

Executed JMB men

Justice triumphs, but we must remain alert

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In this context, one cannot but note the long period which elapsed between identifying the militants and their eventual trial and execution. One hardly needs to be enlightened on the political connections such purveyors of religious extremism maintained throughout their long, sordid career. These connections went a long way in slowing down the process of netting them, not least because of the denial mode in which the last administration had put itself about the activities of the JMB all over the country. Media reports relating to the operations of the JMB network threw continuous light on what was becoming a major issue, but the authorities chose to look away from the reality. It was not until the concerted explosions carried out by the JMB in 63 of the country's 64 districts in 2005, thereby bringing Bangladesh under the international spotlight, that the grave nature of the situation was finally acknowledged by the government. Now that the law has taken its natural course, through a decisiveness of judgment and an implementation of it, it is hoped that such religious extremism will not in future vitiate society and politics in this country any more.

It will, however, be naive to suppose that the executions of the six militants have put an end to extremism in Bangladesh. Fanaticism, unless checked in good time, always digs deep roots anywhere. That thought should keep the nation, especially the authorities, alert to future dangers. There are followers, as well as well-placed patrons, of the JMB; and these elements need to be hauled out of their caves and neutralized. On a bigger scale, there are the root causes of fanaticism that call for swift, decisive handling. Among such causes are unemployment, a lack of social opportunities, etc. Such marks of discontent only add to the growth and spread of religious extremism, which is why government and society at large need to address them in purposeful manner. The triumph of the rule of law we have just experienced is in a larger sense a victory of morality. Let that become a pattern for all of us from here on.

An auspicious occasion

Prophet's messages of eternal relevance

IT'S a great day we are celebrating today. Eid-e-Miladunnabi marking the birth and death anniversaries of Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (pbuh), literally encompassed the life and works of a man who left indelible imprints on the saga of human spirit's elevation from abyss to crowning glories.

He would have had a permanent place in history even as a social reformer by the sheer virtue of lifting nomadic Arab tribes steeped in the depths of superstition including infanticide, tyrannical practices of slavery, undermining of women and hedonic pleasure-seeking to the heights of an orderly society. It was a feat to have led them from darkness to light.

Yet he was more than that – the Prophet of Islam basing his teachings on the revealed book of Quran imparting the message of 'Touhid', the oneness of the Almighty with Muhammad(sm) as His last Messenger. The speed with which the message spread far and wide in his own life time is a permanent tribute to vast moral influence he wielded around him.

His sterling qualities included upholding truth, justice, equity and fair play against stunning odds in societal and community relationships. Personally, he never preached what he did not practise, a rare quality by today's standards.

It is a pity that the values of universal brotherhood, peace and tolerance that the Prophet so vigorously championed are now being misinterpreted by a minuscule minority of religious extremists, albeit with ulterior motives. The Prophet would never have approved violence and senseless blood letting that have become the credo of extremism. Our people are very religious, but traditionally they have never tired of opposing exploitation of religion for political purposes whenever it was attempted. At the other extreme of the fanatical scale, we see the profiling of Islam by those who miss out on its core messages which are peace and communal harmony.

The teachings of Muhammad (pbuh) can be pressed into service in overcoming communal, sectarian and all other types of conflicts that divide the world today threatening to push it on to the brink of disaster.

Information disclosure and electoral process



DR. ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

ECONOMIC analyses of government are typically divided into two broadly overlapping groups: one underscores government as an agent for providing public goods through regulating markets, distributing resources, and generally working for the betterment of public welfare; the other perceives government as an entity propelled by private interests, susceptible to those with the power to manipulate its decisions and failing to motivate its officials to serve for the greater public good.

Obviously, neither model fits the profiles of the last alliance government or any in the past, although a hybrid of the two was most desired. Ever since independence, special interest groups manipulated policy decisions for the benefit of the family and political cronies. Public officials

were politicized to serve politicians' interest letting public service go astray. The worst was experienced during the tenure of the last corrupt alliance government. How could this happen?

In the American system, the fourth branch of government refers to a group that influences the other three branches, namely, legislative, judicial, and executive. This fourth branch encompasses the press (an analogy to the French Fourth Estate), which reflects the voices of the people and interest groups.

The notion that the media or press forms the fourth branch is rooted in the belief that the news media's mission, which is to inform the populace, is crucial to the proper functioning of democracy. The phrase "Fourth Estate" is often used to accentuate the independence of

the press, typically when this is contrasted with the press as a "fourth branch."

The last elected government monopolized the legislative branch (the parliament) by relegating the opposition to the role of street protesters and politicizing the judiciary to carry out their wishes, thus bringing these two branches of government virtually under the wing of the executive branch.

The fourth estate – the media – was vilified and maligned, and journalists were routinely persecuted and murdered. The country's governance, then, was thus reduced to essentially one branch – "the executive branch" and the fourth state the media - was replaced by "family, friends, and party loyalists" who influenced governmental policies and decisions for personal

interests.

A remarkable change transpired on January 11 when the reformist interim government took over the governance of the country backed by the state of emergency. The interim government has reformed the judiciary to function independently like never before. In the absence of the legislative branch, the "Fourth Estate" now encompasses the media, the people and the patriotic army. (The interim government acknowledged their accountability to the people – meaning people's voices are a provisional proxy for the parliament).

The belief that the fourth state has achieved its long fought carte blanche is reinforced when the High Court on March 22 rejected a contempt petition against the Bangla daily Manabzamin which in its

March 21 issue castigated the qualifications and integrity of some judges. Slighting the contempt petition, the justices championed that "the press is free and the judiciary is not above criticism." The HC also stressed that "democratic and constitutional institutions cannot flourish without freedom of press." What a wonderful thing to hear!

In a democracy, the role of electoral process is twofold: select the benign politicians and discipline the malign ones (rent seekers or wheelers and dealers) if they are elected. Conflicts distort the democratic process when the interests of voters and politicians diverge. If incumbents are identified as wheelers and dealers they're voted out of office in their re-election bid. However, false and fabricated information about candidates (often generated by crooked political rivals) easily engender distortions in electors' behavior and the emergence of a benign government becomes out of reach.

Voters typically don't observe the politicians' actions or may be uninformed about their true qualifications and preferences. By electing such candidates, voters inadvertently make an adverse selection. This leads to moral hazard dilemma, which arises when politicians engage in corruption. Both adverse selection and moral hazard arise

because of the existence of asymmetric information between voters and the candidates.

The EC can screen politicians' electoral eligibility by examining the credentials they provide and also use various official sources (such as police reports, banking information, tax filings etc). But how would the information reach the potential voters? Since only 7% people read daily newspapers, the most effective way disclosures about candidates can be disseminated to the general public are via TV, and radio broadcasts. The media can also gather undisclosed yet verifiable irregularities about candidates and publish them for voters' awareness.

In a study entitled, "Exposing Corrupt Politicians" (November 2005) Claudio Ferraz and Frederico Finan showed that access to information enhances political accountability.

The study involved random auditing of Brazil's municipal expenditures of federally-allocated funds. It estimated the effect of the disclosure of corrupt practices of local politicians upon the re-election success of incumbent mayors in municipal elections.

The analyses compared the municipalities which were randomly audited before the elections with those audited after, and found that the disclosure of audit results had a

significant impact on the re-election rates of mayors found to be corrupt.

This effect became more obvious in municipalities where radio broadcast were present and higher levels of corruption were identified by the anticorruption program.

Recent work on political agency models that incorporate both moral hazard and adverse selection show that while greater access to information allows voters to better screen politicians; it might also encourage them to disguise their behavior from detection. Additionally, the effect of information disclosure on electoral success will also depend on the prior beliefs voters have about the incumbent's propensity towards corruption.

When our "little else qualified to do" politicians patronize themselves with the arguments that politicians must ultimately govern the country and not the "non-politicians" like the eleven advisers of the IRG, they're not forthcoming with their past failures and deficiencies as politicians.

Some even argue that the widespread public exuberance with the IRG may dissipate the same way as that happened with the regimes of the past military dictators. These arguments should be considered nonsensical ipso facto.

Ziaur Rahman and HM Ershad

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