

# Our woes as a nation

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**BRIGADIER GENERAL SHAMSUDDIN AHMED (RETD)**

NATIONS do have their ups and downs. They have the best of their times to be proud of and also the worst of their times to bemoan. But what about Bangladesh, the country we have established through immense sacrifices and sufferings of our people? We as a nation seem to have only downs and hardly any ups except that saga of bravery and unity we displayed in 1971 when we fought the much vaunted Pakistan Occupation Army and wrested our independence.

Since then, ours has been a history of pathetic self destruction and self immolation at the hands of whoever came to rule this country. Nobody, including Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the architect and founder of this country, ever tried to establish the democratic rights of the people -- the ultimate goal of our independence.

Instead, all our rulers, without exception, sadly opted for authoritar-

ian and dynastic rule, thus paving the way for corruption of the political elites, the break down of the rule of law, spawning of crime and violence and all other concomitant aberrations and vices inevitable in such a political dispensation.

While history may pardon Bangabandhu for initiating the process of authoritarian rule because he was working under rather extenuating circumstances, having to govern a war ravaged newly independent country with hardly any wherewithal to support him, there was and there is no earthly reason for his successors to continue this process so zealously till now.

A thirty five year old nation state of about 150 million resilient people as homogeneous as we are ethnically, linguistically and culturally ought to have been on its feet and also a thriving force to be reckoned with by now. But this was not to be, primarily because of our power hungry, utterly selfish, unscrupulous and myopic political leaders, most of whom have been catapulted into the seat of state

power, not because of their talent or any political leadership traits, but solely because of circumstances fortuitously throwing them up. These national leaders of ours have systematically destroyed all the ingredients of a democratic polity and good governance which alone could have lifted us from the morass of decay and decadence and the plethora of debilitating forces now at work.

Long time back Henry Kissinger had called us an international basket case. To this have been added many more shameful appellations in the recent past. We now not only carry on our head the stigma of being among the poorest of the poor countries in the world, we have been branded as the most corrupt of the corrupt countries in the world successively for the last four years.

We have also been dubbed as a country almost on the verge of being a "failed state" and a "hot bed of religious terrorism". Our wealthy Arab Muslim brethren have been calling us "miskeen" (beggars) for a long time. Such derogatory remarks about our

country coming from the international community do hurt our pride and sentiments as a self respecting people.

But I doubt very much if these hurt the feelings of our ruling elites. Because if they do, then how is it that they so shamefully go on flaunting their ill-gotten wealth? The question we may ask is: For whose mistakes, follies and failures is our nation being slandered this way?

Our rulers have to answer because it is they who have enriched themselves by pauperizing the country and the people. It is they who have misruled and misgoverned this country which is the root cause of corruption being so pervasive, of poverty being so endemic, and of terrorism and violence being so entrenched in our national life.

I shall single out Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wajed, not only for their failure to stem the rot, but also for the alacrity with which they have pursued the cult of corruption, despotism, criminalization of politics, and total insensitivity towards people's sufferings.

It is a shame that what Gen Ershad did as a dictator to undo democracy and the rule of law in this country during his nine year ignominious rule is still in place because both Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wajed have chosen the fallen dictator as their role model in governing the country.

Both of them have politicized the

bureaucracy, the police administration, the magistracy, the judiciary, the election commission, the public service commission and all other state institutions the way as no other democratically elected leaders have done before which is why there is no rule of law.

The country is awash with gangsterism and gangsters of all hues and varieties ranging from petty thieves to swashbuckling terrorists like Bangla Bhai. We have a dysfunctional parliament, a jumbo cabinet with tainted ministers, and an ever noisy opposition on the streets to vouch for our show-case democracy. Murderers, rapists and perpetrators of heinous crimes are roaming the streets. Police cannot catch them because they have connection with ruling political party. Farmers do not have seeds, fertilizers, diesel and electricity for farming. Ministers concerned do not lose their job. Protesting mobs are brutalized by the police in tandem with ruling party activists. Prices of essential food stuffs are spiralling, causing immense hardships to the common run of the people.

Add to this the ghastly phenomenon of religious fanaticism and militancy, the by-product of late Gen Ziaur Rahman's legacy of wooing the Islamic fundamentalist forces like Jamaat-e-Islami, which opposed the very emergence of Bangladesh and collaborated with the Pakistan Occupation Forces. This Zia legacy

has been being faithfully carried forward first by Gen Ershad and then by Khaleda Zia till now.

There is no denying the fact that the inclusion of Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh in the alliance government has given fillip to the so called Islamization process, leading to the rise of the hydra headed monster of the so called Islamic militants terrorizing and killing innocent people across the country and threatening the very foundation of our secular and democratic polity. (Mark the utterances of Shaikh Abdur Rahman and Bangla Bhai before a trial judge and the state reaction so far). Small wonder Ershad, far from being brought to justice during the last 15 years for the crime of plundering the state treasury and for the myriad miseries he has heaped on the nation, is still a free man breathing in fresh air.

People of this country have never felt so insecure before for their life and property and honour as they feel now. They have never felt so frustrated before. This alliance government is not to blame alone for this. This is the cumulative effect of the autocratic rule and corruption prone syndrome of our rulers over the years. It is time someone called a halt to this power hunger syndrome of our political leaders and brought sanity in our politics.

We can still retrieve ourselves and make amends for what we have lost. For that to happen, our political

leaders need to make a fresh vow and an unwavering commitment to establish democracy, the rule of law, and full democratic rights of the people.

The coming election is going to be the acid test for all of us -- the government, the opposition, the civil society, and the people as a whole. Heavens will not fall if BNP or AL loses in the next election conducted in an atmosphere free from any partisan influence either from the caretaker government or from the election commission.

But hell will certainly be let loose and the country will be in turmoil as it was once in 1996 should the election be held with the AL-led opposition parties boycotting the election on the ground of the credibility of either the caretaker government or the election commission being questionable.

I would earnestly appeal to the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition to sit across the table and have a heart to heart meaningful dialogue in order to put an end to the present impasse on the reform proposals. Let us do away with the letter writing drama. We do need a fully non-partisan, neutral, and effective caretaker government as we also need a fully independent, neutral, and powerful election commission to conduct free and fair election.

To be fair, the opposition apprehensions about the present election commission and the likely head of the next caretaker government being

partisan are not totally unfounded considering the political tinkering the government has done with regard to both. There is genuine need for reforming both the caretaker government system and the election commission in the interest of fair and credible election.

There is greater need now than ever before for the government and the opposition to interact and speak aloud in the language of reason and mutual respect for each other. Any dithering on their part will only invite disaster for the country.

In all humility let me remind both the honourable Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition that Bangladesh has made you what you are today in terms of name and fortune. You had none of it as you made your maiden appearance in politics. You owe it to Bangladesh and its people to work selflessly for a fully democratic, secular and progressive Bangladesh we all had dreamt of as we broke free from Pakistan in 1971. It is not a very tall order.

The writer is a valiant freedom fighter and former Military Secretary to the President of Bangladesh.

# The Koizumi legacy

## CLOSEUP JAPAN

**The media in Japan are now actively involved in evaluating the period of Koizumi to find out if he really ranks among the great. There are, for sure, a number of obstacles in comparing Koizumi with those whom the Japanese would like to consider greats. Under Yoshida, for example, Japan regained independence after its defeat in the war, while Okinawa was returned to Japan under Sato. Both achievements are seen in Japan as significant milestones in the country's modern history. Compared to those far reaching achievements of international significance, Koizumi's success may be considered limited in steering the country to the path of economic recovery. That too created lot of controversy, as the road to recovery needed sacrifice that many in Japan were not willing to pay for.**

MONZURUL HUQ *Writes from Tokyo*

IF everything in coming months go ahead as expected, the Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi is supposed to hand over power to his successor in little over four months time and is destined to take a back seat in politics following the traditional Japanese practice. He has already in his credit a number of landmark achievements.

First, by serving five years in office as country's prime minister, Koizumi has become the third longest-serving prime minister in post-war Japan. Only Eisaku Sato and Shigeru Yoshida held the office for longer period. Moreover, by winning the September re-election as prime minister at a Diet voting by 340 votes, he became the third most popular leader since the main ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was formed in 1955. In this metric his position is behind only to Shigeru Yoshida and Tetsu Katayama. No doubt, Koizumi's achievement is significant, both in terms of longevity in office and in generating support for himself and for the party. The party support was reflected in the outcome of the last general election in September 2005, in which the LDP under his leadership swept to an overwhelming victory. Yet, political analysts in Japan are still not sure if history will rank him alongside Sato and Yoshida as one of post war Japan's great prime ministers.

In the last week of April Koizumi's reign reached a full five-year period. He had already made it clear that he has no intention to continue holding the office beyond the date of expiry of his term in September. Party regulations followed by the LDP limit the tenure of the party leader to a maximum five-year period, and since the leader of the party automatically assumes the post of the prime minister, it is now almost certain that in September Japan will witness the emergence of a new leader at the helm of the government.

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whom the Japanese would like to consider greats. Under Yoshida, for example, Japan regained independence after its defeat in the war, while Okinawa was returned to Japan under Sato. Both achievements are seen in Japan as significant milestones in country's modern history. Compare to those far reaching achievements of international significance, Koizumi's success may be considered limited in steering the country to the path of economic recovery. That too created lot of controversy, as the road to recovery needed sacrifice that many in Japan were not willing to pay for.

In fact, a recent opinion poll conducted by Asahi Shimbun shows that 18 percent in Japan believe that their lives have improved from five years ago, while 42 percent feel they are now worse off. The economic reform that Koizumi was all along so enthusiastic to implement did help Japanese economy to see the light at the end of the tunnel. But the price was a widening gap between those who could rip the benefit off the reform and those who were left behind. Unfortunately for Koizumi, that those who find themselves as being left behind by far outnumber those who think the initiatives of the present administration was helpful in improving their situation.

In helping the economy coming out of a prolonged period of sluggishness marked by a continuous slowdown and deflation, Koizumi in

times had to face strong opposition within his own party as well. As a result, the uphill task of getting the Japanese economy in the right track again was not an easy sailing and on several occasions he had to resort to policies that risked the party to split and break up into a number of different entities. But his populist stance eventually helped him to win over his enemies and carry out the policies that he and his advisors considered good for the country. In fact, the main reason for Koizumi's high popularity can partially be attributed to his strong standing within his own party to implement reforms that he considered vital for Japan's economic survival. As the economy at the end was able to shake off the so-called lost decade of extremely slow performance and began showing signs of recovery, his popularity rose further. But one particular field where he failed to make any gain is Japan's foreign policy.

No doubt, Koizumi has further stabilised Japan's relations with the United States by following a policy in line with the Bush administration. To please Washington, he even took the bold and unpopular decision to deploy Japan's self defence forces troops to Iraq, though to many it might look funny that the Japanese troops stationed in Iraq are in need of protection from other participants of the "coalition of the willing."

It also shouldn't be forgotten that he even took a courageous step to

improve relationship with North Korea by visiting the country twice. Though the initiative backfired later and mutual trust and understanding between the two countries are now in all time low, he was the first Japanese leader to make an official visit to Pyongyang in search of a peaceful solution to the problems between the two neighbours. How a sincere effort could quickly turn that much sour is no doubt a matter of in-depth analysis. But he at least could bring back to Japan some of the victims of North Korean abduction and their families. The whole episode later fell in the hands of nationalist enthusiasts and who turned it into a convenient tool for hate propaganda. Koizumi's striking foreign policy failure, however, is not in relation to his North Korea policy, but it is for making a complete mess of Japan's diplomatic relations with China and South Korea.

Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine might by now be regarded as a living symbol of how a country can easily be dragged into the treacherous path of narrow self-interest. When religious rituals get mixed up with foreign policy, the end result can never be expected to be something grand. The annual visit to the shrine by Japan's political leaders is more a religious ritual than anything else. They go there to pray for the salvation of the souls of those who they consider had given their lives for the safety of Japan. This might outwardly be seen a very innocent act, nothing to do with disturbing or causing irritation of others. But if among the dead, whose salvation of souls the politicians seek, are also the souls of those who are not only blamed, but also found guilty of war crimes in territories beyond Japan, the act might easily flare growing sense of uneasiness among those who fell victims to such war crimes. This is the easy equation surrounding the Yasukuni controversy that is drifting Japan further apart from her closest neighbours.

It is not to say the reactions of Beijing and Seoul are blameless acts of innocent victims trying to correct a gross mistake of their neighbours. The motives behind their overtly expressive reactions are more to appease their own people and win over support domestically. But at the same time, it would be wrong to forget that Koizumi, by his annual visits to the controversial shrine, had overturned what some of his predecessors could achieve in healing the wounds of the past.

It is, therefore, too early to come to a hasty conclusion about which of Koizumi's legacies would eventually be remembered in the long run -- a prime minister who helped the country out of economic recession, or a leader who tried to sail the tide of growing nationalism by carefully cultivating hostility towards neighbours.

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# Understanding Power

## A Noam Chomsky compilation for stimulating mind

ZIAUR RAHMAN

UNDERSTANDING Power by Noam Chomsky unveils a new vista of knowledge that has been kept under dark for a protracted period. His lucid and analytical reviews on politics, the global power battle, and the historical and rational underpinnings of many of the world's most abstruse issues, give a flight to the minds of the reader. Chomsky's incisive thought process ventilates many new views. His writings open a Pandora's Box of forgotten truths and revisits moral codes and conducts of nations, groups and clans.

A compilation of talks given by Chomsky between 1989-1999 covering politics to economics to social harmony and belief systems has been discussed in this book. He moves from topic to topic by answering questions thrown across him by an audience; Chomsky responds to these questions by offering his world view; at times, he would expound more on the issue itself or move the conversation along the rational position he intends to take.

In this compilation, first published in UK in 2003, Chomsky attempts to address many of the contentious issues of global politics, war on terrorism, the truths, the half truths and fabrications of the world that we live in. In this book, he holds critical views on US policy and policies purported by many other countries that exercise power and, at times, absolute power under the guise of diplomacy, democracy, monarchy and other kinds of statecraft. The book has ten equally intriguing chapters; it opens with hard hitting accusations that both 'Kennedy and Reagan' came to power on 'fraudulent denunciations of their predecessors.' He went on to offering his critical appraisal of their coming to power through a false sense of hyping the public into feeling insecure in a world full of foreign spies, terrorists and by invoking jingoistic and military hysteria. In the sections on achievement of domestic dissidence, US network of terrorist mercenary states and overthrowing states, he point-by-point exposed the unlawful and clandestine operations supporting the secret arms sale to Contra-rebels in Central America, covert fundings through rogue states, trainings for terrorist forces in Nicaragua, and defoliating South Vietnam with Napalm bombs.

He mentions that to take the media propaganda to a heightened state of make belief, President Reagan even opened an office of Public Diplomacy and under its veils global atrocities and killings were carried out solely for promotion of certain indoctrinations. Chomsky had mentioned half way into his book that the 'world does not reward honesty and independence, it rewards obedience and service.' The US power, being so supreme during the hegemonic years between 60s and 80s, exercised absolute control of all social and political freedoms, in spite

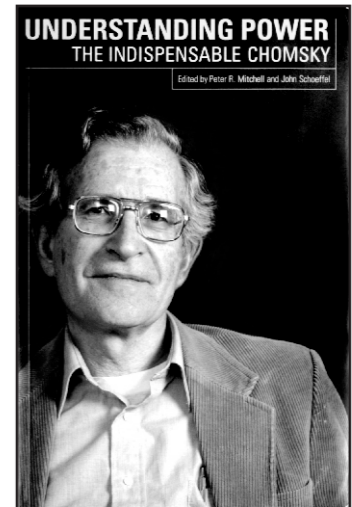
of its own so-called unwavering commitment to freedom, tolerance, pluralism and suffrage. He also threw challenges to the US media, exposing its very narrow and elitist mentality in its coverage of news, views and stories.

Chomsky has made many references in his book about the institution called the government. During a lecture series mentioned in the book, he was asked whether he voted on certain candidate or the party; he had mentioned that the theoretical construct on which the entire system of democracy and voting is based on is nothing but a sham and that the system is controlled by the hegemonic powers of big business; therefore, the very precept of democracy that we find is faulty. In chapter six, he says, 'I'm white, I'm privileged, that means I'm basically immune from punishment by power.' He talks of 'peeling away the blinders,' allowing us to form a real picture of power and who holds the reigns of power. He talks about intellectual charlatans of today with a bitter and acrimonious tone. He then confronts the global views that Adam Smith's founding premise that division of labour was the ultimate goals for the wealth of a nation to grow. Chomsky interpreted that Adam Smith was of the opinion that division of labour was a 'terrible thought,' that would surely stir up the entire school of scholarly thought at the University of Chicago where the likes of George Stigler toil.

In chapter five, he talks about the economic system working for the 'masters,' meaning the elites and business interests, whereas he envisions a system working for the mass. He emphasised on the destructive forces of corporate capitalism and opined that it (Capitalism) is essentially gnawing away at the essence of real democracy where freedom of mind, self, speech and organisation is being dismantled through media propaganda and control of overt and covert measures. He lends his imagination run with visions of 'alternative popular institutions' having idealistic fervor and 'participatory economic' spirit. He also advanced notions that Gulf War was not really about cashing out the oil reserve of Kuwait or ousting Saddam Hussein, but it was more to drive through an agenda that whatever happens in the Middle East is the exclusive domain of intervention by the USA.

He raises the issue of Soviet Union not failing because of its socialist regime, but its totalitarianism that was brought in when Bolsheviks took power. He points fingers to the media for fabrication and propaganda triumph by 'prolonged effort to discredit the very idea of socialism by associating it with Soviet totalitarianism.' He then theorises that successful Soviet development in the 1960s was actually threatening to break the 'American world system,' and opening new possibilities for other states to emulate, ultimately undermining the institution of Capitalism on which

## BOOK REVIEW



USA stands high and mighty. Sensing these unwanted possibilities, Chomsky proposes that, the US, backed by subservient and sterile US media, concocted stories of horrific proportions, making the Soviet look like a bestial and ruthless state where espionage and political freedom were vehemently crushed and dissidents tortured, killed or ostracised from the state. While depicting these monstrosities, they were carefully converting the minds of the populace to support the declaration of war on Soviets and Soviet style socialism, while glorifying US capitalism, its freedom and democracy.

In chapter eight, he talks about the issues of favored states and enemy states defined in terms of their allegiance to the US business interests. He said East Timor was originally dominated by US military support fuelled through Indonesian military junta that ran regimes of terror to quell all kinds of independence movements in East Timor. Indonesia invaded East Timor in 1975 'with explicit authorisation of Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger' and the British, Australians and Americans all had prior knowledge of the invasion plan. Chomsky draws our attention to the fact that East Timor historically was part of the Portuguese Empire and during the 70s (during their collapse of the empire) there was a growing concern that East Timor may move towards communism; therefore, it received decent press coverage in the US. However, during the subsequent years that unfolded, the media and the intelligentsia played dumb to the carnage that went on. More interestingly, Chomsky alludes to the fact that great offshore oil reserves close to East Timor was found by the Australians and the Western oil companies who after unsuccessfully trying to make a deal with the Portuguese decided to work through the Indonesians and, therefore, the business lobby kept everything tightlipped.

In subsequent chapters he brings ideas of welfare state and the anarchist's vision of dismantling state power stating 'personally I share that vision,' but then proceeds onto saying that his immediate goals are to

strengthen some state authority that are under attack now. He says the anarchist's role should be to 'pry open' some meaningful public participation, defend some state institutions and ultimately allow for more free society to evolve. He talks about the concept of 'devolution,' meaning taking power away from the federal government and putting it in the hands of the state government. He noted that on a non-critical appraisal it is more democratic and participatory, but from viewing it from a more abstract perspective, this devolution actually takes power closer to private power and how it can be exercised to gain better tax breaks by even mid-sized corporations or threaten jobs re-location, making it anti-democratic. He also discusses that structures need to be developed to attain equality then these concepts of devolution can be fitted into society.

On the issue of legal system and law, he concludes that laws are also made to support 'big powers play' and that it is completely outside of 'popular control.' In the section of discovering morality in chapter nine, Chomsky talks of 'funny morality' and cites the example of not allowing cock fights on the grounds that they tear each other to pieces while allowing the barbaric sport of boxing, inflicting equally debilitating blows. He talks about value system being in conflict and that there is no single 'axiom' like system.

'Turning point' was the last chapter of the book based on a discussion between 1994 and 1999 across various prosperous eastern states of the United States with the exception of Illinois. This entire chapter talked about issues of family and capitalism hurting family life, children's IQ level falling and the rationale presented by the media and the counter by Chomsky. He took a blow at the media by saying that deep irrationality is being stirred up amongst demagogues and media personalities.

The book not only offers perspectives of the past and present world, it paints a picture of power lobby that continues to dominate global socio-political and economic affairs, while keeping a great propaganda machine running to subliminally and, even directly, mould the views of the population. Chomsky categorically states that we live in a rhetorical world where the ropes of power are controlled by a select class of elites. The book covers a mind-boggling array of issues with substantive statistics to back his doctrines. On many occasions, he offers cynical, yet logical views of the world and, alludes to 'conspiracy theories' that he does not reject in totality. Understanding Power opens new angles for intellectual discourse in many fields and challenges the notions held by the majority, making it a serious book to read for the stimulating mind.

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