

## Affliction of hajj pilgrims

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A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

USUALLY I restrict my columns to political, social, educational and economical events. But today I am using my column for benefit of those who are planning to perform hajj as I have gathered some bitter experiences while doing so this year under government management. The government approved the National Hajj Policy (2010-2014) and hajj package in April, fixing Tk.228,615 for each haji this year. The government expected that around 75,000 pilgrims would perform hajj this year. Of them, 15,000 pilgrims would go under government management and the rest under non-government arrangements.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said that the government would not tolerate any negligence in hajj management. But her directives were not carried out properly by the Bangladesh Hajj Mission. As a result, most of the pilgrims faced numerous problems, both at Makkah and at Madina.

The Bangladesh Hajj Mission rented nine houses at Makkah for the ballottee pilgrims, of which only one (House No-3) was near Herem Sharif, but it was reserved for 225VVIPs and VIPs.

I was put in Towarqy Center (House No-5) Along with 1,800 pilgrims. It was more than two kilometers

away from the Herem Sharif and we had to use taxis six times a day for going to Herem Sharif and returning from there. The pilgrims who were unable to afford taxi were compelled to say their prayers at the hotel or nearby mosques instead of Herem Sharif.

The ballottee pilgrims were put up at Al Safa Residential Center at Madina. Though the hotel was one kilometer away from the Masjid-e-Nabawi, it was the oldest building in the area and lacked many modern amenities.

Most of the ballottee pilgrims were placed under Muallim No-7, who hired some ramshackle buses for transporting them from Makkah to Madina and back. These buses took 14 hours to cover the 450 kilometer distance from Makkah to Madina, causing immense suffering to the pilgrims.

It is praiseworthy that the government sent 94 doctors as pilgrims. But the 111 hajj guides, paid by the ballottee pilgrims, were of no help as many of them were not conversant with hajj rituals and some of them had not performed hajj before. One needs to have performed hajj earlier to be a hajj guide.

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93,870 persons from Bangladesh performed hajj this year. The government had intended to send 15,000 pilgrims under its own management, but failed to achieve the target. It sent only 6,738 persons this year, including 111 hajj guides and 132 army personnel.

The government's hajj package was fixed at Tk.220,550 last year, and SR.1,305 was given to each pilgrim for food and other expenses. The government fixed its hajj package at Tk 228,615 this year but gave only SR.895 to each pilgrim, which was not enough for meeting one's food and other expenses for 43 days.

Two ministers, three state ministers (including state minister for religious affairs) and the secretary, a joint secretary and a deputy secretary of the Ministry of Religious Affairs were included in the government hajj delegation this year. Of them only the deputy secretary, who is also the Government Hajj Coordinator, paid a visit to Towarqy Center (House No-5). Unfortunately, he was harassed by the aggrieved pilgrims. However, the Hajj Mission refunded SR.124 to each haji residing in House 4 and 5 and cooled down them.

This year 125,000 pilgrims from India performed hajj under government management and only 48,000 under private management. Indian government selected these pilgrims under three categories through lottery. The Green (A) category pilgrims had to pay Rs. 1,15,000 each. The White (B) category pilgrims paid Rs.1,05,000 each and the Azizia (C) category pilgrims paid Rs.95,000 each. But the government refunded Rs.2,100 to each pilgrim for food and other expenditures irrespective of their

categories.

The Indian government deputed 1,700 persons to look after their pilgrims and engaged 70 buses for carrying them to Herem Sharif for saying their prayers five times a day and returning to their hotels. Indian Air Lines gifted a beautiful bag, a blanket and an umbrella to each pilgrim and allowed them to carry 55kg goods free of charge.

Our Religious Affairs Ministry officials should learn some lessons from India on hajj management and formulate its hajj policy accordingly. Otherwise, very few people will be encouraged to perform hajj under government management.

I could not help myself to mention an event here, as it hurt me hard. I did not find a copy of the Bengali version of the holy Quran in Herem Sharif and Masjid-e-Nabawi, though there were many copies of the Quran in other languages. The man who worked in this section informed me that there were many Bengali versions of Quran in Herem Sharif, but Bangladeshi pilgrims had taken away all the copies. As such, the authority has stopped supplying Bengali version of Quran.

Luckily, I met a Bangladeshi national who has been working for the last 12 years in Quran section in Masjid-e-Nabawi. I asked him the same question and got the same reply. I do not know whether such unlawful taking of Quran is an act of stealing or not, and whether Bangladeshi pilgrims are really involved in such a shameful misdeed or not.

Hajj is an once-in-a-lifetime obligation only for those who have the physical and financial ability to undertake such an arduous journey.

Hajj is the conglomeration of millions of Muslims rising above geographical, linguistic, cultural, ethnic, colour, and social barriers converging in Makkah. We hear about things, but when we see them with our own eyes, it places us in a different atmosphere.

When you go to the mountain of Hera, you realise that this is the same place where the Prophet used to seclude himself from the whole world for one month every year. It is the place that witnessed the revelation of the first words of the Qur'an and the appearance of the Arch-Angel Gabriel.

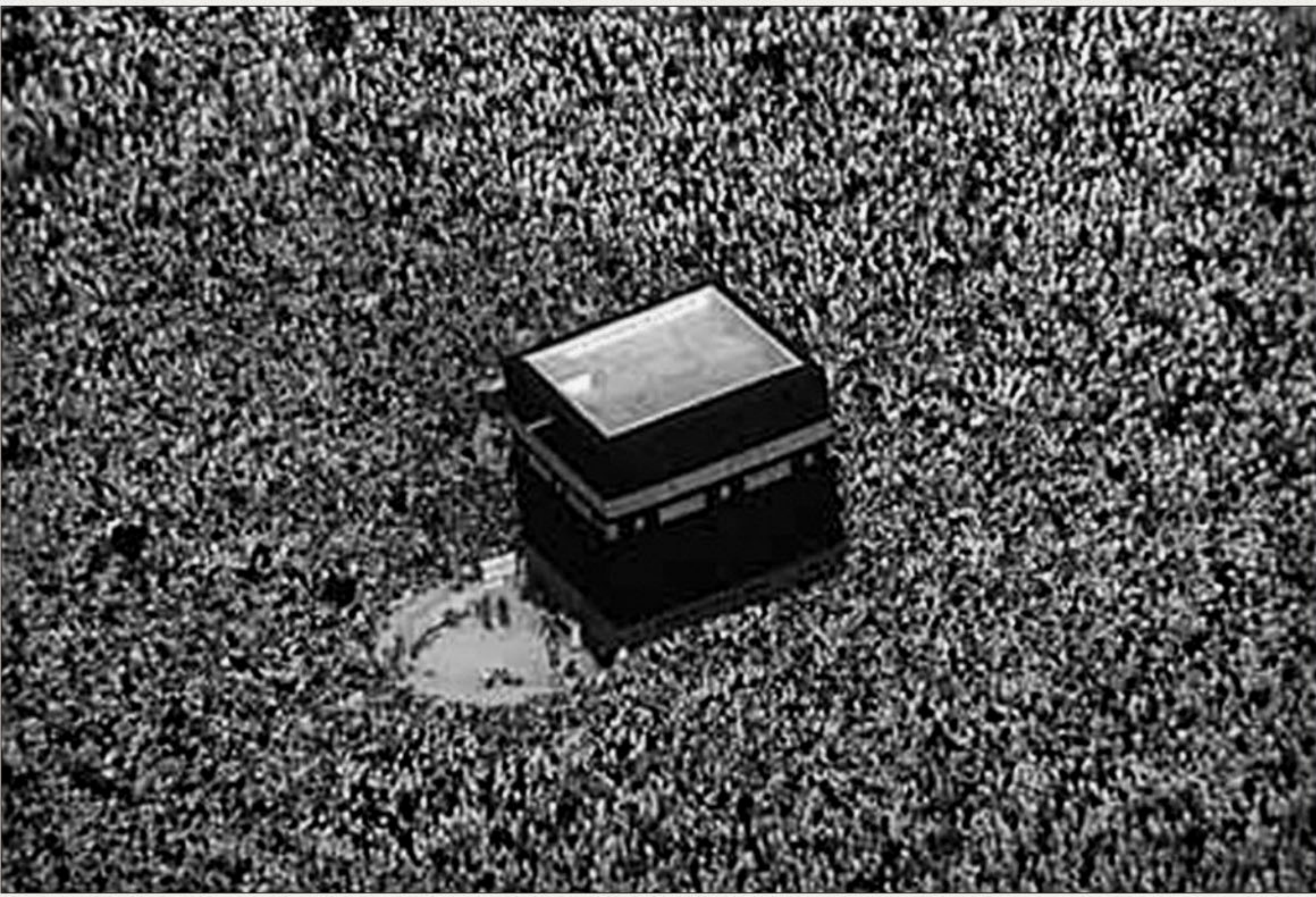
When you move in the Sacred Mosque of Makkah and remember Abraham (peace be upon him) and his son Ismail, you can feel the true meanings of sacrifice and how a father left his newborn with his weak mother in that barren piece of land.

The rigours that pilgrims go through are not simply mindless exercises prescribed in textbooks for them to blindly follow, and then carry home as a trophy of "being there." The gathering of such a large and diverse group of Muslims also strengthens and renews bonds across many borders and their diverse inhabitants.

In his last hajj sermon, the Prophet (pbuh) advised those present to convey the meaning and message of the rituals they had just performed to those who were absent from this great assembly. Thus, a pilgrim's journey does not end simply with the termination of the rituals he or she performs. Pilgrims now carry the responsibility of conveying the message of peace back to their homelands, irrespective of the faith of their countrymen. Islam is after all about tolerance.

Yes, dear hajis, this has been your moment. It was your time to dedicate yourselves to the true meaning of Islam, a religion of peace. Shun the temptations that have been denied you in our holy book, and resist the calls of those who exhort violence and mayhem. And above all, spread this message of peace and goodwill with vigour upon your return back to your lands.

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## Guess who is at fault

When a new government comes into power in this country it is common knowledge that it is there because of the failures or faults committed by the previous government in some critical areas of administration.

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

FAULT-FINDING, indulging in blame game and name changing have been the hallmark of our political culture. Of late, the matter has taken an acute form. Not surprisingly, it has been confined to the two major political parties -- Awami League, the ruling party, and BNP. The ruling party has broken all previous records in this regard.

While name changing has been done at the cost of the state funds, blame game and fault-finding are both directed at the opposition and possibly aimed at its political subjugation and harassment. The technique may achieve its objectives for now but we are certain that the people at large are slowly and surely becoming weary of it all. So much time that could have been otherwise used for more productive purposes has been lost in all this. Besides, it does create a poor image of those who indulge in such frivolous acts, both party-wise and individually.

Of late, this business of fault-finding or blame game has become rather acute. A murder here, a murder there, arson here or arson there, a bomb blast here or a bomb blast there who is to blame; the BNP is to blame. However, this is not to suggest that elements of BNP are beyond reproach, but the problems lie in the way the accusations or the blames are leveled against the opposition. In each instance it is presumptuous and unduly judgmental.

Whenever an incident of such nature takes place the ruling party, within hours, starts a propaganda campaign of pointing fingers at BNP. Often, it looks as though the verdict has already been pronounced and there is no need for enquiry or investigations. Needless to say, this does hurt the image and the credibility of the ruling party in more ways than one. But then does it really care? It has now become

extremely difficult to be sure as to who is at fault for what.

Just take a moment of your time and ponder on the statement that was often given by the ruling party hierarchy while referring to the vandalism of all dimensions by Chitra League in educational institutions and elsewhere in the country: "Chitra League is not involved in these acts, these are being carried out by infiltrators from other cadres." How very convenient. Blame the BNP for the steady deterioration of the law and order situation. Blame the BNP for load shedding, the poor state of water supply, the debilitating state of health services and so on and so forth.

When a new government comes into power in this country it is common knowledge that it is there because of the failures or faults committed by the previous government in some critical areas of administration, but the present day culture of blaming the past government with a vengeance for anything and everything appears to be rather vindictive in character and content. To say that all the corrupt elements come from BNP would not only be travesty of truth but grossly exaggerated.

One wonders whether all the existing problems like the ones mentioned are the inherited legacy of the BNP. We wonder what, with all its access to management tools, has the ruling party done to reverse or improve the situation over the past 23 months or so since it took the reins of the administration.

What one fails to understand is, what is the reason for taking such a hostile stance against BNP? With a two-thirds majority in the Parliament the ruling party could and should have engaged its energies in more productive purposes. Many wonder whether the agenda of the ruling party is to cripple BNP as the opposition, a bad play indeed. With the passage of time ruling party's strategy of

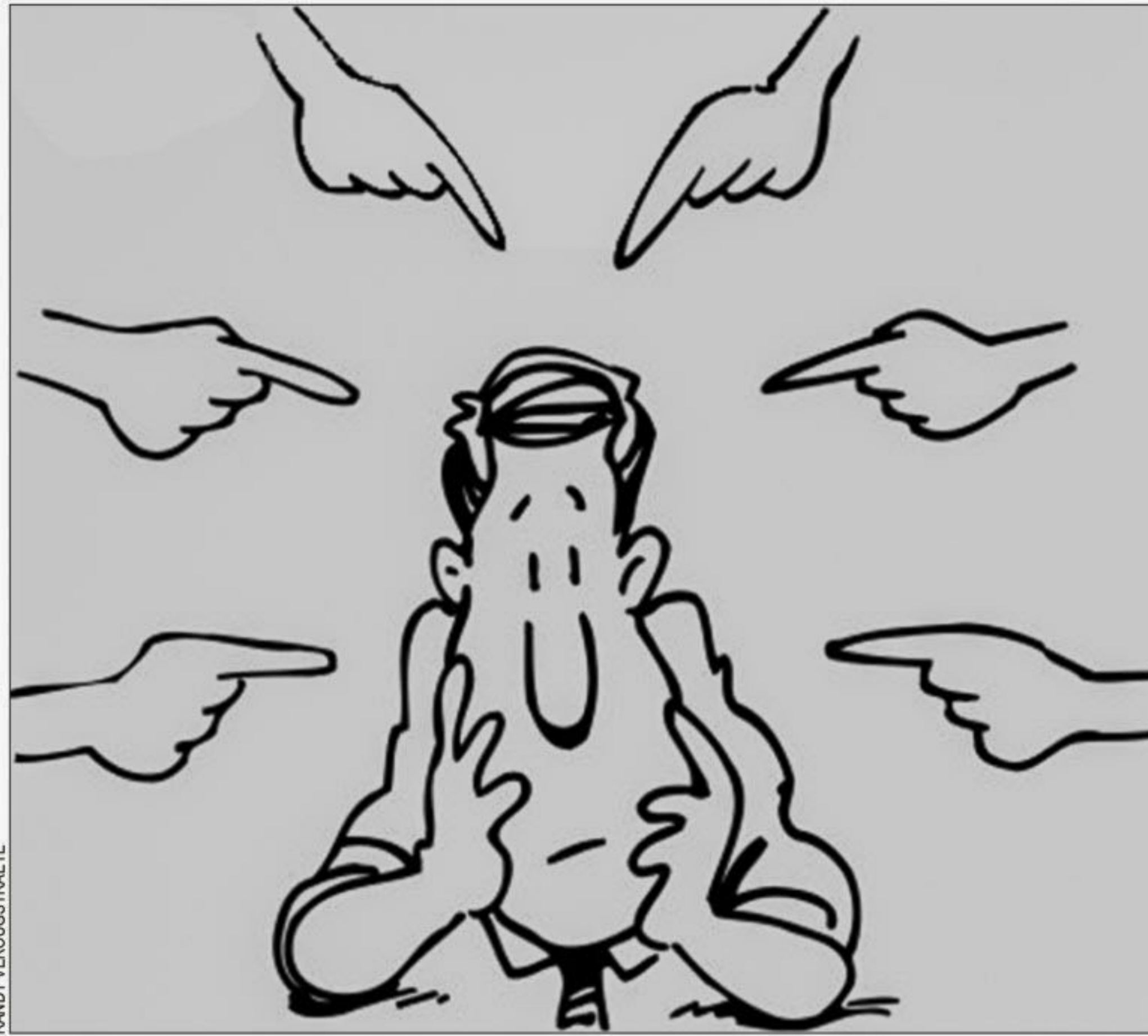
operations appear to be shrouded in mystery and baffling to the people at large.

Most of the senior leaders of the ruling party are involved in this act, starting from the CEO of our administration down to the ministers and several of its lawmakers. Worst of all, this is carried out in an amateurish way where the use and abuse of the language used exceeds the limits of decency and decorum.

In conclusion it must be said that the ruling

party's strategy of tackling the opposition is faulty, far from desirable and certainly crosses the limits of democratic culture. The present government should not only talk about democracy but also be seen to be democratic in all its interventions. It should concentrate more on its shortcomings rather than engage in fault-finding, real or imaginary, and above all deliver the goods it has promised the nation.

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METTERNICH'S WORLD

### Three women ...

THREE women have lately been making quite a splash, separately and each in her distinctive way. There is the Burmese democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, whose political convictions and resilient nature have given her a niche that few can dream of attaining. She has just been freed from fifteen years of house arrest. But isn't it a little more than fifteen years? If you set aside the years 1988 and 1989, you will have an idea of how long and how bravely the daughter of Aung San has suffered at the hands of a brutal military regime that has not flinched even from shooting protesting monks dead. Suu Kyi's huge electoral triumph in 1990, had it not been nullified by the junta, would by now have seen her country play a leading world as a democracy, an exercise that would have been of immense benefit to the neighbourhood. But that is of course a sad story.

What exercises the imagination now is what use Suu Kyi will make of her freedom now that the military regime has let her out into the sunlight. Her National League for Democracy remains banned. Vijay Nambiar, having replaced Ibrahim Gambari as the special representative of the UN secretary general on Myanmar (that is Burma for you), has met her. Days before her release, US President Barack Obama spoke of her struggle with compassion and, on his visit to India, even took Delhi to task for not speaking up forcefully in favour of democracy in Burma.

Meanwhile, the junta has held an election of sorts, meaning that through a civilian façade it has only strengthened its grip on power. Under these circumstances, precisely how much room for maneuvering Suu Kyi has in her bid to remain a potent force in her country's politics remains an open question. The junta has shown no interest in dealing with her. Its beady eyes, in fact, are keeping watch on Suu Kyi. It has pounced on her before. And it might do so again. Politics, or the lack of it, remains therefore a tentative affair in Burma. You will just have to keep your fingers crossed.

Observe now the soup in which Arundhati Roy may finally have landed herself. Her vocal position on such issues as the Indian government's handling of conditions in Kashmir has finally aroused the ire of some very significant sections of the community. Her feeling that the people of Kashmir are entitled to azaadi, freedom, now threatens to bring her squarely up against charges of sedition. Matters have not exactly been helped by her sharing a platform with the Kashmiri separatist politician Syed Ali Shah Geelani.

The good thing about Roy is the clear, articulate manner in which she expresses herself. Those conversant with her denunciations of the Bush White House, indeed with all the western agitation consequent upon the tragic happenings of September 2001, remain aware of the writer's grasp of global issues. Hers is a brave voice forever speaking up in defence of those under repression or threatened with injustice.

That is the good side to Arundhati Roy. The not so good one is the posture she has adopted on Kashmir. It was a political mistake on her part to identify herself with the very theme the Kashmiri separatists have been projecting before the global community. And it was blunder plain and simple to share the stage with a man who, for all his attachment to the welfare of his people, certainly has not endeared himself to Indians as a whole through his boast that God will one day destroy India. You get the feeling somehow that the author of The God of Small Things may finally have stumbled. It will be an unhappy sight watching a powerful voice of conscience eventually defending her patriotism in court.

Which brings us to the pretty Sarah Palin. John McCain's vice presidential running mate did not acquit herself well at the 2008 election and since then she has given up her job as governor of Alaska, produced a rambling memoir and has been on a tour of the United States to whip up a mood of ferocity and frenzy against Barack Obama and everything he stands for. The Tea Party movement, which has made significant gains at the mid-term elections held earlier this month, has much to be grateful to Palin for. The lady herself has seriously begun to think she can challenge Obama in 2012 and capture the White House. She just might. If America can elect Ronald Reagan and the two Bushes, it may well see Palin become president.

But, then, Sarah Palin must get free of the gaffes that make jaws drop everywhere. If she mistakes North Korea for South Korea, it is a problem. But, yes, Dan Quayle once spelt 'potato' as 'potatoe' and George W. Bush couldn't name the leaders of India and Pakistan! Palin can relax, actually.

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