

# Bangladesh: Secular Ideals Betrayed

Wednesday 27 December 2006, by [ANAM Mahfuz](#), [MOHAIEMEN Naeem](#), [SALEH Asif](#) (Date first published: 27 December 2006).

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## AL SHOOTS ITSELF IN THE FOOT

**The Daily Star, December 27, 2006**

by Mahfuz Anam

What a tribute the Awami League has paid to the martyrs of the Liberation War in the very month of our victory. There was perhaps no better way to 'honour' the intellectuals who were brutally killed on 13<sup>th</sup> of December, 1971 for a modern, scientific and secular Bangladesh than by signing a deal with Islamic extremists and pledging to permit fatwa, introduce shariah laws, and basically to lay the foundation for a religious state in the future.

We have known for a while that our politics had become unprincipled, opportunistic and devoid of all ethical considerations. BNP and its allies shocked and surprised us during the last five years. Now AL has shown that it is equally capable of a betrayal of values and ethics in politics. We knew that 'anything to gain power' was the most favourite game of our leaders. We saw with our heads bowed in shame the tussle between Khaleda Zia and Shiekh Hasina to get the man, who was singularly responsible for taking us down the unbridled corruption route, on their side. Earlier, in 2001 we had seen how the party formed by our war hero Ziaur Rahman, who had fought side by side with freedom fighters to liberate Bangladesh from the clutches of Pakistani occupiers and collaborators of Jamaat, embraces those very collaborators and take as partners in government. (Imagine if the war had gone the other way, wouldn't this very Jamaat have rejoiced to see Ziaur Rahman swing from the gallows on charge of "treason" against Pakistan?)

As if from a sense of having fallen behind in the game of deceit, chicanery and opportunism the party that led us during the Liberation War buried the central values of our independence struggle and signed a dangerous deal with the most conservative and extremist fringe of the so-called Islamic parties, which, in effect, lays the foundation

for a future religious state. It is as if the Awami League has sold its soul for a few votes.

How could the AL agree, if elected to power, to "enact laws allowing certified Hakkani Alems to issue fatwas"? Why do we need a law declaring Prophet

Mohammad (pbh) as the ultimate and the greatest of prophets? To every Muslim he has been and will be the Greatest Prophet, no law can glorify him more, and no lack of law reduces an iota of the glory that Allah has bestowed upon him. Now that there is no such law, are we honouring our Prophet any less?

The real purpose here is not to respect the Prophet but to get a cover of legality to oppress people who are termed as different. The undeclared message here is that such a law will make it possible to declare the Ahmedias (a distinct group within the Muslims) as non-Muslims. Then there is a pledge to enact a law that will ban criticisms of the Prophet and his disciples. Good Muslims never criticise the Prophet. But why should we ban any discussion about the activities of his disciples? This is nothing but a camouflaged attempt to enact a blasphemy law.

Then there is the pledge to implement the BNP-alliance government's decision to recognise the degrees awarded by the Qwami madrasas. To her credit Khaleda Zia resisted this pressure for the better part of her tenure and conceded to it at the very end much to the dismay of academics, educationists and modernists in general. The decision was neither well thought out, nor was it the product of any research as to its impact on education in general. The AL could have easily agreed to examine the proposal without pledging to implement something that nobody knows the impact of. This is a good example of how policy pledges are made without either any knowledge of their substance or assessment of their impact.

On Monday, on behalf of the 14-party alliance its coordinator and AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil issued a statement reiterating the alliance's commitment to secularism, uprooting anti-liberation forces, and upholding democracy. Interestingly, no mention was made in it about the deal signed earlier with the Khelafet-e-Majlish. Only the day before Mr. Jalil defended his deal, which he called a 'MOU' and not an agreement, on national TV saying that he had no objection to fatwas from qualified Alems. He even justified that position by saying that it will stop fatwas coming from unqualified and uneducated village mullahs.

Who are these 'qualified' Alems? What makes them 'qualified' to rise above the law of the land? Will this not bring into effect a parallel legal system alongside the existing one? Does our constitution permit a dual legal system? Power to enact fatwas gives these Alems power over our life, our family relations and our property. Signing the deal as it stands (we published the full text in yesterday's paper)

has basically laid the foundation of destruction of our constitution, our legal system and our way of life. In fact, it is a blue print for a different Bangladesh, not the one we have now and not the one for which millions died. It really amounts to destruction of modern Bangladesh created in 1971. (Has Mr Jalil considered the possibility that legalising fatwa will empower Mr. Amini to declare that no woman can be the prime minister of Bangladesh? What will happen to his "Nettri" then?)

If Awami League is serious about implementing the "MOU" after coming to power then it will have to effectively bury its ideological foundation and whatever little was left of its principles. If, on the other hand, the "MOU" is a ploy to hoodwink the so-called "Islamic vote bank", then the AL has sunk to the lowest ebb of political morality where it can say anything to anybody just to gain support prior to elections. This means that the party cannot be trusted. Whatever pledge it makes to the people will be like the "MOU" with the Khelafat, a time serving device to be discarded once in power. Is this Mr. Jalil's message in taking so much pain to distinguish between an 'agreement' and an 'MOU'?

The AL must really believe that we, the people, are a bunch of fools to be taken for a ride and hoodwinked at will. Well, people may have a surprise for such clever people. The deal shows that the party is so desperate and hungry to go to power that it can discard its founding principles, make pledges against what it proclaimed to stand for since its birth and embrace anybody as an ally, even people who really would prefer to see them destroyed.

The truth of the matter is that both the BNP and AL have, over the years, removed all moral underpinnings of their actions. There is no ethical anchor to their politics, and as such, everything is a 'game' in their bid for power. This degeneration has not happened overnight and it has deteriorated over the last several decades starting from Ershad era. The tragedy is that the democratic governments did not stem the tide, they in fact added impetus to the process of decline of morality in politics.

There is a direct link with the rise of corruption in the country and the decline of ethics and moral values in our politics. The last regime of Khaleda Zia set newer records of corruption that put to shame what we saw during the Ershad era. The creation of "Hawa Bhaban" as the alternative source of power opened up the floodgate of corruption led by family members of the former prime minister.

We deliberately waited a couple of days before writing this commentary, hoping that the AL would realise the blunder of its action and retract. It has not yet done so, meaning that it was a well thought out action. Instead, it has issued an eyewash statement insisting on standing for a secular Bangladesh built, we suppose, on the fatwas of the 'certified' Alems. This deal proves how desperate the AL leadership is for going to power. If such be the level of

morality then we, the voters, have very little to expect from them.

Are we condemned to vote only to replace one corrupt, intellectually bankrupt and morally depraved group by another? The Awami League probably thinks that its vote bank is guaranteed. The secularists among them will grumble and protest but will vote for them at the end, the logic being they have nowhere else to go. So there is nothing to worry about. Well, if the view of a very small group of AL die-hards is any indication, they may not have the heart to vote for the BNP but they will not vote for the AL. All of them said that they would cancel their votes in protest.

This is a reaction that the AL will be well-advised to take note of.

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## **AN OPEN LETTER TO AWAMI LEAGUE GENERAL SECRETARY ABDUL JALIL**

**The Daily Star, December 27, 2006**

by Asif Saleh

Dear Mr Abdul Jalil: Ever since this morning, I am feeling very sick to my stomach. I feel like vomiting all day.

It is not because of something I ate but it is because something you did, which is proving very hard to digest. You left us, who fought for some ideals, cheated. You betrayed the policy that you championed the last 5 years just for some petty short-term interest of getting to power.

Today, we watched with disbelief and horror your 5-point agreement with a little known party Khelafat-e-Majlish. You termed it as a "tactical electoral ploy." My utter disbelief turned into shame when I turned on ATN Bangla to find you defending the "good fatwas" against the bad ones.

When pressed on by the journalists, you say with total nonchalance: "I know what I signed" without providing any explanation why you did it. You couldn't even defend the stand that you took and lied on camera that didn't sign anything regarding the Ahmadiyas.

Excuse me, Mr General Secretary! Have you got no shame? Have you ever thought there are actually people who follow politics because they support a principal? Before throwing this slap at these people who has been supporting AL for a return to non-religious politics, did you even care to think about them?

Or Mr GS, sitting in that well-cushioned office for the president of

Mercantile Bank, have you become so tone-deaf that you can't hear the pulse on the street? Just when we have to digest your open embrace with Ershad, you decide to slap us again with this new deal?

Mr GS, do you know that there was once a time you had a party, which actually stood for something? In 1971, it brought upon secularism and social justice in the Constitution? As much as it is hard for you to believe, there is a sizable population in Bangladesh who still believe in these ideals and there are people who believe in religious identity and our Bangladeshi Muslim identity. You are making a huge mistake by taking them for a ride.

Dear Mr Jalil, you think the people who support secular politics and who are scared of by the politics of BNP-Jamat have no choice but to vote for you? Think again. If there is so little difference between BNP-Jamat and Awami League, then they will just stay home on election day.

If this deal is not cancelled, we will know that you care very little about the support for progressive force and are not afraid to plank down years of earned credibility and principles for the little gain, if any, you will make with the Moulana votes.

Dear Mr. Jalil, it is by no accident that Awami League has been in power only for 5 years in the last 30 years. It is years of political ineptitude, inconsistencies and perception of opportunism by its leaders, which caused this. More importantly, it is because of monumentally fatal decisions like these in the past 20 years, which sealed its fate. But still we were willing to give you guys a second chance this time around seeing the long-term danger of Jamat in politics. We chose to ignore years of Awami hypocrisy and inconsistencies.

You went in election in 1986, 24 hours after declaring the participants of election under martial law will be known as national traitor. You brought Jamaat in the same table with you and gave them the first legitimacy. You first resuscitated Ershad in national politics to get into national alliance.

All the time, critics said that there was no difference between BNP-Jamaat and AL. Your supporters said there was a lot at stake in this election and we simply cannot afford another 5 years of accountability-less governance and religious infiltration in Bangladeshi politics of BNP. But your desperation to go to power at the cost any thing makes our head to bow down in collective shame.

Mr GS, how dare you ridicule and make light of our support for the ideals to which this country was founded? Mr GS, you may think that this is election time and every thing you do is justified under the name of "tactical ploy." Well, I have some news for you. In this election, if AL wins, it will be not because of they are a better party than BNP. It will be because people are so turned off by BNP,

they like to vote for anyone but BNP.

It is our misfortune that the ideals that we cherish are hijacked by people like you in Bangladeshi politics, who has no sincerity for ideals or principle. To you, principles can change with every news cycle as long as you can provide your own self-made rationalization for your stand and say that the people are with you.

But do know that winter does not go away after one December. Next time, you need friends in the progressive circle; please do know that will not forget this backstabbing. If they stay passive and do not treat you any differently than BNP-Jamaat, please don't be surprised.

Because, after all, parties are judged by their actions and your actions, dear sir, are not much different from those of BNP-Jamaat. We will rather wait for the party that truly believes these progressive ideals rather than support a morally bankrupt party such as yours, who just uses these as lip service when it suits them and dumps them before election when they think it's a liability.

Mr GS, please don't underestimate the hurt and anguish that has been caused by your action. If you don't cancel this deal, you will be repaid for your betrayal for a long time to come.

Dear Mr Jalil, you have very little credibility after your April 30 deadline in 2004. In any other country, you would have been thrown into the political dustbin after that monumental political failure. Still it's a miracle that you lived through that to cause another similar proportion catastrophic failure yesterday by signing this 5 point agreement with a little known fundamentalist Islamist party and effectively stabbed in the back of your party workers and supporters. You owe them an explanation.

For a party that regularly tries to milk the liberation war for its own advantage and for a party that got a lot of mileage from the 2001 Hindu oppression and 2005 Ahmadiya discrimination, you owe them an explanation for signing a deal that goes completely against your previous political stands.

You still have a chance to control the damage by scrapping this deal. If you want to have any shred of political credibility for the future, you will want to scrap this deal. Otherwise, you will not find the friends with you when you need them, and believe me, you will need friends a lot sooner than you think. Scrap or no scrap, do know this, that from now on we will make it very, very expensive for you to take our support for granted.  
The author is the founder of Drishtipat.

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## HASINA'S ULU DHONI MOMENT

**The Daily Star, December 26, 2006**

by Naeem Mohaiemen

I hate giving people a chance to say, "I told you so." So imagine the chorus after reports of an AL 5-point "understanding" (soon to be denied as "misunderstanding") with the Khelafat Andolan gang emerged. In one swift move, the party rolled over and handed on a platter every major Islamist demand of the last five years. Whether BNP or AL wins in the next election, the patient, cunning Islamists are the big winners in symbolic and real terms.

A friend wrote: "Don't worry, our politicians do beimani (dishonesty). They will do beimani with Khelafat Andolon as well." But for those of us who have lost interest in the why, how, or where AL (or BNP) does anything, the motive for these electoral chomoks (displays) is irrelevant. What really matters is the manner in which every Islamist party, demand, and agenda is slowly but surely penetrating into every artery of the national body politic and infrastructure.

For the last five years, the BNP-Jamaat coalition's ferocious attacks on secularism, and aggressive push for an Islamist agenda has had an unexpected side effect. As BNP's enemy, AL has automatically received the mantle of defender-of-secularism, without doing a single thing to protect it.

During the last three years' attacks on the Ahmadiya community, I spent a significant time with the Ahmadiya mosques for my film Muslims or Heretics. I was struck by the quiet faith many Ahmadiya supporters had that AL would never allow these things to happen. In all the time that Ahmadiya property was burnt, books were seized, mosques attacked, and imams killed, the AL never raised a voice, or joined a rally. But because the BNP was actively tolerating Khatme Nabuwat, all of us presumed that AL would not do the same!

But just read a few items in the MOU with Khelafat Andolon.

- To not accept Prophet Mohammed as the last Prophet is forbidden.
- Blasphemy will be a punishable offense.

If these items sound familiar, it is because these have been demand number one and two on every single flyer given out at Khatme Nabuwat rallies. Having spent time at many KN rallies documenting their speeches, I am struck (but not surprised) by the manner in which the AL has now reproduced in toto the entire text and sentiments of anti-Ahmadiya forces.

After the 2001 elections, BNP-affiliated thugs went on a revenge

spree in Hindu villages, attacking, raping, and looting, all to target presumed AL supporters. The tragedy for Hindu Bengalis is that they are getting the long pole from both ends. Beaten to a pulp for voting AL, and abandoned by AL when they are in power. But AL never has to do any work to prove their credentials. Whether minority or majority, anyone who wants a secular state is afraid to vote BNP because of its clear stance against secularism.

Khaleda Zia once said: "If Hasina gets elected, there will be ulu dhoni (ululation) in the mosques of Bangladesh." That is all it took to get AL branded secular, even while the party took a half dozen steps in the opposite direction. From lok-dekhano (just to show) umra and mathae kapor (covering head) to Bismillah in election posters, the AL has been playing the Islam card for a while — confident that the secular vote is always theirs.

It was Hasina's infamous meeting with Golam Azam that led Farhad Mazhar to write an essay titled: "Sheikh Hasina has insulted Jahanara Imam's memory by touching her coffin." But faced with the larger embrace of Jamaat by BNP, we who are so desperate for even a minute sign of secularism have forgiven AL those past sins. Yes, Hasina sat with Jamaat, but she did not bring them into a cabinet. But at the rate things are going, can we trust that will never happen?

I wonder what Suranjit Sengupta and other minority members of AL are thinking right now. I wonder how they can keep a straight face when Sheikh Hasina talks about "secularism" to Bangali Christians on the same day that Jalil announces an MOU with Shaikhul Hadis. Like Marie Antoinette, AL thinks "let them eat cake," cutting a Christmas cake with our beleaguered Christian citizens. That is the dessert to choke on, a monument to opportunism.

When Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury was defeated in the OIC election, he blamed a global campaign alleging that he was a 1971 war criminal. Chief focus of his ire was the AL. In a furious press conference, he threatened to "Islamicize" Suranjit Sengupta's nether regions.

I remember being horrified, but now I feel that it is better to face SaQa Chowdhury — at least he lays his cards on the table and you know exactly where you are. The problem with the so-called defenders of secularism is that they will smile to your face while running the knife very deep into your poor, unprotected back. Surely we can do better than this?

Some ask why AL gets so much hate for allying with Islamists, but the same does not happen for BNP. It's because BNP is being consistent — they have never said they are interested in secularism. Since their founding years, BNP has been committed to a project of Bangladeshi not Bengali, Allah Hafez not Khoda Hafez, India as permanent enemy, and the gun not the carrot for CHT Paharis. If BNP sits with Jamaat, it is consistent with that vision — they have always been the "Islam bachao" (save Islam) vote (as if our religion is so weak it needs



Bangalis to “save” it). It is only the AL who has ever profited from the secularism vote (and by the way, not just minorities, but also thinking Muslims — and we are legion — want religion separate from state).

Most young people are bored by the 15-year serialized soap opera of BNP vs AL. A retired official says: “Shob chor” (All are thieves) and it’s hard to argue with his nihilistic mind-set. But what does matter is the permanent damage being done to the secularism project (which is never anti-religion, but simply asks for separation of religion from politics). From Zia to Ershad to Khaleda to Hasina, the players change but the Islamist project grows mightier as every party makes concessions to religious politics — whether by an inch or a mile.

Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold. Ten years from now, there may be no Hasina, Khaleda, Tarique, Joy, Jalil, Bhuiyan. There may be a whole new set of players — who may be vibrant new jacks, or the same liquid in a new bottle. But the one sure thing is that the Islamists will be much stronger. Today they are kingmakers, tomorrow they will be kings.

\* *Naeem Mohaiemen (naeem shobak.org) directed “Muslims or Heretics: My Camera Can Lie?”*

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**P.S.**

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