

Tattered blood-green flag: Secularism in crisis



Time to imagine a completely different movement, one that is for class politics that also incorporates secularism within a Muslim identity, not the inadequate, irreligious fig leaf of "ek shagoro" brand pseudo-secularism (easily bought off with a parliament seat and Pajero). Many of us are comfortable inside, and speak from, a Muslim identity -- either as a religious/cultural identity at home or as ethnicized shorthand for "other" or "immigrant" in western diasporas. But we can be inside that identity and still fight to our dying breath to build a left-progressive, equitable, and secular state. This is a battle cry for secular Muslims. And we are legion.

NAEEM MOHAIEMEN

LAST winter, I was filming a follow-up to an earlier project, *Muslims or Heretics*. With the first *kuasha* of the season had come, like clock-work, a new program of anti-Ahmadiya rallies. Khatme Nabuwat, now splintered into two

groups, had announced yet another *gherao* of the Bokshibazaar mosque.

The anti-Ahmadiya rallies were on Friday (*baad jumma*, a toxic mix of misinterpreted khutbas and hate speech). The secularists announced a counter-rally -- on Thursday. At the

Thursday rally, I found myself the lone cameraman; but on Friday I was joined by scores of others: stringers for AP, BBC, the usual suspects.

The footage from the two adjacent days were a study in contrasts. The anti-Ahmadiya marchers were stern young men dressed

in *kafon* white -- steady gazes that express conviction, confusion, or both. The rallies of the secularists are gender-mixed, with women dominating the chants. There is no uniform, but everyone is in colorful saris and warm looking shawls. Inside the camera frame was an inspiring (and cinematic) sight of fluttering green and red flags, with marchers chanting *Ekatthur er Rajakar/Ajker Bomabaj and Al Badar Rajaka /Ajkei Bangla Char*.

But outside the frame was the startling fact that the secular rally had drawn only a few dozen people. As they marched through Dhaka University, not a single student joined them. Perhaps they didn't understand the chants. Or more likely, they were busy thinking of shopping or taking a phone call: "*Ki Rejwan, nishchoy girlfriend shathey?* Good, good."

I thought of this footage again recently after the Awamis cancelled the MOU with Khelafat that (temporarily) legalized fatwas. Lost in the scuffle of why AL did what they did, who was betrayed, who was sidelined, blah blah blah, was a much larger, looming issue.

Secularism today is in a deep free fall. This is not just the crisis of betrayal and maneuvering by political players. The deeper issue is that in thirty five years, we have yet to articulate a strong cultural, economic or political argument for secularism beyond "this is why we fought in 1971." In our version, secularism stands for nothing, only against something -- a mish-mosh of opposition to Pakistan "*ponthi*," *rajakar*, hijab, or Jamaat.

So... What do we do when 1971 is no longer enough?

Humayun Ahmed once had a TV serial where a parrot was taught to say *thui rajakar*. In each episode, the parrot would mouth the same line (well, that's what parrots do...). These days, secular arguments that invoke 1971 feel like that -- pretty to look at and easy to ignore. Over-use has blunted all effectiveness.

Islam as a political force is taking over the vacuum left by the global collapse of the Soviet-aligned left (and the Latin American resurgence has yet to touch Bangladesh). No Bangiyya Muslim politician goes to elections without going on umrah, invoking Allah in every speech, and doing *ghomta* if they are women. Non-Muslims? To hell with them, who else are they going to vote for anyway?

1971 as the sole rationale for secularism hinges on anger, memory, and villains. Jamaat's smart response to this was to remove Golam Azam from the leadership -- knowing that he was a lightning rod for controversy. They still have Nizami, Mujahid, Sayeedee and other liabilities -- but increasingly you start to see the rise of new "brands" within Jamaat.

Within a decade they will have a brand new leadership, a majority of which will be of the post-71 generation. At last week's midnight hour at Shaheed Minar, we listened to a litany of names of people giving tribute. First CTG, then (reduced) BNP, then AL, then the rest. My friend turned to me

and said: "Any moment, we'll hear, *Jamaat er omuk* coming forward with flowers!" A joke right now, but how much longer before they appropriate these symbols as well?

Sharp Islamist minds have already appropriated many icons, while the tired figures of Ghadani, Bangla Academy, et al recycle stale slogans and photo ops. The man who was once "Kafir Nazrul Islam" is now Jamaat's icon as a Muslim poet. This year, Islamist-aligned newspapers touted a slogan for *Ekushey "Matri Bhasha Allahr Sreshtho Daan"*. DVDs are being sold on a Jamaat history of the language movement that has the logo with Bengali calligraphy in Arabic style.

Gone is the Jamaat of *murtad* campaigns, anti-Grameen slogans, and NGO-tree choppers. Today's Jamaat occupies Industries Ministry and negotiates with the "*maluuns*" of Tata. Instead of fighting NGOs, they form their own giant NGOs with Arabist money. Slowly, always patiently, Islamists are infiltrating the civil service, banks, and all sectors of the national infrastructure. All with an eye on the long-term, and more integrity, consistency and ideological honesty than any mainstream party.

As Khatme Nabuwat, Khelafat-e-Majlish, JMB, occupy the loony right, mainstream Islamists like Jamaat start to look moderate, rational and normalized. Nor has it escaped collective attention that there are very few Jamaat men among the list of big crooks bring hunted by the CTG. Expect even more "We want Allah's law/And honest men's rule" slogans at the

next election.

In the end, what are our arguments for separation of mosque and state? "*1971 er Pak hanadar*" is emotionally resonant but insufficient in 2007. As time passes, historians will start looking at 1971 with a more analytic, non-melodramatic eye. As with all national liberation struggles, uncomfortable gray areas will emerge: including how deep was AL's commitment to secularism even in 1970. Afsan Chowdhury's forthcoming comprehensive history of 1971 may be the first attempt at uncomfortable history, wars and all.

Flaws and contradictions are expected in any foundation mythology. A normal maturing process leads to a more open discussion of these issues. But along with that, the opening will weaken the traditional argument for secularism. It's time, really urgent, to support secularism for its own sake, not for 1971.

Many of us have always been for class-based politics that targets the incredible wealth disparity, obscene money race, and insane, unsustainable consumption that is poisoning the globe. But secularism is the missing part of this equation. We are not only a class elite, but also a Muslim elite that ravages this country and renders all others as shadow citizens. From the Vested Property Act onwards, there are laws, "understandings," social norms, politics and quiet discrimination that have rendered our Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Adivasi, and Pahari citizens as sub-human -- frozen

out of schools, jobs, politics, culture, and lived life.

(But look, I'm busy right now, says my friend. Writing a letter to *Daily Star* -- the situation in Iraq-Palestine is intolerable, we must fight injustice.)

Many of our crises are due to greed, power play and discrimination impulses being played out on the vulnerable second class. But in the absence of real ideology (what exactly is AL/BNP/JP's position on globalization? Structural adjustment? Unionization?), religion is still a powerful political cover for these agendas. If you try to oppose it, the answer is always the same. This is Allah's law as I choose to interpret it. If you speak against me, you are a *murtad*.

Time to imagine a completely different movement, one that is for class politics that also incorporates secularism within a Muslim identity, not the inadequate, irreligious fig leaf of "*ek shagoro*" brand pseudo-secularism (easily bought off with a parliament seat and Pajero). Many of us are comfortable inside, and speak from, a Muslim identity -- either as a religious/cultural identity at home or as ethnicized shorthand for "other" or "immigrant" in western diasporas. But we can be inside that identity and still fight to our dying breath to build a left-progressive, equitable, and secular state.

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Toward political party ideologies and manifestoes Now you see it...



Finally, I understand that there is pondering within the CTG as to whether there may be some way of making it mandatory for a Party to implement its manifesto if it is voted into power. To set the ball further rolling in thinking in this direction, I wonder if a provision can be laid down that after two years of rule by a party in power any citizen can appeal to the Supreme Court to the effect that the party seems not to be taking important elements of its own manifesto seriously.

MD. ANISUR RAHMAN

WITH a new culture of governance that the people are expecting and desiring from those who will come into power as their elected representatives, political parties should now change their culture of lofty promises that they do not mean (as evidenced from their past conduct), and present clear ideologically-driven manifestoes toward economic and social development of the nation with concrete promises that they would seriously implement if voted to power.

The preparation of such manifestoes is a serious business not to be done off the cuff but with diligent research and deliberations with different walks of life.

This requires our political parties to invite experts of ideological affinity with them in the various concerned fields for intensive research and deliberations, and the ordinary people should also be involved, when the law permits, in grassroots sessions to get their brains, experience and ideas and also to assess/enlist their preliminary support toward a party's manifesto.

While thus being a matter for expert-cum-people deliberations that each party may wish to initiate, I am giving below an illustrative list

to drive the point home as to the type of questions that a party may wish to address in order to clarify its ideology and design its manifesto:

Economic/developmental

- Operationalization of the fundamental principle of economic and social justice in the nation's constitution in terms of imposing a ceiling on the range of economic disparity in the society (vide also editorial of February 21 in this paper "Recalling Ekushey" referring to the principle of egalitarianism for which the nation fought its liberation war).
- Agrarian reform, as the South Asian "miracle" countries did to get on a higher growth turnpike with greater equity. In our context, this may mean ceiling to land ownership; abolishing of absentee ownership; encouraging and supporting cooperative farming;
- Encourage and support "rakhi business" of producers' own marketing cooperatives to keep their surplus themselves.
- Stopping NGOs doing middlemen's business with products of our primary producers thus themselves exploiting these producers, and asking them instead to assist in promoting "rakhi business" of primary

producers' own cooperatives, cooperative consumer stores of the income-poor villagers to eliminate middlemen's profit, cooperative paddy-banks for farmers to store paddy when price is low after harvest and to sell when high.

- Invite, encourage and support industrial entrepreneurship by low-income people and actively help them become efficient entrepreneurs, with (a) technical know-how; (b) infant industry protection if needed in initial phases to help them mature and thereafter withdraw protection to face world competition, also like policies taken in South Asian countries, instead of submitting blindly to "free market fundamentalism" which no 'developed' country of today had followed in their own days of 'developing'; (c) strict quality control.
- Launch a "shwadeshi movement" to promote home consumption of products of our struggling highly skilled weavers with a sense of pride, and also ask our foreign offices to actively work to promote sales of their products abroad, using the services of our creative "development ambassadors" like Bibi Russel.

- Identify communities and groups in the country trapped in "chronic poverty" whom even a high growth momentum in the country may not touch (as analyzed in the Report 2004-2005 of the "Chronic Poverty Research Centre"), and design special programs to address their poverty and development problem.
- Promotion of "people-to-people development cooperation" through exchanges between people's groups who are moving forward with creative initiatives and others lagging behind.
- Restrict ostentatious consumption by way of luxury cars, glamorous imported household goods, lavish public feasts etc.
- National convention of "untouchable" communities for the nation to be acquainted with the depth of the inhuman social treatment being suffered by them, and formulation of policies for eliminating this shameful culture from the society.
- Develop economic growth centers in and around mufussil towns for geographical spread of urbanization, growth and its benefits.
- Strict policy of not encroaching upon property of indigenous communities, and assisting them in their self-development preserving their own culture and traditions to the extent that they so want.

Educational

- Educational reform, considering the neglected report of the "Students' Education Commission" of 1974, asking student representatives to review for possible modification in the light of present-day needs.
- National literacy campaign for full literacy in 2 years, inviting students to join in the campaign.
- Promotion of "gonogobeshona" and seminars and workshops of underprivileged people throughout the country, to help them formulate their own development policies and take action accordingly with state support as needed.
- Encourage and support educational, and cultural activities of urban "lokais" and national rehabilitation program for beggars.

Women's rights

- Propagation of women's constitutional and human rights and devising of policies for promotion of these rights in consultation with women rights organizations.

Health and recreation

- Promotion of community health insurance schemes with subsidies for specially distressed communities.
 - A program of public acquisition of land for use as recreation space, in particular for the nation's children and youth, to halt the use-up of open spaces to raise residential and commercial buildings leaving the nation's children to practice football and cricket on motor-roads to bid for the world cups.
- To repeat, the above are illustrative thoughts only for consideration in the manifesto of a party. No doubt the parties will formulate their own manifestoes with their own ideologies and assessments of the problems. But it should be on the basis of clear ideologies and programs rather than rhetoric that the nation should be invited to choose its leadership.

And sooner rather than later, the parties will do well, both for their own preparation as well as to instill public confidence in their intentions as well as in their abilities and preparation, to form "shadow cabinets" to start translating their professed manifestoes into concrete action plans. This will also stand them in good stead by providing them with well-deliberated ammunitions for healthy debates on the concerned issues in the parliament whether a party is in power or in the opposition. And it will also be a confidence-builder for voters of like-minded ideologies to know who the experts in a party's shadow cabinet are.

Finally, I understand that there is pondering within the CTG as to whether there may be some way of making it mandatory for a Party to implement its manifesto if it is voted into power.

To set the ball further rolling in thinking in this direction, I wonder if a provision can be laid down that after two years of rule by a party in power any citizen can appeal to the Supreme Court to the effect that the party seems not to be taking important elements of its own manifesto seriously.

Upon such petition the Supreme Court may ask the party to show cause why a fresh election should not be convened. In the case that there will be coalition of two or more parties to form the government, there may be a provision that the coalition upon assuming power will announce to the nation its joint manifesto which they will follow to govern and lead the country.

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The Butcher of Baghdad added a gruesome final touch: thousands of helmets from Iranian soldiers allegedly killed in the war dangle from nets attached to the fists. Other helmets are embedded in concrete at the base of the monument, intended as speed bumps. These days, the monument sits in the heart of the Green Zone. Since the fall of the regime, visitors have left their mark with graffiti. One scrawl in black pen on a green Iranian helmet reads, "I (heart) Iraq."

BABAK DEGHANPISHEH

IT'S the postcard image of Baghdad: a pair of gigantic crossed swords clenched in massive fists. The monument, known officially as the Hands of Victory, is both a symbol of Saddam Hussein's outsized ego and his iron grip.

For nearly 20 years, the swords have dominated the skyline in central Baghdad. But on Tuesday afternoon, 10-foot bronze chunks cut from one fist were stacked haphazardly at the base of the monument, the first step in bringing the swords down.

"I was very shocked when I heard they started destroying it," says Mustafa Khadimi, executive director of the Iraq Memory Foundation, an organization that has meticulously documented the atrocities of the former regime.

The Iraqi government has yet to issue an official statement about the dismantling of the swords, but the effort is clearly already underway.

Khadimi says Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki made the decision to bring down the monument last week in coordination with a governmental body named the Committee for Removing Symbols of the Saddam Era.

The idea of erasing the symbols of the former regime completely undercuts the mission of organizations like the Iraq Memory Foundation, which had planned to build a huge museum on the site.

Representatives from the organization have sent letters of protest to the Iraqi government as well as Unesco. "We need to use these two swords as proof to further generations to show what happened to Iraqi people," says Khadimi.

Saddam constructed the monument to symbolize what he saw as a definitive victory in the brutal war with Iran during the 1980s.

The pair of crossed swords was officially unveiled in 1989, but Saddam started construction on the monument well before the war with Iran was even finished.

He pulled out all the stops. The swords cross approximately 130

feet in the air and are reportedly built from melted-down tanks and other hardware used by the Iraqi military.

The hands gripping the swords, approximately 20 feet high, are bronze replicas of Saddam's own fists.

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Taking a photo beneath the crossed swords is a must-do for visitors of all stripes. And Tuesday was no exception. Humvees and SUVs pulled up for a photo op at sunset as word spread that the monument was being taken down.

Some posed beneath the swords, others pulled out digital cameras to preserve the moment. A handful of souvenir hunters were stopped by Green Zone police as they tried to haul off a half dozen helmets.

Like Saddam's bungled execution, a hasty decision to dismantle the monument could inflame sectarian tensions.

Many Sunnis, whether they supported Saddam or not, will likely interpret the move as a direct snub by a Shiite-led government.

Not exactly the kind of message the government should send while enforcing a new security plan. "The timing doesn't serve anything," says Wamidh Nadhmi, a political science professor at Baghdad University. "This would be a defeat for the whole idea of reconciliation."

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