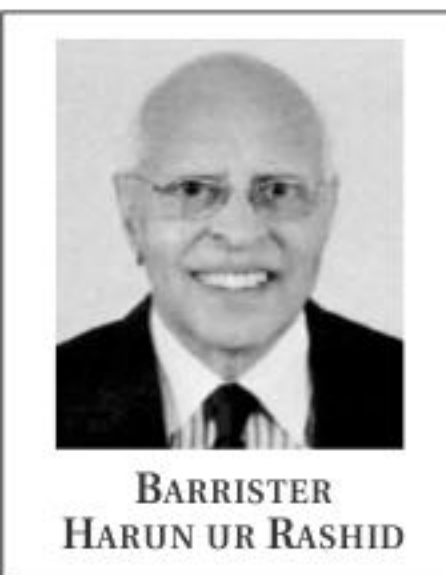


BOTTOM LINE

Spurning offer not unhealthy in democracy



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

ON September 13, five ministers and two state ministers were sworn in by the president. Two veteran leaders -- Tofail Ahmed of Awami League (AL) and Rashed Khan Menon of the Workers Party, a partner of the grand alliance of the AL-led government -- who were invited to join

as ministers did not accept the offer. While analysing the political impact of the refusal of the two leaders in accepting the positions, many political observers say they believe the decision of expansion of the cabinet was taken on various grounds, including the following:

- There is a perception among the public that ministers, except a few, have not performed well and there is a constant murmur in civil society that experienced and suitable persons were not inducted when the prime minister formed the government in early January 2009. The expansion appears to be an attempt to rectify the situation;
- The government's image needs to be improved because its administration is perceived to be inept in dealing with various contentious public issues and the people in general seem to be very unhappy and disheartened. Media reports have shown the shrinkage of the support base of AL during its rule and the expansion is meant to restore public confidence in the AL;
- Partners of the grand alliance have alleged that the Awami League had not consulted with them on many of its policy decisions, and differences of opinion were expressed openly in the parliament by some members of the alliance. Obviously, there has been a lack of cohesion within the grand alliance partners, and it needs to be removed by offering ministerial position to AL's political partners;
- The induction of new ministers from Rajshahi and Khulna divisions will strengthen the representation from the northern and western districts and will have some positive impact on the people of the concerned districts during the forthcoming parliamentary elections;
- Since the parliamentary elections are to be held within 14 months, the AL needs to change gear to

fulfill the promises made in its manifesto before the last election, and the expanded ministry will make all-out efforts to fulfill some crucial electoral pledges.

Ministerial expansion or reshuffle is a "routine matter" in parliamentary democracy. It is undertaken by the prime minister to inject new momentum into the activities of the government. It happens in all democratic countries, and Bangladesh is no exception.

In this case, it is an expansion as no one has been dropped from their ministerial positions. Only portfolios have been re-distributed among the earlier and new ministers and state ministers. (The number of ministers including the prime minister now stands at 51).

Let us examine why the two seasoned leaders -- one from the Awami League and the other from the Workers Party -- did not accept the invitation to become ministers.

The names of the two leaders were made public in

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the media, but it would have been better to know discreetly before the names were disclosed whether they would accept the position. It seems that it was taken for granted they would accept the offer, but this assumption was proved wrong.

Both leaders gave their reasons for non-acceptance. Tofail Ahmed reportedly said: "At the moment, I am not mentally, politically or socially prepared to take office as a minister." The words have been carefully chosen to convey his non-acceptance.

Tofail did not get a berth in the ministerial cabinet when the prime minister formed the government in

January 2009. Political observers were surprised at the time, and believe that he was hurt and that he did not wish to take responsibility for the actions/inactions of the government by accepting ministerial position at nearly the end of the tenure of the government

Furthermore, he has been sidelined in the AL political structure since mid-2009. He has not been appointed as a member of the highest policy-making body, the Presidium, or in the Working Committee of AL. He was made a member of Advisory Council of the party, which he reportedly did not think much of. Instead, he wants to be known only as "AL-worker Tofail."

President of the Workers Party, Rashed Khan Menon, on the other hand, was not allowed to join by the politburo of his party. The politburo reportedly observed that the government had become isolated from the people because of its failure in many areas and therefore it would be "imprudent" for Menon to accept the offer. On September 14, Menon reportedly told journalists at Dhaka Reporters Unity: "This (the offer) was never part of a political process. That has been clear from the prime minister's remark."

Political analysts say the non-acceptance revealed the crack within the AL and the grand alliance of the government, and that what the prime minister wanted to achieve through the expansion has been negated in public perception by non-acceptance of the two leaders.

Both Tofail and Rashed Khan Menon expressed their views in the parliament and outside that the government had failed to deliver on its pledges in many sectors and they felt that the government did not pay heed to many of their suggestions on issues like the share market scam and Sonali Bank loan scandal.

By not accepting the positions, observers believe that the two leaders have sent a signal to the public that there are leaders who have guts and convictions to decline the offer of ministerial positions. This is for the first time I recall that those who were invited to join as ministers courteously turned down the offer.

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The writer is a former Bangladesh ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Freedom to offend



IRENE KHAN

AS the infamous YouTube film unleashes outrage and mob violence on the streets across the Muslim world, we are confronted with a moral and legal dilemma: what are the limits of free speech?

There is no excuse for violence. All sensible people, Muslims and non-Muslims, condemn it.

The film is deeply offensive. All sensible people, Muslim and non-Muslim, also agree on that and denounce it.

Ban the film, take it off the web, say some people. That is where the dilemma arises: when does the exercise of freedom of expression become such an abuse of it that it should be censored?

Taking the film off the web means in effect introducing internet censorship. In future other films could also be removed if they are considered to be offensive. Offensive to whom? Offensive by what standard? And who will decide what is or is not offensive?

Offence is subjective. What offends and what does not can be difficult to judge. The artist M.F. Hussain's depiction of the goddess Saraswati in the nude enraged Hindu rightwing groups, but as the Indian writer Salil Tripathi points out, the images of nude and cavorting gods and goddesses in the caves of Ajanta and Elora cause no offence to Hindus.

Just a few weeks ago in Pakistan a fourteen year old Christian girl was accused of burning some pages from the Holy Koran and charged with blasphemy which carries the death penalty. Her family has gone into hiding for fear of retaliation from angry mobs. That blasphemy exists as a crime in this day and age is a chilling thought. To seek to use it to punish a child shows how far misguided religious fervour can go.

The eagerness to censor the net is not limited to religious zealots. Just last month a Chinese human rights activist was freed after 10 years in prison for sharing information over the internet. He had offended the state, not any religious group, but the response of the Chinese authorities raised very similar questions of whether, why, how and when -- and if ever -- the state should be allowed to control free speech on the net.

A much better path is for us, as individuals, to be our own censors. We do not have to watch the film if it offends us and we can persuade others not to do so either -- but by word, not violence. Such boycott will deprive publicity seekers like the bank fraudster who produced the film from the oxygen of infamy they crave.

The internet is the final frontier of freedom where we can hear and be heard by everyone. We should let the net be. This is not to say that there should be no limit to free speech. Net crime is outlawed in many countries, and as every first year law school student knows, you cannot shout "Fire" in a crowded theatre with impunity.

Most liberal democracies have some legislation on hate speech, although the more "liberal" a democracy the more sparing it is in applying the law, as the Danish cartoon case showed a few years ago. Ironically, the US is alone among western countries in having no crime of "hate speech." Regulation of hate speech is seen as a violation of the First Amendment. The US is a true marketplace of ideas, no matter how crazy or odious.

Many will argue that if the child is not prosecuted in Pakistan, the mobs will take justice in their own hands, or if the film is banned by the US, it will calm down the extremists. Using a threat to public order as a benchmark for controlling free speech creates a dilemma because by doing so we allow violent extremists to set the boundaries of what we can think and say. There is also the difficulty of judging when words or pictures are so likely to lead to violence that it would be irresponsible not to ban them, and when the authorities are merely banning the material either to pander to extremists or because it suits their own political agenda.

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Freedom of expression is so essential for sustaining democracy and pluralism that any limit on it must be very exceptional and restrictive. Free speech allows us to challenge authority, and even to ridicule it if we so wish. The internet has magnified the ability to do so, but that is no reason to limit it. For free speech advocates this incident brings home more than ever the adage attributed to Voltaire: "I do not agree with what you have to say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

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Striding within the veil and beyond

RAINA MOINUDDIN ABU ZAFAR

THE increasing interest in women's empowerment, especially in the "developing" areas of the world today, is gradually taking up an important position in the agenda of world issues. Along with other female-oriented topics under immediate consideration, the role of the "eastern" woman in asserting herself as a capable individual is more openly explored today than ever before. The increased presence of "women behind closed doors" is more noticeable, even in areas where the role of women is comparatively minimised.

On the other hand, the developing image of women has had a multi-faceted impact on many such societies as a fallout of westernised influences and incentives.

Consequently, the image of the empowerment of eastern women has often been presented as mere "westernisation" and not of raised status and recognition of the female as an effective contributor to society.

In the Middle East, changes in women's status are visible symbols of developing female empowerment. However, the entire idea of women as a strong force in a developing society is, unfortunately, being used by some media people as a means to sensationalise the process. For example, the real basis of empowerment of Saudi women is an example of a changing, enlightened nation and not a so-called westernisation of the Saudi psyche or physique. In fact, for the Saudi the recognition and development of the self and the nation through advances in education, profession, and the self underlie a developing, empowered society as an important need for necessary changing trends.

Much is being done to emphasise this need and the presence of women in suitable areas of education, training, work and business.

In my nearly twenty-nine years of residence, I have come to realise that the Saudi woman is empowering herself more as a means to survival and to make use of her emerging inherent capabilities than to imitate her counterparts in westernised parts of the world. She has actually started to realise that she can play an effective role in a developing society keeping within traditions. The Saudi woman today is contributing in

varied areas as business women, professionals as well as skilled and non-skilled workers in an environment conducive to women but effective in its goals.

The growing numbers of Saudi women in educational fields and work places are exciting examples of the empowering of the Saudi woman over the years. A large number of females are being facilitated to go for higher studies abroad with the blessing of the King, Custodian of the two Holy Mosques, and his scholarship scheme for deserving candidates.

As an educationist based in Saudi universities for many years, I have observed the growing interest in female students for higher education, a career, and further studies both at home and abroad in order to acquire greater means to better jobs and more

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advanced skills for their job disciplines.

I have met many talented and capable ladies who ably represent their areas of skill. Dr. Thoraya Obeid, who represented KSA in the UN, was one of the first empowered Saudi ladies I met. Ms. Huda Al Jeraissy belongs to the group of enlightened professionals who want to set precedence in representing once predominantly male areas of work. She is now heading the women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Ms. Muna Abu Sulayman has been acknowledged more than once as a representative of the young Saudi empowered woman, the most important Saudi woman, and the Saudi woman of the year in the Arab as well as the international world. Dr. Hatoun Al Fassi is one of the first Saudi female archaeologists who has

done extensive research on ancient Arab civilisations. That she focuses on areas which were ruled by females once, i.e., Petra, emphasises the growing interest in female based achievements and an acknowledgement of women in positions of power and in decision making. Ms. Lubna Al Olayan is a powerful and well-known business leader.

The empowered Saudi woman has not only made her presence felt in high profile positions but also in more skilled jobs. Among many Saudi women now working in the fields of medicine and the sciences, Dr. Salwa Azza is a well known personality in the field of ophthalmology. Some Saudi females are also involved in hitherto male-dominated professions as exemplified by Ms. Hanadi Zakariya Hindi, the first Saudi female commercial pilot and a pilot for royal aircraft. Unassuming in appearance, of middle class Saudi background, Ms. Hindi exudes a calm confidence that must serve her well as she takes to the skies and international environments in her flying schedules.

Most of these "ground breakers" are a part of the new work force of Saudi females for whom the ways have been facilitated by the government as well as male counterparts and relatives. What is commendable is that most ladies work within the cover of the veil in female compatible surroundings, and follow the set norms of social ethics and dress codes. This does not curtail the required job activities and, at some point, there is compatibility with the requirements of a job.

Saudi women are in job sectors today that include decision making positions. In most cases, women are capable and confident in their assigned roles, which is extensively evident in their dealings and expertise. Some all-female banks are more effective than the others and have a large clientele.

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The writer is Assistant Professor, Imam Mohammad bin Saud University, Riyadh.