

BITTER TRUTH

# Islam never sanctions vandalism



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE desecration of our national flag and defiling of Shaheed Minars by a section of radical Islamists manifest not only a derogatory act but also a vile attempt to create intolerance and disharmony in the society. Any person claiming to be a citizen of Bangladesh cannot desecrate the national flag and Shaheed Minar. These depraved actions are tantamount to denying the existence of Bangladesh.

Reports say that in Baitul Mukarram Jatiyo Masjid, after Juma prayer on the Friday before last, some trouble mongers in the garb of *musullis* burnt prayer carpets to register their protest against blasphemous text against the Prophet Muhammad (SM), alleged to have been put up with vile intention on blogger Rajib's Facebook after his death. No Muslim should incite the feelings of fellow Muslims on any unconfirmed news item about our Prophet Muhammad (SM) published in any newspaper to whip up religious sentiment. How can a devout Muslim tear off the prayer carpet of a mosque or dig up tiles to use as weapons against the police, or journalists or other Muslims?

Some radical groups are spreading their brand of Islam that creates animosity among the Muslim community. Since the early '80s, state and religion have been mixed up. Religion became a tool for exploiting people and the secular character of the constitution was changed to suit the personal ends of two past presidents who came out from the barracks. Ever since then, the fires of conflict, hate and intolerance have been pitting Muslims against Muslims. Some over-zealous

clerics are inciting intolerance and even sanctioning violence in the name of '*jihad*.' This has created ultra-religious groups preaching new ethos and decrees in the name of Islam, and resulted in the mushrooming of madrasas imparting a brand of education bereft of modernity.

An upsurge of extremism, zealotry, and fanaticism has shaken the foundation of our fledgling democracy. Continued apathy, ill-governance and soft treatment created a fertile ground for the militants to operate in. With election just months away as per constitutional obligation, the new threat has serious implications not only for the present government but also for the next elected government. These militants in the garb of

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religious leaders are striking at the very root of Bangladesh -- a nation whose unity is sustained by its religious and cultural diversities.

In their quest for political space, these fanatic groups have exposed the weakness of state power. At a time when the nation needs undivided attention to fight the battle on the economic front, these disgruntled elements are fomenting divisive politics, factionalism and bigotry. The worthy and workable social consensus of tolerance and goodwill are in danger of breaking down because of the inaction by the successive governments at the appropriate time.

What is beyond doubt is that religious extremism has very little to do with theology and is a purely polit-

ical tool. It is time to demand a separation of public life and religious places and institutions. Secularism enshrined in 1972 Constitution of the Republic, though misused by politicians and mocked by fundamentalists, remains the bedrock of our nation. The ground rules of the country's political life have to be redrawn and religious medievalism needs to be exorcised from public life.

Our understanding of religion should be both textual and contextual, drawing on the true principles of Islam to understand contemporary problems. It is this understanding of Islam that can meet the demands of modernity as well as provide a spiritual bulwark against aversion and depravity. On the other hand, in an effort to gain ascendancy in the social hierarchy, perhaps with the lust for power, these religious groups seem to have sold out their religious principles.

The cleverly orchestrated smear campaign launched by the radical religious leaders against the organisers of the "Ekattor Mancha," branding them as atheists succeeded in inflaming the passions of gullible Muslims in the country. In two days, nine persons, never knowing how Islam was in danger, died as a result of police firing and the mayhem that followed. People worry that these activities by a group of people could erode much of the tolerance that Islam espouses.

Beneath the veneer of democracy, tolerance and religious values lies a dark side that these groups find

easy to bring to the surface to serve their vile purpose. We need introspection. We need, for a start, to ask the high functionaries of the government why they found it so hard to control the so-called fanatics. At the same time, moderates and liberals feel concerned about the spectre that looms because of the organised efforts by a section of people to turn the country into a militant theocracy. Today, in most places of our country, tolerant view and liberal attitude towards religion have given way to an oppressive and illiberal attitude. Devout Muslims are shocked to hear that the name of their faith, which means submission to Allah, can summon up such images of violence.

There are indications galore that progressive understanding of Islam in the country is under threat. Being mindful that the rise of radical religious politics has coincided with the erosion of credibility of the successive the governments the country's political leaders must ensure that they can promote justice, equality, and most importantly, freedom for all. In such a situation, if the government and people surrender to the rigid conservatism and blind fanaticism, the hopes of revival and resurgence of the democratic culture and institutions and enlightened nationhood will be irreparably damaged.

Apart from the concern for lives and freedom that might be in jeopardy, moderates fear that the wave of terror and fanaticism unleashed by the extremist groups, maybe with an innate passion to fulfill their desire for power, might destabilise the cohesive character of the society that has existed so long.

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# Defence accountability to defend democracy

IFTEKHARUZZAMAN

RENCH Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, who led the French victory in World War I, an architect of the Treaty of Versailles is credited to have said: "War is too important to be left to generals." What I read in these words is the sovereignty of the people.

Our armed forces are not raised to fight a war in conventional sense, but to defend the country -- the people from possible external aggression, be that very remote. They are raised in the name of the people, in public interest; brought up, trained, equipped and sustained by public money. Their allegiance and accountability, therefore, lies with the sovereign in democracy -- the people.

Discussion on issues of democratic accountability of the armed forces is rare in Bangladesh. For no good reason, it remains a taboo, something I believe is unacceptable even to many in the armed forces, which has itself transformed over the years, not merely because of UN peacekeeping exposure, but also for being enlightened as defenders of an increasingly democratic people.

Accountability and transparency of the armed forces are, however, often subjects of public discourse in the international context, informed by credible research. One recent example is the report released by Transparency International UK on January 29 that analysed various aspects of the defence sector governance challenges and corruption risks in 82 countries including Bangladesh. Earlier, BBC Bangla had produced a series report on business interests of Bangladesh army focusing on conflict of interest, risk of corruption, and erosion of professional integrity.

Media commentaries, both print and electronic, featured concerns about the logic behind the recent deal with Russia for a huge procurement of arms. However, other big issues soon emerged in our political landscape that quickly pushed out of the antenna the question whether the deal was truly demand-driven based on objective needs-assessment or supply-pushed, from a country that in terms of perceived prevalence of corruption ranks 133rd among 174 countries, the lowest in G-20 and much lower than any other potential global arms suppliers.

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has just released a report of the role of a section of the armed forces during the caretaker government of 2007-8. It assesses the nature, process and dimensions of abuse of power by a section of the armed forces, factors behind corruption and implications thereof.

The research takes into account a number of positive contributions made by the then government. These include production of national identity card and voter list within only 11 months; improvement in service delivery in a few institutions; reduction of congestion of ships and containers in the Chittagong port; drive to control unauthorised land grabbing; collection of over-

due electricity and gas bills; step towards separation of judiciary; contribution towards a highly credible election.

However, a section of the members of the armed forces got involved in abuse of power, irregularities and corruption, acted against rule of law and violated human rights, creating the scope of reputational and credibility risk for the armed forces and related agencies.

Abuse of power that took place include extorting money and wealth, violation of the constitution and laws, violation of human rights, undue influence in public affairs including politics, justice and control of the media.

The topmost agenda of the armed forces-backed regime was corruption control. What a section of those who were entrusted to realise that agenda did was indeed abuse of power in the name of controlling corruption. They indulged in extortion from people of different professions either under threat of taking action for alleged possession of illegal income, or offering acquittal and/or reduction of punishment. Victims of such illegal and unconstitutional acts -- individuals

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and organisations -- were forced to provide written undertaking that these were voluntary transactions. Many of those who didn't oblige to such transactions were subjected to harassment including torture.

The report revealed allegations of forcing unwilling land-owners to sell land in a few upazilas near Dhaka as desired by people using armed forces identity. Local public representatives were co-opted in the process, often under pressure. Some who declined were taken to army camp and tortured, or subjected to fabricated cases, even sent to jail.

Local level public representatives were taken to undisclosed places for extortion on such grounds as settlement of land disputes and enforced supply of unauthorised logistic and consumable material for the national ID and voter list project though all costs were budgeted.

This research has also verified media reports and public concern about harassment and physical and psychological torture of political leaders in detention, including the top level businesspersons and contractors, and denial of bail indefinitely without due process. Defenders or could-be defenders were in some

cases discouraged under threat. The accused were eventually released on bail or parole without due process and at record speed.

The harassment and torture inflicted upon teachers and students of universities of Dhaka and Rajshahi was sheer violation of human rights and an example of ignorance, if not a deliberate attempt to undermine the key factor in milestones of our historical achievements.

The high-profile and high-speed anti-corruption drive turned out to be counterproductive because the due process was grossly bypassed. The Anti-Corruption Commission was subjected to the dictates of the Task Force that created the context in which the ACC was to be the eventual scapegoat for the evils left behind.

Intervention in the political process included moves to create divide within major political parties, catalysing new political platform, and the infamous minus-two formula which reflected political ambition of a section of the armed forces, and left behind a heavy baggage of challenges in the political space. The report also provides validity to concerns about one of the worst forms of media control and restriction of individual liberty during the period.

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Why shouldn't we have a national defence policy? Shouldn't we put the people first in such a policy? Shouldn't we integrate highest standards of integrity, transparency and honesty in military operations strategy to ensure prevention of abuse of power? Why should defence budget, expenses and purchases remain tabooed in public discourse?

If properly read, the report may contribute to further professional excellence, integrity, transparency and accountability of our armed forces as much as it may create greater appreciation of the risks involved in engaging them in the civilian agenda. It challenges the myth that direct or indirect military intervention comes as a panacea when deficits in democracy are pushed to the extreme.

The result is just the opposite -- not only does it turn the wheel of democratic progression backwards, but also creates opportunity for corruption, violation of laws and human rights unbecoming of armed forces of a democratic society. This realisation is indispensable also for higher levels of democratic practice and democratic institutionalisation. It is in the hands of political leaders not to create the space for intrusion of undemocratic forces, which is a simple formula in spite of all the differences and mistrust, revert back to negotiating table and defend democracy.

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## IN MEMORIAM

# 'Without Saying Good Bye'

NEHREEN MOJIB

IT'S been four years. So many hours and days have passed. But for us, the wound is still fresh, our hearts bleeds and we still long for our loved ones.

We, the families of 57 officers, are eagerly waiting for justice to be done, and want to see the perpetrators of the massacre punished soon. Maybe fulfillment of this hope will help us to live life more calmly. Very often I shiver with the thought that if justice is not done, what shall we tell those departed souls?

We are passing our days with a positive attitude, knowing that life goes on. When someone we love deeply dies we never get over it. But we slowly learn how to go on without them. They are always ensconced in our hearts, and we never thought we would feel like this.

Those brave officers came into our lives with their wonderful qualities, and made our sky beautiful to gaze upon. They came and went quietly, moving our souls, leaving their footprints in our hearts. They left us without saying good bye ... and now we can never be the same again.

I remember that day, February 26, 2009. When I came out after staying for 32 hours inside the gym, I went to the BDR gate. I couldn't find my son so I had to go back to my residence. I had no clue that my whole world had been turned upside down. After a long argument with the guards, I could get into my house. It was a shocking sight, and I did not know where to look for my seventeen year old son because there was nothing except ashes. By the grace of God I found my son alive and we went out quickly. For a moment I looked back and thought: "Are those ashes heavier then my twenty five wonderful years?"

We, the wives of warriors, know how to act and how to bid farewell to our loved ones when any emergency arises. If I knew on February 25 that my hero, my role model, would not come back alive, then I would have told him so many things that I should have told him before. My children could have let their father know how proud he had made them for so long and that he was the hero in their life.

They went away without farewell, without the proper salutes which they deserved for the service they had given to this country for so many years. I have to admit with a heavy heart that, even after four years, we couldn't do anything. We couldn't even give recognition to this day as "Shaheed Sena Dibosh," or build a "monument" in memory of those divine souls.

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The writer is wife of late Col. Md. Mojibul Hoque.