

Osama bin Laden is dead, again

BRAD K BERNER

THIS time it's for real, almost. On December 17, 2006, officials announced that "Laden," as he was known, was killed by sharpshooters in the northeastern state of Assam, India. "Laden," a 10-foot tall killer bull elephant named after Osama bin Laden by fearful villagers was responsible for 14 deaths in the area and had evaded two previous assassination attempts.

Surprisingly, neither conspiracy theorists nor the Bush administration attempted to use the event to sell books or videos or for political gain. It would have been a hard sell: "Laden" was in India, not Afghanistan; and 10-foot tall pachyderms are not prone to suicide bombings and crashing planes into buildings.

Nevertheless, the real bin Laden has been sold before to the US public, either as the commander-in-chief of a worldwide army of terrorists or as an impotent terrorist hiding in his cave.

Over the past five years, bin Laden has been killed and resurrected on numerous occasions. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, American politicians, mistaking cowboy movies for reality, proclaimed Bin Laden wanted "dead or alive" and depicted him as the commander-in-chief of a highly lethal worldwide army of terrorists.

Subsequently, after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan succeeded in toppling the Taliban and destroying al Qaeda's infrastructure, this contradictory image – commander-in-chief/impotent cave dwelling fugitive -- has swung back and forth, according to the release of his communiqués, al Qaeda attacks, political agendas, or mediations.

Not only has bin Laden's image varied, but he has been reported dead, then alive, and then dead again. For those who speculated on his demise, his communiqués had obviously been faked.

For those who posited that he was still alive, he was, again, hiding out impotently in his cave, far removed from the real "War on Terror" in Iraq, or the real mastermind behind it all.

So, what is to be made of this image pendulum? Is bin Laden a harmless fugitive or the commander-in-chief? Is he a real threat or merely a political pawn used by nefarious politicians? Is he alive or dead, and does it matter?

True, bin Laden still personally participates in directing al Qaeda operations, but al Qaeda is not an army. It is a clandestine organization, now numbering around 50,000 devout adherents according to the latest US intelligence estimates, but most operations are conducted independently, without direct orders from bin Laden.

This is hardly an army that threatens to destroy Western civilization all by itself.

No matter how politically manipulated bin Laden's image is, the threat is real, but it does not center around one man. It comes from both the devout adherents and the many like-minded organizations that have developed over the years from Southeast Asia to Europe.

All of this is linked together by one thing -- ideology. While not agreeing with every point bin Laden has made in his speeches, the organizations/adherents are anti-Western, anti-Israel, and anti any Muslim who doesn't agree with their agenda.

They favour driving the Western foreign presence or influence from their regions and establishing an Islamic government.

Within this reality, bin Laden is neither commander-in-chief nor fugitive. He is a symbol -- a hero in the eyes of a growing jihadist movement.

When he dies, his followers will most assuredly announce his death, for in their eyes he will have become a martyr to their cause.

One thing is predictable in our contemporary, unpredictable world. The next bin Laden communiqué will produce another politically expedient rollercoaster ride. He will be elevated, deprecated, and relegated back to his cave.

If the communiqué coincides with a major al Qaeda attack, he will be the commander-in-chief, again. Few will bother to ask the key question, why has the ideology he espouses become popular? Here in the United States, the answers to this question do not fit the worldview of our political and media elites, so the pendulum will continue to produce a worldview that is dangerously removed from reality.

Brad K. Berner teaches at Arizona State University and Estrella Mountain Community College. He is the author of *The World According to Al Qaeda* (2006), *Jihad: Bin Laden in His Own Words* (2006), and *Quotations from Osama bin Laden* (2006).

Iajuddin solely responsible

ZAHID HOSSAIN

THE neutrality of Prof Iajuddin's caretaker government has always been a big question, and possibly that is the root cause of the present political impasse in the country. Even the US ambassador, in a recent comment, has gone to the extent of saying that the caretaker government of Prof Iajuddin had not always worked neutrally.

The practice of installing a non-party caretaker government for organizing a free, fair and credible parliamentary election was introduced in Bangladesh in 1991. Basically, the spirit behind the introduction of the system was to form a purely non-partisan government so that a really level playing field could be prepared, and a congenial and conducive atmosphere created for holding a free, fair and credible election which would be acceptable at home and abroad.

The pattern of bureaucratic and military rule that became firmly established in Pakistan influenced the trend of politics in Bangladesh, which was a part of Pakistan until the country's independence in 1971. The military leaders, after proclaiming Martial Law in the country, time and again portrayed themselves as saviours of the nation in times of "peril," and were supported in this by a section of the bureaucracy and some political leaders. The absence of frequent elections, and the recurrence of fraudulent elections, alienated the people from the democratic political process. Martial law was in force in the country for more than a decade, and authoritarian rule continued until 1990.

During the rule of military leaders from 1975 to 1990 a number of abusive and fraudulent elections were held where people did not have the right to choose their rulers/ government, and "vote

piracy," "vote hijacking" and "media coups" (media manipulation of election results) became part of the country's election culture. As a result of this, the new experiment of installing a non-party caretaker government, headed by the immediate past chief justice of the Supreme Court, was introduced unanimously by the leaders of all political parties in 1991 in order to conduct a generally acceptable free, fair and credible election which would be acceptable at home and abroad.

Thus the idea of installing a really neutral government was thought of to enable all political parties and candidates contesting the election to campaign freely and equitably, and to ensure that the deficiencies identified in the areas of election related affairs, including preparation of a proper electoral roll, were properly and effectively addressed and the required changes made immediately.

Interestingly the present caretaker government led by Prof Iajuddin Ahmed has, by this time, proved to be a completely different one from the previous caretaker governments. From the very first day of his assuming the office of the chief advisor to the caretaker government, in addition to his presidential office, violating the constitutional provisions, Prof Iajuddin's politically motivated and BNP-Jamat-alliance-oriented actions have been giving a clear signal of his political bias, although he is supposed to be non-political.

Prof Iajuddin, while addressing the secretaries to the government, suddenly made an immature political statement creating a lot of stir in the political circle as well as the civil society. He told the secretaries that the present form of government had become a "presidential form of government," and underscored his supreme authority over the state and government affairs saying that any unwarranted remarks about his personal assistants were tantamount to interference in the affairs of the state. This was, in fact, violation of his oath as the chief advisor to the caretaker government, and the remark was unconstitutional.

He has adopted the policy of going alone, in violation of the constitutional dictum to exercise his executive power in accordance with the advice of the caretaker government. Thus he has, so far, made it crystal clear that he has been more sincere in following as well as implementing the dictation and advice of the BNP-Jamat alliance, rather than acting as per the decisions and advice of his council of advisors, totally ignoring his supposed to be neutral identity.

Major administrative changes involving the officials directly linked with the election process, starting from secretary to the government down to upazila nirbahi officers and upazila election officials, normally take place with the assumption of office by the non-party caretaker government. Surprisingly, Prof Iajuddin claims to have made a lot of changes, but has kept some key posts like the attorney general, and other politically appointed law officers of his office, DG, NSI, DG, FI, key office holders of chief advisor

and the election game. The package proposal, among others, included recasting of the election commission by sending the controversial election commissioners -- SM Zakaria and Modabbir Hossain Chowdhury -- on leave while appointing two new commissioners, one of whom would take charge of the election commission. The package was agreed upon by all the parties, including the Chief Advisor Prof. Iajuddin Ahmed, and there was a real light of hope for a participatory election.

But, suddenly and surprisingly the chief advisor became reluctant to fully implement the package proposal, possibly because of a negative indication from the BNP-Jamat alliance. The advisors had to remain silent, and it was quite embarrassing for them. Prof Iajuddin's partisan colour once again figured prominently, and with that the hope for a participatory election got a real set-back.

The issue of deployment of the army became a subject for discussion even before the caretaker government took office in the flag end of October last year. Prof Iajuddin, during his more than two months stay as chief advisor, has avoided if it had been discussed with the political parties and had not been arranged in such a way.

When the country's political crisis took a worsening turn, a team of caretaker advisors took an initiative to resolve the crisis after discussions with the two major political alliances. They were able to frame a package proposal in an effort to bring both the alliances to

sor's office (former PMO) and the president's secretariat undisturbed. According to newspaper reports the administrative changes he has made so far have been done only after receiving clearance from a particular "Bhaban," thereby expressing his full loyalty and allegiance to his party, rather than to his own conscience and his position.

Prof Iajuddin, as the chief advisor of the caretaker government, has so far taken all the major decisions of the government unilaterally, without consulting or discussing with his advisors. The Election Commission, on November 27, announced the schedule of the next parliamentary election in consultation with the chief advisor.

Most of the advisors of the caretaker government expressed surprise over the announcement, and said that they had not been informed about it. In fact, Prof Iajuddin asked the election commission to announce the election schedule hastily to meet the demand of BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia, although the advisors were of the view that the controversy surrounding the election schedule could have been avoided if it had been discussed with the political parties and had not been arranged in such a way.

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