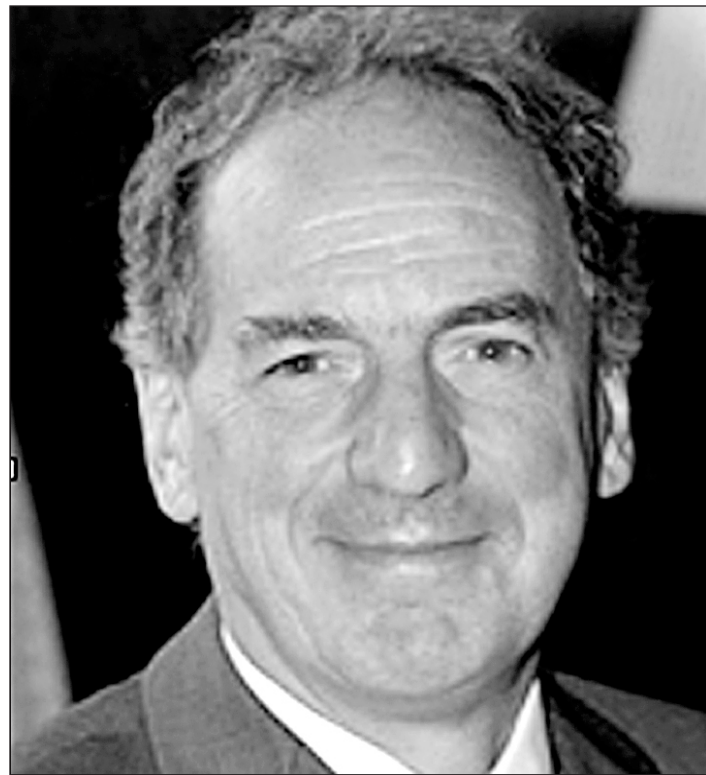


# Expect us to stay neutral -- but not to stay on the fence



DR KIM HOWELLS

**F**OLLOWING the horrific political violence witnessed in Bangladesh at the end of October, I expressed the deep concerns of the UK government, and our desire to see free, fair, and peaceful elections in Bangladesh. I know what you're thinking. Another day, another call for "free and fair elections." After all the

column inches filled, the ink spilled by columnists and commentators, the photos of earnest-looking diplomats and proud civil society members and the TV coverage of pundits and politicians, is it worth it? What does it even mean? And anyway, what business is it of the UK government to speak out? Some might say that a British minister has no right to pass comment on what happens in

**We are not engaging in order to dominate or to take sides. The elections belong to the people of Bangladesh. But as a friend of Bangladesh, we believe in the potential of the country and its people and we support democracy, stability and security to help further its development. Fine diplomatic language has its purpose. But there is a time and place to say what you mean. And in Bangladesh, right now, the time and place for this has never been clearer. What kind of a friend would the UK be if it were not prepared to speak up?**

Bangladesh. It is "undue interference;" or worse, it is "neo-colonial arrogance." Heavy words are lightly thrown.

There is a fine line between interference in the affairs of another country and being prepared to do what's right, at the right time and engage. Some might say: "Give me one good reason why it's any of your business." I'll gladly offer to do better than that.

To be legitimate, any democratic election needs the confidence of the international community; it's not a question of singling out Bangladesh. In any country, those who embrace democracy welcome independent scrutiny and validation of the electoral process as being in everyone's interests. It offers credibility to whoever forms the next government and inspires trust among the people. Recent election evaluation missions by UN, EU, Commonwealth, and the US have consistently identified important points for the political parties, caretaker government, and Election Commission to address to ensure that the elections reach the standards that the Bangladeshi people expect and deserve. Britain

will do its part to support these bodies where it can.

We have a great trading relationship. Britain remains the largest foreign investor in Bangladesh and trade between our countries is worth more than £500 million a year. We'd like to maintain this and the UK minister of state for trade, Ian McCartney, who is planning to visit Bangladesh soon, will no doubt echo this.

But business and trade cannot thrive on uncertainty and instability; investors will not sow seeds in shifting soils. A stable business climate in Bangladesh needs a firm political foundation, with transparency and good governance at the heart of it. These elections will set the tone. Failure to engage now could set back Bangladesh's economic development by years and, in a globalized world, that is in no one's interests.

The security of all voters, party activists, leaders and the media is an imperative for the forthcoming elections. Violence has no place in a democratic society and political parties must be allowed to campaign freely and peacefully.

And it is legitimate for the international community to call on the caretaker government, law enforcement agencies, and the parties themselves to take responsibility and to demonstrate leadership and restraint to ensure this. Human security is a fundamental right and it is a universal one. There is a moral obligation for all countries committed to human rights to scrutinise the protection given to those exercising their democratic mandate. The UK, like Bangladesh, is a member of the UN Human Rights Council and a signatory to UN Conventions on Human Rights and should therefore be prepared to speak out if necessary.

The government of Bangladesh is on record as having requested donor assistance ahead of the January 2007 election. As the largest bilateral donor to Bangladesh, it is only right that we help where we can. DFID has provided £1 million to support Bangladeshi NGOs support the electoral process and help cement democratic practices, such as issues-based campaigning, non-violence and accountability.

This is work by Bangladeshis for Bangladeshis. For a stable and legitimate government, the people of Bangladesh need to be able to have faith in the outcome of the election. The rule of law must apply: no violence, intimidation or manipulation of ballots and an environment conducive to the fullest participation. The need for accountability includes what happens in the run up to the elections as well. Every effort should be made to foster trust in the electoral machinery. The caretaker government charged with overseeing the elections should ensure no political bias. Bangladeshis deserve the right to vote. Ensuring this means having an accurate and inclusive voter list, compiled in a transparent and independent manner.

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Fine diplomatic language has its purpose. But there is a time and place to say what you mean. And in Bangladesh, right now, the time and place for this has never been clearer. What kind of a friend would the UK be if it were not prepared to speak up?

Dr Kim Howells is UK Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

# EU foreign policy at sixes and sevens

DR IMRAN KHALID

**F**RENCH President Jacques Chirac's recent statement in which he has asked the world powers to talk with Iran without threatening sanctions even if Iran fails to halt uranium enrichment before the negotiations, has once again highlighted the differences within the European Union over foreign policy issues.

Mr Chirac's new stance is in contrast with that of the European Union, which said in a statement few days ago that suspending enrichment activities was "no longer a voluntary confidence-building measure but an international obligation" for Iran to get engaged in any sort of negotiation on the subject.

Distancing itself from the EU stance, does bring France more in line with two other veto-yielding permanent Security Council members -- China and Russia -- who have already been opposing any kind of sanctions against Iran on the nuclear issue.

Interestingly, Chirac's remarks have also severely undermined the three-nation group leading EU negotiations on Iran, which includes France itself, along with Britain and Germany. Nonetheless, this situation has once again ignited the debate on the need for coherence and unison in the sphere of EU foreign policy particularly in the context of growing role of the White House in world affairs.

The fact is that, owing to the lack of a coherent and concrete foreign policy structure, the European Union has not been able to demonstrate its true influence across the globe and it is still struggling to be an effective player in global politics.

Despite his desperate efforts to change the situation and to enable the EU to play its due role, Javier Solana, the European Union's dynamic foreign policy chief, has not been able to show any tangible progress in this direction. Since June this year, he has been making a serious effort to project the European Union as an important player by negotiating a package deal with Iran.

Basking in the limelight, he has been visiting Tehran with an unusually delicate mission of package deal to defuse the gathering storm over Iran's nuclear ambitions. Though serving essentially as a postman to the EU and five permanent members of the Security Council, he still has managed to at least register the European Union's presence in contentious global issues like Iran's nuclear

standoff. Solana, former Spanish foreign minister and NATO secretary general, started his job -- with a cumbersome formal title of high representative for the common foreign and security policy -- in 1999 with high ambitions. But ever since, he has been just trouble-shooting.

Despite being a key donor across the globe, the problem with the European Union is that it has miserably failed to dictate or influence the complexion of major global issues like the Middle East, UN reforms, the Iraq quagmire, etc. On all these issues, the dearth of synergy and coordination is quite visible in the EU foreign policy.

"Unsatisfactory coordination between different actors and policies means that the EU loses potential leverage internationally, both politically and economically," is how the commission president, Jose Manuel Barroso, put it recently.

The problem lies very much within the intricate EU architecture where the foreign policy still remains the jealously guarded preserve of the member states, with only a limited role for the supranational European Commission despite having a dedicated commissioner for external relations. The existing national disagreements among the member states have frequently scuttled many attempts towards a unified EU stand on different international issues.

Interestingly, the EU's new constitution has not only identified this congenital anomaly but also tried to address it promptly by establishing a well-equipped European diplomatic service -- having both authority and responsibility to run the show as one voice for the European Union and Solana as its head with the title of EU foreign minister.

However, last summer's defeat of the constitution in the referendums in France and the Netherlands has put the brakes on all that. Without the constitution, Solana remains outside the commission as a handicapped manager, with no direct control over 6 billion euro external aid budget -- the main lever that can make the European Union a key and influential player in global politics.

So, a unified EU foreign policy will remain an elusive dream until the establishment of a "constitutional" EU foreign policy department. There is not a single binding factor in the existing arrangement that has the potential to add the element of synergy in EU foreign policy.

# The sleepwalking caretaker regime

**Let us consider some basic facts regarding the council of advisors. The advisors are accomplished, sensible, talented, competent, respectable, and responsible men and women. Given the opportunity, they will do a credible, and even laudable, job. The problem may lie in the lack of coordination and direction, and in the fact that most of the important positions, as well as actions, are concentrated in the hands of the president/chief advisor. The president is old and infirm, and he urgently needs to delegate some of the vital responsibilities to the advisors who have the specific background for particular and specialized functions.**

OMAR KHASRU

**T**HE current caretaker regime seems to be sleep-walking when it comes to dealing with vital and pressing issues. In the past, caretaker governments always seemed to convey a built-in urgency, a spring in the step, if you like, that is sorely missing in the existing version, even though it is functioning in a real crisis situation.

Inordinate time is being spent on procedural matters rather than on a genuine and concerted effort to tackle the critical and urgent concerns. The previous transitional administrations seemed really involved, right from the word go, in important matters at hand, such as improving the law and order situa-

tion by nabbing criminals and terrorists, recovering caches of illegally encroached property and land, including the banks of the river Buriganga. The dual considerations were to do as much good as possible, and to make the best use of the relatively short 90-day tenure. The common people used to pine for the relative safety, fairness, and unselfish welfare activities of the caretaker regime.

The current caretaker regime in contrast seems rather laidback and lackadaisical, yet to find a firm footing. Otherwise, how to explain or justify the wasting of valuable time, and the waiting for two weeks before forming a working group to discuss with various political parties the ways for resolving the

intractable and inexorable political predicament. Why this group could not be formed 10 or 12 days earlier is rather incomprehensible.

What some of the advisors are doing is talking and talking, and talking some more to the media, in allegories and metaphors, waxing poetic and basking in the glory of the attention and significance they are receiving. It seems that they just do not want to miss this opportunity to become media stars. The fact is that they have accomplished precious little, and the output has been rather negligible. So far the indication is that, in real terms, the honourable advisors have been working at two excruciating speeds: stop and slow. The fervent appeal to them would be to talk less and do more, much more, to over-

come the on-going crisis, and to devote all their energy and efforts towards holding a free, fair, and credible election.

Speaking of deployment, you have to shake your head in utter disbelief and bewilderment at the recent goof-up regarding the deployment of the armed forces to control the law and order situation. The home secretary's circular on deployment of the army was apparently issued without following the rules of business, embarrassing the council of advisors, and that prompted the rescinding of the order. It is imperative to figure out who was behind this improper directive, and to take appropriate administrative action for this serious transgression and infraction. But frankly, I will not be holding my breath expecting swift and punitive action against the perpetrator of this serious offense.

Let us consider some basic facts, precepts, and tenets regarding the council of advisors. The advisors are accomplished, sensible, talented, competent, respectable, and responsible men and women. Given the opportunity and leeway, they will do a credible, and even laudable, job. The problem may lie in the lack of coordination

and direction, and in the fact that most of the important positions, as well as actions, are concentrated in the hands of the president/chief advisor. The president is old and infirm, a heart patient, and he urgently needs to delegate some of the vital responsibilities to the advisors who have the specific background, talent, and credentials for particular and specialized functions.

Jimmy Carter was a highly educated nuclear engineer in the US navy and governor of Georgia before becoming the president of the US. As a president, his attention to detail, and supervision of even the most minor decision, was well-known. He was considered a pedantic pedagogue and his single-term presidency, between 1976 and 1980, was considered an abject failure. He was beaten comprehensively by Ronald Reagan. Carter has, since, received a Nobel Peace Prize for his humanitarian and social work, and has proved to be the most successful former president.

Ronald Reagan was an actor, not a terribly successful one. He dabbled in actor's guild and was elected the chief of the Hollywood actor's union. He blended his acting back-

ground and union activity with conservative politics and became the governor of California in the early 1960s, just like the current California governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger. Reagan did not pay much attention to detail, and was actually photographed napping in a few cabinet meetings. But his two-term presidency, that changed the course of history, was considered extremely successful. He gave broad guidelines and let his extremely capable and dedicated advisors take care of the minute details. Reagan oversaw the end of the Cold War, the defeat of the Soviet empire, and universal acceptance of free market economy.

The moral of the story is, let the advisors in the caretaker government work independently, minimizing the role of the entrenched bureaucracy. Let the advisors do what they need to do, and what they must do, without unnecessary interference or insidious road-blocks. Let them save the country from falling into the abyss, and let them work towards a free, fair, and reliable election that all sensible people want.

The author is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

# The case for Bangladesh Studies

**An Institute of Bangladesh Studies may be established. This institution should train teachers and compile, edit or update relevant textbooks. It should also conduct research on various pedagogic aspects of Bangladesh. It should have a library and should subscribe to all journals that relate to Bangladesh and regional studies. It should also liaise among different private universities with a view to maintaining a standard in the teaching and study of Bangladesh. Before such an institution is established, one or a number of universities, in cooperation with the University Grants Commission, may arrange a national workshop to chart the future course of action with respect to Bangladesh Studies.**

IFTEKHAR IQBAL

**B**ANGLADESH has become a subject of much pedagogic interest since the early 1990s, when private universities started operating in this country. A number of causes may be attributed to such interest: patriotic feeling, government encouragement, need for balancing the syllabi by accommodating subjects of humanities and social sciences, guardians' expectations etc.

But, probably it is time now that we also recognize that Bangladesh Studies exists because *Bangladesh itself is worth studying*. The historical developments since ancient times, in what is Bangladesh territory, culminated in its birth as a modern nation-state in 1971.

In spite of the relative failures at different levels in the public sphere, there has been perceptible, and often sharp, upward movement in different sectors in the social, economic and cultural arenas. But, going beyond the debates about whether Bangladesh has performed well, or badly, as a nation, we should be satisfied that it is one of the few nations in the developing world which is remarkably exposed to domestic, as well as global, intellectual and development discourses. This is precisely why Bangladesh Studies deserves far greater attention in the higher education sectors than it is currently receiving. There are, however, a

number of issues that need to be addressed in this connection.

A major problem is that most universities allocate only three credit-hours for a course relating to Bangladesh Studies. The problem for the teachers is, therefore, what to teach within this limited period, which does not amount to more than 40 hours, at best. Since there is no teacher who is comprehensively trained in Bangladesh Studies, one has to have a particular academic background, such as History, Public Administration, Sociology etc.

This means that a teacher with a particular academic background would tend to focus on his/her own field of specialization. This may often create the problem of allocation of proportionate time to all proposed themes in the syllabus, since the idea of the course is to teach almost all conceivable subjects, ranging from geographical features to constitution, economy to culture and so on. Most teachers are perhaps trying to do equal justice to some selected topics, but their is no doubt that students end the course with either a lopsided view of Bangladesh, or a partial, or insufficient, knowledge of topics covered.

Second, English is perhaps more important for Bangladesh Studies than other subjects such as Computer Science or BBA, precisely because it falls mainly within the disciplines of Social Sciences

and Liberal Arts. Students often fail to understand lectures unless Bangla is also used simultaneously; but this is not what the private universities would encourage.

Third, there are not many suitable textbooks on this emerging subject. Some years ago, an important publication in this field, *Bangladesh. On the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century*, edited by AM Chowdhury & Fakrul Alam, was published and some universities recommend this book. This is the first attempt to address the problem of the lack of textbooks in this field. However, given the inefficiency in English of a majority of the students, and the inadequate level of understanding of issues relating to broader areas of humanities and social sciences, this book appears to be a bit difficult for undergraduate students.

Another publication that followed is *Bangladesh: National Cultures and Heritage: An Introductory Reader*, edited by AF Salahuddin Ahmed & Bazlul Mobin Chowdhury. The same comments apply to this book, excepting that while the former focuses on contemporary issues, the latter focuses mostly on history and tradition. In a way, these two books are complementary to each other, but at the same time it is problematic for the students to consult both books together for a reasonable synthesis, since each of the books is too thick to be digested in the limited time frame of 40 hours

or so.

Another source of information is a reference book, *Banglapedia*. This is a huge, commendable work by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, and is edited by Sirajul Islam. But again, problems relating to the above two books also apply to this encyclopedia. Previous experience with our students suggests that, considering the time constraints and the level of linguistic efficiency of our students, we need more workable, manageable and digestible textbooks, fairly tuned to the need and ability of the students.

Fourth, students sometimes find Bangladesh Studies out of sync with their core subjects which relate to business, science and technology or pharmacy, for instance. They do not see tangible linkages between their core subjects and Bangladesh Studies. By the same token, students still do not see career prospects linked with the subject.

What can we do about the problems that exist in teaching Bangladesh Studies? As far as the question of inadequate level of learning of the students is concerned, one remedy is that the private universities, which are offering 3-credit course in Bangladesh Studies, may perhaps allow three more credits. That way the teachers and the students would perhaps get breathing space, and would go little deeper into a particular topic. It may also be possible to widen the range of teaching Bangladesh Studies by having the subject as a Minor.

Another option is much larger, and requires more serious attention. Some private universities may offer a BA or BSc degree in Bangladesh Studies. It would perhaps be helpful in the sense that in three or four years a student will become well-versed in various aspects of Bangladesh, including economy, society, art and culture, history and tradition, politics and administration, international eco-

nomics and diplomatic relations. Yet another option can be to offer a short one to two year diploma course solely on Bangladesh.

Secondly, an Institute of Bangladesh Studies may be established. This institution should train teachers and compile, edit or update relevant textbooks. It should also conduct research on various pedagogic aspects of Bangladesh. It should have a library and should subscribe to all journals that relate to Bangladesh and regional studies. It should also liaise among different private universities with a view to maintaining a standard in the teaching and study of Bangladesh. Before such an institution is established, one or a number of universities, in cooperation with the University Grants Commission, may arrange a national workshop to chart the future course of action with respect to Bangladesh Studies.

Thirdly, universities should try to make sure that students do not have the feeling that Bangladesh Studies is a peripheral subject which takes up only three hours per week, and costs a few thousand taka. There are many ways by which the university governing bodies and academic councils can take Bangladesh Studies to a new height within academia. It is heartening that many universities have made the subject compulsory for students of other departments. But this is not enough, and it does not address the problem of Bangladesh Studies remaining an "underdog" in the higher studies sector. Universities should seriously think of offering degrees at both, undergraduate and graduate levels.

Fourthly, the government of Bangladesh, the corporate world and the NGOs can play an important role in promoting Bangladesh Studies. The promotion of Bangladesh Studies would serve both, the students who graduate in this subject and the different organizations that employ them. Both cadre and non-cadre public service



sectors can substantially benefit from employing students with a degree in Bangladesh Studies.

If a BUET graduate in Chemical Engineering can end up being a career diplomat, or a Soil Science graduate of Dhaka University can become a member of the Board of Revenue, then we should not have any problem in accommodating a graduate of Bangladesh Studies in our Civil Services.

Similarly, the corporate world will, hopefully, have no problem in accepting students of Bangladesh Studies. In the corporate management of Unilever in the UK, for instance, there are numerous top level staff who graduated in History, Political Science, International Relations, Cultural Management,

and so on. At the same time, there are reasons to believe that the NGOs in Bangladesh would warmly accept graduates in Bangladesh Studies, who will be better placed to contribute towards the ongoing development process of the country.

Before concluding, it must be asserted that efforts to develop and promote Bangladesh Studies should be integral to an overall effort to cohesively accommodate different subjects of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences in the realm of private sector higher education. Unlike in other countries, private universities in Bangladesh denote a different category.

One of the many determinants of this difference of private universities

from "mainstream" universities is that the former, with few exceptions, do not offer degrees in the subjects within Liberal Arts and Social Sciences. But some private universities have reached such a height, in terms of financial stability and reputation, that they can easily afford to open full-fledged departments and offer degrees in diverse subjects within the Liberal Arts and Social Sciences. It is time that the "private university" now transforms itself into simply a "university."

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