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Rise of hate speech in India

Stern official action needed to prevent it

WE'RE concerned by some recent developments in India relating to hate speech and anti-Muslim rhetoric pushed by Hindu nationalist elements. Last week, a now-expelled spokesperson for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) made offensive comments about the Prophet Muhammad. The remarks—made during a televised debate and then supported through a now-deleted tweet by another leader—landed the party in trouble by causing huge backlash from Muslim nations. So far, at least 15 countries, including close Indian allies, reportedly lodged official protests and demanded an apology from the government. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) also condemned the comments, which it said came “in the context of intensifying hatred and abuse toward Islam in India and systematic practices against Muslims.”

One may recall that some months ago, in a meeting of religious leaders at Haridwar, Uttarakhand, most vicious anti-Muslim sentiments were expressed in the most hateful language. Under any other circumstances, police would have made arrests or taken some legal action for trying to disturb peace and social harmony. But this was brushed aside as the views of “fringe groups”.

This whole situation, from our perspective, is highly disturbing, to say the least. As a neighbour and friend, we expect nothing but peace and stability in India, and hope that everything will be done to ensure that. While the government of Bangladesh has made no official comments about the recent development that caused the diplomatic storm in India, people, however, were disturbed by what they saw as a continuation of anti-Muslim comments and violence that are threatening peace.

It is, therefore, vital that the authorities in India, as in Bangladesh, remain careful about the profound and destabilising effects of communal politics. We have seen how hate speech and intolerance for religious diversity have often been promoted to serve vested interests. In India, Hindu nationalist forces have for decades pursued a particularly divisive agenda. The latest incident should, therefore, bring in greater awareness among Indian policymakers of the need to consciously undo the damage of that toxic tendency. They must stay vigilant so that no hate speech or crime is ever tolerated again. We also feel that sterner action by the government is called for to stop the spread of hate speech against the Muslim community. Only that can guarantee lasting peace in the country and the region.

Why waste so much money in the name of capacity charge?

That's not the way to go if we want to make power affordable to all

IT seems that the deal that Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) had signed with India's Adani Power back in 2016 is going to cost Bangladesh dearly—because we will not only have to pay a high price for the electricity produced by them using coal, but will also have to pay a high “capacity charge” to the company, even if we cannot use the electricity produced by them.

As per the agreement with Adani Power, it was supposed to supply 1,496 MW of electricity to Bangladesh for 25 years starting from December 2021. But now that the plant is all set to start its operation from August this year – after a six-month delay due to pandemic-induced disruptions – the BPDB is not ready to buy electricity from them because the Power Grid Company of Bangladesh (PGCB) has not been able to prepare the infrastructure needed to import it. The result is, the BPDB would have to pay a whopping Tk 1,219.1 crore in capacity charge for four months till December, by which time our transmission lines may be partially ready for import.

The question that naturally arises is: Why has the PGCB not been able to get the infrastructure ready within the stipulated time (December 2021)? A more pertinent question is: Why did the BPDB sign the deal with the Indian corporation in the first place, knowing that it would use costly coal to produce electricity? Why didn't they go for importing renewable energy which is not only environment-friendly but also low-cost and sustainable?

Reportedly, Bangladesh will have to pay more than Tk 1 lakh crore to the Adani coal power plant as a capacity charge over the 25 years. With this money, we could have built three Padma bridges, according to a study done by the Bangladesh Working Group on the External Debt and Growthwatch. Moreover, the power from Adani Godda will be 56.2 percent more expensive than other imported power, as the study has found.

At a time when the people of the country are struggling to meet their day-to-day expenses due to rising inflation and inequalities, such wastage of public money in the name of buying power is totally unacceptable. More so when the prime minister herself has urged people to take austerity measures to go through this tough time. While people will definitely do what they can to cope with the situation, the government should also make sure that public money is not wasted on projects that have long-term detrimental effects on our economy. It must ensure that the money is instead used to serve struggling citizens.

Why election 2023 needs to be different from the last two



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

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SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

ANALYSES of Bangladesh's last three elections would reveal the dark side of our politics, which to a large extent replicates practices marked by a policy of exclusiveness, keeping the major opposition party out of the fray, and creating a loyal opposition obligated to the ruling party. It is disheartening to see the ruling party, a political party with established credentials, replicate a highly undemocratic innovation of a military ruler of keeping a tamed opposition in parliament. In fact, in its turn, the Awami League has gone a step further and appointed a few of them as cabinet ministers.

The 12th parliamentary election is just round the corner, and Bangladesh has come under international radar in this regard. Our development partners, the UK and US in particular, have expressed their views on the type of elections they would like to see in 2023. The US ambassador did not mince words when he said that his country wanted to see a fair and “internationally” acceptable election in Bangladesh. It has also engaged the attention, and rightly so, of the ruling party.

Firstly, no election would be valid without the participation of the other major political party, the BNP. And here lies the problem. BNP is loath to participate in the next general election under the current government running the administration. And the Awami League would not have it any other way. It would not relinquish power before the expiry of its term. The respective positions expose the irony of the situation in which we see a reversal of the previously held positions of the two parties. Awami League, once a strident votary of a neutral caretaker system, no longer thinks it a good idea, and the BNP, which had initially opposed the idea, thinks that the only way a free and fair election could be ensured is by having a neutral body at the helm of the administration.

I believe both the ideas are fundamentally flawed. The most important point the two parties have missed is that neither the ruling party nor the administration under it runs the election. And it is not the caretaker government, if there is one, which would conduct the elections either. It is the Election Commission (EC) that organises and conducts the election with the support of the administration. So why these rigid positions?

Take the BNP's position, for example. Once bitten, twice shy, the BNP made



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An acceptable election depends on the Election Commission's ability to display its grit and resolve, exercise its writ, remain neutral, and be prompt to address complaints and proactive in detecting violations.

a blunder in 2014 but participated in the elections in 2018, only to burn its fingers. The 2018 election was an aberration that never was. It was an aberration that sapped the Election Commission's credibility and people's interest in politics. Therefore, the BNP is not remiss in thinking that with Awami League in power, a free and fair election is not

electronic voting machine (EVM)? Participatory elections do not necessarily mean a free and fair election. And we know that. Ultimately, it is the CEC and his commissioners who can make all the difference. An acceptable election depends on the Election Commission's ability to display its grit and resolve, exercise its writ, remain neutral,

possible. And none other than the former chief election commissioner (CEC) has very recently admitted that there are challenges in holding the polls under a party government. It would have been a great help had he spelt out what the challenges were that he had faced in his five years in office. It is a sad reflection on our system that while other democracies have elections with the incumbent in charge of the administration without anyone questioning its credibility, we need special dispensation to conduct our parliamentary elections. And this is only because the institutions and agencies in these countries work independently and possess enough spine to resist undue pressure. Thus, the gripe.

But why is the Awami League so unsure of itself as not to accept a neutral dispensation running the administration during the conduct of national elections? It had claimed in 2014, as it does now, that it was riding the crest of popularity with its many achievements. Thus, one may ask: Did it have to resort to the blatant measures and ploys to ensure victory in 2014 and 2018? If one would need a lantern to find BNP leaders during elections, as some Awami League leaders think, then why not relent on your position? The Padma Bridge is a purple patch of the Hasina administration, and should be a vote catcher for the party. So why the uncertainty? Why so many new ordinances to stifle free speech? Why equate the party with the state? Why root for a voting apparatus which has been discarded by most of the leading democracies in the world because of its susceptibility to tampering – the

and be prompt to address complaints and proactive in detecting violations – unlike the former CEC and his team, whose belated reaction to any complaint was its hallmark. The million-dollar question is: Can the new Election Commission absorb the pressure of the ruling party, prevent the government's direct and indirect influence in the election process, and provide a level playing field for everybody? Past experiences in general do not engender confidence in the system.

In the final analysis, there are more compelling reasons for the BNP to participate in the election, and for the Awami League to allow an acceptable, free, fair and participatory election without resorting to the means of the past two. For the BNP, it would not like to be in the political wilderness it has been in the last 10 years. In 2018, everything was done to ensure that the BNP did not get the second highest number of seats and become the major opposition in parliament. Certainly, it deserved to win more than the six seats it did the last time. As for the Awami League, its seriousness in making the next election participatory is demonstrated by the comments of senior party members, including the prime minister. There is a realisation in the ruling party that the kind of elections held in 2014 and 2018 would no longer wash. The next election has to be not only accepted nationally, but internationally too. The question is whether the two can reach an agreement that would include arrangements of holding the Jatiya Sangsad election, making it impervious to the ruling party's influence.

IPEF has something in it for Bangladesh



Shamsheer M Chowdhury, Bir Bikram, is a former foreign secretary of Bangladesh

SHAMSHER M CHOWDHURY

IT is now clear that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has thrown all post-Cold War calculations on global politics, geopolitics and the global economy, out the window. Along with severe disruptions in supply chains and the consequent cost surge, it has brought perceptions, and realities, of military security threats to the forefront.

As part of the fallout of the Ukraine war, countries like Finland and Sweden that had prided themselves for their historical neutrality from any institutionalised military alliances have signed up for joining Nato. Germany has committed itself to significantly raising its defence budget, with Japan very likely to follow suit. Clearly, its implications are not confined to Europe alone; the footprints are spread from the Global North to the South, from the West to the East.

While it is already evident that the aftershocks from the tectonic events in Europe will continue to reverberate round the world for the foreseeable future, for countries like Bangladesh, the economic fallout will bring forth multiple challenges – in fact, it already has.

Historically, Bangladesh has believed in the principle of safety in numbers, and for the right reasons. It is this that led Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, as prime minister, to take Bangladesh to the Commonwealth as early as February 1972, to the non-aligned group of nations a year later, and to the OIC in 1974, the same year that Bangladesh proudly entered the United Nations as a full

member. Promoting multilateralism through regional, subregional and transregional cooperation has been a motto for Bangladesh throughout its existence as a nation-state. It conceived the formation of Saarc in South Asia, and has been a founding member of Bimstec, a coupling of parts of South and Southeast Asia together. And has also been an active member of other such initiatives.

Regional and multiregional economic cooperation mechanisms are always a work in progress; they are a process, not an event. More often than not, outside factors make it necessary for course reset and a readiness to adapt to shifting regional and global factors. The war in Ukraine is one such factor.

Located strategically as it is on the top of the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh is connected to the mighty Indian Ocean and, by extension, the Pacific. Economic cooperation in the vast maritime waters, therefore, is a logical choice for us. The recently announced concept of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) can be one such choice.

As the very name suggests, the proposed IPEF is an economic forum that is expected to stand on four main pillars: economic connectivity, economic resilience, clean economy, and just economy. It is an important step towards trying to evolve a rules-based trading order that is inclusive and open to all the member states in the region.

Understandably, some have highlighted the IPEF as a Quad-plus initiative, simply because its launch was timed with the recent summit of Quad members in Tokyo. IPEF, however, needs to be viewed from a distinct perspective – as being tangentially unique from Quad itself. While initiatives like Quad and even the AUKUS, in recent times, have been looked at more from the perspective

of enhancing security-driven aspects, the IPEF brings in a clear economic dimension that makes it relevant to the Indian and the Pacific Ocean and the Bay of Bengal littorals, of which Bangladesh is one.

Unlike the CPTPP or the RCEP, the IPEF is not a free trade agreement (FTA), but it provides a *carte blanche* to the member countries to choose what best suits their needs from the four pillars. So, there is a huge manoeuvring space within its parameters, which finds compatibility with the potential members. While the IPEF is very much a work in progress, it is undoubtedly an incremental step in the move towards a regional economic framework. Hence, it deserves serious consideration by Bangladesh.

Assuming that Bangladesh chooses to enter into consultations with others on the IPEF – and I think it should – the timing of expressing an interest is of critical importance. It is best to signal one's intentions when the proposed forum is at its formative stage. This will enable Bangladesh to play an important role in determining and defining the rules of engagement that will allow us to preserve and promote our national economic interests.

These may include, but need not be limited to, an inclusive framework for ensuring stability of supply chains, non-restrictive market access for its exports, multimodal and seamless connectivity, investments leading to job creation, and providing guarantee for manpower exports under legal frameworks.

If Bangladesh were to decide to sign up for serious consultations on the IPEF, it should do so without avoidable delay. Having established our credentials as a responsible regional player, the time has come for Bangladesh to seek an active role in the blue economy offered by the bay and the two mighty oceans.

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