

Eid-ul-Azha into the new year

Let it be a happy augury

MUSLIMS will celebrate their second biggest religious festival, Eid-ul-Azha, tomorrow, which also marks the heralding of a new year, with due solemnity and fervour.

The day has a deep symbolical meaning which takes us back to the great episode in which Prophet Ibrahim (Sm) was about to sacrifice his beloved son to honour a divine decree but was spared the agony by the Almighty Allah, and he sacrificed an animal instead.

People have to bear in mind that the festival originated from the readiness of a prophet to make a supreme sacrifice and, as such, its celebration is actually a reminder of that great occasion which should inspire people to place their faith above all worldly possessionseven the beloved son. The social context may have changed, but the lesson to be learned from Eid-ul-Azha remains unchanged. The sacrifice, that is so strongly emphasised here, can be made through working for the well being of others.

The Eid is being observed this year at a time when the nation is passing through a grave political uncertainty. The two major stakeholders in politics are locked in a fight that now threatens to extend the Eid holidays for over a week (thanks to the 14-party alliance's siege programme for January 7-8), thus bringing everything to a standstill for that long a time.

So the happy beginning of the year with the Eid may be marred by political turbulence which has already cost the nation dearly.

The joy of Eid has to be shared by all, regardless of social and economic standing. All of us need to bear this in mind to make the Eid a little more sympathetic to the have-nots than before. Let the occasion inspire the affluent to sacrifice a bit of worldly pleasures for the benefit of the less fortunate.

We wish our readers a very happy Eid and a fruitful New Year.

Saddam's hanging

Justice dictated by occupiers is hardly convincing

SADDAM'S hanging on the day of Eid-ul-Azha, a day of religious festivity for the Muslims all over the world will be received more with trepidation than perhaps any sense of relief.

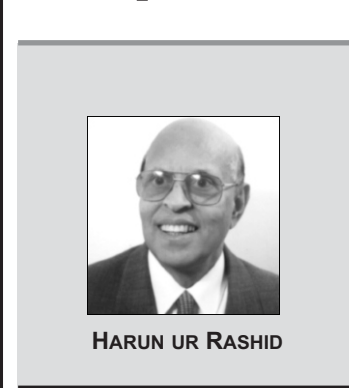
He has lived by the sword and died by it. It is true that he was one of the most ruthless dictators of recent times. He has been equally repressive to the Shia, Sunnis and the Kurds. But those that have sent him to the gallows are the ones whose interest in the Middle East he had once served. It is the West, particularly the United States, whose proxy Saddam was, standing against Iran's potential rise and influence in the region in the 80s. Saddam was toppled not by the Iraqis but by an occupying force and he was tried not by the Iraqis but by a court formed by a government under and dictated to by the occupying power.

His execution will be seen differently in different quarters of the globe. However, any objective analysis of the event cannot overlook the fact that it was a victor's justice perpetrated upon the vanquished, for a crime that pales into comparison to the ones he is equally guilty of committing. These were crimes against humanity in which the West had been his partners and abettors in many ways. Alas! He will not be there to answer charges in the killings of several hundred thousand in the Kurdish region of Iraq in 1987-88 because he is history now, hanged on charges of killing 148 persons in Dujail in 1982. Thus, it will not be wrong to impute motives to the hurried hanging of Saddam.

With Saddam history now the question is, will it allow the Iraqis to start a new chapter in the country's troubled history? What is next for Iraq - is the question that we ask. And we are concerned at the prospect of the sectarian chasm being further widened that might be the cause of Iraq's eventual disintegration along sectarian lines. Can the occupying powers control the event that is likely to get worse?

It would be our earnest hope that our Iraqi brethren will temper their reactions. Precipitate actions that might lead to further fratricidal conflict will only help the enemies of Iraq. It will not only endanger peace in the Middle East it has also the potential for engulfing greater part of the globe in a bloody conflagration.

To participate or not to participate



HARUN UR RASHID

FREE, fair and credible election is an essential element of democracy and an environment has to be created for all political parties to participate in the election. There is no doubt that the primary responsibility, however, falls on the non-party caretaker government and the Election Commission.

Furthermore, all political parties as well as civil society bear responsibility to ensure that a spirit of tolerance and accommodation prevails. Major parties in particular have an added responsibility to avoid confrontation during the election process.

The December 29 announcement by the AL-led grand alliance to call back-to-back countrywide blockade on January 7 and 8 and the reiteration of its earlier demands appear to inject doubt in their participation in the election. It is like a see-saw game.

Certain recent events have occurred and they are:

- The rejection of President Ershad's nomination forms
- The AL-led grand alliance has not given reasons to the public as to why they decided to participate in the election, despite their demands remaining unfulfilled.
- There has been a chorus of widespread protest by civil society, minority religious groups and freedom fighters for the deal between AL and Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish (BKM).

Let us examine these events one by one:

On December 14, the High Court Division sentenced former

BOTTOM LINE

When the image of Bangladesh is high and positive, it is critical that Bangladeshis can demonstrate to the world at large that a free, fair and credible election is possible in the country. The non-party caretaker government, the Election Commission, the judiciary and public servants have a great responsibility to ensure that all parties participate in the election.

President Ershad to two years imprisonment in a graft case and asked him to surrender to the trial court. On December 26, the one-member vacation bench of Justice Abedin of the Appellate Division rejected Ershad's petition for a stay.

Lawyers for former President Ershad have made out a case that: (i) it remains a mystery as to why his appeal from the trial court was suddenly activated at this critical time of submission of nomination papers by the office of the Attorney General, (ii) that under a law of 2003, Ershad is deemed to have already served two year sentence because earlier in the same case he had served more than six years' imprisonment. That being the case, he is free to stand in the election, and (iii) his appeal remains pending before the Appellate Division for final decision and the matter is under judicial consideration (sub-judice).

Against the background, it has been alleged by Ershad's lawyers and supporters that the rejection of Ershad's nomination papers is politically motivated. Former President Ershad reportedly said that "if the conspiracy against him" continues, he might not take part in the election. He further added: "I am eligible to appear in the election, but they are obstructing me. Since I am in the grand alliance, I'll take my decision by consulting with the alliance partners." He did not name who "they" are but the meaning is palpable to everyone.

His lawyers argue that support for the allegation of political bias rests partly on the fact that the rejection of his nomination papers outside Dhaka was not reportedly declared until the Returning Officer in Dhaka had decided in the matter. If it is true, it smacks certain extraneous considerations, allowed to play in the decision of rejection.

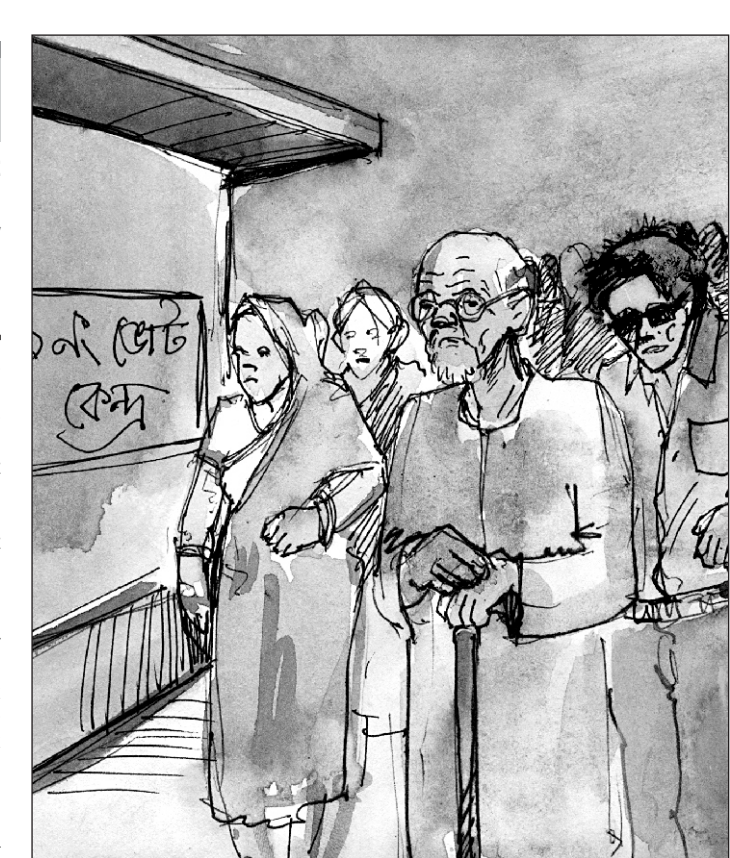
On the second issue, on December 24, in a major shift, the AL-led grand alliance decided to participate in the election, though their demands remained unfulfilled. No explanation was given for the reversal of its decision except that its secretary general told reporters that their "movement has always aimed at having a level playing field ready for the election."

The supporters and people in large are confused and perplexed as to why the AL-led grand alliance decided to participate in the election when they knew that a level-playing field had not been created by the concerned authorities.

Although for the sake of democracy, it is prudent to go in for election if the level playing is created, otherwise many political analysts believe that it is better not to participate in an election that will not be credible, free, and fair.

The election process is as important as the outcome of the election. If the election is held in an environment when AL-led alliance's demands remain unmet and if it loses the election, then AL-led grand alliance will be able to tell the whole world that the outcome of the election is not acceptable because it is rigged.

Is that the strategy for the AL-led grand alliance? Or is it that prospective candidates put extreme political pressure on the AL-led grand alliance? The question is: in case the AL-led grand alliance does not participate in the election, can AL-led grand alliance persuade



shocked supporters that principle of secularism (means that politics should not be based on religion) has finally been buried through this controversial MOU for apparent political expediency.

Many political observers believe that the AL found itself in a tricky situation. On the one hand, it wants to participate in the election to gain power; on the other hand, it and its partners of their grand alliance firmly believe that a level playing field has not been created. Under the circumstance, they feel that it is better to have a policy of ambivalence in the matter of participation in election.

Like corporate products, nations, too can be regarded as brand names and their standing in the international community evaluated. That is what the Anholt Nation Brands Index does four times yearly. Bangladesh's positive image has been displayed all over the world by the award of Nobel Peace Prize to Professor Yunus and the Grameen Bank.

When the image of Bangladesh is high and positive, it is critical that Bangladeshis can demonstrate to the world at large that a free, fair and credible election is possible in the country. The non-party caretaker government, the Election Commission, the judiciary and public servants have a great responsibility to ensure that all parties participate in the election.

It is noted that democracy means not only free election, but also rule of law, free media, a minimum material standard for people, and a strong opposition in the parliament. Sir Ivor Jennings, the eminent constitutional expert wrote: "A tyrannical majority and a recalcitrant minority ruins democracy."

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

Election eve Eid



ANM NURUL HAQUE

EID-ul-Azha, the greatest religious festival of the Muslims will be celebrated tomorrow in Bangladesh with due solemnity. It is an exceptional occasion; totally different from any other festivals, as the real invocation of this festival is the sacrifice of life for the sacred cause of Allah.

What Allah expects on this sacred occasion, is a giving of our whole being to Him, not simply sacrificing animals to commemorate the sacrifice of the Prophet Ibrahim (sm).

This year, Eid-ul-Azha comes to Bangladesh amidst political hurly-burly over the 9th parliamentary election slated for January 22. The nation got a respite from the political impasse over the general election, as the AL-led grand electoral alliance, in a major policy shift, decided to participate in the election. But the respite did not last long.

The grand alliance of the 14

BY THE NUMBERS

The spirit of Eid-ul-Azha tends to activate the message of Islam for peace, unity and sacrifice and we all need to be imbued with it. But the celebration of Eid is not tempered with the principles that define piety and reverberate with love and generosity. Let Eid-ul-Azha this year be a prayer for durable peace and serenity in the country. May the message of Eid cure political estrangement and ill feeling among the politicians and the true sense of sacrifice be imbibed in them.

party conglomerate and JP-LDP have now announced fresh blockade program following the cancellation of nomination papers of Jatiya Party (JP) chief HM Ershad. Fierce clashes between the police and the activists of grand alliance marked the dawn-to-dusk hartal imposed by the alliance on December 28 in greater Rangpur to protest the cancellation of nomination papers of HM Ershad.

It is our perception of public feeling that they do not want to see the holding of the national election without participation of the major political parties.

JP Chairman HM Ershad has filed appeal with the EC on December 29 challenging the validity of the returning officers' (RO) decisions rejecting his nomination papers for five constituencies. The number of candidates appealing the rejection of their nomination papers has reached 79 within two days of the three-day process for filing appeals against RO's decision. The EC will start disposing of the appeals from December 31.

The AL-led grand electoral alliance has announced back-to-back countrywide blockades on January 7 and 8 demanding publication of a properly corrected and updated voter list and resignation of the chief adviser. AL president Sheikh Hasina has also threatened, if the demands are not met, Bangabhaban will be blocked indefinitely. Such a decision has created fresh tension among the people on the eve of Eid.

Eid-ul-Azha, a major annual religious event marked by the spirit of supreme sacrifice, comes with a reminder of sacrifice and forbearance that we are expected to demonstrate in every spare of our life.

What is missing among our politicians is the real spirit of sacrifice and forbearance as much as it is informed by piety.

ity of Indian cattle in the market and the parliamentary election.

The candidates of the parliamentary election are buying lots of sacrificial cattle as part of their election campaign. This has pushed up the cattle prices in the market. Those who have chosen this auspicious occasion of Eid to woo up their electors and supporters with the meat of sacrificial animals and encourage mindless extravagance and prodigality have in fact trampled the message of sacrifice.

Election has also boosted sales of consumer commodities ranging from mobile phone to motorbikes, DVD players to television. According to a newspaper report, the importers and whole sellers are receiving huge orders for these commodities from the candidates for electioneering purpose particularly in rural areas. The Election Code of Conduct of Bangladesh, circulated vide Election Commission Notification 1403, April 26, 1996, clearly states that no candidate or any person on his behalf shall, openly or in secret, give any donation or gift in their campaign to the activists or voters.

Bangladesh is a country globally known for negatives like poverty, corruption and political violence. The all pervading corruption and narrow politics are major impediments to our economic growth and poverty reduction. Political impasse has, by and large, been a part of our national political lexicon for quite a long time. Through the AL grand alliance has agreed to participate in the election, the cloud on the political horizon has not yet been dissipated.

Each religious festival heralds a joyous and carnival atmosphere. But the prevailing economic and political situation has outpaced the festive mood for many. The continuing high prices of all essentials have eroded the real income of the common people, who cannot afford to buy pricey sacrificial animals.

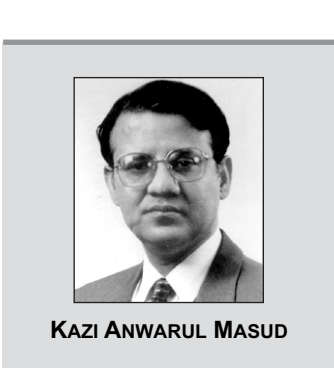
On the other hand, homeward journey of the people for family reunion have become an ordeal, as the transport services are overstretched. Only the activists and supporters of the political parties are in festive mood as the candidates of the parliamentary election are indulging in mindless extravagance and prodigality for winning election.

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ANM Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.

The art of politics



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

FOR Machiavelli, a prudent Prince finds a convenient instrument in religion to rule the people in peace without giving them any worthwhile concessions. For political expediency Machiavelli insists upon his Prince to adorn the good qualities. Yet if the Prince is wise, he neither can nor ought to keep his word, when keeping it would be injurious to him.

But today the enlightened people of the world (and no one wants to live in darkness) want transparency, accountability and non-religiosity in the conduct of state affairs.

The art of politics is generally believed to gain power because for the political parties involved in wanting to do good for the people,

GOING DEEPER

It is surprising that Awami League did not consider the image of Bangladesh abroad at a time when the Western world is deeply concerned over the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. If a political party like Awami League has to find it expedient to sign a contract with Islamists, then people start to wonder whether both Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis are correct that religion drives both Islamic culture and politics and that the motivation for Islamist violence is religious fundamentalism.

the politicians are expected to gain power. The question is what process one should adopt to gain power. Should it be by hook or by crook, or should there be a place for principles that the political parties have pledged not only in their election manifestos but also advocated since their inception as political parties.

Though one must recognize that political parties like most institutions go through an evolutionary process. Such evolution by definition should be dictated by comprehensible circumstances and should have the consent of the adherents of the political parties.

If decisions taken by a political party is sudden and is perceived to be contradictory to its principles, which had garnered support for the political party in the first place, then such non-consultative change is likely to be seen as opportunistic and devoid of moral force.

Awami League, which leads the 14-party combine, now joined by others, in a grand coalition to fight the forthcoming parliamentary elections suddenly signed a memorandum of understanding with an obscure Islamic fundamentalist party.

They pledged that no law would be enacted that contradicts with the Quranic values, sunnah and the shariah. Government recognition of degrees given by the Quomi madrasas will be ensured and laws

secular credentials following the stream of criticism from the intellectuals and ordinary people sounded hollow. It is not understood why the Awami leadership felt at this stage to declare its Islamic credentials. This was totally unnecessary for the largest political party in the country in terms of vote, that would most likely alienate the minority communities and secular minded Muslims whose allegiance to the party had so far been taken for granted and forced them to think of their next course of action.

Should these people decide to absent themselves from casting their ballots then the Grand Alliance may lose more votes than it would get from the Islamic fundamentalists. What is surprising is that a party like Awami League felt the need to bow down to the fundamentalist's erroneous campaign.

Though we know that secularism is neither agnosticism nor atheism, but provides guarantee to all to practice their own religion in manner they see fit and that the state would not impose the religious belief of the majority population on the minority communities.

It would be prudent to remind us that religions have too often been used to "justify the violation of human rights, in part through the

hierarchical and selective use of role ethics and postponement of temporal justice to divine judgment."

One would have thought that modernity had freed us from the religious emphasis put upon society by Scholasticism that people being fearful and predatory must submit to the absolute supremacy of the state in both secular and religious matters for self-preservation.

The MOU has also opened the door for enactment of blasphemy law that the world is still trying to get rid of in very socio-culturally underdeveloped parts of the world. In the developed countries, example can be given such as the refusal to entertain any complaint against Salman Rushdie for his Satanic Verses because Rushdie's irreverence was not recognized as a crime under British law.

In the US, blasphemy runs counter to freedom of religion and freedom of expression both of which are guaranteed in the First Amendment of the US Constitution. US Justice Tom Clark once observed: "It is not the business of government to suppress real or imagined attacks upon particular religious doctrine."

Gradually US state courts found prosecution of blasphemy cases unconstitutional and unenforceable. Australian Humanist Society found blasphemy law as "a relic of religious persecution, a penalty on opinion" and a defiance of hard won freedom of speech that underpins democracy. UN Commission on Human Rights had been particularly harsh on Pakistan for intolerance and commission of violence against Christians, Hindus, and Ahmadiyas.

The pledge on fatwas would not only complicate the judgment of the High Court describing it as unconstitutional (though the order has been stayed by the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court). It may further encourage semi-literate maulanas and imams in our mosques to issue fatwas in abandon causing unimaginable distress of the common people particularly women, the victims of injustice of the affluent landlords in the villages.

The source of law should be unambiguous and the laws should be legislated by parliament and not imposed upon society by non-elected people.

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It would be foolhardy to dismiss the emergence in the US of a cohesive and distinct group of people exerting decisive influence on crucial policy matters as the neo-cons do, so rarely seen in the American history, in addition to the increasing evangelical influence in the US.

Bangladesh may be a Muslim majority country but we are surrounded by Hindu India, Buddhist Myanmar and except for Malaysia a non-Muslim South East Asia. The geopolitical situation in our environment and beyond suggests that we be reticent in over-exposition of Islam as the sole dictator of our day-to-day life.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.