

Bishwa Ijtema

A fraternal congregation of great appeal comes to a close

AS the final prayers of the 45th Bishwa Ijtema come to solemn end at Tongi on the outskirts of Dhaka, a famous place-name on the spiritual map of the devotees, curtain will have been drawn on the second largest congregation of Muslims after the Hajj.

At least three million participants will leave the place for their hearths and homes vastly enlightened with the message of peace, brotherhood, co-existence, tolerance, and above all, renewed allegiance to the Creator.

The three-day Ijtema included sermons, prayer for greater spiritual accomplishment, exaltation and welfare of Muslim communities, and, on a more mundane level, solemnising marriages without dowry. The instructive nature of the event can hardly be overemphasised.

The spirit of internationalism was evidently writ on the 5500-strong assemblage from as many as 90 countries out of 152 there are in the world. The rapport and bonding among the Islamic scholars on the one hand, and between them and the large body of participants and audience on the other, that emerged from the event will have an enduring value to the Muslims across the world.

Despite our many constraints, we believe, we did our best. And, lapses if any, will hopefully be seen with a forgiving eye.

Bangladesh can take pride in having hosted such mammoth congregation which has not only religious connotation but also a cultural significance. When the world is riven by religious, ethnic, sectarian and socio-political conflicts, an event like Ijtema bears a demonstrative testimony to the longing for unity, solidarity, peace and brotherhood.

Given the ever increasing size of the congregation over four decades, the sheer organising challenge handled by the Bishwa Ijtema committee and the logistical and amenities supports and security arrangements that the private sector, utility bodies and the government respectively have had to provide give cause for satisfaction of all concerned over its successful completion.

Bangladesh's capacity to hold an international event of this dimension is increasing. Learning from this year's experience, we should try and go for greater capacity building for hosting more such events.

Appalling conditions at Jagannath University

Return the dormitories to it

AN entirely untenable situation has been created at Jagannath University. There can be no denying that the manner in which twelve dormitories of the university have been under illegal occupancy for the last so many years has brought conditions to a pass where both teachers and students of the university now feel that urgent action is necessary to correct conditions. The outburst that was noticed in old Dhaka a few days ago was, given the realities of the situation, a reaction to old grievances that successive governments have either ignored studiously or have not had time to pay attention to. The present government, having been elected to office with a massive mandate, has made it clear (and that was in light of the students' outburst) that it will not tolerate any violence at academic institutions.

That is a fine and logical expression of the government's determination to maintain law and order. But where the Jagannath University situation is concerned, a deeper and harder look by the authorities into the reasons behind the current troubles has now become necessary. It is by now obvious that elements of all sorts --- and they include activists of both the Chhatra League and Chhatra Dal, to say nothing of policemen and others --- have been in possession of these dormitories in what can rightly be termed as a well-organised, unholy nexus of vested interests. It is the preponderance of these elements that has kept the university, its teaching staff as well as students, hostage to helplessness for years. The time has now arrived when a full and unambiguous reversal of the situation must be brought about. For that to be done, let the authorities take the first and urgent move of constituting a task force to inquire into the matter of how these twelve dormitories have gone out of the university's control. And then must come the act of identifying those responsible and dealing with them under the law of the land. That done, ways must be found, and swiftly too, of recovering this university property from the predators and restoring it to the university. There can be no two opinions on the issue.

Jagannath University, situated as it is in old Dhaka, has for long enjoyed a reputation as an institution catering to young men and women of the area and elsewhere. But matters such as the dormitory issue have gradually eaten away at its moral authority and left it a pawn in the hands of the unscrupulous. We will expect that with the recovery and restoration of the dormitories to the university, a process of intellectual rejuvenation of Jagannath University will be set in motion. Meanwhile, let it be ensured that in future no one will ever make any move to grab property that belongs to educational institutions or to any organisation serving the public interest.

Campus police

To provide a safe, secure and orderly campus environment conducive to the successful pursuit of educational opportunities and accomplishments, the public universities of the country need police capable of establishing a professional and trusting relationship with the students, teachers, and other staff.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

JAGANNATH University became the latest venue of violence that turned Old Dhaka into a battle zone leaving at least 100 innocent people including 20 female students injured, as well as damage of 20 vehicles and office equipment.

The students, who were demonstrating to recover 12 of their dormitories, illegally occupied by powerful people, criminals, police and Dhaka City Corporation, faced brutal police actions lobbing around 120 teargas canisters, charging truncheons to disperse them and arresting 10 students.

Organising a demonstration program by the students in a bid to restore 12 grabbed dormitories has some logic, as there is a severe crunch in student housing in the university, but their engagement in violence is condemnable.

But there are reasons to believe that the students were given a very raw deal in this particular case by the university authorities who should be held responsible for disregarding the students' genuine needs.

The general student body pays a very high price for campus violence losing academic sessions, as the university authorities usually choose the escapist way of closing the university sine die for subsidising tension.

The battle between the agitated students and police in a very sensitive place like varsity campus sent a strong and clear message to the government once again that handling of student community calls for care and compassion, patience and prudence, not force. Coercive approach always proved counterproductive, particularly

when student sentiments are concerned.

Brutal police actions in the female student halls of DU at the dead hours of night in 2002, created such a strong public resentment across the country that compelled the government to remove the vice chancellor to calm down the situation. Many senior teachers of DU were beaten up severely by the police as they protested such brutal police action in the female student halls.

Police also handled very brutally another agitation program on the DU campus in May 2005, following the tragic death of a DU student under the wheel of a bus at Shabbagh crossing. Police beat up mercilessly the mourner students entering the campus.

The relationship between the students and law enforcers has deteriorated significantly after the incident at DU in August 2007. Not only the students and teachers of the universities, many conscious citizens of the country also think that law enforcers should not be allowed to enter the university campuses for handling student agitation. Such a situation should be handled carefully, not with bullets and batons.

The government was contemplating formation of campus police to provide a safe and secured campus environment to the country's public universities, after the violence at DU in August 2007 that spread like wild fire to other campuses and triggered an unfortunate episode, compelling the government to close down all universities and colleges in the major cities and to impose curfew to crush the violence.

The idea for forming campus police to meet the safety and security requirements



Will campus police do a better job?

of the DU campus community was also discussed in the DU senate meetings several times in the past. But no concrete steps were taken so far to shape up such police, considering its sensitivity.

To provide a safe, secure and orderly campus environment conducive to the successful pursuit of educational opportunities and accomplishments, the public universities of the country need police capable of establishing a professional and trusting relationship with the students, teachers, and other staff.

The campus police, either armed special police or unarmed security squad, should be quite different from the conventional police forces and should have some special characteristics that suit the sentiments of the students. The campus police, composed of educated and enthusiastic people, should be given proper training to make them skilful in all security tactics.

There are many universities across the world which have their own police to provide a safe and secure campus. The Howard

University in Washington DC, for instance, has a very inventive Campus Police Dept which works cooperatively with the District of Columbia Metropolitan Police and other District of Columbia and Federal government agencies. The Howard University campus police exercise full police powers to arrest offenders.

A popular expectation from the new government is that it will bring back peace to the university campuses, removing root causes of violence and concomitant sine die closure of universities for benefit of our future generation.

Other than the bitter feud between rival students groups, the interference of police in student agitation is a major cause of campus violence, as the capacity for rational handling of such a situation is found severely missing among the police. Therefore, formation of campus police may be the best option for tackling campus violence.

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

More food, less fear, will win the future

The finals will take place in the elections after this, probably in 2012 or 2013, when the Congress and the BJP will square off in most parts of the country, sufficient to give one or the other over 200 seats. Whoever wins the argument on food and fear in 2012 will control the decade.

M.J. AKBAR

CAN you win a general election without winning the argument? Curiously, both the ruling coalition and the principal opposing alliance seem to think so. The government has a vested interest in fudge. After all, there can be no opposition if there is no position. Its best hope is to muddle through the April-May poll and return with roughly the same numbers through a strategy of least resistance.

What is less comprehensible is the response of the BJP. It looks befuddled before fudge. Instead of raising issues, its spokespersons throw pebbles. If you cannot clear a haze, the haze has won the day. The Left has been more successful in creating the tension of a debate, but its resonance is limited to a couple of pockets, while the Third Front is too thin to be considered a net, let alone a magnet.

This is going to be a cold election. Neither candidate nor party will be able to waft on hot air. If the BJP wants to succeed, it has to remember a key fact: the Hindu voter is outgrowing communal rhetoric. He wants more food and less fear. At the moment he is getting the reverse.

The Congress has one advantage: Muslims, its main vote-bank, do not vote for something; they vote against someone. This suits the Congress perfectly. It feeds fear to Muslims, and offers development to other electorates.

Success breeds imitation, but change, the slogan which dazzled the US in autumn, will be insufficient in an Indian summer. Frustration has stripped the Indian voter of illusions. Offer him change, and he will demand to know to what. Promise him a job and he will ask where, when, how and to whom.

Americans gave Obama a pass on delivery systems and destination. The relevant slogan

is not the one that defeated Bush the Son, but the one that laid out Bush the Father 16 years ago: "It's the economy, stupid!"

Since no government in its senses would want to contest an election on the economy when jobs are disappearing in cities and farmers are committing suicide in villages, the Congress seems poised to offer a virtuous trinity of vitality (Rahul Gandhi), morality (Manmohan Singh), and nobility (Sonia Gandhi).

The voter will, however, check for substance behind the advertising. The chief minister of the biggest Congress state, Rajashekhar Reddy, has become synonymous with sleaze. He has lost the plot. Or, more accurately, he has sold the plot to Satyam.

The arithmetic of a cold election will be determined by the sum total of regional numbers. The formation of the next government could depend on how well the allies, rather than the principals, do. The BJP's partners seem more confident than the Congress's friends. But such is the perceived fluidity of options that Pranab Mukherjee, Nitish Kumar, Jayalalitha, Mulayam Singh Yadav, Mayawati, Chandra Babu Naidu and Sharad Pawar see themselves as possible occupants of 10 Janpath.

They may not agree on anything else, but they believe that neither the Congress nor the BJP will cross the 150-seat mark neces-

sary to become the plank on which a government can rest. The politics of the Nineties and the "Naughties" has seen the rise of flexible morality leading to an explosion of opportunity.

Will the politics of the "Twentytens" be different? Yes. There is likely to be fatigue in north and central India with the insular dynamics of small parties, trapped in concentric rings of family and state; and a yearning for political formations that offer more than stagnant regional horizons. The next government in Delhi, like this one, might be less than the sum of its parts, rather than more. There are no institutional methods of re-nourishment once the leaders of small parties become vulnerable to age or accident.

You might then, with good reason, consider 2009 the semi-final election. The finals will take place in the elections after this, probably in 2012 or 2013, when the Congress and the BJP will square off in most parts of the country, sufficient to give one or the other over 200 seats. They will have younger, if not newer leaders, creating the base for single-party majorities again.

The debate will not change, because the problem will not have been resolved. Whoever wins the argument on food and fear in 2012 will control the decade.

M. J. Akbar is Director, Covert Publications.

Where does the government stand?

Since the essence of Awami League's manifesto is to provide a better way of life to the down-trodden people, it would be beneficial to define the economic philosophy of the government.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THE massive mandate received by the mohajote has thrust upon the prime minister the great responsibility of meeting the aspirations of the people. To improve the condition of the people the government may have to invest a huge amount of money. Where will the government get the resources from, given the habitual reluctance of the rich and the powerful to pay taxes and, as seen during the period 2001-2006, to steal wealth of the state, along with the drying up of external capital in the form of assistance and foreign investment?

In developing countries, macro-empirical work on the FDI-growth relationship has shown that, subject to a number of crucial factors such as human capital base in the host country, the trade regime, and the degree of openness of the economy, FDI has a positive impact on the economy.

Notwithstanding some scepticism about accretion of national wealth through foreign investment that often has high social cost, the world is now confused whether, in view of the global meltdown, Adam Smith's theory that minimalist role

by the government can lead a country "to the highest degree of opulence from lowest barbarism" is not an outdated theory after all.

Capitalists ignored the fact that perfect marriage between demand and supply is a theoretical concept, particularly in places where a few firms forming syndicates control the supply and price of commodities. In economies like ours, captains of industry and commerce also often dictate state economic policies, either as pressure groups on the political authority or on their election as members of parliament.

The government's decision to halve the price of most fertilisers and reduce the price of diesel has been welcomed by farmers. The International Rice Research Institute does not hold out hope of increased land for farming or any easing in the fertiliser market in the future. Given the global population increase and consequent increase in food price, coupled with the tendency of some businessmen to reap abnormal profit, the "invisible hand" of governmental intervention in the market will be necessary if the mohajote is to fulfill its promise of bringing the price of essentials within the reach of the common people.

The challenge facing the government will be immense. The US Department of Agriculture, in its July 2008 report, predicts that the global economic meltdown combined with food and fuel (though fuel price is going down) price hikes will contribute to the ongoing deterioration in global food insecurity, with a negative impact on countries that are most food insecure.

USDA's long-term projection of price increase shows that 90% of the price shift that the world had seen in 2005-07 will persist, putting tremendous pressure on low-income households. The FAO/WFP crop and food supply assessment mission to Bangladesh, in its August 2008 report, estimates that 40%, or 56 million people, are "absolute poor," i.e. unable to acquire the minimum level of food required to maintain normal health. Among them, 27 million were categorised as "hard core poor," i.e. unable to acquire two-thirds of the minimum level mentioned earlier; and 11 million as "ultra poor," i.e. unable to acquire half of the minimum requirement.

The prevalence of absolute, hard core, and ultra poor increased from 2000-2005 due to population growth. For Bangladesh, import sources will become fewer, i.e. Myanmar, due to cyclone Nargis, will not be able to export six lakh tons of cereals, part of which would have come to Bangladesh. In Thailand, too, exportable quantity is expected to decrease. Added to supply-side constraint, the price of cereals and food-led

inflation paints a discouraging picture.

It is absolutely necessary for the government to stock food and to import ahead of any emergency that may occur. The government may also face challenges in reducing the income gap between the rich and the poor. Harvard University Professor Bruce Scott (The Great Divide in the Global Village) writes: "Average incomes have indeed been growing, but so has the income gap between rich and poor countries. Both trends have been evident for more than 200 years, but improved global communications have led to an increased awareness among the poor of income inequalities and heightened the pressure to immigrate to richer countries. In response, the industrialised nations have erected higher barriers against immigration, making the world economy seem more like a gated community than a global village."

The insistence by the rich to erect barriers to immigration and the inability of the poorest nations to attract foreign capital can have adverse effects on Bangladesh. This should naturally bring up the question of the type of economic philosophy that the Bangladesh government should follow. Since the essence of Awami League's manifesto is to provide a better way of life to the down-trodden people, it would be beneficial to define the economic philosophy of the government.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.