

Holy Shab-e-Barat

Imbibe its true spirit

TONIGHT is highly auspicious, beckon as it does, Muslims all over the world, to remember the Creator, supplicate before Him and seek His forgiveness, blessings and salvation. We ask for mercy; for, He is the Most Merciful, blessings because the Almighty has plenty of it to shower on the deserving and salvation because it is to Him we turn for freeing us from the mundane ordeals. The overarching spirituality of the occasion is reflected through our reassertion and renewal of the belief that our fortunes are the gifts of Almighty.

Shab-e-Barat, in actual effect, means penitence for our foibles and seeking good fortune. We must remember though, unless we deserve something through perseverance, honesty and hard work, we simply would not be entitled to Allah's bounty. The occasion has a message for the individual, society, and the nation in a broader sense.

This night offers a window of opportunity for renewal of honesty of purpose, conscionable dutifulness and service to others as articles of faith. Tonight we set aside the banal and the worldly and evoke the fundamental strength of belief in God and His creation, the universe.

As the sun sets, we will find the faithful ready for a night of prayer, introspection, soul-searching and self-examination. Through this auspicious process, we shall strengthen our bondage to true and beneficial spirit of our religion. In the quest for rediscovery of the self we shall realise not just that this life matters, there is too the hereafter we must remain conscious about.

Restore their ancestral homes

Authorities must act expeditiously

ONCE again, injustice repeats in Chittagong Hill Tracts. Fourteen land grabbers evicted 22 Chak families in Naikhangchhari Upazila of Bandarben. Where are these land grabbers now? Surprisingly not in jail, in fact they are yet to face any action even after a probe report had recommended their immediate arrest. The expropriators have help from local rubber sapling suppliers who go into contracts with land grabbers to grab land.

Cases where the ethnic communities got their land back from the grabbers are few and far between. The victims of this injustice could not even file any case against these 14 land grabbers, the level of corruption and injustice is to that level, and it has been over three months since the incident took place.

We all know what the right thing to do here is. There is no grey area or confusion in this case. Yet we are offering no protection to the vulnerable indigenous community which is often harassed and intimidated by vested quarters.

The real test of good governance lies in providing peace, security and livelihood options to groups of people who are in a minority. Far from it, we are failing to basically protect their right to their ancestral homes.

In the present case, the culprits are known and arrests have been recommended by a duly authorized probe committee. All that is needed is hauling them up and restoring the grabbed lands to their rightful owners.

Has quality of politics and politicians declined?

GOPAL SENGUPTA

RECENT findings lend support to the common wisdom which asserts that there has been a steady erosion of public faith in politicians and the political system. People felt that politicians had given Bangladeshi democracy a bad name. Today the image of parliament that emerges from television is more akin to a boxing ring. Some would attribute the bedlam to the nature of Bangladesh's polity.

In contrast to the dour and forbidding manner of its Western counterparts, the parliament of Bangladesh is seen as a lively reflection of the country's socially and culturally diverse polity. And yet, parliament must function with a minimum consensus or risk being reduced to irrelevance in the public eye, with the attendant danger of popular disillusionment with the democratic process itself. Unfortunately, the rot may be already running too deep, with parliament habitually lurching from session to unproductive session, with bills and debates on key issues taking the backseat to noisy protests and walkouts.

Before every session, the speaker makes a fervent appeal to all political parties for cooperation in conducting the proceedings smoothly. But this has become more of a ritual today. Only during obituary references is parliament calm.

When the live telecast of parliamentary proceedings began, every one hoped that our representatives would behave better and discharge their duties more responsibly as the people had an opportunity to see them in action. But our MPs hardly seem to bother about public opinion.

Unfortunately, most people with a vision and a broad outlook do not enter politics for obvious reasons. In fact, many do not even cast their votes. Unless we break this vicious cycle, there will be further deterioration in the political scenario.

The quality of politics and politicians has declined alarmingly. The manner in which politicians conduct themselves -- disrupting proceedings, forcing adjournments and clashing in parliament -- is deplorable. Parliament, a pillar of democracy, has been reduced to a sorry state. It is time to take urgent measures to arrest this decay. The treasury and the opposition benches must come to a minimum agreement on running parliament -- if not for improving their own public image -- at least for the sake of Bangladesh's democracy.

The mission to deconstruct



HOW helpless is an institution or an individual before the power of a government? Ask Nobel laureate Dr. Munhammad Yunus, the founder of Grameen Bank (GB). The government first dislodged the person Yunus from his position as the managing director of the GB on the ground that he had gone past retirement age to head the institution and, of course, a law was in place to induce his exit. Then came the turn of the institution he made. A commission was instituted to look into its financial transactions, its legal standing and succession rules. The government did not stop at that. Since it had only three members including the chairman among 12 directors who ran the Bank, the next step was how to give more power to the government representatives on the board. So the 29-year-old law of GB was amended to make the chairman more powerful.

Now the commission has come up with its recommendations to reconstitute GB. To reconstruct the future of the Nobel Prize winning micro-lending institution, the government instituted a commission. But the recommendations the commission has come up with may make the Bank's future bleaker than stronger. It not only suggests taking total control of the GB by raising its shares to 51% from its current stake at 3%, it also plans to split the institution into 19 parts. How better to kill it than by smashing it to smithereens? And then the sight has also been set on the majority of board members who are regarded as a bunch of 'unenlightened' rural women. So infuse 'educated, people in the board.' And who cares even if the present board members have been elected by the 8.4 million borrowers of the Bank?

At discussion scheduled on July 2, the GB's future will be determined. And you cannot impute the stigma of meanness to the government since it has not forgotten to invite Dr. Yunus to the discussion!

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), an American founding Father and the principal author of The Declaration of Independence did, perhaps, envision this kind of government when he said: "My reading of history convinces me that most bad government results from too

much government."

We have only to look four decades back, not two centuries, in recent history of Bangladesh to understand Jefferson's observation. We must face facts. And it was not just a Bangladeshi experience that the government is a bad manager when it comes to handling state-owned institutions. The experience has been more or less the same everywhere. Since the late 1970s till date, governments have been loosening their grip on the economy and allowing the private sector to flourish. Bangladesh has also been very much in tune with this global trend. Looking at the way the present government has been handling the Grameen Bank, one wonders if it is again being possessed by the phantom of those long bygone days? Or is it that this throwback to olden days is conspicuous only in the case of GB?

Given its record of mismanagement and corruption in the financial sector, what moral authority does the government have to meddle in the affairs of an otherwise eminently successful microfinance organisation, the GB?

The government has been taking one destructive step after another against this hapless organisation and its founder, ignoring the appeals from home and abroad. Expressing his concern about the government's proposal to restructure the Grameen Bank, renowned economist and one-time chairman of Grameen Bank, Prof. Rehman Sobhan, in an interview with a local daily, has advised the government against moving further on the Grameen Bank issue. The founder of the Grameen Bank Dr. Muhammad Yunus in recent article asked: "What offence has Grameen Bank committed that it must be broken into pieces? Someone has to explain this."

A total of 575 teachers of the University Teacher's Association of Bangladesh (UTAB) in a statement said if the recommendations of Grameen Bank Enquiry Commission were implemented, the globally acclaimed institution would lose its uniqueness and be destroyed. US Representative for New Jersey's 12th congressional district Rush Holt said: "If the government of Bangladesh persists in its attacks on the bank and Prof Muhammad Yunus our government should re-evaluate the wisdom of our current push to deepen political and security ties to the current government."

But the government appears to be heedless of all these appeals, warnings and well-meant pieces of advice. It as though hell-bent on its mission to decimate the Grameen Bank.

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| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

How to end the stalemate with iran

SEYED HOSSEIN MOUSAVIAN and MOHAMMAD ALI SHABANI

THE stunning election of a pragmatic former Iranian nuclear negotiator, Hassan Rowhani, has offered the Obama administration a once-in-a-lifetime chance to end the atomic stalemate with Iran.

In the West, Rowhani is widely seen as a turbaned politico from inside the establishment. One of us has worked for him directly, as his deputy in nuclear talks. The other has conducted research at the think tank he runs. We can attest that he is wary of a purely ideological approach to foreign policy and is driven by more than simple expediency in pursuit of the national interest. After seeing the nuclear deal he was attempting to negotiate with the European Union fall apart in 2005, Rowhani is now seeking to resolve the nuclear issue once and for all, and also to redeem himself politically.

Rowhani's victory demonstrates that there is now real momentum toward the initiation of direct talks between Iran and the United States. Despite remarks he has made to appease hard-liners since his victory, Rowhani's campaign rhetoric made clear his desire to change the hostile relationship with America. In recent months, even Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has given permission for direct negotiation -- although he has not expressed optimism about its prospects.

The single biggest threat to this unique window for dialogue is misguided perceptions of each side's respective strengths and weaknesses. To avoid squandering this opportunity, President Obama and President-elect Rowhani, who takes office in August, must resist and debunk the false impressions that have been promoted by extremists on both sides.

In Washington, some have started portraying Rowhani's election as proof that America's current approach, which relies on tough sanctions, is working. The perception is that the Iranians are willing to budge on their nuclear rights, and that the centrist president-elect -- who once agreed to temporarily and voluntarily suspend uranium enrichment -- will make unreciprocated concessions. According to this theory, a weakened Iran, hungry for an imminent end to hard-hitting sanctions, will take what it can get. This view implicitly promotes the dangerous idea that the United States should retain or even stiffen its rigid nuclear posture.

In Tehran, there is a sense of optimism about the nuclear issue that derives from a tenuous narrative of Iranian resurgence. For years, there has been a systemic reluctance to engage in substantive negotiations, unless Iran is operating from a position of strength. Now a new president has won a clear popular mandate after eight years of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's divisive rule. As a result, there is a growing perception that Iran has the long-sought upper hand.

Indeed, many view Rowhani's background as the supreme leader's longtime personal representative to the Supreme National Security Council as evidence of a new era of national cohesion. This perception of strength could spur Iran to seriously enter nuclear negotiations. But overconfidence could also lead Iran's rulers to avoid making the concessions necessary to break the stalemate.

Rowhani and Obama must stick to pragmatism and fend off extremism. They must combine prudence with courage and take reciprocal, rationally sequenced steps, and then follow through with hard sells at home. And most of all, they must avoid embracing the misperceptions of strength and weakness that have brought us to the brink.

When two rivals walk into a room, each convinced that he has the upper hand, it can end only in disaster. These diametrically opposed perceptions of the meaning of Rowhani's election have the potential to torpedo this unique opportunity for a deal.

Worryingly, the West has a history of squandering chances to strike a deal with Rowhani. He has publicly suggested that one route out of the nuclear stalemate is the torpedoed 2005 proposal he negotiated with Jacques Chirac, France's president at the time. Under that plan, Western powers would recognize Iran's legitimate rights under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, including uranium enrichment for civilian purposes like nuclear energy and medical research.

In exchange, Iran would accept the International Atomic Energy Agency's definition of "objective guarantees" that the Iranian nuclear program will remain peaceful and not be diverted toward weaponization in the future. That proposal fell apart because of pressure from the George W. Bush administration, which insisted on no enrichment at all.

Eight years after the collapse of dialogue with the European Union, the dominant discourse in Tehran still portrays Rowhani's recommendation to suspend enrichment on a voluntary, temporary basis as a failure because it resulted only in humiliating calls for an indefinite suspension of all enrichment.

But Iran's relinquishing of its legitimate rights under the N.P.T., including enrichment, isn't, and has never been, on the table. However, Iranian leaders are open to new measures that would permanently allay Western concerns about Iran's nuclear program. Indeed, the contours of a final nuclear deal are clear. Iran will have to agree to the highest level of transparency and cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency and assure world powers that its nuclear program will never be diverted toward weaponization. In exchange, the West will have to recognize Iran's right to peaceful nuclear technology, including enrichment, and gradually lift sanctions.

Sooner rather than later, Iran and the United States will engage with each other. The main obstacle to a final deal is no longer its terms, but the path to reaching such an accord. Rowhani and Obama must stick to pragmatism and fend off extremism. They must combine prudence with courage and take reciprocal, rationally sequenced steps, and then follow through with hard sells at home. And most of all, they must avoid embracing the misperceptions of strength and weakness that have brought us to the brink.

After decades of fruitless confrontation, both the United States and Iran need cooperation.

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LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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"The relevance of Ataturk"

While more often than not I respectfully disagree with Syed Badrul Ahsan's opinion pieces, his June 19 essay "The relevance of Ataturk" should be reflected upon deeply by those who simply assume that democracy means all is good. Governance by democratic consent coupled with iron-clad guarantees of individual liberty and pluralism is a far cry from the majoritarian mob rule that he has rightly warned us about in that brilliant opinion piece. The history of theocratic democracy in our times is a sad one and, usually, entails a 'one man, one vote, one time' formula that results in systems where religious minorities, women, and artists bear the brunt of medieval barbarism. Kemal Ataturk, the savior of Turkey, knew this all too well and made sure that such barbaric elements were spoken to in the only language they understood. As Mr. Ahsan points out well, Bangladesh will pay a steep price, perhaps irrevocably, if it fails to heed the lessons of the founder of modern Turkey.

Esam Sohail
Kansas, USA

Destroying Grameen Bank



We do not understand why the government is ridiculously trying to destroy the Grameen Bank which has earned Nobel Prize jointly with its founder Prof. Yunus for its outstanding performance in creating opportunity to bring the poor out of poverty. The whole world is following this bank as a role model for development of the poor. Is there not a single voice in the country to protest such unjust act of the government?

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Doctor of faking

This is a new twist in criminal activities practiced by a medical doctor (or cheat), who issues medical certificates as needed by any unscrupulous client, all for a hefty fee! We have, in earlier decades, heard of many English movie titles like "Doctor in the House," "Doctor at Large" and others. Now we have a "Doctor of faking", actually sitting in a private clinic in Dhaka.

This person must be minting money. The curious question that comes to mind is: what percentage of this is given to the private clinic where he carries out this "certificate issuing business"?

Both the doctor and the clinic should be thoroughly investigated by the police and CID to unearth the details of this ugly matter.

S.A. Mansoor
Dhaka

The "Letters" page...

As a regular reader of The Daily Star, I have a keen interest in the "Letters" page. This page used to come out thrice a week -- Monday, Wednesday and Friday and contained eight to ten letters on diverse issues. It was the readers' zone where they could air their views on different topics. Thus the "Letters" page used to be a mirror of the public opinion. As for me, to see my letter in print was a refreshing experience.

But to my surprise I found that this page has been curtailed and sidelined. It now appears on the margin and contains only three or four letters. We earnestly hope that the people at the helm of this paper will restore the "Letters" page to its full length.

Zabed Wali
Chittagong

Comments on news report, "It will send you and me to jail" published on June 22, 2013

Ash C.

Thanks to the honorable PM for including herself as a probable jail mate of Begum Zia in her 'anticipation,' should a caretaker government takes over. The army backed government of 2006 - 2008 was the 'fruit of her movement' as she proudly claimed and brought her to power in 2009 -- of course, after making both the ladies state guests for a while. What a very vast majority of population want is a non-partisan caretaker government to hold a free, fair and credible election.

sl_jay1946

So you ultimately exposed your apprehension of "JAIL." Isn't it high time you relented and reinstated CTG instead of allowing broad daylight killings and scourge of destruction leading to the same consequences -- CTG with bloody vengeance?

Reazuddin

The prime minister knows now that the days are numbered for her government and that's why she is desperately trying to undermine the opposition. But interesting thing is that, whatever she does, people have decided not to see her again in power and will get rid of her in the next election.