

JU VC's rash remarks

Not befitting his guardianship

WE are surprised by the recent remarks of the VC of Jahangirnagar University blaming intruders for the recent spate of violence in the JU campus. He has given a clean chit to the Chattra League, absolving them of all responsibilities for the recent turmoil. Coming as his remarks do, from a person who is supposed to be fully conversant with the facts and the goings on inside the campus, it is, we feel a deplorable effort to shift the blame on others when most of us know who the real culprits are.

At a time when attempts are being made to arrest the prevailing campus situation all over the country, the remarks will very likely perpetuate the problem. One would not be wrong to suggest that the VC's comments sounds more like the statement of BCL spokesman rather than the head of the institution.

Regrettably, the VC has risked the credibility of his position that requires him to be non-partisan, notwithstanding his political preferences, and to ensure the safety and interest of all students, irrespective of their political predilections. By taking the position that he has, he stands to lose the confidence of other students. He would do well to remember that as the VC he is the guardian of all the students under his charge and not of a particular group. And, as he said he knew who the instigators were, was it not his responsibility to forestall them promptly?

If the vice-chancellor's contention is true that the violence is being orchestrated from outside, then why did he very recently expel six students of his university belonging to the BCL cadre on charges of involvement in violence in the JU? And would the BCL central committee have disbanded the JU committee and embargoed their activities for three months were it not for their unruly behaviour? And why would the PM have felt compelled to disassociate herself with the BCL if she was not distraught with the activity of the student wing of her party? These are all proofs, if proof is ever required, of the BCL's direct involvement in the violence and the chaos that is prevailing in the campuses.

Not the presence of police alone but essentially a non-partisan approach to the issue can only help bring about the required congenial atmosphere in the campus. The perpetrators are well known and must be dealt with most severely.

Pull up the railway from morass

A suggested action plan to revitalise it

JUST how neglected the Bangladesh Railway (BR) has been since the country's independence is driven home by some eye-opening statistics cited at a roundtable recently. Not only has it lost over 40 percent of its land resource to illegal occupation, the size of its inventory with which it had originally begun in 1971 has also shrunk terribly over time. Whereas the BR had 500 locomotives and 16,100 wagons in 1972, the figures have plummeted to 285 and 9,473 as of now. Not only that, the number of railway employees has also fallen and the railway tracks, sleepers and signalling equipment are antiquated, to say the least.

All of this is supremely ironical when one takes into account the fact that 5.38 crore commuters used the railway in the last fiscal. Despite the decrepit state the BR has been pushed into by successive governments and the rapid expansion of road transportation, the railway even in a shambles gets used annually by more than one-third of the country's population. This itself is a measure of its still unrealised potential as bulk carrier of passengers and goods.

The chief merits of railway transportation, both passenger and goods, are that it is cheaper and safer compared with travel by road and waterways. This also happens to be a mode very popular with tourists elsewhere in the world.

There is a three-point suggestion we would like to advance for the development of the railway with the hope that the government will give it due consideration, early in its tenure. The recipe we are providing may not necessarily entail a large injection of funds into the sector. First and foremost, the government must help the railway reclaim 40 percent of the land it has lost to a wide variety of expropriators. This would open an avenue for the railway to make profitable use of the land thereby generating revenues for modernisation and expansion purposes. Secondly, the Bangladesh Railway should be helped by the government to recover the accumulated sum of Tk 12,000 crore that different organisations owe to BR in unpaid freight bills. So, the bankruptcy of the railway is not all of its own making, to a large extent, it's the handiwork of various other organisations.

Our final point relates to policy-making. For all intents and purposes, we have treated road, railway and waterway in straight jackets and not as mutually reinforcing components of a multi-modal transportation system. It is time we did that and gave the railway its due.

Fundamentalism, militancy and terrorism

Militancy and terrorism are cacti that flourish through the perversion of humanism that is common in all religions. It sometimes assumes a political character.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

IT has been an anomaly of sorts over the past two months. We have had joyous celebrations, been dumbfounded with despair and then sought solace within our national identity.

On the one side we have had the festivity of our cultural ethos, our identity as a Bangali brought to the fore with the commemoration of *Falgun*, the *Ekushey* and our Independence Day. We have had music, drama, artistic expressions and publication of books. We have reaffirmed the secular nature of our being. This appreciation of pluralism in our society was a continuation of the democratic process that had earlier seen the conclusion of the electoral dynamics both at the national as well as the Upazila levels.

On the other hand, on a parallel track, we have had a defiance of discipline through a horrifying mutiny, and also watched with dismay and horror the re-emergence of the JMB terrorists and militants. Both were ominous to say the least. I shall however confine myself today to the issue of militancy and terrorism.

Dozens of JMB militant operatives, including women have been arrested. There has also been discovery of arms, explosives and grenade making materials from their hideouts as well as from foreign funded Madrasas and orphanages. There were also CDs and samples of jihadi militant literature. It was also significant that this shadowy militant resurgence had been achieved with funding (allegedly received from

sympathisers living in the Middle East and the UK) through illegal channels. Hints of suspicion have also surfaced that some local NGOs were involved in this clandestine exercise.

Fortunately, this time round, the law enforcement agencies and other associated intelligence gathering operatives, including the Rab were on the ball. This permitted pre-emptive action and senseless mayhem was averted. One wishes that our other intelligence agencies were equally capable. This might have enabled us to avoid the disastrous mutiny that occurred within the BDR ranks in Dhaka and elsewhere.

The other day I ran into an old friend and former colleague who now resides permanently in Europe. His wife, a European, was also visiting Dhaka with him (nearly after fourteen years). I asked her if she had noticed any change in Dhaka after so many years. She said, 'Yes, I have.'

As expected, she referred to various aspects of the city—the traffic jams, pollution and the demographic explosion. She also interestingly added another facet. She pointed out that the 'Pakistani element' appears to have increased within our society. I was taken aback and asked her to explain.

In response, she pointed out that she had noticed a large number of women wearing *hijab* and/or *burkha*. She also mentioned that there appeared to be many young men, sporting beards, wearing caps and kurta rather than pant and shirt.

I have subsequently discussed her views with some sociologists. Eventually, all of us came to the conclusion that there was an

evolving shift in our sartorial behaviour, particularly in our emphasis on external aspects of our religion. We also agreed that this phenomenon was especially applicable in a certain section of the population and that this was probably being caused because of the conservative influence of our millions of non-resident migrant workers based in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia. There was also consensus that this was contributing indirectly to expanding enrollment of children in the rural hinterland in non-secular educational institutions like Madrasas instead of regular schools.

I believe that fundamentalism is directly linked with militancy and terrorism. This inter-active phenomenon is true not only in the case of Islam, but also for those in the Hindu, Christian or Jewish faiths. Classical examples exist in the treatment meted out by fringe Hindu extremists towards Muslim and Christian minorities in India. There are also examples of unacceptable behaviour meted out by Christian and Jewish zealots in some other countries.

Militancy and terrorism are cacti that flourish through the perversion of humanism that is common in all religions. It sometimes assumes a political character. It can also emerge from ethnic presumptions. Classical examples of this in the political arena in Bangladesh have been evidenced through the activities of Harakat ul Jihad-i-Islami Bangladesh (HUJI-B) and that of Jamiatul Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB). The quest for acceptance and recognition of indigenous identity has also led to terrorist activity within our borders. The Parbatya Chattogram Janoshangati Samity (PCJSS) in the Chittagong Hill Tracts is an example of that.

Our political leadership has unequivocally reiterated more than once that counter terrorism will receive special attention. I believe that such a course of action will be essential if we are to meet our development

targets and also ensure stability and security not only for the common people but also for potential investors within our economy.

Terrorists always target infrastructure. They do so to create confusion and lack of confidence in the governance format. In our case, we have to be particularly careful because we have such a thin spread of capacity in transportation, in energy, in communications networking, in ICT and public utilities. Destruction of existing facilities will severely impair our economic chances.

We have a tough task. It is this, which persuades me to hope that our government will undertake a hands-on, pro-active approach in creating employment opportunities for both the rural poor as well as the thousands who graduate every year from religious schools.

Functional, vocational training must be made compulsory and part of the syllabus in all religious as well as in secular educational institutions. Those graduating from Madrasas must realise that there are alternative avenues of employment and that they do not necessarily have to become religious teachers only.

The dynamics of countering terrorism will also require greater coordination and sharing of information between the relevant intelligence agencies within the country and also with assigned organisations in the neighbouring countries. This will facilitate the tackling of this growing menace, which does not respect frontiers.

Lastly, at all levels of our educational system, there should be a conscious effort to enhance the secular aspects of education—music, art, foreign languages and sports. We must not lag behind in this age of globalisation.

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The Indian voter's predicament

The voter himself is confused because he increasingly finds leaders shrinking in stature, parties lessening in space and the people losing the idea of India.

KULDIP NAYAR

*My pain, a voiceless song
My being a nameless mote
If only my pain could speak
I'd know who I am*

THESE words of Fiaz Ahmad Fiaz, the late Urdu poet, interpret the feelings of an ordinary Indian voter who some political parties hail as aam admi (common man). This is the 15th Lok Sabha which he or, for that matter, the 700 million voters will elect. Yet, he feels helpless because the elected do not attend to his problems. He wants to be heard in the medley of songs and slogans that makes every the poll campaign noisier and costlier than before, but does not even discuss what ails him.

The voter himself is confused because he increasingly finds leaders shrinking in stature, parties lessening in space and the people losing the idea of India. There are more hate speeches than ever before. And no party has compunction in giving tickets to criminals and the corrupt.

The election to the Lok Sabha is one. But in fact there are 26 elections, as many as states in the country. Everywhere there is a different agenda, a different leadership and a different caste combination to attract the voters. The main all-India party, the Congress, which has led the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), has lost in strength substantially.

Its stalwarts like Sharad Pawar, Lalu Yadav

and Ram Vilas Paswan have joined hands among themselves, with their own regional parties, which articulate local problems. The UPA has stayed as a shell, leaving top Congress leader Pranab Mukherjee to explain that they have left the Congress alliance, not the overall UPA, which rules the country.

The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) has suffered the same fate. It too has lost its allies. Its combination, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), is weaker after the exit of the Telugu Desam in Andhra Pradesh and the Biju Janata Dal in Orissa.

The voter is used to either the Congress or the BJP forming the government. A third combination has ruled in the past, but has not lasted long. He would like to try a non-BJP and a non-Congress government. But he is not sure whether it can muster a majority in the Lok Sabha, 272 out of the 545-member house.

As of today, it leads the other two. But if the past is any guide, the third front has depended on the support of the Congress or the BJP. Both of them have pulled out the rug from beneath the front's feet on their political convenience. A mid-term poll has followed.

But this holds good even if the Congress or the BJP forms the government. The two may not reach even the present strength the Congress having 153 seats and the BJP 130. Both are hoping to get back members of their old alliances. Yet it depends on how strong will Mayawati emerge in UP,

Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu, Chandrababu Naidu and Biju Patnaik in Orissa. They have not joined any pre-poll formation. Their tilt will matter.

The communists, who do not look like retaining their old number of 62, have declared that they will not support the Congress even after elections. This only lessens the latter's chance of mustering a majority. But the Congress has no doubt that the communists would be forced to support it and make other allies to do so to stop the BJP from coming to power.

The predicament before the voter or, for that matter, the nation is that in face of political uncertainty no clear-cut decision may be possible. Any prime minister wanting to keep his or her allies in tow may have to make compromises to accommodate them. In the midst of global meltdown, certain steps need to be taken to direct the economy in a particular direction. They may be unpopular but they are necessary. On the other hand, the lower half wants such people at the helm who, instead of giving them a dole in the name of guaranteed rural employment, can give them a better standard of living.

The polity is so fractured that nobody knows who will be the next prime minister. Top industrialists would like to see Manmohan Singh in the gaddi once again. Even otherwise, he may get the consensus because leaders like Lalu and Paswan, who have joined hands with Mulayam Singh of Samajwadi Party, have announced that after "winning at the polls" they will support Manmohan Singh. Still this does not ensure his return. The Congress may itself drop him at the eleventh hour for Rahul Gandhi.

Apart from Manmohan Singh, L.K. Advani, Sharad Pawar, Mulayam Singh, Mayawati, Jayalalitha and Naidu are candi-

dates for the prime ministership. Every aspirant depends on which party wins the most seats and who from among them can muster a majority in the Lok Sabha. At this time, any guess is good enough it is like the flip of a coin.

Those who are spending big money the average is Rs. 5 crore a seat using criminals in their constituency to increase strength are not going to be content with mere glib talk or empty promise. They, when elected, would demand a price: a seat in the cabinet or some contract which may help them "make up what they have spent."

The Muslim electorate, roughly 12% to 15%, is still undecided. Although some Muslim parties have mushroomed, the community looks like voting for the non-BJP parties, selecting the one, which can win in a particular state. It has been seen in past elections that the Muslims choose a winnable candidate and then voted for him en bloc. The party tag is not important, his secular credentials are.

The Congress is hoping to win back the community, once its vote bank. This expectation is the main reason why the party is going it alone in Bihar where it broke an alliance with Lalu Prasad and in UP with Mulayam Singh who was going out of the way to adjust the party's exaggerated claims.

Whether by jettisoning allies before elections for broadening its space will work in favour of the Congress is yet to be seen. Even if it does, the party will have to get substantial outside support to form the government. In face of these uncertainties, the voter's real problems have been pushed to the background. His pain is writ large on his face. He is nameless, but his affliction has a name: poverty.

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Voters put Islamist parties in their place

The majority of Indonesians, including most of its huge Muslim population, trust the secular-nationalist parties to run this country more than those parties that exploit religious symbols.

ENDY M. BAYUNI

VOTERS have spoken and it's clear that they want nationalist-secular political parties to control the direction this country, leaving Islamic parties, a permanent fixture in Indonesian politics, to once again play second fiddle.

The results of quick counts of the April 9 parliamentary elections by four independent survey organisations show that four Islamist parties will be represented in the national legislature: The Justice Prosperity Party (PKS), the National Mandate Party (PAN), the National Awakening Party (PKB) and the United Development Party (PPP).

According to these quick counts, each of these parties secured between five and eight percent of the total national vote which, if lumped together, accounts for less than 25 percent. This is within the historical range of the share of votes of Islamist parties in all four democratic Indonesian elections.

The message that voters sent to these

Islamist parties is the same as it was in the previous elections. The majority of Indonesians, including most of its huge Muslim population, trust the secular-nationalist parties to run this country more than those parties that exploit religious symbols.

These four are mid-size parties that will be ranked from fourth to seventh largest in the House of Representatives. In contrast, the Democratic Party (PD) of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono polled more than 20 percent and Golkar and the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) each received around 14 percent, going by the results of the quick counts.

The combined share of votes for Islamic parties declined this year if we remove the PAN and the PKB from the group. The PAN has shed its Islamic image under Chairman Sutrisno Bachir, though it has not announced this openly, knowing that it would be detrimental to its chances of election. The PKB is the party of the Nahdlatul

Ulama, the country's largest Islamic organisation and has no ambition to turn Indonesia into an Islamic state.

This leaves the PKS and the PPP as the only parties in the national parliament with a clear Islamic agenda that includes the creation of an Islamic state/civil society at some stage in the future and the introduction of some form of Sharia.

The PKS, the larger of the two, held its ground and may even have slightly increased its share of the national vote within the 7-8 percent range, though fell well short of its stated target of 15 percent. Considering its impressive rise to just above 7 percent in 2004, up from less than 2 percent in 1999, this year must count as a flop.

Having been part of Yudhoyono's coalition government and of national and local legislatures, the performance and track record of the PKS came under a lot of public scrutiny and people voted on that basis rather than relying on the party's promises and its anti-corruption slogans, as it did in 2004. The fact that the PKS managed to slightly increase its votes this year tells you what voters really think of the party. The PKS is and will always be seen by voters as an Islamic party.

In contrast, the PPP makes no bone about its Islamic identity and campaigned hard on

this platform, exploiting religious symbols and slogans to gain votes. Voters were still not impressed and people who had voted for the PPP in the past abandoned it in 2009.

For all of its shortcomings, the general election is still the best gauge of the popularity of Islamic parties and their agenda, including the creation of an Islamic state and the introduction of sharia. The majority of Indonesian voters clearly still believe in the pluralistic nature of the nation. The new government should not hesitate to roll back all the sharia by-laws, which are discriminatory to non-Muslims and clearly against the constitution. They must also repeal the Draconian anti-pornography law, pushed by Islamist parties last year, which many viewed as a restriction of artistic expressions, including the way people dress.

Islamist parties may be down but they are not out. Islam will always be a political commodity that can get positions in this country, but it has its limitations, as the PKS is now finding. At best, these Islamist parties can influence the government as junior partners in a coalition government. But don't expect them to grow history is against them.