

# Asset disclosure and millionaire ministers



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**P**OLITICIANS are the most corrupt professional class in the world. This hypothesis was released by Transparency International from London on December 9, 2005 on the occasion of International Anti-Corruption Day. The hypothesis was substantiated based on a two-year survey which included 55,000 respondents from 69 countries.

Survey respondents from 45 countries scored political parties on top in the list of corrupt entities for the second year in a row. As expected, some of the "millionaire ministers" of Bangladesh government which topped corrupt ranking for the fifth time in a row reacted with blistering attacks on the messenger instead of analyzing the message.

Awami League lawmakers' June 28 call for a discussion about the disclosure of assets by all politicians to uncover all-pervading political corruption is what a truly democratic parliament is expected to do. Interestingly, LGRD minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan's (AMB) admission that corruption is going on from "top to bottom" appeared

openly audacious, ostensibly sincere and politically pragmatic. The asset disclosure of the PM, ministers and lawmakers were one of the election pledges of the ruling BNP although it was before the allegations of "making millions" against them became widespread. If pressed hard through protests and hartals, they will succumb to the demand for asset disclosure but only after making their millions untraceable -- a move that would be tactically similar to their recent signs of slow and cautious movements towards a dialogue on reforming the CTG, the EC and election matters. This change of heart came only after they took time and completed politicisation of every election related government departments to command their loyalty for election victory.

Isn't an irony that AMB's "top" of the "top to bottom" person, the PM Khaleda Zia, while delivering her government's fables of accomplishments long gave a deaf ear and a cold shoulder to the opposition lawmakers' unflinching demand for asset disclosure and an open floor discourse on the recent TIB corruption reports. What is even more incongruous is AMB's 360 degree U-turn with his reaction against his ministry's topping the TIB 2005 corruption ranking. AMB even threatened legal recourse unless TIB retracts its report.

TIB must not blink and retract the report if its corruption data are backed by facts. If the TIB yields to pressure and intimidation it would diminish its credibility forever. TIB may not take AMB's vacuous threat seriously and should feel threatened

if he really carries through his bullying of retribution with court cases. The whole country would enjoy the court proceedings which, as a by product, will uncover the deep rooted empire of corruption network of the ruling cartel. When you pull the tail the head also comes along. AMB's threat simply manifest into: "If you cannot refute the message, attack the messenger."

Some of the "millionaire ministers" dubbed the TIB report as being "politically motivated" and a conspiracy to tarnish the images of the government and the country as well. Haven't we heard these scripts of accusations of conspiracies with "terrorists' violence", Kansat killings for agitations against power shortage, the burning of garment factories, school teachers' strikes and so on? The ruling cartel and their high command find the reasons for everything that goes against them as being rooted in "foreign and domestic conspiracies."

Most citizens and "a few good people" of the likes of lawmakers Oli Ahmed and Sheikh Razzak Ali of BNP would agree that TIB's ranking reflects citizens' experience with the political and bureaucratic machineries of the government. The ruling cartel may attack the messenger but they cannot delete the stigma of successive years of their topping the corrupt government ranking.

The declaration of assets and liabilities is imperative to combat large-scale corruption. The purpose is to make the election process more transparent and accountable; the hope is that making candidates declare their

financial assets and criminal record, if any, would help in reducing such undesirables as the influence of black money and criminality in politics.

Asset disclosure is an endemic problem in almost all developing countries. The manner in which financial assets has been declared in many countries reflect a dismal pattern and reveals some broad mockeries. For example, in a May 24 BBC News report Mubashir Zaidi wrote: "In Pakistan, politics is considered a rich man's job. Many MPs are either industrialists or agriculturists, and are widely seen as wealthy elite. Yet if the recently published list of their assets is to be believed, they are living a frugal and penniless life. More than 80 MPs on the list released by the Election Commission of Pakistan solemnly declare that they do not own a house, and 100 say they have no car."

In case of our neighbour India, the following observations are noteworthy:

-- Numerous candidates have declared moveable assets of merely a few lakhs, which were grossly out of proportion with their lifestyles. The legal limit on Lok Sabha election expenditure is Rs. 25 lakhs, a rule everyone breaks.

-- On the whole, the wives of candidates are wealthier than themselves. This corroborates the well-known fact that the financial assets of the politicians are wedged with members of their families.

-- Ironically, those joining politics from other professions -- particularly film stars -- have declared much higher assets. For example, Sunil Dutt disclosed his estimated

assets at Rs. 20 crores and Govinda is not far behind. The politicians were less straight about their wealth and dubiously "preferred to embrace the image of the humble khadi-wearing neta."

-- There seems to be no uniform standard when it comes to assessing real estate properties. Luxury flats in Mumbai, prime farm houses outside Delhi and estates in the countryside have been hideously undervalued in many instances.

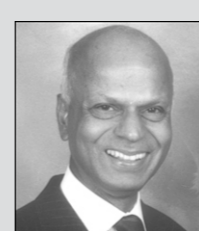
-- All in all, asset disclosure has raised more questions and provided fewer answers. Once nominations are accepted, the rules prohibit challenging asset declarations except by way of an election petition after the results are declared.

Would the millionaire politicians of Bangladesh do their asset disclosure any differently from those of their Indian and Pakistani counterparts? However, it makes good politics for the oppositions to discredit the ruling cartel further into a defensive posture of "no replies like that of the PM" by pushing for asset disclosure issue, which they have been hideously evading. But wouldn't it make far-sighted politics for the "few good people" among BNP lawmakers and all the opposition lawmakers in a pre-emptive move to publish their portfolio of assets and liabilities?

The country desperately needs a parliamentary committee of true patriots which would pursue the "millionaire ministers" all the way to the ACC and thus rescue the country from further defamations.

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# US and rule of law



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM writes from Madrid

**T**HE protection of individual rights is one of the pillars of the US constitution and due process is the means by which this protection is effectively guaranteed. Close to nine hundred years ago the 39th article of the Magna Carta (1215) gave a perfect definition of the due process. It said: "No freeman shall be taken or (and) imprisoned or 'disseised' or exiled or in any way destroyed except by the law of the land."

The Fifth Amendment to the US constitution states: "No person shall be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law." The Universal Declaration of Human Rights reaffirmed the "right to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal."

The Geneva Conventions, relating to Prisoners of War, prohibit "the passing of sentences and carrying out of executions without judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court affording all the judicial guarantees which are recognised as indispensable by civilized societies."

The Bush administration was

perfectly aware of all this before the start of its so-called war on terror. In order to circumvent the due process of law, it built a strategy which was based on two premises that in the war on terror the president had unlimited powers to take any decisions and that the terrorist suspects had no rights under the US legal system and the international law.

The objective was to place the terrorist suspects in a legal limbo so that they were completely at the mercy of the US administration -- it could do whatever it wanted to do with them. In order to deprive the prisoners of their legal rights under the US constitution, it set up prison camps which were not on American soil but in Cuba and other secret places on foreign soil.

To deny them the protection of the Geneva Conventions, they were branded as "unlawful enemy combatants" and not as prisoners of war. The president's executive order of February 7, 2002 clearly stated that Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions did not apply to Al Qaeda or Taliban detainees.

On June 29, 2006 the Supreme Court ruled that President Bush's special military tribunals -- which merely gave the appearance of being fair judicial courts but in reality had very significant limitations -- to try these so-called "enemy combatants" were illegal because no congressional approval had been sought before they were established and because they were not in accordance with the standards set by US laws and the Geneva Conventions.

In passing this sentence, the court tried to reaffirm three fundamental principles. First, the presi-

dent was not above the law; second, the legislature was not there merely to rubber-stamp the president's decisions but also to control the executive power; and third, in pursuing its war on terror, the United States was bound by the rules of international law such as the Geneva Conventions.

No doubt the Supreme Court ruling is a step in the right direction but it is a modest one. Human rights activists should not start jumping with joy because there are considerable doubts about the exact consequences of the ruling. On July 11, the Bush administration asked "the Congress to fix, rather than scrap the system of military tribunals struck down by the Supreme Court."

However, on the same day, the Pentagon stated that in compliance with Article 3 of the Geneva conventions, the prisoners at Guantanamo prison camp will be treated humanely. But according to some analysts there is still considerable scepticism as to whether Pentagon will fully comply with the other requirement of Article 3 of the Geneva conventions of 1949 which prohibits "the passing of sentences and carrying out of executions without judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court affording all the judicial guarantees."

I am in agreement with the Economist's comments on the court ruling. It wrote, the Supreme Court "blocked the executive from doing what was clearly unlawful, but otherwise sought to interfere as little as possible."

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# Unintended consequences

You wouldn't be alone if you thought the world was spinning out of control: war in Lebanon, North Korean missile launches, Iran's nuclear program, Iraq's civil war and real disagreements among world leaders at the G-8. As secretary of state under Bill Clinton, **Madeleine Albright** handled variations on many of these issues. Now serving as co-chair of the Pew Global Attitudes Project, she spoke to Newsweek's **Zvika Krieger** to give her take on events -- and yes, it's as bad as she's ever seen it.

**Krieger:** First off, what do you think of the hostilities between Israel and Lebanon?

**Albright:** It is very serious and I am very worried. While not everything is the United States' fault, our lack of attention to many of the issues in the Middle East, except for Iraq, has not helped the situation. I am very worried about the interaction of all these different aspects, of spreading violence in the

Middle East.

**Do you see an Iranian role in this? Flexing their muscles in the region with Hizbullah?**

I hope I'm wrong, but I am afraid that Iraq is going to turn out to be the greatest disaster in American foreign policy -- worse than Vietnam, not in the number who died, but in terms of its unintended consequences and its reverberation throughout the region. I would say that

Iran has gained a great deal out of the war in Iraq in terms of influence, particularly its ability to manipulate various other forces in the Middle East. Clearly, Hizbullah is a group that has been funded through some contributions by Iran. Also, Syria and Iran share a feeling that they've been isolated or squeezed out of any discussions in the Middle East, and are finding solace in each

other. There is no question that this is a time when Iran is showing where it can have certain influences.

**This all comes when the Bush administration's attitude toward foreign policy seems to be changing.**

Reality has actually set in for the Bush administration -- in some cases -- in terms of the necessity for diplomacy. Especially as they are now dealing with the problems in Iran and

North Korea, they are seeing that it is absolutely essential to have some cooperation in the international community. And so I think that they are less unilateral, but I still think they are unidimensional. They (are not) looking enough at the variety of issues out there in which the US needs to play a role.

**Why the change?**

Nothing was working. There wasn't a lot of traction on a variety of things that they were involved in. At a certain stage, everybody learns.

**Should the administration be talking to Iran?**

I have to say that in the meeting of, as I call us, "the former people" -- former secretaries of state and defense -- with the president in May, one of the suggestions I made was that they needed to

deal with Iran directly. Not just in order to check a box, as the vice president was reported to have said, but because I think it is valuable to deliver your messages directly.

**North Korea, of course, is also giving Bush headaches.**

The Bush administration has not done what I think they need to do. We were in the middle of negotiations with North Korea when we left office. And I actually would argue that sometimes it's very useful to have continuity in foreign policy. You have to forget about partisanship and pick up where one team left off. After all, all of us are trying to do the best for America. The Bush administration totally switched signals on everything and went from direct talks to multilateral talks, and I think that on North

Korea it would be useful to pursue bilateral talks.

**Do you agree with Bush's strategy in dealing with Putin?**

I was not for boycotting the G-8 summit. It provides the president an opportunity to state a case about what we believe in, not what to President Putin directly but also in front of the others. I would question whether he should look into President Putin's eyes again, meaning that President Putin is pretty clever about looking the way he wants to look. As President Reagan said, "Trust but verify." So trying to see President Putin's soul is not exactly the way to go.

**But is the White House becoming less ideological and more pragmatic?**

I think that it continues to be a pretty ideological administration. I get the

sense, in reading about them as well as a couple of meetings at the White House, that they continue to believe that they have the right answers. Their certainty about things is something that damages their ability to move forward on a whole host of issues. I can't think of an area where things have improved in the last five years. One of the things that troubles me is the certainty with which the Bush administration is convinced that God is on their side and that they are following a very specific plan. So when plan A doesn't work, there is no plan B. And that's ideological.



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# A new Middle East is born

**OMAR BARGHOUTI**

**S**IX long, blood-stained days have passed since Israel launched its barbaric attack on Lebanon without succeeding in exacting a significant military toll on the resistance itself. Six days are exactly what it took Israel to deal a crushing and humiliating military defeat to the largely inferior armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan in June 1967, and to subsequently occupy the Palestinian Gaza Strip and West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the Syrian Golan Heights, and the Egyptian Sinai peninsula.

How the "Middle East" has changed in the past 4 decades! Indeed, thanks to the Lebanese resistance, and to an extent its Palestinian counterpart, this volatile zone is undergoing radical transformation from a region where Arab regimes -- and societies, more or less -- have largely internalized defeat and US-Israeli hegemony as fate to one that is palpably rebuilding its confidence in the future and its hope for an era of justice and peace, without colonial and racist oppression.

This is certainly not the "New

Middle East" that had been on the agenda before the current Palestinian intifada broke out. Shimon Peres, the current Israeli deputy prime minister and one of the few remaining historic Zionist leaders, often spoke during the heyday of the Oslo "peace process" between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) of his vision for a new Middle East, where Israel and its Arab "neighbours" would live in harmony, peace and common prosperity.

For the uninitiated in Zionist talk, this translates into an official Arab capitulation to Israel's hegemony over the Middle East, opening up lucrative Arab markets to its advanced economy and to its insatiable desire for becoming a regional empire.

Conspicuously missing from Peres's grand plan was a just solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict which, according to international law, would entail ending Israel's occupation and colonization of the Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese territories occupied in 1967; recognizing the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their lands, from which they were ethnically

cleansed to establish Israel on the ruins of their society; and ending Israel's system of racial discrimination against its own Palestinian citizens, who are denied any semblance of equality in a state that not only discriminates against them in the provision of basic services and recognition of fundamental rights, but precludes them from its very self-definition as well.

After six days of Israel's aggression against Lebanon -- ostensibly to free two of its soldiers captured by Hizbullah in a stunningly sophisticated military operation at the Lebanese-Israeli border -- and its deliberate, gradual massacre of innocent Lebanese civilians as a tactic to erode Hizbullah's public support, the Lebanese resistance has not only persevered but has also dealt Israel some unexpectedly harsh blows that have already succeeded in lastingly changing the face of the Middle East. While the West chose to ignore the plight of Arab civilians who have fallen victim to these latest Israeli war crimes, the Arab world did not miss the blunt felling of several other "victims," illusions and myths that have hitherto been perceived by many as facts of life.

The first of those victims is Israel's "deterrence." Israel explicitly admitted that its deliberate use of overwhelming -- or "disproportionate," in the West's sanitized language -- force was aimed at recovering its "damaged deterrence." Its patent means for achieving this end is through indiscriminate killing and gratuitous devastation, both intended to reinforce Israel's image in the collective "Arab mind" as an invincible, unrivaled power in the region, and, crucially, as a "mad dog" that knows no rational bounds to the exercise of brute force to achieve its objectives, as Moshe Dayan once advocated.

From this perspective, instilling despair and utter fear becomes Israel's weapon of choice in psychological warfare, the tools of which it has mastered for decades. Accordingly, hope among the oppressed must be crushed at any price lest it leads to upheaval and open defiance to the oppressive order. What Hizbullah did in six days, coming at the heels of six years of open Palestinian defiance in the occupied Palestinian territory (OPT), is nothing less than tearing down that "iron wall" of Arab hopelessness, thereby further undermining the foundations of Israel's

deterrent capability.

Another casualty of Israel's double-aggression on Gaza and Lebanon is the official West's claim to moral consistency, decency, or even respect for international law. Western governments have, by and large, openly or bashfully supported Israel's invasion of Gaza and its ruthless bombardment of Lebanon as a form of "self-defence," overlooking the standard definition of this notion and the limits set on it in international legal conventions.

European submission to, or voluntary adoption of, the US doctrine that only Israel is entitled to the right to "defend" itself in this conflict betrays Europe's collusion in reinforcing a key pillar in the US empire's world view: might makes right, and international law can take a hike.

As an editorial in the Guardian today rightly states: "Not calling clearly for a truce at once could suggest [Europe's] complicity with what Israel is doing and the US is tacitly backing: using overwhelming force to defeat or cripple Hizbullah, whatever the consequences for Lebanon or the region."

Furthermore, by expressing a nauseatingly unbalanced concern over loss of Israeli lives -- military

and civilian -- while comparatively devaluing loss of life among Arab civilians in Lebanon and Gaza to little more than a nuisance that may potentially blemish Israel's otherwise bright image, Western officials and most of the sheepish, corporate-controlled mainstream media in the West have betrayed a level of naked racism that many had thought extinct in these beacons of democracy and enlightenment. Reflecting this phenomenon, a recent New York Times editorial, for instance, describes Israel's atrocities in Lebanon as "far-reaching military responses" that are "legally and morally justified."

Of course this hardly comes as a surprise to anyone closely monitoring Western political and cultural discourse about the Arab world, as expressed by officials, pundits and media editorials. Still, the unmitigated disregard for the sanctity of human life in the "global south" in general, whether in Afghanistan, Iraq, Guantanamo Bay, Rwanda, Palestine or Lebanon, in comparison with Western -- including Israeli -- lives, is a disturbing reminder that racism, far from being an ugly memory of the colonial West's past, is live and kicking and abundantly present in its corridors of power,

singularly affecting its decision making vs. the Middle East.

At the core of this resilient bigotry is a common view -- not always overtly articulated -- of non-whites as merely relative humans, lacking some of the basic attributes associated with "full" humans, i.e. whites. The essentially equal worth of all human life, irrespective of ethnicity, colour, gender or faith, has again become among many Western elites a matter of opinion.

The latest fatality in Israel's war of aggression is the Arab-Israeli "peace process." The Arab League's Secretary General, Mr. Amr Moussa, has officially announced his death in a press conference held right after the emergency meeting of Arab foreign ministers in Cairo on Saturday. Again, this is not news to any observer of this process of deception, which was carefully designed to legitimize Israel's control over parts of the occupied Palestinian territory and its denial of some of the inalienable rights of the people of Palestine, as well as to dictate Israel's terms for "peace," namely unqualified Arab submission to its injustice.

Given all the real and virtual victims of Israel's ongoing trashing of international law and mockery of

the so-called international political system, purportedly headed by the UN, Arab civil society ought to struggle to further spread the reach and depth of the growing, progressive movement advocating a boycott of Israel, similar to that applied to apartheid South Africa. Ultimately, only such a morally sound, non-violent form of resistance can produce sustainable and practical pressures that can hold Israel to account and therefore give just peace a chance.

Israel embarked on its latest bloody adventure hoping to change the rules of the game. People of conscience everywhere can indeed hand it brand new "rules of the game": turning it into a pariah state until it fully complies with its obligations under international law and starts treating its victims as equal humans who deserve full human and political rights, most crucial of which is their unassailable right to live in freedom and dignity.

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