

e-Bangladesh

Free exchange of information should be viewed as a democratic tool to empower people, create transparency, enhance productivity and encourage entrepreneurship. The high-capacity submarine cable that now theoretically connects Bangladesh with the rest of the world would remain a fashionable "showcase" unless we ventilate our mind with a fresh awareness of technology's full spectrum of social and market potentials.

DR. ADNAN MORSHED

AT the World Economic Forum in Switzerland in February 2004, Bill Gates, chairman of the software behemoth Microsoft, acknowledged his company's strategic mistake in not pursuing what is now an integral part of the post-industrial society: Internet search for information. Gates appeared astounded by a then-fledgling company, Google, which questioned the industry's prevailing wisdom that search technology would soon be a marginal product of the digital market. Instead, Google envisioned limitless economic potential in Internet searching.

Today Google has pretty much become the torchbearer of search technology. Its founders, Sergey Brin

and Larry Page, two young Stanford University computer science graduates, understood with clairvoyant magic that the future belonged to the technology of finding the right information quickly and efficiently. The company's user base is now mind-boggling: close to 300 million Google searches on an average day around the world! Not surprisingly, "google" has become a verb, meaning "to perform a Web search." The American Dialect Society identified the verb to google as the "most useful word of 2002."

Information has become the hottest commodity of the electronic market economy or the e-world. The high-tech infrastructure that enables access to information superhighway is, therefore, of utmost importance for any nation.

That infrastructure finally arrived in Bangladesh in May 2006. Making a landfall at Cox's Bazar, a new submarine cable -- a 12,500-mile fiber-optic odyssey from Singapore to France -- allows Bangladesh a data-transfer capacity of 10 gigabytes per second, a massive improvement from the current 150 megabyte per second.

The high-tech link is expected to make telecommunications, Internet connections, and data transfer much faster and cheaper. The possibilities of e-business, call-centre services, data processing, software development and export, outsourcing and distance learning, among other opportunities, clearly brighten up the nation's economic horizon. In short, a fertile ground has been identified for an e-Bangladesh.

But, as history teaches us, technol-

ogy alone cannot catalyze social change. Is not technology without the right frame of mind to exploit it worth nothing? The procurement of advanced technology must be coupled with a corresponding change in the mindset of the people and, most of all, of government bureaucracy and our political establishments. A new culture of valuing information as a tool of social mobilisation and making information available on the Internet has to be nurtured aggressively, along with a national agenda of uplifting mass computer literacy.

Both public and private sectors, NGO's, institutions of the civil society (such as: schools, colleges, universities and libraries), banks, hospitals, utility companies and transportation facilities need to adopt a streamlined process of information dissemination through effective Websites. By visiting Websites and accessing information, clients and information-seekers could avoid the slow-moving human interface, the long and slippery alleys of bureaucracy and, happily, the corrosive practices of bribery.

Even if it sounds like science fiction, the concept of Website as a gateway to the world of information

and all kinds of transaction has become the pillar of an efficient society, at least in the West. Present only on the information superhighway (except their warehouses in the physical world) by means of their Websites, many companies generate revenues in the billions of dollars. Examples abound: Amazon, e-bay, Google, and Dell, among many others.

In the United States, I buy ninety-five percent of my books, cheaply, from the Internet with a credit card after surfing a few competitive Websites. Such transactions will not kill the romance of strolling in a neighbourhood bookstore and meeting a few fellow bibliophiles. Air travel has become an exclusive domain of the Internet. In the last five years I bought all my domestic air tickets from Internet auctions and last two tickets to Bangladesh from airline Websites.

Now, how do we fare in Bangladesh in terms of what I would like to call the "Website efficiency?" Let us surf a few Bangladeshi Websites.

There is no provision in the Bangladesh Biman Website to buy

tickets! Imagine a hypothetical situation: a Western national, John, wants to travel to Bangladesh for tourism. He wants the most cost-effective route and, naturally, he would check out the national career Website, from which he cannot glean any sense of the airfare, let alone buy the ticket. He has no clue as to how to score the best and cheapest airplane ticket to Bangladesh. Only the South Asians know where the South Asian travel agents are (mostly in New York or Los Angeles), and they seldom participate in the mainstream travel market. John would eventually abandon his Bangladesh trip in favour of one to Nepal or Thailand. The Biman Website includes a history of the airline's evolution (poorly written, and fraught with grammatical errors!), but how does it help a prospective client?

Come to the Webpage of the Bangladesh Ministry of Cultural Affairs. While it lists the Ministry's cultural initiatives (often in a self-congratulatory mode), the site barely gives any objective glimpse into the cultural heritage of the country. There is very little or no information on the books, paintings, dramas,

poetry, films, or architecture that collectively shape the conscience of the nation. The language is shoddy and fails to inspire curiosity. Visually the site is hardly attractive. By employing tested, professional Web designers for its graphic self-representation and soliciting contributions on important aspects of culture from key writers of the country, the Ministry would benefit significantly.

You want to carry out some research at the National Library of Bangladesh. You go to their Website and find out that there is no system of searching for books! In the traditional method, you would take a rickshaw from, say, Dhanmondi to Agargaon, with the name of a rare book in your hand. Upon reaching the library, you would come across a dubiously busy librarian at the front desk. You would check on the availability of your book. It is not available, you are told. Alas, three hours have already been spent! A functioning Website, allowing you to know beforehand whether the book is available or not, would have saved three valuable hours (a 26-mile marathon is run in less than three hours!). For advanced technology to

take full effect, a new consciousness of time must also be grafted on the idea of technology.

Fortunately, not all is bleak in the Bangladeshi firmament as the private sector breathes some fresh air. Bangladeshi newspapers lead the way in Website usage and are by far the country's most effective conduits of information dissemination.

People's right to information is fundamental and irrefutable. One could write a history of oppression in terms of the victim's inability to access information. Free exchange of information should be viewed as a democratic tool to empower people, create transparency, enhance productivity and encourage entrepreneurship. The high-capacity submarine cable that now theoretically connects Bangladesh with the rest of the world would remain a fashionable "showcase" unless we ventilate our mind with a fresh awareness of technology's full spectrum of social and market potentials.

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The plight of the RMG workers

Regrettably, the exporters and some politicians have not only, instantly, held a neighbouring country responsible for the labour unrest but also recommended that armed battalions guard RMG businesses where labourers would work, virtually, at gunpoint.

"They enlarge and lengthen their fringes; cherish the chief place at dinners, the best seats in the synagogues, and the greetings in the market places" [Matthew 23:5-7] the Bible

BLUE collar working conditions in Bangladesh have never been outstanding. Bangladesh's society is deeply rank prone and normally visible with employers treating employees roughly in all matters from wages, working terms, to working environment. The dismal picture of employer-employee is usually same whether at home, office, or in factory.

Bangladesh may not have the illegal culture of bonded labour, as in the brick kilns in Pakistan's Peshawar, where many work as actual slaves but harsh working conditions do persist in Bangladesh to form the underlying reasons for the recent labour violence.

The exporter's forum, however, pointed to an Indian conspiracy to damage Bangladesh's international market prospect. The lifting of textile quotas has given a new dynamics to the textile trade and it is not only India competing with Bangladesh but also Pakistan. A recent UNDP report mentions of 'falling profits' for Pakistani manufacturers and exporters of textile and clothing due to increased price competition with the lifting of quotas. The export bosses should have mentioned both the neighbouring countries, instead of one, of a possible sabotage unless privy to specific evidences of conspiracy by one.

The Indians already enjoy a trade surplus with Bangladesh. There are, as the exporters say, many Indian RMG units operating in Bangladesh. Indians are major suppliers of textile raw materials for export. Indian exporters particularly from the North

Eastern States of Assam and others look forward to use Chittagong sea port as their major international trade outlet. Under such favourable trade prospects, it is most unlikely that one would axe one's own feet.

It cannot be simple, though simply said, for a foreign country to disrupt another economy in such a scale but it can be a good excuse for our proprietors to conceal their faults by pointing their finger to somewhere else. Our politicians, business owners, or bureaucratic officials excel in spotting scapegoats and hoarding dirt in their closet.

They see workers, farmers, and the lowly paid as a class to exploit and destined to serve them the masters. Our poor have no bargaining positions or alternatives. They dare not enter rooms of sahibs for discussions or complaints. Muslims are supposed to see others, irrespective of their social or economic positions, as equals but rarely the rich in Bangladesh practice what Islam instructs. The upper and the wealthy in Bangladesh have a zamindari attitude and expect the less fortunate to serve, pamper, and revere them. Those they employ must obey and listen, put no question, and seek no answer. It is also customary for lowly paid employees to stand upright and greet, every time, an employer walks past them and stay standing until the employer is out of sight. Such is the raja-proja relationship that is theoretically obsolete and non-existent in the West but thoroughly practiced in Bangladesh and neighbouring countries in various forms. Without respect and dignity for fellow humans there can be no development whatever be the annual export aggregate.

However, only a government with a liberal economic and political system

can enact and enforce laws that protect common citizens from abuse and discrimination by fellow citizens higher in income or position.

The garment leaders have powerful organisations and affiliations. The media often highlight these influential men propagating strong views. They negotiate effectively with governments, cleverly with opposition politicians, ride expensive cars, and live in posh homes, fight for social status as CIP, and many contest elections to have a VIP eminence.

However, they are least concerned about improving the conditions of those they employ. Every law, rule, or regulation by government helps some group and imposes costs on others' (Mancur Olson). The garment exporters enjoy too many national and international rules in their favour at the expense of the workers. When NGOs or worker's unions cite poor working conditions and payments, the prosperous exporters accuse them of creating no tariff market barriers to protect foreign manufacturers and employees.

The exporters are vexed about the country's international image the violence have caused but even in peaceful times Bangladesh's image, or its performance, is seen as one of the worst in the world. Poor wages and poor working conditions cannot be hidden neither is it morally correct to impress upon foreigners that such state of affairs is fictional or a conspiracy.

The factory owners seal windows to prevent pilferage of raw materials and to account for all 'bonded' materials to the government but at the cost of worker's safety and lives. In fire emergencies, many burn to death or crushed in stampede as all exits stay shut. Multi-storied factory buildings

have collapsed not knowing how many perished, punished, or what compensation offered.

The violently agitating workers singularly blamed the owners for their deprivation. The TV reporting and recordings of spontaneous comments by workers were clear that there are deeply rooted worker's grievances. The outburst happened as their collective voice was ignored and unheard by their well-heeled employers.

The payment structure of our clothing sector workers is miserable and will never increase as that would reduce the profit margin of the exporters. Desperately poor and unemployed people flock to towns for extremely cheap wages and dwell in slums often mysteriously burned, apparently, for land grabbing or repossession. In villages, government forces hunt and even shoot down small cross border traders. In cities, police forcibly evict street hawkers. There is a strong but unjust media and societal bias against street peddling though common in wealthy cities. Bangladesh belittles the critical importance of informal trading that is the foundation of any strong economy or an emerging one. They reject market economics of demand and supply and restrict market freedom.

Every country faces three problems that it must resolve. What goods to produce? How will it produce? And, who will produce? Milton Friedman, the living legend of personal economic liberty, observes that, "every country answers some aspects of each question through market forces and other aspects through the political system". The proportions vary greatly from country to country. At one extreme was the old communist country as the USSR or Red China. The other extreme was Hong Kong before China's retake in 1997, or the US before the Great Depression in 1930s.

Countries as Bangladesh where the government, the political system, regulate and control RMG exports economic abnormalities as poor wages, lack of safety regulations and

labour discontent is extensive. Earned are billions of dollars but the working conditions and frustrations are almost deliberately overlooked by the exporters and governmental authorities.

Throughout world history, there have been many outbursts and revolts where people as peasants, workers, or soldiers, go bananas. In unfree and undemocratic systems, authorities, whether religious, commercial, or governmental tend to ignore voices of resentment and grievances. Consequently, authorities either crush or crushed by rebellious violence.

Regrettably, the exporters and some politicians have not only, instantly, held a neighbouring country responsible for the labour unrest but also recommended that armed battalions guard RMG businesses where labourers would work, virtually, at gunpoint.

If these elitist trends and attitude embedded in the heads of employers and authorities continue, Bangladesh could eventually become a country of vast disorder and violence. More export with more government control, aiming to earn more foreign money, would mean more factories across cities with more exploited labour. If the regimented work force is unhappy, there will be no need for any foreign competitor to ransack our city but the sheer number of the working class would be sufficient that no force would be able to contain. The ruin-ation of the country would then be complete or who knows if a new beginning could take place.

Pundits often talk of a third force in Bangladesh due to continued political anxiety but, perhaps, the real third power likely to appear would be the vigour of the workers, and the small traders, who are the underprivileged, under paid, unloved, subjugated, and physically brutalised, unless economic justice establish firmly and rewards shared justly.

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SAAD S. KHAN

THE former French colony of Comoros has become the seventh Muslim nation in a row, since the beginning of the last year, to have opted for Islamists in the national elections. Ayatollah Ahmad Abdullah Mohammad Sambi has won the first ever free and fair multi party presidential election in the country, with an impressive 58% of the vote defeating Ibrahim Halidi, backed by outgoing President Azali Assoumani who got 28% of the vote, while former military pilot Mohamed Djaanfari gained 14%. A 460-strong African Union team was there as their observers monitored the balloting and their troops maintained order during the election day--- while Comoros army, with the dubious distinction of attempting 19 coups--- remained in its barracks.

It may be recalled that only ten of the Muslim countries held free and fair elections in the past eighteen month or so, and Islamists won in seven including such important countries as Iran, Iraq and the Palestine, while secular candidates or parties have won only in three, namely, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan and Albania. The remaining countries like Azerbaijan, Chad, Kazakhstan and Egypt where the elections were not free and fair, the incumbent dictators claimed victories.

The Union of Comoros Islands, a holiday paradise with picture-postcard beaches, is desperately poor, thanks to a history of political violence that, at times, left the country teetering on the brink of disintegration. The triple problems of military coups, secessionist sentiments in the constituent islands, and extreme poverty reinforced each other. There were, as noted, 19 military coups, four of them successful, in the brief history of 30 years as an independent nation.

The descendants of Arab traders, Malay immigrants, and African peo-

ples, contribute to the islands' complex ethnic mix. At the time of independence, three islands voted for independence and the fourth Mayotte decided to remain part of France in 1975. So the Union consists of three islands, Grande Comore, Anjouan and Moheli in an uneasy cohabitation. In fact, the latter two declared unilateral independence following a violent conflict in 1997. In an effort to bring the breakaway islands back into the fold, a new constitution in 2001 granted the three islands their own presidents and greater autonomy. The Union of the Comoros, under the overall leadership of Azali Assoumani, retained control of security and financial matters.

The presidency of the Union rotates between the three islands every four years. The presidents of the three semi-autonomous islands are vice presidents of the Union of Comoros. A 33-member national assembly sits on Grande Comore. The incumbent, Azali Assoumani, represented Grande Comore. His successor had to come from Anjouan, so all the three candidates this time around were from this island. A president from Moheli is set to take office in 2010.

Mr Sambi is poised to become a pioneer in three ways; the first civilian head of state after a peaceful transition, the first person from Anjouan, and the first ever cleric, to become the President of Comoros. Mr Sambi, 48, a former MP and a Sunni Muslim cleric, a businessman with a passion for basketball, campaigned on promises to fight unemployment and corruption. Being a relative newcomer to politics, he was himself untainted by corruption. He is a charismatic public speaker, who knows how to work a crowd. After returning from his studies in Iran, he set up a political party - the National Front for Justice - but he soon left politics to concentrate on business, while still preaching. The father of seven owns factories which produce

mattresses, bottled water and perfume - a key Comoros export. He lives above a shop called The House of Mattresses in the Anjouan capital, Mutsamudu. He also set up and owns the private television station called Ulezi (education).

The main challenges before him are to promote a democratic culture in his country marked by the supremacy of constitution, rule of law, and respect to equal rights. He has dismissed charges that he is an extremist and has said that his country is not ready to become an Islamic republic. He has vowed not to outlaw the famous Comoran lavish wedding ceremonies or to force women to cover their hair. He has promised to be loyal to the constitution so that military coups and violent secessionist movements in the islands becomes a part of history.

The second main challenge for him is economic. The people of the Comoros are among the poorest in Africa and are heavily dependent on foreign aid. Natural resources are in short supply and the islands' chief exports - vanilla, cloves and perfume essence - are prone to price fluctuations. Money sent home by Comorans living abroad is an important source of income. The President needs to adopt policies that will strengthen investor confidence and attract foreign tourists.

The nation has seen too much violence, hatred and rivalry. The former French mercenary Col. Bob Denard, who remained behind-the-scenes king maker for too long, assassinating and replacing presidents in palace coups so often, is no more on the stage. Now it is incumbent on the new President to open a new chapter of civilian supremacy over military which is the best way to foster a sense of a unified Comoran nationhood.

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Time to pause and think

For a while I too was extremely agitated with government's inaction and failure and in all honesty was considering myself very much a part of the various street agitations and protest marches. What is happening in the name of protest marches is nothing but leading the nation to anarchy. I therefore feel that I cannot be a party to this unbridled free for all violence and vandalism on the streets no matter what. Today I am also reminded of that famous saying, " Democracy is often tyranny by the majority." I am afraid slowly and surely we are stepping into a mob culture of the worst form and I do not wish to be a party to it, now or ever.

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

THERE is an old saying, " Whenever you find yourself with the majority it is time to pause and think". Today I find myself with the majority in their assessments on the question of the long list of failures of the present regime. This government has literally destroyed all branches of administration making them inefficient and ineffective. It is dictatorial in nature and oppressive. It is anti-people and extremely corrupt. Its lawmakers have not delivered what

we expected of them. All that I like most people of the country wish is to see the country come out of this miserable state of affairs and yet I wish to pause and think aloud.

Admittedly in democracy it is the people's right to go out in the open and stage protests and street agitations to realize their demands and seek redress of their grievances, but I think the time has now come to pause and think about the nature and the extent of certain aspects of our protests on the streets and public places. Without going into the merits

and demerits of the issues at stake I am afraid we have driven matters too far. The recent events of breaking cars and damaging of public property in the heart of the city, the breaking of several garment factories in Savar, the incident in Shanir Akhara, all tell a story, a story that makes me both sad and highly concerned. Are we advocating anarchy? This is one of the worst of times in the life of our nation and hence we should proceed with extreme caution and care in dealing with the situation. BNP may come and go and so may Awami League, but the

fact remains that Bangladesh is here to stay for all times to come. Today, any one who dares call him a patriot must make all out efforts to stop all such acts of vandalism.

The state in which our country is today, it will take years for it to recover. I hope our aspirants to the seat of power in the coming elections do realize the fact that it will take more than a magic wand to put things right and proceed ahead. Most of our vital institutions of governance are in a shambles, the law enforcing agencies, the education, the bureaucracy you name it. It is also time to consider the fact that all the political parties since Independence, including the major Opposition party had progressively contributed to the process of this decline.

If we are to salvage this country we should urgently consider depoliticizing the entire society that is beset with and enveloped in biased political thinking. Slowly and surely in the name of building political awareness what is happening is that, the people at large are led into cauterized

and partisan thinking, particularly by the two major political parties.

It is indeed time to sit back and seriously consider taking some hard decisions by our political leadership. It is high time that the political leadership, the intellectuals, members of the civil society put their heads together to reconsider the role of the partisan student bodies affiliated with various political parties. Admittedly, it was traditionally the student community, which was at the forefront of all our major democratic movements including our war of independence, but it must be said now that perhaps they have outlived their purpose. I strongly recommend that if not anything else all parties should put a moratorium on the activities of their affiliated student bodies for at least a period of five years.

The state of our bureaucracy is in total shambles. As it is with the departure of the erstwhile CSP cadres the operational capacity of our present bureaucracy has been reduced to its lowest rung ever. It is thus high time that all, the intellectuals, members of

the civil society, the various groups of professionals, come out in the open and condemn any form of politicization of the civil service. Civil servants from here onwards, whether in service or out of service, should be completely barred from indulging in active politics at least for a period of five years after their retirement from service. If need be the rules of civil service should be revised to make this into a law.

As we proceed we find that there remain much to be said about our judiciary. Today the sanctity of the judiciary is at stake. Lawyers with their partisan roles have made the court premises places for holding all kinds of public meetings and processions. The administration has further weakened its foundations by continuous flouting of court orders and directives. Day by day the Judiciary as an institution is becoming weaker. At the forefront of this process of weakening of our Judiciary lies our irresponsible political leadership. As one keeps thinking of the state of our Judiciary, one is reminded of the famous state-

ment made by Blaise Pascal about an ideal system of Judiciary which is worth quoting here, and which our lawmakers would do well to carefully take note of. He says, " Justice without power is inefficient; power without justice is tyranny. Justice without power is opposed because there are always wicked men. Power without justice is soon questioned. Justice and power must, therefore, be brought together, so that whatever is just may be powerful, and whatever is powerful may be just". We would also do well to remember that in the final analysis what is of vital importance is justice and not the judges.

Of late a band of wrongdoers allegedly under instigation of what many describe as "conspiratorial and under instigation from external elements" are out to destroy our major window of excellence in the industrial sector, the readymade garments industry (RMG). The agitating garment workers have carried out a war like ravage in which a good number of factories have been set ablaze and properties worth millions

have been gutted. Referring to the incident while seeking protection of their investments the Korean Community of Investors said that, " most of the violence was being created by thugs from outside EPZs and not factory workers."

For a while I too was extremely agitated with government's inaction and failure and in all honesty was considering myself very much a part of the various street agitations and protest marches What is happening in the name of protest marches is nothing but leading the nation to anarchy. I therefore feel that I cannot be a party to this unbridled free for all violence and vandalism on the streets no matter what. Today I am also reminded of that famous saying, " Democracy is often tyranny by the majority." I am afraid slowly and surely we are stepping into a mob culture of the worst form and I do not wish to be a party to it, now or ever.

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