

Time to pause and think

If we are to salvage this country we should urgently consider de-politicising the entire society that is beset with, and enveloped in, partisan political thinking. Slowly and surely, what is happening in the name of building political awareness is that the people at large are being led into cauterised and partisan thinking, particularly by both the major political parties.

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

HERE 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 of the question of the long list of failures of the previous regime. That government had literally destroyed all branches of administration, making them totally inefficient and ineffective. It was dictatorial and oppressive in nature. It was anti-people and extremely corrupt. Its lawmakers at the highest levels were liars and continually indulged in falsehood and deception. The present caretaker government seems to be following in their footsteps. All that I understand and like most people of the

country I also wish to come out of this miserable state of affairs. Yet I wish to pause and think aloud.

Admittedly, in a 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 that we have driven matters too far. The recent incidents of breaking of cars and damaging of public property in the heart of the city, vandalising at several garment factories in Savar, the incident in Shanir Akhra 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 will Awami League but the fact remains that Bangladesh is here to stay for all time to come. Today, if anyone dares to call himself a patriot he must make all out efforts to stop all such acts of vandalism.

It will take years for the country to recover from the state which it is in today. I hope the aspirants to the seat of power in the coming elections do realise the fact that it will take more than a magic wand to put things right, and then to

proceed ahead. Most of our vital institutions of governance are in shambles, the judiciary and the law enforcing agencies, education, the bureaucracy, the army, you name it. It is also time to consider the fact that all the successive political parties since independence, including the former major opposition party, had progressively contributed to the process of this decline.

If we are to salvage this country we should urgently consider de-politicising the entire society that is beset with, and enveloped in, partisan political thinking. Slowly and surely, what is happening in the name of building political awareness is that the people at large are being led into cauterised and partisan thinking, particularly by both the major political parties.

It is indeed time for our political leadership to sit back and seriously consider taking some hard decisions. It is high time that the political leadership, intellectuals, and members of the civil society all put their heads together to completely disband the partisan student bodies affili-

ated with various political parties. Admittedly, it was traditionally the student communities, which were 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 a period of five years at least.

The state of our bureaucracy is in total shambles. As it is, with the departure of the erstwhile cadres of CSP belonging to the erstwhile Pakistan civil service the operational capacity of our present bureaucracy has been reduced to its lowest rung ever. It is, thus, high time for all, the intellectuals, the members of the civil society and the various groups of professionals to come out in the open and condemn any form of politicisation 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 retire-

ment. If need be the rules of civil service should be revised to make this into a law.

As we proceed we find that there remains much to be said about our judiciary. Today the very process of recruitment of judges is in question. 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 had further weakened its foundations by continuous flouting of court orders and directives. Day by day the judiciary as an institution is becoming irrelevant and weaker. At the forefront of this process of weakening of our judiciary lies irresponsible political leadership of both the AL and the BNP.

As I keep thinking of the state of our Judiciary, I am reminded of the famous statement by Blaise Pascal about an ideal system of judiciary which I am tempted to quote here and which our lawmakers would do well to carefully take note of: "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." As we can see, the institution of the judiciary has also taken a blow that has shaken its very foundations. 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 miscreants, allegedly under instigation of what many describe as "conspiratorial and under instigation from external elements," is out to destroy our major symbol of excellence in the industrial sector, the readymade garments industry (RMG). The so called agitating garment workers had carried out war-like ravaging in which a good number of factories had been set ablaze, and properties worth millions had 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 by factory workers."

For a while I, too, was extremely agitated with government's inaction and failures and, in all honesty, was considering myself very much a part of the various street agitations and protest marches. But clearly our political leadership, in the opposition in particular, has carried matters too far and set some dangerous precedents. 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 that, 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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A 'psychological crisis'

Harith Al-Dhari is a wanted man. In early November, the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government accused the influential Sunni leader of inciting terrorism and issued a warrant for his arrest while he was out of the country. Al-Dhari, who also heads Iraq's influential Muslim Scholars Association, declared the warrant illegal, and continued traveling around the region as part of his campaign to get other Arab states to deny recognition to Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's administration. The warrant has further inflamed tensions in Iraq, where many consider al-Dhari -- a longtime supporter of violent resistance against American troops -- a hero. He spoke to Newsweek's Michael Hastings at his current home in Amman, Jordan.

Hastings: Why did you think the Iraqi government issued the warrant?
Al-Dhari: Because of the chaos and lack of security and the killings, and the destruction. There is a psychological crisis in the government. Our political speech is realistic and very honest and it's starting to disturb them. It uncovers a lot of facts that they don't want to reveal. My visits to the Arab countries have established pressure on them. Also what happened in Washington ... the (midterm) elections made the (Iraqi) government afraid of the unknown. They (carried out) a number of irresponsible procedures, and one of them was the warrant for my arrest. One of the reasons for this warrant is that they say I incite divisions, sectarian divisions between the Iraqi people, that I am provoking them. That's what they claim.
Do you blame the Americans for the warrant?
 I don't blame them because I'm not sure that the US was behind it. I blame the Iraqi government.

Whether it was al-Maliki or others behind it, I don't know. In practical terms, this warrant cannot have come out without the prime minister's knowledge.
Can al-Maliki stop the death squads?
 I don't think he is unable to stop it. And if he is unable to stop it, he should step down from his position. If he really cares about Iraq and the Iraqi people because he is the person responsible for Iraq, and if he is unable to stop the death squads and crimes against the Iraqi people, he should resign. If it goes on and he's unable to stop it, that means he approves of it.
The recent violence has been the worst since the war began. What's your solution?
 (In Washington), they're all getting solutions they're not capable of doing. It could be very easily done. To stop the political process, and find an alternative, a strong defining alternative that is able to give them security for Iraq and Iraqis. To end this mockery, what they call democracy, what they call this

political process, that is considered one of the stupidest jokes in history.
You're called a terrorist by some in the government.
 They claim this because I support the resistance. (They say that) as long as I support the resistance, I'm a terrorist and I support al-Qaeda.
So you distinguish between the resistance and al-Qaeda?
 al-Qaeda is part of the resistance. But the resistance (consists of) two kinds. The resistance that only resists occupation -- this we support 100 percent -- and the resistance that mixes up resisting occupation and killing the innocents and the Iraqi people. Even if it calls itself resistance, we condemn (this). We do not support it at all.
But much of the violence is Sunni versus Shia. So what do you tell your followers?
 There is a resistance that only resists occupation, and there are groups that are in the same tunnel as the occupation, and they help

and support the occupation by fighting the resistance. And the resistance answers these parties. (Shiite cleric) **Moqtada al-Sadr called upon you to issue a fatwa condemning violence after the latest wave of attacks.**
 He knows very well (that) we were the first to issue these fatwas, three years ago. The most important was that it was sacrilegious to kill a Muslim, and we spoke about this. There was a comprehensive agreement, and we wanted the declaration to be signed by all the (religious schools), and also the Sadrite group. The government rejected it and mocked it. (So) why is Sadr saying it now? Is he trying to provoke a problem? When the Americans attacked Sadr and surrounded him in Najaf and Kufah, we made a fatwa to stop Muslims from killing Muslims. We stood by (Sadr), and the Iranian marja (religious schools) and Lebanese marja stayed away. We stood by him and helped him anyway.
So is Sadr a friend or an ally now?
 He will not come back as a friend or ally unless he lets go of supporting the occupation, and denounces the division of Iraq, sectarianism and federalism.
Are you worried about Iran's designs on Iraq?
 No. The Iraqi people are real people, strong people -- they will resist.
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China leads the game in Africa

IMRAN KHALID

THE Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), in the first week of November, attended by leaders and heads of states from 48 African countries, has left no shadow of doubt about China's long-term strategy to get "deeply involved" in the continent. The event, which preceded the APEC summit by few days, was perhaps the biggest gathering of its kind in recent times. But Beijing successfully managed to evade media attention -- particularly Western, and project it as a low-profile episode that was simply aimed at celebrating the 50th anniversary of inauguration of diplomatic relations between China and African countries. The enthusiastic participation of major oil producing African countries was the hallmark of the summit that chalked out a blueprint to guide cooperation between the two sides for the period 2007-2009. China, through its exceedingly generous pledges for financial support to the continent, projected itself during the summit as a serious player in Africa. The overwhelming response displayed by participants, and their eagerness to enter into business deals with their Chinese counterparts, corroborated this fact. The Chinese leadership, on its part, left no stone unturned to demonstrate its willingness to bear the financial cost for their venture into the African continent -- which has all the potential to turn out to be a smart investment. Apart from offering cooperation on a wide

range of issues like politics, economy, international affairs, technological, cultural and social development, China offered a \$3 billion preferred loan package and a \$2 billion "preferential buyers' credit" to Africa in next three years. China also pledged to set up a \$5 billion China-Africa Development Fund to encourage Chinese companies to invest in Africa -- the fund will provide the start-up capital for Chinese companies wishing to initiate their business operations in Africa. China announced cancellation of the debts owed to it by the African countries and pledged to set up five trade and economic zones in Africa by 2009. This will automatically compel China to further expose its market to African manufacturers by increasing, from 190 to 440, the list of duty-free export products from least developed African countries. Chinese President Hu Jintao announced a variety of measures, spanning the major spectrum of relations between China and Africa. He pledged that, in the next three years, China would train over 10,000 African professionals in various fields, establish 10 centers of agricultural excellence, build schools and clinics, and cooperate with African countries in politics and multilateral issues. China is quite actively acquiring natural resource assets, outbidding western contractors on major infrastructure projects, and providing soft loans and other incentives to bolster its competitive advantage in Africa. The volume of China's trade (\$50 billion this year) with Africa -- though still smaller compared to the United States -- is growing at a much faster rate, and its exports to

Africa have begun to cross US exports. Perhaps one of the main stimulants behind China's drive into the African continent is its need for cheap energy. With its oil imports souring up, China is now increasingly dependent on African oil that amounts to 30% of all its imports. China National Petroleum Corporation has pumped billions of dollars to acquire the management of Sudan's oil production, estimated at 150,000 barrels per day. Another Chinese company signed a deal early this year to pay \$2.3 billion for a major stake in a Nigerian oil field. Sudan and Angola are the other countries where China is spending heavily on the oil industry. Last year, China extended a \$2 billion package of oil-backed loans to Angola, sub-Saharan Africa's second largest oil producer after Nigeria. At the same time, the continent is also directly benefiting from China's engagement, and demand for resources has increased prices and propelled significant GDP gains in many African countries. Thousands of African students are studying at Chinese universities and technical institutes, and Chinese doctors and advisers are working across Africa. Chinese companies are helping in rehabilitation of infrastructure in African countries, buildings and roads, and other ways of modern communication like cell phone services to the remote places. Operating very quietly and steadily, Beijing has, over a decade, assumed a very influential role in the continent. Take the Darfur issue, where China had been on the forefront in

blocking the US-backed sanctions against the Sudanese officials involved in the bloodshed there. The flourishing trade with Sudan kept Beijing from joining hands with the American. Obviously, this development is being skeptically watched by Washington and its allies, who are eager to asphyxiate the Chinese influence in the region. Washington realizes the fact that it has only one option to deter this strategic threat, and that is by increasing its presence on the continent through material and financial support, either directly or through donor agencies. But the problem with Washington and its Western allies is that, being the exponents and propagators of human rights and democracy, they have to tag this material and financial support with democratic and human rights reforms there. But the pseudo-democracies and dictatorships in Africa are obviously more comfortable with China, which offers the financial support with few strings attached, and does not put any pressure to change their style of governance or human rights handling. That is why the African countries are more and more turning towards Beijing in the name of "strategic partnership." The fact that 48 out of a total of 53 African nations attended the Beijing summit is itself an indicator of the changing trends in the thinking patterns of the continent. So, China is all out to lead the game in Africa. Dr Imran Khalid is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Will guns fall silent in South Asia?

War changes everything, and the longer it endures, the harder it becomes to recalibrate the basic equations of governance. The weak hand that state actors have dealt to themselves, of course, makes commerce complicit in conflict. Thirty years of battle fatigue in Afghanistan have turned tribal leaders into warlords whose economic interests are easier to satisfy by eluding legality -- trading opium and weapons -- than by following the law.

PAULA R NEWBERG, YALEGLOBAL

TWO signatures -- that was all that was needed, Nepali activist Rupa Joshi wrote last month, "for Nepal to promise to stop killing each other." After a bitter, decade-long insurgency that left more than 13,000 dead, Nepal's struggle among Maoist insurgents, the national army, political parties and the kingdom's embattled monarchy may soon be over. Last month, Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala and Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal, once known as Prachanda, signed a comprehensive peace agreement. Nepal's and their overjoyed foreign donors contemplate elections in June and a quieter, more peaceful future. If peace holds, then Nepal may serve as a model for the rest of conflict-torn South Asia. After all, fighting in and about Kashmir has

lasted since 1947, Afghanistan has been at war for most of the past 30 years, and Sri Lanka has endured cruel battles between insurgents and government forces for more than 20. Even if peace doesn't hold, however, Nepal's experience illuminates the problems of governing unruly states in an ever-embattled region. There is little question that good governance has failed to take hold in most of South Asia, and the challenge of sharing responsibility for progress rather than allocating blame for shortcomings remains enormous. Political and military leaders -- Tamil Tiger founder Velupillai Prabhakaran, Afghan mujahid Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Pakistan's long line of military-backed presidents, and Nepal's monarchs and its leading Maoists -- have consistently mistaken accretion of power for legitimate authority, bludgeon for competence, and utilitarian

alliance for political partnership. But weakness begets weakness, those in power seek more of it, and every interlocutor -- citizen, soldier, lender, ally -- has been left to cope with the fact of power rather than with the essential demands of citizens on their states. These factors -- deeply seated and home grown -- have long been the makings of a regional tragedy that defies even the most agile political actors. Long-time South Asia watchers catalogue the causes of praetorianism and insurgency like folklore refrains: corruption, poverty, tribalism, civil-military disputes, the thwarted ambitions of the underprivileged and the underserved and ranging ambitions of the power-hungry, imbalances between small and large economies, and, of course, the predations of foreign powers. Frayed links between society and polity -- whether colonial inheritance or

local creation -- repeatedly damage the capacity of states and citizens alike to withstand the inevitable uncertainties of poverty and disappointments of missed opportunities. No surprise, then, each conflict-affected government has failed to live up to its promise and deliver promised goods. And so wars have returned, in all their humanitarian and political complexity, to cut an insidious, broad swath through the region's governance. Despite armies, police and patrols, every tactically permeable border reflects compromised political authority -- for what is the first job of government if not to protect borders and in so doing, create the conditions for economic stability and progress? Exiled Kashmiri insurgents gain entrance to their country through Nepal and bring Pakistani intelligence trailing behind; drug dealers elude sanction-conscious Iran by traversing the mountain passes to Central Asia, thus compromising the Afghan border; arms transshipments make their way to Sri Lanka; and of course, Kashmir's Line of Control separating India from Pakistan turns porosity into artwork. Afghanistan's Hamid Karzai repeatedly cautions that "terrorism has no boundaries." War changes everything, and

the longer it endures, the harder it becomes to recalibrate the basic equations of governance. The weak hand that state actors have dealt to themselves, of course, makes commerce complicit in conflict. Thirty years of battle fatigue in Afghanistan have turned tribal leaders into warlords whose economic interests are easier to satisfy by eluding legality -- trading opium and weapons -- than by following the law. Pakistan's endless disputes between army and politicians have turned the country's governing apparatus from one big feudal calculus to one big military calculation. Bangladesh, on the cusp of new elections, has once again hardened personal acrimony into a way of political life that leaves the state open to every kind of criticism. Nepal's Maoists parlayed pervasive problems of inequity and unequal opportunity into guerrilla ideology. They also played on civic fears that neither army nor monarch could protect the country. The winners in the peace process include villages ravaged by the insurgency, but surely the first victory goes to the political system itself, championed by a tiny urban elite who labored mightily to liberalize the

state so that it can accommodate differences and embrace dissent. This is a break with the past: Maoists earlier turned their back on elections, leaving the parliamentary system to flounder, and Nepal's new agreement recognizes the sad triumph of aggression in a place once immune to such violence. If peace fails, it will be not only because insurgency breeds freelance warlords, but also because neither Maoists nor monarch nor political parties will bend far enough to accommodate the other, leaving the state too inflexible to rise above discord. And if this becomes true, it's because long conflict erodes citizenship by undercutting access to justice. When Maoists interceded in village disputes, their "people's courts" routinely cloaked rights violations as populism, and in return, the Nepalese state violated free speech in the name of state prerogative. November's comprehensive agreement therefore explicitly safeguards the victims of rights abuse. The 2001 Bonn Agreement nominally offered similar promises for Afghanistan -- and yet today Taliban routinely impose their own practices to settle disputes, as they did during their first rising,

when no one governed the country at all, threatening the fragile constitutional structure of the Afghan state. This is backdoor terrorism -- almost impossible for its victims to reverse without the very state protections that have been rendered inaccessible to them. The contagion of extremism through rights abuse respects few boundaries. Pakistan, for example, has effectively turned over control of its tribal areas to sectarianism who levy their own taxes, control roads and dispose justice according to standards far removed from the country's weakened constitutional law. The government's decreasing capacity to handle its ever-increasing political insecurities thereby poison the prospects for regional recovery, and turn governance into an on-again, off-again choice rather than a long-term, shared political good. It's difficult to separate cause and effect here, but it's no surprise that Pakistan now seeks direct accommodation with the Taliban, as it did in the late 1990s, and advises NATO to do the same. This mistakes tactical decisions -- bargaining with insurgents to facilitate the provision of humanitarian aid -- with fundamental

choices about national politics, regional stability and governance writ large. The Taliban, after all, are not Maoist nationalists; instead, they have become cogs in a movement that disregards nationalism, negates rights, and destroys both the promise and the reality of justice. Bowing to brutality is rarely effective or politically astute. If South Asia's insurgents read Nepal's agreement simply to mean that violence wins, they are wrong. Conflict is not a means toward governance, but its end. The Maoists knew this when they left parliament years ago and will learn it again when they participate in elections to re-enter government. This is something the Taliban have not done and are not likely to do. Only disarmament and an end to fighting, whether in Nepal or Kashmir or Sri Lanka or Afghanistan, can turn South Asia away from war and toward the kinds of governance that the citizens deserve. Paula R Newberg is an international consultant who has reported on South Asia for more than two decades. (c) Yale Center for the Study of Globalization. Reprinted by arrangement.