

Political intolerance is anti-democratic

CONSCIENCE & SOCIETY



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party they should have shown more political tolerance in handling the gherao of the PM's office on April 19, 2006.

Instead of having a nearly three mile "no-sit-in" zone to protect the PM's office, which is obviously the property of the nation, the opposition processions should have been allowed, escorted by the less volatile police force (generally such processions remain peaceful but police provocations make them disruptive), to come probably up to the fountain in Bijooy Sharani where they could find a bigger sit-in area.

The government could have announced in advance, through media, a committee (if the PM wanted to avoid the crowd) headed by a senior minister and a party boss, say the Secretary General, which could meet the representatives of the opposition processions and take their written demands for government's consideration.

If the situation was managed like this in a democratic way, then one could say with some amount of certainty that the opposition would not have behaved the way it did. Apparently, it did so under the provocation of the terribly intolerant police force which routinely beat up all the former Home Ministers whenever they find them in the processions (L Z Babar may take note of this).

However, had the ruling party shown tolerance and respect to the opposition's program regardless of its character and if the opposition still behaved the same way, the ruling party would have scored a big plus for the next election. But unfortunately things went beyond control and it was proven to the world that Bangladesh political parties talk of democracy, but hardly observe the democratic rules when it comes to their show of political strengths.

They go by their standard for-

mula whenever they are out of power and observe hartals, gheraos that bring terrible distress to the civil society. Though peoples' memory is short, it is not that short; all political parties must remember that the election is only a few months away. If all these deeds and counter-deeds are for coming to power or for retaining power as applicable, then they must show respect to what people want; the people want peace and not street fights in the name of democracy.

The people want dialogue; democracy demands dialogue between political parties to solve problems and not street agitations (street agitation may be a democratic process but that should be only the last resort) that destroy economy and bring immense suffering to the people. The dialogue between opposition political parties and the ruling alliance is a must for finding an acceptable solution so that a free and fair election could be held early next year.

But unfortunately there is no progress in that area. Only exchange letters and harsh words. The combined opposition does not want to sit with the Jamat. The reasons are well known, but the ruling party reportedly appears hell bent to include Jamat as it says Jamat is a part of the ruling alliance. People wonder why such objections now when the opposition sat with Jamat earlier and also sometime sit with them in the present parliament. The opposition never said it would not go to the parliament as Jamat is there. Unless Jamat is banned politically for their alleged crimes during Liberation War, their representatives elected by the people will sit in the parliament and may appear in the political discussions as a part of the alliance.

However, for the sake of good politics and for the welfare of the country, the ruling party could avoid nomination of Jamat. Maybe they would do so as the final letter has not been sent out yet by the ruling alliance. What the ruling party could do is to do internal consultation with Jamat as and when necessary on all the issues and present them to the opposition in the Reform Committee. This could be a way out. As Jamat issue is a terribly

sensitive one, the ruling party should give due consideration to it while sending the names for the Reform Committee.

The opposition argument as stated by a senior member Tofael Ahmad appears reasonable when he says Reform Committee is a political committee and not a parliament committee. Indeed, the ruling party allowed the opposition to include non-MP member in the Reform Committee. So it may not be necessary at all to include Jamat in the committee though the said issue was mooted in the parliament.

The most important thing is that the dialogue must take place, the presence of Jamat should be ignored if nominated for finding an acceptable solution to the reform of the caretaker government and Election Commission. The people will not rest unless these are sorted out by the political parties. The political parties must not think that "the nation is made up of two political parties, where people are only their playthings" (ref: The Daily Star editorial).

The nation demands that the next election is held in a free and fair manner and that the political parties do not field corrupt candidates. The parliament must have clean people who will be willing to serve the people and not plunder the wealth of the country. The people fought and liberated the country and they have the right to say how the country should be run; this is what democracy is all about. Any failure to do so may bring political disaster of unknown dimensions.

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US-China face-off in Latin America?

LETTER FROM AMERICA



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LAST April 14, an important meeting took place in Washington DC between officials of the US and China, the countries with the world's biggest economies. The meeting involved formal talks on multilateral cooperation in Latin America. It went largely unnoticed in the press amidst the news coverage of important events in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Nepal and other world hot spots and the anticipated arrival of Chinese President Hu Jintao in Washington last week.

But the summit was a seminal event, the first of its kind between the two countries. Most significantly, it signifies the importance of China's growing role in a region long regarded by Uncle Sam as its own backyard.

While both the US and China have said that strengthening Sino-Latin America ties will not harm US interests in the region, many US experts say the Bush administration, with its preoccupations elsewhere, has not woken up to the fact that China's increasingly aggressive move in Latin America does have important political, security and economic implications for the country.

"Until recently, Washington had all but ignored that China has made inroads in the region," Xuan-Trang Ho of the Washington-based Council of Hemispheric Affairs wrote in the Panama News last November. "China has deepened their cooperation, especially in the areas of trade and development."

Following recent diplomatic exchanges between China and major Latin America counties such as Brazil, Venezuela and Chile, China committed itself to new investments in Latin America and the Caribbean totaling \$50

China, meanwhile, is hungrily searching the globe for energy sources to fuel its booming economy, while it looks for new markets to sell its low cost manufactured goods. By this year's end, some sources predict China will become the world's biggest oil importer. That's why the country is now diligently searching the world for energy sources. As it looks to Latin America, China can see that Venezuela, presently the world's fifth largest oil producer, has the Western Hemisphere's largest proven oil reserves. With regard to energy, the strategic objectives of China and oil-producing Venezuela converge.

billion. During the first years of this century, Latin America exports to China have grown phenomenally - 50.4 percent annually between 2002 and 2003 alone. During the period, exports from Brazil increased 503 percent, Argentina by 363 percent and Chile by 238 percent.

Still despite these impressive growth rates for trade, China is not yet playing a major regional role in investment. That dynamic, however, is expected to change. This past April 13, Jose Luis Machinea, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, said China is "potentially" a "large" investor in Latin America. He elaborated: "Traditionally, foreign investment has come from the United States and Europe; however, it's essential to diversify capital flow."

What's behind the strengthening ties? It's obvious on Latin America's part, given the result of recent regional elections. The region wants to reduce its economic and political dependence on Uncle Sam, a country that historically has often operated with a Big Stick in the region. For decades, the US in the name of the Cold War, backed unsavoury right wing dictatorships, which crushed the mainly leftist opposition and supported US corporate interests. Moreover, there is growing discontent over US promulgated neo-liberal policies that don't seem to be working. As reporter David Lynch explained in USA Today: "Across the region, leaders railing against 'savage capitalism' are now the norm and major US initiatives such as the Free Trade Area of the

Americas lie dormant." China, meanwhile, is hungrily searching the globe for energy sources to fuel its booming economy, while it looks for new markets to sell its low cost manufactured goods. By this year's end, some sources predict China will become the world's biggest oil importer. That's why the country is now diligently searching the world for energy sources.

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In 2003 China signed a deal with Venezuela to buy its crude oil. The following year, the country indicated that it would invest heavily in Venezuela's oil sector. Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's charismatic and Bush-baiting leader, who has called the US president "the world's biggest terrorist," has been a major thorn in the side for the US. He hasn't fallen in line like the region's reactionary caudillos or strongmen of the past usually did.

Right wing critics view Chavez as a "Castro with oil." Critics of the US, on the other hand, believe the CIA was responsible for the 2002 coup attempt that nearly toppled Chavez. Thorn in the side wants to reduce Venezuela's dependence as the US market, which now buys about 15 percent of its oil from the country.

"Analysts have estimated that the demand and availability of the world's petroleum supply will remain tight in 2006 and that fluctuations in crude oil prices will

depend to a large extent on the robustness of the Chinese economy and the stability of global geopolitics," assessed Xuan-Trang. "As a result, the rivalry between the US and China for primacy in gaining access to the Western Hemisphere's energy supplies will prove to be a major challenge for Bush."

And oil is not the only energy resource China is after. The amount of wood it imports from Latin America has dramatically increased, as the country will need 120 to 170 million square metres of wood annually until 2002 to sustain current demand. The economic powerhouse is also looking to the region to supply copper, bauxite, iron ore and other raw materials for its industries.

Not all Sino-Latin American experts see China's hunt in Latin America for secure supplies oil and other natural resources as necessarily a bad thing. In 2003, Riordan Roett of the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, told Congress that it was "good for Latin America, and should be seen by Congress as complimentary to the dynamic relationship between the US and China." Roett added, "A counter plan by the United States in the region is most welcome."

Like many things Bush, that plan yet to be formulated. If a plan does come, let's hope it's not another familiar Blast from the Past -- a botched CIA attempt to remove Mr. Thorn-in-the-Side.

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Kansat afterthoughts

Given the current situation in Bangladesh, the authorities may wish to consider the people as rulers and not as ruled and themselves as servants of the people. The opposition parties are not obstructionists but creationists whose reform proposals are aimed at creating a level playing field for the next general elections. Bangladesh may not be rich monetarily but Bangladeshis are inheritors of a rich socio-cultural heritage.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

FORMER Clinton administration official Dr. Susan Rice, underscoring the threat of global poverty, emphasizes that poverty "can also give rise to the tensions that erupt in civil conflict." In a recent study, British Department of International Development has shown that countries with low per capita income run greater risk of internal conflict than middle-income countries (\$5000 per capita income). These countries being potentially weak countries allow international predators or sub-state actors to incubate the contagion of terrorism, ultimately affecting global peace and security.

It is generally accepted that poverty, vast income disparity between the halves and have-nots, considerable unemployment and underemployment, ultimately lead to state failure. Other contributing factors are corrupt governance, partial democratization, degrading human security, and lack of social and welfare facilities.

After more than three decades Bangladesh, though not Henry Kissinger's "international basket case" (an observation made in the heat of Cold War politics and to ease Nixon's visit to Beijing), still remains a least developed country. If between seven and double digit growth rate is necessary to free the country from "poverty trap" then we may have to wait for quite some-time.

The Chinese claim to have moved three hundred million people out of poverty in three decades. India prides herself for a three hundred million middle class having purchasing power to buy goods which previously would have been considered as conspicuous consumption.

In Bangladesh the growth of real per capita income in FY05 is expected to slow down, with marginal increase in the per capita income of the poor and widening gap between per capita income of the poor and non-poor. In the face of these facts, the claim made by the authorities of "flood of development" naturally becomes suspect.

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen describes development as a fundamental human right. Indeed while reviewing William Easterley's book, The White Man's Burden, Sen points out the radical difference between "what is in demand which is integrally linked to the buyer's ability to pay and that of supplying needed goods and services to people whose income and wealth do not allow a need to be converted into a market demand."

Essentially, development demonstrated through construction of residential buildings and shopping malls for the comfort of the few while the great majority of the people live in desolation and despair is no development at all. It is a cruel joke played on the people for being "privileged" every few years to cast ballot to elect political leaders in the hope that their lot will

be measurably improved.

The needless violence perpetrated on the hapless people at Kansat by the authorities is a case in point. Innocent people were killed, men, women and children were brutalized, their homes were looted and they were driven out of their home only because the people were agitating for supply of electricity and to end corruption by the concerned officials. Kansat happenings remind one of the overall prescribed by the Bush doctrine of preemption where doctrine to "threat" was not only disproportionate but also not imminent invalidating any justification for the use of force.

No one in his right mind will believe that stick-wielding agitators posed any threat to the lethally equipped law enforcement people. Twenty odd people were killed and scores more were injured, reminiscent of the atrocities committed by the Pakistani occupation forces in 1971. Brutalities were unnecessary and avoidable. But then the police assault on journalists in Chittagong who went there to cover the Bangladesh-Australia cricket match and on the Awami League led political protests in recent days procession on the 18th April leads one to wonder as why the administration always chooses to exercise extreme measures when peaceful ways are available.

Bangladeshis have experienced virulent martial laws, both foreign and domestic, and endured untold sufferings but always triumphed at the end. Why then, one may ask, is

this instinctive tendency to use force? We, the people, have the right to call the government to account for the unnecessary use of force, ask whether it was necessary to kill and injure so many people where dialogue could have sufficed? The routine response to pay blood money to the dead and the injured as atonement for crimes committed in cold blood has to be abjured. Loss of life cannot be measured in terms of money nor the void left behind by the dead can be filled.

It is generally recognized that violent response to disputes results from lack of arguments for dispute resolution or due to the impatience of the authorities to hear our the arguments of the aggrieved party. Governments generally have the monopoly of violence because if that monopoly is broken then sub-state actors and/or their mentors can cause internal conflicts in which the non-partisans get caught in the cross fire. But the governmental monopoly on violence must be backed by legitimacy for it to be effective and the legitimacy could be, in Max Weberian sense, traditional, charismatic or legal-rational. History is replete with examples where exercise of coercive authority proved to be barren. Erich Honnecker tried it but failed to prevent the fall of Berlin Wall. More recently, the velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia, orange revolution in Georgia, peoples' power in Ukraine and Philippines (Marcos and Estrada episodes) are examples enough. The on-going struggle for regaining democratic rule in Nepal is also a case in point. The Americans and the Europeans have upbraided Bangladeshi authorities time and again for violation of basic human rights. Almost every year the US State Department in its annual reports on human rights and religious free-

dom keeps on reminding the authorities that respect for these rights are integral to good governance. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch keep on pointing out specific cases of human rights violations by enforcement authorities.

One suspects that the West, which after centuries of fighting wars has found more merit in compromise than in conflict, is more tolerant of aberrant behavior by countries like Bangladesh because these subalterns are yet to achieve the essential ingredients for sustainable democracy. Besides some academics like Professor Iris Young have attempted to understand some people's acceptance of the use of violence by the legitimate agents of the state as an extension of its power to ensure obedience of the people to the authorities' understanding of the laws of the country.

Such an enforced understanding can transform the country into a police state in which Orwellian tyranny becomes a reality. Already the laws empowering the authorities to listen in to telephone conversation on the pretext of ensuring security are in place despite its possible abuse by those listening in and almost unanimous condemnation by the civil society.

What is worrying is that steadily but surely all the organs of the state are being politicized and robotized. German born philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote in her seminal work On Violence: "The greater the bureaucratization of public life, the greater will be the attraction to violence. In a fully developed bureaucracy there is no body left with whom one can argue, to whom one can present grievances, on whom pressure of power can be exerted. Bureaucracy is the form of government in which every body is deprived of political freedom."



One fears Bangladesh may slide towards anarchy where the people in power, ignoring its transient nature, might have decided to meet dissent with more and more brutal force and use not only the state agents but also party cadres to club down dissenting voices. One cannot also be totally dismissive of the Rao Farman Ali blueprint of 1971 to physically eliminate political opposition. Already several attempts to assassinate the leader of the opposition were made but mercifully failed.

Several front ranking leaders and grass root workers of the opposition Awami League have been killed. Intellectuals known for their progressive views have either been murdered or are under death threat. It is open season for journalists and internationally Bangladesh is ranked as a risky place for journalists to work.

Governmental efforts at curbing Islamic extremism have been found wanting. If published account of four thousand members

of the suicide squad and two hundred thousand Islamic militants is given credence, then the capture of some leaders of JMB, though commendable, leaves much to be desired. In today's world of international connectivity and national interest being dependant on international cooperation the world at large may like to be assured of "externalities" i.e. cost of an activity that spill over onto people who are not involved in the activity.

Given the current situation in Bangladesh, the authorities may wish to consider the people as rulers and not as ruled and themselves as servants of the people. The opposition parties are not obstructionists but creationists whose reform proposals are aimed at creating a level playing field for the next general elections. Bangladesh may not be rich monetarily but Bangladeshis are inheritors of a rich socio-cultural heritage.

Bangladeshis are, perhaps, the only inhabitants of this planet who

gave blood for establishing the right to their language. Coercion, therefore, to still the dissenting voice of such a people may work for a while, but is unlikely to stem the tide of popular demand for good governance and ending of corruption.

As Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz suggests enquiry of the policy makers should be for "moral growth that is sustainable, that increases living standards, not just for today but for future generations as well, and that leads to a more tolerant, open society (which can) ensure that benefits of growth are shared equitably creating a society with more

social justice and solidarity." With such a goal in mind both the opposition and the government should sit together to sort out their differences without sacrificing the basic moral values of the liberation war.

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