

Theatrics about Hasina-Khaleda talks

Let the two leaders themselves initiate the process

MUCH talk has lately been going on about the projected meeting, or the need for a meeting, between Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia. On the one hand, there is the clear feeling that the chiefs of the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party should get down to one on one discussions. On the other, much theatrics has come into the entire matter, especially since Barrister Rafiqul Huq in off the cuff remarks said that the two leaders should talk directly to each other and that he was trying to bring them together. Huq's acceptability to both sides attracted public attention and generated a good deal of interest.

But then came the theatrical, or call it farcical, side of the story. Taking advantage of the development, individuals such as the president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry came forward with the offer that the FBCCI would like to facilitate the talks between the two leaders. Soon, Rafiqul Huq acquainted the media with news that he was in telephonic touch with Hasina. Then came Adviser Hossain Zillur Rahman's comment that the government would facilitate such a meeting. Lately, AL acting general secretary Syed Ashraf Islam has dived in, with the suggestion that both the lawyer and the business leader should stay out of what in his view was a political matter. Yesterday Huq claimed that Zillur Rahman had apologised to him on Islam's comment.

Theatrics and gimmicks aside, we at The Daily Star are of the view that Sheikh Hasina and Begum Zia, being the leading national figures they are, should on their own take the initiative to come together for talks. There is hardly any need for third parties to come in when they can themselves instruct their party colleagues to make preparations for such talks. If they do that (and they certainly can), it will surely signal a singular and symbolic departure from the past. Of course, we realise that one meeting will not wipe out the accumulated bitterness of the past seventeen years, but the fact that they can meet and exchange points of view will in itself be a landmark. There are some basic ideas they can agree on. One of them relates to the forthcoming polls. Both leaders must let the nation know that, provided the elections are truly free, fair and transparent, they will accept the outcome without one accusing the other of rigging and similar malpractices. Additionally, they could agree that Parliament will be the focus of politics, that both the ruling party and the opposition will follow the democratic norms, and that neither side will boycott it and liaise with each other. It is a declaration that must come from them in the collective rather than an individual sense. They should remember that the people are keen on seeing representative rather than interventionist politics at work. That acknowledgement on their part will augur a new beginning.

We firmly believe that discussions between Begum Zia and Sheikh Hasina will be as much about substance as they will be about symbolism. They will certainly enthrall the nation into feeling encouraged about the future of its democracy.

Lailat-ul-Qadr

A glorious night

THE Holy Prophet (PBUH) has enjoined upon us to seek Lail-at-ul Qadr, Night of Power, in the last ten nights of Ramadan and says that he who spends the Night in worship, with a pure motive of faith and devotion, will have all his past sins forgiven.

Last night, the 27th of Ramadan is generally accepted by the Muslim scholars as the night of the revelation of the Holy Quran. This is the night when Allah (SWT) sent down his message to mankind through His last Prophet as a redeemer for not only the Muslims but for the entire mankind. But for the Muslims this night has a special significance, for not only as marking the beginning of the revelation of Holy Book but also for the fact that Allah has called this night as better than a thousand months. For all the prayers and supplications of only one night of Qadr is equal to that of a thousand months.

For the Muslims it is a time to both supplicate and introspect. While most Muslims spend the night seeking penance, forgiveness and Allah's Blessing through prayers and recitation of the Quran, equally of importance for them is to spend sometime in introspection, if for nothing else than to assess how much we have been able to internalise the teaching of the Quran and the Prophet (PBUH) and reflect those in our daily lives.

One must admit that we as Muslims have not fully lived up to the teaching of the Quran and the Holy Prophet (PBUH), either in letter or in spirit. If as Muslims we find ourselves maligned and at the receiving end of the critics' tirade, then we are the ones who must take the major blame for it. Islam is a religion of peace, equality and tolerance and yet we are projected as quite the opposite. And that is mainly because of the very minuscule minority amongst the followers of the faith that have distorted its teaching, for narrow convoluted purposes.

There is a need for the Ummah to act unitedly against those in the community whose extremist and violent tendencies have tarnished the image of Islam. That should be our resolve while we seek mercy of the Almighty on this auspicious occasion.

SARI NUSSEIBEH

In a recent report, Peace Now (an Israeli NGO) revealed that since President George W. Bush convened the Annapolis peace talks last October, the number of construction tenders issued in East Jerusalem has increased by a factor of 38 compared to the previous year. Since 1967, when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza, and especially since the Madrid peace negotiations of 1993, Israel has built almost 13 new neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem, which is

now home to more than a quarter million Israelis -- almost the same number as Palestinians allowed to reside within the city.

If you recall that most plans for a two-state solution envisage East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state (alongside the Israeli capital in West Jerusalem), it's easy to understand why many Palestinians are losing faith in this project.

There is another reason the two-state solution is losing support: Washington's attitude. On a recent trip to Ramallah, US

Whither rural non-farm activities?



ABDUL BAYES

QUITE a number of scholars have dwelt on the role of the rural non-farm activities (RNFA) in greasing growth and reducing poverty in rural areas. The most recent empirical evidence also points to a preponderant growth of RNFA throughout Asian rural areas. It has been revealed that RNFA constitute one-fifth to one-fourth of household income and account for 20-40 percent of rural employment generation. More important than this, they are bracketed as a beacon in the rural livelihoods.

One seminal study nicely narrated RNFA as follows: "During the economic transformation, the emergence and the rapid expansion of the non-farm economy in rural areas and the towns that serve them becomes a major source of growth in income and employment. From relatively a minor sector, often largely part-time and subsistence-oriented at the early stages of development, the rural non-farm economy develops to become a major

motor of economic growth in its own right, not only for the countryside but for the economy as a whole. Its growth also has important implications for the welfare of women and poor households, sometimes helping to offset inequities that can arise within the agricultural sector."

Available empirical evidences suggest that in the 1990s the growth of non-agricultural income in rural areas of Bangladesh outpaced agricultural income. For example, between 1988-2001, non-agricultural income has grown at 4.2 percent per annum compared to 0.3 percent for agricultural income.

At the same period, employment has increased at a rate of 2.7 percent and 1 percent, respectively. Two discernible impacts of this transformation are noteworthy. First, the poor segment of the rural society engaged themselves in non-agricultural activities and thus raised their income levels and second, agricultural wage increased as a result of labor having been transferred from agricultural to non-agricultural sector. By and large, the growth of

RNFA could be dubbed as pro-poor.

Therefore, like any other developing country, generating productive employment for the growing labour force remains a formidable challenge for Bangladesh. Recent rise in the proportion of the working age population has added to the labor force and the majority of them still remain in rural areas despite the rapid rural urban migration. The capacity of absorbing the incremental rural labour force in agriculture has become extremely limited for various reasons.

First, there is no scope of expansion of land frontier; the arable land in fact has been declining over time. Second, cropping intensity has almost reached the limit by accounting for about 200 in the recent past. Third, the growth of crop production now depends almost entirely on technological progress resulting in low employment elasticity of output. In other words, land is now releasing more labor paripassu the rise in land productivities. And finally, despite all the developments in

the past, there still exists a need for increasing labor productivity and reducing unit cost through mechanization.

Information on primary and secondary occupation of sample households and the relationship with RNFA could be captured from a Brac-backed repeated sample survey of 62 villages. First, the importance of RNFA as both primary and multiple occupations significantly increased during the last two decades; nearly half of the rural workers now embrace RNFA as primary and secondary involvement. This compares with one-third in the 1980s.

A number of factors could be added to this change: expansion of transport and communication networks, positive role of NGOs through micro-credit programs, etc. The rise of mechanic as primary occupation could be added to the growth of irrigation pumps and mechanized agriculture. Business activities boomed during 1988-2000 period and then did not increase much. Service had increasingly been emerging as primary occupation

for rural labor force. However, the share of unemployed force increased from 3 percent to 5 percent.

What is the contribution of RNFA to household income? From the household survey it appears that the share of income from RNFA now constitutes more than half of the total household income compared to a little over one-third in the 1980s. It may be mentioned here that RNFA accounts for 25-50 percent of rural income in Asia. However, the household income grew roughly at 4 percent per year over the entire period and most of the incremental income came from the RNFA. The growth of income from RNFA soared high at about 7 percent per year compared to a feeble 1.4 percent per year growth in agricultural incomes. As a result, the share of non-farm sector in rural household income has been increasing very fast over the years.

In this context, we can possibly invoke the "push" and the "pull" debate. Questions are raised whether the expansion of the rural non-farm sector is due to soaking of surplus rural labour in marginal low-paying occupations, as agriculture cannot provide employment for the growing labor force. That is, workers are "pushed out" of agriculture into low-productivity work in rural non-farm economy. Thus, the rural non-farm sector may be the employer of last resort. But it is not only the landless, lacking employment in agriculture, who

have engaged themselves in rural non-farm activities. Households with better resource positions, i.e. with more land and education are engaged in rural trading and service sector activities.

Despite the robust growth of RNFA in rural areas between 1988 and 2000, the slowing down of the pace of progress afterwards warrants explanation. We reckon that expansion of road communication networks, access to electricity, and other major developments that cause d RNFA to expand, have seemingly stalled in recent years. We also observe that the micro-credit programs of NGOs apparently lost the appeal in alleviating poverty. It might have also so happened that educated workforce have migrated outside rural areas.

Whatever could be the reason, the policy implication is that rural infrastructure and especially access to electricity should assume top priority in policy agenda. The recent experiences of shortfall in ADP achievements and anarchy in the energy sector point to the pitfalls that deter development of RNFA. Second, growth centres need to be established in remote areas so that the nexus between agriculture and non-agriculture is maintained for a pro-poor growth process. And finally, NGOs should focus more on targeted credit rather than serving as sub-contractors of international agencies for assistance.

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Can a political party be banned?



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THE definition of a political party from the time of Edmund Burke as "an organised assembly of men united for working together for the national interest" has changed over time to one that may not accept members from a minority community and insists on establishing khilafat. Indeed, the head of the Hizb ut Tahrir (Bangladesh) publicly announced: "We always want to oust all governments in all Muslim countries in the world to establish khilafat states."

The world is already mired in the militant activities of al-Qaeda operatives, their latest act being the carnage at the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad. The conflict is not only inter-religious or intra-religious. The hydra-headed Medusa has used underdevelopment, poverty, tribal and cultural differences, etc among people to unleash its poisoned fangs.

Bangladesh will have to construct its own brand of democracy, keeping in view its social, historical and cultural traditions. One, however, becomes apprehensive when religion is advocated to be one of the pillars of our socio-political construct. Undeniably, Bangladesh is a

GOING DEEPER

In Bangladesh, for example, the events involving terrorist activities perpetrated by Islamic extremists have strengthened the demands of the secularists to put a ban on religion-based political activities. The 1972 constitution did provide for such a ban. Now that the elections are knocking at the door, a tough question has to be answered. Capitulate, or keep it pending for the "next government" to decide?

Muslim majority country and most of the people are devout Muslims.

But the absence of the separation of religious and the political authority in unambiguous terms opens up the possibility of strengthening the alleged presence of those committed to revolution and reordering the world in a way that would undo modernism and take countries like ours to sixth century Saudi Arabia. Our denials notwithstanding, the question, however, remains whether sub-state actors living in a shadowy world received political patronage from some of the leaders of the erstwhile government.

Madrasas continue to flourish and the degrees awarded by these institutions continue to be recognised as equivalent to the degrees given by colleges and universities, making religious education equal to secular education. Though the Bangladesh government is not beholden to Islamist political groups, one may consider establishment of a single madrasa regulatory authority under parliamentary oversight with powers to bring the madrasas in line with mainstream education; and to derecognise madrasa certificates as equivalent to degrees issued by boards

of education and universities.

Ordinarily, one would have thought that almost all of the 150 million Bangladeshis, speaking the same language, belonging to the same race, and for most part practicing the same religion, should have a coherent, cogent and non-dissident society, free from the risk of the contagion of chaos. But the opposite appears to be the case.

Intolerance of opposing views, sclerosis of thought, monocentric locus of power, and rapacity of the rich and the powerful are the present afflictions of Bangladesh society. The erstwhile Orwellian tyranny of the majority was further compounded by increasing activism of Islamists who wish to recreate their vision of an Islamic society, not simply by imposing the sharia, but by establishing an Islamic state where religious edicts would be integrated into all aspects of society.

What happened in 1971 was a war of liberation and not a civil war, as claimed by a follower of Jamaat. To quote a report on Bangladesh by the International Crisis Group: "Islamists, especially the Jamaat-e-Islami Party, are often accused of siding with

Pakistanis, joining in genocide and allegedly actively assisting massacres, especially targeted killing of intellectuals in Dhaka in the last weeks."

The same report states that, as early as April 1971, US officials protested their government's support for West Pakistan and argued that "the overworked term genocide is applicable." Perhaps, one of the most telling accounts of Jamaat's collaboration during our war of liberation has been given in a book Witness to Surrender by Pakistani Major Siddiq Salim about the anti-liberation role played by Jamaat, Muslim League, and Nizam-I-Islam.

The emergence of religious intolerance in Bangladesh has been documented by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the US State Department, among others. If the Muslims are to prove historians Bernard Lewis wrong that "Islam was never prepared, either in theory or in practice, to accord full equality to those who held other forms of worship, and that the centuries-old rivalry between Christianity and Islam is no less than a clash of civilisations, the perhaps irrational but surely

historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both," then the Islamic world will have to adorn itself with all the traits of modernity. Globalisation is no longer a choice; it is a reality. In this game, the West has a decided advantage over the Muslim world.

If the concern of the international community is to safeguard its values and its way of life against the onslaught by Islamic fundamentalists' inflexible and nihilistic war of attrition then care should be taken of Jamaat's politics in Bangladesh. Jamaat's argument that its representation in the parliament has been through democratic elections should not detract the world of the so-called Islamic Free Election Trap in which the fundamentalists use democratic means to get to power only to abolish democratic practices through legislation.

The problem with Islamic political parties like Jamaat in Bangladesh is "the persistence of ambiguity" suffered by Islamists almost everywhere. Jamaat's spiritual guru, Maulana Maududi, described the movement's purpose: "To initiate the deed in the form of a movement so that religiosity does not become static in our personal lives, but we struggle to implement this deed and also try to crush those forces that are against its implementation." This partly explains Jamaat's opposition to the Bangladesh liberation movement as dismemberment of a Muslim state caused by the machination of a Hindu India.

An inconclusive debate remains about the incompatibility of democracy with monotheistic religions. Robert Dahl, in his classic book Polyarchy emphasised that democracy must have a constitution that by itself is democratic in that it respects fundamental liberties and offers protection to minorities. Additionally, democratically elected governments must rule within the confines of their constitutions, be bound by law and be accountable.

From historical observations it has been found that religions place obstacles in the way of democracy. John Rawls found it particularly difficult in a pluralistic society in which citizens hold a variety of socially embedded, reasonable yet deeply opposed comprehensive doctrines to arrive at an overlapping consensus.

There is, however, no denying the fact that religion-based politics generates fear among the minority community, the protection of whom has been pledged by all civilised countries both in their domestic law and in international commitment.

In Bangladesh, for example, the events involving terrorist activities perpetrated by Islamic extremists have strengthened the demands of the secularists to put a ban on religion-based political activities. The 1972 constitution did provide for such a ban. The post-1975 conservative establishments amended the constitution, once in 1977 and again in 1988, by passing the 8th amendment, making Islam the state religion.

In sum, now that the elections are knocking at the door, a tough question has to be answered. Capitulate, or keep it pending for the "next government" to decide?

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The one-state solution

Today, with over half a million Jews living across the 1949 Armistice Line, it's almost too late to reverse the process. It is therefore time for action, not words. Practically, this means pushing within the next few months for a fair deal both parties can live with. And that means a two-state deal;

east-west axes, serviced by highways, electrical networks, etc. -- as organic extensions of the Israeli economy.

But Israeli construction has (again according to Peace Now) increased by 550 percent in the past year. This building, combined with that of the nearly complete separation wall or barrier, and reports that Israel wishes to maintain security control along the eastern edge of the Jordan Valley, sends another message: that Israel plans to hold onto the land for good.

Combine this with the still unaddressed refugee problem, and it's no wonder many former two-staters are giving up hope.

It is important to remember that the Palestinian national movement only began to endorse the idea of a two-state solution 20 or 30 years ago, as a practical

compromise. Realising that Israel wasn't going anywhere, moderates decided that their best hope for a state was one alongside Israel, not one that sought to replace it.

Yet the 15 years of negotiations that have followed have produced little, and thus it's no surprise that faith in this supposedly pragmatic option is waning. The lack of progress, as well as the unmistakably expansionist reality on the ground and the growth in popularity of Hamas, have left little room for anyone seeking a positive future for Palestine.

Except, that is, to rejuvenate the old idea of one bi-national, secular and democratic state where Jewish and Arab citizens live side by side in equality.

For some, such as the intellectuals and activists who make up the Palestinian Strategy Group

(which recently made this case in Arabic newspapers), talk of a one-state scenario is meant to warn Israel of the dangers posed by its expansionist policies.

This group would still prefer a two-state solution to emerge. Others, however, are returning to the one-state vision first espoused by Fatah (the mainstream Palestinian nationalist movement) back in the late '60s.

The first group believes that one-state talk might help knock some sense into the heads of Israeli decision-makers. The second prefers a one-state solution, because it would create a government they would eventually control as a demographic majority.

Although even Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has lately recognised the danger Israel faces, it is not clear that other decision-makers in Israel do. They may try

to defer the problem through some diversionary tactic, such as throwing control of the West Bank's population centers to Jordan under continued Israeli military supervision.

Such a "solution" was first floated by Israel back in the '70s. According to this scenario, Gaza would also be thrown to Egypt.

But even if Jordan and Egypt could be persuaded to accept such burdens -- and they couldn't be -- neither tactic would bring lasting stability in the region. And serious proponents of the one-state scenario seem not to realise how much more human suffering it would take to attain.

As for sounding alarm bells, this might have made sense 25 years ago, when settlement building in East Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank was just starting. Today, with over half a million

Jews living across the 1949 Armistice Line, it's almost too late to reverse the process.

It is therefore time for action, not words. Practically, this means pushing within the next few months for a fair deal both parties can live with. And that means a two-state deal; the Israelis will never agree to anything else.

Many Palestinians think a single state might be ideal -- since it would involve the defeat of the Zionist project and its replacement by a bi-national country that would eventually be ruled by its Arab majority. But many ships have been wrecked on such rocks before. And the one state likely to emerge from a cataclysmic conflict would likely be anything but ideal.

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