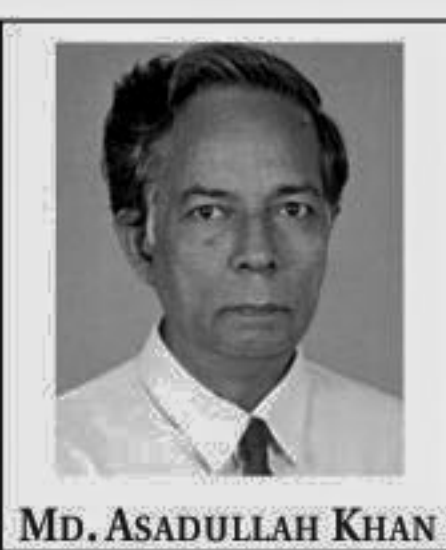


BITTER TRUTH

# Spectre of militancy looms



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE spectre of militancy with an overtone of religious extremism has again raised its head in some areas of Bangladesh. Reports published in the national dailies indicate that so-called Islamist militants under the aegis of Jamaat-e-Islami party have resorted to unprecedented violence in different parts of Bangladesh to foil the war crimes trial, although the issue does not relate to their present party set up and future course of action. The so-called Islamist parties are propagating jihad through distributing books and leaflets among gullible villagers and school and madrasa students. The reign of terror let loose by radical cadres magnified a terrifying truth: men driven by extremist ideas and actions seem to be out to set the civil society on fire. They are guilty of redefining the concept of Islam which ideologically stands for non-violence and love for all. Prophet Muhammad (SM) had to fight a deadly war in order to survive but as soon as he felt his people were safe, he devoted his attention to building a peaceful coalition of tribes and achieved victory by an ingenious and inspiring campaign of non-violence. These radical scholars of Islamic theocracy must not lose sight of Prophet Muhammad's (SM) example of moderation and tolerance in talking about the treaty of "Hudaibia." The significant part of the treaty that impresses us all regardless of religious conviction is the Prophet's (SM) great magnanimity, tolerance and self-restraint. Article (4) of the treaty reads: Prophet of Islam and his party were not to enter Mecca that year, but they could enter unarmed the following year. Prophet Muhammad (SM) went back to Medina that year. This underscores that Islam, since the days of Prophet Muhammad (SM), has demonstrated tolerance in the face of severest provocations. But these days some extremist groups and fanatics masquerading

as devout Muslims are brandishing weapons and resorting to violence and hate campaigns. More so, some fanatic groups in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the world are eager to profit from a surge of sympathy by invoking the slogan, "Islam is in danger." But let it be made explicitly clear to these protagonists of religion that never was Islam in danger, and never will be. What is beyond doubt is that religious extremism has very little to do with theology and is a purely political tool. Jamaat-e-Islami party with many outfits has possibly spawned groups like Hizbut Tauhid, Hijbut Tahrir, etc. with the intention of imposing their writ on the state by violent means. As it appears, the ideology of terror is being disseminated, acts of terror are being planned and efforts are made to carry them out. Their leaflets and books contain articles and messages that run counter to the state law and the constitution of the country.

## The vast majority of Muslims who are horrified by the killings, burnings and violence on the streets must reclaim their faith from those who have so violently hijacked it.

It is in some schools and madrasas that impressionable young men -- many call them jihadis -- imbibe the mechanics of mayhem laced with religious overtones. The greatest threat these radical groups pose is that they can inspire and galvanise impoverished elements in the society. Neither BNP nor AL, who ran the country alternately during the last 22 years, took any measures to modernise the syllabus of these madrasas. It is widely felt that the unchecked mushrooming of these religious schools -- often affiliated to hardline organisations and jihadi groups -- has been the major factor in the spread of the culture of militancy.

The world order is full of diversity. So what we can talk about is unity in diversity and that is what our Creator wanted us to assert. Allah tells all human beings: "O people! We have

formed you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another" (Sura 49:13).

Malaysia, a Muslim majority country, stands out in the Muslim world for merging Islam and modernity. Malaysia is an open and diverse economy rapidly transforming itself into one that is knowledge-based. Women occupy the highest ranks of decision making and even outnumber men in the universities. The success of modern Malaysia in building a vibrant economy and a cohesive national identity from a patchwork of cultures has shown that Islam guides its believers toward knowledge, progress, tolerance, good governance, and promotion of human dignity.

Malaysia has been able to succeed where other Muslim countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan still fall short, in large part due to how we understand our faith. Free from the pursuit of rigid dogma, the Malaysians have been able to overcome problems that continue to plague the majority of Muslims elsewhere -- poverty, illiteracy and oppression.

Citizens here feel unnerved because there are signs that this progressive understanding of Islam is under threat in the country. Political Islam has taken advantage of heightened religious consciousness and tries to convince Muslims that the state of affairs in the country is anathema to the "authentic" vision of Islam. Self-appointed clerics increasingly claim monopoly over religious discourse, crowding out voices of reform and progress. The growing conservatism that we see may bring about alarming consequences. If left unchallenged, it could germinate into a radical and reactionary force that rejects modernity, generates intolerance, and imprisons the minds of Muslims behind the bars of dogma and blind imitation. The vast majority of Muslims who are horrified by the killings, burnings and violence on the streets must reclaim their faith from those who have so violently hijacked it.

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# Shahbagh thoughts

JULIAN FRANCIS

"WHY have you come here today?" asked a young woman at Shahbagh. "What do you think of it all," she added. I replied, "I came to absorb the atmosphere here and I think that this is an important part of the history of Bangladesh."

I went on to explain that I was present in Dhaka when democracy "returned" to Bangladesh in December, 1990 and I remember how Mirpur Road in Dhanmondi was packed with rejoicing people after midnight on the day that President Ershad stepped down. The emotions then and at Shahbagh now are, in some ways, similar. The most striking aspect is that most of the people leading everything at Shahbagh were born after 1971 and so, even though it is early days, it appears that the spirit behind the Liberation War and the emergence of Bangladesh is going to be in safe hands in the future.

It is most unfortunate that a section of people in Bangladesh continue to deny that there were millions of collaborators in 1971 that assisted the Pakistan army in acts of gruesome violence and genocide. In 1971, I was responsible, on behalf of Oxfam, for supplementary care of about 600,000 Bangladeshi men, women and children living in refugee camps. There, I saw with my own eyes and heard the verbal evidence of acts of brutality experienced by the refugees from the hands of the Pakistani soldiers and their helpers, the so-called Peace Committees, the Razakars and the para-military members of al-Badr and al-Shams.

It is particularly poignant that this outpouring has started in the month of Ekushey. After all, the young led the Language Movement in 1952. They were fearless then and they fear nothing now even though there is a section of misguided youth determined to unleash a reign of terror, attempting to silence those at Shahbagh. It is also significant that the day of One Billion Rising takes place at this time too, because this movement itself has a strong link with the Liberation War when hundreds of thousands of women endured unbelievable suffering at the hands of the Pakistan army and their collaborators.

Lines of men and women joined hands on February 12 for 3 minutes of silence to press for war crimes justice and I joined the line of young men and women where Kemal Attaturk Road links Gulshan with Banani. Later, some asked me to spend time with them in a nearby coffee shop and to recount my memories of 1971 and the early, difficult, days of Bangladesh. The young are determined to learn the accurate history of the birth of Bangladesh.

What has particularly struck me is the friendliness of the young people in the crowds at Shahbagh. They were sitting, sometimes for hours, next to complete strangers and all were helping each other with snacks, water and sometimes a shoulder on which to sleep! This great community spirit is something Bangladesh needs in all walks of life. Helping each other and one's neighbours, keeping the community free of litter and pollution, driving safely and politely, to mention a few. I anticipate that the youth of Bangladesh will bring forth more shining examples in the days to come.

The writer, who has had an association with Bangladesh since 1971, was honoured in 2012 as a foreign friend of Bangladesh for his role in the country's War of Liberation in 1971.

# Are nuclear power plants viable for Bangladesh?

MO CHAUDHURY

THE government of Bangladesh has reached an agreement with Russia to build the country's first ever nuclear power plant (NPP) in Rooppur, Pabna. Given the momentous nature of the venture, this commentary lays out some major issues to facilitate and inspire public debates on the matter.

First, NPP offers the prospect of environmentally clean power supply at low operating costs over the long term. The estimated \$1.5 to \$2 billion construction cost of the Rooppur NPP does not seem expensive for such a plant. However, more details are needed about the modernity and sophistication of the NPP technology to be installed -- the components of the construction cost that will not be covered by the cited cost figure, and the proportion of the construction cost that will be local (in Bangladesh taka). Information is needed about the contracted operating fees, servicing fees, uranium costs, used fuel and waste management cost, decommissioning cost, and the cost of supporting facilities.

Second, once the various cost components are duly factored in, it needs to be evaluated whether the Russian collaboration is the most cost effective choice for Bangladesh. Prior to 2009, China offered to build and fund the Rooppur plant; South Korea also offered financial and technical help. It is thus unclear as to what comparative evaluations led to the agreements with Russia.

Third, according to the 2011 agreements with Rosatom (Russian atomic agency), Russia will supply the enriched uranium fuel and repatriate the used fuel back to Russia, and the Russian firm Atomstroyexport will build the NPP. Given the physical distance between Russia and Bangladesh, and the transportation and navigation arteries to Rooppur, the plan for long distance ferrying of the radioactive materials needs to be known and carefully evaluated. The plan for a repository of the radioactive waste is not quite known either, although low level wastes might be concealed beneath the NPP structures. Any radioactive waste repository in Bangladesh, however, exposes the connected water and marine system to grave risks of contamination due to seepage. These issues are more pertinent in Bangladesh than in Russia or elsewhere, given Bangladesh's topography, population density, and population proximity to any corridor.

Fourth, International Nuclear Event Scale (0 to 7, each increment is roughly ten times more severe) measures the severity of NPP events. By any estimation, the hazardous effects of a higher level event on health, water and food chain, and in general on the riverine ecological system of Bangladesh will be many times greater than those the world has hitherto witnessed.

Bangladesh is a very small country and any radioactive material released into the open is likely to spread quickly to much of the country and the neighbouring regions of India, exposing possibly more than hundred million people to nuclear contamination. While the government of



## Nuclear power plants offer an environmentally clean way of diversifying the power generation portfolio of Bangladesh at low operating costs over an extended period of time. However, the capital costs are large without significantly meeting the long term power needs, the risks are real and grave, disaster management appears daunting, and an array of alternative clean power technologies are indeed available.

Bangladesh is expected to have conducted in-depth study of the potential impacts of INES higher scale events, the information needs to be more widely circulated, examined and debated.

Fifth, before constructing and operating the Rooppur or any other NPP, it is essential that not only the risks be measured/estimated, but also an efficient and well-resourced risk control and disaster management system is designed, put in place and well-rehearsed ahead of time. This is of paramount importance because NPP will be a novel venture for Bangladesh, but the country is not reputed for its governance effectiveness, safety and disaster management record and preparedness. Moreover, the infrastructure, from transportation to medical, is grossly inadequate even under normal circumstances. It is unfathomable how Bangladesh can quickly evacuate and relocate say just a few hundred thousand people from the Rooppur area, not to speak of the expected

millions.

Sixth, while the Rooppur NPP may be cost competitive, how its 1,000 MW or even the projected 5,000 MW NPP capacity by 2,030 (re: World Nuclear Association) will vitally address the longer term power needs of Bangladesh calls for a careful evaluation. According to the government, the projected demand is 19,000 MW in 2021 and 34,000 MW in 2030. If the Rooppur NPP is connected to the grid by 2,021, it will meet less than 5% of the projected 2021 power need, even operating at 90% capacity. If all 5,000 MW of projected NPP capacity comes alive by 2030 and operates at 90% capacity, only 13% of the 2030 power needs will be met. Of course, if the economy and the population continue to grow, this percentage will dwindle even further beyond 2030.

Thus, unless Bangladesh becomes infested with NPPs, the nuclear choice is unlikely to make a dent in the country's growing needs for power over the longer haul. Meantime, each of the five (assuming 1,000 MW size) projected NPP additions would keep aggravating the chances of a higher INES event and its potentially colossal effects.

Seventh, the wisdom of entering at all the arena of nuclear power generation is worth debating, given that most of the long-time and economically resourceful users (e.g., US, UK, Japan, Canada) are actually winding down their NPP capacity. The few countries (like China, Russia and India) actively adding capacity are self-sufficient in the technology, have atomic weapons arsenal, and more importantly wish to either preserve their own reserves of non-renewable resources (like crude oil) and/or to curtail their dependence on such external resources for strategic reasons.

Lastly, with the Rooppur plant and the planned additions thereafter, the risk of the radioactive materials falling into the wrong hands cannot be downplayed considering the history of turbulent politics, poor and porous security apparatus and law enforcement, and widespread corruption and governance failures.

In summary, NPP offers an environmentally clean way of diversifying the power generation portfolio of Bangladesh at low operating costs over an extended period of time. However, the capital costs are large without significantly meeting the long term power needs, the risks are real and grave, disaster management appears daunting, and an array of alternative clean power technologies are indeed available. In the end, whether the risks and costs of NPP are acceptable enough is not a matter to be resolved by the science experts or economists. After all it is the ordinary people of Bangladesh who would bear the lethal consequences of potential NPP mishaps for generations. If this is not the time for fully informing and engaging the citizenship on such an overarching matter, then when?

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