

'For AMU, it's a battle of perceptions'

The minority character of the university has a sentimental and far-reaching significance for Muslims, who deserve this right, says VC

UNEASY lies the head that wears a crown. This could be even truer of the successive vice-chancellors of the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), the historical institution located in Aligarh district in India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh, who have struggled to eke out consensus on their methods of governance – on what is the best approach to serve the interest of the students/university. For **LT GENERAL ZAMEERUDDIN SHAH**, whose term as the vice-chancellor comes to an end tomorrow (May 16, 2017), his five years at the helm have been even more momentous. While there have been reports of his uneasy ties with the previous Union Minister for Human Resource Development, it was also during his tenure as the V-C that the university had to move court to argue its case for the preservation of its minority status. "This has been the most difficult job I have had to tackle," Lt Gen Shah told *Qatar Tribune's* **MEHRE ALAM**, in what could possibly be dubbed as his last interview while in office as the V-C.

The AMU, he pointed out in the online interview, is fighting a battle of perceptions, and, "if we can correct the wrong impressions people have about us, we would certainly be the leading university of the country."

As for the Muslim youth's educational advancement, the former deputy chief of Army staff, said the key lies in strengthening their educational foundation. Any "ghettoization" on religious grounds is a dangerous trend for students, he noted.

Excerpts of the edited interview:

QATAR Tribune: From the army to the vice-chancellor of a premier Central university, how has the journey been for you? Did you find the transition smooth?

LT Gen Zameeruddin Shah: The vice-chancellor's role relates to laying down policy, public relations, garnering funds for the university and ensuring the rule of law prevails. This was a little more difficult than the Army where there is a chain of command and the rules and regulations are well framed.

In AMU, everything is vice-chancellor-centric. This leaves the vice-chancellor with very little time for contemplation or leisure. This has been the most difficult job I have had to tackle. It is unforgiving and



AMU Vice Chancellor Lt. General (Retd.) Zameeruddin Shah (2nd from left), with veteran actor Naseeruddin Shah (centre), during the Professor Zahida Zaidi Memorial lecture at Kennedy Auditorium in AMU on May 4, 2017. Naseer, who is the brother of the vice chancellor, was a student of AMU from 1966 to 1970 and lived in a room he shared with four other students at Sir Syed Hall (Osmania Hostel).

thankless. We worked hard because of the responsibility entrusted upon us and to safeguard the interests of this historical institution.

Q: Your term as the vice-chancellor comes to an end on May 16. Are you satisfied with what the university has achieved in these past five years of your stewardship?

A: I am only partially satisfied. Our aim was to make AMU the No. 1 University by 2017. We came very close but the unfortunate incident of arson in April 2016 took a heavy toll on the perceptions about the university. All I can say is, we have laid a strong foundation and my successor should be able to achieve the goal we had set for this great seat of learning.

The AMU has recently received a certificate of the 11th rank among the Indian Universities from the National Institutional Ranking Framework India Rankings (NIRF) associated with the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. Could the university have done better?

AMU was ranked 11th among Central Universities – we scored very low marks in 'Perceptions'. If we can correct the wrong impressions people have about us and score high marks in 'perceptions', we would certainly be the leading university of the country.

What are the main challenges facing the university currently?

The main challenge lies in dealing with the criminal elements that enter the campus and attempt to control the students. They sponsor their elections and expect favours in return. Another challenge is the porous nature of the campus. We have had to close a large number of entry and exit gates. This has led to inconvenience but has ensured better curbs on the entry of criminal elements.

AMU has some of the renowned Centres for Advanced Learning,

like its History Department, for example. What are the future prospects?

The Centres of Advanced Learning, as in the Department of History, are the pride of AMU. They have done outstanding work in the field of research and academics.

You took over as the V-C when the UPA government was in power at the Centre. Your term saw the change of guard at the Centre with the BJP-led NDA government taking over the reins in 2014. There were reports of you having troubles with the previous Union HRD minister. Has it been smooth with the cur-

rent Union HRD minister?

The present HRD Minister has always given me a patient hearing. We have full faith that he will be fair and just to the university, especially with regard to the terms of funding, which we expect to be equitable.

Your term as the V-C will also be remembered for the reason that the university has had to move court to fight for its minority status. Could you share your thoughts on the expected outcome? In case the university loses its minority status, what could the impact be on the institution?

The minority character of the university is dear to the hearts of all Aligis (alumni of the university). It has a sentimental and far-reaching significance. That's why we deserve the right to remain a minority institution.

In the past few years there has been a debate on the issue of tolerance with several writers, artists etc. having expressed their dismay over what they term as growing intolerance. Now, there are incidents of cow vigilantes attacking people and taking the law into their own hands. Do you think the society has grown more intolerant over the years?

AMU teaches morality and large-

hearted tolerance. We are a modern, secular university and we abide by that philosophy. Vigilante action can never be tolerated and we are certain that the government will take action to protect all sections of people.

You have been quoted as saying that all governments at the Centre have been biased towards AMU and none of them have treated the institution well. Do you stick to those views?

I stick to the view that AMU has suffered inequity of funding from all governments. All central universities of equal size need to be funded adequately.

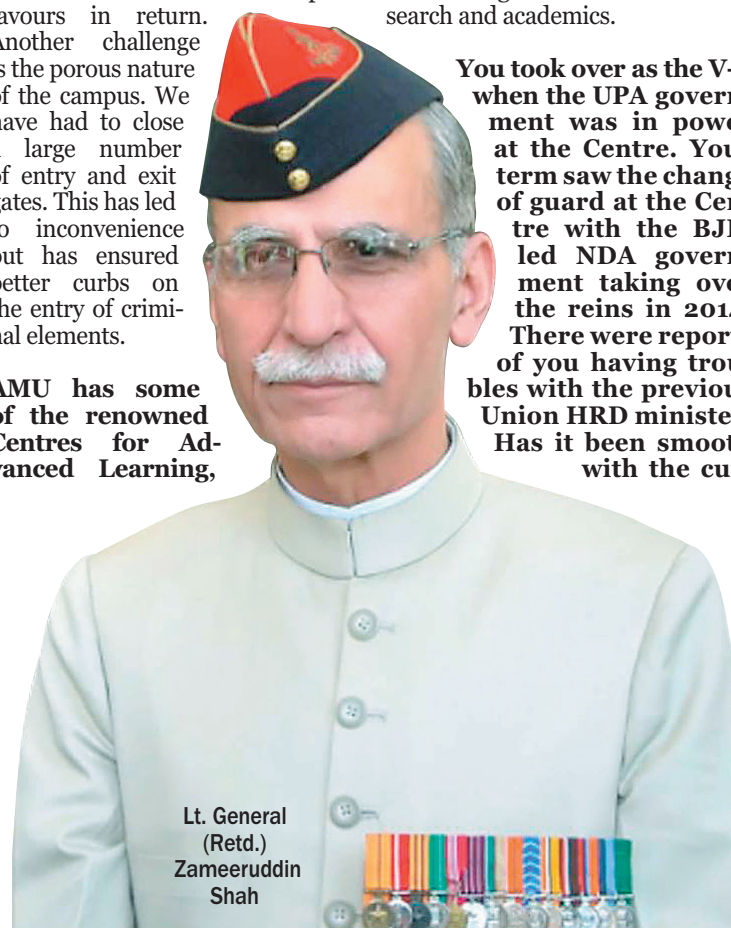
What, according to you, are the key challenges facing the Muslim community of India in terms of education?

The key challenge facing the Muslim community is lack of education at the school level. Because of financial constraints, Muslim children cannot go to good schools and thus, are ill prepared to face open, competitive examinations for institutions of higher learning. If we can establish a chain of schools where we can strengthen the educational foundation of our children, it would alleviate the educational problems of the Muslim community.

The separation and ghettoization of children on religious grounds in schools is a dangerous trend. Another problem is the decay of old Islamic educational institutions. They have been exploited by some families. Their revival is essential.

Your name is doing the rounds as a possible candidate for the post of the next Vice President of India.

As I am to complete my term as the V-C of AMU on 16th May, the Vice President's term is also getting over in a few months from now. It's okay that people might be expecting such a seat for me. But as of now I can assure you that I want to relax, play golf and do something related to establishing quality schools to carry forward the rejuvenated Aligarh movement. I shall never shy away if I am called for any service which is in the interest of the nation. I want to work until the last breath of my life. Every day is a new day. You live with the kind of responsibilities and the challenges of the day.



Lt. General (Retd.) Zameeruddin Shah