

Happy Eid-ul-Fitr

Let the values of Ramadan enrich life

AT the end of a month of fasting, Muslims all over the world observe Eid-ul-Fitr. This observance comes after days spent in recalling the spirit of the Islamic faith and practising it in daily life. Indeed, the month of Ramadan is a constant reminder that religion, and with that a deep sense of religiosity, is what underlines the pursuit of life. Faith is that fundamental guiding principle which lifts individuals from the banalities of the temporal world to one that is spiritual in nature. For what is religion after all if it does not act as a spur to a strengthening of one's moral base? The prayers and the fasting that Muslims have observed in Bangladesh and across the world are simply a reassertion of that moral base. It is with such an awareness of what we as mortal beings must do to uphold faith now proceed to a celebration of Eid-ul-Fitr.

The lessons that come with Ramadan and with fasting are many and varied. While the individual is expected to purify himself in the eyes of the Creator through abjuring all worldly temptations, he is equally expected to ensure that those in need of succour will be treated with the dignity that religion promises to accord to them. Such dignity is to be manifested through fitra and zakat, as part of the rules governing our collective observance of Ramadan. In a larger sense, however, the fulfillment of fitra and zakat-related responsibilities are a reassertion of the principles that we as Muslims holding faith in Islam are normally expected to uphold. In other words, it is caring for those who have been uncared for, lifting out of misery those who have wallowed in despair and offering the light of hope to those who have long been in darkness that we will be expected to re-emphasise on this occasion. There is, besides, the thought that Ramadan is a month that teaches us again the values which enhance the quality of life and living. And among those values are a need for humility and a remembrance of the transitory nature of life. In Ramadan, it is an opportunity to move from the ordinary to the metaphysical that presents itself to us. Let us hope that as this Ramadan nears an end, we will have rekindled all these values within ourselves and indeed passed them on to our families, neighbours and friends.

The end of Ramadan and approach of Eid-ul-Fitr is also a time for us, here in Bangladesh, to reflect on the moral perspectives that we can bring into our collective national life as we prepare for a return to democratic politics. Let the year ahead be one of moral and social rejuvenation.

We wish all our readers a happy Eid-ul-Fitr.

Reward for schools and teachers

Let it be a tool for raising quality of education

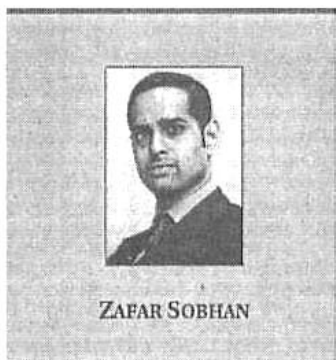
THIS is a least trodden area in our scheme of things: rewarding good work in any tangible form rather than confining ourselves to at best wordy compliments. We would run down schools and teachers, sometimes in a sweeping manner, losing sight of some of their performances despite all the constraints they are having to work under.

It is in this light that we welcome the news published in Prothom Alo about the education ministry planning to introduce incentive awards for better performing secondary schools, their teachers and even management committees. Some 1000 institutions, both government and private, at the upazila level, are likely to be the beneficiaries. The whole idea, is to foster competition among the schools to raise their bars and thereby help enhance the overall level of quality of secondary education.

The thought is noble, to be sure, but given the set of criteria, the schools already in an advantageous position in terms of facilities, teaching staff and better score cards compared with the rest are likely to get a head-start in bagging the prizes. The fact remains though that in a scheme of things where best schools are to get Tk one lakh and the best head teacher Tk 10,000, assistant teacher Tk 7,000 and the best management committee Tk 25,000 a fair amount of competition is likely to be generated with its potential for lift-pump effects.

Since the draft proposal is set to be sharpened before adoption, we have some specific ideas to advance by way of ensuring result-oriented implementation of the scheme. First of all, the proposed evaluation committee sounds officially dominated with only a college teacher from outside the pale. We suggest taking onboard some public and community representatives to broaden the evaluation committee's representative character and ensure its neutral functioning as well. In the past, good schools and teachers had received crest of honour but this time the extensive programme being taken to tangibly reward excellence can only meet its purpose if it leads to raising the quality of secondary education even modestly. For, the quality of secondary schools is dependent on a number of factors, not the least of which is the guarantee for professional school management committees.

We can handle it



ZAFAR SOBHAN

IT was reminiscent of the climactic scene from the movie "A Few Good Men." No sooner had the interim government floated the idea of setting up a truth commission, then there rose a chorus of disapproval. "You want the truth?" roared the chattering and political classes, doing their best Jack Nicholson impersonation. "You can't handle the truth!"

There's no pleasing some people. All we have heard over the past nine months from certain sections is that the current anti-corruption drive is destroying the economy and threatening to plunge the country into penury and ruin.

Its critics have charged that the anti-corruption drive that has many of the nation's premier businessmen behind bars or on the run has shaken business confidence to the core and that the resultant instability and uncertainty has left the economy in dire straits.

Indeed, there is some truth to this. The fact that there is a new sheriff in town, so to speak, and that the corruption and criminality that passed as business as usual for so many years is being reined in, is bound to cause economic dislocation and insecurity, and that is precisely what has happened.

That said, one would have

thought that those who were most critical of the anti-corruption drive and its repercussions on the economy would be the first to applaud the fact that the government has taken on board their criticism and is looking at alternative measures to balance fighting corruption with maintaining a healthy economy.

One would have thought that the anti-corruption drive's critics would be gratified that the government has demonstrated some measure of flexibility and imagination when it comes to resolving the problem, that it is responding to public opinion and the changing situation on the ground, that it is willing and attempting to correct course.

One would have thought wrong. So loud have the howls of dismay among the usual suspects been that one could be forgiven for thinking that the government had suggested blanket amnesty for murderers, rapists, and child-molesters.

Now, of course, many questions remain as to how such a program would be administered, who would qualify for inclusion, how a truth commission would complement the existing legal system currently in place, etc.

These are all legitimate questions and concerns that will have to be thought through and addressed.

STRAIGHT TALK

The dust up over whether the truth commission would be available only for businessmen is a red herring. The key to inclusion would have to be the nature of the crime committed. Certain crimes would qualify one for participation, other crimes would disqualify one. The distinction, therefore, would be based not on whether one is a politician or bureaucrat or businessman, but on what one is credibly accused of.

But I get the sense that too many of the critics are not interested in how the idea can be developed into something acceptable and workable, and are more interested in scoring cheap points against the plan's proponents.

Too many people are not looking for a practical solution to the problems the nation finds itself faced with when it comes to cleaning up the decades of corruption and dysfunction in all organs of the state including the legal apparatus. By all means we should be skeptical and cautious, but let us be constructive as well.

To fully appreciate the idea of a truth commission and the extent to which it is a suitable institution to help us move forward, we need to go back and take a hard look at where the country was prior to 1/11.

The simple truth is that prior to 1/11 the country was mired in corruption and dysfunction, and the current anti-corruption drive is an attempt to break out of the vicious cycle of misgovernance and maladministration that has plagued this country since its birth, and, indeed, for decades if not centuries before.

This was never going to be an easy or straightforward task. Bringing wholesale change and

reform to any entity, let alone an entire country, is always difficult. The fact that corruption had become so institutionalised in the country meant that it had extended its tentacles into almost every nook and cranny of daily life and that uprooting it would essentially require turning the country upside down.

In addition, decades (if not centuries) of shambolic and self-serving rule by colonisers, dictators, and putative democrats alike had left the legal and judicial apparatus required to effect the necessary changes (like all other organs of the government) utterly dysfunctional.

This is the reality that the interim government was faced with, and there is no question that it was, and remains, a daunting one.

Simply put, with the resources (both institutional and human) at its disposal, and given the depths of corruption that it is attempting to dispel, the government cannot do everything. It has no option but to prioritise and focus on what is doable.

Thus it was as far back as February that I have been arguing that the government needs to consider plea bargains as an essential tool in its prosecutorial armoury. The setting up of a truth commission

is no more and no less than another similar acknowledgement of the stark reality of the current situation.

The idea is simple. Instead of subjecting them to court trials (which they might win or lose), the government can give certain accused the option of appearing before the truth commission. It would operate as a parallel judicial option, and participation would be totally voluntary. An accused could choose to take his or her chances in a court of law, or he or she could instead choose to testify for the truth commission.

Such an option would make sense for many people. If one doesn't believe that one has committed any crime, then one need not participate. The option to be tried in court and be found either guilty or innocent would always remain.

But the truth commission, by being a non-adversarial proceeding, would have considerable advantages for the state.

Participants would have to give a full accounting of their misdeeds. They would have to testify fully as to their crimes and those of others. They would be required to make restitution of monies illegally obtained and pay a stiff fine on top of this. In return, they would avoid jail time. In essence, this is no different from a plea bargaining deal, and I fail to see what anyone would find objectionable in such an arrangement.

If it is determined that one has not given a full accounting or has materially misled or hidden information from the commission, this would disqualify one from its benefits and would in itself be an offence punishable by a serious prison sentence.

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truth commission would be available only for businessmen is a red herring. The key to inclusion would have to be the nature of the crime committed. Certain crimes would qualify one for participation, other crimes would disqualify one. The distinction, therefore, would be based not on whether one is a politician or bureaucrat or businessman, but on what one is credibly accused of.

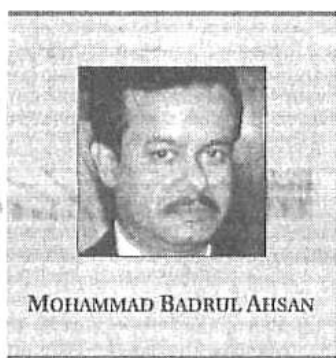
Certainly, the crime might differ depending on whether one was in government at the time or not. Paying a bribe is a quite different offence from receiving one. It should be perfectly straightforward to structure the commission in such a way that no community or class of person is targeted. If the commission is not available to those who are accused of official corruption, it will not be because they are politicians or bureaucrats per se, but because the crimes they are accused of are not eligible for disposal by the truth commission.

The truth commission will help the smooth and swift administration of justice. In addition, due to the fact that it is a non-adversarial forum, it will provide torrents of information that will help us better understand how we got where we are and how best to move ahead.

Due to their adversarial nature, trials do not always bring out the truth and they often do not provide any kind of closure, either. A truth commission, apart from being a very practical measure for lightening the burden on the court system, will provide the nation a measure of truth and closure for some of the crimes and misdeeds of the past. I think we can handle it.

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Closing of the Red sea



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THOSE who have seen the movie Ten Commandments will remember that breathtaking scene when Charlton Heston playing Moses parted the waves and led the Israelites across the Red sea. The entire sequence consisted of three major events. First the sea parted, and then the God's people journeyed through the parted sea followed by the enemy army. Finally, the sea closed over the pursuing enemy and drowned them.

If we take the same sequence and extrapolate the events back and forth, it gives an idea as to what would happen should the sea of change, which started parting good from evil on January 11, abruptly close. The enemy may cross the sea and the God's people may be drowned. The reason I fear this is because there is a growing clamor to seal the waters. Enough

CROSS TALK

The need for reform arises firstly because missing links of justice and fairness crumbles an old and decadent system. The fall of the Roman Empire, the atrocities of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Reformation, wars, revolutions, holocausts and massacres shed the blood of men, women and children because mankind never relented in its search for those missing links, which either didn't exist or degenerated from abuse. Where is that search heading for us?

is enough, say the politicians. They want the emergency to be lifted as of yesterday.

So it looks that in nine months, the reform process is suffering from fatigue. The government is ready to make concession, the businessmen are asking for exception and the people are changing their perception. The whole thing may have lost its thunder, and what started with a bang might end with a whimper.

If that happens, the rest is easy. The elections will be held, politicians will return to saddle and, dollar to doughnut, the same old rodeo show will begin all over again. Most, if not all, of those who have been taken to jail, will walk free. All the charges brought against them will be proved as harassment, everything confiscated will be returned to them.

If it does, the Red sea will close just like that, and the forces of good will be wiped out by the

forces of evil. Since the prospect of political reform looks remote, it is going to be at best the same old liquor in a new bottle. Again, the country will seethe with corruption. The bad guys will advance and the good guys will retreat.

That should remind of the Bourbons of France who were stubborn kings. They ruled until the French Revolution sent one of them to the guillotine and brought down the dynasty. And it was Talleyrand, a French statesman of that time, who made an observation about them, which is worth repeating. The Bourbons were peculiar people, he said, who never learned anything, and who never forgot anything.

It speaks of an emotional stasis that also characterises our mental state. It seems there is a growing debate over the reform process, which is increasingly arriving at an emotional deadlock. There are people who believe the reform

process is making good progress.

Then there are those who aren't so convinced. Going at this rate we are going to have a divided nation. One side will not learn anything from what has been accomplished so far. The other side will not forget that the reform was not taken to its logical conclusion.

Things right now stands at the tactical equinox. It's as far from failure as it's from success. In other words, it will take very little to tip the balance towards failure and whole lot to pull it towards success. Basically, whether anyone recognises it or not, the center of gravity of the reform initiative has already shifted.

Thus the concern isn't who is going to be arrested. The concern is whether they will stay in jail. The concern is no longer whether a free and fair election can be held. The concern is rather if honest and qualified candidates will want to contest. The concern isn't

whether the political parties will be reformed. The concern is whether the personality cult in politics is going to be strengthened.

This is something to worry for the leaders of reform; if they as a collective body, haven't started already. What will happen if the emergency is lifted? What will happen if the elections are held? How will it be different after December 2008 compared to what it was before October 2007? What has been achieved so that the political parties will be constrained to behave themselves?

These are critical points to ponder, because the change is beginning to look like a constant. In the end it may seem like a delusion, when a man rowing all night finds in the morning that his boat had never left the dock.

Now one can love or hate Machiavelli, but the man saw it in the 15th century that one would play with fire if one failed to sincerely carry out a reform. In the "struggle between the custom of the ancient faith and the miracle of the new, the gravest tumults and discords were generated amongst men," was his conclusion.

Then he recounted the story of Girolamo Savonarola, a Dominican preacher, whose forceful preaching influenced the

people of Florence to institute his reforms. One of Savonarola's many reforms involved trial for treasons. The reforms allowed those convicted of treason to appeal the judgment.

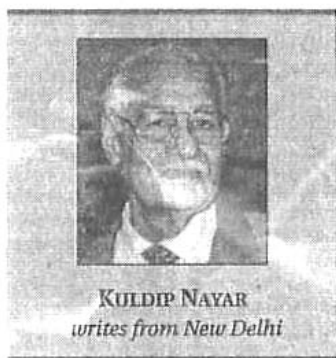
But shortly after the law was passed, five men were convicted of treason and weren't allowed to appeal. When Savonarola failed to condemn the violation of this new law, it turned the people against him. Ironically, he was convicted of treason by the very government, which he had created and it ended in his execution.

The need for reform arises firstly because missing links of justice and fairness crumbles an old and decadent system. The fall of the Roman Empire, the atrocities of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Reformation, wars, revolutions, holocausts and massacres shed the blood of men, women and children because mankind never relented in its search for those missing links, which either didn't exist or degenerated from abuse.

Where is that search heading for us? The sea, which was successfully parted may be in a hurry to close. Intolerance, impatience and indifference are swelling the waters. But then who knows? The sea might overflow and inundate.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

Liberals at war in India



KULDIP NAYYAR
writes from New Delhi

THE political scene in India is heating up. The general election is still one and a half years away. Yet every party, small or big, is preparing itself for the eventuality because the Manmohan Singh government is tottering in the crossfire between the Congress and the Left.

Congress president Sonia Gandhi has fired the first salvo by blaming the Left publicly, without naming them, for stalling India's development while opposing the Indo-US nuclear deal. The Left has reacted harshly, even though she has explained to its leaders personally that they were not her target.

Even the last minute formula did

BETWEEN THE LINES

No doubt, caste is co-terminus with class, but this has eliminated the feudal order in the process. This has strengthened democracy despite the fragmentation of society. The unfortunate part is that the Mayawatis, the Lalu Prasad Yadavs and the Paswans have come to corner votes in the name of caste. They have all the ill-gotten wealth and no scruples. The Congress should have fought against them to foster values.

not work. The government said it would hold talks with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on the requirement under the deal, without finalising it until after the discussion with the Left. Obviously, it was loss of faith in the government.

The Left has, however, made it clear that if the Congress wanted a mid-term poll, it was ready for it. So far they were not saying so lest they should be blamed for early elections. The voters are generally wary of a party, which pushes them to a mid-term poll, because of the unnecessary expenses involved.

It is apparent that the Left was led up the garden path and given to

understand that the Congress wanted to work out a formula, which would accommodate the Left's concerns. The Congress, it turns out, was all the time in touch with Washington to assure it that New Delhi would talk to the IAEA before the deadline.

The Congress may be honest in believing that the Indo-US treaty was the best thing that had happened to the country. But, in all fairness, it should have been categorical from day one, and not created a smokescreen to mislead the Left and other liberals. All of them honestly believed that the Manmohan Singh government was discussing with America about

how to mollify their fears, and would tell them.

It is a pity that the two parties with liberal credentials have come out in the open to attack each other. This reminds me of what Jawaharlal Nehru said in August 1945. In a letter to Palme Dutt, a British communist leader, he wrote: "You must realise that it pains me to see the gulf that has arisen between the Congress and the communists in India." The fallout of the quarrel between the two may benefit the BJP, which was practically out of the reckoning till recently.

The party was still divided between the supporters of Atal

Behari Vajpayee and those of L.K. Advani. But the split among the liberals has made the party close its ranks. The BJP mentor, the RSS, has literally forced the unity.

Political developments in Karnataka have also helped the BJP to regain its focus. This may push its internal squabbles to the background. Forty months ago the BJP entered into an understanding with the Janata Dal (Secular), headed by former Prime Minister Deve Gowda, that it would share power -- the JD (S) to be at the helm for the first 20 months.

But at the end of that period, the JD (S) went back on its word. A bit of sympathy is visible for the BJP, even though Deve Gowda has accused the party of turning Karnataka into "a laboratory for its Hindutva experiment." Not many would buy the argument, because Gowda's son was the state chief minister.

Nonetheless, Hindutva is the BJP's plank in Gujarat when the state goes to the polls by the end of this year to elect its new assembly. The Gujaratis, still soaked in chauvinism, are not seeing through Chief Minister Narendra Modi's anti-Muslim bias. The eight per

cent Muslim voters have been excluded from election debate in the state.

Although senior members in the BJP are up in arms against Modi's authoritarian style, the party high command has nominated him as the next chief minister. His blatant communalism may come in handy to it in the future. This also means that the BJP will once again play the anti-Muslim card in the Lok Sabha polls.

In a way, India presents a strange spectacle. Modi's communal stand is matched by an example of pluralism in West Bengal. A Muslim boy got married to a Hindu girl of a rich scion recently. A few days later, the boy's body was found on the railway tracks. It was given out that he had committed suicide. The authorities, some of them probably bribed, also said so. That it should happen in a Left-run state is a shame. Two police officials and some policemen have been suspended, but the cover-up is very thick.

Yet, the Hindu neighbours of the boy's parents and the media have brought the whole thing in the

open, forcing the government to order a judicial inquiry. What impressed one the most were the joint meetings by Hindus and Muslims to seek justice. It was people versus the authorities, knowing no religion. One hopes that people will win.

One also witnessed the same courage in the media when it put the BJP to shame -- the party offered apologies -- after the planned killing of Muslims in Gujarat. Modi's role has not been forgotten because he struck at the foundation of India's democratic and pluralistic society. Non-Muslims have contributed to the rehabilitation of riot victims, which is far from settled.

It is a tragedy that the BJP will once again be poisoning the atmosphere when it begins the campaign for general elections. Many people may be taken in by the party's propaganda. The society, by and large, is secular and does not respond to the BJP's appeal for polarisation. Still, the very fact that a party, which does not subscribe to secularism, thrives is a matter of concern.

Yet, the serious concern is the caste factor, the ugliest social system, which plays a big role in elections. Castes have gone beyond the classification of "dalits" and "backward classes." Now Brahmins and Rajputs also have their brigades with weapons. This has stratified the society, trivialised politics and enhanced the chance of violence.

No doubt, caste is co-terminus with class, but this has eliminated the feudal order in the process. This has strengthened democracy despite the fragmentation of society. The unfortunate part is that the Mayawatis, the Lalu Prasad Yadavs and the Paswans have come to corner votes in the name of caste. They have all the ill-gotten wealth and no scruples.

The Congress should have fought against them to foster values. But the party, with its shrinking base, needs them to come to power. It would rather compromise on principles than confront them. This may be bad for the nation. But this is a fact.

Kuldip Nayyar is an eminent Indian columnist.