

## A modest step forward Onus put on national mitigation measures

THE outcome from Bali climate conference can be seen in a positive light given that the USA is party to a consensus which it has not been during the Kyoto protocol days since 1997. In a last-minute dramatic turn, the US reached a compromise with the European Union, tilted towards itself though, to the effect that no numeric range in slashing green house gas emissions was adopted in the declaration. Aside from the USA, it does not also require two of the largest emitters of the world, India and China to take on reduction commitments. Yet, a framework to launch negotiations and a timeline for reaching an accord by 2009 to fight climate changes has been spelt out.

That itself is a measure of public concern reflected in the resolve made in Bali to reach sustainable solutions to rising temperature and global warming. We, however, agree with the environmental experts that no scientific 'punch' has been put into the fight against global warming. The much-awaited IPCC fourth assessment mentioned dates and required levels of emission reduction from 25-40 percent by developed countries which was not agreed to by them. Only a vague commitment was made to 'deeper cuts in global emissions of green house gases'.

It seems, however, that a greater emphasis has been placed on 'nationally appropriate mitigation actions' by the developing countries and that these have to be 'enabled by technology, financing and capacity-building in measurable, reportable and verifiable manner'. The burden of guilt is far from being accepted by the worst polluters of world environment while the pressure is kept up on those at receiving end.

What exactly a country like Bangladesh, among the frontline states to take the brunt of the global warming, has received from Bali? An adaptation fund which Bangladesh can draw from when suffering from weather events has been formally launched. But if the size of the fund is not equal to the task facing developing countries, it would end up being a mere palliative. The important issue of identifying practical adaptation measures are understandably left to further negotiations. Furthermore, no headway has been made as for the crucial element of technology transfer.

Need we say, the environmental negotiators are racing against time? With modest emission cuts it would take 30-40 years to repair some of the damage wreaked on the world atmosphere through denudation of ozone layers by CO2 emissions. But drastic cuts are needed in carbon emissions as safe alternative energy sources are harnessed to save the world from a full-scale environmental disaster.

## Massive power breakdown

No ad-hoc measures would do

THE major nationwide electricity failure on Saturday came like a bolt from a clear sky with no gale or cyclone in the vicinity whatsoever. It was a mechanical failure at the national power grid originating at Ashuganj and it took hours for the PDB technicians to repair the glitch and bring back normalcy in life. Our guess is there is hardly a functional auto-reactive mechanism in place to arrive at a solution within the shortest possible time. By all means, it was an irritant of a large scale as day to day work almost came to a halt at many places. Among the mentionable sufferings, trade and commerce activities and hospital services were severely disrupted because of the obstruction. To say the least, the experience made the citizens ponder anew the dismal state of our existing electricity generation and distribution system.

It is not a comfortable realisation that Saturday's was a massive power failure for the second time since November 16, which came in the wake of cyclone Sidr. To have another failure of such magnitude so soon cannot be explained away, especially when in a modern world, computerised systems are increasing efficiency level almost to the point of flawlessness.

Here we have to say that following some measures taken by this government, the margin of power deficit has been markedly reduced in the past months. But the repeated power grid failures only indicate that the ills of the sector remain deep rooted and multi-faceted. Hence, we strongly believe the entire gamut of electricity generation and distribution system has to be restructured under a long-term action plan. Patch works will solve immediate problems but it will not go a long way to meet our demand for uninterrupted supply of electricity.

We also feel that Dhaka being the capital and hub of business, political, educational, administrative and diplomatic activities, the city cannot remain shut off from electricity for hours. Hence it would be prudent to develop a fall-back power supply system along with the urgent repair and modernisation of the existing national grids.

## Ignorance is our worst enemy



HARUN UR RASHID

WITHIN the Islamic world of about 1.4 billion of people, disparity between rich and poor is stark. The leaders of Islamic community have not been able to rescue many of them from oppression and humiliation.

About the Islamic community, former PM of Malaysia Dr. Mahathir Mohammad at the OIC Summit in KL in 2003 said: "Some believe that poverty is Islamic, sufferings and being oppressed are Islamic. Some preach that the world is not for us. Ours are the joys of heaven in the afterlife. All we have to do is to perform certain rituals, wear certain garments and put up certain appearance."

President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan at a seminar in 2002 expressed critical comments on Islamic community. He stated that the Islamic world was: "The poorest, the most illiterate, the most backward, the most unenlightened, the most deprived and the weakest of all the human race."

Whether these statements of Muslim leaders are correct or not, it provides food for thought for the Islamic world.

We live in a war-torn world. We live in an unequal world. We live in a world where 15% per cent of world's population of rich non-Muslim countries hold 80% per cent of the world's wealth. Non-

What is often overlooked is that the Islamic world is in an uncertain position in the 21st century. There are at least two groups -- supporters of orthodox interpretation of Islam and supporters of moderate and tolerant version of Islam. The strength of the debate between the two is likely to determine the future of Islam.

Muslim G-8 countries have 60% of the world's Gross Domestic Product.

The aforesaid rich countries are becoming richer day by day. Why do they become rich? Does the Islamic world seriously think about the causes of its current plight?

Although the Muslim world may control 60% of the world's known oil reserves, its gross GDP stands at \$1,200 billion, a paltry sum compared with Germany's \$2,700 billion and Japan's \$5,600 billion.

Muslim majority countries suffer severe economic sclerosis because most scholars believe that they pay little attention to educational and scientific development. For example, it is reported that Greece, a backwater country of Europe, publishes more books annually than the entire Arab world.

What does it signify? It demonstrates that education and pursuit of scientific knowledge is at the bottom in the Islamic world. How many Muslims get Nobel prizes in medicine, physics, or chemistry?

What the Islamic world needs is the self-assessment as to why this pitiable situation has developed. It seems that whenever serious critical self-examination is done by some Muslim authors, they are not welcome in their own Muslim-majority countries.

As Socrates said: "The unexamined life is not worth living." Alexander Pope in *Essays on Man* wrote: "The study of mankind is

man." All these sayings tell us one thing: i.e. self-examination.

Regrettably, envy and self-denial tend to stand in the way of self-examination. We tend to blame others for the situation. We should take a look in the mirror rather than blame others. Some observers say there is an Islamic code of silence among most of the Islamic scholars.

### Early history of Islam and divisions

The early history of Islam is so evocative that that Muslims have felt compelled to take strong political and moral positions on the side of this or that party to the conflict, plagued in the early days of Islam.

History has it that the Battle of Camel (656 AD) was fought between two Muslim forces where about 5,000 Muslims were killed during the battle. Many Islamic historians hold the view that the Battle of Camel was a flagrant violation of the fundamental Islamic tenet because Muslims fought against Muslims.

There is a view that in early Islamic history, four divisions in the Islamic Ummah appeared.

These were Shi'a, the Khawarij, or seceders who regarded any authority in the ummah other than their own to be illegitimate, the Mutazilah who isolated themselves from political life altogether and Murji'ah, who withheld judgment regarding the ultimate fate of all parties to the conflict that led to the assassination, leaving it to Allah to

judge on the day of final reckoning.

The purpose of indicating the divisions within the Islamic ummah is to highlight the difficulties faced by Muslims in consolidating the spirit of brotherhood.

### Challenges for the Islamic world

Ideas and beliefs change over time and they are made of a variety of strands of thought and multiple interpretations. Therefore, the solution to the ills of Islamic society cannot be the same. As they say, one size does not fit all.

The Muslim world is severely fractured along ethnic lines -- all having very different views on Islam and the world. Muslims include a variety of individuals, extending from China to the US, from the oil-rich Middle East to Africa. It demonstrates that Islamic ideology is not uniform or rigid.

A modern state is an entity of multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multi-linguistic people, and religion has been separated from the governance of state in western democratic process under the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia. Some say that the industrial revolution took place in Europe because of unfettered intellectual inquiry and empiricism that was promoted.

Currently, even the sovereignty of a state has been diminished by economic globalisation. World history at the 21st century is at a turning point: one era is closing down and another is opening up.

The two great developments of modern time -- growing demand for popular political participation and the Islamic resurgence -- have come together, creating new realities that affect Islamic ummah and participatory democracy.

A major issue in democratisation of Islamic communities is whether or not Islamic scholars and leaders have successfully made the transition from listing "democratic doctrines of Islam" to creating coherent structures of Islamic democracy, that are not simply reformulations of western concept of democracy. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Turkey are examples where democracy and Islam co-exist.

Across the Muslim world, governments and Islamic community grapple with issues of democratisation and equality of rights between men and women. Despite commonalities of religion, differing national contexts and identities give rise to a broad spectrum of political systems, reflecting the multi-faceted relationship of Islam to the state.

If the current predicament of the Islamic ummah is to be lifted, there is a view that the ummah cannot ignore these developments in the political process and the Islamic doctrines have to be interpreted in the light of time-place.

It is argued that Muslim majority states must be built upon representation and political participation and the challenge is one of power-sharing and inclusiveness, creating conditions that will allow political pluralism.

Another matter that is relevant in the contemporary world is the rise of militant Islam. Pseudo-Islamic extremism and violence have distorted and warped the image of Islam. The extremists have hijacked Islam to meet their narrow ends.

The pseudo-Islamic extremists argue that the solution for advancement of Islam lies in going back to "the basics of Islam" -- as interpreted by them. The writings of controversial Islamist, Syed Qutb, an Egyptian, hanged by the Nasser regime in 1966, have influenced many of the contemporary radical militants. The extremists found followers amongst the young urban poor who are unemployed and suffer from deprivations.

Another probable reason of militancy is arguably the deficit of democracy, i.e. lack of participation of people in running the governments in the Middle East, and the alternative strategy returning "back to the basics" of Islam has been packaged in an uncomplicated manner that has gained popularity and influence among youth and ideologues.

### Conclusion

What is often overlooked is that the Islamic world is in an uncertain position in the 21st century. There are at least two groups -- supporters of orthodox interpretation of Islam and supporters of moderate and tolerant version of Islam. The strength of the debate between the two is likely to determine the future of Islam.

Some suggest that moderate Muslim majority states may spread the view of peaceful and tolerant Islam in democratic society as against the version of orthodox Islam that is hell-bent on establishing a kind of regime in the name of Islam that goes against the root of Islam.

The Islamic world has enough resources and must rise from the slumber and show that Islam can be a boon to humanity.

Barister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

## Rise, 2008



M. J. AKBAR

IS this the ultimate opinion poll? In early December a press release issued in Islamabad cited an opinion poll conducted by a Boston-based organisation called, slightly obviously, International Public Opinion Polls (IPOP: was the acronym significant?). The respondents in Pakistan, it said, had been interviewed by phone or Internet and concluded that a very satisfying 74% thought that President Pervez Musharraf's popularity had risen ever since his tailor had the good sense to change his dress code to civvies. To complement such good news, 55% of the respondents thought that the general elections in Pakistan should be held in early January as announced by the government, without any delay.

All would have been well, except for those pesky fact-checkers who never seem to understand a good thing when they see it, or have any appreciation of the huge burden of national interest that weighs so heavily on the soul of self-appointed dictators. A little bit of checking discovered that there was no such organisation based in Boston, and that the zip code on

the address was false. We all know that some of Mr. Musharraf's family lives in Boston, but they are not involved in polls in any way.

In the middle of December, an American institution that works for the Republican Party did conduct a poll and discovered that there was only 23% support for President Musharraf, 25% for Nawaz Sharif, and 30% for Benazir Bhutto. Some establishment type in Islamabad taunted these figures. It couldn't be because someone actually believes that three fourths of Pakistan is anxious to keep Musharraf in power; it must be that old sin of loyalty above the demands of truth. Actually, the president should take comfort in the second set of figures rather than delude himself by staring at the first lot. With 23% of the vote, he becomes a genuine King's party, and will decide who, between Bhutto and Sharif, will form the government in partnership with him. That is not bad for a chap who can't take no for an answer.

There is a strange quality to opinion polls on the sub-continent; they matter far more to those in power than to those who

elect individuals to power. Opinions are not shaped by opinion polls. They are merely the comfort food of politicians. The voter is never gullied by declared trends. If anything, a frontrunner may be hurt by too repeated an insistence on projected victory because it might leave his supporters complacent and his adversaries energised.

The opinion polls that have emerged after the first round of polling in Gujarat are not as parentless as the IPOP offering in Islamabad, but there is a hint of illusion or bias in what they suggest. The vote difference is too small, making the variables that much more important: a tweak here and a message there can take figures in any direction you want. It is far more fruitful to watch the face in the crowd. Check out which leader draws the glow on the faces of the audience, and whose meeting raised perfunctory applause and slogans, and you might be closer to the truth. Numbers at a meeting actually indicate very little, but involuntary reactions are more revealing. And of course, there is always the standby reliability

of the bookie. The bookie is important because, unlike the journalist, he puts his money where his mouth is. Opinion polls of course are a joy unto themselves: they have fun at your expense, literally.

An election season seems to have begun, and will get into full gear after the results of Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh are known two days before Christmas. Two weeks after Gujarat, the political agenda will have changed so sharply, Gujarat might well have never existed. The time balance on the nuclear deal will be exhausted. Dr. Manmohan Singh will have to take a decision on whether he wants the deal or whether he wants his government.

Events that have taken place in the silence of the shadows will determine the results of elections next summer. At the very top of the list will be the price rise of food.

Statistics do not lie outright; they merely tease and mislead. When a government issues a statement that the price rise has only been five per cent, the number says nothing of political importance, although it has great validity as a figure of

economic importance. The prices of manufactured goods, for instance, purchased by the middle or upper middle class, might be flat, while the price of food, the prime necessity of the poor, taking away a substantial part of his income, might rise by 10% on an average, and register a 15% rise in essential items. Food prices have been going up consistently in India for the last four years, for a variety of reasons, including tectonic shifts in delivery patterns and a slow but determined shift in the nature of trade. There are variables in availability, as new forms of capitalisation take food out of circulation and into preservative environments. No single change is happening on a dramatic scale, but too many small changes are taking place simultaneously.

Perhaps the most significant change is in the nature of consumption, as rising prosperity among the certain sections of India (particularly in the South) change dietary habits as well as scale up levels of consumption. The demand for wheat in South India is an instance. This may not be because South Indians have suddenly fallen in love with the chapatti and the paratha, but the explosion in the number of bakeries in small towns will provide the answer. Breakfast is becoming a more sophisticated meal. Simultaneously, poverty and indebtedness are driving the marginal farmer to suicide; the price of disparity, or the distance between aspiration and availability, will have to be paid by those in authority.

This is compounded by changes in the international pattern of consumption. An average Chinese person ate 20 kg of beef per year in 1985; today that figure is over 50 kg. The hasty and misguided shift to farming for ethanol-based fuel is creating quiet havoc in the farming sector. At another level, the West continues to subsidise its farmers so that the market forces it advocates for others do not affect its own core constituencies. Three fourths of the world still lives in rural areas -- outside the comfort zone of secure subsidies. A billion urban consumers worldwide live around what might be called the urban-anger line. World food prices have jumped a massive 75% since 2005. The knee-jerk reaction might be to blame the jump in oil prices, but this is only one of many factors, and not necessarily the most important one.

To cut a long story short and place it back in perspective, 2008 will see a sharp rise in food prices in India. This is not just an economic statement. This is a political fact in an election year. Any delay in the election date cannot help a government in such an environment. The trigger for an election might be the nuclear deal, but the direction of the bullet will be determined by the price rise. This is one of those bullets which could do a 180 degree turn and travel back towards the gun.

Wealth creation is not synonymous with poverty elimination. A country needs the first, but elections are won by the second.

M. J. Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

## Sweet victory and awful defeat

Indeed, the present generation has only been seeing a once-proud nation having endless defeats in politics and society. They have seen this land being plundered and incarcerated by its generals, presidents, and prime ministers, who, in turn, made the people hostage to their own land.

MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

WHEN victory showered this nation on December 16, 1971. It is hard to describe the feeling if one has not seen such a scene before. Hundreds and thousands of onlookers watched the march of the defeated enemy soldiers.

I can clearly remember the face of a Pakistani soldier on this march with whom I suddenly had an eye contact from a distance. This person perhaps was in his mid-thirties with an unshaven face, but certainly a face with full of hate and agony.

Terminal, hardly a few days after December 16, 1971. It is hard to describe the feeling if one has not seen such a scene before. Hundreds and thousands of onlookers watched the march of the defeated enemy soldiers.

One may ask, after all those years, why this came back to haunt once again? The answer is simple. One feels totally devastated

watching helplessly, how a once-proud nation, has been suffering from extreme greed, fraudulent politics at the top, and failing in prosecuting Bengali war criminals after 36 years.

The other day, I was moved by going through a piece in a Bangla daily contributed by a young journalist. The message of his piece was so powerful it has given me a huge shake. The write up was titled: "I have not seen the victory, alas, have seen the defeat."

This was from a person who was born after 1971, though having extensive knowledge about December 16, but is puzzled by witnessing the post-1975 defeats

one after another. Indeed, the present generation has only been seeing a once-proud nation having endless defeats in politics and society. They have seen this land being plundered and incarcerated by its generals, presidents, and prime ministers, who, in turn, made the people hostage to their own land.

Why has the victory unfolded like this? Why our own leaders began acting like aliens? Why the nation has fallen into cycle of endless defeat? There are, I am afraid, no easy answers. However, there is no doubt in mind that a new dawn has broken on the day of January 11. The military-backed interim civilian government came forward and rescued the nation from a potential man-made catastrophe of a scale that was never felt before.

To look ahead, it is impossible not to drag in history. In all

nations, the government's law and home affairs play major roles in shaping and establishing the rule of law in order to protect the citizens against criminals. Certainly, this becomes a paramount job for the ministers concerned everywhere.

Unfortunately, in our case, what have we witnessed? We witnessed our law and home ministers presided over regime after regime how not to establish a rule of law. In this regard, two names immediately come to mind. One is the former law minister, and the other is the former state minister for home (both are now in custody).

The former law minister had a very colourful life. He is a UK-trained barrister who has been around for long and was minding the affairs of the nation under several regimes. He was a minister during general Zia's time, was a colourful PM and vice-president

under Ershad and lately the minister for law and justice under Khaleda-Nizami. A colourful man indeed, however, has a long list of dirty laundry.

As recent as last week, the highest court of this land despatched verdicts on two cases on which he presided over in the capacity of minister for law and justice: the case surrounding fugitive Safa and the case involving former SC judge, Justice MAAZiz.

Allegedly, in the case of fugitive Safa, the minister was the mastermind in setting the proceedings up and in the case of Justice Aziz, it was the minister who paved the way for this judge illegally holding two constitutional positions concurrently or over 20 months. In both the occasions, he allegedly played dirty tricks to deceive the nation in order to satisfy his masters.

Coming back to the former

state minister, he acted even more ruthlessly. The cases against which this person has been taken into custody are certainly hair-raising. This man was known as an unscrupulous trader in political circles and a close ally of the law minister, who was in charge of preserving law and order of this land during the last government. Indeed, both the men politicised the law enforcement agencies to establish their writ on this land.

These men and their actions brought awful defeat for them as well as for the people. The actions and inactions of these former ministers, and others like them, had almost totally wiped out whatever shred of victory was left from the face of Bangladesh.

In recent months, unfortunately, it seems conspiracy has not been waning. The ground is being prepared for inviting a clash. In this regard, the cases against the

DU teachers and students immediately come to mind. Conspiracy or not, the nation sees no reason to drag any more the cases against the teachers and students under custody. They have suffered immensely already.

It will be a mother of all defeats if no respectable solution can be found to this crisis. The nation expects an immediate action by the president. The president's former colleagues under Duta (which he led in the past) are pleading to the government for releasing the teachers and students under custody before the Eid festival. Will the honourable president listen to their call?

To put simply, the nation does not want to watch another self-inflicted defeat in the month of victory. The solution to the crisis needs to be found before it gets too late.

The author is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.