

Latif's highly outrageous remarks

He must face the consequence

THE reckless and irresponsible comments that the Post, Telecommunication and Information Technology Minister Abdul Latif Siddiqui made in New York on Sunday have grievously hurt sentiments of the Muslims involve as they did some basic tenets of Islam. He has previous record of getting away after making many remarks that would have caused revulsion. But given the enormity of the outrage he has committed this time through his irreverent utterances in a foreign land, the government should deal with his indiscretions with an iron hand.

A high level committee of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) in its report had disclosed how during his previous stint as the textile and jute minister between 2009 and 2013 he abused his power with abandon in disinvesting some 48 state-owned enterprises (SoEs) in a non-transparent manner. It is equally important that he is held to account for those reported acts. One wonders how a man with such track record could be included in the cabinet second time. How could the government tolerate his improprieties for so long?

There are some strong indications of his dismissal from the cabinet. We suggest he be removed immediately followed by legal proceedings drawn against him for what amounts to hurting religious sentiments. At the same time, he must apologise to the public.

It is worth pointing out that there are some other ministers who make comments that are utterly unbecoming of the positions they hold.

Actually, Latif's case brings to the fore the question of choice of ministers and the liberty they are often given to conduct themselves the way they pleased.

Old-age predicaments

Provide systematic support to the elderly

A global index released on occasion of International Day of Old Persons has ranked us higher than India, Nepal and Pakistan for the level of well-being of older people. However, our ranking as 59th among 90 countries as well as the reality on the ground suggests that we have a long way to go before we can ensure our elderly population economic security, health benefits and other necessary safety nets.

As economic compulsion and changing family structures lead to breakdowns in traditional family structures, more elderly are left to fend for themselves. Although some positive steps have been taken by the government over the years to provide support, such as the Old Age Allowance Programme or Widow's Allowance Scheme, they fail to reach a majority of the elderly who are in dire need of these social safety nets. There is still a dearth of old age homes for the elderly, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The situation is especially grave for invalid or bed-ridden citizens as there are no government or NGO-run facilities in the country that provide them any assistance. Given that the pension system only covers public servants and leaves out the vast majority of workers in the agricultural and informal sector, how are these vulnerable citizens expected to survive once they become bed-ridden? Under these dire circumstances, the government must allocate more resources towards providing systemic assistance to the elderly who, by 2025, are projected to constitute 9 per cent of the total population.

Fighting the fires they lit

EDITORIAL: THE HINDU (INDIA)

ARMED with an overwhelming parliamentary endorsement, the British government has joined the United States-led coalition of countries that have been conducting aerial bombings of regions in Syria and Iraq under the control of the Islamic State (IS). The territorial expansion of the regime in Iraq appears to have been halted, at least for the present. Last August the very same Parliament had roundly rejected Prime Minister David Cameron's proposal that Britain intervene militarily in Syria in retaliation for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's alleged use of chemical weapons against anti-government Syrian forces. Clearly, much has changed in the space of a year. The frenetic growth of the latest and most fierce avatar of jihadist terrorism in the Iraq-Syria region, the rapid export of its ideology to the young and disaffected in Britain and Europe who are joining its fighting forces in droves, the barbaric forms of punishment it employs against its critics, and its access to staggering financial resources -- through oil from captured oilfields, and even the plunder and sale of a vast reservoir of antiquities in northern Syria -- has given it a presence and strength that poses a direct threat to the region and beyond. Indeed, the protection of the United Kingdom from IS-sponsored acts of terrorism topped the list of reasons Mr. Cameron advanced in his speech to Parliament in justification of British air strikes against IS bases in Iraq. Crafted to win the support of the Labour opposition, the carefully worded motion seeking approval for armed intervention promises that British aircraft will not bomb Syria, and there will be no British "boots on the ground."

Of a well-considered military plan, a mission-aim, a pullout strategy and a timeframe there was little evidence in Mr. Cameron's speech; even less so the signs of any political and diplomatic vision of positive intervention. The brutal instances of beheading by IS activists of western journalists and aid workers captured on video and circulated on social media might well turn out to have been a bait by IS to draw the West into a war which in turn could feed an even more virulent brand of jihadism. However, Version 2014 of the Iraq story is an outcrop of Version 2003, when the western alliance declared war against Iraq on the concocted premise of the presence of weapons of mass destruction, destroying a once-prosperous society. This fanned sectarian and religious divides in the country, and created a bubbling groundswell of popular hatred of western governments. Today the same military alliance is struggling to douse the fires that it set 11 years ago -- and it may end up stoking them.

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

Any civilised person would find it below his or her dignity to comment on those remarks which could only have emanated from a demented mind. But even at the risk of lending oneself the ignominy of commenting on the garbage that spewed from the mouth of the said minister one cannot allow such things to go un-commented.

Latif Siddiqui made abrasive comments on several matters that included religion, specifically on an important article of faith of the Muslims. But it is not only the contents of the remarks only but also the crass and asinine choice of words he preferred to express his views with, proves how true is the saying that if someone's deeds lower his position, his pedigree cannot elevate it.

The minister is known for his arrogant, imperious and haughty deportment. His latest outburst, this is not the first time he has commented on sensitive issues or treated his audience with contempt and derision, is perhaps because he had gotten away with similar acts in the past. He had once made derogatory remarks about the Speaker of the Jatiyo Sangsad, and in a most outrageous outburst he had said that all those opposition members calling for hartal should be put down. In a civilised society there cannot be more provocative comments than to call upon one to kill another. Not pulling him up, let alone disciplining him then, gave one the impression that the party leadership actually conformed to his views.

The way he doled out public land as a minister and even exempted people from paying their due interest on loans, which was not his remit, shows that he considered his ministry his own fiefdom and those under him his ten-

C.R. ABRAR

QUITE predictably, the 2014 national census of Myanmar has come back to haunt the ethnic Rohingyas. Media reports inform that the Myanmarese government has devised a new plan under which members of the Rohingya community would be given the thorny choice: accept ethnic reclassification and the prospect of citizenship or be detained. Under the new arrangement the community members would be required to identify themselves as 'Bengalis' (and not as 'Rohingyas') or face detention. Plans are underway to "construct temporary camps in required numbers for those who refuse to be registered and those without adequate documents."

The new decree is being proposed at a time when most of Myanmar's 1.3 million Rohingya population, particularly those in western Arakan, has been living in what has been described as "apartheid-like" condition. In 2012, the community experienced serious clashes with the Rakhine Buddhists that led to death of 280 people and displacement of 140,000. It is only in early September this year that the two-year old curfew was lifted.

In most likelihood the plan has been mooted to offset international pressure "to promote peaceful co-existence and prevent sectarian tension and conflict" and to address the situation of statelessness through a citizenship verification programme and promote economic development. But these lofty goals do not appear to have takers in the Rohingya community nor among the rights activists. They feel that it could place thousands of Rohingyas, including those living in long-settled villages, at risk of "indefinite detention."

Although the bait of citizenship has been tagged with the offer of reclassification as Bengalis, the Rakhine state officials are already on record clarifying that restriction on many of their freedoms, including that on movement, would persist. There is widespread apprehension that registration "as Bengali" would make them vulnerable should the Myanmar authorities decide to send them to Bangladesh as being illegal immigrants.

During the last census most of the community members refused to register as "Bengalis" as the term was synonymous with illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. International agencies such as the UNFPA and bilateral donors provided support in conducting the 2014 census. Despite prior warnings from various quarters that incorporation of ethnic and religious issues in the exercise was likely to exacerbate existing communal tensions, the agencies went ahead with the census as they were convinced of the need for such information.

The census based the counting of population on 135 officially recognised ethnic groups that has been deemed by critics as "outdated and inaccurate." The Rohingya community, dubbed by the United Nations as one of the most persecuted minorities of the world, was not included in the list. The government promised the international sponsors that everyone would be allowed to self-identify their ethnicity. But only a day before the census, not surprisingly, the Myanmar government prohibited respondents from identifying themselves as Rohingyas. Those who did were excluded from the count.

The situation warranted the UN to issue a statement. The statement noted that "in its agreement with the United Nations ... the (Myanmarese) government made a commitment to conduct the exercise in accordance with international census standards and human rights principles... It explicitly agreed with the condition that each person would be able to declare what ethnicity they belong to. ... Those not identifying with one of the listed ethnic categories would be able to declare their ethnicity and have their response recorded by enumerators." In a rare move, the UN agency expressed its concern about the government reneging on its pledge, saying it could heighten tensions in Arakan state and undermine the credibility of the data collected.

You are out of order Mr. Minister

LATIF Siddiqui is completely out of order and the prime minister has done the only thing she could in respect of the errant minister. However, he is yet to be shown the door finally. It will be done soon we hope which would assuage the raw nerves created by the inane comments of the posts, telecommunications and IT minister made in New York.

Any civilised person would find it below his or her dignity to comment on those remarks which could only have emanated from a demented mind. But even

ants. And he had gotten away with that too.

This time he has gone too far with his snide comments. One could not care less about his religious beliefs or inclinations, and he is entitled to his own opinion about the institutions of Islam, or for that matter any religion, but he must understand that demeaning a religion or hurting the sentiments of Muslims, or for that matter any religion, does not fall under the category of free speech. And he has made the comment at such a time when the international community, Bangladesh in particular, is having to combat the menace of Islamic extremists who justify their extremist, and indeed un-Islamic, actions on exactly the behaviour and utterances like that of Latif Siddiqui's.

Wise men had said that it is better to keep your mouth shut and let people think you are a fool than to open it and remove all doubts. And the Holy Bible says that even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue. And Hazrat Ali (RA) is known to have said that a fool's mind is at the mercy of his tongue and a wise man's tongue is under the control of his mind. Unfortunately, Latif Siddiqui has removed all doubts, and by speaking once too often has exposed a lack of even the rudimentary idea of Islam and its institutions.

We feel that the minister deserves much more than the sack. He is unapologetic and continues to hold on to his belief. He is entitled to his beliefs but if that happens to disavow one of the fundamentals of ones faith then there is a problem which, with even the cover of freedom of speech, is made to look like a figleaf.

However, there are a few things that we must comprehend. The IT minister is not the only loose cannon in the party. There are a few others who, with their undignified mannerism and utterances in public, have brought bad name to not only the party but also to the office they hold. And it is for the prime minister to decide how to deal with them. It would also be a lesson, we hope, for those in high office not to indulge in loose talks that will inflict more than a personal discomfort.

Secondly, while the reactions and criticisms against the errant minister are justified and so are calls for the most severe actions against him, and nobody should see 'politics' in it, what, however, is certainly not acceptable is that the situation should be exploited to create unrest in the country.

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Ethnic cleansing of Rohingyas

The Myanmarese government's latest plan needs to be viewed in the situation now prevailing in Arakan. The Rakhine Social Network (RSN), a coalition of Rakhine activist organisations and the newly formed Arakan National Party (ANP), are currently engaged in a virulent anti-Rohingya campaign. Implicit in their agenda is "to isolate the Rohingya population and drive them out from what the Rakhines regard as their homeland." Even moderate Rakhine leaders endorse the "apartheid-like conditions" that the Rohingyas have been subjected to and the "continuation of abuses" that, according to Arakan watchers, "amount to crimes against humanity." While independent monitors and UN officials have raised alarm about the treatment meted out to the Rohingyas, the Myanmarese and the Rakhine state governments claim that the displaced Rohingyas live more comfortable lives in the camps than before the violence.

The Rakhine chauvinist leaders are on record that they favour giving citizenship rights to about 200,000 Rohingyas (less than 20% of the current Rohingya population in Arakan) and forcibly removing the rest to the proposed "detention camps" where they would be held in perpetuity pending settlement in third countries. The goal of such an exercise is to check the "demographic invasion" of the Rohingyas in Arakan, they reason.

In a situation where the state has abdicated its responsibility to protect the ethnic Rohingyas it is the international NGOs (INGO) such as the Medecins Sans Frontieres-Holland (MSF-H) who are playing a critical role in providing basic services to the members of the community in Arakan. These INGOs have also been targeted by the Rakhine organisations. Since last year the aid workers began receiving anonymous death threats and landlords began turning away humanitarian agencies. In February 2013, the MSF-H office was closed down in view of mass protests for being biased against the Rakhines. In reality, the organisation was penalised for treating those who were wounded during the communal riots in January, an event that the government denied ever occurred.

In March that year another organisation Malteser International's office premises and UN warehouses in the state capital Sittwe were attacked and ransacked over a rumour that a Buddhist flag was desecrated. The situation forced aid workers to evacuate the region. It resulted in denial of access to crucial health care services to more than half a million Rohingyas in camps and villages in the vicinity.

In March 2014 a new body, the Emergency Coordination Centre (ECC), was created to oversee the work of the foreign aid agencies. Members of the RSN dominate the committee. The Rakhine leaders who agitated against the foreign aid agencies in the aftermath of the March 2012 violence have now been given the responsibility to monitor the work of INGOs so that they did not favour the Rohingyas. The level of Rakhine contempt against the aid agencies is reflected in the following statement by Than Tun, a state ECC member and RSN patron: "Speaking as a Rakhine, if I were to put bluntly, if all UN agencies and international NGOs were to leave Rakhine, it would go half way to resolving the conflict in Rakhine state" (Reuters: June 18, 2014). According to UNHCR, 86,000 Rohingyas have fled Burma since 2012 to escape persecution.

Thus, one may conclude that while western countries and corporations are competing with China and each other in carving out their own niches in the vast reservoir of Myanmar resources and when Myanmar is being embraced in the comity of nations for its incremental advances in restoration of democracy, the Myanmar state has remained on course to cleanse the Rohingyas from Arakan. This move of the Myanmar authorities is not only an abdication of their responsibility to protect, but constitutes crime against humanity. History will not absolve the perpetrators and the abettors of this heinous crime.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Save tiger, scrap plan for power plant

While addressing the inaugural ceremony of the three-day 2nd Global Tiger Stocktaking Conference 2014, held at Sonargaon Hotel on September 13, PM Sheikh Hasina urged the world leaders to save tigers in order to save nature. She rightly said that tigers save the Sundarbans and the Sundarbans save Bangladesh.



PHOTO: AFP

But it is her government that is going to build Rampal Power Plant near the Sundarbans. If this government cares so much about Sundarbans, they should not build this coal-based thermal power plant near Sundarbans.

Md. Tofazzel Hossain
Kushtia

Online shopping

Although the concept of online shopping is new in Bangladesh, it is getting popular day by day. People who remain busy all day long can easily do their Eid shopping online. It has also created opportunities for young entrepreneurs to run their business with little capital. Thanks to technology! Murad Hossain
Shamoli, Dhaka

Community development thru' tourism

27 September is the World Tourism Day. Bangladesh is a land of natural beauty which attracts both domestic and international tourists. The country has excellent tourist spots which include enchanting sea beaches, serene lakes, deep forests and wild life, archaeological sites and historical monuments, mosques and shrines, temples, churches, pagodas etc. According to World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the direct contribution of travel and tourism to GDP was 2.1 percent in 2014. "Tourism and Community Development" is the slogan of UNWTO in 2014 to promote and develop local communities through involving them in tourism activities.

Misbah Uddin Sumon
Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management
University of Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Talks have to be with BNP," published on September 28, 2014

Genuine Musafeer

Continuous non-cooperative, hostile and aggressive statements against each other will ultimately breed more violence.

Sayed Rahman

People of our country do not expect much from the political parties. If any political party can keep the essentials' price under control and ensure economic stability, then people will support that party.

Salim Uddin

It is unfortunate for Bangladeshi voters that they could not cast their votes in the last election. Their voting rights have been denied. Now the country has become a playground for nasty politics. Both parties have failed to fulfil people's expectations.

S. M. Iftexhar Ahmed

How unfortunate are the people of Bangladesh that they have to choose between AL and BNP. Both parties are being run by leaders who are totally unfit to rule. BNP's stubborn alliance with a controversial party like Jamaat makes them no better.

"Innovative way of cheating in exams!" (September 28, 2014)

Nantughotok

It is sad and discouraging that teachers are involved in this criminal activity. If crime is encouraged from the highest level, then it is normal that the poor teachers should be making profit in their little capacity.

"Tk 2 crore heist" (September 28, 2014)

Sayed Rahman

Looting in such a way is not new in our country. Is there a way to keep money safe?