

Eid-ul-Fitr reinforces hope for better future

Let's live up to its spirit

EID-ul-Fitr comes once again with its message of remembrance of the Almighty and caring for those who are less privileged than us. With the end of the holy month of Ramadan, it becomes our particular responsibility to go for self-assessment on what we have endeavoured to do during the period and what we could yet have done to bind our spirit with the higher calling of faith. Ramadan is a testing time for all Muslims. In this month, it is questions of how we have fared as a society, of how the gap between rich and poor keeps us pinned to disappointment that we deal with. Ramadan is also a reminder that Islam is a religion of peace and abjures all forms of extremism. Exploitation of faith for the purpose of attaining ulterior motives is an idea abhorrent to Islam. Ramadan is also a message about the higher moral quality we need to bring to life and a necessary lesson that life lived on earth is but a preparation for the world hereafter.

That preparation, we need hardly emphasise, is of course based on the deeds we do throughout the course of our corporeal lives in this world. In Ramadan, matters relating to a proper observance of the Islamic faith come especially to the fore. Zakat, fitra and all those duties ordained by faith are what we strenuously need to practise. When we add to these the essentiality of fasting, we remind ourselves once again of the fact that Islam goes much beyond an observance of abstractions. It is a code of life that underlies it; and central to that code is a set of values laid out by the Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) fourteen centuries ago. It becomes our particular job at this time, as Ramadan is about to draw to a conclusion, to ask ourselves as to how far we have been able to uphold the spirit of the religion in this holy month as well as in those outside it. Islam does not anywhere call for a severance of the individual from the realities of the world of which he is a part. It simply expects him to relate his worldly activities with his spiritual responsibilities. Which is when we busy ourselves with the question of how our citizens may have suffered in this Ramadan season through the manipulation of prices by dishonest traders, how workers in industrial units may yet be going through pain owing to a non-payment of their legitimate dues.

On Eid-ul-Fitr, therefore, it is self-questioning that we will go into. And we will hope that our experience of Ramadan this season has left us with a better, wider understanding of ourselves and of our responsibilities toward our families, our neighbours, indeed to everyone around and beyond us.

We wish everyone a happy Eid-ul-Fitr.

Cashing in on poverty, why not!



SHAHNOOR WAHID

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

Poverty is a favourite pastime of the governments that come to power. It is something they can play around with. Successive governments in last 37 years had undertaken hundreds and hundreds of projects in the name of creating job/work for the poor. They had prepared volumes and volumes of project proposals pinpointing the problems and explaining the sure shot solutions in lucid language. Donors swallowed the bait and generously gave money for the implementation of those projects.

AN awful lot has been deliberated on and tons of papers have been photocopied in our never-ending search for the perfect strategy for poverty reduction. If you keep your eyes and ears open you will notice that it has become the fashionable subject to discuss during high-profile lunch and dinner where local and foreign elite try to discover the line that differentiates between poverty and non-poverty. In such discussions, the poor are merely percentages...60 percent...40 percent...and so on.

Thank God, we have poverty in our midst! It is the hottest selling item in the market. It brings money into the country -- an awful lot of money indeed. But does it ever go to the people who need it most? Nay, sir. It goes to

those who talk about poverty...who write about poverty...who prepare documents on poverty. It has become the bread and butter of a number of people and organisations, therefore, if poverty is reduced it will spell disaster for them.

It also keeps a frighteningly large number of government, non-government, donor and UN officials engaged in all sorts of activities throughout the year. Slogans: Wage War on Poverty...We Shall Conquer Poverty...Keep Poverty Sealed in a Bottle...Turn the Poor into Human Resource...Give Them Goats... Well, it has been going on for decades. It will go on for centuries. Meanwhile, Zorinas will continue to search for a morsel of food in roadside litters, and

Begums will dine on lamb roast. Poverty is stuck on our fate as "Fate Accompli."

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Their representatives came to Bangladesh and went around the project sites to see for themselves the progress of work. They ate

muri and pitha made by the villagers and went back home to live happily ever after with the satisfaction of a work done well. But little could they guess that as soon as they had boarded the plane in Dhaka, the politicians (in power then) and bureaucrats (perennially in power) had started to jointly milk those projects for their own benefits.

Then came the NGOs of various hues and sizes with mind-boggling ideas about poverty reduction. They got hold of the incredulous Gofran mias and Zorinas in the villages and told them beautiful stories. They held *uthan baitaks* (courtyard meetings) with the villagers. Gofran mias and Zorinas began to see beautiful dreams after the NGO guys left. They began to go around

In circles...having money...having no money...having no money. So, we haven't seen Gofran mias and Zorinas living in a better home or eating well after ten years but we have seen those NGO guys buying flats in Gulshan, driving new jeeps and going to Singapore for treatment. Poverty reduction, indeed.

Now, can we really reduce poverty? Impossible proposition, unless we recognise the underlying problems. It is a fact that the population is increasing at a frightening pace and with that is increasing the number of poor in the country. In the rural areas and in the city slums every poor man fathers four children on an average. Hence, whatever strategy is taken today to find work or means of livelihood for the existing number of poor people, in another five years the number will increase and continue to increase. So, the plain and simple solution is to see that the number of poor people does not increase.

How to do that, you ask? Well, the first and foremost thing to do is to empower the poor people with the knowledge of the perils of multiplying without looking at the future. The future of the country, I mean. They cannot just go on procreating mindlessly and leave

the burden on the state. That is downright irresponsible act and they have no right to do that. Yes, you heard it correct, no right.

Remember, as soon as a child is born, it becomes the responsibility of the state to ensure all its basic rights like food, shelter, health, education and protection. Now, that costs money and the irresponsible fathers have no *matibetha* (headache) about it. Therefore, poor people should be made aware of these facts and be motivated to be more responsible. And the state authority will have to enforce it with the help of relevant laws. Hence, sure shot answer to poverty reduction is strict implementation of population control strategy among the poor segments.

It is incomprehensible why the governments and politicians never talk strongly or with conviction about population control through undertaking vigorous family planning measures. Somewhere, something stops them midway. They fear some kind of backlash from some quarters. Unless the fear is allayed we shall only see many more seminars and read many more documents on poverty reduction.

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

Why Begum Khaleda and Sheikh Hasina should talk

BOTTOM LINE

Given the confrontation between the two major parties since 1991, democratic norms and traditions totally disappeared from ethical standards of most of politicians. Democracy in the country was dominated by tyrannical rule of the majority and a recalcitrant minority. The conduct of both parties had alienated an overwhelming majority of common people, and when 1/11 came there was a relief in the country.



HARUN UR RASHID

A lot of articles have appeared in the newspapers recently on the proposed face-to-face dialogue between the two former prime ministers. Some writers and politicians doubt whether any fruitful outcome would emanate from their talks.

Barrister Rafique-ul Huq first raised the matter, expecting that a new dawn could rise in restoring healthy political environment in the country if the two national leaders talked to each other.

This is a commendable initiative, coming from an eminent barrister who, as a citizen of the country, has the right to propose such a meeting. Furthermore, his standing is greater than other people's because he represented both the leaders before the courts at a difficult time in their personal lives.

The leaders will not talk about their personal matters, or about removing their dislike for each other, but about promoting representative democracy in the country. There is a saying that the interests of a political party come before self-interest, and the interests of the country come before the interests of a political party.

Briefly, politics in the country since 1991 was characterised by and large by the following unsavoury practices:

- The mutual dislike for each other continued unabated between Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina. They did not speak to each other for years. As a result, confrontational politics prevailed.
- If one lady won the election and ran the government, the other lady and her party MPs boycotted the parliament on allegation of the election being rigged and non-cooperation in the parliament by the ruling party. The issues were raised on the streets and violence would erupt among the supporters of rival parties.
- The prime minister became an authoritarian leader because of dynastic reasons. One is the wife of a slain president and the other lady is the daughter of assassinated president and founder of the nation. Hardly any cabinet minister or MP had the courage to express different views on the prime minister's decisions.
- Politics became a big commercial investment because if one could become an MP, it was a gateway for him/her to make

money by being corrupt and abusing power and privilege. If MPs and ministers became corrupt, bureaucrats were not far behind them.

Suspected corrupt ministers and MPs were never dismissed or put on trial, and corrupt individuals and musclemen moved freely under the patronage of influential politicians. Criminalisation of politics became a routine affair. A section of ministers and MPs had allegedly pampered criminal elements to make money by extortion as long as they could bring enough votes for politicians during the elections.

State institutions became weak, and it is alleged that successive governments appointed their own people in the state institutions. In the perception of the public, there was almost a complete breakdown of integrity of some of the state institutions. Bureaucracy became politicised, and those who "did not go with the flow" were marginalised.

Given the confrontation between the two major parties since 1991, democratic norms and traditions totally disappeared from ethical standards of most of politicians.

Democracy in the country was dominated by tyrannical rule of the majority and a recalcitrant minority. The conduct of both parties had alienated an overwhelming majority of common people, and when 1/11 came there was a relief in the country. But everyone realises that the caretaker government has been a stop-gap one and that an elected government has to run the country, and, therefore, politicians have an important role to play in restoring representative democracy in the country.

What should they talk about?

It is assumed that the two leaders must have gone through a process of self-analysis and introspection when they were in prison. Socrates said that an unexamined life is not worth living.

The leaders must have taken stock of the past deeds of their parties' stalwarts and realised that there must be a new beginning in politics, which will not be influenced by money, muscle and corrupt elements.

Broadly, they need to talk about the following:

- Acceptance of the outcome of a fair election with grace.



Sheikh Hasina



Begum Khaleda Zia

- Please, break the ice.
- Role of ruling party and opposition in parliament.
 - No boycott of the sessions of parliament.
 - Political issues not to be settled on the streets.
 - Some guidelines for conduct of supporters during hartal.
 - Revision of the Constitution.

A few words about revision of the Constitution

The 1972 Bangladesh Constitution provides for representative democracy in which the ability of the elected representatives to exercise decision-making power is subject to rule of law (not merely rule by law) that places constraints on the government leaders on the extent to which the will of majority can be exercised against the rights of minority parties.

37 years of governance have demonstrated the pitfalls, and misinterpretation, of the provisions of the Constitution. Some of the amended provisions (such as Article 70) tend to be totally against the democratic norms of

the Constitution, and they need to be deleted.

What is imperative is that provisions of the Constitution must be made explicitly clear, with checks and balances on the separation of powers among the organs of the state -- executive, legislative and judiciary. There exists an imbalance between the powers of the president and those of the prime minister, which needs to be rectified.

It does not matter whether their parties or members of civil society initiate the process of talks, if the two former prime ministers can arrive at a consensus on the issues mentioned above it will augur well for the country.

Politics is the art of the possible, as Bismarck said. Both the prime ministers have served the people, and it is always the politicians in all countries who provide service to the community. Politics is the highest call of service to people.

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

Delhi encounter raises tough questions



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

THE PRAFULBIDWAI COLUMN

It's shameful that India's anti-terrorist police cells haven't managed to rise above the suspicion that they prefer brutal, even barbaric, methods over due process of law. Unless their anti-terrorist strategies and operations undergo radical reform, the minorities whom they selectively target won't feel secure or part of the national community as full citizens.

Even more ludicrous is the idea that the Indian church is primarily devoted to religious conversion. Official records show education to be its largest activity.

The response of India's political leadership to anti-minority violence has been appallingly inadequate. It has failed to reassure the minorities that the state will protect their rights as citizens and not shield majoritarian groups.

In parallel with this is the state's attitude to terrorism. Under the influence of National Security Adviser MK Narayanan, it has come to view terrorism largely through a religious-communal prism. Its anti-terrorism strategy remains strongly Islamophobic.

The term "terrorism" is never used in respect of Hindu extremists like the Bajrang Dal, VHP or the Shiv Sena despite their self-confessed killing of innocent non-Hindu citizens. Hindu extremists have been repeatedly found making/planting bombs in Nanded in Maharashtra, Tenkasi in Tamil Nadu, and Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh.

Typically, the authorities' knee-jerk presumption in respect of a terrorist attack is that it must be the work of Muslims.

The police round up and interrogate Muslims, and detain them for long periods -- in violation of the Supreme Court's guidelines that the detainee must be told the reasons, his/her relations must

be immediately informed, and he/she be produced before a magistrate within 24 hours.

As the government comes in for increasingly hysterical attacks by the Bharatiya Janata Party for its "weak-kneed" attitude towards terrorism, it's tempted to display machismo by taking ever-stronger measures against Muslims -- to the point of staging fake "encounters" in which the police summarily kill suspects.

Many states have anti-terrorist cells, with dozens of "encounter specialists," with a licence to kill, and huge funds to obtain "sensitive" information.

As the BJP's demand for tough anti-terrorist action reaches a crescendo, the government's reactive, but irrational, response

is to arbitrarily arrest hundreds of Muslims, interrogate them with third-degree methods, and extract false confessions.

This has created a climate of intimidation, insecurity and terror -- starkly evident in Jaipur, Bangalore, Ahmedabad, Delhi, and even villages in UP's much-maligned Azamgarh.

Take the alleged September 19 "encounter" in the Badli House area in Delhi, in which two terrorists, Atif Ameen and Mohammed Sajid, were killed, one was arrested, and two escaped.

The Delhi police say Atif was Indian Mujaheddin's topmost leader, who organised all major recent terrorist bombings. The Mumbai police contradict this and say the "mastermind" is Mohammad Sadiq Shaikh.

The Delhi "encounter" occurred less than a week after Delhi's multiple bomb blasts. It conforms to a familiar pattern like the Ansal Plaza and other encounters featuring Rajbir Singh.

The "encounter" story would have provoked a sceptical public response but for the fact that Inspector Mohan Chand Sharma

was also killed.

However, the Delhi police version is inconsistent. It claims Atif was the mastermind behind the bombings in Varanasi, Jaipur and Ahmedabad. But those cities' police name others: respectively, Waliullah, Shahbaz Hussain, and Abu Bashar-Abdul Subhan Qureshi, alias Taqeer, also publicised as the "IM mastermind."

The Delhi police say that Atif led a shadowy existence and recently stashed away Rs.3 crores in an Azamgarh bank. But the bank says his account had Rs.1,400.

Atif recently rented an apartment in Bada House. He registered the deed and got himself duly verified by the police.

A "terrorist mastermind" wouldn't practise such openness -- especially because the police had been watching the area for a week.

The police accuse Atif's associate, Saquib Nissar, of planting bombs in Ahmedabad on July 26. But records show that Saquib took an MBA examination in Delhi from July 22 to 28.

According to an eyewitness

account of the "encounter," there was an altercation when the police entered the 4th floor apartment where Atif and Sajid lived.

They dragged the two unarmed men down to the ground, where heavily armed Special Cell policemen were present. They severely beat up the two after cordoning off the area. In the ensuing scuffle, a policeman's gun went off and three bullets hit Sharma in the back and exited from the side/front.

After this, the police apparently fired at Atif and Sajid point-blank. A picture of Sajid just before burial shows at least four bullet-holes in the front portion of the skull. Even one bullet would have proved fatal. But the assailant pumped more, presumably out of vengeance.

Post-mortem reports, obtained by a private TV channel, disprove the police claim that Sharma was killed in frontal firing by Atif and/or Sajid as he entered their apartment. Newspaper pictures showed that the front of Sharma's white shirt wasn't bloodstained.

Atif and Sajid's autopsy reports show severe bleeding from beatings. The police claim that two terrorists escaped. But given just one narrow entry/exit point, nobody could have escaped.

Even assuming that Atif and Sajid were terrorists, there's no reason why they couldn't have been smoked out of the apartment, properly interrogated, tried and punished. All this calls for a ruthlessly independent judicial inquiry.

It's shameful that India's anti-terrorist police cells haven't managed to rise above the suspicion that they prefer brutal, even barbaric, methods over due process of law. Unless their anti-terrorist strategies and operations undergo radical reform, the minorities whom they selectively target won't feel secure or part of the national community as full citizens.

And that's the last thing India can afford if it's to have a modicum of social cohesion, and respect for human rights and the rule of law.

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