

Attack on Charlie Hebdo and freedom of speech

MAHMOOD HASAN

FRANCE is in mourning. On January 7, two masked men entered the office of *Charlie Hebdo* in central Paris and killed 10 journalists and two policemen. A manhunt is underway to arrest the suspects. President Francois Hollande declared a day of mourning on January 8 and stood in silence for two minutes at the Police Headquarters along with the rest of the country in respect for the dead.

Charlie Hebdo is a satirical cartoon magazine published every Wednesday. It is a contemptuous, disrespectful and a non-conformist left-leaning weekly lampooning politicians, politics, religion, culture, society etc. The publication is named after the cartoon strip *Peanuts*' lead character Charlie Brown. Hebdo in French means 'week.'

The attack was carried out by two 'jihadists' in revenge for ridiculing Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). To recall, in September 2005 Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published cartoons of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) depicting him in the most disrespectful manner. The incident led to widespread protests around the world including violent demonstrations in most Muslim

countries. Denmark had to withdraw diplomats and close its embassies in many countries at that time.

In 2007, *Charlie Hebdo* reprinted the cartoons of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The magazine was sued for incitement of racism by two Islamic groups in France, but was cleared by a Paris Court. Editor-in-Chief cartoonist Stephane Charbonnier insisted that the cartoons of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) were no provocation -- but a signal that free speech was alive and well in the country. In 2011, the weekly published cartoons inviting the Prophet (pbuh) to be its guest editor. Again, in 2012, it published more caricatures of the Prophet (pbuh). Charbonnier said in 2012: "Muhammad isn't sacred to me. I don't blame Muslims for not laughing at our drawings. I live under French law. I don't live under Quranic law. Freedom of press, is that a provocation?"

Indeed, that was a direct provocation of an audacious nature -- which seriously hurt the sentiments of Muslims in France and elsewhere. Not to forget that over 10% of the population of France are Muslims. Charbonnier, who was under threat of attack, was given police protection. The assault on the magazine office killed Charbonnier.

William Donohue, President of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil rights in the United States commented: "It is too bad that he (Charbonnier) didn't understand the role he played.... Had he not been so narcissistic, he may still be alive.... Liberty may be endangered by the abuse of liberty as well as the abuses of power."

Muslims practice aniconism -- opposition to the use of idols or images in Islam. The person of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is extremely sensitive because the traditional view is that he cannot be depicted pictorially, let alone in a satirical manner. To all Muslims such sacrilege of the Prophet (pbuh) in the name of freedom of speech/press is nothing but a crude and lowly attempt to denigrate Islam. The Western media has time and again used the Holy Koran and the name Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to provoke Muslims.

The incident has left France traumatised. Leaders from around the world have condemned the attack. In a demonstration of solidarity with *Charlie Hebdo*, citizens gathered in Central Paris holding banners "Je suis Charlie" -- I am Charlie. People raised hands holding pencils -- a sign that "the pen is mightier than the sword (read gun)." For

the French it is unbelievable that the magazine could come under attack for mocking Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and Islam. The government considers the incident as an attack on the Republic.

The attack will have several ramifications in France in particular and Europe in general. The poor Muslim immigrants in France -- mostly from North Africa and the Levant -- will be further ostracised. They will certainly face severe discrimination and hatred. The far-right nationalist political parties, which are on the rise in France, will mount strong anti-immigrant campaigns. There have already been attacks on three mosques in Paris. The secular French society will be further polarised as Islamophobia increases. The ease with which the attack was conducted will encourage jihadi Muslims to plan more attacks on French installations.

In Europe in general, which has high unemployment and is going through severe economic difficulties, the anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiments will be further accentuated. There have already been anti-Muslim demonstrations in Germany, Sweden and other capitals. Far-right political parties in these countries are gaining in popularity.

The issue here is where to draw the line when it comes to freedom of press. Does the principle of secularism and freedom of speech allow a magazine to print cartoons/pictures that hurt the sentiments of a major religion, knowing well that it may provoke violence? Isn't self-restraint and discretion in such matters a wiser policy? Freedom comes with responsibilities. More the freedom, more the responsibility. One must not abuse the freedom to the extent that it may disrupt social harmony.

After the attack, some have suggested that Muslims could have rebutted with the 'pen' and not 'gun.' Did they mean that Muslims also start drawing caricatures of Christ or Moses using freedom of speech? These twisted arguments do not condone the sacrilege committed against Islam. To the jihadi Muslims the publication of the cartoons was a kind of declaration of war. To them it was not "freedom of speech." The jihadists responded in the language of war.

While we condemn the irreverent pictures/cartoons of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) by any news media, we unequivocally condemn the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*.

The writer is a former Ambassador and Secretary.

Blockade hurts the economy

Both Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia must think for a moment how much they have gained by their ego-driven political decisions.



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

liamentary polls. People's perception is that if the government had allowed the BNP to hold the meeting at Gazipur without creating any hindrance, things would not have come to such a sad pass.

Despite the fact that BNP does not have a clean past and its alliance with anti-liberation forces allowed the radical and extremist forces to rise and create instability and communal clashes in the country, the AL-led government must admit that every citizen has a right to express his/ her views peacefully. If the government claims that it has introduced multi-party democracy in the country

NP Chairperson Khaleda Zia's announcement on January 5 evening, of total blockade of roads, railways and waterways, was not unpredictable or surprising. She made this disclosure in presence of the media after the government confined her in BNP's Gulshan office and stopped her and her party allies from going to the party central office at Nayapaltan to hold rallies denouncing the last par-

in letter and spirit, then under no pretext can it lock up an opposition party office.

No doubt, Tareque Zia's inflammatory remarks about Bangabandhu stoked fire and anger in the rank and file of the citizenry who saw Bangabandhu in his youthful days fighting with fiery zeal for the liberation of the country. No mature and sensible political leader in the country, either in AL or any other party, has any reason to listen to such remarks about Bangabandhu made by any hyperactive leader staying far away from the country for years. Bangabandhu has a place in history that nobody can scratch out by making caustic comments about him. Many of these leaders who are maligning Bangabandhu were not even born when he stood firm against the tyrannical rule of Pakistani military dictatorship.

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia's call for blockade for indefinite period has caused serious disruption in people's lives and movement across the country. This will play havoc with the export-oriented industries as there is no alternative way of carrying goods to ports for shipment out of the country. Business activities suffered a severe blow during the last three days of blockade as people remained indoors for fear of violence and shortage of transport. This means that the readymade garments (RMG) industry will be badly hit. Similarly, imported goods from the seaports as well as goods

from land ports across India-Bangladesh border cannot be transported to the markets inside the country. This will cause the prices of essentials to soar. Khaleda Zia and her allies should know how much the common people will be hit by this blockade. With inter-district transport off the roads, many desperately sick patients from outlying districts who need better treatment in hospitals at Dhaka can't get to Dhaka and other places in the country, and may eventually die without treatment.

With 7 persons killed so far in clashes between AL and BNP and in police firing, political fever in the country is heating up again. Apprehension, despondency and despair hang over the country as people ponder over the difficulties and hardship they have to undergo in the days to come because of the crippled state of business and transportation. The only thing they want is that they must not be subjected to such ordeals that directly affect their lives and living.

The AL government, although it came to power in an almost voter-less election, has to be more cautious and must try to garner people's support through good governance and fulfilling the pledges they made to the people. And the first step in that direction is to eliminate corruption from all spheres of national life and root out rampant terrorism.

There is need for political reconciliation, and

that can come about only when BNP severs its connection with Jamaat. In a bid to reach that conciliation, both AL and BNP must refrain from distorting the history of the Liberation War or making any incendiary remarks about liberation war heroes and about each other. The present tough stance taken by the two main political parties will only contribute to prolonging the unforeseen ordeals for the citizens. We shudder to think of the disaster that the country is heading for, if there are more blockades, more *hartals* and continued violence.

Both Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia must think for a moment how much they have gained by their ego-driven political decisions. The indiscreet actions of BNP and its allies, and the government's arrogance and highhandedness, have only heightened the crisis.

With all the upheavals that people witnessed during the last few years, they want to see the emergence of charismatic leadership in this critical period when there is shortage of everything other than greed and violence. The leaders people are looking for must try and win political allies, seek consensus and avoid vendetta. There has to be a change of governance and style.

The writer is a columnist of *The Daily Star*. E-mail: aukhandk@gmail.com

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