

RELEASE IN PART
B6

From: McHale, Judith A <McHaleJA@state.gov>
Sent: Saturday, February 20, 2010 8:28 AM
To: H
Subject: FW: Daily Star Op-Ed: McHale sees positive side of Islam in Bangladesh

As we discussed yesterday

----- Original Message -----

From: Sernovitz, Harvey W
To: Moriarty, James F; Danilowicz, Jon F; Variava, Heather C; Hallock, Catherine A; Lovelace, Lauren H; Schumacher, Adam (USAID/Dhaka/DG); Mellott, Joseph; Kenna, Corley
Sent: Fri Feb 19 23:49:51 2010
Subject: Daily Star Op-Ed: McHale sees positive side of Islam in Bangladesh

This is the first commentary I've seen on U/S McHale's visit. This couple with Sec. Clinton's Int'l Mother Language Day message that is in all the papers has given us great coverage on both the secular and religious fronts in the paper today.

Harvey

----- Original Message -----

B6

From: Harvey Sernovitz [redacted]
To: Sernovitz, Harvey W
Sent: Sat Feb 20 10:13:32 2010
Subject: Daily Star Op-Ed: McHale sees positive side of Islam in Bangladesh

McHale sees positive side of Islam in Bangladesh

<http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=127047>

M. Serajul Islam

MS. Judith A McHale, US Under Secretary of State for Public Affairs, who was recently in Dhaka, is the senior most ranking US Government official to visit Bangladesh since President Obama took office in USA and Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh. During her public engagements, she made some remarks that are very encouraging for Bangladesh. In Dhaka University she said that US would take 20,000 students every year from Bangladesh where at the moment, the intake is far fewer.

The Under Secretary made more encouraging remarks when she addressed Madrassah students of Uttar Badda Islamia Kamil Madrassah. When a student informed her that Madrassah educated students are seldom given US visa for education, she said categorically that US doors are open to Madrassah educated students of Bangladesh. She also said that the US Embassy is providing teachers for teaching English in Madrassahs and her Government "is proud to be working with the Madrassah." She also said that religious leadership is a key to the success of socio-economic development efforts. Her most positive remark was her belief that Bangladesh could assist the US to bridge its gap with the Muslim world.

The Under Secretary however did not say how many Madrassah students who would be given visa annually as she did for the general students.

This notwithstanding, the fact that a senior Obama administration official has publicly made positive remarks for the Madrassah educated students and role of Islam in society is very significant. Her statement came on the back of a number of other initiatives that the US Government has taken in Bangladesh to work with the Madrasahs. The US Government is working with a number of NGOs to sensitize Madrassah students on democracy, information and communication technology, etc.

This is a significant change in US stance on Bangladesh. Not very long ago, the US Ambassador to Bangladesh Harry Thomas was crying hoarse about religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh; that was dismissed by the BNP Government. The Awami League went overboard to spread the news that Bangladesh was seething with religious fundamentalism, even labeling the BNP Government as "Taliban". Early in 2006, the US Assistant Secretary for South Asia, Ms. Christina Rocco, on an official visit to Bangladesh, strongly advised the Government that it had no choice but to rein in the religious fundamentalists, that later led to the arrests of Bangla Bhai and the JMB terrorists. The BNP Government arrested religious terrorists in a make believe manner that was a far cry from the dangerous portrayal about them in the media and by the opposition, when they were at the height of their criminal activities.

The meekness of their surrender and their execution under the Caretaker Government without any repercussion from their cadres who were supposed to on the verge of capturing power by force left no doubt that the case of religious extremists in Bangladesh was over politicised and overstated. They raised their ugly face in no uncertain terms because the BNP Government indulged and encouraged them. The national elections in December 2008, in which over 20 million first time voters entered the election process further sealed the nation's contempt for political parties in Bangladesh that use religion for achieving their ends. In fact, even the BNP found the religion based parties a political liability in the last elections when the biggest of the religion based parties in Bangladesh, the Jamat-e-Islami could manage just 2 seats.

Although the parties that have used religion for politics have been historically rejected by voters in Bangladesh, interestingly Islam as a religion has made significant inroads into the lives of the overwhelming majority of its people since independence. There are many reasons for this that is outside the scope of this writing. This spread of Islam, unlike in many other countries, is still tampered by liberal traditions embedded in the history of the religion in this part of the world where Sufism has played a major role. Nevertheless, the resurgence of Islam in Bangladesh also faces the dangers of evolving in the opposition direction. It is an issue that must be dealt with the utmost caution to deter Bangladesh from following Algeria or Afghanistan.

Soon after the Awami League came to power early last year, a vested group was busy spreading distorted information to create public opinion against the Qoami Madrasahs (QM) and calling for restoration of secularism by removing Islam from public life. A World Bank Report later trashed the propaganda against QM, one that suggested that under BNP Government 35% soldiers recruited were from QM. There was a period of lull in the campaign of this group against Islam based political parties and the Madrasahs after the WB report, although the report may not have been alone responsible for the lull. . The annulment of the fifth amendment of the constitution, the war trial criminals that would involve mostly the Jamat; and the recent activities of Jamat's student cadre in the universities have re-activated the move. A section is claiming the restoration of the 1972 constitution to ban the Jamat.

Ms Judith McHale's visit is very significant in the present context of Bangladesh's politics. Unlike Ms Christina Rocco's visit in early 2006, she did not sound any alarm bells for Bangladesh on the issue of religious fundamentalism. To the contrary, her visit to the Madrassah, together with the initiatives of her Government to work with the Madrasahs of Bangladesh by providing them with modern educational tools are positive signs that US is not worried about 'religious fundamentalism' in Bangladesh and that it even visualises a role for Bangladesh to help it reach out more towards the Muslim world. Some months ago, the US Government dropped the name of Bangladesh from the watch list of countries where religious freedom is at stake. This is another indication that religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh is on the decline in US perception

The author is a former Ambassador to Japan and Director, Centre for Foreign Affairs Studies