

Bangladesh on al-Qaeda's cross hairs?

ISHFAQ ILAHI CHOUDHURY

THE release of a taped message from al-Qaeda's ideologue and its current head, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, warning the government of Bangladesh of dire consequences unless it stops what he termed as "wanton killing of Islamic scholars" and other anti-Islamic acts, has created a flurry of excitement. Indeed, this is the first time that a warning message was aimed directly at Bangladesh. We are not sure if the message was indeed from Zawahiri, only a voice scanning machine can do the job.

We are not even sure if Zawahiri is still alive; for years he has not been seen alive on the video. Even if he is alive, we are not sure of his whereabouts. He might be in Afghan-Pakistan border, where he was last seen with Osama bin Laden more than a decade ago. He could be in the Yemeni hills or even in an ISI safe-house in Pakistan, with his 3 wives and half a dozen children. Zawahiri, an Egyptian physician born in

sation aimed to set up a world-wide Islamic caliphate by violent revolution against what it considers to be un-Islamic rulers of Muslim states. Interestingly, it's professed jihad against the 'Crusader' West, principally USA, Israel and their allies, never materialised.

Al-Qaeda had always had a small but active support base in Bangladesh. In the fatwa issued by al-Qaeda in 1998 under the banner of "World Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders," there were three signatories beside Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri; one of them named Fazlur Rahman was from Bangladesh, probably representing HUJI (B). During Taliban's heydays in Afghanistan, Osama was a hero to the Islamists here. Large portraits of Osama used to be seen fluttering in the rallies of the Islamist parties. "Amra shobai Taliban, Bangla hobe Afghan" (We all are Taliban, Bangla will be Afghan) was a favourite slogan of their youth fronts. However, with the defeat and decline of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, the slogan lost its appeal.

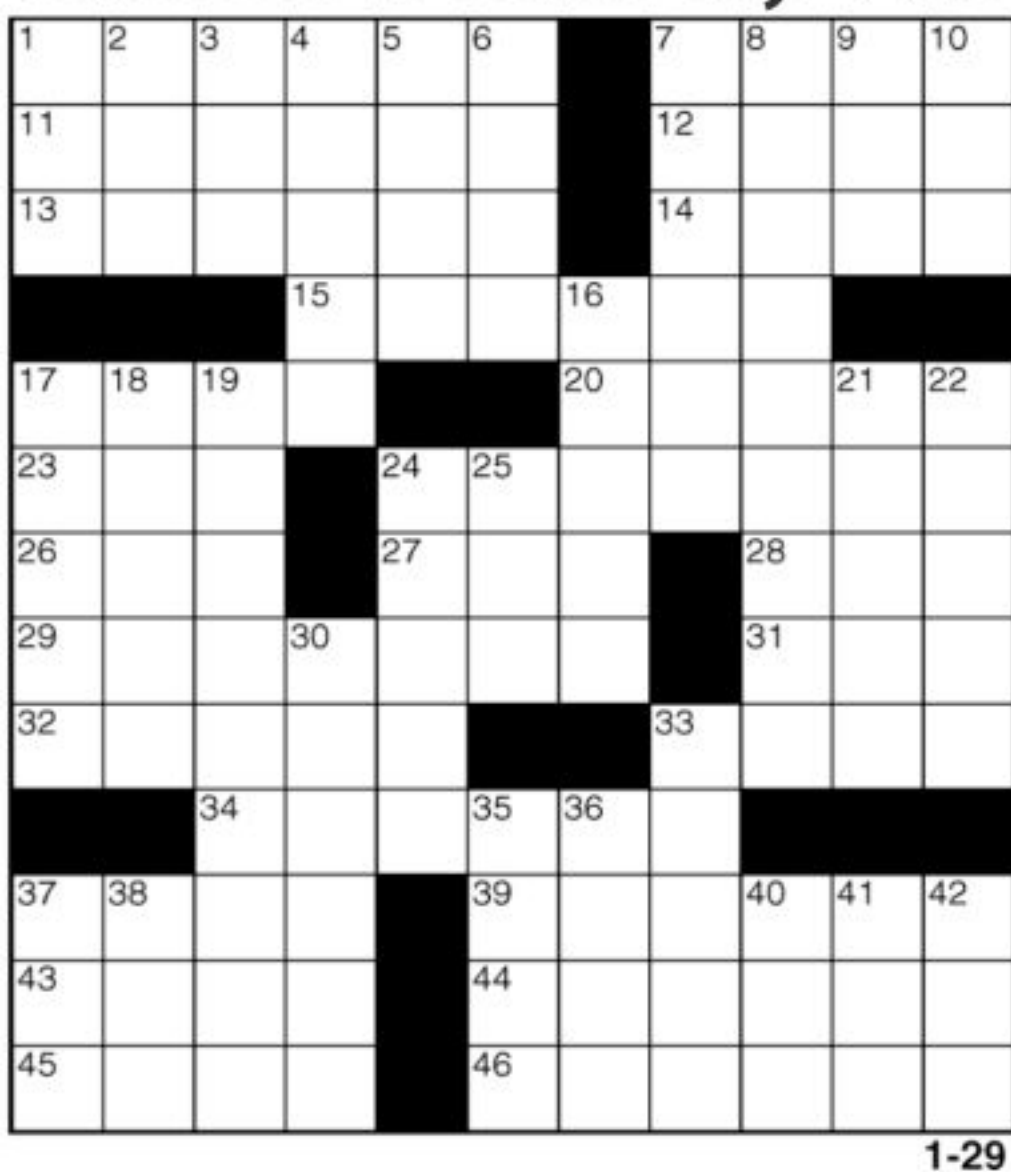
In the later part of the 1990s, we saw the rise of Islamic militant organisations such as HUJI (B) and JMB who had close links with al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Their rise and eventual fall is all part of the current history that is still fresh in our mind. While those two organisations are in limbo, we have seen new organisations such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir and Ansar-ul-Islam Bangla Team -- both claiming to be pan-Islamic in their character. Jamaat-e-Islam (JI), the most well-organised Islamist party in Bangladesh, and its student front Islami Chattra Shibir avowedly do not believe in terror as a weapon of politics, yet in the recent anti-government protests across the country JI and Shibir carried out the most violent attacks, often targeting innocent bystanders. In the post-election communal incidents too, JI and Shibir activists were often cited by the victims as the perpetrators.

The dramatic rise of Hefajat-e-Islam and their march to Dhaka on May 5 last year was another eye opener for us of the gathering strength of the Islamist forces. Since then Hefajat, an organisation of the students and teachers of Qawmi madrasas in the country, has shown its power in all local elections and has been recognised as a force to be reckoned with. Hefajat's 13-point demand appears almost identical to the demands of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). TTP has grown so powerful that the central government in Islamabad is forced to negotiate with it while it continues its attack on Pakistani military and civilian targets. We only pray that we do not end up in a similar mess.

Those of us who dream of a democratic state, a multi-religious, multi-cultural society, an educated, healthy and prosperous nation, the Zawahiri message, even if it is a hoax, is a stark reminder that we have an enemy at the gate, and only together we can defeat it. We as a nation need to close ranks on the minimum agenda, and on the question of fighting religious extremism there is no other option but a national consensus.

The writer is a retired Air Commodore and a security analyst.

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph



Yesterday's answer

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Seize opportunity to put national train back on track

AHMED A. AZAD

FOR over a year the people of Bangladesh have been held to ransom through relentless political violence centring on the type of election-time government and the trial of indicted war criminals. Most Bangladeshis had hoped that the two warring camps would reach a last-minute compromise that would result in a fair and inclusive parliamentary election. However, that collective hope never materialised.

The recently concluded election may have constitutional legality but its acceptability and credibility remain questionable as most registered political parties stayed away, the electors in 153 out of 300 constituencies were denied the constitutional right to vote, and the contrived loyal opposition is a joke at the people's expense. To avoid further disruption to daily life and economy it would be advisable if the AL, instead of viewing the hollow victory as a mandate to rule unhindered till the end of January 2019, chose in the national interest to use whatever time is available before the next election to work with all pro-Bangladesh parties to bring an end to fundamentalist militancy and resolve outstanding governance and political issues that affect peace and development.

The temporary respite from relentless violence and disruption to daily life since the January 5 parliamentary election has delivered welcome relief to the long suffering populace and provided both the major political camps some time to reflect on their future course of action. The government should not be lulled into complacency as the two issues, namely the trial of war criminals and an acceptable election-time government, that ignited the country before the election still continue to simmer. In the 2008 election the AL received a clear mandate for instituting the International War Crimes Tribunals for trying those who com-

mitted crimes against humanity during the Liberation War in 1971; the incumbent government still retains overwhelming support on the issue and has an obligation to expeditiously bring the proceedings to a successful conclusion.

Seizing power or retaining it by any means has been the main reason behind most pre-election violence since the return to democracy in 1991 as there are huge rewards for the victor and dire consequences for the losing side. It would have been nice if the AL had heeded the court's observations and retained the CTG system for the next two elections, but besides the court ruling it illegal the system is also inherently biased against any incumbent government and favours the opposition. That is the reason why both major parties champion it when in opposition and try to override it when in government.

It is not the government but the Election Commission (EC) that is constitutionally mandated to conduct election, so the solution is in making the EC totally independent and powerful and to provide it with all administrative and operational support needed to conduct a fair and inclusive election. But keeping Bangladesh's history in mind, and to avoid the violence and political instability that precedes parliamentary elections, it may be necessary to also institute a system of elected interim government that is acceptable to all.

It will be a shining example of statesmanship if the incumbent government convenes a national meeting to reach consensus on a system of fair and inclusive election, and in deference to majority public opinion goes back to the polls as soon as practicable. However, such elections held every five years, no matter how peaceful, will be meaningless if democracy is not practiced in the intervening period. For achieving good governance the government itself can take the necessary measures to overhaul the administrative, security and

judicial systems to make them more responsive to the people, and provide independence and teeth to the watchdog organisations such as the ACC and HRC. However, a democracy that delivers can't be achieved without tackling the very problems that undermine it.

After 42 years of independence the poorer segment of the population (30%) still remain the most disadvantaged. Ethnic and religious minority communities have been reduced to the status of second-class citizens. Politics and parliament have been hijacked by businessmen. The parliament and local governments are non-functional. Instead of grooming future leaders the major political parties have relied on their student and youth fronts for muscle power and in return allowed them free reign to engage in corrupt and criminal activities for personal gain. These shortcomings arise from pervasive corruption and greed that has eaten into the moral fabric of our society as a direct consequence of the loss of our ideological bearings. So the base line for any comprehensive solution should be the true restoration of the 1972 constitution and renewing and strengthening the four pillars of our nationhood that are enshrined therein.

The government and the opposition will earn the gratitude of the people, if for once they set aside their partisan differences and use this opportunity to sit around the table with all other pro-Bangladeshi political parties and representatives of all segments of society to find an acceptable election formula that is immune to regime change; and to discuss, debate and find common ground for solving the above problems to ensure the democratic, social and economic rights guaranteed in the 1972 Constitution.

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Empowerment of upazila parishads is the key challenge

FARID HOSSAIN

IT'S again the Awami League vs. the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The multi-phase upazila elections that began on Wednesday are supposed to be non-partisan if the relevant laws are followed. But the ruling AL and the main opposition BNP have turned the polls into a platform, bringing into play their bitter rivalry. They could not care less about the laws and rules thanks to the weakness of the institutions, such as the Election Commission, which are tasked to deal with the violation of law or code of conduct.

The EC has ignored the involvement of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and opposition leader Khaleda Zia in the local government elections. Both leaders have asked their parties to make sure that no rebel candidates challenge the candidates they select, especially for the office of upazila chairman, a key attraction of the vote. Barring the use of the election symbols of the two parties, Boat in case of AL and Sheaf of Paddy in case of BNP, and direct nomination, both the parties are in the campaign for their candidates. The threats of expulsion (in some case local party units actually have done so) against the rebel candidates coming from the top level have not worked well. But such threats have created an atmosphere of intimidation, hampering the campaign by the so-called rebels.

BNP central leaders have gone to the extent of lodging official complaints accusing the government and the ruling party of resorting to irregularities and intimidation to scare the BNP-backed candidates off the race. The response from the government has been the routine denial.

However, independent analysts and

observers have alleged too much interference by local MPs in the election process, ranging from picking the candidates to alleged vote rigging. They are also upset that the EC has ignored the violation of election codes by the major political parties.

On the first day, 97 upazilas went to the polls in which over 1.64 crore voters are eligible to choose from among 432 candidates vying to become chairmen, 513 seeking to become vice-chairmen and 329 fighting for the offices of the female vice-chairmen. The five-phase elections will end in March.

The local government vote should be seen in the context of the January 5 general election that was marred by an opposition boycott and widespread violence. Main opposition BNP is taking part (unofficially though) in the upazila polls injecting an element of high interest among the voters. The opposition's participation and the local issues are expected to produce a significant turn-out of voters, surely much bigger than what the nation had witnessed in the January polls. So, the turnout will not be an issue in the polls. A good turnout, however, will be a boost to the morale of the EC which is still smarting from the highly disrupted 10th Parliamentary election. The voting is also expected to be peaceful, even though BNP already has a host of allegations against the ruling party, accusing many AL-backed candidates and their supporters of seizing polling stations and throwing agents of BNP-backed candidates out of the centres.

The key question, however, lies elsewhere. What do the upazila elections mean to the AL and BNP and the future of democracy, hamstrung by the recent political turmoil?

Is it going to help bring the two main

political rivals closer to a dialogue to end the debate over the January general election and lead to a decision to hold a new general election sooner than later? What happens if BNP-backed candidates sweep the polls? Will that be seen as a formal rejection of January polls and the new government it has produced?

It is unlikely that the results of the upazila polls will have any big impact on the national issues such as a new election which will be inclusive and credible as it demanded by the BNP. In case the AL-backed candidates win most seats, this should not be seen as an approval of the new government and its policies. That is because local issues and the candidates largely dominate the local government elections rather than the national political issues. So, should BNP do better than AL, the opposition should not misread the outcome as endorsement of its key demand: the resignation of the government to pave the way for holding a new election supervised by a non-partisan caretaker administration. An AL win should not also be seen as a rejection of the opposition.

Instead, the political parties, especially the government, should focus on how to make the upazila parishads effective local government bodies allowing them to exercise the powers they have. MPs should stop meddling into the affairs of the upazila parishads allowing the bodies to operate independently.

Empowered local government institutions are the key to making democracy strong and meaningful to the rural people. It's a big challenge for the political establishments too.

The writer is former Bureau Chief of AP Bangladesh.

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