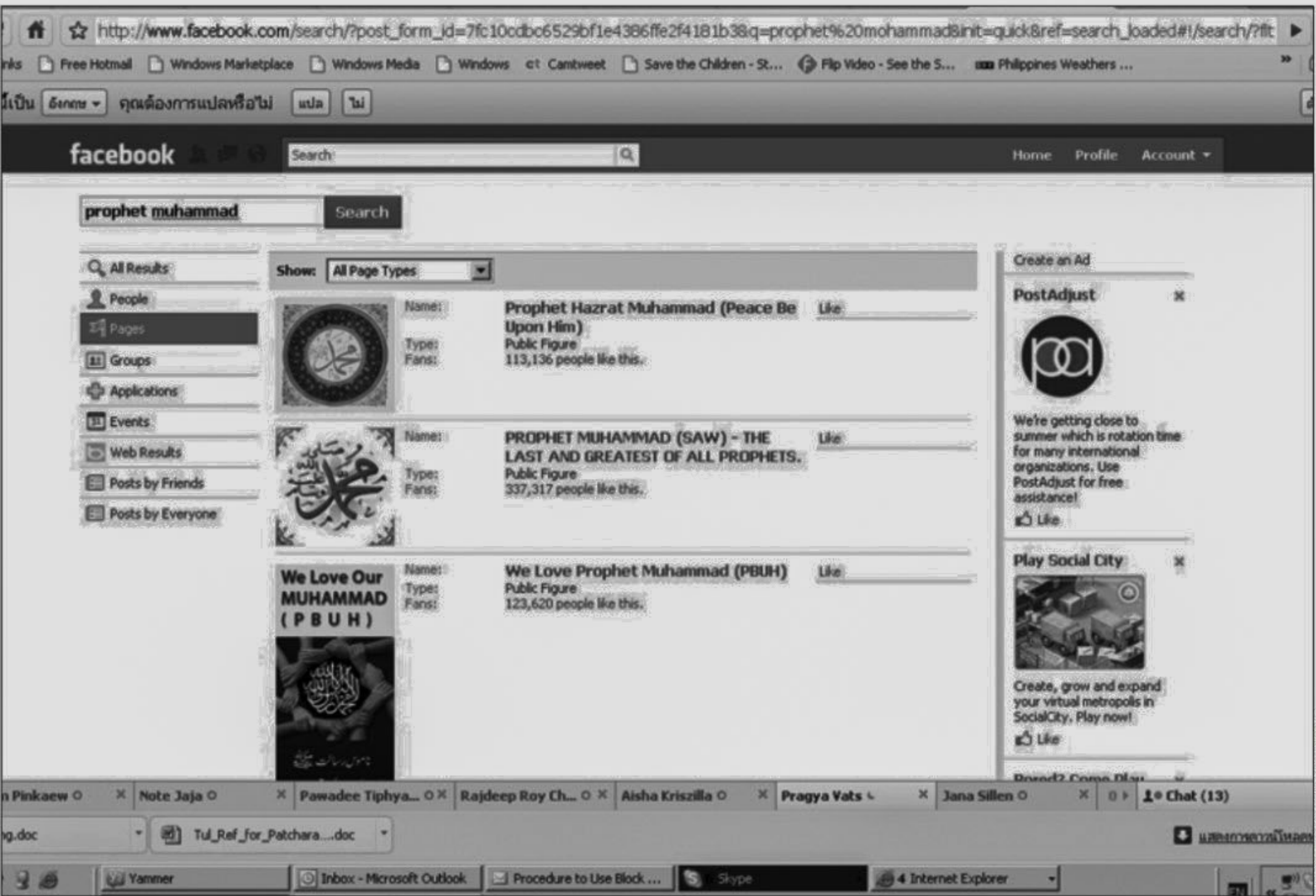


Faceblocked



Most of the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) related pages on Facebook are fan-pages dedicated to following the teachings of the Prophet.

A ban is not a protest. In this current day and age, it is best described as an act of denial. Banning doesn't make anything go away. It just helps create a cocoon where what we don't like exists for everyone else, just not us.

FARIHA SARAWAT

I've heard both sides of the Facebook story over the last few days. I've heard the story that banning is a breach of freedom of expression and is unreasonable censorship. I have also heard the flipside -- how Facebook censors anti-Semitic content, but not anti-Islamic content, and hence the ban is a political protest against this selective censorship. Some have even romanticised the latter story as the Islamic subaltern taking a defiant political stance against the repressive West. I'm sorry but I don't understand how stopping the people of Bangladesh, regardless of their faith, from accessing a global social network that has made rooms for all kinds of social, political, and religious sentiments,

including anti-Islamic ones, can be pitched as a just political protest. I also don't understand that the sentiments of those who support this kind of restriction. But then again, I don't think I belong to the group that purports to speak for the subaltern. Like most Facebook users of Bangladesh, I belong to the 18-34 age bracket, which incidentally is also the largest segment of our population. A protest is a strong action that is in response to or is a reaction to some other action. Despite the "pro-" prefix, today, protests are hardly ever in favour of anything, and mostly strong reactions against something. Protests almost always have popular support from a large number of people, are often reactions to disservice from a government or any other organisation or individual -- it's

something people do when they feel they have been wronged or let down by those that they feel they have some kind of a relationship with. And the protestors also have some kind of an ask, a demand, a change that they hope to see from the protest. Our rallies, marches, petitions, even hartals -- annoying and disruptive as they are -- are forms of protest. The recent ban on Facebook, albeit temporary, is not an act of political protest. A ban is not a protest. In this current day and age, it is best described as an act of denial. Banning doesn't make anything go away. It just helps create a cocoon where what we don't like exists for everyone else, just not us. It gives us a false sense of security, as we pretend that since we can't see it or feel it, it doesn't exist; that somehow, excluding it from our world makes what we don't like less potent; less of a threat. But of course, in the real world -- that is, the world outside of the ban we impose on ourselves and the other elements we control -- it has no bearing on the actual threat that the subject of the ban poses. Bans don't change the status quo in favour of the banner -- they just help us feel as though we have uprooted the problem, kind of like cutting

of the head for the headache. Bans, in our case, make an issue we don't like and would like to see go away get more attention than it would have otherwise. Too bad banning YouTube did not really teach us that. The Facebook ban is not a protest. There is no large body of people supporting it. The Bangladeshi zeitgeist is not the bearded young fellow on the street burning flags and effigies. And neither is it the spiked-hair kid playing Farmville for hours on his computer. But even then, the latter will probably be more representative of the Bangladeshi youth of today in terms of their hopes and aspirations. Those who have been responsible for banning Facebook don't really have a relationship with the site. Otherwise they would definitely have known that reporting a Facebook page for offensive content is far more effective in getting rid of that page than nation-wide flag-burning photo-ops. If they had any actual knowledge of the application, they would also know that barring the offensive cartoon page, most other Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) related pages on Facebook are fan-pages dedicated to following the teachings of the Prophet, and have hundreds of thousands of devout followers, including Bangladeshis. More importantly, the ban on Facebook is not a social or political protest because it did not envision any kind of change in the public actions or perceptions regarding religion, religious sentiments and sacrilegious activities. Merely pegging Facebook as western propaganda and hence having it banned because it offends certain "armed and dangerous" factions of the society, most of whom have no relationship with the tool, is not really a "change." It's simply us admitting to our inability to contain and control mindless violence. Today Facebook, tomorrow Google -- is banning websites the most sustainable way to keep the young and impressionable away from the evils of "sacrilegious content"? Can we prevent the "armed and offended" from getting "provoked" by acts of intolerance by making sure they can't access certain offensive sites? Will a blanket ban prevent the "instigators," the "blasphemous" from posting offensive content on the internet? Will it really teach them a lesson? If you think the right (or righteous and just) answer to any of the questions above is yes then you are even more delusional than the four-year-old me who thought that hiding under my blanket would make the ghosts inside my head go away.

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Still stigmatised

In many countries laws and policies that were prejudicial and discriminatory against people suffering from leprosy have been repealed. India repealed the Lepers Act 1898 during 1992-93.

MARTIN ADHIKARY

LAW is common sense, common goodwill. Laws are supposed to facilitate the creation of an environment for the promotion of the dignity and right of persons in a society. No human-made law, enactment or policy is for posterity. Sometimes ancient laws need to be modified, changed or even repealed in view of changed circumstance. One such law today is the ancient Lepers Act passed in 1898. In those days there was no real treatment for leprosy. This law was passed to help people affected by this disease, as well as the community, from the spreading of the same. Affected people were turned away by their own families and neighbourhood, and were forced to live on begging. They were so alienated and stigmatised that they did not have any dignity of life. They lived sub-human lives. They were arrested by the police if found in the locality, consigned to asylums and special places meant for them, and were given whatever treatment was available at that time. They were not allowed to come out in public, barred from entering into certain callings and professions, not allowed to travel in public mode of transport, etc., for fear they would spread the disease. Now the situation is altogether different. There is modern scientific medicine; the WHO prescribed and universally accepted and applied Multi-drug Therapy (MDT) -- dapsone, clofazimine and rifampicine -- is the best cure for leprosy. All organisations, government and non-government, the world over use this medication for effectively treating the disease. MDT is free and is easily available in our country at all upazilla health complexes and all leprosy-related organisations' clinics and hospitals. Leprosy is a very mildly infectious disease. The bacterium (myco-bacterium leprae) causing this disease loses its power to spread within 24 hours' time after the first dose. About 98% people have a natural immunity against it. Since 1985, more than 14 million patients have been cured globally through MDT. Since 1985 up to the end of 2009 around 190,000 leprosy cases were detected in Bangladesh and around 182,000 have been cured with multi-drug therapy. To be sure, the segregating ancient Lepers Act 1898 does not have a raison d'être. It violates human rights and dignity; it goes against the Constitution of our country as well as all the universal Charters or Declarations of human rights. The repealing of this Act will help our society in mainstreaming the people affected by leprosy, and pave the way for the restoration of their human dignity. Side by side, systematic and practical education on leprosy and its care should be given its proper place in the MBBS and nursing courses curricula so that integration of leprosy treatment is possible at public health institutions. This will contribute to the realisation of the vision for a "Bangladesh without leprosy," for which several organisations have been working. People affected by leprosy are often denied their human rights, and the presence of this law can help them to enjoy their human rights. Social discrimination in all forms continue to devastate their lives altogether. There is a need of a serious political commitment both on part of the government and the public. In many countries laws and policies that were prejudicial and discriminatory against people suffering from leprosy have been repealed. India repealed the Lepers Act 1898 during 1992-93. Over the last several years I wrote in various national dailies appealing to our governments to take necessary steps to repeal this Act. With all people of goodwill I share the confidence that our government and our sovereign parliament, with their *din bodoler sanad* or vision, have the political will to accomplish this milestone and thereby usher in some ray of hope for the people suffering from the life-devastating stigma around leprosy.

Reverend Martin Adhikary is Director of Advocacy and Promotion of the Leprosy Mission International-Bangladesh, and also a social worker.



Let's remove the leprosy taboo.

Why BNP should join the budget session



The BNP should give voice to her grievances.

By joining the budget session, the opposition BNP can raise these and other issues of national and public interest in the house. Why should BNP allow a walkover to the ruling AL?

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

IT has been reported in a section of the press this week that the main opposition BNP is still undecided about joining the budget session of the parliament which begins on June 2. Those newspapers reported that the opposition chief whip, Zainul Abdin Faroque, has ruled out the possibility of BNP's returning to the house for the budget session. The explanation furnished by the opposition chief whip is that "there is no environment for returning to the house." He has, however, hinted that if the government agrees to meet their demands first, then they will think about joining the budget session. But the same reports said that BNP's standing committee member and lawmaker Salauddin Quader Chowdhury has hinted at

BNP's joining the budget session to register its protest against the government's "misrule." There are still some other BNP leaders who maintain that nothing can be said unless the meeting of the parliamentary party is held. Meanwhile, parliament speaker Abdul Hamid has expressed hope that the opposition will join the ensuing budget session, saying that nothing has happened after the last parliament session that could be a ground for the opposition's boycott of the budget session. In a parliamentary system of government, the opposition party often refers to itself as a shadow government. Therefore, the opposition should conduct itself in parliament in a manner that would persuade the people of the country that it could be an improvement on the government of the day. BNP may have certain genuine grievances, which should be redressed by the ruling AL. In

order to have those grievances redressed as well as to discuss issues of national and public interest, BNP should join the forthcoming budget session of parliament. A budget is an annual statement of the estimated receipts and expenditure of the government in respect of each financial year. The rules of procedure (ROP) of parliament lay out the details of the presentation, discussion, voting and passage of the budget. The pertinent point here is that the house is at liberty to discuss the budget as a whole, or any question of principle involved in it. By attending the budget session, BNP can pinpoint the failures, if any, in the implementation of the commitments made in the budget for FY 2009-10. BNP can further pinpoint whether sufficient allocations have been proposed in the coming budget (FY 2010-11) for the vital sectors of the economy, such as agriculture, energy and power, education, health, family welfare, etc. Available reports suggest that BNP is preparing a shadow budget for handing over to the finance minister before his presentation of the national budget for the FY 2010-11 on June 10. Think tanks, economists, development experts and businessmen are working on the shadow budget. Sources say that there may be recommendations for the government as to which sectors should be given more emphasis in the budget. Analysts say that the placement of shadow budget by the opposition BNP will add a new dimension to Bangladesh politics. In its first budget (FY 2009-10) after coming to power in 2009, the AL-led alliance government made commitments for improvement and development in various fields. These include, inter alia, achieving higher economic growth, producing 500 MW additional electricity in the public sector and 440 MW in the private sector in 2009, attaining self-sufficiency in food production by 2012, including enhancing food grain storage capacity, reducing poverty and increasing income-generating activities, ensuring adequate health services for all and reducing population growth rate, stabilising the prices of essentials and protecting consumers' rights, and ensuring the independent role of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). Against these commitments, encouraging results are yet to be seen in most cases. Quoting Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the *Financial Express* of May 27 wrote that economic growth had slowed to a seven-year low.

The BBS said that growth in the year to June (2010) came at 5.54%, the slowest since 2002-2003. Bangladesh's financial year runs to the end of June, but the government published the growth figures ahead of the annual budget due on June 10. Overall exports were down 1% year on year in the nine months to the end of March, with apparel, which accounted for 80% of the \$15.56 billion shipments last year, seeing a fall in orders. Another BBS survey report, titled "Monitoring of Employment Survey -2009," released last week showed that unemployment increased by 28% to 27 million while underemployment increased by 27% to 1.54 crore during the last three years. Although a decreasing trend was noticed in the rate of population growth in the recent past, there has been a reversal in the growth rate due to absence of effective delivery of services at the grassroots level. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in her inaugural address to the Bangladesh Food Security Investment Forum on May 26, disclosed that the country's population was increasing by nearly 2 million a year. The AL-led government has not yet been able to ease the electricity crisis. It has recently undertaken a program for installation of rental power plants based on unsolicited offers. This has invited criticism from different quarters, which alleged that a situation that called for unsolicited deals to buy costly electricity was created by a quarter in the government after intentional spoiling of the tender process in late 2009 for the installation of eight rental power plants. Quoting UNB, *The Daily Star* of May 30 wrote that the government would have to provide Tk.5,000 crore in subsidy to the power sector in the coming fiscal year to purchase electricity from the costly rental power plants. It can be said with certainty that consumers will have to ultimately bear the burden. A move is already on to increase the electricity tariff. Instead of strengthening the ACC, the AL government has initiated steps to clip the ACC's wings by reducing some of its powers. By joining the budget session, the opposition BNP can raise these and other issues of national and public interest in the house. Why should BNP allow a walkover to the ruling AL?

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