

Sanctity of the national mosque

It cannot be allowed to be impinged on

IT is highly regrettable that on the past two successive Fridays Baitul Mukarram, the premier venue of Jumma congregation in the city, had to witness noisy disturbances, fisticuffs and even hurling of shoes centring around appointment of principal Md Salauddin as the new Khatib.

On Friday prior to the immediate past one, supporters of acting Khatib Mufti Moulana Nur Uddin and those of the newly appointed one engaged in brawl and even tossing of shoes at each other to the utter surprise and shock of the large body of faithfuls assembled to perform Jumma prayers. Although the designated new Khatib did not lead the prayers on that day, apparently in a bid to avert tension, yet when the acting Khatib started reading Khudba (sermon), supporters of the former created a furore. On the following Friday when the new Khatib began to conduct his first Jumma prayers, protests raged from his detractors triggering clashes in and outside the mosque. The breakaway group went for a separate Jam'at on the road near the north gate of the mosque in a show of protest in public.

All these do not only undermine the sanctity of an exalted religious place but also profoundly hurt the sensibilities of the faithfuls. Mosque being a place where people converge to supplicate before the Almighty in an atmosphere of tranquillity cannot be the place for chaotic scenes, far less for such an abominable act as hurling shoes around.

We have occasionally seen in the past some religion-based political parties or groups taking out processions from the mosque compound and organising political rallies outside its gate. Sometimes in the event of clashes with the police, political activists or pickets use the mosque premise as refuge. Now, we see an open tussle between two groups inside the mosque. Noticeably, different organisations with political label have been issuing statements in favour of either the newly appointed Khatib or the acting one. The government ought to deal with the issue firmly before it snowballs.

Mosques or religious places must be kept above political squabble and controversy of any sort whatsoever. It's a place for prayer and the relevant authorities in the government should get a move on to protect its sanctity at any cost.

Widening dimensions of Gaza conflict

Israel's actions will radicalise Palestinians even more

THE Israeli government's rejection of an appeal by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon for it to declare a unilateral ceasefire in Gaza is the latest sad twist to an increasingly agonizing story. In the three weeks since Israeli forces launched their offensive against Hamas militants in Gaza, more than 1,000 Palestinians have died through a demonstration of Israeli firepower, with most of the victims being women and children. In the last one week, Israeli soldiers have attacked local neighbourhoods in Gaza while Tel Aviv's airpower has relentlessly pounded away at residential buildings in the name of flushing out Hamas militants. Not even the UN compound there has been spared, an act of wanton aggression that has forced US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to raise the issue with the Israeli leadership. Now Amnesty International has weighed in with a call for an investigation into the incident and has even hinted at the attack being regarded as a war crime.

The irony of the whole situation is that despite all the protests against Israel's actions worldwide, its leadership has defiantly resisted all calls for it to rein itself in. There have been other ironies at work as well. Consider this: while nearly the entire Arab region has maintained a studious and quite indefensible silence on Tel Aviv's pummeling of Gaza, the governments of distant Bolivia and Venezuela have moved decisively to cut diplomatic ties with the Zionist state. Even Egypt's moves toward bringing about a ceasefire have been marked by half-heartedness. Briefly, governments in the Middle East have not exactly endeared themselves to Palestinians and people elsewhere by the sheer inaction they have put themselves into. The degree of pressure that ought to have been mounted on Israel by these governments has woefully been missing, a fact that perhaps has led to the desperation of the Palestinians. The Hamas could be dissuaded from launching rockets into Israeli territory through other means, but what cannot be accepted is the brazenness of the Israeli response and the inability of the global community to compel Ehud Olmert's government to put a stop to its actions.

These next few days will determine the future for both Palestinians and Israelis. The Gaza attack has left the former more radicalised, while the latter will sooner or later understand that their victory will have been a pyrrhic one. Worse, the conflict threatens to leave the world even more polarised than it already is.

Koko's kickbacks

It beggars the imagination, the amount of money that some politicians and businessmen earned, enjoying unchecked power and privilege during the tenure of the last BNP-led government. They turned the country into their private fiefdoms, plundering its wealth and siphoning off huge fortunes to maintain accounts with offshore banks.

A. N. M. NURUL HAQUE

ARRIVAL of US-UK team to Dhaka to identify the persons involved in laundering of \$200 million to Singapore and to help Bangladesh recover the money is a significant development towards retrieving of our stolen wealth siphoned off abroad.

The money was allegedly paid in kickbacks to Begum Khaleda Zia's second son Arafat Rahman Koko and a number of ministers of the BNP-led four-party alliance government and Hawa Bhaban clique.

The US Department of Justice has already moved to confiscate around \$3 million from bank accounts of Koko maintained in Singapore and the forfeiture action against the funds has been sought in a US district court in Washington DC. Meanwhile, the US ambassador in Bangladesh has said that the US Justice Department's action in this regard has nothing to do with Bangladesh politics.

The case filed with the US court on January 8, primarily relates to alleged bribes paid to Koko in connection with public works projects awarded by the government of Bangladesh to Siemens AG and China Harbour Engineering Company for building a new mooring container terminal in Chittagong port.

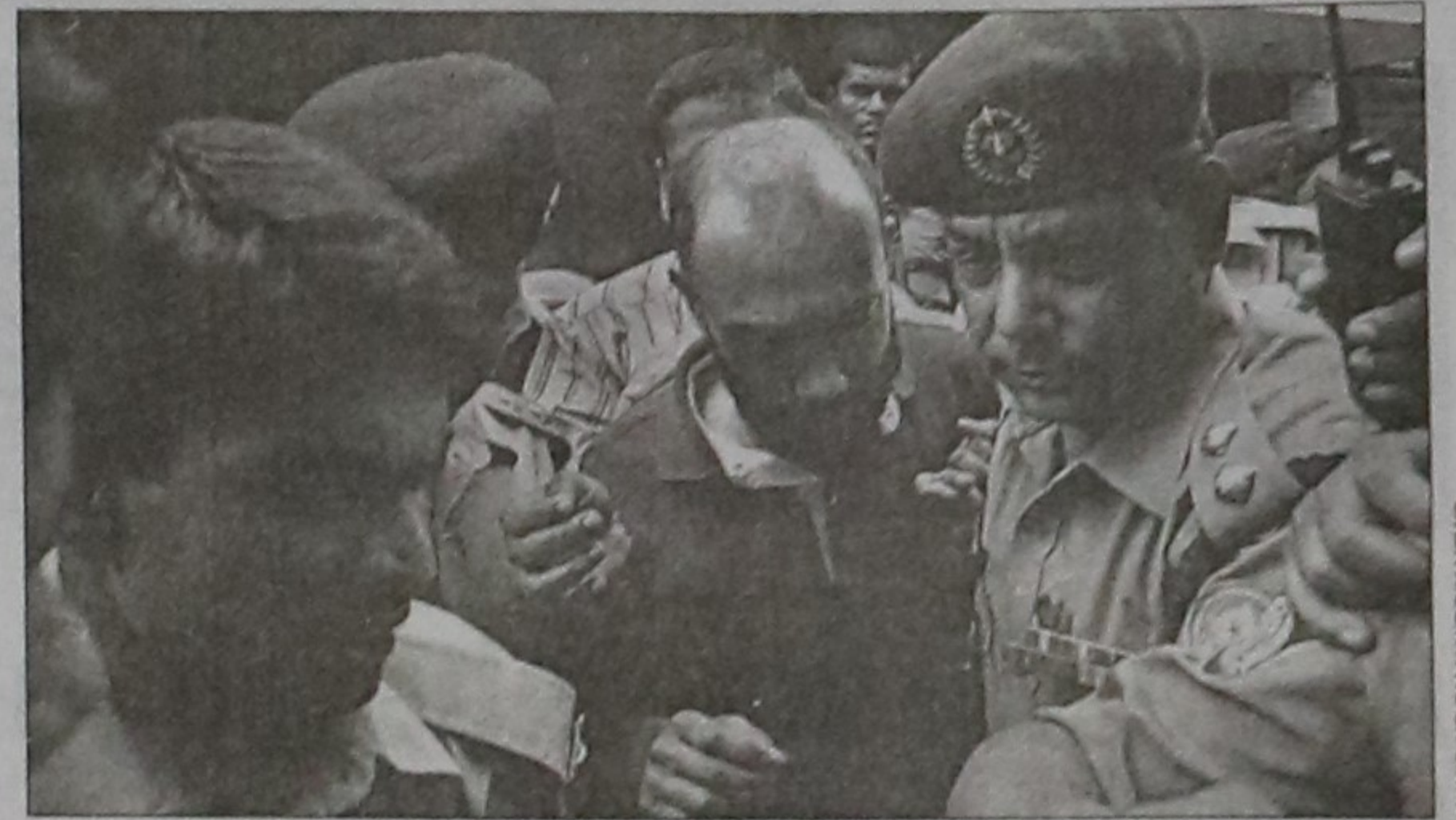
Siemens Bangladesh has admitted that between May 2001 and August 2006, it made illicit payments of at least \$5.32 million through purported business consultants to various Bangladeshi officials in exchange for favourable treatment during the bidding process on a mobile telephone project.

The ACC also unearthed information with the help of Singapore government in December 2007 that Koko has foreign currencies worth around Tk 11.43 crore deposited in a Singapore bank. Investigation into the controversial Warid Telecom deal also revealed how Koko ripped off millions of dollars to buy property in Dubai and build bank deposits in Hong Kong.

The caretaker government had been able to retrieve \$129 million siphoned off money in its drastic measures taken against the corrupt businessmen and political bigwigs. It recovered foreign currency equivalent to Tk 20.41 crore from controversial businessman and a close friend of BNP's former senior joint secretary general Tarique Rahman, Giasuddin Al Mamun who issued three cheques for repatriation of the money siphoned off to Singapore.

The caretaker government was convinced that in the past few years, corrupt people had siphoned off huge amount of money earned illegally to Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Switzerland, UK, US, and some Middle East countries and tried to reach specific agreements with these countries to get retrieval of the siphoned off money. It also formed a high-powered task force to accelerate the process of repatriation of the money.

Bangladesh Bank also formed a special team Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) with the technical assistance from the US to combat financial crimes and to retrieve money stashed abroad. The FIU, comprised of Bangladesh Bank officials and Anti-Corruption Commission and law enforcing agency officials, could not make any progress.



At the centre of the scandal.

World Bank has offered its assistance to recover the wealth siphoned off from the country by corrupt people. World Bank's South Asia Region Vice President Praful Patel made this pledge during his visit to Bangladesh. "Stolen assets must be recovered and the World Bank stands ready to provide assistance in this regard." United Nations has also offered help for retrieval of illegally earned money sent overseas.

It beggars the imagination, the amount of money that some politicians and businessmen earned, enjoying unchecked power and privilege during the tenure of the last BNP-led government. They turned the country into their private fiefdoms, plundering its wealth and siphoning off huge fortunes to maintain accounts with offshore banks.

Though retrieving of stashed and kickback money by the corrupt politicians and government officials is a common problem faced by many developing countries, success in repatriation is scanty.

A Presidential Commission of Good Government in Philippines had been able to retrieve a tiny portion of money siphoned off to Switzerland by Ferdinand Marcos. The Nigerian government, however, succeeded in retrieving nearly one billion dollars stashed

abroad by the late dictator Abacha. The Bank of Indonesia (BI), the central bank of the country, is hunting the Bank Century's shareholders to retrieve the bank's assets stashed in UK and Singapore. BI's deputy governor said that BI would send letters to banking watchdogs in the two countries to help retrieve Century's assets needed to save the bank and, if necessary, it would seek assistance from Interpol.

Stashed kickbacks of Koko, which may go beyond \$200 million, has impelled us to think anew of the magnitude of corruption at top level that has eaten so deep into the fabric of our national life.

The involvement of US Justice Department and FBI in investigation of such trans-border financial crimes has added an impetus to our efforts in combating corruption in high places and to get back the stashed away money.

We expect that the new government would take all measures to ensure that such anti-state elements get severe punishment for the damage that they have inflicted on the country.

A.N.M. Nurul Haque is a Daily Star columnist.

Challenges for the new government

The challenge will, however, have to be faced to stimulate RMG exports and invite foreign investment in the face of current global meltdown that may continue for another two years, and to create employment when the Western economies and Middle Eastern construction industry are expected to compress, thus affecting remittances from Bangladeshi expatriates.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

IN simplistic terms, communism failed as an economic system because it could not sustain itself in meeting the demands of the people, as the supply of the commodities was determined more through bureaucratic fiat than through an analysis of the real demand for the goods and services.

As Alan Greenspan wrote (The Age of Turbulence): "The Soviet Union had a bureaucracy for everything. At the pinnacle sat Gosplan which dictated the type, quantity, and price of every commodity produced at every single factory and plant across 11 time zones."

Such power inevitably invited corruption, as accountability to the people (as exists in democratic societies) did not exist. Of course, the political reasons were also paramount in the demise of the communist system. The stunning improvement in the economic development of the Western

world increased the aspirations of the people in the communist bloc and hastened the pace of the demise of communism in its heartland in Europe.

Mikhail Gorbachev's introduction of glasnost (openness and candour) in the media and culture and perestroika (restructuring) of the nation's economy and political system led to quick extinction of the Soviet system and the dissolution of the Soviet empire.

Among the most impressive contributions of Gorbachev to the change in the global political structure was his refusal to intervene in East Europe where popular pressure for political transformation had gained momentum.

Political cost of unbridled capitalism became apparent with the global meltdown that started in the US, where the Adam Smith's theory that minimalist role by the government will take a nation "to the highest degree of opulence from lowest barbarism" fell flat on its face because lack

of oversight on the craving of the capitalists for abnormal profit.

People who are strong believers in capitalism ignored the externalities embedded in the market and ignored the fact that perfect marriage between demand and supply is a theoretical concept, particularly in places where few firms control the supply of commodities and free flow of information about market conditions does not exist.

In underdeveloped economies, often captains of industry and commerce also dictate state economic policies either as pressure groups on the political authority or on their election as members of parliament. Constricting opportunities for industrialists and businessmen from contesting the elections would infringe upon their fundamental rights as free citizens.

This argument is unassailable if unholy nexus does not develop between political and economic entities. But with the withering of idealistic politics and the advent of commerce based politics politicians in both the developed and developing worlds have increasingly become dependent on donations from industrialists to finance their elections. These donations are hardly given for altruistic reasons. Such concentric relationship invariably leads to inequity and social stratification in terms of wealth and power.

Bangladesh has demonstrated its strong commitment to democracy through the recent election. Now the

present government will be facing challenges to bring down the price of essentials within the reach of common people.

Over the last few weeks price of coarse, medium, and fine rice dropped by 12%. But according to Samarendu Mohanty (Rice and Global Financial Crisis), the current rice area is at a historic height and additional area is unlikely to come to meet future increased demand. If the yield growth rate does not increase, the price of rice globally will not come down.

Besides, crop yield is directly related to the amount of nutrients taken up by a crop, and fertilizer supplies a significant portion of the nutrients (fertiliser markets are expected to remain tight for another three years).

Bangladesh government's decision to increase subsidy on fertiliser and reduce price of diesel to boost agricultural production could make us less dependent on import of cereal. Warning that punitive measures will be taken against hoarders and profiteers is showing results.

The challenge will, however, have to be faced to stimulate RMG exports and invite foreign investment in the face of current global meltdown that may continue for another two years, and to create employment when the Western economies and Middle Eastern construction industry are expected to compress, thus affecting remittances from Bangladeshi expatriates.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Flattery, please; who wants friends?

Our saving grace may be simply this: greed for power will trump greed for money. Indian politics is full of characters without character. The voter with a billboard is checking them out.

M.J. AKBAR

ONE of the most instructive stories I have read about democracy comes from 1865. John Stuart Mill, the British philosopher, was an independent parliamentary candidate for Westminster that year. He was campaigning to extend the franchise to the working class. He was making his pitch before an audience when someone entered the hall carrying a billboard. On it was a quotation from Mill: "The lower classes, though mostly habitual liars, are ashamed of lying."

The proverbial thunderbolt had interfered, and it could have left the candidate dead. He was asked, had he written those words? Mill paused, but for only a second. "I did," he said. There was another pause. And then audience erupted, applauding, clapping, whistling, and stamping their feet in approval. Their leader, George Odger, cheered Mill with a classic remark: "The working class had no desire not to be told of their faults; they wanted friends, not

flatterers."

Friends, not flatterers. If you emptied Delhi of flatterers and limited the political-bureaucratic ruling class to friends, the city's population would come down by 99%. It is pertinent to note that Mill got elected.

The point of the story is not the honesty of the intellectual, but that of the working class. The electorate would have punished a lie. Obviously, not everyone was blessed with such virtues, but you have to be blind not to recognise the value system that made Britain, a nation of shopkeepers (Napoleon's phrase), into the 19th century's pre-eminent superpower.

They had a word for it, character. Character was a moral asset that combined honesty and loyalty to a fellow citizen or comrade-soldier. It is a reflection of contemporary morality that we have changed the meaning of the word. Today a character is either a chap with a tic in his metabolism, or a role in fiction, film or television. From a truth, character has changed to artifice.

The front page of every newspaper in

Delhi provides daily testimony to the fact that Indian power politics is about flattery, which is why loyalty has overlapped completely with obsequiousness. The sycophancy may be marked in Congress, but other parties are hardly immune. Mayawati routinely demands cringing obedience from those hapless enough to have taken a favour from her, and uses humiliation as a political tool. Stories from the South are worse.

Andhra Pradesh is rife with thuggery. You might ask, legitimately, why newspapers do not expose this odious stink. The price of independence is high. When the chairman of the Eenadu group, Ramoji Rao, refused to be Andhra chief minister Rajashekhar Reddy's lackey, the state government went after his businesses with vicious ferocity. Every instrument of coercion in the state government, the union finance ministry, the registrar of companies, the income tax department and even the Reserve Bank of India, was used against Ramoji Rao's Margadarsi Financiers.

When this did not break Rao, bulldozers were sent to demolish permanent structures in his Ramoji Film City on the excuse that they were built on land assigned to weaker sections. Quite clever, that: not only does Rajashekhar Reddy bludgeon the media, but he tries and milks it for votes as well!

The currency of political discourse has

also been devalued. Confronted with a billboard today, the politician would have issued a press statement claiming that he had been misquoted. Misquoted in his own book? Yes, of course; the printer did it. What he had actually written was: "The lower classes, though mostly never liars, are always ashamed of lying." It was obvious that the printer was in the pay of the opposition.

But there is some hope. Corruption is the most venal sin in the checklist of the voter. Politicians might think that they have hidden the evidence by muffling or strangling the media. But you can fool all the voters only some of the time. Word travels, if not through print and audiovisual, then through the air, borne by the tongue. There is some evidence that no politician can erase: when there is theft, something has to be stolen, and in the case of irrigation projects it is the fact that there is no water where there should have been water for the farmer.

Equally, the message is going out that those chief ministers who are clean will get re-elected. Our saving grace may be simply this: greed for power will trump greed for money. Indian politics is full of characters without character. The voter with a billboard is checking them out.

M.J. Akbar is Director of Publications, Cover.