

## STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

# Why choose the road to confrontation?

## Golam Azam taken into custody A major step forward in the trial process

THE arrest of former ameer of Jamaat-e-Islami Golam Azam on Wednesday adds a vital phase to the trial process begun against the war criminals and those who committed crimes against humanity in 1971.

This is an important turning point in the trial process. Just as men like Tikka Khan were perpetrators of war crimes, Golam Azam symbolised betrayal and collaboration with the occupation forces of Pakistan and of crimes committed by Al-Badr, al-Shams, etc.

As the ameer of Jamaat-e-Islami, he was instrumental in aiding the Pakistani forces to form the al-Badr and al-Shams killer squads.

These storm troopers were created to annihilate freedom fighters, political leaders and workers, commit arson, and carry out loot, plunder and rape. He was allegedly behind the creation of Razakars as the ancillary force of a murderous Pakistani regime.

What we particularly recall with horror is the heinous snuffing out of Bengali intellectuals just hours before the dawn of independence with the ulterior motive of crippling the new nation.

Without any prejudice to the trial process, now that this man has been taken into custody, the law should take its own course to bring him to justice. Though he is responsible for a shameful betrayal of his countrymen and committed crimes of historic proportions against humanity, we would like to see a fair and just trial against all the accused persons in the International Crimes Tribunal.

That the trial could not take place during the last forty years is a national shame. Successive governments either deliberately adopted a laid back attitude or were reluctant to initiate any process of trial. We recall here with anger that President Ziaur Rahman abolished the Collaborators' Act and allowed the return of Golam Azam to Bangladesh, thus facilitating a restoration of his citizenship.

Golam Azam was among those who did not show even a hint of remorse for their vicious betrayal of the people even in an independent Bangladesh and went about doing their politics defending their past role. They deserve nothing but our scorn.

Thus, it is with a sense of accomplishment that we view the trial of the war criminals, however belatedly our process of repaying our debts to the martyrs can be said to have begun.

## Where did all the teachers go?

### Hardly an isolated case

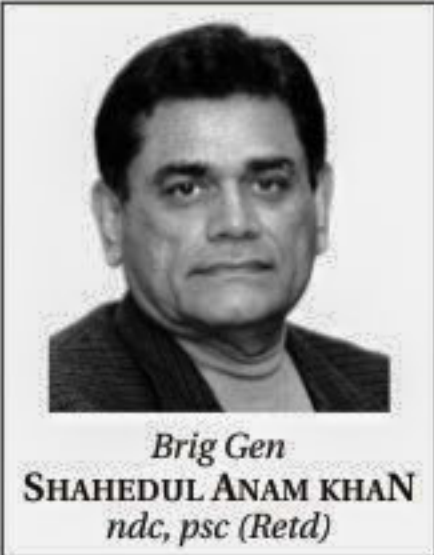
JUST when we were upbeat with the free distribution of textbooks to schools on a massive scale and reorganisation of examination system at the primary and junior secondary levels, this may sound a bit like an anti-climax.

Last Monday must have been a disappointing day for the students of a public primary school in Gazipur. After waiting all morning for teachers to turn up, the school's sweeper taking pity on the children, asked them to go home. Not a single teacher or even the principal of the school had come to school. Residents of the area have revealed that the principal comes to school quite late and leaves early. Teachers open and close the school according to their convenience. Meanwhile, the two hundred or so students are left in the lurch.

The fact that the children came to school shows their eagerness to learn. But with teachers as irresponsible as this school's, such enthusiasm is bound to meet an early death.

Unfortunately, this has become a general practice rather than an exception. School children all over the country are deprived of a school environment that is conducive to learning. Before, this meant dilapidated buildings, a dearth of desks, uninspiring syllabi and corporal punishment. All these things led to a large number of school dropouts, despite the increasing enrolment rates. But now it is not just the dearth of teachers that is the problem but the dearth of responsible, dedicated teachers to motivate students. This in turn relates to the pay scale and incentives given to public school teachers which, we know, far from reflect the current cost of living. Underpaid teachers have little incentive to give their best and may even try to find second jobs to make ends meet.

All said and done, however, there seems to be a decline in ethics in these institutions that requires more than just better teacher salaries. Regular monitoring and surprise visits by school inspectors have to be maintained. Errant



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IN war the opposing commanders choose the path of least resistance. It makes good sense in any field of human endeavour to seek the easiest

way to achieve one's objective. I am not sure whether that applies to politics as well, particularly to politics in Bangladesh. But looking at how the major political parties have postured, it appears that such a truism does not apply to politics in Bangladesh.

And that is not surprising since many theories and logic do not apply in this country either. Can one explain why suddenly prices of edibles shoot up all of a sudden a week before the month of Ramadan when there is neither any shortfall nor extraordinary demand at home nor price increase in the international market, or the prices of spices make for the sky immediately before Eidul Azha?

Much like the fact that market mechanism fails to work in our country, political reality fails to drive politics here too. And that is why I guess one gets to be asked often the question, "Why do the political parties seek the path of confrontation, particularly the government since it is the party in power and has the initiative to diffuse the situation?"

Indeed why when a more phlegmatic and cool-headed approach might have spared the people the consequences of the inevitable conflict of the two major parties. I am not sure, like many, but might perhaps venture a few guesses.

One could get away by suggesting that some people thrive in confrontation. In fact, sedentary environment does not activate their metabolism; their body chemistry is made up in such a way. And that too perhaps applies to the PM and her party who, like a kite, find the opposing turbulence the best circumstances to fly in.

But one would have thought, given the great period of turmoil that the country had to weather, that she might want to settle for some quietude.

For example, most people feel that the PM could have used the sliver of a possibility of compromise offered by the Appellate Division ruling on the 13th Amendment and gone for two

It could be so because the PM and her party were supremely confident that the opposition would not be able to garner much public opinion to its cause on this issue, given its poor showing in the last election. That the BNP was not in a position to recreate a situation that was precipitated by the AL's stance in Oct 2006, and she would

three years in office, and feels that the poll under a CTG would doubly ensure the BNP's return to power.

The third possibility could be that the PM is confident of public support of her position on the CTG.

These positions, admittedly, stem from bad judgement and poor reading of the situation, and expose the PM's and her party's diffidence about the party's prospect in the next national election.

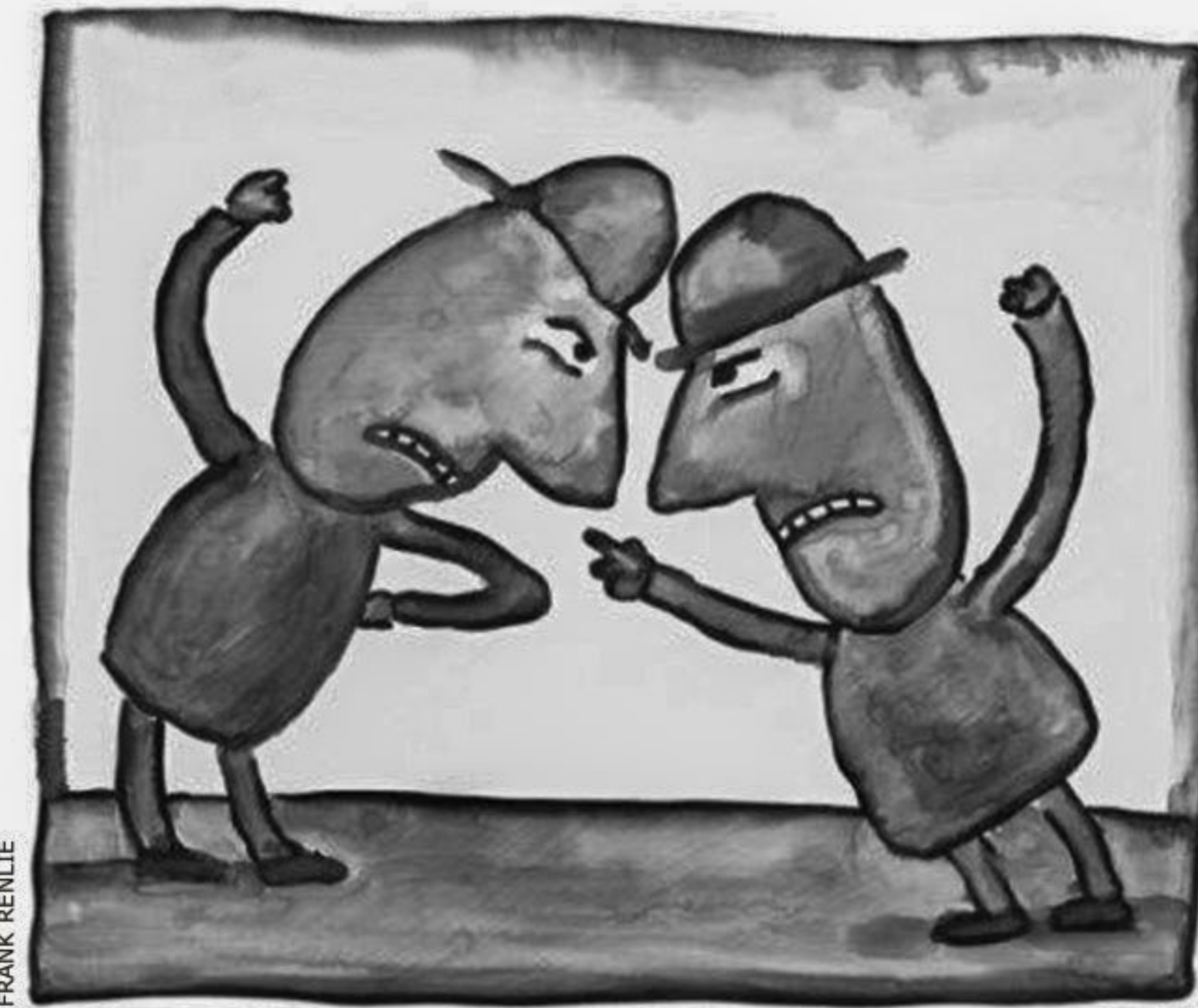
For one thing, looking back to our electoral history starting back from the British days since the introduction of direct elections in 1937, statistics do not show the return to power of the current incumbent, and during the last twenty years since 1991 in Bangladesh the fact has been reinforced most decisively by the electorate.

And for another, we learn nothing from history nor are we able to read the public mind. And that is the other question that one gets to hear. Why does not the government read into the results of the local elections? Starting from the municipal elections that were held early last year to the three mayoral elections there are tell-tale indicators which any political party that is not headstrong or overconfident would do well to take cognisance of.

The government may brush these off as peripheral and of local phenomenon, but should it not realise that local phenomenon accretes into national trend of public opinion. Can't these results be extrapolated to come up with fairly good assumption of how things would look at the national level? The ruling party may use these elections to show that free and fair elections can be held without a caretaker system, but these were not national election, some might argue.

The political scenario for 2012 does not augur well. The two parties are inevitably headed towards a collision course which statesmanship would help avoid but partisanship would make inevitable.

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more elections under a caretaker system that she and her party had fought tooth and nail for. It was sort of an escape clause that should have been seized. Why didn't she? And look at the uncertain prospects that the country is staring at as a consequence? And there could be many conjectures, one's could be as good or as bad as those of others.

have her way at the end to hold the next election under her dispensation.

And that leads to the second inference, which is that Sheikh Hasina is extremely worried about the fall in her party's rating in public opinion as was amply demonstrated by the two public opinion polls carried out by the two largest dailies in the country to assess her party's performance after

## The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

# How Iraq can define its destiny

ALI A. ALLAWI

THE Iraq the United States left behind last month is dramatically different from the country it invaded in 2003. Gone are the comforting simplicities of the "war on terror" and democracy building. The geopolitical context that America has bequeathed to Iraq is now defined by five critical challenges.

First, Iraq is at the center of the American-Iranian confrontation; it is the only place where the US military has faced off directly against Iranian-backed militias.

Second, it stands in the middle of the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia for regional supremacy. The Saudi royals oppose the current Iranian government but not necessarily the Iranian system itself; they might happily co-exist with a different Iranian leadership, as they did during the 1990s.

Third, as Turkey reasserts itself in the Middle East, both to counter Iran and to promote its own vision of modernising Islamism, Iraq is in the middle once again. Turkey is a patron to the large Sunni-dominated Iraqiya parliamentary bloc and the biggest source of investment in the Iraqi Kurdistan region. And it is intimately involved in the affairs of the Kurdistan Regional Government, the KRG, in order to keep close tabs on Turkey's own Kurdish separatist movement, which is based there.

Fourth, Iraqi Kurdistan is thriving, and will most likely drift toward some form of de facto independence. It is already nearly there. The spectacle of Iraq's fugitive Vice President, Tariq al-Hashimi, holed up in Kurdistan beyond the reach of Baghdad, is the clearest proof. The KRG's success in providing security and services -- in

contrast to the central government's dismal record -- is fueling demands for other autonomous regions throughout Iraq, posing a major challenge to the historically centralised and militarised Iraqi state.

Finally, the current atmosphere in the region reeks of an impending sectarian explosion. Shiite-Sunni conflict led Iraq to the brink of all-out civil war between 2005 and 2007.

Today, a reprise of that disaster is quite possible. The triumphalism of Shiite politicians masks anxieties about their community's ascendancy. And the news media, especially Arabic-language satellite channels, are brimming with blatantly offensive sectarian sentiments and contributing to an atmosphere of crisis and impending disaster -- prompted in no small measure by the nefarious work of bigoted and ignorant clerics, often inspired by the intolerant ideology of Wahhabist Islam.

The French historian Fernand Braudel used the term "longue duree" to describe how changes in the deep socio-economic and technological structures of civilisations play out over long periods of time. Such shifts are as important in determining the history of societies and nations as major political events and crises.

The Middle East is today experiencing a twofold upheaval of immense proportions: a dramatic acceleration of climate change, water shortages, urban growth, environmental degradation, persistent eco-

nom and resource imbalances, and population explosions that coincide with wars, invasions, foreign interventions, civil and religious strife, and mass uprisings. And the *longue duree* is now exerting its influence on Iraq.

The livelihood of Iraqis is overly dependent on a state that is entirely reliant on a single resource. Agriculture has effectively collapsed; the great river systems of Mesopotamia have shriveled; trade routes based on Iraq's unique geography have vanished; and transport links have atrophied. Merchants and entrepreneurs are merely recyclers of state-owned and state-generated wealth and a

previously open and culturally and religiously accommodating society has been replaced by beleaguered communities locked in laagers.

The Arab successor states to the Ottoman Empire have all proved to be unstable, prone to violence and easy targets of foreign intervention and control. Left unchecked, Iraq will remain hostage to the turbulent region in which it finds itself -- and to the price of oil.

This is Iraq's legacy, but it need not be its destiny. Iraq must reimagine the Middle East, creating new economic, security and political structures that weave Middle Eastern countries closer together while peacefully accommodating the region's ethnic and religious diversity.

In the American-Iranian cold war, Iraq must resist being dragged into a confrontation. We have real interests

on both sides and can play an important role in mediating and even defusing that conflict.

In the regional struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Iraq must stand on the side of justice and equity by pushing for free and fair elections, representative government, minority rights and the rule of law in places like Bahrain, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

Iraq should welcome Turkey's return to the Middle East, not as a neo-Ottoman Empire but as a successful example of a dynamic economy rooted in a democratic state that respects its Islamic heritage.

And it could halt the drift of the KRG toward independence by creating open and fair Iraqi national institutions and civic culture. These are the best guarantors of national unity.

Finally, to prevent a sectarian war in the Middle East, Iraq must resist the rhetoric of extremists and push for an inclusive understanding of Islam that undermines the viciousness of hateful ideologues.

The passivity and indifference of Iraq's leaders to these fundamental challenges contrasts with the ferocity with which they have fought their battles for political power and influence, and the frenzy with which they have sought material gain for themselves and their cronies.

Wise leadership and statesmanship could lead us out of this morass. Failing that, the forces buffeting Iraq and the region may very well lead us to a catastrophe.

The writer was Iraq's minister of trade, defense and finance in succession between 2003 and 2006. He is the author of "The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace."

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 12

475 Basiliscus becomes Byzantine Emperor, with a coronation ceremony in the Hebdomon palace in Constantinople.

1976 The UN Security Council votes 11-1 to allow the Palestine Liberation Organization to participate in a Security Council debate (without voting rights).

1991 Gulf War: An act of the U.S. Congress authorizes the use of military force to drive Iraq out of Kuwait.

2006 A stampede during the Stoning the Devil ritual on the last day at the Hajj in Mina, Saudi Arabia, kills at least 362 Muslim pilgrims.