

Everything's coming up ... not exactly roses in Bush's garden of Arab democracies

MICHAEL HIRSH

IT is one of President Bush's favourite applause lines. "Freedom isn't America's gift to the world," he repeats in speech after speech.

But what if what is actually blooming out there isn't lilies at all, but something more like stinkweed? What if we're seeing not the beginnings of secular, friendly democracies in the Arab world, which Bush and his advisers have spoken of so hopefully, but Islamic-dominated governments that are antithetical to American interests, giving off foul odours of Sharia and caliphates to come?

In fact, this seems to be happening. Fundamentalist stinkweed is sprouting up all over the Arab world. Yet the Bush administration -- employing the same creative skills that it used to recast its reasons for the Iraq war several times over -- is still telling the American people that what they're seeing is lilies.

American policymakers got many things wrong when they decided to invade Iraq. Most of these errors have been amply thrashed over: the manipulated intelligence on WMD and Saddam's ties to terror; the decision to lay down a smothering, paternalistic occupation despite having insufficient troops to secure the country; the reckless conflation of Al Qaeda with the Iraqi insurgency, so that US troops came to treat ordinary Iraqis with harsh techniques intended for a handful of hardcore Qaeda leaders; above all, the pretense that Bush's "war of choice" in Iraq had anything at all to do, at the beginning, with America's war of necessity against Al Qaeda.

But one major mistake has mostly escaped scrutiny: the Bush administration's misreading of the power of Islam in the Arab mindset, and of Islam's central importance in Arab society. The administration is still in a state of denial about this. Con-

sider the election results in Iraq. Right up until the parliamentary elections in mid-December, US officials were waxing hopeful that Iyad Allawi, the secular Shiite exile and former CIA operative they installed as interim prime minister, would be returned to power. Ahmad Chalabi, the once and again Pentagon favourite -- the man who once sold the administration on dreams of a secular, Israel-friendly Arab model state -- made a triumphal sweep through Washington last fall before the election. Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, thinking Chalabi might be on the verge of a major comeback, agreed to meet with him despite accusations that he and his associates revealed US secrets to Iraq.

Instead, the outcome stunned the administration. According to European foreign-policy chief Javier Solana, fully 78 percent of Iraqis voted for religious-party candidates. The secularists were marginalized. Allawi garnered a mere 25 seats out of 275 in the new Iraqi Parliament, and Chalabi's party was completely shut out. The new Iraqi prime minister may well be someone the Americans can work with, like current Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari or Adel Abdel Mehdi. But both these men will be at the beck and call of Shiite clerical leaders Abdul Aziz al-Hakim and Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, whose slates dominate half of Parliament and who have their own agendas.

This follows a pattern of denial going back to the beginning of the US occupation. A year before the US invasion, a Pentagon source who spoke on condition of anonymity told me that Central Command ordered Army intelligence to work up a file on Sistani, the most powerful cleric in Iraq. Central Command wasn't sure exactly who he was, but they knew he was important. Yet when Sistani rose to become the dominant voice for the majority Shias after the invasion, the Bush administration sought to brusquely shove him aside, and the Army's intel dossier was apparently forgotten.

Sistani, a fast learner once described to me as "frighteningly intelligent" by his political ally, Mowaffaq al-Rubaie, pleaded for early elections and a quick handover. He suggested, reasonably, that the Americans make use of the widely distributed United Nations food cards for voter registration. According to Rubaie, who is currently the Iraqi

Yet such is the paranoia of US policymakers about Islam that, since the Khomeini revolution in 1979, they still see every Islamic party as an incipient Iranian-style mullah state, or as a budding terrorist group that will give succour to Al Qaeda. What these policymakers miss is this: what happened in Iran hasn't occurred anywhere else. Iran underwent a unique revolution, one in which mullah control was written into the radical new constitution (much to the frustration of many in its younger generation today)



Iraq two years ago, when all this was just getting in motion, Rubaie complained that the Americans didn't understand how far Shia have traveled ideologically in their direction. "The traditional Shia political position was that of Hizbullah," he told me. "Now the Shia have made a paradigm shift toward the position of the US." But the occupation authorities, he said, "did not understand."

Other Islamists, like Hakim, have been willing to accommodate the Americans, if not quite cozy up to them. (Hakim has already made one trip to Washington, and may well make another in coming weeks.) "Nobody knows the failure of the Iranian system better than the Iraqis," says Reza Aslan, author of the new book "No God But God."

The obvious question arises: how could a US president who has made his own religious faith so much a part of his political philosophy -- even in America's supposedly secular system -- miss the fact that Arabs might want to do the same thing in their own politics? Bush was, quite simply, misled, Aslan says. "For the past few years or so, Western governments have been essentially blackmailed by our allies in the region, by [Egyptian President Hosni] Mubarak and King Abdullah [of Jordan], into believing that autocratic anti-democratic policies are necessary; if it weren't for them there would be theocracy in the region."

Another reason was the pre-eminence in Washington of the "Lewis Doctrine," as The Wall Street Journal once called it. Bernard Lewis, the dominant scholar of Islam of recent decades, succeeded in persuading his Bush administration allies of the need to forcibly implant, in the Arab world, a secularized democracy. Lewis saw Islam as essentially anti-modern and anti-democratic, the Arab equivalent of the medieval mindset in Europe that had to be vanquished by the Reformation.

national-security adviser, the savvy Sistani went about pressing his demands with a studied disingenuousness, knowing that Shiites made up 60 percent of the population. "He said, 'I read this textbook of democracy in the world, and the first thing I read is about elections, and so I'm asking for elections. I didn't go to the Qur'an, there is nothing written in the Qur'an about elections.'"

But for the Americans, empowering Sistani was just too scary. Born in Iran, he was seen as a medieval relic who perhaps harboured dreams of emulating the practices of his mullah pals next door. And Chalabi and his intellectual sponsor, the great sage

over that turned the country over to the same Shiite majority parties that now control it anyway. It also might have meant dealing with a less troubling, or at least less Islamized, Sunni minority (which began the occupation largely secular but is no longer after years of infusion by foreign jihadis). Now, after two years of being put off by the Americans, then murdered en masse by Sunni insurgents, the Shiites are no longer in much of a mood to share power.

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Rival scholars argue that Lewis and other conservative thinkers underestimated the role that Islam plays in Arab self-identity -- the sense of protective justice that the religion imparts to ordinary people, especially in traditional Arab autocracies. For centuries, there was comparative stability and prosperity in the Islamic world because Islam was playing its traditional role of constraining tyranny, argues Richard Bulliet, a Columbia

University Arabist. When many Iraqis felt themselves subject to an autocratic US occupation -- it's difficult for Americans to stomach this, but they are seen as autocrats -- they simply resorted to Islam, expecting it to play its traditional protective role. "Lewis gave a kind of scholarly gloss to what the administration wanted to hear" about secular democracy, says Bulliet. After 9/11, Bulliet and other Arabists with kinder, more nuanced views of Islam were branded soft on terrorism and hounded into silence (even today, a Web site called Campus Watch monitors their every statement for evidence of squishiness on Islam and on anti-Semitism).

Now Bush and his advisers have been quietly grappling with the idea that their principal interlocutors across the Arab world may soon be very religious men (sort of like them). Not just in Iraq either as Wednesday's historic Palestinian election has shown. When asked, US officials insist they will have no dealings with Hamas, because it is a terrorist group. In private, however, the president has been gingerly laying out what one senior European official described last year as Bush's "theory of redemption."

As Bush put it in remarks last spring, even terrorists can be weaned from violence by the need to satisfy their constituencies. "Maybe some will run for office and say, 'Vote for me; I look forward to blowing up America,'" Bush said. "But ... I think people who generally run for office say, 'Vote for me; I'm looking forward to fixing your potholes or making sure you've got bread on the table.'"

Author Aslan -- whose book argues that Islam has always made room for democracy, going back to the days of the Prophet -- sees an "excellent political experiment" in all this. Hamas has removed sentences calling for the destruction of Israel from its campaign literature, he says, and it has performed better than the corrupt Fatah in delivering services to people. "For years we've been talking about how democratic participation is the only way to moderate extremist ideologies," he says. "Here is the perfect chance to see that in play." But first the Bush administration must admit that everything may not be coming up lilies.

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Is a fair election possible under this CEC?

It is still not clear as to why the government is afraid of facing the people with reforming caretaker government or electoral laws. Are we to believe that the present government may like to go for anything, right or wrong, to win the election to retain power. Already the Election Commission is at a standstill because of CEC's failure to understand clearly his actual role as the chief of the commission. What will happen to the new recruits from the JCD?

ABMS ZAHUR

OUR limping democracy under an inefficient, corrupt government will soon be under the stress of a national election. The new Chief Election Commission appears to be working under the Prime Minister's Office and not independently. During the short period of stay in office it appears that he does not believe in working like an Election Commissioner. He has made it abundantly clear that he cannot take any action not acceptable to the PMO. Though he is oath bound to be neutral for holding free and fair election, gradual politicisation of the Election Commission has created enough doubt in the public minds about his capability for holding a free and fair national election.

The Election Commission is virtually passing through deadlock since August 2005 because of war of nerves between the Chief Election Commissioner and the other two commissioners on the issue of preparation of voter list. The CEC's decision, ignoring the recommendations of other commissioners to go for preparing voter list on the basis of previous voter list, appears to be unprecedented in the history of Bangladesh. Preparation of fresh voter list involving an estimated expenditure of around Tk.1500 million appears to be not only unnecessary it is also irregular.

After the HC verdict against preparation of fresh voter list, the avoidance of the CEC to hold meeting of the commission appears to be adopting some trick to free himself from pressure from outside

the commission. The option that appears to be open for him is either to act independently with advice from the commissioners who have the equal status with him or to resign from the post of CEC. After all, resignation of the CEC is nothing unprecedented. Only very active cooperation from his more experienced colleagues can make it possible for him to hold the 2007 election. This does not, however, appear to be a possibility and as such it seems there may not be any free and fair election under him, even with the recent addition of two new commissioners to give the CEC a majority.

As we see there is no possibility for a smooth, meaningful, and effective election in the present political situation. The four-party alliance and the Awami League, as it appears, cannot come to an understanding because BNP cannot leave JI. Though Jatiya Party of Ershad was considered at one stage as some sort of a balancing factor however, this does not appear to be any more feasible because of division in the party. Unless Ershad with 19 court cases hanging on him decides to resign from the chairmanship of the party, JP cannot play any effective role in Bangladesh politics.

We are not sure as to the capability of Bikalpadhara to emerge as a strong force against BNP. None of the smaller parties appear to be performing better than their past record. Due to growing influence of political mastans, some experienced and capable leaders may not be able to obtain party nomination in both BNP and AL. This may happen particularly in BNP because of its compulsion for

leaving 70-80 seats to JI. Some of these disgruntled leaders may contest independently. It would not be surprising if a considerable number of them are elected because of their past records.

Not only in holding election, Bangladesh is also facing the danger of becoming a failed state. Neither political nor social nor economic situation indicate any encouraging sign for the common people. Statistical analysis showing growth may be useful for raising credit rating. It does not convince us that raising the level of investment has benefited the poor people as was expected.

There is no indication showing improvement in the level of corruption or law and order situation. ACC is still non-functional. Extra judicial killings can never root out violence. In fact the government is still showing hesitation in controlling Islamic militancy. Good plan can hardly be executed successfully with highly politicised, corrupt, and inefficient administration. Common people are suffering from serious insecurity because of Islamic militants, high price of consumer goods.

The image of Bangladesh has already been tarnished abroad because of corrupt administration, confrontational politics between major political parties, failure of the government to control militancy and insecurity of minority communities. Despite loud claim, the government has failed to play appropriate role in the WTO, maintain or improve relations with US, or EU countries or India or Japan or South Korea, or even with OIC countries. In making public statements, we

often see use of strong (sometimes harsh even) expression by some of our ministers. This is either because of weakness in drafting the statements or sheer lack of adequate depth of knowledge to deal with foreign governments. We may not have enough leaders (political or otherwise) to handle foreign diplomats from advanced countries or donor agencies, we must refrain from using harsh or unkind words about donor agencies or developed nations or neighbours.

Time has come for us to concentrate on improving our diplomatic parlance. We must not forget about our need for support from friendly states and donor agencies to tackle our various economic and social problems effectively and rapidly. We should never ignore the fact that we shall have to go a long way to become even a mid-level income countries because of good number of hurdles.

It would be wrong to try to win the election through vote rigging. This would be just like jumping from frying pan to fire. As we see, BNP has the capacity to win election without any support from any other political party if it can maintain its image as a moderate Islamic party. By seeking support from JI it may even lose some votes because JI's image has already been damaged due to JMB's nefarious activities. Close association with JI will definitely create an impression that BNP also supports militancy though BNP has a considerable number of freedom fighters in its fold.

It is true that BNP has not been able to fulfil some major commitments during the last election. This does not mean that they are totally without success. Had they been more prudent about nomination of their candidates and members of the cabinet, had there been no tendency to copy some misdeeds of the previous government, had there been more cooperation from the opposition, had there been no mischief by the Islamic militants, BNP could, perhaps, have done better. No successful election is possi-

ble without successful political negotiation. Showing strong arrogance or threat will not lead us anywhere. It is still not clear as to why the government is afraid of facing the people with reforming caretaker government or electoral laws. Are we to believe that the present government may like to go for anything, right or wrong, to win the election to retain power. Already the Election Commission is at a standstill because of CEC's failure to understand clearly his actual role as the chief of the commission. What will happen to the new recruits from the JCD?

Killing of two judges by members of a militant group in broad daylight has made the life of public servants insecure. How many officers can be given police protection against suicide bombers. In such a situation, it is advisable for the government to increase the possibility for further deterioration of law and order situation before election.

In the past we have seen that the strong dictators like Ayub Khan or HM Ershad ultimately bowed down before the wish of the people, only about ten years back Khaleida Zia herself showed respect to the wish of the people. Though limping, we are still maintaining democratic government. We do not expect from BNP any act that will destroy democracy. On the other hand, we hope that sooner or later the Awami League will realise their role to protect Bangladesh against Islamic fundamentalists, in enabling the democratic forces to revive their strength to fight for secularism and retain our existence as a free nation.

We wish that the new CEC would realise the true situation and decide quickly and correctly as to how to accomplish the task of conducting a free and fair election in the present situation. However, we cannot be optimistic under this commission. ABMS Zahur is a retired Joint Secretary.

Are we lost and confused?

Is something missing in our thought process? If so, what is it? Is it self-consciousness? Is it soul-searching? Or is it a lack of understanding of something else? Does the missing thing provide the key to self-fulfilment? Perhaps we are missing something that we don't know or are unaware of. It may be because we are too busy in our daily lives or don't bother to think about what is missing.

ABDUL QUADER writes from Cambodia

Are we lost? Are we confused? Nowadays we are not sure about our place in society because we have so many roles to play. We are multi-tasked and need to attend to so many things, profound and trivial. We are living in an uncertain world where things are moving too fast, making it is extremely difficult for us to pause, ponder, and reflect.

The sense of security has disappeared to a large extent with the loss of certainty and comfort we felt in the past. People in the past knew that things would not change too quickly, which provided them with a sense of assurance and security as far as consequences of human actions were concerned.

Are too many choices good for us? Is too much competition beneficial to the society? Is unbridled desire for material well-being always good for human beings? Has the definition of "good" and "bad" changed? Has the "unacceptable" in the past now become easily "acceptable" in modern times? All these are very difficult questions indeed and can be addressed within the framework of a theological discipline as well.

The "immoral" is often treated or perceived as "moral" and the society is indifferent to this dilemma. Expediency often becomes more important than a set of moral principles. "The more, the merrier" may not always lead a person to an abode of peace and bliss. But who will make the value judgement?

It is now easy to be lost within the countless and confusing choices that modern times offer us. The more the choices, the more confused we become because we cannot decide what to take, what to retain and what to discard. We face distractions everywhere and are susceptible to losing concentration that we need in order to achieve inner peace and happiness. Sounds philosophical?

Are we becoming more and more restless? Is it because we have a conflict between the conscious and the sub-conscious states of our mind? Or is it because we have a tug of war between the "good" and the "bad" within us? We often do what we really don't want to do. The constant conflict between the conscious and sub-conscious states of our mind can hold us back from attaining the harmony we need to achieve inner peace in our mind.

The never-ending conflict embedded in our mind perhaps stands in the way of our moving towards the desired path of equilibrium -- a state where our thoughts, feelings and actions are all in accord with each other. But we are often unable to control our own thoughts, feelings and actions given the fast changing surroundings in which we now live.

The smaller the world, the smaller the space we have. We have made the world smaller -- thanks to the faster transport as well as the development, wider diffusion and ever-increasing use of information and communications technology. Now we have a lesser sense of inner space with

the world becoming smaller and smaller as time unfolds in front of us. The so-called "information explosion" has led us to a path of distractions causing a lack of focus on things which are perhaps more important to life.

Is the smaller world with all the knowledge at our fingertips always good for us? Does not the "unknown" provide us with a sense of suspense and awe, which could be more satisfying? Who knows!

Is something missing in our thought process? If so, what is it? Is it self-consciousness? Is it soul-searching? Or is it a lack of understanding of something else? Does the missing thing provide the key to self-fulfilment? Perhaps we are missing something that we don't know or are unaware of. It may be because we are too busy in our daily lives or don't bother to think about what is missing. We just drift with the current of time.

Change in life is inevitable, good or bad. This presupposes conscious actions of mankind to influence the change for the better. Just living is trivial; how someone is living is more important if looked at in the light of the purpose of life.

How do we fulfil the promise of life? What promise? We don't remember we made any promise to anybody. Do we?

"Look and you will find it -- what is unsought will go undetected," said the Greek philosopher Sophocles. But ignorance is bliss. So why not live in the world of bliss!

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