

## A night of soul-searching and salvation

*Renewing commitment to true spirit of Islam*

LAILATUL Barat, or the night of emancipation, falls tonight, preceding the 15th night of Shaban, the eighth Hejira month, according to Muslim lunar calendar. It is the special night to seek forgiveness from Almighty Allah by atoning for the past sins and earnestly praying to Him for His munificence in spite of the frailties and failures of the faithful. The devoted Muslim also commits on this holy night to steadfastly uphold spiritual values and conduct his temporal life in a way that does not hurt fellow beings in any way.

It is also said that on this night the Almighty keeps the doors of mercy and forgiveness for his beloved wide open. So, whoever would be sincere enough to cry for God's forgiveness would be granted this in full measure.

Actually, the night has got a special meaning in the life of every Muslim, for it gives him the opportunity to take stock of the past in terms of his dealings with his fellow people in the day-to-day life and seek divine guidance for an improvement of his conduct in future. So, the holy night is also one of purifying one's soul and emerging as a clean person approaching the worldly affairs with a new fervour.

The spirit is one of staying away from what might be harmful for the individual as well as the greater humanity. This brings up the significance of Lailatul Barat for the modern-day Muslims in a fresh light. For it is observed that a handful of people are given to extremist proclivities often committing violence which is at variance with the true spirit of Islam. In fact, Islam being a religion of peace as the Arabic word 'Islam' itself stands for, never permits violence in any form or shape.

This is where we urge Islamic scholars to explain the real message of Islam to all and sundry asserting that use of force and violence have no place in our religion. On this occasion we pray for the salvation, wellbeing and prosperity of all humanity.

## Demolition culture bodes ill for the nation

*When will we come out of it?*

THE removal of the late president Zia's murals from the Bangabandhu National Stadium has raised a few questions in the public mind regarding the rationale behind such acts, which always appear to be high on the agenda of any new government. The murals were demolished at night and it looked like a special assignment carried out by the sports administration in an air of secrecy or at least not having due transparency as these were brought down.

It is not clear, though, why in the first place the murals of Ziaur Rahman were placed at a stadium named after Bangabandhu. And why were they removed once being placed? Are not the decision makers showing lack of maturity in handling matters that can have profound sentimental implications?

Now, the first question is, why this juxtaposition of the two leaders in every display of public memorialisation? Doesn't it denigrate the image of both the leaders? Is it indispensable that one leader will have to occupy a place along side the other all the time and on every occasion?

That said, the serial demolition drive by every new government to erase the names of the past governments' revered figures is at best nothing but a reflection of low national self-esteem. At worst, it is a manifestation of the desire to obliterate everything belonging to the political rivals. The culture of naming, renaming and de-naming has to come to an end, once and for all, and the leaders, regardless of party affiliations and ideology, must be placed on the pedestal of honour that they deserve. A leader's position in history cannot change with the change of government, unless we are ready to be branded as a morally and politically bankrupt nation.

The removal of the murals is illustrative of how the political parties refuse to give each other any space whatsoever. It seems they are engaged in an endless struggle for imprinting their own ideas on the nation's collective psyche, often in violation of all norms of decency. They are trying to prevail over their adversaries through means far from civil. Neither side has ever deemed it necessary to weigh the consequences of applying force in such matters and how our values and beliefs are also getting demolished with the structures and portraits that they dislike so intensely.

## Whither anti-corruption drive?

The government's decision to withdraw cases that it sees as politically motivated should be reconsidered. While it is true that it was common practice of past governments to indulge in false litigation to harass political opponents, to bypass the judicial process would mean demeaning the judiciary and the rule of law.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

It would appear that the drive against corruption has gone awry. To many it would seem that what started with a bang by the erstwhile caretaker government is petering out rather mildly.

But corruption remains the core issue for us. What is one to make of the World Bank's refusal to fund any further project in the road sector because of corruption? It is a slight on the nation but we can't take the WB to court to have it prove the allegation. And one couldn't agree more with the finance minister that the WB itself is a party to it.

Public perception of national issues like corruption is shaped by the instances of reported graft and illegal benefits of ex-ministers and high officials to let off an alleged murderer, or to bestow undue favours to a foreign company operating in the country, or of one reportedly owning more than hundred flats in Dhaka. Many of these are yet to be proven in the court of law, but what law can prevent me from forming an opinion of my own?

The so-called jihad against corruption in the two year's of the CTG may have not turned out the way people expected, but it did expose several things.

First, had it not been for the drive we would never have known that a government servant could stash away millions at home without anyone up or down the chain ever coming to know of it. But for it we would have been unaware of government lands being allegedly given away to a minister's son at a most ludicrous price, or of public universities employing man-

power much beyond that authorised, causing loss of millions to the state, or of privately owned horses fed on energy biscuits meant for the poor.

We had said in these very columns in early 2007 that the public in general wanted to see measures that would permanently break the unholy nexus that existed between some politicians and some unscrupulous businessmen and dishonest bureaucrats. But the people in general were also sensitive about arbitrary curbing of the rights of individuals. In this regard there was need to follow the legal process and the rule of law.

What went wrong, to my mind, was the motive behind the drive and the way it was pursued.

It is now clear that the anti-corruption drive was an instrument to go after the politicians to "cleanse politics." While not all politicians were epitome of honesty and integrity, the manner in which the drive was conducted exposed the ill motives. Any action that is not accompanied by honest intentions is destined to fail.

While most of those hauled up for alleged corruption were politicians, they were arrested without any charges against them. The manner of their incarceration, some with their families, and subsequent questioning, did not conform to the legal norms. And while many had to wait for a long time before being charged, some, enjoying the patronage of those calling the shots, went scot-free even when substantive charges of corruption to the tune of millions were brought against them by the ACC.



Don't let them slip out

At least one, known to have exploited the system to the hilt during the 4-party rule for personal gains, was not even asked to furnish his wealth statement, or find mention in the so called suspect list prepared by the NCC (whose locus standi the advisor heading it had himself questioned), because of his links to the top brasses.

As of today, reportedly, more than 200 high profile accused have obtained stay order on the cases against them filed by the ACC. And most of the stay orders have been on technical grounds and not the merit of the case.

The PM herself has expressed her displeasure at known bigwigs who, according to her, had amassed crores illegally, and she is convinced that the allegation of corruption against them are substantial and have merit, are being able to slip through the net because of technicalities.

We resent seeing ourselves at the top of the list of most corrupt countries but are quite unaware of the serious effect it has on

human security. This government, we are sure, would also like to root out corruption. And one way to ensure that is by having the cases of corruption proved in the court and the guilty punished.

While the innocent should not suffer, the people would not like to see the corrupt and the bad ones become heroes because of some legal loopholes or weak handling of the cases. And this would require the ACC to be able to work without invisible fetters.

In this regard, the government's decision to withdraw cases that it sees as politically motivated should be reconsidered. While it is true that it was common practice of past governments to indulge in false litigation to harass political opponents, to bypass the judicial process would mean demeaning the judiciary and the rule of law. The PM can increase her government's credibility by letting the legal process run its course.

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## Accommodating the reformists

The misguided politicians of AL have been tackled well by Sheikh Hasina. By allowing nomination to these veterans she was able to avoid a crisis in political leadership, and by not including them in the cabinet she could accommodate and encourage the younger members of the party.

A.B.M.S ZAHUR

NO doubt credit goes to AL chief, who was able to submit an amended and approved constitution of the party to the Election Commission in time. It is also a milestone in the history of AL, which completed the council session without hassle. The activists of AL were immensely delighted and inspired by her statement, "friendship and no retaliation," in the council meeting that. This has given a new direction to our political culture.

In constituting the new cabinet the AL chief came up with a surprise. For the first time in the parliamentary history of Bangladesh, we have many new young faces in the cabinet. She showed courage by offering two very sensitive portfolios to women, home affairs to Sahara Khatun and

foreign affairs to Dr. Dipu Moni. To our satisfaction, they have performed well, though Sahara Khatun had to face the extremely tense situation of the Pillkhana carnage, and Dr. Dipu Moni faced the issue of Tipaimukh Dam.

In any situation there is always room for improvement. Choosing the right person for the right place is a pretty difficult task, particularly in the situation created after 1/11 and the setting up of an unconstitutional caretaker government, which appears to have spared no pains to weaken top politicians, if not to destroy them. All its tricks and strategies failed because the people of Bangladesh love democracy. Bangladeshis surely fought the War of Independence for achieving nothing less than democracy.

During the war, some people cooperated with the Pakistani military government

because of their faith in the strength of the Pakistan army. They even formed a faction named Pakistan Democratic Movement to assist the army. They were led by some politicians who did not have faith in the strength of the people. Similarly, some veteran politicians of our major political parties started dreaming of reforming the parties without leadership of the two ladies, who were incarcerated by the CTG to keep them out of touch with their respective parties. These veterans cooperated with the CTG to avoid arrest and harassment.

There is some controversy over the need for Razzaque, Amu, Tofail, Suranjit and Abdul Jalil to explain their conduct during emergency. Some AL supporters feel that these members have been punished twice; by not being included in the cabinet and by being discarded from the presidium.

The misguided politicians of AL have been tackled well by Sheikh Hasina. By allowing nomination to these veterans she was able to avoid a crisis in political leadership, and by not including them in the cabinet she could accommodate and encourage the younger members of the party. She discarded the veterans from the presidium to avoid any possible conflict, making the body more dynamic. However,

veterans have been appointed as advisers to assist her administration whenever necessary.

In a democratic party, members can have differences of opinion. But if any member works against the interest of the chief there can be no reason for allowing him to retain his position. Sheikh Hasina could have followed the example of the Nehru Commission (1942), which recommended that rebellious congressmen explain their conduct -- and failure to do so was punishable by expulsion from the party. She did not opt for such a strong measure. Instead, she preferred to utilise the experience of the veterans. This shows her political maturity.

The process of reform is a virtually unending one. She has realised that she is aging. As such, it is high time for the AL high command to find really capable leaders to guide the party ably and effectively. Some political analysts feel that by allowing domination of younger leaders the AL chief has taken a great risk. No risk, no gain. We hope that the new leaders will prove their worth soon. What is most important is their dedication and loyalty to the chief in assisting her achieving her vision 2021.

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## Preserving water bodies

Water bodies have a wide range of ecological, socio-cultural, economic and commercial importance and value in Bangladesh. They are habitats for a large variety of flora and fauna of local, national and regional significance.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

WHILE addressing the inaugural function of the National Fisheries Week-2009, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina asked the authorities concerned to ensure preservation of all types of water bodies to protect natural breeding places of fish and thereby help increase fish production. This is undoubtedly a timely directive that needs the fullest implementation.

The water bodies are also known as wetlands. According to information available from various studies, different types of inland water bodies in Bangladesh include:

- Rivers: 7,497 sq km,
- Estuaries and mangrove swamps: 6,102 sq km,
- Beels and haors: 1,142 sq km,
- Inundable floodplains: 54,866 sq km,
- Kaptai lake: 688 sq km,
- Ponds: 1,469 sq km,
- Baors (oxbow lakes): 55 sq km, and
- Brackish-water farms: 1,080 sq km. The total area comes to 72,499 sq km, which is about 50% of the total land surface.

Water bodies have a wide range of ecological, socio-cultural, economic and commercial

importance and value in Bangladesh. They are habitats for a large variety of flora and fauna of local, national and regional significance.

The water bodies are critically important for human settlements, biodiversity, fisheries, agricultural diversity, navigation and communication, and ecotourism.

Taking a cue from the prime minister's emphasis on the need for preserving the water bodies, it may be stated that from time immemorial fish and fisheries have played a very significant role in the nutrition, culture and economy of the country. The famous adage "mache-bhate Bangali" highlights the importance of fish in our lives.

According to the Bangladesh State of Environment Report 2001, about 80% of the daily animal protein intake in the diet of the people comes from fish. According to the just completed PRSP, the fisheries sub-sector contributes over 5% to GDP and export earnings and employs about 10% of the total labour force.

It is also equally true that inland open-water-capture fisheries have declined substantially and losses in output from this source have adversely affected the poor who used to earn a livelihood from subsistence fishing in the floodplains. This has

happened due to filling up of floodplains for human settlements and development activities and use of pesticides in agricultural lands.

The situation has become acute in and around Dhaka. The campaign jointly launched by The Daily Star and Channel I shows how the rivers Buriganga, Sitalakhya, Turag and Balu, which serve as the lifeline of the city, have become victims of land-grabbers and polluters.

The floodplains and low lands in and around the city have been filled up or are in the process of being filled up. Many canals in the old part of Dhaka have completely disappeared. Even the lakes at Gulshan and Uttara have suffered drastically.

The absence of a tough and comprehensive law on the protection of water bodies has been primarily responsible for the failure to protect the water bodies from the land grabbers and polluters. The laws on water bodies -- The Bengal Canal Act 1864, The Bengal Irrigation Act 1876, East Bengal Embankment and Drainage Act 1952, Inland Water Transport Ordinance 1958, Ground Water Management Ordinance 1985, etc. -- are, as their titles indicate, sectoral in nature.

The latest Act -- The Playground, Open Spaces, Gardens, and Water Bodies Conservation Act 2000 -- suffers from loopholes and inadequacies regarding protection of water bodies. Section 1 of this Act suggests that it has application on the water bodies of the cities, divisional and district towns and municipalities. The water bodies in the rural areas are outside

the jurisdiction of this Act.

The Act does not have any provision that prohibits construction of any kind of permanent or temporary structure within a determined distance of the water bodies. The Act also does not have any provision that provides that the water bodies that have been marked in survey records and exist in other approved government documents will be recovered if they have been encroached on.

Moreover, although the Act specifies the fine and imprisonment term for violation of any of its provisions, it does not direct the government to recover the original characteristics of the water bodies if someone fills them up.

It was learnt from newspaper reports that that the BNP-led alliance government initiated a move to enact a new law with strict provisions to protect water bodies and flood-flow zones across the country.

The media reports revealed that the committee tasked with the preparation of the draft law had prepared the draft, but it was not finally placed in the cabinet meeting. There were reports that a powerful lobby had been very active against the enactment of a tough and comprehensive law on the matter.

In view of what has been stated above, the need for enacting a tough and comprehensive law for preserving the different types of water bodies can hardly be over-emphasised. The earlier it is done, the better it will be for the country.

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