

The spectre of religious militancy

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE spectre of militancy with an overtone of religious extremism has again raised its ugly head in the remotest south western part of Bangladesh. The report published in the national dailies on January 19 indicates that religious militants are organizing again in Patuakhali and greater Barisal district under the banner of Hizbut Tawhid. It is an Islamist organization not yet banned but propagating jihad through distributing books and leaflets among villagers and school children, reportedly with the verbal permission of certain government high ups of the locality. This information has come as a chilling reminder of the irreparable damage done in the by gone days when Bangla Bhai and his ilk dominated the political arena of Bangladesh during the alliance rule. As it appears, every day the ideology of terror is being disseminated, acts of terror are being planned and efforts are there to carry it out. The leaflets and books contain articles and messages that run counter to the state law and the constitution of the country. Citing the fact that Prophet Muhammad (SM) in nine years went into 107 battles to establish Islam and has directed all his followers to wage jihad against the moshreqs and kafirs, the author of the book clearly espouses a military programme. These radical scholars of Islamic theocracy must not lose sight of Prophet Muhammad's (SM) example of moderation and tolerance in articulating the treaty of Hudaibia. The part of the treaty that impresses us all regardless of religious conviction is the Prophet's great magnanimity, tolerance and self-restraint. After six years of stay in Medina, the Prophet (SM) came to Mecca for performing Umrah with an unarmed band of 1500 followers. Article (3) of the treaty fills us with awe and admiration for the

Holy Prophet (SM). It reads, "If a Quraysh from Mecca, under guardianship, should join the Prophet without the guardianship, he/she should be sent back to the guardian, otherwise, they should not be sent back." Article (4) of the treaty reads, "Prophet of Islam and his party were not to enter Mecca that year, but they could enter unarmed the following year." Prophet Muhammad (SM) went back to Medina that year. Other remarkable feature of the treaty of the negotiation was that the draft started with "Bismillahir Rahmanir-Rahim" meaning "in the name of the Allah, the most Gracious, the most Merciful." The Quraysh insisted on excising that sentence and it was done at the instance of the Prophet (SM). The article of negotiation contained another word "Rasul- ul- Allah" meaning the Prophet of Allah. The Quraysh refused to accept this word in the article of negotiation on the plea that that they did not adhere to the faith (Islam) preached by Prophet Muhammad (SM). On that point also, the magnanimous Prophet (SM) instructed Hazrat Ali to delete that word. But Hazrat Ali, out of his profound respect and reverence for Prophet Muhammad (SM) could not oblige him. Realizing the sentiment of Hazrat Ali, the Prophet (SM) himself, with the assistance of Hazrat Ali, made the excision. Overwhelmed by the magnanimity of Prophet Muhammad (SM), the members of the Quraysh tribe embraced Islam in large numbers. One wonders as to why all these great and singular examples of self-restraint and superb sense of tolerance demonstrated by the Prophet (SM) even in that dark age are being lost sight of. Some fundamentalists trained in the academy of terror set up by the followers of Osama bin Laden have found poverty-ridden and Sidr-hit Patuakhali, Borguna, Ballavpur and Mirzagani upazillas as the most fertile grounds for planting the seeds of terror. The

followers of Osama bin Laden have established the academy of terror in these places after the Bin Laden model. What is beyond doubt is that religious fundamentalism has very little to do with theology and is purely a political tool. Run as a joint venture with the dreaded Hujji, now banned, these groups have now possibly transformed into Hizbut Tawhid, its teachers are mostly returnees from Afghan war now perhaps working as religious teachers in schools and madrasas in the remotest part of the country and its syllabus is one of frightening magnitude. It was here that that impressionable young men - many call them jihadi - imbibed the mechanics of mayhem laced with religious overtones. The greatest threat these radical groups pose is that they can inspire and galvanize the impoverished elements in the society. It is true that the country's slide into extremism began with the alliance rule in 2001. It began with a perception that has only been challenged in the wake of serial bomb blasts in 63 districts simultaneously. Khaleda Zia government's pro - Jamaat policies were an attempt to win support from the radicals and its leaders at a time when her popularity was slipping and the development rhetoric was convincing fewer and fewer people. Even after the execution of Shayekh Abdur Rahman and Bangla Bhai and flushing out of the terrorist dens from various parts of the country, the flame of jihad still flickers. With 46 grenades recovered from Shimulia village under Debhata upazilla, Satkhira district on February 15 last by RAB, after the arrest of Mufti Moin Zandal, a top leader of Mufti Hannan-led Hujji, there is a fear lurking in public mind that the spectre of terrorism might emerge again. True, with a very swift and robust action by RAB, some hidden academies and arsenals of terror may have been smashed, but its alumni have

proved to be adept and apt pupils. Where they choose to use the lessons learnt must now be the biggest worry for us. The country in the last few years has seen an upsurge in extremist movement, zealotry, and fanaticism that has shaken the foundation of the fledgling democracy. The country's fresh wave of reforms should have started from the madrasas where some of these radical Islamic institutions offer religious education almost free to the poorest children and they are at the core of support for the religious parties. In a sense, these madrasas work where the country's education system has failed, but with it some of them have brought in the dangerous culture of extremism. Happily, many of the madrasas under the control of the ministry of education have reformed their curricula and syllabi, but most of the BNP and AL, who were in power during the last 15 years, didn't take any measure to modernise the syllabus of these madrasas for fear of electoral debacle. It is widely acknowledged that the unchecked mushrooming of these religious schools some of which are reportedly affiliated to hard-line organizations and jihadi groups - have been the major factor in the spread of the culture of militancy. Some of these madrasas, which cater primarily to students from underprivileged economic background, have been accused of propagating distorted versions of Islam and have been the prime recruiting grounds of extremist groups such as the Taliban, Hujji, Hizbut Tawhid cadres and a host of other organizations going by different names but propagating the same culture of militancy. But what has become alarming for the government now because of the lax attitude shown during the tenure of the alliance rule is that a good number of these madrasas have been linked to acts of terrorism within the country challenging the writ of the state. Zealotry, fanaticism and extremism



ism have no place in a progressive society destined to carve out an independent and dignified place in the contemporary world. Today, preservation of any closed system is not only unacceptable but untenable too. The use or threat of force can no longer be an instrument of governance. The world order is full of diversity. So what we can talk about is unity in diversity and that is what our Creator wanted us to assert. None should coerce us to abandon our conscience, our convictions, our philosophy or traditions, nor do we urge anyone to abandon theirs. If we speak of the true spirit of Islam and its values, we at once find it in the essence of the great Quranic Surah that says "La Ekrahna Fiddeen and La Kum Deenokum Olya Deen" meaning that "there is no compulsion or coercion in religion. Your religion is yours and my religion is mine." Sheikh Mohammad Rafaat Osman who teaches Islamic law at the most prestigious Islamic school in Cairo's Al-Azhar university insists that the Quran unconditionally bans suicide even as a tactic in a legitimate holy war. "As I interpret our religion, I don't see any exception to this rule", he says. You can expose yourself to a situation where you might be killed, but you can't knowingly take your life. This is not the only problem. Sheikh Mohammad sees with suicide bombings: attacking innocent, unarmed people is forbidden. Prophet Muhammad (SM) demanded that we not kill women, children or the elderly. Attacks should be against soldiers and armed civilians." One of the less-noted pitfalls of merging mosque and state is that interpreting the Quran often has more to do with politics than genuine scholarship. Precisely speaking, history is full of lessons in the futility of waiting for the extremist groups to humanize themselves. Once it was Hitler, and it was thought he could be contained by appeasement, but when the Holocaust revealed itself, it was too late. In the case of the terror personified by bin Laden and his promoters or followers in the country, it is not too late. A sustained war against terror will not spare those who turn approver and change sides at the last minute. The author is a contributor to the Daily Star.

Kosovo's independence: An anxious period for Europe

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

THE United Nations envoy for Kosovo says independence is the "only viable option" for the territory, in a report to the Security Council. The envoy, Finnish diplomat Martti Ahtisaari, (former President of Finland and one time UN Under-Secretary General) says Kosovo should have internationally-supervised independence for an initial period. After UN-sponsored negotiations failed to reach a consensus on an acceptable constitutional status because of some opposition of veto-wielding members of the Security Council members, Kosovo's provisional government unilaterally declared independence from Serbia on 17 February 2008. The ethnic balance of Kosovo tilted as the number of Albanians tripled, rising from almost 75% to over 90%, but the number of Serbs barely increased, dropping from 15% to 8% of the total population. Independent Kosovo (with about 2 million people with overwhelming majority of Albanian Muslims) received international recognition as a sovereign state, notably from the United States and some major European countries, such as Britain, Germany, France and Italy. Kosovo's sovereignty is disputed by Serbia, Russia, China, Spain, Romania, Cyprus and Greece. The official position of these countries is that Kosovo is a Serbian province under an interim UN control, formally known as Autonomous Province of Kosovo. Brief history of Kosovo Kosovo shares borders with Montenegro to the west, Albania to the southwest, Republic of Macedonia to the south and Serbia to the north and east. Pristina is the capital and largest city. By the end of the 19th century, the Albanians had replaced the Serbs as the dominant people in Kosovo. However, in 1912, during the Balkan Wars, most of Kosovo was taken by the Kingdom of Serbia. Numerous colonist Serb families moved into Kosovo, equalizing the demographic balance between Albanians and Serbs. Many Albanians fled into the mountains, and numerous Albanian and Turkish houses were razed. The reconquest of Kosovo was described as retribu-



tion for the 1389 Battle of Kosovo in which Serbs were defeated by Ottomans. At the Conference of Ambassadors in London in 1912, presided over by British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, the Kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro were granted sovereignty over Kosovo. In the winter of 1915-1916, during World War I, Kosovo saw a large exodus of the Serbian army, which became known as the Great Serbian Retreat. Defeated and worn out in battles against Austro-Hungarians, they had no other choice than to retreat, as Kosovo was occupied by Bulgarians and Austro-Hungarians. The Albanians joined and supported the Central Powers. In the 1970s, an Albanian nationalist movement pursued full recognition as a Republic within the Yugoslav Federation, while extreme elements aimed for full-scale independence. Inter-ethnic tensions continued to worsen in Kosovo throughout the 1980s and '90s. President Milošević of Serbia capitalized on this discontent to consolidate his own position in Serbia. Milošević was to meet with local leaders, because the local Serbs were threatening to organize a demonstration in Belgrade. On June 28, 1989, Milošević

delivered a speech in front of a large number of Serb citizens at the main celebration marking the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, held at Gazimestan. Many think that this speech helped Milošević consolidate his authority in Serbia. In 1989, Milošević, employing a mix of intimidation and political maneuvering, drastically reduced Kosovo's special autonomous status within Serbia. Soon thereafter, Kosovo Albanians organized a non-violent separatist movement, employing widespread civil disobedience, with the ultimate goal of achieving the independence of Kosovo. Kosovo Albanians boycotted state institutions and elections and established separate Albanian schools and political institutions. Immediate cause of independence In 1998, during the conflict between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs, roughly a million ethnic Albanians fled or were forcefully driven from Kosovo by Serbian armed forces, several thousand were killed (the numbers and the ethnic distribution of the casualties are uncertain and highly disputed). An estimated 12,000-18,000 ethnic Albanians and 3,000 Serbs are believed to have been killed during the conflict. Russia has vehemently

opposed independence, reflecting its historical ties with Orthodox Christian Serbia, which continues to claim Kosovo as a Serbian province. Russia has its own violent ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus (Chechnya) and it is understandable for its opposition. Is opposition misconceived? Kosovo Albanians asserted independence from Serbia in the past but could not retain it because of European politics in which in the past Serbia was considered a victim and thus a winner on every occasion. Given the history of Kosovo's Albanians, many analysts consider that the opposition to Kosovo's independence is misconceived. Kosovo's ethnic conflict is different in many ways from other ethnic conflicts. Kosovo has a history of its own and should follow its logical and reasonable course. Many historians believe that Serbia's continued brutal oppression of Kosovo Albanians in the '80s and '90s and economic exploitation of Kosovo led to the unilateral declaration of independence. Furthermore the Western countries know that China and Russia will veto Kosovo's independence at the Security Council. Serbia must realise that all the constituent-states of former Yugoslavia have declared independence. The dominance of Serbs over former Yugoslavian states has disappeared by its own flawed actions and omissions. Even Serbia could not forestall the independence of Montenegro where about 32% of its population are Serbs. Serbia must appreciate that Europe is changing fast and the European Union with its current 27 members would expand steadily. The Westphalian concept of sovereignty and statehood is being replaced by a new world order and supra-national authority that take decisions on behalf of member-states (European Commission). European analysts say that if Serbia wants to enhance their quality of life and prosper within Europe, it must become a part of European Union. Therefore, it must have a peaceful dialogue with European Commission to resolve the issue of Kosovo's independence. Mere emotion does not play in cold politics but reality and reason should guide their views and actions. The author is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Pakistan elections: Some observations

MUMTAZ IQBAL

MOST elections are cathartic, allowing society to let off steam. Some are transformational, like Ukraine's Orange Revolution and as the 2008 US presidential elections could be. Others have revolutionary impact: the 1970 elections in undivided Pakistan divided it, materially changing South Asian geopolitics. Pakistan's recent election reveals significant elements of catharsis, sizeable potential for transformation but meager scope for revolutionary change. CATHARSIS The elections' conduct and outcome make Pakistanis rightly feel good. The steam built up in the pressure cooker of the politics of dictatorship threatening to blow the Pakistani state sky high has been released. Despite doubts, elections were peaceful. The public, restless for a long overdue change, demanded nothing less. But credit also goes to COS Gen. Kayani who, pulling out army officers from civilian duties, signalled the bureaucracy to be non-partisan. Kayani's motives included bridging the growing alienation between society and army and protecting GHQ's core institutional interests. Officers abandoned Musharraf because of his damaged reputation, just like Kurmitola in 1991 abandoned Ershad. The results revealed the Pakistani voters' maturity. They elected secular parties in all four provinces, ditching the religious ones as in the past, evidencing again if evidence was needed that religion is not material to political deliverance. TRANSFORMATION The voters didn't give any party a clear majority. PPP won the most seats but mainly in Sindh. The next largest PML-N won in Punjab only. This bound PPP and PML-N to work together. While disparate manifestoes

and conflicting personalities make coalition a shaky enterprise, it may be a blessing in disguise in Pakistan where ethnic tensions run deep and distrust of Punjab is rampant amongst smaller provinces. It'll force politicians to talk to each other and find common cause on tactical and strategic issues. Already this is happening. The PPP and PML-N, supported by ANP will form a coalition with PPP's respected Makhdoom Amin Fahim rumoured as the putative PM. Restoring the sacked judges and sacking Musharraf being the two main points on the coalition's tactical agenda suggest that it intends to move quickly to reassert the substance of civilian rule. This may be easier said than done. Musharraf will fiercely contest judicial restoration, since this is the thin end of the wedge for the besieged president and fuel the momentum for his ouster if implemented. Even if judges are restored which seems more likely than not--ousting Musharraf may be tricky because of his lingering but potentially dwindling US and GHQ support. While powerful props, neither Washington nor army brass want to be on history's wrong side. So the odds probably favour Musharraf leaving sooner rather than later. A coup de grace swift orchestrated dignified resignation rather than death by a thousand cuts messy impeachments should enable Pakistan to bury the past symbolically and move forward substantially. If neither of the above happens, then the coalition may cohabit with Musharraf under a power sharing arrangement whereby presidential powers e.g. dissolving NA are clipped and civilian supremacy established over time, if ever. Though not a happy prospect for Pakistani democracy, it would be tantamount to a victory of despotism over accountability. Moving on, since election victory euphoria is a wasting asset, the coalition's obvious strategic challenge is how it governs.

For starters, Pakistan's fragile national unity needs strengthening. Thus, the Federation's centralised authoritarian rule should give way to substantial and overdue provincial autonomy to keep the Balochis, Pashtuns and Sindhis happy within and committed to Pakistan. Punjab will have to be less overbearing, and seen to be so. The Sindh-Punjab entente represented by the coalition offers the best chance of attaining this elusive objective. Economic management will continue as before but with more money for the provinces. The defence budget remains sacrosanct and grows modestly, especially if Musharraf's de facto rapprochement with Delhi eases border tensions and Indo-Pak commercial relations expand. Islamabad's shameful servility to Washington needs retooling to restore Pakistani honour, put relations on a more even keel, and enable more sustainable conduct of the so-called anachronistic war on terror as a US ally, especially since the religious rightists have been sidelined. The gratification of revanchist US goals in Afghanistan contributes to Pakistan's destabilisation by stoking Pashtun nationalism and irredentism. This requires a US/NATO re-examination of the basis and conduct of its increasingly dubious warmore like "occupation" in Afghanistan to seek dialogue with rather than extermination of the Taliban. After all, Afghanistan is their country, not a testing ground for arcane US counter-insurgency doctrine and weaponry. This review won't happen under Bush so it would be to admit failure, as in Iraq it could be one of the major tasks of the new White House. REVOLUTIONARY The elections shouldn't expect much change in who runs Pakistan and how. The rural feudals will still call the shots but a revitalised community of urban legal and right activists should be a potent force for social progress and secular change. Punjab will remain the dominant province. Punjabi-dominated army/bureaucracy will control the levers of power. But the likely first fruits of democracy is that Islamabad will be less heavy-handed and more high-handed; minorities' concerns will receive and carry greater weight and toxic levels of provincial and ethnic tensions should abate. Those in power have their job cut out in righting the listing and drifting Pakistani ship of state. A deft captain, skilful navigation and disciplined crew are essential for the vessel to reach harbour safely. The author is a freelancer.

