

## Now, it is groundwater pollution

Immediate action on rivers is an imperative

THE extent of pollution seeping into our rivers is mind-boggling and has been that way for years together. If there ever was any hope that remedial measures would be taken to deal with the problem, it now seems that hope was belied. That much becomes clear through a front-page report in this newspaper yesterday. Pollution in the rivers has reached such an alarming point that now even the groundwater system is getting contaminated. That is most distressing, given that aquifers are recharged from the riverbeds and the water is then made available to the population. Our report, based on the findings of a survey carried out jointly by the World Bank and the Institute of Water Modelling (IWM), points up the dilemma we have before us. We either let the pollution take wider swathes of our rivers or we take decisive action against all those individuals and elements responsible for the degradation of the rivers.

Clearly, with the scarcity of water (apart from scarcities of other sorts) taking increasingly serious levels, it is but natural that action to clean up the rivers be undertaken on an urgent basis. Unfortunately, demand for such action has grown over the past many years, with industries responsible for depositing their effluents in the rivers repeatedly warned about the need to clean up their act. That warning, repeated over time, has not been heeded. It is also clear that the authorities responsible for ensuring pollution-free rivers and other water bodies have failed to do their job. The result is not only a number of muck-filled rivers but also increasingly narrowing rivers owing to the deposition of effluents as well as unlawful filling in of rivers by unscrupulous elements. The precarious nature of the situation cannot be ignored. With the surface water already contaminated, as much as 85 per cent of the demand for water in the nation's capital is met from groundwater sources. Now, with even the groundwater levels becoming afflicted by pollution, it is the health of citizens that is endangered.

The water issue needs to be tackled on a priority basis. That calls for some steps to be taken, swiftly and ruthlessly. Firstly, a comprehensive monitoring of the riverbanks must be initiated, the objective being ensuring that effluents are not dumped by industries. Factories indulging in such acts must be quickly penalised. Secondly, a long-term and focused clean-up operation of the riverbeds must be undertaken. Finally, a detailed programme of river dredging of the polluted, narrowing rivers must be prepared and put into implementation mode.

Civic problems and efforts towards their resolution are almost always the basis on which the performance of a government is judged. The water crisis, in that sense, is a sure test for the administration.

## Deaths of BDR men in custody

Act carefully before it becomes an international issue

WE express our deep concern over the deaths of some BDR personnel in the custody of the various law enforcing agencies. The issue is important on two counts: one, we are talking about human life; two, we are talking about the image of the country. Bangladesh has an empowered and functional judicial system that can take care of such crimes. Therefore, in no way, extra-judicial measures can be given a blank cheque by anybody. To be candid, unusual deaths of suspects in custody is an endemic problem in this country. Therefore, the explanation of the deaths of BDR men given by representatives of the security forces do not always sound credible enough. Such deaths remind us of the old issue of custodial deaths under the past governments, which have been widely criticised by the people of this country, including this daily. Despite repeated urging, no government launched a vigorous investigation to unearth the truth behind such unwarranted deaths in police custody.

Reportedly, suspects in custody have in most cases been denied access to lawyers and family members. Hence, the government should take effective measures to ensure accountability and transparency in the process of investigation and holding of the trial. We believe this is a suggestion worth pondering since we do not want the whole issue to be blown out of proportion. If the number of custodial deaths continues to mount, we fear it might as well become a serious international issue that might become too hot to handle at some stage.

We have always been vocal against all sorts of extra-judicial killings and custodial deaths and once again we urge the government to look into the deaths of the BDR personnel. No more detainees must die under suspicious circumstances while in the custody of the government law enforcers. Everyone has the right to trial and justice. Let the law take its own course.

## It's law and order, stupid!

According to the inherent dynamics of intra-party violence over the spoils, the prevailing disorder will only intensify. Notwithstanding the AL's attitude and actions, law and order is at the core of the country's survival, progress, and prosperity.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

LAW and order in Bangladesh has seldom been good. But never before has it been so bad as now. On earlier occasions, we could at least indulge in wishful thinking that things would improve, our law enforcing agencies would come of age, and, above all, the people at the helm would mature enough to rid us of the menace.

The public was fed on these hopes for long. They no more work. How could they when the lurking dangers on the law and order front are so ominously real? During the closing days of the last AL government, law and order suffered a nose-dive, reaching its nadir during the succeeding BNP-Jamaat regime. Ever since then, the country couldn't come out of the quagmire.

The laxity and lapses made on this front have now come home to roost. That the lawlessness has escalated was also recognised last week in the monthly DMP briefing on crimes. As revealed by the DMP source, the theft, dacoity, and hijacking committed last month came as serious cause for alarm.

During the same period, the cases of murders doubled. According to newspaper reports, on one night last week there were three cases of murder and a case of unnatural death. At the same time, there was a daredevil dacoity in five houses in old Dhaka's Sutrapur.

Even in the crowded areas of Motijheel, Mohakhali, Farmgate and Sadarghat the so-called "Thu-thu" (spitting) parties are menacingly active. The bus and railway stations

as well as steamer ghats are in the thrall of "Malam" and "Agyan" parties. Where are we living?

Political revenge and vengeance are no less responsible for the collapsing law and order situation. The excesses of the front organisations of the ruling party have made it precarious. A new dimension has been added due to the threats given by the militants. The authorities are also concerned about sabotage attempts on our rickety water and power supply system. Are we virtually under siege?

The public reaction to the breakdown of order is obviously one of shock and trepidation. But for the remorseless crime lords, killing is a game, kidnapping an adventure, and rape a fond pastime. As fear and anxiety stalk the countryside, Dhaka, the country's nerve centre, has virtually turned into a criminals' den.

Yet, law and order is the first and foremost test of a credible government. In its absence, the authorities have little justification to stay. As in the past, the present government's actions also, if any, are based on a lop-sided concept of law and order. They seldom realise that the real power to govern springs out of moral authority. Instead, the ruling party wants to exercise power through muscle.

It is amazing that a highly-mandated government like the present one has to so frequently err in its political conduct with regard to a poor-second opposition which is gasping for mere survival -- making a con-



Time for the law to get tough.

frontation inevitable and further aggravation of law and order irresistible.

Yet a harmonious relationship with the opposition and settlement of issues peacefully has great potential for promoting a stable law and order situation. By antagonising the opposition, the government will only compound its problems.

Squashing the weak is always a zero-sum effort, which only dents the ruling party's democratic credentials. It also gives its unruly cadres a taste of crude power, which they often exhibit even by challenging law enforcing agencies.

In the meantime, the nation seethes for what it perceives to be the deceit meted out to it by the AL government headed by Sheikh Hasina. Law and order figured prominently in the election campaign, and the AL-led Mohajote was catapulted to power by vowing to restore it and promising to root out terrorism.

But unfortunately such prospects appear

bleak when it starts to blame the preceding governments ad infinitum instead of clamping down on professional terrorists and criminals, including those hiding behind the Awami cloak.

According to the inherent dynamics of intra-party violence over the spoils, the prevailing disorder will only intensify. Notwithstanding the AL's attitude and actions, law and order is at the core of the country's survival, progress, and prosperity. The country is held hostage to its vicissitudes, not allowing it normal economic life or an investment climate or environment for production.

In a law and order situation where all hell seems to have been let loose, a national effort of all social and political forces will have to be employed to combat the menace. The inevitable point of departure for this will, however, have to be the recognition of its gravity in a national context.

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## Reinventing political Islam

Islam makes it an obligation on every Muslim to seek knowledge. In early Islamic civilisation, all knowledgeable men, which consisted of scientists, artists, litterateurs, philosophers and theologians were deemed as the *ulama*.

MUNYEMA HASAN

ONCE upon a time Islamic civilisation was a bastion of intellectual debate and freedom of thought. It pioneered algebra and spherical trigonometry, the concept of zero, public hospitals, public libraries and academic degree-granting universities. It gave the world innovative surgical and astronomical instruments, ushered in a scientific revolution in optics and helped lay the foundations of modern medicine.

It gave us the awe-inspiring architecture of Moorish Spain and Mughal India. Muslim thinkers pursued love, poetry, and philosophy with equal zeal and taught the equality of men and woman. So influential were the contributions of this age of discovery that it hastened a European Renaissance.

Fast forward a couple of centuries and things are very different. What has happened in these years for Islamic civilisation to be reduced to the state it is in today? Writers and scholars have been trying to decipher the reasons for the rise and fall of this Islamic Golden Age.

They point to the political mismanagement by some of the later caliphs, the

Crusades, the Mongol invasion, the fall of the Ottomans and the subsequent colonisation by European empires. With the devastation of the rich heritage that followed, one very important aspect of Islamic thought seemed to have become ossified in history -- *ijtihad*.

It is the independent and reasoned interpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunnah and was a commonly used legal practice in early Islam. This was based on the understanding that every new generation of Muslims have to reinvent and reinterpret their religion to make it relevant against the existing social, economic and political context.

The freezing of *ijtihad* in dominant Sunni tradition has had many a negative effect on political Islam. *Shari'ah* or "Islamic Law" for example, is a human creation, an effort to understand the divine will in a specific context. As such, it is less law and more a problem-solving methodology. But conservative interpretations have elevated it to divinity itself and presented it as an immutable set of guidelines.

Islam makes it an obligation on every Muslim to seek knowledge. In early Islamic civilisation, all knowledgeable men, which consisted of scientists, artists, litterateurs,

philosophers and theologians were deemed as the *ulama*. With the decline of *ijtihad* the *ulama* increasingly came to comprise only religious scholars.

Take *jihad* and its over-simplified meaning, holy war. Its more important spiritual connotation of inner struggle and intellectual endeavour in ones personal and social life has been lost in translation. Similarly *ijma*, the third fundamental source of *Shari'ah*, has been narrowly understood to be a consensus among Islamic clerics. Yet it is the consensus of the entire community, embodying participatory and democratic governance.

However, it would be a mistake to say that this decontextualisation and reductionism in political Islam has not been challenged. Many reformist scholars and intellectuals such as Jamaluddin Afghani, Mohammad Abd'uh and Mohammad Iqbal led the calls for *ijtihad* at the beginning of the last century. More contemporary thinkers such as Ziauddin Sardar, Amina Wadud and Abdullah an-Naim are at the forefront of it today.

Yet this spirit of scholarly enquiry and reform has neither percolated among the Muslim community nor been internalised. The Muslim world struggles to engage with modernity, continuing to export medieval times and applying it to an ill-fitting reality. It has produced autocracies, theocracies or dictatorships where oppressive brands of Islam sit comfortably with their political ideology.

America's direct and indirect political alliances with these actors haven't helped

the scene either. Be it during the Cold War by supporting the Mujahideen in Afghanistan or the present day dictators in the Middle East, American foreign policy has also played a role in fanning extremist political Islam.

With very little political freedom to channel grievances, the reaction to both domestic despotic leaders and Western hegemonic architecture has been violence. Movements like the Muslim Brotherhood have become mirror images of what they are fighting against. The common Muslim is faced with no real political alternatives that strive to solve the problems of his day-to-day life.

Colonialism and the subsequent geopolitical fragmentation of the world has led to the ummah or global community of Muslims to be reduced to the nation state. It is from here that a reformed political Islam should emerge, in order to be in harmony with the diverse practices of Islam, which reflect local cultures and customs.

Hard-line organisations themselves will have to moderate their stance in order to appeal to the masses. Muslim leftists, secularists and reformists must become more visible and their ideas accessible to the public. They should coalesce to produce home-grown political ideologies that champion equality, justice and pluralism.

International human rights norms or a liberal democracy are not irreconcilable with Islamic values. That is something which Muslims need to understand and believe in order to bring about change -- in the personal and the political sphere of life.

## Sher-e-Bangla: A point of reference

Huq obviously relished the moment. He slowed his walk to the dais, bowed left and then right as he acknowledged the cheers, and finally found his place beside Jinnah. The future founder of Pakistan told the assembled delegates: "The tiger has now been caged."

EDITORIAL DESK

ABUL Kashem Fazlul Huq lived what many would consider a rich, fulfilling life. Born on October 26, 1873, he breathed his last in Dhaka on April 27, 1962. It is said that the last four years of his life were spent in physical agony, and yet, Sher-e-Bangla, as he has come to be known in history, was one of the pre-eminent Bengali politicians whose entire life was given over to the service of his people.

By the time the All-India Muslim League met in Lahore in 1940 to ask for the creation of Pakistan, Huq was already a well-known figure within undivided India's political circles. But it was certainly that conference in Lahore which cemented his reputation as the Tiger of Bengal.

Abul Hashim, himself one of the foremost Muslim politicians in pre-partition times, records in his slim work, *In Retrospect*, the

manner in which Huq made his way to the podium in Lahore on March 23, 1940.

He made his entry into the venue of the Muslim League conference even as Mohammad Ali Jinnah was busy exhorting his party about the need to demand Pakistan. Observing Huq, all League representatives cheerfully welcomed him as Sher-e-Bangla.

Huq obviously relished the moment. He slowed his walk to the dais, bowed left and then right as he acknowledged the cheers, and finally found his place beside Jinnah. The future founder of Pakistan told the assembled delegates: "The tiger has now been caged." Moments later, Fazlul Huq moved the resolution for Pakistan.

Huq left the Muslim League in 1942 and after that, till the division of India, engaged in various political permutations and combinations, notable among which was his

forging a coalition in Bengal with Shyama Prasad Mukherjee. It was a coalition that eventually did not work.

In 1947, Huq moved to East Bengal, the eastern province of the newly created state of Pakistan. With politics increasingly becoming hostage in the hands of the ruling Muslim League, Sher-e-Bangla found himself adopting, more and more, anti-establishment and therefore popular causes.

In 1954, it was the combined force of his personality and those of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani (symbolised by the Jukto Front) that forced the Muslim League out of power through elections in East Bengal.

As chief minister of East Bengal, Huq expected to redraw the frontiers of politics vis-à-vis relations between his province and the four provinces constituting West Pakistan. In the event, he failed. Soon after his government took over, an unhappy West Pakistani ruling clique instigated riots at Adamjee jute mills in Narayananganj.

And then Huq made a trip to West Bengal, met his old friend Bidhan Chandra Roy and waxed eloquent about the historical ties between the two parts of old Bengal. The Pakistani administration painted his remarks as a conspiracy to break up Pakistan. On May 31, 1954, barely two

months into ascending office, the Fazlul Huq ministry was dismissed under Section 92(a).

But a political comeback was what would define Huq's career within slightly more than a year. In August 1955, the man who had been accused of treason in May 1954, was inducted into the cabinet of Prime Minister Chaudhri Mohammad Ali as Pakistan's interior minister. That was a remarkable turn of fortune for Sher-e-Bangla.

Fortune came his way again when, on March 24, 1956, a day after the Pakistan constituent assembly adopted a constitution for the country, Huq took over as governor of East Pakistan. Here, too, something of history was made, since Huq was the first Bengali to be governor of his own people. His predecessors had been either British colonialists or West Pakistanis.

A.K. Fazlul Huq was removed from the office of governor on April 1, 1958. That effectively was the end of his career in politics. Age was finally catching up with him. In the four years left to him of life, he would be witness to the first military takeover of Pakistan in October 1958 and the suppression of democratic politics in the country.

Sher-e-Bangla remains a pivotal point of reference in the politics of not only Bangladesh but of pre-1947 India as well.

