine, followed by railway, which shrank the distance, and telegraph, which crushed it. Time was money and efficiency became

Origin of Species made it more pronounced. The change is also captured in popular fiction of that time, from Jane Austen in the 1810s to Charles Dickens' pictures of mid-century London life in 1895. It went from comedies of country manners to blistering portraits of urban poverty and, finally, time travel.

Change is motion of time, change is motion of mind, while the mystery stands still as events go by. There was a time when widows burned themselves on their husbands' pyres. There was a time when the Londoners spent their Sunday afternoons at Bedlam mocking the crippled and

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