

Lal Mosque bloodstained

Lessons writ large for all concerned

WHEN religious extremism takes on such a rabid form as to threaten the state power, the government of the day cannot sit idly by. It has to act and deal with it with an iron hand. Religion cannot be allowed to be used as a tool of armed politics, that too from a mosque and madrassa using women and children as human shield in confrontation with the government.

From these points of view, one couldn't but try to understand the storming of the Red Mosque by the Pakistani security forces. The people of Pakistan, however, would be the best judge as to whether there was an alternative course to resolve the crisis without the bloodletting the government action entailed. It is worth noting that the nine-hour-long peace talks led by a former Pak prime minister Chaudhry Sujaat Hussain with the militant leaders floundered on the rock of the Pakistan government not agreeing to 'safe passage' for the militants, including the foreign elements, holed up in the mosque.

The top most militant leader Abdul Aziz had been already taken into custody while attempting to flee and the second-in-command Abdur Rashid Gazi has been gunned down. Even though the top leadership has been neutralised, the spectre of Taliban-style aggressive fanaticism may well not have vanished from Pakistan.

The most pertinent question is: why successive governments in Pakistan, including Musharraf regime, allowed things to come to such a pass that a mosque could develop into a safe haven for militants armed with machine guns, rocket launchers and gasoline bombs? During the last six months in particular there has been a campaign of abductions and threats carried out by the extremists like the Talibans did in Afghanistan.

The alarming dimension to all of this is the vicious pursuit of the goal for imposing shariah rule on Islamic Republic of Pakistan where the Constitution itself forbids anything going against Islam, there is a parliament where the matter could be discussed and various avenues of public debate in existence.

The Lal Mosque episode should lead to a fresh acknowledgement of the need for making a distinction between religiosity i.e. love for religion and exploitation of religious sentiments of people to advance aggressive obscurantism of a misguided bunch.

There is a lesson to learn for Bangladesh, although playing politics with extremism in our country has not taken as rabid a form as in some other countries. Still, we must take guard against any possible use of mosque and madrassa as a base for advancing extremist political agenda, the portents for which exist in Bangladesh.

Moitree Express

Let it be a symbol of friendship all the way

THE Kolkata-Dhaka train service, which will reconnect the two historically linked cities, is set to begin in September. The news that the officials from India and Bangladesh have succeeded in reaching an agreement on operating two passenger trains on this route, each making two trips a week, is indeed a long awaited breakthrough as far as development of a regional communications network is concerned. It is going to be a new and much-cherished service for a huge number of people on both sides.

We believe the train to Kolkata will be a symbol of goodwill and friendship between peoples of the two countries, as Moitree Express, the name given to it, suggests. It is also quite in keeping with the Saarc spirit of establishing people-to-people contact -- an essential precondition for meaningful economic cooperation. Such contact will help defuse tension and bring people closer to each other. The idea of establishing train service among the countries in the region should be extended further in future through connecting more and more cities and towns. The benefits of having such a railway network are numerous as has been proved in Europe. If the countries of the subcontinents want to turn the region into a fast-developing economic bloc, communications should always be a priority area.

The Indian officials have proposed that a security fence be built at the point where the train will cross over to the Indian territory. The proposal reflects the Indian concern over certain cross-border issues related to security and prevention of illegal activities. However, we believe everything will be settled when a Bangladeshi railway delegation visits Kolkata very soon.

The train to Kolkata will revive the memories of the dim and distant past when train was about the only means of transport for the people of East Bengal intending to travel to Calcutta. Today the journey will start once more, albeit under changed circumstances and after quite a few decades.

Our best wishes for the Moitree Express.

Addressing the root cause

For such a generation to come about, concerned, conscious and aware patriots need to raise themselves beyond controversy, broaden their hearts, and campaign tirelessly in bringing about a change in the minds of fellow citizens, the policy makers and other stakeholders in building an educational and social infrastructure. Only a modern, pragmatic, and robust educational infrastructure, reflecting the priorities of our nation, will be able to combat the issues of corruption and other destructive elements of our society.

TALHA J. AHMAD

THE extortion cases and allegations of graft and abuse of power dominate media every day. Previously honourable, powerful and supreme individuals are now being demonised by charges of irregularities of all kinds, including keeping of alcoholic drinks and relief goods unlawfully.

Former friends and partners are now turning into enemies, creating terror in the minds of the most powerful and famous politicians. Presidents accuse their subordinates of betrayal, while the subordinates accuse the superiors with a desire to

smoothen their own future.

The love and admiration, previously so well articulated, are now being replaced with equally zealous anger, dislike and hatred. The civil society, media and the nation watch in amusement, often confused by the situation. Those with opportunities to write are now filling papers with words describing the unfolding events in the juiciest of manners, blending humour and anger in the lines.

The exposure of the malaise of corruption and the betrayal of trust and, in many ways, examples of treachery is, of course, a good thing. The

disgust of the wider society and the increasing contempt for the immoral, criminal and unholly politicians and others is also a positive sign, one which we all should celebrate. It is right, therefore, that columnists, thinkers and commentators find attractive ways to narrate and analyse these stories.

After all, mounting corruption, rage of power, and greed of the political leadership has set our nation back. Their selfish actions, fuelled by lack of patriotism and consideration for the wider society, had got us going backward. However, the much discussed

issues of corruption, extortion, abuse of power, and tax-evasion are mere symptoms of a wider problem, the root causes of which remain largely un-discussed.

In the following lines, I shall offer glimpses of what I feel are the root causes. One thing is clear from the events leading up to, and in the aftermath of, the fall of the first caretaker government of Prof. Iazuddin Ahmed, is that the political maturity of our nation is yet to take a solid shape.

It is clear that the current situation as it exists had not been foreseen by any of the political blocks, neither BNP nor AL had ever anticipated a situation of the kind we see now. This is a failure of a spectacular kind, one that immediately disqualifies all these major players of politics from their positions. The actions taken by the BNP led government immediately prior to the end of their tenure, and the opposition offered by AL, lacked vision, sincerity and

patriotism.

Since the installation of the current government, the extraordinary events and a visible vulnerability of the politicians clearly shows the lack of accountability that existed in all those years of our country's history. The absence of strong civic institutions, aware middle class, and an alert population, is evident. Because if there were institutions led by the civil society, the educated middle class and the wider professional and business communities then the situation could have not come to where it has.

The failure is not just of our political leadership, it is a collective failure of us all, as a nation. Our failure is our inability in holding these politicians accountable much earlier. Many, of course, would argue that there had been vocal opposition to various mindless acts of destruction of our nation by our leaders, but due to lack of public support this opposition was not

heeded. This argument highlights our failure even further.

Politicians provide political leadership, thus they have a following in the wider society, but the civil society, professional class and business outfits offer moral and ideological leadership, for which there should have been an even stronger following. If the educated, aware, and otherwise politically non-partisan groups had lived up to their responsibility and renewed their commitment to the nation, then the politicians would not have been able to overlook the dissatisfaction of the people.

The two points raised above, the absence of institutional deterrence from the wider non-political quarter and the lack of political maturity on the part of politicians, brings me to my final point, which is the failure of our educational establishments. Lack of serious political vision is the product of our ineffectual education system, which offers no

opportunity for students to understand the nation, its history and the challenges that it faces. There is no framework for educating our young people to understand the needs and challenges of our society, and to develop a sense of responsibility.

If we were able to instil in our students a sense of belonging, and a commitment towards the well-being of this nation, our national institutions would have been much stronger and more effective in deterring the corrupt, greedy individuals and groups from looting the national wealth in whatever shape and form they could.

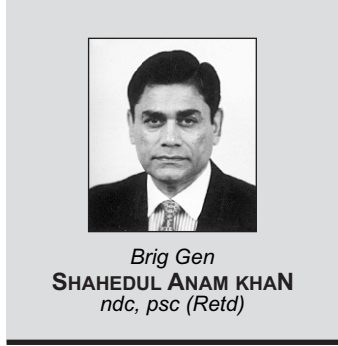
Instead of focusing on a genuine debate in modernising our education system, at the heart of which should be determination of a vision for the nation which, in turn, will influence the curriculum and content, we often focused narrowly along "sectarian" lines, thus wasting valuable time.

To sum up, therefore, we need a future generation of leaders beaming with confidence, vision and motivation, who will understand the needs and challenges of our nation. They will recognise the strengths, and devise ways to tackle the malaises.

For such a generation to come about, concerned, conscious and aware patriots need to raise themselves beyond controversy, broaden their hearts, and campaign tirelessly in bringing about a change in the minds of fellow citizens, the policy makers and other stakeholders in building an educational and social infrastructure. Only a modern, pragmatic, and robust educational infrastructure, reflecting the priorities of our nation, will be able to combat the issues of corruption and other destructive elements of our society.

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Leadership, morals and ethics



I am again delving on the issue of leadership, being fully aware of the general misgivings our political leaders have engendered in the minds of the public who have, for the greater part of the existence of Bangladesh, generally remained outside the ambit of their consideration. I am also aware of the fact that the leaders of the two major parties are in the national focus, and if a random public poll were to be taken today it would in all likelihood reflect the divide in opinions that exists in the respective political parties about their top party leader.

While many would like to see the two top personalities leave the scene, whether for better or for worse only time will tell, the two seem to disagree on the manner and method being employed rather than the spirit behind the idea.

But they seem to be convinced that they have been anointed for the posts by virtue of their links with the founders of their parties. They have been holding the job for close to a

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quarter of a century, and as time passes they seem ever more convinced that it is theirs to hold till eternity.

One wonders whether they have ever contemplated on the fact that their being put in the top party post was really making a virtue out of a necessity. It was really the surnames they were carrying that their partymen wanted to exploit. That is something not unique to us and, looking around at the countries of the region, the two ladies should feel happy to find themselves in equally illustrious company.

But leadership is not all about being put in a place of authority. While one may be put in a high office, becoming a true leader, particularly in the realm of politics, is quite another matter. Leadership is quite like greatness; some are born leaders, some acquire the essential qualities, and some are thrust into the position.

But being thrust into the position does not automatically invest one with all the leadership traits. Leadership has also to be underpinned by ethics and morality in order to make it legitimate and acceptable.

Today, politics and politicians, particularly the two top leaders, are under public scrutiny, ever more so after the incredible revelations appearing in the media about the scope and level of corruption that some of the politicians have been allegedly involved in, and the moral turpitude that some of them had sunk into.

And while it would be unfair to indict both of them in equal measure for the ills that pervade our politics today, they must, nonetheless, share the responsibility in proportion to the time they were in office, as they must also be given plaudits in the same proportion for all that they were able to achieve.

If our leaders have failed to demonstrate the qualities of leadership, it may perhaps be because they lacked the ingredients in the first place, but what they seem to forget is that "when a man assumes a public trust, he should consider himself as public property," as Jefferson had said two hundred years ago.

Being public property by their own choice, they must not demur at public comments on their future. The choice between

discarding them or retaining them is as much a public right as that of their party men or women.

And I talk as one of the public, not predisposed to the views of either those who want them go to make reform of their parties easier, or of those who think that they are indispensable. Neither do I subscribe to the view of the establishment that they have become redundant because they were unsuccessful leaders and should, therefore, consider quitting politics, without citing specifics on their failure.

However, I feel that the comment, "all political lives, unless they are cut off in mid-stream at a happy juncture, end in failure, because that is the nature of politics and of human affairs," merits consideration.

But quite apart from being a successful or unsuccessful leader, and one can apply all kinds of yardsticks to determine success, there is the very important aspect of the moral force of the leader or the person in command that adds to the art of leadership, and allows one to achieve more than what the science of management can ever do, as per Colin Powell. And it is the moral

authority of the two that many are questioning now. Why so?

It is for everybody to see the morass that some very senior politicians belonging to both the major parties have taken themselves and the country into, with their unbridled greed and lust for money.

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It is difficult to believe that a deal that was settled at a sum that many in Bangladesh cannot even think of earning in several generations was not in the knowledge of the "superior."

Even if we were to give the benefit of doubt and accept the argument that the leader had no knowledge of all the dubious deals that had been carried out under his or her watch, then a cardinal task of a leader was not ensured, which is to be fully informed about what his or her charges are up to.

It was for them to keep their men or women under watch. As a US president is reported to have remarked: "Every man who takes office in Washington either grows

or swells, and when I give a man office I watch him carefully to see whether he is growing or swelling."

Some people holding public office in our country have swelled beyond recognition at the expense of the country and, as things may turn out, to their general detriment too. Thus, on both counts, those of ignorance and acquiescence, a leader can be marked down as a failure. He/she may not be faulted for the acts of commission of their ministers, but, certainly, the onus of moral responsibility cannot be avoided by them.

Very few people have the moral courage to own up to their mistakes, and we are not surprised that the two leaders have not, even once, mustered enough courage to say: "I was wrong."

Since a party of order and stability, and a party of progress and reform, are both necessary elements for a healthy state of political life, to recall John Stuart Mill, anything that destabilises an established party should be avoided; but not without asking the fundamental question, which is whether the leaders under whose authority so much wrong was perpetrated have the moral authority to seek an office which needs the confidence of the party men and the people at large?

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What will the reform proposals bring for the country?

Reform must attract the real talented, honest and patriotic individuals towards the party, instead of the hardened criminals who spread threat and terrorism to show the supremacy and evil power of the party. There should be a competition to see how many criminals and dishonest people can be expelled from the parties. One's position in the party should be determined on the basis of talent and real performance in the political field. Buying of position and nomination must be foreign to all the parties forever, if they genuinely want to tilt towards the welfare of the state and republic.

MASUM BILLAH

THE political arena has received a sudden and unexpected tremor, heading towards a wave of reform. Actually, it was long overdue, but what kind of reform is needed remains hazy to those who seem to be busy with the affair. Hidden motives might have directed them towards such a drive.

Questions arise in the minds of conscious people about whether reform would bring about the desired qualitative change in politics, which has been dominated and occupied by people who were there by virtue of muscle and ill-gotten money, taking the nation to the verge of ruin. Still, the much talked about reform proposals emanating from the brains and minds of the politicians tend to keep them within the grip of corrupt individuals.

The first and foremost point regarding the reform proposals

should be, who will come to politics. Can anyone having money and muscle become a politician? Should individuals having much influence and evil power to subdue the forces against their party come to politics? Integrity, tolerance and patience of an individual should not be the considering points?

All parties should decide who will have access to politics. Whoever has money can be accommodated in the house of politics should not be the motto of political parties. Individuals rejected from one party on disciplinary ground or for corruption must not be harboured or welcomed in another party. Clear-cut guidelines should be declared before the nation as to who will have access to politics.

The sources of funds must be identified and clearly indicated before the nation by each and every party. The group of people, which talks about transparency

and democracy must not depend on extorted money. It kills the very vitality and spirit of the party. Such a party can never give any real service to the nation.

When a political party doesn't have a transparent source of financing, the politicians definitely wait to plunder national wealth. They are ready to tell a series of lies and commit any kind of crime, as their prime objective is gaining state power and grabbing the right to distribute national wealth according to their sweet will.

This kind of distribution always fattens their pockets, and the party's. It's a serious crime. Politics must not be a money earning game. It should be dedicated to the country and countrymen.

Even though academic qualification is not so important in democracy, it has serious implications on politics and the performance of the candidates. The extraordinary virtues of politi-

cians may over-shadow the academic qualifications, but leaders of that stature are hardly visible in our present political scene.

So, academic background must be given weightage in this reformation move. Usually good, academic career-oriented people will be able to show better performance in respect of anything. Most of the student leaders who become national leaders hardly touch the books.

They think that the tools of politics are having the gift of the gab, telling unlimited lies, gaining muscle power to pose as a threat to the other parties, posing themselves as terrors in the campus, taking food and other essentials free of cost from the canteens and neighbouring shops, and doing unsocial deeds. These student leaders bury the books. Whatever we say, these leaders have nothing to give to the nation, except hoodwinking the people and selling the national wealth.

Students should be prepared to serve the country in the real sense of the term, and to respond to any critical moment of the nation, just like the freedom movement, and the movements against autocrats. They must not be allowed to play with arms and money, and say good-bye to study and books. The leaders who developed themselves

through this kind of culture will adore this tradition. From now onwards this culture must be wiped out from Bangladeshi politics.

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Most of the people of our country don't have access to affluent way of living. Those who represent the poor people as politicians have a huge amount of wealth, and most of this wealth has been earned through illegal ways.

Political parties should have established some legal income generating sources such as hospitals, industries, poultry farms, fisheries, banks, transport business etc. Running these institutions smoothly and efficiently might prove their skills

and ability to run small institutions, which would help them run the state.

Through hospitals they could give genuine and necessary help to the poor people. They could manage many job opportunities for the people. They could establish educational institutions to give education to the poor people free and quality education, showing their honesty and nobility.

Side by side, they could have transparent and sound financial sources to run the party. The political parties of poor countries must not follow the steps of the wealthy countries. The parties of poor countries must have their own income, and they must own some welfare organizations and service sectors so that they can prove how to give service to the nation and the poor people.

These thoughts never came to their minds. They just wait to grab state power once again and distribute the poor country's wealth among their party men. This could never be the way of dealing with poor country's economy. This could never be the way of leading political parties.

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