

# Bangladesh as the first stop for President Obama

What better country is there for him to visit first than Bangladesh, where nearly 87% of the population is Muslim, and there is religious harmony? It bridges Muslim majority countries of South East Asia and the conservative Muslim countries of South and West Asia.

NASIM FIRDAUS

**I**t was in the media recently that President Obama's first foreign trip will be to a Muslim country. Earlier, Obama had said to an Arabic television channel that he would like to extend a hand of friendship to Muslim countries.

What better country is there for him to visit first than Bangladesh, where nearly 87% of the population is Muslim, and there is religious harmony? It bridges Muslim majority countries of South East Asia and the conservative Muslim countries of South and West Asia. The pendulum of religion remains more or less steadily at the centre, and religious and sectarian disagreements are limited to street protests.

The United States was averse to the creation of Bangladesh because the moment was not right for American politics. A breakaway country in the volatile South Asia could and did strain the American political establishment. While the United States was making friends with China the Soviets got an

opportunity to remind the Americans that South Asia was still under their sphere of influence.

USSR and India and, by extension, Bangladesh, signed a 25 year treaty of amity and friendship reassuring each other against any American threat. Forty years on, it is the beginning of a new era for both Bangladesh and the US. The two countries should seize this moment to begin a relationship that is meaningful. Bangladesh can be a bridge to a deeper understanding between the West and the Muslim countries.

1971 mauled the subcontinent badly. It took another twenty years for the United States to recognise that South Asia needed more attention than it was getting from it. Until 1995, the US State Department did not have a separate division for South Asia and, barring its intervention in the Afghan war against the Soviet Union, did not engage itself seriously in South Asia.

South Asian countries were lumped together with the Near East and East Asia division, otherwise known as the Middle

East. It was only natural that US diplomacy didn't feature hugely in any of the countries that this mammoth division represented -- neither in the Middle East nor in South Asia.

Only after the tragic death of the American ambassador to Pakistan in a terrorist attack, did the US recognise the need to pay attention to the deteriorating situation in South Asia as well as the Middle East. In his second term, President Clinton's administration created a new South Asia division in the State Department with Robin Rafael, the former wife of the assassinated US ambassador, as the assistant secretary of state for South Asia.

President Clinton visited this region when the Kargil war between Pakistan and India was perhaps already a ticking bomb. Not surprisingly he spent more time in India than in Pakistan or Bangladesh. Bangladesh was not of particular interest to the powers that be at the time, perhaps because it was not party to any regional or international conflict.

With Afghanistan becoming a hotbed for regional terrorism at the beginning of this century, and with the destruction of the twin towers, South Asia got another booster dose of attention from the state department from the Bush administration.

While all this was playing out in Pakistan, Afghanistan and India, Bangladesh was quietly going through

a roller-coaster ride between moderate religious practices and homegrown extremism in the name of religion. Quietly, because there was no visible international dimension to the home-grown extremism in this country, therefore it was not worth the attention of the super power(s).

The cultural and religious tolerance that had served Bangladesh well at the time of liberation once again helped it to get out from under the thin veil of self-destructionism. The people relegated extremists to the bins of history, and succeeded in bringing back moderation in their political and cultural life to the centre.

This change was brought about not through violence and intimidation but through the ballot box and a truly successful campaign against extremism. At the same time, change was brought about much in the same way in the United States by the campaign that brought Barack Obama, despite having Hussein as his middle name, to the central theme of humanity first.

Bangladesh proved to the world that with or without the blessings of greater nations its people could think straight and draw the line firmly. Its status as a moderate Islamic country has once again been re-established. It has shown that even with a low literacy rate Bangladeshis still have the cultural and religious savvy to get out of quagmires.

It is a country where reason has



Stepping off at ZIA?

hope; where hope cannot survive without reason. And the reason is: Bangladesh is a moderate country where there is religious harmony and respect for others; it is a country which looks forward to a better tomorrow

rather than looking back to the nightmares of yesterday. This is why Barack Hussein Obama should visit Bangladesh first!

Nasim Firdaus is a former Ambassador and Secretary.

# Reconstitution, abolition, and ...? Pranab Mukherjee's visit

The bottom line is that the government should face the fact that pointless reconstitution and abolition for rehabilitation of party lackeys, or for gratification of party desires, will hardly be welcomed by the citizenry. Thus, the party should not take precedence over the public.

KAZI S.M. KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

**W**HILE our political leaders are still at loggerheads on a trifling issue like occupation of seats in the parliament, their unwelcome sermons have started to vex the people again. They are now busy dishing out suggestions instead of striking the problems at their roots.

However, I must say that the idea of reconstituting the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) and abolishing the Local Government Commission (LGC) has not gone down well with conscious citizens for very valid reasons. Thus, many informed and conscious people have branded those schemes both preposterous and precarious, and very rightly so.

Anyway, it provides one with an opportunity to thank the objective media of the country that they have not endorsed such rash reconstitution thinking of our political gurus.

As our political leaders have found a new lease of life after restoration of democracy, people seem to have braced themselves to receive more and more such sensational recommendations from the all-knowing politics experts every now and then. It is said that change itself is changeable. As is apparent, however, our political leaders will never change under any circumstances.

Many of our political leaders must now be having the misconceived notion that they have been heavily relied upon by the citizens since they had been given votes of approval again. I, however, think that they have just been given another chance to show real change in their words and actions. The magic wand of power has simply been shifted again, temporarily.

One must not forget how happily the common people welcomed the incarceration of criminalised political bosses following 1/11.

I feel that the PM has been misled by ambitious political aides into thinking of reconstituting the ACC, which has become a beacon for hope for the ones in

the country who hate corruption. Meanwhile, Dhaka Mayor Khoka's invective against LGC reminds us of the avarice of four political leaders.

Yes, they want power and they want it absolutely. They are not ready to share it with anybody, let alone remaining under supervision by any monitoring body. Admittedly, LGC was formed following recommendations of a high-powered body for strengthening the local governments so that those seats of local democracy can function efficiently and effectively.

As I said earlier, editorials and commentaries in the objective media of the country are giving due coverage to the issue of reconstitution of ACC. To be precise, the Daily Star editorials and columns have not minced words that irrational reconstitution of ACC by replacing its chief Hasan Mashud Chowdhury will be something that might even jeopardise public confidence in ACC itself.

There is no need to search for statistics to justify his integrity. Just go to the street and ask a common person about him. He will definitely give a better answer than the veteran politicians will.

People have been watching his activities from well before he became the chief of the ACC, starting from his role as an

adviser during the Iajuddin-led caretaker government. There is unimpaired public perception that he was instrumental in turning ACC into an awe-inspiring entity for the corrupt people of all political colours.

Through the media, we very often get to see and hear a good number of high officials of various bodies reconstituted or formed during the Fakhruddin-led caretaker government. They include, among others, CEC A.T.M. Shamsul Huda, EC Shakawat Hossain, BRRC Chairman Akbar Ali Khan, LGC Chairman Foyezur Razzak and LGC Member Prof. Tofail Ahmed.

Have these people not created an aura of respectability as well as expectancy among the citizenry? Should the government not tap their expertise in their respective fields for giving a real chance to its charter of change? Is it easy to find people of the same calibre and integrity among the party rank and file? Long experience of our political culture, however, has shown that party men do not do things well.

The bottom line is that the government should face the fact that pointless reconstitution and abolition for rehabilitation of party lackeys, or for gratification of party desires, will hardly be welcomed by the citizenry. Thus, the party should not take precedence over the public. People of this land are forgetful, yet expressive. Whether the party in power cares or not, the people must have the clue to the missing word of the continuum: reconstitution, abolition and...

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The new Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (Bipa) seeks to promote and protect investments from either country. The trade pact was originally signed in 1980, and renewed in 2006. The fresh renewal was essential since the earlier agreement would end in March 2009.

KAMAL UDDIN AHMED

**N**OT surprisingly, Indian political leaders were the first in the world to welcome Sheikh Hasina's spectacular victory in the 2008 parliamentary elections. Congratulating Hasina, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh assured India's commitment to further strengthening bilateral relations.

Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee also hoped that the Hasina government would sincerely address the problem of terrorism. While responding, Sheikh Hasina said: "Bangladeshi soil will never be used to carry out any terrorist act against our neighbours."

AL's election manifesto, "Charter for Change" referred to the party's commitment to friendly relations with "India, Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar," as well as "regional and sub-regional cooperation." Remarkably, while India was pointed out by name, Pakistan was left out. This may be attributed to Hasina's gratefulness to India and her dislike of Pakistan, which was responsible for genocide in Bangladesh in 1971.

The BNP-led four party alliance governments had an anti-India stance mainly due to India's big brotherly attitude, and the dearth of reciprocity. Relations seemed to have improved to some extent during the two years of the caretaker government (2007-2008).

The government, with good connections with Indian political leadership, has again got an opportunity to put India-Bangladesh relations back on track. During Hasina's previous term as prime minister (1996-2001), Bangladesh and India concluded an important agreement on sharing of Ganges water. One more vital agreement on the Chittagong peace treaty was also signed with India. Nonetheless, Sheikh Hasina was cautious in her approach towards the transit issue because of strong resistance by the opposition political parties.

Bangladesh's contentious issues with India are: sharing of waters, demarcating of 6.5km borderland and maritime

boundary dispute, tariff and non-tariff barriers and killing of Bangladeshi citizens by the Border Security Force of India. India did tell Bangladesh when it floated tenders for exploration of gas and oil in the territorial waters of Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal.

India wants to have transit facility across Bangladesh from east to west, and also needs to use Chittagong port. India alleges that Bangladesh gives sanctuary to Indian separatists.

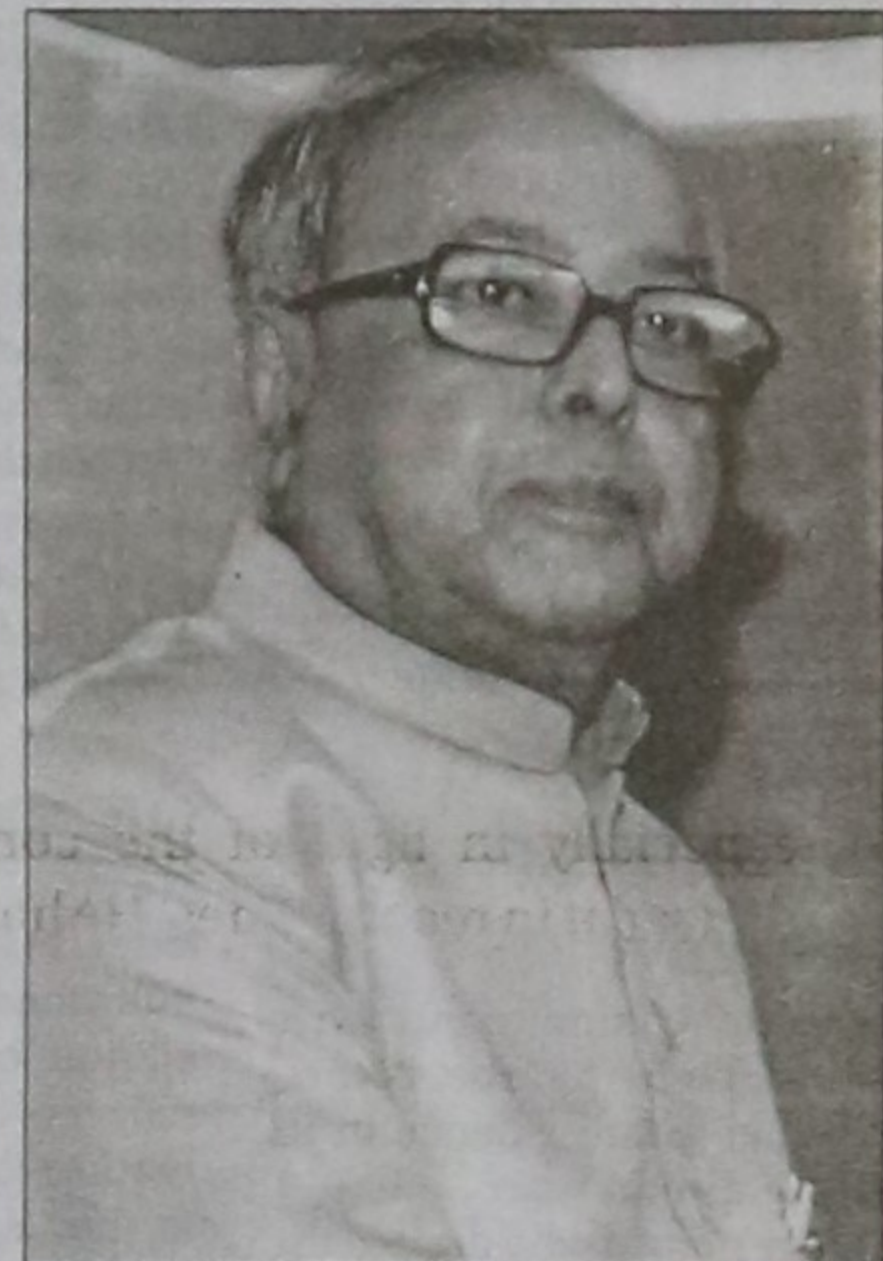
Against the above backdrop, the Indian External Affairs Minister paid an official visit to Dhaka on February 9. It was the first high-level visit by an Indian leader after Bangladesh returned to an elected government, ending two years administration of caretaker government rule. Undoubtedly, it was more than a "goodwill" visit, with positive outcome.

Mukherjee exchanged views with Bangladeshi leaders, including Prime Minister Hasina, on a wide range of bilateral and regional issues, including security, strengthening of connectivity, trade and investment, peaceful border management, final demarcation of land and maritime boundaries, and formation of a regional task force against terrorism.

However, earlier media reports revealed that while Delhi wanted a bilateral anti-terror pact with Dhaka, the later preferred to set up a regional task force that would comprise other South Asian nations.

During his visit, Pranab Mukherjee signed two agreements -- renewal of the trade pact, and a new accord to promote and protect investments in both countries. Earlier, the cabinet had cleared the way for signing of the two agreements in an effort to boost trade and investment with India.

Under the renewed bilateral trade agreement, both countries will now be able to use each others' waterways, roads, and railways for transportation of goods through each others' territory. On the other hand, the new Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (Bipa) seeks to promote and protect investments from either country.



Pranab Mukherjee

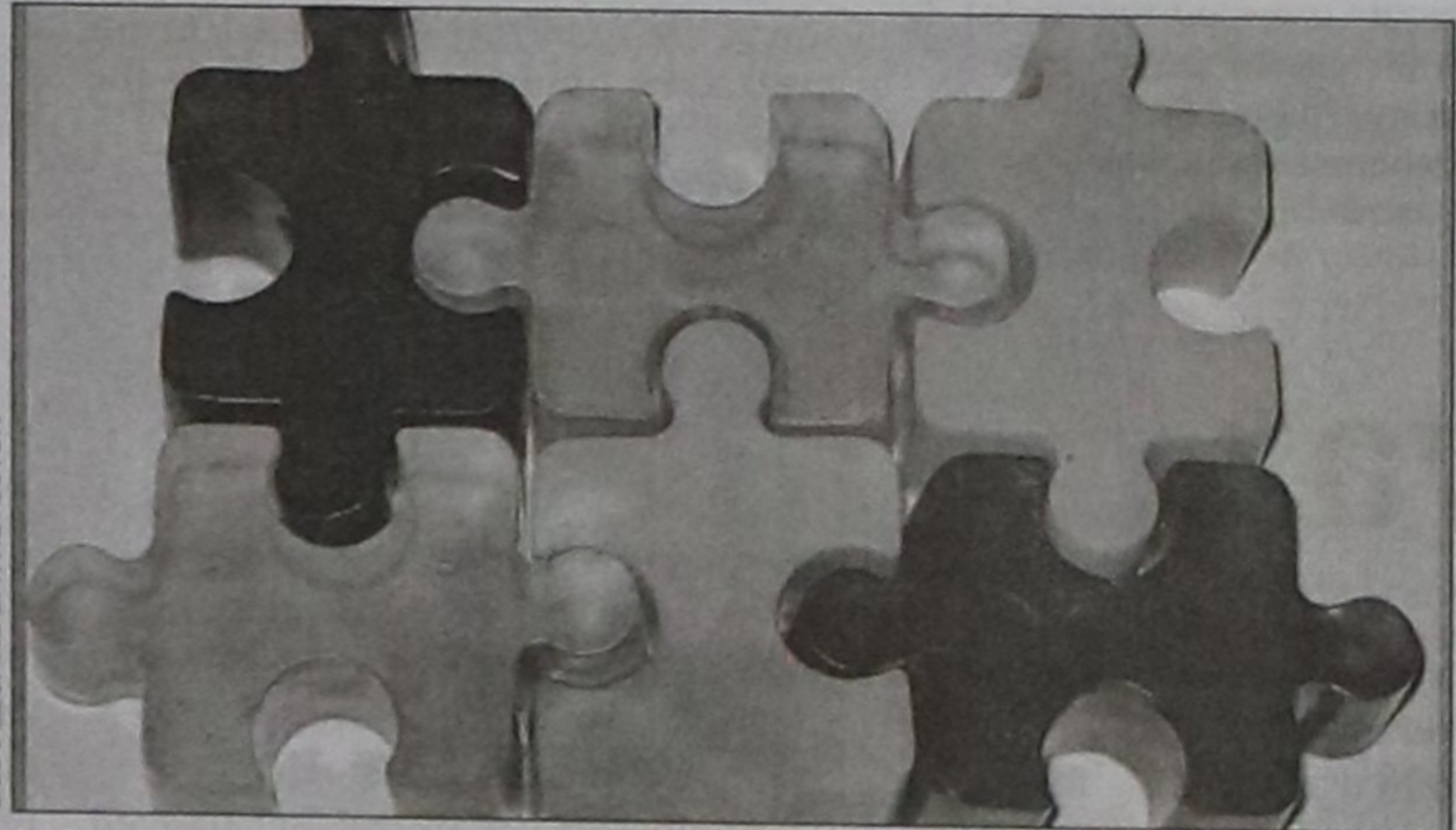
The trade pact was originally signed in 1980, and renewed in 2006. The fresh renewal was essential since the earlier agreement would end in March 2009.

Moreover, an investment promotion and protection agreement is important, given that there has been a flow of investment from both sides. The agreement on bilateral investment protection would give Bangladesh and India most favoured nation (MFN) status to each other. Dhaka has been concerned about bridging its huge trade gap of about \$2 billion a year.

However, Mukherjee said: "Being a former foreign trade minister, I can most respectfully tell you there is no mechanism through which bilateral trade between two countries in respect of each and every country could be balanced. It is not possible." But surely it is possible to reduce the gap and to keep it within the manageable limit. Bangladeshi trade analysts believe that India has not taken sufficient measures in reducing the huge trade gap by withdrawing tariff and non-tariff barriers.

Political observers believe that Mukherjee's visit and the signing of two important agreements are a clear signal that New Delhi is eager to improve and strengthen its ties with Dhaka. However, nationalist discourse, hostility, and suspicions, mainly due to decades old unresolved issues and new irritants, continue to impede further strengthening of Bangladesh's bilateral relations with India.

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Refitting the pieces?

# It's time for Asian Idol



millimeters. I watched a bit of the show the other day. It consisted entirely of pretty young people tearfully revealing that their deepest wish is to be incredibly rich, famous superstars. How, er, cute. It's just a bit too American, if you know what I mean: it's based on young people having wildly unrealistic fantasies. Now we Asians are famous for being inspired by ("stealing") Western ideas and improving them. So let's fix American Idol. Here's how it could go.

A TV host leaps out on stage. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Asian Idol!" he shrieks to rapturous applause. To the left of the stage sit three judges: a grumpy one, a pretty one and a cool one.

Host: "And our first contestant for this evening is... Mr Ah Li." A plump middle-aged Asian man in a dark grey suit walks on to the stage.

Grumpy Judge: "Nope. Don't like him. It's a No from me."

Pretty Judge: "He hasn't opened his mouth yet."

Grumpy Judge: "Yeah, that's why we should stop now, while the going's good."

Cool Judge: "Chill, big guy. Sometimes the worst lookers are the best performers."

Grumpy Judge: "My instincts are never wrong. Remember William Hung in 2004?"

Pretty Judge: "So what are you going

to perform for us today, Mr Ah Li?"

Ah Li: "I am an Asian accountant and today I will organise simultaneous listings for an IPO in Hong Kong, Delhi and New York."

Cool Judge: "Cool. Go for it."

Grumpy Judge: "If he must."

The starting hooter sounds. Ah Li snaps into action. He sticks a wireless Bluetooth device receiver into each ear and then pulls out two Blackberrys. He writes texts on both at once while shouting instructions into his headsets.

Ah Li: "Register form 10279a with contact 739 in New York. Copy in triplicate to Securities and Futures Commission. Pick up form 72075b and file with registrar 821. Email certificate

984d (i) to compliance officer 267 and forward receipt to clerk 241."

As he continues in this manner, the studio audience starts to laugh and clap, and the judges sit up and take notice. Ah Li starts to sweat. He earns another round of applause by removing his jacket and tie without interrupting the stream of messages. Another minute passes.

Host: "Five seconds left."

Ah Li: "File form 17a2 in triplicate with Inspector 676. Done? Great, I want them all up on the main boards, now, now, now!"

Host: "Three. Two. One."

Ah Li: "YES! They're listed." The hooter sounds. The crowd goes

wild. The three judges swap surprised glances with each other. Cool Judge: "Hey man, that was pretty, uh, cool."

Grumpy Judge (reluctantly): "Not the worst I've seen."

Pretty Judge: "Do you have a girlfriend?"

By doing an Asian version of this show, we could make people in Asia seem cool to a worldwide audience. Youngsters in the West will go out and buy thick glasses to be more like us. Math books will outsell Harry Potter.

I'd organise all this myself, except that it seems like a lot of work. Now if only there was a show called Bone Idle.

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