

# Ushering back a better, brighter democracy

This was my message to all I met: government authorities, political parties, civil society leaders and ordinary citizens. I saw clearly that democracy belongs in Bangladesh; there are no insurmountable obstacles to ushering back a better, brighter, more sustainable democracy after the elections in December.

BAN KI-MOON

WHAT a pleasure it has been to visit beautiful Bangladesh. I saw the difference that innovative micro-credit financing for development can make in peoples' lives -- a difference between life on the edge and a life of hope and progress.

I saw how innovative NGOs can partner with global corporations to promote UN Millennium Goals. A case in point: the Grameen Danone social business enterprise, dedicated to improving the nutritional health of children.

I saw how a small *char* community in the middle of the Jamuna River has worked with government authorities and UN specialists to protect itself from natural disasters and climate change.

My visit may have been brief, but I come away with a deep respect and admiration for the Bangladeshi people -- for their industriousness, for their inventiveness in grappling with the challenges they face, and for their indomitable spirit.

Bangladesh has much to offer the world. It is a model of how economic growth and poverty-reduction should go hand-in-hand. It is a case study in successful family planning, getting girls into schools and reducing child mortality. Both blessed and battered by Mother Nature, Bangladesh has become a

leader in disaster management -- demonstrated during the floods and cyclones of 2007. Bangladesh reaches well beyond its borders to assist those in need. It contributes outstandingly to UN peacekeeping missions around the world. I salute those who have lost their lives or been wounded in the cause of international peace, and I honor their families for their sacrifice.

Great challenges lie ahead. Like many developing nations, Bangladesh is especially vulnerable to the crises of our day: climate change, the energy and power crisis, global economic recession, rising food prices. All must be confronted for Bangladesh to continue its economic climb.

This is why I have called attention, strenuously and repeatedly, to the moral dimension of the global financial crisis. We must ensure that it does not weigh disproportionately on those who can least afford it. We must insist that wealthier countries do not retreat on their foreign assistance programs and commitments under the Millennium Development Goals.

Times of global crisis demand global solidarity. We cannot allow the financial crisis to turn into a prolonged human crisis.

For Bangladesh, much depends on good governance. Perhaps never before has it been so important for the nation's diverse people



Ban Ki-moon

and political leaders to pull together -- to fight corruption, to uphold the rule of law, to respect institutional checks and balances and to promote democracy.

This was my message to all I met: government authorities, political parties, civil society leaders and ordinary citizens. I saw clearly that democracy belongs in Bangladesh; there are no insurmountable obstacles to ushering back a better, brighter, more sustainable democracy after the elections in December.

Bangladesh possesses all the qualities for successful and vibrant democracy. Bangladeshis are politically engaged, independent-minded, eager to debate their future. It has a vibrant press and active, organised

political parties representing many points of view. Its voter list is the envy of many countries; the UN is proud to have helped create it. And Bangladesh has experience with successful democratic transitions of power.

What is needed now is to put the larger interests of the nation above other interests. For its part, the government must protect the fundamental rights and freedoms necessary for a free, fair and credible election. It must ensure a level playing field. And it must guarantee that the elections take place in a peaceful and secure environment.

The incoming government will need to reach out to the opposition in Parliament. The opposition must engage constructively with the new government. Political competition is good and necessary, but it cannot be allowed to undermine the foundations of democracy. Tolerance and cooperation are required so that everyone can win.

Political parties shoulder a big responsibility. They must engage with citizens across the country and shape their very different interests into a coherent vision. They must agree among themselves to evolve the unwritten conventions and norms that define acceptable political activity.

They must abide by the electoral rules and desist from violence and intimidation. They must work together after the elections, sincerely and in good faith, to consolidate the reforms begun by the current caretaker government. And they must dedicate themselves sincerely to fighting corruption.

Time and again, Bangladesh has proven that where there is a will, there is a way. I am confident that the creative spirit and wisdom that grace this ancient culture will guide the country through its time of need.

Ban Ki-moon is Secretary-General of the United Nations.

## TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND

# 'The country is not leased to any party'

Dr. Col. (ret) Oli Ahmad, Bir Bikram, was born on March 3, 1939 at Chandanaish in Chittagong. He obtained his PhD degree from Oxford Brookes University in 2003. During the liberation war, he fought gallantly in Chittagong region, and was conferred with the gallantry award "Bir Bikram." After resigning from army service in 1980, he started political activities and was elected as a Member of Parliament five times. He served as a state minister in 1982 and minister from 1991 to 1996. He left BNP and formed LDP in 2006. He wrote several books on revolution and the liberation war. Suranjith Deabnath and Wasim Bin Habib took the interview.

What is your opinion about the caretaker government's (CTG) decision on holding the parliamentary elections amidst emergency?

National elections are held across the country while city corporation elections were held in limited areas. The CTG has no legal authority to remain in power or compel political parties to comply with their sweet will. Political leaders are not servants of the ten advisers, most of whom do not have any address or any root or any acceptability to the people. There are in power by default and because of the mistakes of political leaders.

Do you think that the CTG and EC have shifted from their previous position on the issue of reforms?

In some cases, they have made diverse comments before the nation regarding election. But, some of their utterances have confused the nation. They have no legal right to do whatever they feel like. Holding of the election does not mean rehabilitation of corrupt politicians.

Do you believe the political culture of the country will change due to RPO?

Nobody should expect a miracle overnight. But I think the EC is moving in the correct direction, except for the application form for nomination. It is 31 pages long, very complicated, and almost like a schoolbook. It will not be possible for many candidates to fill up the application form correctly.

Some political parties oppose local observers for the coming polls. Do you support it?

I feel that we should not raise objections against everybody. But those who are involved directly with political parties or have relation with political parties must not be allowed as observers in the next election. Do you think political parties will resume "blame game" and refuse election results again?

I have been in politics directly for the last 34 years and indirectly for the 50 years. Nobody can say all the elections were fair and free. Many candidates did use arms and muscle power, and stuffed ballot papers in the boxes because of defective voter list and bribing of election officials including people in uniform. It happened on a large scale in greater Chittagong, Dhaka and many other places. At least 20 to 25 defects were there. As a result, the losing party always blamed the winning party. Besides, some candidates of political parties are habituated to telling lies and blaming others for their own failure. This time also there is scope for stuffing of ballot papers if the candidates and presiding officials have good understanding. So, presentation of ID card must be made compulsory and the number on the ID cards should be recorded. But the threat of arms can still play a big role in discouraging voters from coming to the voting centres.

The government will have to take steps to recover arms and arrest people at least 15 days before the election date. I believe, after these, no candidate or political party can repeat the same.

Do you support deferral of upazila elections?

I don't consider it as an important matter. Political parties do not hold elections. It is the duty of the EC. If they can do it why should we raise objections. Do you think reform should be imposed?

Not in any manner. But create an environment where people will ask for it.

Do you support the EC's decision about front or associate organisations of political parties?

I think they have taken the correct decision. We should not involve the whole nation in politics. If everybody is busy with politics who will lead the other sectors of the country. We had done student politics in our time, but never as a tail of any political party. We only spoke when the whole nation was in problem.

What is your view about the CTG's effort to reform administration?

I think the EC are well equipped to hold a good election. They are capable and are working as a good team, except for some minor lapses which should not be seen as a big problem.

What is your opinion about the minus-two formula?

I've no idea about minus or plus, but known corrupt politicians must not be allowed to be candidates. The proper place for these criminals is jail.

What do you think about the proposed meeting between Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia?

I don't consider it at all necessary. If they sit together the nation will not become heaven. The real success lies in punishing the corrupt people and selecting good candidates. Both the print and electronic media need to play an important and unbiased role. Fifty percent of the problems in voting can be solved if they play a correct role.

What are the lessons for the politicians from 1/11?

We should not be arrogant. The country and the people are not leased to any political party. We must obey and respect the laws and practice democracy in the real sense, not for ourselves but for the country.

Many corrupt individuals are now coming out under bail. What is your comment regarding this?

We feel that some of the advisers, for unknown reasons, have surrendered to the will of corrupt people. Maybe they will have to answer for it one day. Allah shall not forgive any sinner who has looted the property of 15 crore people of this country.

Should the political parties give nominations to those who are either convicted or accused in graft



Dr. Col. (ret) Oli Ahmad, Bir Bikram

cases?

Anybody who has been convicted is not eligible to become a candidate according to existing law. But those who have still not been convicted can participate in the election. In this case, the people will have to play an important role in casting their votes.

Do you support religion-based politics and political parties?

We have a constitution and the EC needs to follow it. There is no alternative for anybody.

Should political parties allow nomination of war criminals or communal people as candidates? What is your party's stand?

Every citizen of this country has the right to be a candidate in the election. Anybody who committed any type of crime, whether during the war or at some other time, and if it is proved, must not be allowed to participate in any election. He should be in the jail.

How do you evaluate the activities of foreign diplomats?

It is a shame for the nation. The time has come for us to handle our own business. We need courageous leaders who have the experience, ability, proper grooming, personality and requisite qualifications to handle the country's affairs. I don't blame any foreign diplomat.

Which political alliance will your party join ahead of the election?

Today, we are in a better position compared to 2006. Now everybody knows our election symbol, "umbrella." We are part of a grand alliance with Awami League (AL), and have an official meeting on November 7. But, sharing of seats will be finalised after arrival of AL chief Sheikh Hasina. We are not going to ask for any seats from AL or any other party in the grand alliance. There is no possibility of clash of interests with LDP.

When will you start distributing nomination forms among your leaders?

We will start distributing nomination papers from November 7 from our central office.

How many constituencies is your party going to contest from?

We can only decide that after receiving the nomination papers and interviewing the aspiring candidates. We have about 45 former ministers and lawmakers who have popularity and acceptability in their respective constituencies, and they can easily be elected as a part of the grand alliance.

What are the priority issues in your party's manifesto?

We will arrange loans for small businessmen and farmers of rural areas with a very low interest and without any collateral security. We will also make special arrangements for irrigation and electricity.

Do you support the caretaker government system? How will you evaluate the reform measures undertaken by the caretaker government in the last 20 months?

In future, we must not have any CTG. Political parties and leaders must learn how to trust each other and behave with responsibility. It is a shame for us. If we do not trust each other will other people trust us? The caretaker government is the illegitimate brainchild of some of the political leaders' fertile brain to destroy the political institution. Some of the leaders have fallen in the trap knowingly or unknowingly.

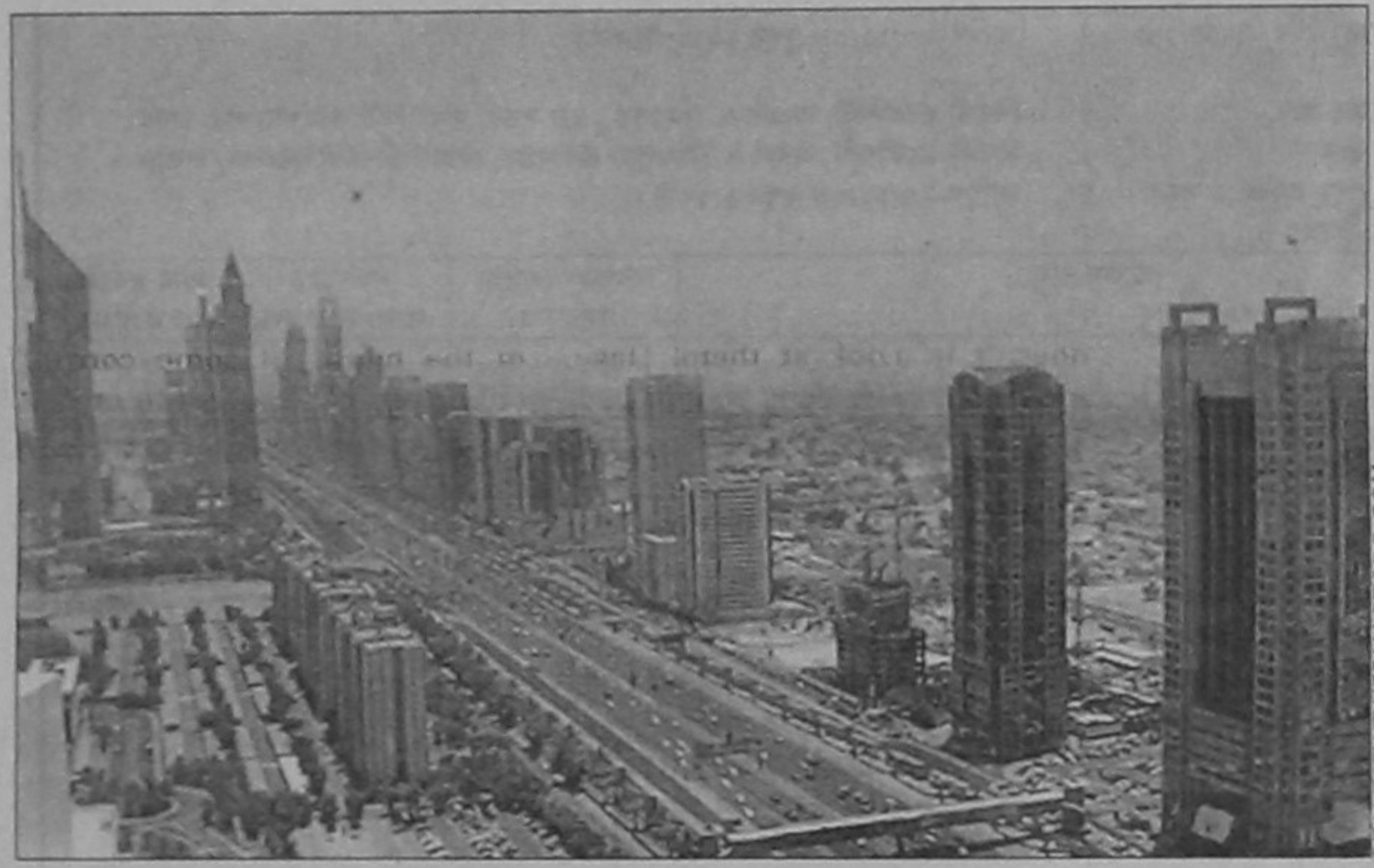
You came out from BNP and formed LDP, and were involved with Bikalpa Dhara. Why did it split?

I don't want to repeat or say anything about it. We have separate identities and work as separate political parties.

Will you respond if BNP calls you back?

Today's LDP is a popular political party, which enjoys the support of the people. Nobody should rule out any possibility of what will happen in the future. According to our party's constitution, I don't take any decision individually. We sit together, discuss and take collective decisions for all important matters.

## Doubts about Dubai



Few believe that Dubai is really in danger of defaulting on its debt. It is, of course, only one of seven emirates in the UAE; vastly wealthier Abu Dhabi or other Gulf countries would almost certainly rescue their neighbour in the event of a crisis.

KEVIN PERAINO

DUBAI'S boom has long been fueled by the notion that the region's oil economy would one day betray the tiny emirate. With shrinking hydro-carbon revenues now a single-digit percentage of its GDP, diversification into tourism, finance and other services was a no-brainer.

Even if oil prices slumped -- as they have in recent weeks, to below \$70-a-barrel -- the city's rapidly multiplying hotels and resorts could still be counted on to attract sun-seekers from Europe and Asia. The result: a supercharged real-estate market that includes some \$300 billion in recent projects.

Yet with stocks around the world tumbling and credit markets frozen, Dubai's heavily leveraged building binge is starting to raise concerns. A recent Moody's report found that Dubai's leverage now exceeds its GDP, and is likely to continue to outpace growth for another five years. That makes access to international credit markets particularly important. Unfortunately, loans are hard to come by these days. It doesn't help that Dubai's real-estate prices seem to be cooling somewhat (even if average returns are still in the double-digits). Finally, and perhaps most troubling, slumping world stock markets and rising unemployment are likely to keep non-Gulf tourists at home, just when those revenues are needed most.

Few believe that Dubai is really in danger of defaulting on its debt. It is, of course, only one of seven emirates in the UAE; vastly wealthier Abu Dhabi or other Gulf countries would almost certainly rescue their neighbour in the event of a crisis. In a proactive move, the UAE recently announced plans to guarantee domestic bank deposits for three years and inject some \$30 billion into local banks. As for Dubai, any potential rescue would be relatively inexpensive, considering the hundreds of billions of dollars sloshing around in the region's sovereign wealth funds.

Still, with oil and natural gas prices falling, those funds are no longer unlimited. And any intervention close to home in the Gulf could make sovereign-wealth funds even more skittish about investing abroad in foundering US banks, as they did late last year. That could remove an important prop for struggling Wall Street firms. "A lot of these funds invested [last year] and got burned," says

David Rubenstein, managing director of The Carlyle Group, who spent much of last week in Dubai. "I don't think any part of the world is immune."

Gulf-watchers began raising eyebrows earlier this month when two Dubai mortgage lenders, Amlak Finance and Tamweel, announced they were merging. Still, even if Dubai is likely to suffer from the lack of liquidity in the international credit markets, its fundamental problem is of a slightly different nature than the derivative-fueled bust of the American mortgage crisis.

"There's virtually no securitisation here," says one senior private-equity investor in the UAE, who asked not to be named so he could speak more frankly. "Markets are not very evolved here." The problem, instead, is that the speculative construction has been so feverish that banks have overextended themselves. "They just don't have the cash because they've been making these crazy loans," says the investor.

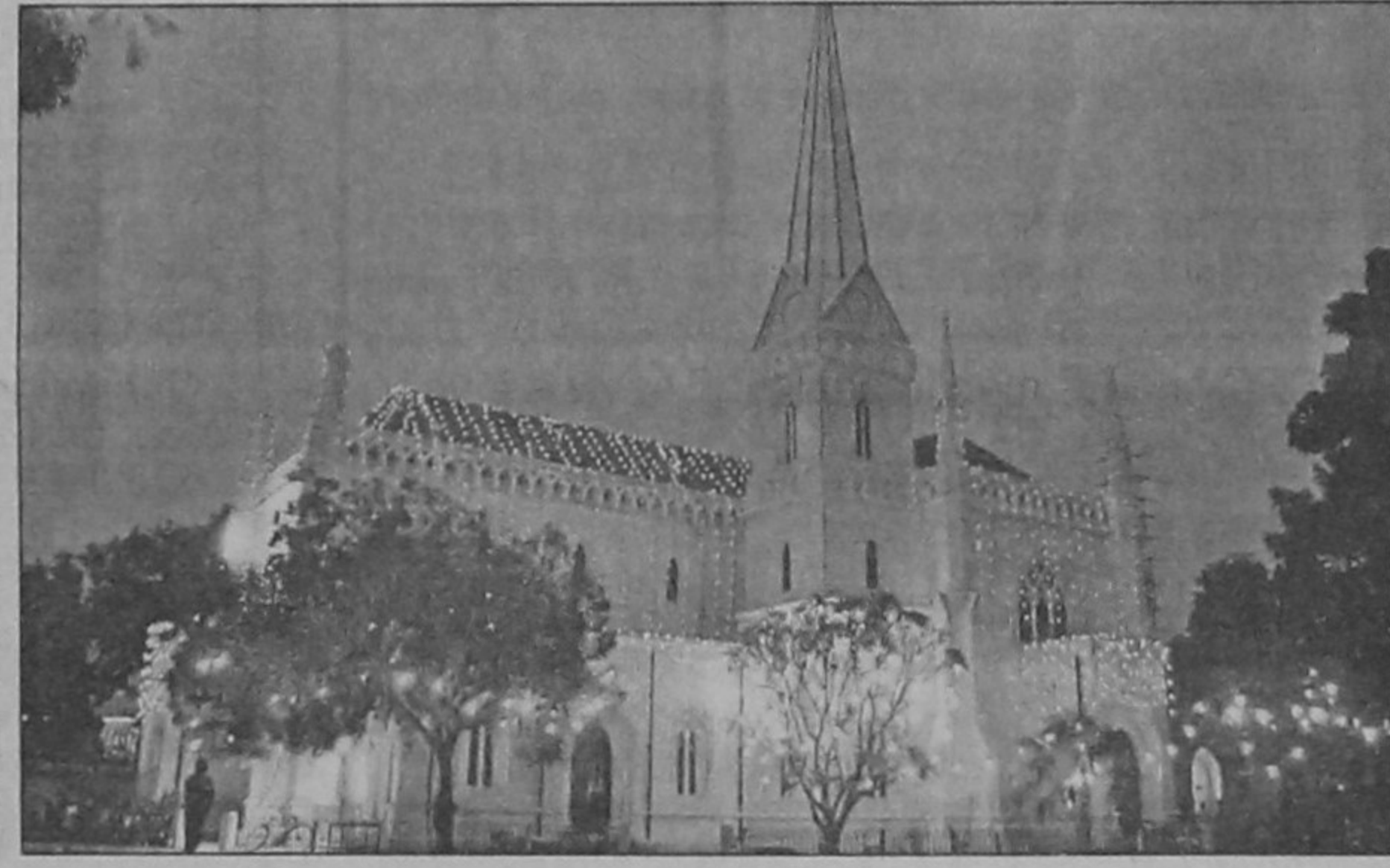
Dubai's building boom is so new that many of those loans are only beginning to be repaid. If tourism slows for any protracted period of time, it could leave developers vulnerable. Take, for example, the emirate's newly opened Atlantis resort, a massive pink structure complete with shark tank and palm-shaded man-made islands. For now it's packed -- and not only with oil-rich Gulfies.

"You walk around, and the voices you hear are all British and Russian," says Richard Rivlin, author of "Desert Capitalists." Yet "if the Brits are feeling pain in their pocket-books, they're going to be more worried about making their mortgage payments than going on a week-long holiday in Dubai."

There is, however, one category of visitor that is still making the cross-Atlantic trek to Dubai. As Wall Street firms have gone bust, "you're starting to see a lot of New York resumes floating around," says the private-equity investor, with more than a hint of Schadenfreude. An influx of cash-strapped former masters-of-the-universe isn't exactly the kind of visitor the emirate's economic planners had in mind. But at least there are some people out there who still believe in Dubai's promise.

Unlike Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Hinduism never had an Abraham, a single

## Raw wounds



What will be the face of India 60 years from now? Will the Indian flag be predominantly saffron encroaching upon a diminishing band of Muslim green? Will re-conversion to Hinduism be enough to protect Muslims and Christians from further discrimination?

FAKIR AJAZUDDIN

SOME wounds were never intended to heal. The division of the subcontinent in 1947 was one of them. What remains raw and suppurating even after 60 years is not the effect of the displacement of millions of people from their homes, the bisection of its human, material and natural assets, or the mutilation of a common history. It is the tacit admission that every religion in India other than Hinduism is an immigrant, a tenant rather than a son of the soil.

One does not need the third eye of Shiva to see the destruction that is being wrought in too many parts of India by right-wing Hindu extremists, intent on reversing history by re-converting the converted. There can be no friend of Hinduism, within India and outside it, who is not disturbed by accounts of the recent forcible conversion of Christians back to Hinduism.

Communal India today would seem to be no better than 16th century Tudor England. Then, Mary Tudor, a Catholic, ordered the persecution of converts to Protestantism and a reversion to the religion of Rome; today, a country led by a Catholic-born convert to Indian nationality is mute witness to sectarian barbarity in which the religions imported from Rome and from Mecca are targets for re-conversion.

Sixty years ago, the segregation of Muslims concentrated in the northern and eastern extremities of India was thought to be the solution to sectarian hostility. Pakistan and later Bangladesh became the new nation-state ghettos for sub-continental Muslims. For years since then, they offered residual Indian Muslims the same choice that Israel did for Jewry unwelcome in Europe and the East. Muslims who remained in India were left to create their own ghettos, as Jews were in Russia.

What will be the face of India 60 years from now? Will the Indian flag be predominantly saffron encroaching upon a diminishing band of Muslim green? Will re-conversion to Hinduism, even if it were to occur on a large enough scale, be enough to protect previous Muslims and Christians from further discrimination?

Millennia ago, the Ocean of Milk was churned by the *devas*. It produced first a pot of poison *Halahala* that Shiva swallowed, and afterwards the precious pot of *Amrita*. The churning of India's communal ocean is yielding *Halahala*. How long will it take for the *Amrita* of communal harmony to emerge?

For India, religion will always be an issue. That pluralism exists in India is a fact. That India is secular is a matter of interpretation of the term "secular." Does it mean the separation of religion and the state, or does it mean the referee-ship of the state over all competing religions?

It could take Hinduism another thousand years to mature, before it feels no longer threatened by ideologies more structured than its own, or by religious observances that go beyond tactile symbolism.

Millennia ago, the Ocean of Milk was churned by the *devas*. It produced first a pot of poison *Halahala* that Shiva swallowed, and afterwards the precious pot of *Amrita*. The churning of India's communal ocean is yielding *Halahala*. How long will it take for the *Amrita* of communal harmony to emerge?

progenitor whose descendants populate every corner of the globe. These religions have over the centuries become spiritual trans-nationals, while Hinduism has remained concentrated within the geography of India itself.

Ironically, Pakistan and Bangladesh have less to fear from Indian communalism than ever before. They are being legitimised already as outcasts, living like butchers do in rural India, on the periphery.

The million mutinies, to borrow Naipaul's memorable phrase, that will take place over the next 60 years will be not from without but from within India. Now that India is on an irreversible trajectory to becoming a regional superpower, it will need to be prepared to suffer the same finger-wagging the Chinese have had to endure from Western liberals after the Tiananmen incident in 1999. India should expect similar sermons from its friends.

For the first time in their recorded history, both India and China have expanded their political identities to occupy their geographical boundaries. For the Chinese, religion will never be an issue. Over a thousand years have passed since the Great Anti-Buddhist persecution in 845 AD.

In the next thousand years, unless there is another Tang dynasty, no single religion is likely to emerge pre-eminent, head and halo above the others as Buddhism did.

For India, religion will always be an issue. That pluralism exists in India is a fact. That India is secular is a matter of interpretation of the term "secular." Does it mean the separation of religion and the state, or does it mean the referee-ship of the state over all competing religions?

It could take Hinduism another thousand years to mature, before it feels no longer threatened by ideologies more structured than its own, or by religious observances that go beyond tactile symbolism.

Millennia ago, the Ocean of Milk was churned by the *devas*. It produced first a pot of poison *Halahala* that Shiva swallowed, and afterwards the precious pot of *Amrita*. The churning of India's communal ocean is yielding *Halahala*. How long will it take for the *Amrita* of communal harmony to emerge?

Millennia ago, the Ocean of Milk was churned by the *devas*. It produced first a pot of poison *Halahala* that Shiva swallowed, and afterwards the precious pot of *Amrita*. The churning of India's communal ocean is yielding *Halahala*. How long will it take for the *Amrita* of communal harmony to emerge?

Fakir Ajazuddin is an eminent Pakistani journalist and author.