

TI comments

Case of missing political will

THE Global Corruption Report, 2006 of Transparency International (TI), Berlin in its Bangladesh section appears to have focused on the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC)'s genesis and its dysfunctional state since inception a year and a half ago.

The TI, obviously, is of the view that if the ACC had worked effectively, corruption would have been, to that extent, curbed in the country. Note the TI's change of emphasis away from the topmost ranking of Bangladesh as a corrupt country based on a global perception index; the report this time concentrates more on why and where the government has actually failed in containing the persistent malady.

The report has actually made three points: first, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) was formed not out of any 'political will' but as a 'concession' to donor and civil society pressures. In other words, the government was not spontaneously motivated to constitute the commission, which is the other way of saying that the government did not carry any conviction with the formation of the body. Obviously, the developments subsequent to the advent of the commission go to strengthen such impressions, however much the government may bask in the glory of having constituted such a body after all.

It has become a fixation with the powers that be that once a body is formed, no matter with whom and with what authority through delegation of powers, the government can jolly well wash its hands off any further responsibility in seeing it work. There we come to the second point in the TI report suggesting that government retains the wholesale control of the commission: its budget, staff recruitment and organisational structure.

The third reason for the ACC debacle has been pinpointed in the decision having been imposed by the government to 'rehire' the staff of the erstwhile Anti-Corruption Bureau which was, in the first place, dissolved for its ineffectiveness, making room for the ACC.

Needless to say, the above drawbacks are contrary to the provisions of the ACC Act. The points made in the TI report are extremely cogent, unassailable and worthy of endorsement. If we are serious in creating a proper institution against rampant corruption, then there would be no alternative but to reorganise the existing body wholesale and give it the teeth it needs to function. The government should cease placing the blame at the doorstep of the internal conflict-ridden ACC because it can not hide the fact that it had not fundamentally empowered the body to be effective? It lies with the government to change things around now.

For a better Boi Mela

As a vital source of enlightenment

THE Ekushey Book Fair originated in the pristine love for Bangla language and literature, but it has reached the water-shed from which it has to acquire a global appeal. This is needed in a context where 21st February is the International Mother Language Day.

The *mela* serves as a rare meeting point for publishers, writers, book lovers and readers in an annual cycle which one wishes were more frequently organised given the potential it has to promote book sales, inspire authors to write more, and in the process, expand reading habit in the country.

Let's not forget, the book-marketing mechanism remains pathetically undeveloped. The entire city has but a few known public sale centres. Most of the them appear to be just like any other vending outfit of commercial merchandise.

There are two other aspects of the book fair, which demand our close attention, so that we can enrich and perfect it more and more from one year to another. It is often alleged that publishers and established authors, driven by a common interest, use this venue for boasting sales of their books often ignoring many upcoming and budding writers. The selection procedure for allotment of stalls is also marked by opacity and political consideration, so it has been reported. Such shortcomings must be overcome to add some real value to the book fair.

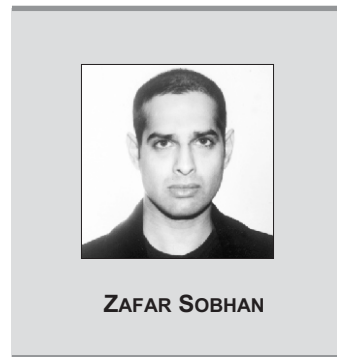
Aside from displaying English translations of our literary works, there should be a conscious effort to publish and put on sale books authored in English by our own budding and promising writers.

We wish the Book Mela all success and the readers a feast on good, quality books.

How about a Look North-East policy?

STRAIGHT TALK

Opening ourselves up to the North-East and extending an olive-branch of conciliation in that direction could reap enormous benefits to the Bangladesh economy. It would also create friendlier relations with our neighbours with whom we unfortunately have had few links with in the recent past. And it could help realign our problematic relationship with India as a whole.



ZAFAR SOBHAN

PERHAPS what we need in Bangladesh is a Look North-East policy. This would mean paying closer attention to the interests and concerns of the people in India's North-Eastern region when formulating domestic and external policy, and more importantly, re-imagining our relationship with India by looking at it through the prism of the North-East and not solely through the prism of New Delhi and Calcutta, as we tend to do now.

The North-East region of India has remained underdeveloped for two reasons, the principal one being the short-sightedness of the Indian central government, and its neglect of, if not outright hostility to, the legitimate aspirations and demands of the people of the region.

New Delhi has never shown this region any sensitivity with respect to

its linguistic, religious, and cultural differences from the rest of India, and desire to maintain this differentiation, and has deliberately under-funded development and tried in an extremely heavy-handed manner to bring the North-East within the "mainstream" of the country.

In addition, New Delhi has always remained cool to the very practical solution of permitting Bangladesh to step in and fill the economic gap that the North-East's geographic distance from the rest of India has occasioned.

But when it comes to the question of the underdevelopment of the North-East, Bangladesh is also culpable.

The most obvious way in which Bangladesh has contributed to the continued stagnation of the North-East has been in our steadfast refusal to grant India transit rights through Bangladesh to the North-East.

One argument made in defense of this refusal is that it has helped protect Bangladesh's trade with the North-East. But the reality is that we have never really made any effort to develop a market for our goods in the region, and so there is not much to protect.

The biggest victims of both the Indian and Bangladesh policies have been the inhabitants of the North-East, who are denied cheap goods from the rest of India due to the lack of transit rights, and are

also denied cheap Bangladesh goods due to a combination of India's protectionist trade policies and lack of any Bangladesh efforts to develop this market.

The truth is that a cornerstone of the Bangladesh policy on transit is that it does hurt India. That is the whole point. The idea is that by instituting a policy that does considerable damage to India, we can use this as leverage to get a better deal with respect to Indian policies that are harmful to Bangladesh interests.

The trouble with this formulation is that the Indians who are hurt by the policy are primarily those who reside in the North-East. This is the crux of the problem with respect to how we envision and deal with India.

When we think of India, we think of Calcutta and New Delhi, and not of the North-East. When we think of Bangladesh policies harming Indian interests, the interests we have in mind are supercilious bureaucrats in New Delhi and rapacious businessmen in Calcutta. We don't think about the effect of our policies on the people who they actually affect the most, the long-suffering inhabitants of the North-East.

The thing is that India and its regional dominance, economic, military, and cultural, and the fact that it surrounds Bangladesh on three sides and is often insensitive

to our interests, has created a sense of vulnerability and inferiority in the minds of our policy-makers (and possibly the nation as a whole). It is this mind-set that contributes significantly to much of the tension we have in our relations with India.

But if we didn't think of India as this monolithic "big brother" we would not be so quick to act in such a way as to harm the interests of the North-East, which in no way can be thought of as a "big brother" to Bangladesh.

Essentially, the national mind-set with respect to India completely ignores the dynamics of our relationship with the North-East and lumps the North-Easterners in with the rest of the country, without giving much thought to the reality on the ground.

If we were to ever think of India in terms of the North-East, then we would see that our transit policy is actually contributing to the continuing underdevelopment of this backward region. We are not only keeping money out of the pockets of businessmen and bureaucrats from New Delhi and Calcutta, we are also contributing to the continuing impoverishment of the most neglected corner of India, one that we could have far better relations with than we do at present.

It would be both in our own national self-interest and the interest of our neighbours in the North-East if the Bangladesh attitude towards India were to take the North-East into consideration. In fact, such a realignment of thinking with respect to India could help us move the bilateral relationship to a more productive and cooperative footing.

What would this mean in practical terms?

In practical terms it would mean recognizing, as Nagaland MLA Alok Jamir said to me, that for the North-East, it is Bangladesh who is the

"big brother," and that a more fruitful relationship with the region and its people can be built if we acknowledge this reality and make policy decisions accordingly.

In fact, the people of the North-East share many commonalities with Bangladesh in their view of New Delhi, and would welcome a more nuanced and mutually cooperative relationship with us.

But this means that we would need to pay real attention to the concerns of the North-East, instead of permitting the region to get caught in the cross-fire (if you'll pardon the expression) of the tensions between Dhaka and New Delhi.

This means paying serious attention to issues such as illegal migration from Bangladesh to the North-East. The policy of total denial on the part of the Bangladesh government is in response to the absurd allegation from New Delhi of 20 million illegal migrants, the apparent inability of New Delhi to tell the difference between economic migrants and "infiltrators," and the cynical exploitation of the issue by politicians to win votes.

But if we were to look beyond this and speak with North-Easterners, we would see that their fear of demographic domination is a very real one that we would do well to address.

In fact, from transit, to insurgency, to border disputes, to water sharing, to smuggling, almost all of the issues that are irritants in the India-Bangladesh relationship might be addressed more productively than they are today if we were to approach the issue from a perspective that created space for the concerns of the North-East.

There is much more that we can do to nurture this relationship that would be of great benefit to us.

One thing that North-Easterners consistently request that we might wish to consider cooperation on is a

rail link between Akhaura and Agartala that would greatly diminish the cost of transporting goods to the region.

Similarly, permitting the North-Eastern states to use Chittagong port as entry and exit point for goods would be tremendously beneficial to them, and of course, earn Bangladesh considerable revenue, too.

In fact, Bangladesh could consider realigning our economy to a certain extent to benefit from our proximity to the North-East and comparative advantage in certain sectors. We could set up industries, perhaps in Comilla, with an eye on the North-Eastern market, and we could think of more direct investment in the region, perhaps creating linkages with industries here. There is no good reason why commercial and cultural ties between Bangladesh and the North-East have remained so tenuous.

Opening ourselves up to the North-East and extending an olive-branch of conciliation in that direction could reap enormous benefits to the Bangladesh economy. It would also create friendlier relations with our neighbours with whom we unfortunately have had few links with in the recent past. And it could help realign our problematic relationship with India as a whole.

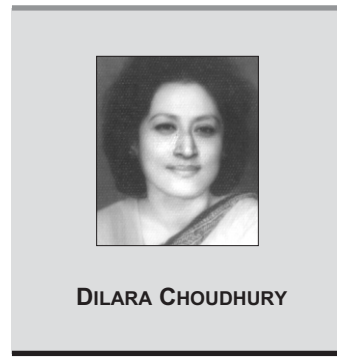
We might find that when we focus on the North-East, that many of our problems vis-a-vis India diminish considerably. Of course, we cannot simply side-step New Delhi, but there is much to be gained from enhancing people-to-people contacts with the North-East, and dealing with the government at the state level to break down barriers and create understanding and opportunity on both sides of the border.

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Pakistan's options in Indo-Pak peace negotiations

PANORAMA

Pakistan, however, would invest heavily in playing its Washington card. It is a critical ally of US, who, for the first time, since India and Pakistan became independent, enjoys a unique position in South Asia. Its tilt towards India policy without abandoning Pakistan has paid off and its goodwill and friendship are sought by both South Asian rivals. The strategy serves their respective national interests -- India, in its quest for major power, and Pakistan for both domestic and external support, particularly in dealing with Indian threats.



DILARA CHOUDHURY

THE third round of Indo-Pakistan composite dialogue has recently ended without yielding any substantive progress on the core issue of Kashmir. Needless to say that Pakistan has been greatly disappointed by its outcome. Officially, however, Islamabad commended the progress of the peace process, which has boosted people to people contacts across the LoC and somewhat helped to mitigate mistrust between the two South Asian arch-rivals. Pakistan's Prime Minister, while paying an official visit to Washington, went out of the way to emphasize the importance of peace negotiations and stated that nothing would be allowed to vitiate the environment for holding con-

tinued peace talks. No doubt his statement was directed to impress upon the host country about his country's undying endeavours to make peace with its neighbour India, but the fact that no substantive agreements could be reached on eight recognized disputes are enough to indicate that peace between two has remained as elusive as ever. And there is ballyhoo in Pakistan that the President is being too flexible and conceding too much in return for too little or nothing.

Pakistan's disappointments stem from the fact that since the warming of the relations between the two in 2003, the steps forward have been small and slow and despite all the noise of Confidence Building Measures India's stand on Kashmir remains the same as it was in 2003. During the third round of talks, New Delhi has emphasized its previous position by stating that "short of redrawing borders in Kashmir it is ready to consider all suggestions for a solution." By the same token, it also rejected Pakistani proposals such as Independence or Joint Control of the Himalayan region, or demilitarizing it and placing sections under United Nations mandate. India feels that giving up its territorial claims and accepting

status quo is as far as it can go, whereas Islamabad's dilemmas stem from the fact that acceptance of such proposition flies flat on its self-conceived notion of national identity. And more critically, it undermines Pakistan's fifty years of national security and foreign policy goal. It feels that that after investing fifty years in trying to bring a change in Kashmir, Pakistan deserves some concessions. The crucial question is: in the face of Indian intransigent attitudes, can it afford to hold out indefinitely in order to have an amicable settlement? What options --coercive or persuasive -- does it have to make India change its mind?

By all counts, it seems that Pakistan cannot afford to opt for any coercive measures. Liberation of Kashmir has been the lynch-pin of its foreign policy since its creation in 1947. Resorting to conventional wars as policy instrument failed miserably. Three wars (1948, 1965, 1971), huge military build-up and procurement of nuclear arsenals, pursued at the cost of peoples' basic rights and needs, did not help. Consequently, Islamabad adopted a policy to keep India engaged militarily in Kashmir through its policy of Jihadi insurgency by giving sup-

port and training to militants in Indian held Kashmir. The policy was adopted in the context of large scale alienation of Kashmiri people of Indian rule that gave rise to an indigenous uprising in 1989 with Islamabad claiming that it was giving only moral and other support to the Kashmiri people's struggle for freedom. The argument held some truth. At the time, forums of Kashmiri separatist militants were indeed operating in the valley who sought help from Pakistan. They were termed as "freedom fighters" not "terrorists" - fighting for Kashmiri people's right to self-determination. India accused Pakistan's alleged involvement in the insurgency by terming it as "cross-border terrorism" and confronted its Jihadi strategy with twin approach: holding the valley and the insurgency militarily while trying to reach for a political solution by bringing the Kashmiris into the political process.

The policy of recriminations brought India and Pakistan on the brink of war in 1999 and in 2001. Even the bilateral talks at the highest level during this period collapsed in mutual accusations and counter-accusations, making the prospect of Kashmir solution remote. Both held their respective grounds. Pakistan's Jihadi policy, however, began to be undermined due to the international terrorist attacks against America in September 2001. Existence of Islamic militants on both sides of Kashmir divide did not escape Washington's attention, as tackling international Islamic militant groups became top priority in US foreign and national security goal following September 11. Washington expected Pakistan, as its critical ally on its war on terrorism, to restrain these groups in the context of the ground rules of a state's responsibility for terror-

ist groups operating inside its borders that were laid by President George Bush in his United Nations speech in November 2001. Subsequently, Pakistan's insistence that Jihadies were Kashmiri freedom fighters and were only getting moral and other support from Islamabad was no longer tenable, especially in the wake of suicide bombings outside Jammu and Kashmir State Assembly in October 2002 and the terrorists attack on Indian Parliament in December 2002. In the backdrop of changed rules of the game and under pressure from US, President Pervez Musharraf conceded in his January 12, 2002, National Assembly speech that Pakistan would not allow Jihad in the name of Kashmir.

Pakistan's constraints in its Jihadi policy do not emanate from external pressure and changed international scenario alone. It arose from country's internal situation as well. The Government of Pakistan began to feel weary of the presence of these Jihadi militant groups within Pakistan's borders, who not only radicalized the society by giving rise to sectarian strife and political violence, but also turned against the government for its close link and cooperation with the US in its dealings with the Al Qaeda. The threats posed by these groups seemed so menacing that the President in his maiden speech in the National Assembly declared that "internal extremists" i.e. Islamic fundamentalists militias, not India, pose greatest threat to the state. Yet Pakistan cannot completely do away with its present path unless some progress is made on Kashmir conflict.

Pakistan, however, would invest heavily in playing its Washington card. It is a critical ally of US, who, for the first time, since India and Pakistan became inde-

pendent, enjoys a unique position in South Asia. Its tilt towards India policy without abandoning Pakistan has paid off and its goodwill and friendship are sought by both South Asian rivals. The strategy serves their respective national interests -- India, in its quest for major power, and Pakistan for both domestic and external support, particularly in dealing with Indian threats. As US interest in South Asia is hampered due to Indo-Pakistan conflict, it has taken advantage of the situation and has been playing a pivotal role in defusing tensions and bringing them to negotiation table highlighting the fact that Pakistan would not allow Jihad in the name of Kashmir. Islamabad feels that as a critical ally of US, it may persuade Washington to play a behind the scene role in nudging New Delhi to move towards a mutually honourable agreement on Kashmir. It should, however, be noted that US has definite limits in influencing India in this respect.

Actually, resolution of such an intractable and longstanding problem as the status of Kashmir will remain elusive unless Indians and Pakistanis have a change of heart about their neighbours. This can happen only if there is increased flow of people across the borders and more contacts in economic and cultural domains. Only mutual trusts, demilitarization in Kashmir, mutual defense cuts and due consideration of the hopes and aspirations of the Kashmiri people will pave the way for a lasting peace in Kashmir. Pakistan's option is to work towards that goal while keeping a close tie with Washington and hoping that United States would become a catalyst for change.

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OPINION

The rise of militant Islam and the response of the ruling coalition

MOHAMMAD MOZAHIDUR RAHAMAN

FEAR and freedom seem to be at war with each other in today's world and our Bangladesh is not an exception to this. Behind the denial syndrome of the ruling coalition, the mushroom cloud of radical Islam spear-headed the first suicide bombing in the history of our country.

Given the enormity of the phenomenon, the perplexed coalition and our apathetic but pretentiously compassionate political figureheads responded with the usual filibuster, political rancour and yet another showcase of patricianism above the national interest.

Surprisingly and quite sadly, the only effective measure the coalition government could so far come up with to respond to this rise of militant Islam is to legally

wiretap the private conversations of the citizens of this free country. This measure infringes on the very freedom that the extremists want to steal from us. When fear takes over freedom, the extremists win. Once again the coalition got it dead wrong.

In this piece I argue that militant Islam is not an end in itself. It is an unjustified means to achieve political Islam. To design an effective remedy we must first debate the recognition of political Islam and then argue whether fear of militancy or freedom of democracy is the justifiable means to achieve that end of political Islam.

I argued in this column before that Islam, by its very nature of being all-encompassing, is also very political. Islam without politics is an empty shell without much of its essence. In fact, historically Islam had flourished the most under the banner of an Islamic

With every act of injustice, fear silently takes over the freedom of logical thinking. During this hostile takeover, fear shrouds the aura of freedom and induces society to resort to unjustified means to thwart potential perpetrators of injustice and, in doing so, ensure justice for all. Unfortunately, between this fracas of fear and freedom, it is the very notion of justice that becomes the ultimate casualty of war. The coalition government must be guided by the spirit of freedom not the trauma of fear in combating the residual Islamic militancy in our country.

State in Madinaa during the time of the Prophet Muhammed (pbuh). Then one wonders can militancy be a justifiable means to achieve this political Islam?

The Arabic word "Islam" means "peace" which is the natural consequence of total submission to the will of Allah. And Allah commands in the Quran: *O mankind! We created you from a male and female and made you into tribes, so you may know each other* (49:13). The universality of the appeal of Islam is evident in its very name. It is not named after a person as in the case of Christianity which was

named after Jesus Christ, Buddhism after Gotama Buddha, Confucianism after Confucius, and Marxism after Karl Marx. Nor was it named after a tribe like Judaism is named after the tribe of Judah and Hinduism after the Hindus. It is indeed a way of life based on peace, submission and universal brotherhood.

In essence, Islam and injustice are logical impossibility. As Allah says clearly in the Quran: Had your Lord willed, everyone on Earth would have believed. Do you then force everyone till they believed (10:99)?

It is not militancy but democracy which is the justifiable means to political Islam. It is the "freedom of the people" not the "fear of the people" that can enshrine the path of Islam as a system of life. It is justice not injustice that justifies the recognition of Islam as one of the dominant faiths in this world. It is the recognition of the conscious choice God Himself entrusted every individual with that should guide the political formation of the society.

Then one wonders why there is militancy in the name of Islam? Why this recent unjustified terror

on innocent lives and the perpetrators are all happened to be Muslims? Why eight out of the world's top ten most terror inflicted regions have to do with Muslims?

The answer is simple yet powerful, most obvious yet not being critically discussed, common knowledge yet the so-called intelligentsia seem to be oblivious to it. It is the sense of injustice among the Muslims, the abduction of their freedom by their own governments and by external powers, the fear of losing their freedom of faith and the hope of reviving a sinking ship of Islam

that pushes few Muslims to the brink of begetting injustice to others. It is this sense of a losing cause that shrouds the logical thinking process and induces them to hold on to the last straw of hope, be it extremism. But unfortunately, the first victim of that militancy in the name of Islam is, in fact, the Islam itself.

As a part of the Islamic world cannot escape the pandemic of Islamic militancy even though we are blessed with a democratic political process. Although we have successfully accommodated political Islam in our system of political formation, the residuals of militancy will haunt us because there will always be religious bigots who will always take the wrong side of the battle between fear and freedom. But we must not give in to fear and thwart the progress of freedom. If so, we will in fact perpetrate the

that breeds the militant Islam and the consequent injustice in the first place.

With every act of injustice, fear silently takes over the freedom of logical thinking. During this hostile takeover, fear shrouds the aura of freedom and induces society to resort to unjustified means to thwart potential perpetrators of injustice and, in doing so, ensure justice for all. Unfortunately, between this fracas of fear and freedom, it is the very notion of justice that becomes the ultimate casualty of war. The coalition government must be guided by the spirit of freedom not the trauma of fear in combating the residual Islamic militancy in our country.

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