

Muslim Brotherhood and United States: Crisis or summer cloud?

KAMAL GABALLA

TOWARDS the end of March and as I wrote these words, anger and criticism shook the streets of Egypt and the international sphere with accusations directed at the Muslim Brotherhood regime that they are stifling freedom of expression in the country.

With the United States' criticism on top, governments and international rights groups also expressed concern, immediately following the Egyptian prosecutor-general's order to arrest and interrogate prominent satirist Bassem Youssef.

The president-appointed prosecutor accused the famous television host of the weekly show *Al-Bernameg* of contempt of religion, insulting the standing of the president and disturbing public order and peace.

U.S. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland quickly then expressed the American government's concerns following the release of Youssef on L.E. 15,000 bail. "We have concerns that freedom of expression is being stifled," she said.

"The government of Egypt seems to be investigating these cases while it has been slow or inadequate in investigating attacks on demonstrators outside of the presidential palace in December 2012, other cases of extreme police brutality and illegally blocked entry of journalists," she added. "There does not seem to be an even-handed application of justice here." U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry had also addressed the issue with Mursi, according to Nuland.

Moreover, in solidarity, prominent American television host Jon Stewart dedicated a segment of his *Daily Show* to Bassem, where he told President Mohamed Mursi: "You are the president of Egypt. The inheritor of one of the greatest lands and people in recorded history. Your people invited civilisation."

Bassem, who was hosted by Stewart last year, had admitted that the idea for his show was inspired by the Daily Show that has aired for more than 15 years. "What are you worried about? You're the president of Egypt, you have an army. He has puns and a show. You have tanks and planes -- we should know, we still have the receipts. Silencing a comedian doesn't qualify you to be president of Egypt," Stewart told Mursi on his show. "Without Bassem and all those journalists and bloggers and brave protesters who took to Tahrir Square to voice dissent, you President Mursi would not be in a position to repress them," he added.

In a strange twist of events, the official Twitter account of the US embassy in Egypt posted Stewart's sarcastic commentary on Youssef's arrest, to which the Egyptian presidency responded by saying: "It's inappropriate for a diplomatic mission to engage in such negative political propaganda." The account was later shut upon an order by US envoy in Cairo Anne Paterson.

Bassem Youssef's case stirred up many questions and concerns over current and future ties between Egypt's ruling Muslim Brotherhood, with its representative in the presidential palace, and the American administration.

Among the most important questions that pop in

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one's mind are: (i) Is the honeymoon of the Brotherhood and the US really over? (ii) What is the real root of this mutual interest between the two countries (whether the Egyptian government is in the form of a military, dictatorship or now religious)? (iii) Is it possible that the White House will eventually remove its political cover from over the Muslim Brotherhood like it did with Hosni Mubarak's government during the 2011 uprising? (iv) How effective could the influence of the US and the international community and media be in wearing out the legitimacy of the Muslim Brotherhood's regime that rules the Middle East's most populous country?

Prominent Egyptian political analyst and journalist, Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, has insisted that the US gave the green light to the arrival of political Islamism to power in Egypt -- through President Mohamed Mursi who was once a senior member of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Heikal insisted that the Brotherhood's keenness to reach power forced them to cooperate with the United States, pointing out that the spread of headscarves and even *niqab* (full body veil) in Egypt had given the international community the impression that political Islamism had the support of the majority.

Heikal also claimed that the White House sent the now-toppled Mubarak regime a letter, before the 2005 parliamentary elections, asking it to grant the Brotherhood a chance, which the government agreed to. It was then that Washington decided to facilitate the Brotherhood's gradual road to power -- but only to be surprised with how quick and aggressive the grip was.

The US government has cooperated with non-jihadist Islamist groups since the beginning of the 21st century. It had become clear to President Bush, at the peak of the War on Terror, that the popularity of non-Jihadist Islamist currents were gaining momentum and were able to draw the masses, in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria.

No matter what the identity of the ruler is, certain things are set in stone: Egypt's commitment to the peace treaty with Israel, steady petroleum transfer through the Suez Canal, strategic cooperation between the two countries in fighting terrorism, maintaining the status of Egypt's army so as to keep regional balance of power in check and finally respect for freedoms and minorities.

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According to Egyptian journalist Emad AlDin Adeeb, there are three advantages to this strategy; the US avoids the high expenses of waging a war and focuses on its domestic economic struggles and not foreign policy (unless it's concerned with Asia, in particular China, Japan and Korea).

While some people wish that the army would return to save Egypt from the tight grip of the Islamist group, others believe that such move requires the consent and support of the US who would only signal it when its own interests are at stake.

It is no secret that the Mubarak regime lost its ability to survive once the US publicly declared that the time for change had come. It was then that Mubarak's power started to really shake from beneath him and his regime felt as if it had lost its backbone while faced with the raged masses of protesters.

Will the same scenario soon play out against Mursi?

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SHIFTING IMAGES Oscillating between despair and hope



MILIA ALI

"P LEDGING that the high ideals of nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism, which inspired our heroic people to dedicate themselves to, and our brave martyrs to sacrifice their lives in, the national liberation struggle, shall be the fundamental principles of the Constitution;" so states the preamble of the Bangladesh Constitution. But recent events in the country may have given us cause to question the relevance of the statement at this point. The past few weeks have generated much frustration and despair for most Bangladeshis who are asking, why is it that forty two years after independence we are still struggling to protect the founding principles based on which the country's hard-earned freedom was achieved?

Yes, I am referring to the challenges posed by the protest rally organised by Hefajat-e Islam on April 6. Like most of the nation, I, too, have been unnerved by the wave of Hefajat supporters ominously marching into Dhaka city with their thirteen-point demand agenda. I will refrain from discussing the merits and demerits of the demands since they do not deserve a place in any rational discourse. However, I am outraged that the extremist religious right has the gall to propose that we pronounce judgments on who is a Muslim and who is not. And I am stupefied that these so-called guardians

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of Islam are demanding that women's behaviour and dress code be modified according to their interpretation of the Sharia and the Quran!

The resurgent extremism in the country contradicts the basic principles of the Bangladesh liberation movement. The nation was created to ensure religious freedom and equality for all citizens -- Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and Jews. The irony is that the Jamaat-e-Islami Party never believed in an independent Bangladesh. In fact its leaders colluded with the Pakistan army to counter the efforts of the brave heroes fighting for our freedom. It's indeed bizarre that the Jamaatis are now pretending to be the mascot of Bangladesh's welfare!

How did it come to this? Is it a failure of the current administration that initially caved in to the forces that are determined to push us back to the cave age? Or did the Hefajat movement gain momentum from the brazen support of the leading opposition party? The very same movement that would, on religious grounds, bar the leader of the opposition from participating in an open discussion with her male colleagues! But then politics finds strange bedfellows and its workings are generally beyond the grasp of us ordinary folks.

Whatever may have caused this national crisis, we need to confront reality rather than play the blame game. The fact is that the well-organised and well-trained religious right is determined to force its dogmas on the country with zeal and passion. The moderates, on the other hand, believe in inclusion and pluralism and are basically averse to conflict. With time this could result in a gradual surrender of the liberal forces to entrenched interests. Should we then concede that bigotry would finally win over liberalism?

As I was struggling with these disturbing thoughts, a simple poster inviting children to participate in a painting competition on Pahela Baisakh set me thinking on a different track. I remembered that the Bengali New Year is around the corner and happy memories of past Pahela Baisakh festivities crowded out the negative emotions from my mind. I humbly saluted this joyous cultural event which straddles across race, religion and economic strata.

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The city parks will come alive with the sound of music. And the streets, which have now become dangerous zones of protest rallies and cocktail bombs, will be once again filled with the happy chatter of women in red and white saris and men in colourful attire. In the true spirit of Pahela Baisakh, Bangladeshis will demonstrate their artistic sensibility in a blend of sensual and cerebral pleasures that are secular and inclusive.

Perhaps Pahela Baisakh, with its all-embracing message of love and tolerance, will help dilute the nation's differences and push back the reactionary forces of fundamentalism. This could be a small but significant step towards restoring the secular ideals of the country's Founding Fathers.

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Need for Bangla fiscal year

M. INAMUL HAQUE

THE need for a Bangla fiscal year was first expressed by this writer through a letter published in the *Bangladesh Observer* on March 17, 1993. Since then, the writer has increasingly been convinced that it is an essential need for this country, for executing our development works in an effective manner.

The current fiscal year of Bangladesh starts from July 1 of the Gregorian calendar and ends on the June 30 of the following year. In the subcontinent, it is similar to that of Pakistan. India, though it has the same legacy of British colonial rule, the fiscal year ranges from April 1 to March 31. Sri Lanka's fiscal year ranges from January 1 to December 31. Fiscal year in UK ranges from the first week of April to the last week of March, in Japan it is from April 1 to March 31, and in USA it is from October 1 to September 30.

Apparently, there is nothing wrong in the fiscal calendar in Bangladesh. But if we assess the implications of this calendar we find that our development activities are regularly in a mess at the year-end. Our expenditure is most in the month of June, when most development works are done and rains and floods arrive. Can we not complete these works before the rain arrives by changing our fiscal calendar?

If we look at the fiscal path of the calendar we see that the procedure starts from the month of May, when the proposed budget is framed and put to the parliament for debate. The budget session of the parliament during June approves the budget. When the fiscal year starts, the ongoing development works are slowed down due to the monsoon and the floods, but some emergency works are done. The autumn is when everything restarts, but the works cannot be started soon.

The delay occurs because of finishing of the tendering procedures and following of the procurement guidelines. All development works must finish by June 30. But, in June, rains arrive and flash floods occur in the northern and eastern districts. The country can also experience tropical cyclones during this time. So, for any kind of development works



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increases the load of debt on every citizen. Though much of the funds is siphoned out through consultancy and corruption the remaining money, if spent properly, could also give some good results.

The fiscal plan, without considering the climatic conditions of this country, helps the culprits to take advantage of the bad weather, when work cannot be done properly. But at the end of the fiscal plan, spending becomes a government priority to show its success, though the actual work done could be far less. In this way, many of our development projects end up in a financial mess. I feel that if we switch over to the Bangla calendar for framing our fiscal year, the situation can change towards a positive direction.

The Bangla calendar is a solar calendar that starts

from April 14 of the Gregorian calendar. It's first five months, Baishakh, Jaishtha, Asharh, Sraban and Bhadra have 31 days and Ashwin, Kartik, Agrahayan, Poush, Magh, Falgun, and Chaitra have 30 days every year. During leap years in the Gregorian calendar, the Bangla calendar has 31 days for the month of Falgun. Thus the dates and months in Bangla calendar coincide with (except some days of February in leap years) dates and months of the Gregorian calendar every year.

The Bangla calendar is based on six climatic seasons having two months allocated to each of them. These are summer, monsoon, floods, autumn, winter and spring. All these seasons have significant effects on the river flows and the crops and vegetation in the fields. The Bangla calendar is very much indigenous and has a tradition of thousands of years. The starting and ending dates of the Bangla calendar are the same as the calendars of most south and south-east Asian countries, i.e., India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia and Sumatra.

Historically, the Bangla calendar is a fiscal calendar of the rural areas based on the crop seasons in this region. The seasons are aus from Baishakh to Sravan, amon from Bhadra to Agrahayan and rabi from Poush to Chaitra. A good harvest of rice during aus and amon

brings good fortune. The remaining rabi crops bring additional wealth to our people.

Traditionally, the business community end their fiscal year at the end of Chaitra, and open a new book of accounts (*halkhata*) from Baishakh 1. The revenue department also has the same calendar year. Let us follow our historical tradition and change our fiscal calendar according to the Bangla calendar. For practical reasons the fiscal calendar can be from April 1 to March 31, similar to that of India. To wind up the accounts, an overlapping period can be there up to April 13.

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