

## Taking advantage of religion

*Let us not confuse religiosity with extremism*

HERE can be no doubt that Bangladeshis are, by and large, a religious people. The crowds at events such as the Bishwa Itjema and the number of people who attend prayer services every Friday stand as testimony to the fact that, as a nation, we take our religion seriously, and that it is an important part of most Bangladeshis' lives.

Nor is it merely Muslim Bangladeshis who are devout. Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, and others also have their religious traditions and observances, and the piety of the minority communities in Bangladesh is no less than that of the majority. Religious festivals and holy days are scrupulously observed and celebrated and form a crucial part of minority communities' self-identity, which is one reason why it is so important for us to respect all religions and that we enshrine such respect in the constitution.

We should be careful, however, never to confuse the religiosity of Bangladeshi people, with the bigotry in the name of religion that certain people or groups are propounding. Since the inception of the country, and before, there have existed groups who have attempted to take advantage of the deep sense of religiosity that exists among the majority population and to abuse this piety to spear-head a political agenda. There can be no place in our polity for groups that use the cloak of religion to sow the seeds of discord and division.

Even worse is when this kind of hatred and bigotry disguised as an appeal to religious sentiments is used to whip up fear and violence. Using religion to justify violence and hatred is both an affront to the democratic principles on which this nation was founded as well as the worse kind of abuse of religion.

Recently, human rights groups have again criticised the abuse of fundamental rights in the country, correctly linking the phenomenon with the culture of impunity that has been allowed to grow up. It has become customary for the government to dismiss such criticism out of hand. We need not subscribe to every word of the critique offered, but surely it is worthwhile to pursue truth somewhere in between the government's angry denial and the abuses catalogued.

The government must address the substantive parts of the critical report and not merely retreat into denial mode. Extremism, specially extremism in the name of religion, is an undeniable problem for the country, and the government must address both the problem and the culture of impunity within which it has flourished.

## An inexplicable nosedive

*Railway is a perfect mode of transport in a populous country*

THE railway is the oldest institution in the communications sector which still can play an important role in accelerating the pace of trade and commerce, alongside carrying passengers. But reports say that the railway is now beset with many problems including damaged and rundown tracks which make train journeys an extremely hazardous proposition in many places. At least 1500km long track is now unsafe for movement of trains and a few hundred accidents take place a year in the country. Damning statistics, to say the least.

While the road communications infrastructure has improved vastly over the years, the railway stands more or less where it was in the past. The railway is moving ahead all over the world along with other modes of transport. But the issue of its development has been neglected in our context. Given the size of the population and growth of trade and commerce, the railway has enormous potential for expansion. With its great cargo and passenger carrying capacities, the railway should not have been limping with so many problems.

The development of road or river communications network should not be a substitute for the railway. It is not really an either/or situation. What we need is to develop every sector to improve communication facilities in general.

The damaged railway tracks do not only hamper the movement of trains, but also pose a grave risk to the passengers. It is not enough to keep only the major tracks in order. The safety of passengers is an issue that should be taken seriously, regardless of the importance of a route or the number of passengers travelling on it. The unusually high number of accidents can only discourage people to travel by train.

The railway authorities have to take corrective measures, keeping in view the safety of passengers, on an emergency basis while a railway modernisation programme is undertaken with vigour.

## KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

It would be difficult to assess the results yet of the most recent visit by President Bush to Europe, the first since his reelection, aimed at cementing the fractures in the transatlantic alliance caused by US unilateralism in the post-cold war period. Condoleezza Rice, the new Secretary of State, preceded President Bush, apparently with the message that the second Bush administration would not be as dismissive of Europe as his first administration was.

Rice, addressing her audience at the Institute d'Etudes Politiques, pointed out that, being a slaveowner, even Thomas Jefferson's passion for liberty was flawed, and gave credit to the men and women on both sides of the Atlantic for standing firm in the face of tyranny and refusing to accept as final the iron curtain which separated them from the universal values of liberty, freedom and human dignity.

She assured the Europeans of the second Bush administration's preference for power of ideas, of compassion and of hope over military and economic power. She, however, remained firm on the concept of abridgement of sovereignty based on "the belief that the fundamental character of regimes cannot be separated from their external behaviour. Borders between countries cannot be peaceful if tyrants destroy the peace of their societies from within states where corruption and chaos and cruelty invariably pose threat to their neighbors, threats to their regions and potential threat to the entire international community." So to face the interwoven threats posed by terrorism, proliferation of WMD, regional conflicts, failed states and organized crime, Europe and America have to stand together.

On the heels of Condi Rice's visit to Europe President Bush went there. Addressing the European leaders in Brussels President Bush reassured them that transatlantic alliance "is the main pillar of our security" -- a refrain he had no difficulty in conveying to Tony Blair the next day, but perhaps not so successfully to Jacques Chirac, who admitted the existential divergence of opinion between the two countries but agreed to cement, broaden and strengthen the US-EU relations within their broader context.

At Bratislava (Slovakia) President Bush admonished Vladimir

Putin on the slow pace of democratization in Russia. Russian worry over expansion of NATO in 2002 and the recent developments in Ukraine edging the country closer towards the EU and away from Moscow did not appear to have figured prominently in the talks. US could consider the possibility that Putin's successor could very well be a "restorationist" dedicated to regain lost glory of the Soviet Union. American dismissive attitude towards Russia, consultations in Russia-NATO Council notwithstanding, may weaken the prospect of eventual reconciliation with Russia.

But if a man is known by the company he keeps then we should note that while Bush let go of Colin

As expected, President Bush did not show any sign of contrition over the Iraq invasion (albeit the overthrow of Saddam Hussein was a collateral benefit of the war) which went against the grains of Professor Michael Walzer's exposition of the principles of just and unjust war. Walzer's argument rests on the premise that as with domestic crimes, use of force would require actual or imminent boundary crossing, invasion or physical assault to justify war. Otherwise any use of force by one state against the political sovereignty or territorial integrity of another state would be a criminal act.

President Bush and his administration had already dismissed the idea that the Iraq invasion was

their public affairs which may or may not be suitable for other cultures, undeniably Islamic countries suffer from democracy deficit and seem to resist embracing democratic practice in the conduct of their public affairs. At the risk of being too self-critical we may wish to remind ourselves of Henry Kissinger's assessment that it would be unwise to expect the Muslim world to adorn itself with all the traits of modernity that took the West centuries to get comfortable with.

Wisely perhaps, both Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schroeder have accepted American unilateralism in Iraq as a thing of the past and have decided to move on. But then the European anger at the US act of preemption loses meaning

Kofi Anan of the gravity and unprecedented nature of the threat facing the 21st century and his call on the UNSC to consider "early authorization of coercive force" strengthens the case for reinterpretation of what constitutes "threat to peace" under the UN Charter.

In an address to the UNGA in September 2002 Kofi Anan warned member states of the challenges facing the 21st century and created the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change to suggest policies and institutions that the UN would require in this century. This High Level Panel has identified six cluster of threats including war between states, violence within states, poverty, disease and environmental degradation, terrorism,

Rice in Paris is contingent on how a government treats its citizens, its foreigners, or its prisoners which in a substantial part provides or deprives the government of the legitimacy it needs.

The most recently published open letter titled A Compact Between the United States and Europe signed among others by Clinton National Security Advisors Sandy Berger and Tony Lake, academicians Ivo Daalder, James Dobbins, Francis Fukuyama, Robert Kagan, Annie-Marie Slaughter, Susan Rice, former British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd, Oxford Professors Timothy Garton-Ash and Kalypso Nicolaidis should be given due consideration.

The Compact shows sort of desperation felt by this assembly of iconic presence that it is time for Europe to realize that it cannot expect America to recognize the errors of their ways and reverse the policies of the past four years and for the Americans to realize that they can not simply explain the rightness of their ways and expect Europe to come on board. Each side must recognize the legitimate concerns of the other. The Compact identifies US-EU areas of agreement on Iraq, Iran Middle East Peace, China, climate change, democracy in the Middle East, the Geneva Conventions, Afghanistan, Sudan, the developing countries, and the UN and suggests ways and means to bridge the gaps where they exist and redouble efforts in areas of agreement.

The very fact that such a group of eminent people thought it necessary to publicly advise the US and Europe reflects their conviction that global peace depends in large measure on the extent of concert of power wielded by the two sides. But then again, while transatlantic fissures should be mended, Nato should not substitute the UN nor should the world give in to the idea that the absence of unipolarity is not multipolarity but apolarity denoting "anarchic new Dark Age, an era of waning empires, and religious fanaticism, of endemic plunder in the world's forgotten areas, of economic stagnation, and civilization's retreat into a few fortified enclaves." The UN with all its imperfections continues to remain the preferred destination where majoritarian view reflective of universal consciousness will help the conduct of international relations.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

## The second Bush administration would love to see reforms of the UN, including that of the UNSC, an organization which caused grief to the conduct of US unilateralism in the run up to the Iraq war. The debate on the reforms have gathered force due to global recognition of existential threats posed by rogue states, failed states, and non-state actors.

Powell he retained Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz and other neo-cons, promoted Condoleezza Rice, and appointed Ambassador Negroponte as the new Intelligence Czar.

The Europeans may find it difficult to forget Rumsfeld's caustic remarks when NATO for the first time in its history invoked Article 5 relating to commonality of threats to all members if one member is attacked (prior to NATO bombing of Afghanistan) or of his derisive description of the European countries who disagreed with the Anglo-American plan to invade Iraq as "old Europe" and no less importantly of the concept of American exceptionalism and doctrine of preemption expounded in the Bush National Security Strategy "based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests."

One is at once reminded of Robert Kagan's suggested division of work of the Americans "making the dinner" and the Europeans "doing the dishes." In Kagan's view, World War II destroyed the European nations as great powers and subsequent relinquishment of the colonies denoted perhaps the most significant retrenchment of global influence in human history. Added was Europe's loss of centrality in the American security matrix as a result of the end of the cold war.

unjust and are congratulating themselves over the recent elections in Iraq, which they hope may encourage other Arab countries to ease repressive measures in place for many years. Additionally the Bush administration appears to continue with its belief that sovereignty is not a blank cheque and sovereign status of a country depends on its fulfillment of its obligations both to its own citizens and to the international community.

Condoleezza Rice in her Paris speech reminded the world of the firm belief of the transatlantic alliance that "the fundamental character of regimes cannot be separated from their external behaviour." It is not clear, however, how convinced the European allies (except UK) are of American muscularity given the fact that most Europeans believe that the world is now far less safer than it was before the Americans went on a rampage without the consent of the UNSC.

Equally they are not very sure how far US threat would succeed in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria and Iran in making these countries shed off tribalism, stop alleged help to terrorists, curb nuclear ambition and adorn themselves with traits of modernity. However much the Muslims would like to prove Bernard Lewis wrong that democracy is a parochial custom of the English speaking people for the conduct of

if one were to accept Professor Michael Glennon's thesis that UNSC's failure to prevent the Iraq war was not a failure at all, but was due to the incompatibility of the new global configuration resultant of the towering preeminence of the US with the way the UNSC was framed to function. Though the French, Chinese and Russian efforts since the end of the cold war were directed to bring about some semblance of multipolarity in global politics it was forgotten by these powers that while Europeans found comfort in democratic legitimacy flowing from the will of the international community, the Americans, in the words of Francis Fukuyama, "tend not to see any source of democratic legitimacy higher than nation-state."

The second Bush administration would love to see reforms of the UN, including that of the UNSC, an organization which caused grief to the conduct of US unilateralism in the run up to the Iraq war. The debate on the reforms have gathered force due to global recognition of existential threats posed by rogue states, failed states, and non-state actors. Princeton Professor Annie-Marie Slaughter has advocated rewriting or at least reinterpreting some of the rules and provisions of the UN Charter to face these threats.

She argues that recognition by

transnational crimes, etc.

The panel appears to have suggested revision of Article 51 of the Charter relating to self-defense by suggesting the UNSC to be more pro-active in the future, and take decisive action earlier before distant threats become such that these cannot be met with little or no reaction time. The panel endorsed the concept of responsibility to protect civilians from large scale violence, a responsibility that rests with the governmental authorities. When a state fails to protect its civilian population, the panel suggests, the international community then has to act through humanitarian operations, monitoring missions and diplomatic pressure, and ultimately with force if necessary when all other means fail to produce results. This accords with Garth Evans chaired International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty which, inter-alia, recommends international intervention to defuse humanitarian crisis caused by massive violation of human rights, genocide, famine or anarchy.

Besides Westphalian model of sovereignty, particularly the purist concept, already corroded by globalization, now has a theoretical existence due to willful abandonment of sovereignty (e.g EU) or invasion (e.g Iraq). The current mood in according sovereignty most recently espoused by Condoleezza

## Ought we to dissolve our dead parliament?

### NAZRUL ISLAM

WITH sustained quorum crisis and the intermittent absence of main opposition, the 8th parliament has lost its efficacy for a long time now. Is there any logic to prolonging this ineffective parliament?

The question has become evident from the fact that the Treasury Bench members also appear to have lost their interest in parliament, resulting in a serious and continuous quorum crisis in the ongoing parliament session. In a house having a strength of 300 members, it is astonishing that the 60 members required for averting quorum crisis do not attend the house.

The main opposition Awami League has been boycotting the House from the beginning of the 8th Parliament on various grounds, some valid, others less so. The Awami League with 55 plus MPs might have equal responsibility to their electorates which they are not fulfilling, but their absence does not have any effect on the smooth running of the parliament as the

ruling alliance has an overwhelming majority. The Awami League, according to their logic, may have reasons for boycotting the parliament. But what happens to the ruling party MPs? Why have they lost their interest? Minus AL lawmakers, the ruling alliance has alone over 225 MPs. Then why the quorum crisis? Has the 8th Parliament become dead?

employee of a government or private office lost his interest in his job, would the employer continue his service? Is it morally right to cling to the post without serving one's paymasters? An MP is nothing but an appointed representative selected by the voters of his constituency. He is selected through votes rather than through an interview. He was supposed to serve his elector-

of controversial laws such as the ones on speedy tribunal and women's reserved seats that triggered serious discontent among the members of the public.

The ineffectiveness of the present parliament is palpable from the deliberations of some lawmakers who belong to none but the ruling alliance. The lawmakers, chairmen of various parliamentary standing

than a ministry. The ministries and ministers are accountable to these committees. But what is going on here? The ministers skip the committee meeting and the bureaucrats do not answer their queries and provide information.

Some of the committee chairmen clearly stated that the committees are non-functional due to the indifference of the concerned ministers

public interest.

I didn't see any news about any Treasury Bench lawmaker who talked about price spiral of essentials, price hike of petroleum products or hike of transport fares. I never heard any member from the Treasury Bench bring any amendment in any bill, however anti-people it might be. But if the Treasury Bench members were on the opposition bench, they surely would raise objection to the same bill. What a farce goes on in our parliament. Here personal interest is above party interest, party interest is above people and national interest.

The behaviour of the legislators, both ruling and opposition, indicates that they are not any more interested in this current parliament. In fact, they are taking preparation for election. Awami League has been demanding election for a long time. BNP MPs are also apparently not interested in this House. So it is better to go for fresh recruitment for selecting new representatives who will serve the purpose of their electorates.

Nazrul Islam is a journalist and freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

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As a voter and conscious citizen of this soil, I think time has ripened to dissolve the 8th parliament. The time has come to seek a fresh mandate, both for the government and lawmakers. The electorates who sent their representatives to the parliament are not being represented, although the MPs are taking lucrative allowances and other perks from their voters. If an

ates through participating in the parliament sessions and making legislation that would help ameliorate their socio-economic conditions.

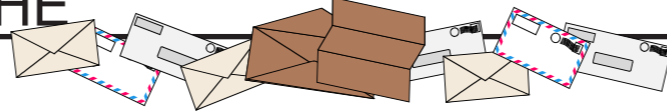
But what are we witnessing from the lawmakers of the 8th Parliament? In fact, the 8th Parliament could hardly frame a single law which is public-friendly and people-oriented. Rather it passed a number

committees, at a workshop in presence of the Speaker clearly expressed their discontent saying that the parliamentary committees are nothing but a rubber stamp. No minister, even the petty government officials, pays heed to them, cooperation is a far cry. In fact, in parliamentary democracy, standing committees, dubbed as watchdogs, are supposed to be more powerful

and their bureaucrat subordinates.

Another thing, lawmakers are supposed to work for their voters. They should talk about the people's interests, their grievances. But what do we see in our House? The lawmakers most of the time engage themselves in spitting venom to opposition parties and showering praise to their leaders. They hardly say anything which is of common

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE



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Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

### Distribution of wealth

Bangladesh has got a population of 140 million. Fifty per cent of the total population live below poverty line. Almost every year people of Gaibandha and Kurigram districts are hit by Monga. No programme is taken up to create new jobs. The late president Shahid Ziaur Rahman took some bold steps to create jobs for the rural people. His government, for the first time, instructed commercial banks to lend Tk 100 crore in agricultural loans. At the beginning, the commercial banks did not take it very easy. They were reluctant to go to the agri-sector to disburse small loans. But ultimately the NCBs were compelled to give agri-loans. These created so many self-employment opportunities.

Now the agri-loan sector has been proved to be a large area of

investment for the NCBs. The government also took other steps. They ordered opening of bank branches at upazila and union levels. This opened avenues for mobilising small savings and creating investment opportunities and jobs.

But unfortunately people have witnessed closure of so many branches of the NCBs. These were losing branches. But reasonable time was not allowed to these branches to make efforts and endeavors to earn profit. All branches of a heavy fruit-bearing tree do not bear fruits in the same proportion. But if the non-fruit bearing branches are cut down, the tree will grow weaker and ultimately may die down. If NCBs and other state owned enterprises earn a profit of Tk 14 crore, the earning of each man or woman will go up

by Tk 1.00. But if a few individuals earn Tk 14 crore, the whole population will have no share of it. State owned enterprises serve so many purposes. These enterprises keep control over the prices of goods and services produced by the privately owned enterprises. The government owned enterprises help in equitable distribution of wealth, and, on the other hand, privately owned enterprises help in accumulation of wealth in a few hands.

Money plays a very important role in almost every sphere of social life. Therefore mass accumulation of wealth brings prosperity to the country as a whole and accumulation of money in the hands of a "class" is always a threat.

Therefore, every opportunity to allow distribution of wealth should

be exploited for the greater good of the country.

Tapader Md. Khalilur Rahman  
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### Pond fish culture

Being a protein deficit nation, we are struggling with a lot of problems of nutrition which could not be solved in a day. Having a lot of rivers and water bodies, we may be a nation with surplus fish. But the scene is quiet opposite. We have huge water bodies without fish. If some persons start to culture fish in the unutilised ponds, a cross section of people would generally raise the question of clean water source from the pond.

A segment of people of our society is still 100 years behind thinking in terms of productivity. They seem to be thinking that all ponds and water bodies in the rural or suburban areas should be filled with clean

water and there is no necessity of the existence of fish. People will use that clean water for different purposes. But what we found in the previous decades? All unutilised water bodies were the ultimate reservoirs of mosquitoes and harmful insects. Sometimes the authorities started crash programmes for cleaning the unutilised water bodies. But that had no meaning in production terms.

Availability of clean water for household use and utilising the water bodies through fish culture are two different things. Clean water may be provided through digging wells or by setting up shallow tubewells. If an arsenic bed water layer is not available in the tubewell, then fresh water can be managed through digging canals by connecting the rivers. But fish culture should not be discouraged

by raising the question of clean water availability.

No doubt, public health is also an important factor, but we can maintain it without stopping fish culture in the ponds by adopting alternative steps.

We should encourage the fish cultivators by rewarding them for perfect utilisation of water bodies, instead of discouraging them.

Md. Billal Hossain  
Chandpur

### Learning English

Since I started reading English newspapers, particularly 'The Daily Star', I came across so many articles and letters on learning English. All the writers have emphatically tried to put forward suggestions in favour of learning the language.

English is not only the language of

the English, but thanks to globalisation, it has become the language of the world that can bridge the whole world as a global village. And national languages, other than English, have become like state languages. There was a time when the nations did not have to learn a common language for communication with others. But the scenario of the world has changed. Like the superhighway or connecting roads, English has become a super communication language which has brought the whole world closer to each other. So we must learn English. But the question is how!

The Daily Star can pave the way for generating enthusiasm among the learners. My son was not good in English. But his English language skills improved greatly after he read your newspaper regularly for about 45 days. To create interest in the

learners' minds the English newspapers can play a vital role and I suggest that they read The Daily Star. It is a newspaper that can help the young men and women who are interested in learning English correctly.

I believe that the letters published in DS greatly help the budding writers eager to see their names in black and white. They can write on any subject of their choosing and express their ideas freely. To learn English, spoken or written, a congenial atmosphere is required and unfortunately we do not have it. I think DS can play a definite role in the process of learning English by publishing reports and articles in an easy and lucid language. Your contribution in this regard is already very significant.

Nihendra Nath Chaudhury  
Palashbari, Gaibandha