

CROSS TALK

A sign of maturity

Respecting people's will welcome

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina's acknowledgement of popular sentiments regarding a new airport at Arial Beel is to be appreciated. Coming as it does after an eruption of violence that left a policeman dead and scores of others injured, her statement should now help reduce the tension gripping the area. Moreover, her view that there will be a feasibility study before a new site for the proposed airport is selected is proof that the government has taken cognizance of the realities. Such a study should have been undertaken before the decision to build a new airport at Arial Beel was taken. The manner in which the Arial Beel issue was approached was flawed because of two basic reasons. In the first place, the airport-related decision took little note of the adverse impact a new airport would have on the environment of the area. In the second, no effort was made at all to ascertain the wishes of the local people.

The self-correction is welcome as no prestige issue has been made out of it. Sheikh Hasina has described her government as a people's government. It is therefore only proper that every time a major move touching the lives of people is made, the first priority must be to gauge public opinion. Otherwise, there would be a spilling over of hurt feelings into violence as was experienced.

Now that the prime minister has weighed in with a change in approach, we will ask the authorities to restore normalcy in Arial Beel. Homes are without their male inhabitants and markets have stayed closed since the clashes because of the cases filed against nearly 21,000 individuals in the aftermath of the incident. These cases must be withdrawn and those on the run from the law must be permitted to return to their families. For the ruling party, it is important to remember that the next three years will be critical as well as crucial for it. It cannot afford to repeat mistakes of the kind we have just seen in Arial Beel.

Hena tragedy outrageous

Culprits must be punished

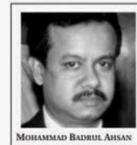
THE way a rape victim in a remote village of Shariatpur, far from being redressed for the abuse she was subjected to, was whipped leading to her death has left us reeling from utter shock and outrage. We have no word to condemn the crime committed by the so-called village arbitration body that gave the order to lash the girl based on a fatwa issued by a village imam. In the same breath, we cannot but express our dismay over how such a barbaric medieval drama could be enacted under the very nose of the local administration. How could they be unaware of the High Court rule that declares fatwa illegal and unconstitutional?

The story of the adolescent girl, Hena's' molestation at the hands of her elder relative followed by her cruel murder by her own people is a stark reminder of the darkness of superstition and bigotry in which our rural society is caught up. In actuality, the half-literate village bigot whose fatwa was instrumental in murdering the hapless girl and the equally illiterate villagers who executed it, had hardly had any real understanding of the Islamic laws they claim to be championing. So, those responsible for the victim girl's tragic end committed a grave crime on more than one count: they misinterpreted Islam, violated the existing High Court's ruling on fatwa as well as contravened the law against violence on women and children.

The tragic incident has occurred despite the existence of the law to prevent repression on women and children and the presence of so many women right activists. That is enough to point to the poor level of implementation of the law on the one hand and the inadequacy of the rights groups to reach out to the poor and the vulnerable.

In the present case, those responsible for the Hena's tragic end to life should deserve no mercy. They should be caught and awarded the harshest punishment available

When people get perturbed



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

LAST week Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said in London: "I am doing politics for the welfare of

people, not for my personal gain." Her statement had the reverse twist of a Chinese proverb that says those who seek power for personal ends eventually run afoul of popular opinion. The uncanny sense of history sublimated in the prime minister's voice. It couldn't have been said better or sooner when popular opinion is seeking a resounding resurgence worldwide.

Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali fled his country after 23 years of iron rule. People have risen against Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh after 32 years and they are asking him to go. Hosni Mubarrak kept Egypt in his stranglehold for 30 long years, and is perhaps fuelling his jet and loading his billions, ready to leave. The surprising thing about popular uprising is that once people rise, their rulers topple faster than mud houses in mad torrents.

Perhaps it is also an early warning for other potentates -- sheiks, emirs, sultans and kings -- of the Middle East and the pseudo-populist leaders in Asia and Africa. King Abdullah dismissed his prime minister last Tuesday after the Jordanians agitated over food prices. He got the message and wants to keep his people happy. More than 150 years ago Abraham Lincoln knew what despots of the world seem to have always ignored. "You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time," he said. History has borne out that there is hardly an exception to that rule.

Although it's mysterious why some people should allow themselves to be fooled longer than others. In western

countries rulers change every four to five years, although they seek reelection within the allowable limits of their respective constitutions. In comparison, tyrants and monarchs in rest of the world want to rule lifelong, some for generations.

Previously the French presidents could stay in office for 7 years and run for as many terms as they wished. Following a 2000 referendum, the term was reduced to 5 years and the constitutional law of July 23, 2008 stipulated that a French president cannot serve more than two consecu-

South Africa only after one term in office. Given his popularity and contribution to the country, his countrymen would have reelected him for as long as he lived. But the man knew when to stop. He quit before power got addictive.

Contrast between Mandela and the dog-in-the-manger president of Ivory Coast. Laurent Gbagbo postponed elections for five years and when he finally held one, the results went against him. He refused to step down and barricaded the winner in a hotel, leaving 200 dead.

uum created in Italian politics, whose populism somehow got misguided in his erotic overdrive. One of his call girls described how he enjoyed the company of as many as 20 women at a time, not to consort with all of them but to be "touched, caressed, by many hands at once." All politicians like to press flesh. Berlusconi likes the flesh to press him.

People and their rulers are forever engaged in this uneasy struggle. Rulers wish to rule and people wish to be left alone. Somewhere in this transaction the equilibrium remains

People and their rulers are forever engaged in this uneasy struggle. Rulers wish to rule and people wish to be left alone. Somewhere in this transaction the equilibrium remains an elusive goal.



tive terms. The United States elects a president every four years, restricted to two terms.

There must be a scientific basis why duration of a government is limited to a certain number of years. Why is it four to five years instead of eight to ten years that elected governments should stay in power in each term? Perhaps government like medicine is best in the right dosage, ineffective below prescribed level and harmful in overdose.

Nelson Rohilala Mandela served 27 years in prison fighting for his people but stepped down as president of

It is said that people deserve leaders they get. Whatever the Italians did, they got Silvio Berlusconi, who is accused of bribery, tax evasion, corruption, subversion of the press, and now racy relationships with a claqué of prostitutes. It's amazing that his people returned him to power three times as their prime minister. Corruption has permeated the entire Italian political class and rest of its society. Perhaps that explains how a moral nightmare could sit at the helm in the land of the Medici.

Frightening but factual, Berlusconi is the best to emerge from the vac-

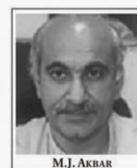
an elusive goal. When the prime minister said in London she wanted to "change the fate of the common people," it raised hopes back home, but was shattered as quickly by the upheaval over an airport.

Good news the administration has backed down. After all government is more than air traffic control whose concern should be wellbeing of people, not comfort and safety of airline passengers.

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BYLINE

The many battles for Deoband



M.J. AKBAR

ONE of the great follies of the contemporary world is the conversion of the priest, of any faith, into a cartoon character.

And so the imam is caricatured with an elongated beard and twisted eye; the pandit has an exaggerated tuft, obese stomach and gloats; the Christian father wears a sanctimonious air barely disguising a leer.

This nonsense is largely due to the decline of religion in the ebbing moral universe of modern man, and partly due to the existence of a radical extreme at the edge of every clerical class, which justifies violence in the name of a higher power.

Faith -- mosque, temple or church -- has been a traditional sanctuary of the people in their constant struggle against innumerable forms of autocracy and dictatorship that have been the tragedy of human history. The institutions of God provide a comfort zone to the individual persecuted by institutions of man, particularly during moments of distress.

Faith is often a symbol of resistance, as autocratic Arab regimes are discovering today, when the streets are finally alive with the thunder of long-overdue protest against smug dictatorships that confused their harsh intelligence services with intelligence.

Competent governments, whether of dictators or democrats, have understood the power of the clergy and chosen a dual response: repression of the radical extreme and a continuous attempt to co-opt the clergy into the establishment through a less than discreet combination of flattery and

bribery. The real test for the clergy comes not during periods of relative calm, but during phases of social and political oppression.

If we want to understand the influence of the ulema in the life of the Indian Muslim, particularly in north India, then we must remember the sterling part they played in the age of

single rupee as donation from the British; its small band of teachers and students ate what the local community offered. Mahatma Gandhi recognised not just the theological importance of this seminary but also the empirical influence of its grassroots connections. Deoband was the antithesis of the elitist, Nawab and landlord-

power centre; and where there is power, there will be politics. What we are seeing at the moment is a political battle between factions, and the vested interests that feed off them, for the control of Deoband.

There are many reasons for the unrest generated by the appointment of Maulana Ghulam Mohammed Vastanvi as *mohtamim*, or virtual vice chancellor. Vastanvi is a remarkable Maulana who started a school with just six students in a hut in a tribal region on the Gujarat-Maharashtra border in 1979, and built it into an institution with 200,000 students across the country.

This is why he is the first person from outside the immediate UP region to be given this honour and responsibility. His presence promised the reform that students thirst for; but it also threatened to upset the cartel that has used Deoband to squeeze out personal benefits from Delhi and abroad. These deep-seated interests would have challenged Vastanvi on any pretext; they found an emotive one with the help of narcissistic, power-hungry journalists in their club.

Deoband is, as has happened before, at a crossroads. If Deoband has become the property of a clerical group that wants to exploit this great name for its own greed, then Vastanvi will be driven out. If Deoband remains honest to the ideals of its founding fathers, then it will lead the way to educational reform and open thought that can turn an underprivileged Indian Muslim child into a privileged adult.

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decline, the 19th century, when every other pillar of sustenance crumbled, either eaten by the worms of decay and decadence, or defeated by the rising force of British arms. It was the clergy that held the community together, even as its radical wing, led by the students, or taliban, of the seminary of Shah Waliullah launched a jihad for the restoration of political power.

That war failed, but those who did not go to war provided a greater service through leadership at the micro level to a community that was under such economic and social pressure that it feared the loss not only of sustenance but also its most cherished elements of language and culture. Out of such traumatic conditions was an institution like the Dar-ul-Uloom at Deoband born nearly a century and a half ago. Its founders refused to accept a

dominated Muslim politics of the early 20th century.

Deoband is often demonised by a Western-influenced discourse. Yes, there is a fringe that has converted Deoband into a fatwa factory for regressive pronouncements; and some of its influences have been distorted to justify violence. But every great centre of education produces a few children who dishonour their intellectual parent.

Deoband is a tremendous resource for those Muslims who do not have the advantage of birth or lineage. It is the hope and dream not only of those who want to serve Allah through the mosque, but also young men who see in its educational repository a chance for a better life.

The place it commands in the affections of Muslims makes Deoband a

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 4

1794

The French legislature abolished slavery throughout all territories of the French Republic.

1932

Japan occupied Harbin, China. With the establishment of Manchukuo, Japanese troops occupied Harbin on this day.

1936

Radium becomes the first radioactive element to be made synthetically.

1948

Ceylon (later renamed Sri Lanka) becomes independent within the British Commonwealth.

1952

Students of the University of Dhaka and other institutions gathered on the university premises and warned the government to withdraw its proposal to write Bengali in Arabic script, and insisted on the recognition of Bengali.

2004

Facebook, a mainstream online social network is founded by Mark Zuckerberg. There are more than 500 million active users currently on Facebook.