

The state of the republic

In a situation where elected representatives of the people are denied opportunity to discuss in Parliament issues of great importance, in a situation where members of Parliament cannot disagree with the policy of their own party and cannot vote according to the dictates of their best judgment, in a situation where marriage of convenience catapults to power a party which was opposed to the emergence of Bangladesh and many of whose leaders are guilty of crimes against humanity, the tyranny of the majority needs to be opposed by all sentient citizens of the country.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

ABOUT three weeks back President George W. Bush told the US Congress and the world that "the state of the union is strong, and together we will make it stronger." His hope for togetherness denotes inclusiveness, bipartisanship, and embraces all Americans.

In Bangladesh, the state of the republic is not strong and "togetherness" is absent in our political culture. Intolerance displayed by the government in and out of Parliament to opposing views, disdain showed to the genuine difficulties faced by the people crushed under the relentless wheels of poverty, indifference shown to the concerns expressed by the international community and to their insistent advice for good governance, prosaic and cosmic efforts at controlling lawlessness through selective use of illegality (crossfire) practiced by the law enforcing authorities which have failed to address satisfactorily either the question of legality of the measures undertaken by the law enforcement authorities or the basic question of insecurity assailing the nation -- these are some of the factors pushing Bangladesh towards the abyss.

Perhaps one of the most constrictive features defacing the democratic character of the coun-

try is the tyranny of the majority. James Madison warned in the Federalist Papers "of the great importance in a republic not only to guard society against the oppression of its rulers but to guard one part of the society against the injustice of the other part." Unless a mechanism can be devised to prevent fifty one percent of the people from controlling one hundred percent of the decisions, the "tyranny of the majority" cannot be prevented.

This was keenly felt by the framers of the American constitution in the early days when the fragile nation was being cobbled together, when Madison would rather call the American Federal Government a republic rather than a democracy because the people did not vote themselves but were governed by the representatives they elected, when Alexander Hamilton advised accommodation of "interests or opinions of interests" of the then constituent thirteen independent states.

Why else did the Founding Fathers establish a bicameral legislature -- Senate and House of Representatives -- instead of a simple majority rule by a unicameral legislature? Why else does the US constitution have an Electoral College to elect the President instead of the President being elected by a simple majority of popular votes? Why does the US constitution give the President the

veto power over decisions made by the majority of both houses of the Congress? While understandably the American constitution was the product of a particular time and amended as circumstances changed over time, the essential point made here is to remove the false impression of the government that a mandate for five years is meant for infinity and even that five years period can be abridged should circumstances so dictate.

In a situation where elected representatives of the people are denied opportunity to discuss in Parliament issues of great importance, in a situation where members of Parliament cannot disagree with the policy of their own party and cannot vote according to the dictates of their best judgment, in a situation where marriage of convenience catapults to power a party which was opposed to the emergence of Bangladesh and many of whose leaders are guilty of crimes against humanity, the tyranny of the majority needs to be opposed by all sentient citizens of the country.

Albeit in a different context, it is not difficult to comprehend the reluctance of Henry David Thoreau to surrender fully his rights to the elected representatives. Reserving the right to dissent is mankind's inheritance from civilization and expression of dissent signifies that elected members can be fallible and should be shown the right way

should they falter on the path of righteousness.

Totalitarianism, it has been argued, is not an antithesis of democracy but is one of its extreme possibilities. Totalitarianism is reflected through total identification of political functions and powers that in a democratic system are conceptually thought to be different. Alexander Hamilton's need for accommodation, referred to earlier, is consonant with the views of German philosopher Jurgen Habermas.

He stresses that a state's raison d'etre lies primarily "in the guarantee of an inclusive process of opinion-and-will formation in which free and equal citizens reach an understanding on which goals and norms lie in equal interest of all."

But when different state institutions whose duty it is to check on the excesses committed by others are manipulated in such a way that their distinct personalities are merged with that of a powerful executive, totalitarianism is born.

Never in the history of the world has totalitarianism been beneficial to the people. From Louis XIV's "L'etat c'est moi (I am the state)" to Hitler's Nazism to autocratic rule by military dictators and absolute monarchs, asymmetrical socio-economic developments in totalitarian regimes have denied the great majority of the people living in the lower strata of totalitarian societies the trickle down

effects of development which once was believed to hold the essence of development theory.

Short of violence, from both external and internal sources, to effect regime change, resort to "coherent majoritarianism" has been suggested which requires not simply most votes that signal legitimate outcome but the most votes produced by best arguments. Such a process would not only avoid the risk of "legitimacy deficit" of the decisions made but would also fulfill, in the words of American philosopher John Dewey, "the means by which a majority becomes a majority: antecedent debate, discussion and persuasion."

One could consider Dewey's philosophy of accommodative behaviour as utopian given the confrontational nature of politics in Bangladesh where the government's strong determination to hang onto power (through election engineering, if necessary) is far less dedicated by the will to serve the people and more by the desire to use public office for private gains. The daily catalogue of corruption replete in our media perhaps explains more than anything else why the authorities are so determined not to lose authority. The observation made to the House of Commons in the 18th century by Edmund Burke that as wealth is power, so all power must infallibly draw wealth to itself, could be equally true of Bangladesh today.

The combined opposition parties have placed in the Parliament a charter of reforms relating to the caretaker government, election commission, and the electoral process, which, if accepted by the government, are expected to give the people the opportunity to participate in a free and fair elec-



tion.

The opposition parties feel, as do many Bangladeshis and foreigners alike, that all the state apparatus having been either politicized or being rigorously controlled by the government including the constitutional bodies, participation in the next parliamentary elections without the reforms spelled out by the Leader of the Opposition in Jaiyo Sangsad would be asinine.

One wonders whether the unease repeatedly voiced by President Bush that "problems originating in a failed and oppressive state (he was referring to pre-Karzai Afghanistan) could bring murder and destruction to our country (because) dictatorships

shelter terrorists, and feed resentment and radicalism (while) democracies replace resentment with hope and respect the rights of their citizens and their neighbours" can be answered by writer/columnist Jonathan Rauch.

Rauch credits Ariel Sharon and Junichiro Koizumi, both champions of the Right, with insurgency in their own parties by giving political space to the restive centrists, and in Koizumi's case replacing dinosaurs with new recruits in the Japanese parliament.

Though Bangladesh is not exactly comparable to either Japan or Israel considering the level of development and culture (two of the four conditions suggested by Francis Fukuyama as necessary for

democratic transformation), yet Bangladesh does fit in with the two other conditions, namely, neighbourhood effect (Indian practice of uninterrupted democracy for more than half a century) and ideas (i.e. insatiable craving for democracy among Bangladeshis which intermittent military dictatorships and their camouflaged politics could not wither away).

The sooner our authorities realize that no amount of repression can weaken the people's desire for holding of a truly free and fair election which hopefully would usher in good governance, the better it would be for Bangladesh and the international community.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Building bridges between faiths

TALKING BOOKS

Armstrong is what one reviewer describes as "arguably the most lucid, wide-ranging and consistently interesting religion writer today." She is certainly a profound thinker and prolific writer on comparative religion, perhaps the only philosopher living who has addressed faith, belief and organized religion with an objectivity and balance that is remarkable.

YASMEEN MURSHED

THE "cartoon" story is filling column inches around the world but I think the two best pieces on the subject are by Robert Fiske and M.J. Akbar, both of whom have summed up the opinions of most educated, moderate people in the world.

As the latter points out, the Danish press showed a cavalier disregard for the consequences of their actions and the attitude of the rest of the European press is also cause for concern, but the British have been remarkably balanced in their coverage of the news. The protestation of the Europeans about the "freedom" of their press is quite unconvincing because the fact is that there are some restrictions on the press in every country, notably by the laws of libel, especially when it is a question of protecting the dignity of a human being or belief.

For example, in France it is legally forbidden to say that the Jewish Holocaust did not happen, as it is also in Germany and Austria. Thus it is obvious that the European press has been selective in its "freedom" -- applying restrictions to certain subjects but not to others. The Danish government has been seriously remiss in not applying their very comprehensive libel laws to the situation early on so that the matter could have been resolved judiciously.

To express anger through protests and demonstrations is a natural human reaction to what one considers an insult to a person, object or belief that one holds in the greatest of esteem. For example the Catholic world reacted sharply to the film, "The Last Temptation of Christ," which showed Jesus in explicit sexual situations. In Paris, cinema were set on fire and people killed and injured.

In India last week, after protests in Delhi, the eminent artist, MF Husain had to apologize and withdraw a painting from an exhibition because it depicted "Bharat Mata" as a naked young woman. In the case of the cartoon, the depiction was clearly meant to arouse anti-Islamic sentiments, because neither the Prophet nor indeed the Qu'ran condone terrorism, militancy and mindless violence, no matter what the so-called fundamentalists such as Osama bin Laden claim.

Anyone who knows anything at all about the Holy Prophet knows that it was his outstanding humaneness and compassion that was his most significant quality.

It is sad that Europeans still remain largely insensitive to the emotion that Muslims have for their faith and their beliefs, simply judging us by the outward appearance of beard and "hijab" and recently by the increasing tendency to label all terrorism as Islamic.

It is this dangerous lack of knowledge and understanding that leads to what Robert Fiske describes as "the childishness of civilizations" not a "clash of civilizations between secular Western democracies and Islamic societies." The cartoon affair makes it clear that the gulf continues to widen and it behooves educated persons to make Islam and what it really preaches more widely known and taught.

Apart from the works of writers from the Muslim world -- and there are many -- there are well known Western authors who have written knowledgeably and objectively about Islam such as Marie Anne Schimmel and Arthur Guilleme who tried to present a view that would be acceptable to Western scholars. A recent series of books on Islam and the other monotheistic faiths has been written by the British writer, Karen Armstrong.

Armstrong is what one reviewer describes as "arguably the most lucid, wide-ranging and consistently interesting religion writer today." She is certainly a profound thinker and prolific writer on comparative religion, perhaps the only philosopher living who has addressed faith, belief and organized religion with an objectivity and balance that is remarkable.

Her great strength is that she has herself undergone great doubt and uncertainty about her spiritual beliefs and faith. This led her to study the great religions of the world in depth and her research into comparative religion has given her a wide perspective and acknowledged scholarship in the field.

After the Salman Rushdie affair which incited a British backlash against Muslims in 1989 she wrote the biography of the Prophet, "Muhammad: A Western Attempt to Understand Islam" in 1992 which first brought her into the field of Western writing on Islam. It was the second biography that I read

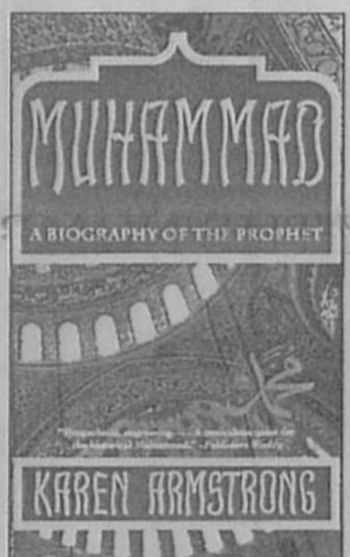
-- after Martin Lings' book -- that was written by a well known Western writer of our generation. It seemed to me to be even-handed and unprejudiced, albeit from a non-Muslim's point of view. The book was well received in the West and reviewers praised it as "respectful without being reverential, knowledgeable without being pedantic, and, above all, readable."

It is certainly a useful book which gives an introduction to the period and culture in which Islam was born and an account of the major events in the life of the Holy Prophet, ending with a brief overview of the state of Islam after the death of the Prophet. There have been several editions of the book since then and Armstrong has revised the last chapter to bring it up to date with world events. However she has made assumptions and attributions to the Prophet and his followers which are not well authenticated by Muslim sources, therefore there are in general some reservations about the book by Muslims.

Obviously Armstrong's point of view is that of a non-believer but one who admits to being drawn to Islam after she grew disenchanted with her own early belief in Catholicism. She had spent her formative years as a Catholic nun, finally leaving her English convent in disillusionment without having discovered the spiritual strength that she was seeking. She underwent all kinds of ups and downs, feelings of disorientation and a loss of connection to the real world, "feeling separated from the rest of humanity as if behind a sheet of glass." It was after much soul searching and reflection that she gained a measure of understanding of her own spiritual needs and now describes herself as a "monotheistic freelancer."

She has described this search for spiritual enlightenment in "The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out Of Darkness" (Knopf, 2005) which is a gripping memoir of personal and mental conflict and growth within faith. She has also written numerous other books which have explained her ideas about Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. She sees a clear connection between the great monotheistic faiths and is committed to her role as "a bridge builder who promotes understanding among the three faiths."

Three of her books, "A History of God" (Ballantine, 1993), "Jeru-



salem: One City, Three Faiths" (Knopf, 1996), and "The Battle for God" (Knopf, 2000) show what unites the faiths. Each, Armstrong writes, has developed the image of one Supreme Being who was first revealed to the prophet Abraham. All have historic links to Jerusalem. And more recently, each has built up a rigid conservative strain as a reaction against the modern world.

Armstrong is currently teaching Christianity at a Jewish college for rabbis in London and will hopefully influence them to be less exclusionary of the other monotheistic faiths. She is recognized as a powerful advocate for understanding and cooperation among the three great religions of the world and has been given various awards by Islamic organizations. She has become a sought after speaker on television and at conferences.

However Armstrong gets her share of criticism from those who like to be divisive rather than inclusive when it comes to relationships among countries and regions. For example her book "Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths" was criticized as being anti-Jewish and the very personal account of her life as a nun "Through the Narrow Gate," that revealed the restrictive life of the convent, led to a strong Catholic reaction.

At present it seems that after all the emotional and spiritual travails of her life she has finally found, in a life of teaching, writing and public speaking, her fulfilling place and purpose. But, she says, "I tremble for our world, where, in the smallest ways, we find it impossible ... to find room for 'the other' in our mind."

The "case of the cartoon" validates this remark clearly and makes me hope that the works of authors such as Karen Armstrong find a wider readership all around the world.

Yasmeen Murshed is a full-time bookworm and a part-time educationist. She is also the founder of Scholastica School.

Fortress Dhaka

What has emerged on the landscape of our Dhaka city is an urban space where increasingly large sections are managed by private companies, as distinctive from those controlled by public authorities. Examples of these fragmented and privatised spaces are gated neighbourhoods, large apartment complexes, big shopping malls and large corporate headquarters, under heavy private surveillance and separated from the public realm by controlled access and clear boundaries.

SARDAR MASUD KARIM

A key to understanding a city's performance in providing a decent civic life to its citizens is to explore its relationship between the public and private domain. This relationship is manifested physically in spatial organisation of a city's public and private space and is constantly evolving through changing social and economic processes.

In the present context of globalisation associated with free market economy, cities all over the world are undergoing rapid transformation through reorganisation of their social and spatial geography. Our Dhaka city is no exception. Dhaka's rapid growth to a mega city, however, has been a costly exercise, as it has been parallel with a growing social divide, a vast migrated population from rural areas with no access to employment, shelter, basic civic amenities are undermining the quality of life for large groups of the population in the city depriving them any form of decent civic life.

These symptoms have led to concerns for the fragmentation of the social world, where a vast majority of society are excluded from the "mainstream." This underclass "other" are increasingly being marginalised in all aspects of social, political, economic and cultural domain of the city. This exclusion is increasingly manifested spatially on the urban landscape of Dhaka as their access to urban space is getting restricted through large scale privatisation of urban space through land and property markets.

This exclusion is painful for the excluded and harmful for society as a whole. While some societal rules about exclusion are benign -- the right of strangers to enter a person's home at will is unacceptable in almost all cultures -- exclusion of groups of city residents from access to all that the city has to offer on the basis of social status, income, religion or race is painful to members of the group and damaging to the society at large, as evidenced by the increasing crime and conflict in cities around the world.

In recent times we are observing that in our Dhaka city real estate developers are contributing to socio-spatial segregation by privatising urban space. The changing nature of development companies and the entry of the finance industry into built environment production and management have partly led to what is widely known as the privatisation of urban space.

Large scale developers and financiers expect their commodities to be safe for investment and maintenance, hence their inclination to reduce as much as possible all the levels of uncertainty which could threaten their interests. This trend is parallel with the increasing fear of crime, rising competition from similar developments, and the rising expectations of the consumers, all encouraging the development of totally managed built environments.

What has emerged on the landscape of our Dhaka city is an urban space where increasingly large sections are managed by private companies, as distinctive from those controlled by public authorities. Examples of these fragmented and privatised spaces are gated neighbourhoods, large apartment complexes, big shopping malls and large corporate headquarters, under heavy private surveillance and separated from the public realm by controlled access and clear boundaries. This total management of parts of the city is in part an attempt to control crime.

"Crime" acts as a counter-claim to space and as such is itself an exclusionary force keeping many groups vulnerable and marginalised.

The universal and inevitable consequence of this crusade to secure our Dhaka city is the destruction of accessible public space. The contemporary opprobrium attached to the term "street person" is in itself a harrowing index of the devaluation of public spaces. To reduce contact with untouchables, so-called "urban redevelopment" has converted once vital pedestrian streets into traffic sewers and transformed our public parks into temporary receptacles for the criminals and social underworld. Our Dhaka city, as many critics have recognised, is being systematically turned inside out -- or, rather, outside in. The hermetically sealed spaces of the new mega-structures and supermarkets are concentrated in the centre, street frontage is denuded, public activity is sorted into strictly functional compartments, and circulation is internalised in corridors under the gaze of private police.

Dhaka is gradually becoming, a vast and continuous system of signs that we read and obey mostly on a subconscious level. Today's upscale, pseudo-public spaces are full of invisible signs warning off the underclass "other." Although our architects are usually oblivious to how the built environment

contributes to segregation, pariah groups -- whether poor migrant families from rural areas, street children we call tokais, or homeless slum dwellers -- read the meaning immediately.

This epochal coalescence has far-reaching consequences for the social relations of the built environment. We are getting used to living in a fortress city brutally divided between fortified cells of affluent society and places of terror where the police battle the criminalised poor. The old liberal paradigm of social control, attempting to balance repression with reform, has long been superseded by a rhetoric of social warfare that calculates the interests of the urban poor and the middle classes as a zero-sum game.

In cities like Dhaka, on the bad edge of post-modernity, one observes an unprecedented tendency to merge urban development, architecture and the police apparatus into a single, comprehensive security effort.

The readers may find my above observation is one of desperation and despair, offering no obvious way out of the current impasse. I have tried to capture the seriousness of the issue and highlight the factors and forces behind the scene which are contributing to the process of socio-spatial exclusion in our Dhaka city.

Not all can be understood, appearances as well as essences persistently deceive, and what is real cannot always be captured even in extraordinary language. However, an effort to understand what is going wrong within the existing system is one step towards the solution of the problem.

There is hope, nonetheless, if we really want to get out of the current impasse. The problem we are facing is not unique to our Dhaka



Sardar Masud Karim, an architect and urban planner, is currently working for the Department of Planning (DoP), NSW Government, Australia.