

In defense of secularism

It is necessary to re-discover secularism. Secularism is neither anti-religious nor anti-Islamic. Secularism means that the government of a country should not carry out its day-to-day jobs adhering to any religious texts. Religion is for people to practice for their spiritual development, if they want.

A.J.M. SHAFIUL ALAM BHUIYAN

SECULARISM remains as an enigmatic concept in our national politics. Progressive politicians are yet to be successful in establishing it as a principle of governance. The last several years have been tough for them, and they were on the run because of the emergence of a radical right wing. Many progressive politicians would be happy to see secularism remain as a non-issue in the upcoming election.

Unfortunately, they will have to face it. During every general election it became an issue. I can share the example of one election with you when I, as a journalist at the time, intensively covered election processes. It was during the 1996 parliamentary election when I traveled across the country to know how common people would see the election, who they would prefer for their votes, and what they would expect to see after the election.

During that election, one party was subject to a smear campaign that if the party would be voted to power, we would hear ululation from the mosques

instead of azans, since the party holds secularism as one of its principles. Many elderly Muslims in rural areas asked me about this for clarification.

In our country, ululation is a Hindu ritual. Muslims never did it as a practice. But in Arab countries, women, irrespective of religion, ululate to celebrate a wedding, to express grief over a death, and to show honour to a respected person. In East Africa, women at some orthodox churches ululate to call people for prayer. Ululation is not a Hindu religious practice; rather it is a cultural act performed mainly by the Arabs.

The AL could undo the smear campaign at that time because people were fed up with BNP rule. Of course, during AL's tenure we did not hear any ululation. Nobody really expected to. People understood that it was a ploy to scare voters away from the AL. The AL may encounter this propaganda again as we are approaching to a general election at the end of this month. One hopes that the four-party alliance will not bring this issue back to challenge secularism.

Since the mid-1970s, the right wing

politicians hijacked the idea of secularism and defamed it as something anti-religious and anti-Islam to establish their political legacy, stoking people's fear of losing their religious rights, and became somewhat successful. General Ershad's declaration of Islam as the state religion and the rule of the four-party alliance have weakened the foundation of secularism in the country. Religious fundamentalists are now pushing for enacting laws to protect religious fanaticism. Having the goal to enact blasphemy laws in the election manifesto is one example of that.

It is necessary to re-discover secularism. Secularism is neither anti-religious nor anti-Islamic. Secularism means that the government of a country should not carry out its day-to-day jobs adhering to any religious texts. Religion is for people to practice for their spiritual development, if they want. Inherent in the idea of secularism is the plurality of religion and tolerance.

In a country, people of multiple religions exist. If the country is run by the texts of a particular religion, people from other religions will find it discriminating against them. The duty of a democratic country is to establish justice and equality and ensure the protection of the rights of minorities and vulnerable groups.

Bangladesh is a unique country in terms of its birth. It was created as a result of a language-based nationalism, not based on any religion. Adhering to this fact, the founding figures outlined

secularism as one of the principles of state organisation.

The military dictators, who ruled the country after the murder of the founding father, initiated the exploitation of religion for their political purposes. But one thing Bangladeshi people demonstrated time and again is that they are deeply religious, but they do not tolerate religious fanaticism in any form or shape.

In the 1960s people stood against Mawdudi's orthodox interpretation of Islam. In recent years, people have rallied against religious fanatics like the so-called Bangla Bhai, the leader of a religious vigilante group who faced capital punishment. People are aware that the so-called Islamic parties invoke the religion for their political gains.

It is not only Muslim fundamentalists who hate secularism and use religion for political gains, but the Hindu, Christian, and Jewish fundamentalists also do the same. Secularism emerged as a political principle as a result of people's upheaval against Christian churches across 19th century Europe.

We can keep faith on the awareness of our people, but hardly can sit idle if we want to regain secularism. Muslim fundamentalists have gained strength and have got organised and are working round the clock to cajole people in the name of religion. Pakistan lends us a great lesson here.

Once Pakistan had a vibrant progressive force, but the country began to be dominated by fundamentalists with the



The freedom fighters fought for secularism.

patronage of President General Ziaul Haque in the early 1980s, who, with Middle Eastern money and US support, trained various Islamic groups to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. Now not only Pakistan but also the whole South Asia including Bangladesh and India is now under threat from religious radicals.

The government which we hope to elect through the upcoming parliamentary election should initiate a tripartite move involving India and Pakistan against religious extremism. Our gov-

ernment's role may be critical in this move since we have an opportunity to emerge as a mediating force between India and Pakistan if we can have an independent stand without moving toward any one of them. I believe most Bangladeshis would like to see the country emerge as a key player of peace in the increasingly volatile South Asia.

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Election 2008: Defenders of the minority vote

There is clear evidence of violence which resulted in Hindu-majority polling centres being closed, Hindu voters staying away from polls, as well as manipulation of vote counting to exclude the Hindu vote.

NAEEM MOHALEMEN

A seminar last week discussing the newly formed National Human Rights Commission, it was pointedly asked why it had no minority members. The chairman had no reply for us, but the question kept percolating in the room.

In another air-con room a week later, the Awami League unveiled its election manifesto. Section 18.1 pledges to improve the condition of minorities, adivasis, indigenous people, and dalits, by removing discriminatory laws, forming land commission to protect their land, creating job opportunities, etc. Section 18.2 talks about implementation of the CHT Peace Accord.

Those who recall the abrupt volte face of the AL-Khelafat Andolon alliance of December 2006, or who are distressed at the alliance presence of JP which inserted "Islam as state religion" into the constitution, will remain cautious. But while guarded, we may still

hope for an incremental shift in political parties' commitment to minority rights.

Historically, minority communities have been perceived to vote for the AL (if only because the other parties are increasingly hard-line on religion). This was manifested in 2001, when Hindu voters were prevented from voting in many areas. After the BNP-Jamaat victory, BNP-allied local gangs attacked Hindu villages. According to press reports at the time, the southwestern and southern part of Bangladesh (popularly known as the 'Hindu belt') was worst affected.

Meghna Guhathakurta, in a forthcoming essay (Journal of Social Studies No. 121 January-March 2009), describes a visit to Bhola, one of the worst affected districts: "Among the atrocities committed were charging into households, attacking men, women and children with sharp knives and weapons, in certain cases threatening with guns, terrorizing women and children

In a petition filed to the High Court in November 2001 (Writ 6558 of 2001, Ain o Salish Kendra vs. Government of Bangladesh, judgment pending as of 2008), a list of 391 incidents of violence or intimidation against minorities in different villages were documented from newspapers of September-October 2001.

Dhaka Division (112 incidents):	Rajshahi Division (50 incidents):	Khulna Division (97 incidents):
Faridpur (13), Dhaka (12), Rajbari (2), Madaripur (1), Tangail (8), Narshingdi (3), Gazipur (11), Munshiganj (6), Narayanganj (3), Kishoreganj (5), Netrokona (6), Sherpur (11), Jamalpur (10), Shariatpur (11), Mymensingh (3), Gopalganj (7)	Seralganj (11), Pabna (6), Dinajpur (9), Nabobganj (1), Rajshahi (12), Naogaon (3), Ishwardi (1), Panchagarh (2), Bagura (1), Natore (4)	Jessore (18), Shatkhira (10), Khulna (13), Bagmati (31), Kushtia (1), Narail (14), Magura (2), Jheniadah (5), Chuadanga (3)
Barisal Division (61 incidents):	Sylhet Division (4 incidents):	Chittagong Division (67 incidents):
Jhalokathi (8), Patuakhali (13), Bhola (12), Ferozpur (3)	Moulvi Bazar (3), Sylhet (1)	Chandpur (6), Comilla (22), Feni (11), Chittagong (16), Laxmipur (2), Cox's Bazar (7), Noakhali (2), Khagrachari (1)

by beating and chasing them and in certain cases raping and attempting rape. Looting of Hindu households and sometimes Muslim households which sheltered Hindus took place throughout the night and in waves since most households had fled in terror and their houses were left unguarded."

According to research done by a rights NGO, based on the National Democratic Institute (NDI) data-set, the 1991 and 2001 Bangladesh election results could have been different given

the razor-thin margins by which many seats were won, and the huge number of minority voters that were prevented from voting in those very seats. Out of 300 constituencies for parliament seats, there are 71 where minority voters are significant (ranging from 11% to 61%) and 50 where they are visible (5-10%). According to the 2001 Population Census, the Hindu population was 11,379,000 - 9.2 per cent of the total.

These statistics do not count other religious minorities, nor ethnic minori-

ties. If we look at the intersection between religious and ethnic minority in Juma people of Chittagong Hill Tracts, we find these were areas with lowest voter turnout. According to analysis of NDI data by Rahman & Ahamed (Daily Star, Dec 12), there were 850 centres where voter turnout in 2001 was less than half of total registered voters. Of these, 87 centres were in Cox's Bazaar, 49 in Bandarban, 67 in Rangamati, and 36 in Khagrachari. In addition, around 87 centres with less than 50 per cent turnout were in Cox's Bazaar-3. There were 35 polling centres where voter turnout was as low as or lower than 10%. Of these, 18 were in Rangamati, 8 in Khagrachari, 5 in Cox's Bazaar-3, and 2 in Bandarban.

Looking at specific constituencies in 2001, Rahman & Ahamed (Daily Star, Dec 13) zero in on Bagerhat-4 where 12% voters are religious minority, and Khulna-5 where 40% of voters are religious minority. Looking at the NDI data, there is clear evidence of violence which resulted in Hindu-majority polling centres being closed, Hindu voters staying away from polls, as well as manipulation of vote counting to exclude the Hindu vote. In both constituencies, a Jamaat-e-Islami candidate was declared the winner.

As a result of the tremendous pre- and post-election violence directed at

minorities in 2001, this has become an area of specific interest for international election observers in 2008. Local human rights defenders are doing outreach to make sure minority voters do not get intimidated. But so much more is needed, including a public commitment to this from the Election Commission and other administration.

In India's West Bengal, Trinamool and Left Front compete with each other to woo the minority vote (in their case, the Muslims). Of course this is practical politics -- West Bengal has a 27% Muslim population, and there is no law like Bangladesh's Vested Property Act that creates downward pressure on their numbers (in fact the Muslim voter numbers have gone up with each election). In Bangladesh, as the Hindu population is going down due to VPA, politicians think the minority vote does not have to be respected, nor do many worry about ensuring that these voters can enter polling booths safely.

A call to protect minority rights must come from the majority. I place my hope on ordinary citizens, the silent majority, the secular Muslim. We can and must defend Bangladesh's secular core, starting with the minority vote.

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Thirty seven years on

With our will and determination, there is strong reason to believe that we can do justice to our valiant freedom fighters who sacrificed everything in the war of independence by organising and arranging trial for war criminals.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

THERE are three versions of the liberation war of Bangladesh: one of the AL, another of the BNP, and yet another of the JI. We want to avoid the anomalousness about it because of our apprehension that our national consciousness may be challenged. This has emboldened the parties who oppose the birth of Bangladesh to call the war of independence a civil war because, they argue, Pakistan was one country and both sides were fighting on a shared land, and that the war was between India and Pakistan.

The argument that the war of independence of 1971 was a civil war is not tenable because Independence Day was March 26 1971, and, as such, Pakistani forces were fighting against Bangladeshi forces.

Another argument that it was a part of Indo-Pak war is also not acceptable because the primary war was fought between Pakistan and Bangladesh forces. The Indo-Pak war was, in fact, a by-product of the Bangla-Pak war. Everything that happened after March 26, 1971, was contingent on

this war.

The then government of Pakistan wanted to nullify the results of the 1970 election through another election in 1971. Members of the National Peace Committee and participants in this election were against the creation of the state of Bangladesh. As these people were acting against the state of Bangladesh they should not be a part of political structure of Bangladesh. As Bangladesh came into existence on March 26, 1971, the argument that the Pakistan army were fighting against rebel forces cannot be acceded to.

All the parties opposing the war of independence were banned in 1972 because they were enemies of the state, in the truest sense of the term. It is well known that such people are not tolerated anywhere in the world. It is unfortunate that these elements have not only been allowed to re-enter politics in Bangladesh, but they have been able to share state power. We have not yet been able to formulate the requisite laws to punish the people who participated in the anti-liberation activities as war criminals.

The greatest damage done to our

body politic was through actions/decisions like establishing one-party rule, displacement of constitutional pillars, and converting Bangladesh into single-religion state. It is really sad that even after 37 years of independence, we have no credible survey as to how many people were killed in genocide, or how many women were raped by Pakistan army. Bangladesh's birth and history should have been turned into a rational discourse and not an issue of contention.

Thirty seven years are not very long period for a nation which has passed through so much of political restlessness. With our will and determination, there is strong reason to believe that we can do justice to our valiant freedom fighters who sacrificed everything in the war of independence by organising and arranging trial for war criminals.

Only posturing may not assist us in achieving the purpose. It would be too much to expect such a critical and serious job from a caretaker government. We wish that all those who have love and respect for the freedom fighters may tenaciously pressing the next government for taking all out measures to organise the trial of the war criminals and flush out the anti-liberation politicians from the political arena of Bangladesh for the peace and prosperity of the land.

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Equal opportunity

We should remember that women's participation in the elections is not a privilege but their constitutional right. It must be remembered that for the smooth-functioning of democracy, good governance and sustainable development women must be mainstreamed in the political process.

RANJAN KARMAKER

FREE, fair and neutral Jatiya Sangsad and local government elections are a must for a democratic, just and equitable society. Participation of all citizens in these elections is very important, for which there is a need to take special initiatives from the policy, legal and structural perspectives.

The Election Commission (EC) has made it mandatory for political parties to include at least 33% women in the different committees to qualify for registration. Another good initiative is the preparation of a new voter list including photos. In a total of 8,10,58698 voters there are 4,12,36,149 females (50.187%) and 3,98,22,549 males (49.13%).

The Election Commission can form a number of committees with representatives from relevant departments and citizens. They will ensure everybody's participation at local levels. These committees are Electoral Investigation Committee, Election Management Team, Election

Monitoring Team, Law and Order Team, and Vigilance and Monitoring Team.

In these committees, 33% women's participation must be ensured as the representatives of approximately 51% voters because they will be able to raise women's issues and concerns and thereby take appropriate initiatives.

We have seen in the past that women could not exercise their voting power in some areas because of fatwa and other false religious dictations. The EC should encourage women to cast their vote, and should take strict action against those who try to deter them. The EC should ensure that the overall electoral environment is women-friendly.

Our recommendations are:
• Separate women's booths should be set up in those constituencies with more women voters;
• Adequate number of separate polling booths should be set up for women. Since women have to spend more time for household and child rearing purposes, they should not

have to wait for long to cast their vote.

• Women should be deployed as election officials in the electoral centers and booths.

Though the constitution of Bangladesh and different policies clearly recognise women's equal rights and partnership, women's participation in political and state institutions has been very limited due to the dominance of a patriarchal mindset.

However, in the last few elections, we saw that women, especially those of the religious minority and disadvantaged groups, were the first victims of attack during or following the elections. So without proper steps, women may not be encouraged to go to the polling stations and cast their votes.

We should remember that women's participation in the elections is not a privilege but their constitutional right. Therefore, it is a major responsibility of those involved with the elections process to take proper steps so that women do not face any difficulties while exercising their voting right. Political parties also have some responsibilities in this regard. It must be remembered that for the smooth-functioning of democracy, good governance and sustainable development women must be mainstreamed in the political process.

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