

When pets attack

Bengalis sick of the mutual fratricide of AL-BNP may one day decide to cast their protest vote with various Islamists. Unless there is a real secular alternative, there may even be an Islamic state in all our futures. In 1979, the Shah's regime was so brutal and hated that even Iranian leftists donned the chador as a marker of protest. The thing is, after the Shah left, they couldn't take it off.

NAEEM MOHAJEMEN

After each revolution several thousand of these corrupt elements are executed in public and burnt and the story is over. They are not allowed to publish newspapers. We will close all parties except the one, or a few which act in a proper manner."

[Ayatollah Khomeini, quoted in Life of the Ayatollah, Baqer Moin, Thomas Dunne Books, 2000]

Kawser Miah was a regular presence at our Elephant Road adda. Whenever we would sit for sickly-sweet tea and stale toast biscuit, he would be at a nearby table. We would smile, wave and get back to our adda. The thing I remember most about Kawser is that he was always up to some scheme -- whether involving women, money or going abroad. His confidence in these matters was overwhelming and his favorite phrase was "manage korbo." Oshubidha nai, oke manage kore felbo. Or even more dismissively, Dekhben kemon kore oitare size kori.

I don't really frequent the Elephant Road adda any more. But I did run into Kawser once. He wasn't looking so good. A combination of cigarettes, poor diet and a string of bad luck had left him looking haggard and prematurely old. What happened to business? Apparently his partner on one venture had run off to Singapore with the money. He had now been "managed," by someone sharper and quicker.

I was thinking of Kawser recently as I read the news of the Awami League's attempts to expand their "greater electoral alliance" by incorporating "like-minded" political parties. Like-minded is now a very elastic term, stretched to include Neajame Islam, as well as active talks with Islami Oikya Jote factions, Islami Constitution Movement, etc. This is the same AL that once talked a good game about protecting secularism, back when bomb blasts had made Islamist a dirty word.

Here we go again. The AL thinks, of course, that they will use these Islamists to

battle BNP's Islamists, and eat into the so-called Islam-ponthei vote. The same way that Khaleda, Ershad, and Zia all thought they were using the Islamists to weaken their opponents.

In the absence of meaningful difference on issues such as industrialization, foreign investment, trade policy, wages, etc, our political turf wars rotate around symbols and icons -- nation's father, independence announcer, and religion. In the vacuum left by the collapse of the left, religion has emerged as a powerful organizing force. The mosque and madrassa are natural gathering places that can facilitate recruitment. Over the decades, successive groups of politicians have tried to harness this power, whether by directly courting Jamaat and smaller parties, or by engaging in communal slogans like Khaleda's "moshjid e ulu-dhoni." All the while thinking they are "using" and "controlling" the Islamists.

When Zia inserted Bismillah into the constitution, and removed secularism, he never imagined he was creating future rivals. Ershad

too thought ederke ami manage korbo, and introduced Islam as state religion. In Khaleda Zia's first government, Golam Azam scored a hat-trick by getting his citizenship back. I remember passing Mohakhali rail crossing and steering past burning cars -- that's how I learnt about that particular court verdict. But soon enough, the outrage passed. Too many other things to worry about. 1971 was no longer an issue. Ancient history, our elders told us. They would know.

When Hasina held hands with Jamaat during the oust-BNP movement, could she guess that same party would give BNP an electoral edge in 2001? BNP took things to another level, placing two Jamaat ministers for the first time in the cabinet. Not just any posts either -- Social Welfare and Industry. Now both NGOs and Tata have to negotiate with them. Every time we have a new government, there is always an incremental improvement for the Islamists.

The only setback for Islamists was the recent upsurge of nihilistic bomb attacks. Some people even whisper that renegade BNP factions could have created Bangla Bhai, to "manage" AL, and create alternatives to Jamaat. Whether these allegations are true or far-fetched, something is definitely fishy about the haste to execute JMB leaders. From dead leaders in jail cells, to Manzur killed by a

"mob," our history is full of these incomplete stories.

Talking about the way in which pets can turn on their masters, I'm thinking now of Ahmad Chalabi. When the US dropped him as an ally, he decided to hitch his star to the Iraqi Islamists. The avowedly secular Chalabi thought he could manage people like Moqtada al-Sadr. Now he has been eclipsed and booted out by the people he helped to put in power, including those that are fomenting civil war. An Iraqi official even told a journalist recently: "Ahmad Chalabi's problem is that he is usually the smartest man in the room, and thinks he can control what happens. But these guys don't care if you have a Ph.D. in math; they'll kill you. In the end, things went way past the point where Ahmad thought they would ever go. I can't imagine he wanted that. But he helped start it."

The 2005 bombings put a temporary pall on the idea of religious politics, but that shadow too will pass (Bangali forgets nothing trivial, but cannot remember anything important). The Islamists have always been focused on a hundred-year plan, while the main parties claw at each other and think of a five-year survival plan (with Bangkok plane tickets ready in a drawer). People who believe they are divinely ordained to rule can afford to be patient and build strength. Already deep inside the universities, they are quietly infil-



trating the civil service (hence the recent upgraded BA/MA status for madrasa degrees), business sector, and army. Their goal is always the long-term.

There is a popular wall chequea: "In thirty years, we are the only people whose hands are not dirty with money. We want Allah's law, and honest man's rule" There are of course many examples of clerics who came to power elsewhere and turned out to be incredibly corrupt and repressive. Last week, hundreds of Iranian students interrupted a speech by Ahmedjanijed, shout-

ing "death to dictatorship." But since clerics believe they have a divine mandate, bending to the ticking time bomb of mass dissent among post '79 generation is out of the question. Most religious people are like my father -- quietly going to the mosque, fasting, paying zakaat. Beyond that, they live quiet lives and leave people alone. The thought of forcing religion on others runs counter to their ethical and moral understanding of Islam. But for others, force is the only correct language.

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fratricide of AL-BNP may one day decide to cast their protest vote with various Islamists. Unless there is a real secular alternative, there may even be an Islamic state in all our futures. In 1979, the Shah's regime was so brutal and hated that even Iranian leftists donned the chador as a marker of protest. The thing is, after the Shah left, they couldn't take it off.

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Without a vision people perish

The present Constitution of our country after the 5th Amendment made in 1978 has in it the Principles of State Policy (Articles 8-25, Section-II). It starts with the words of complete trust and faith in God, nationalism and democracy and economic and social justice. But the way, in which governments have been leading us, we have yet not paved the way for the citizens towards democracy, or a socio-economic justice leading to sustainable peace in any section of the people.

REVEREND MARTIN ADHIKARY

The title of this article is taken from the Hebrew secular Old Testament book of Proverbs, from Chapter 29:18. A generation has passed since our nation had fought for and has achieved liberation from the domination of Pakistan. Our heroic and patriotic freedom fighters had a great vision behind the liberation war.

This vision and dream was that the people of this land would live in a society with the right of self-determination, to be realized in every form of freedom, whether political, economic, social and religion, and that the human rights of each citizens would be

enjoyed to the fullest.

Unfortunately for us it appears that today the vision needs to be rediscovered because it has now long been shattered and marred. It is more unfortunate that it has not been marred by any foreign power, but by the people with selfish and vested interests within our own country.

We still quarrel over the question: "Who declared Bangladesh independent from Pakistan first?" We have been passing through a political weather that is getting mystified day by day. Today our young generation does not have enough reasons to show cheerful faces.

Our school and college-going children seem to have forgotten

their smiles. This is because they wake up with uncertainties about their classes and they head back to sleep at night with more uncertainties about the following day. As the book of Proverb says: "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bone (Proverbs 17:22)."

The present Constitution of our country after the 5th Amendment made in 1978 has in it the Principles of State Policy (Articles 8-25, Section-II). It starts with the words of complete trust and faith in God, nationalism and democracy and economic and social justice. But the way, in which governments have been leading us, we have yet not paved the way for the citizens towards

democracy, or a socio-economic justice leading to sustainable peace in any section of the people.

At present, we also have some political leaders constantly referring to the Constitution in their public speeches, demanding that everything in the national election must be carried out, following this supreme writ. However, when people are in power they tend to forget the solemnity of the Constitution and disrespect it when it comes to their own party and vested interests. Where do the Constitutional principles of human rights fit in when there are RABs with their so-called crossfires?

The president-cum-chief adviser himself has assumed the position of the chief advisor by neglecting the Constitutional requirements. I could go on, but I am not a person with a particular political affiliation. As an ordinary citizen of this country I would like to see that our country and all our people can be hopeful for a day when we will be able to hold a fair

and peaceful election to constitute a Parliament which will mirror their genuine hopes.

A great deal of valuable and irreplaceable time has been spent in dilly-dallying through exchanges of "letters" in the past, in the so-called dialogues a few months ago between the two big political camps and in all the activities concerning the electoral functions of the Election Commission and all that means. But the people still find themselves trying to figure out exactly what will happen in the near future in connection with the general election. As it stands today and as it will ever be for any nation to march with the time in peace and progress, there is no alternative to integrity and justice on the part of people's leaders. There is no righteousness without justice and fairness. I again quote from the Proverbs, the words: "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people (14:34)."

An overwhelming majority of our political leaders do not live up

to their dignified status as leaders of people, a noble vocation and pledge. They are motivated by power and greed for dishonest incomes, and not by authentic patriotism and love and service to the people whom they are supposed to represent. We proclaim in the very national holy writ, God, to be our supreme source of strength and faith of all our constitutional thoughts and principles. But we do not respect the human rights of people. Today we need good and reliable political leaders, who will be able to create hope for a better future for us and for our future generations. Politics has become really challenging for honest and learned people somehow or the other.

Throughout history in every nation, people in the past struggled for establishing human rights and dignity, that all people are equal in the eyes of law. Law is common sense. This common sense is very basic to the foundation of a society to be free from despotism, anarchy and tyranny in any form. All the documents

that enshrines fundamental human rights, whether it is the Magna Charta (1215), the Petition of Rights (1628), the Bill of Rights (1688) of England; or the Virginia Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence of America, and the American Bill of Rights (1791); the French Declaration of people's human Rights (1789), and so on, all have glorious histories of the people's struggle for establishing their human rights, the Crown of Creation, in the eyes of law just as we in Bangladesh have our own Constitution. In the course of history the UN came to articulate in 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to encourage and motivate all its signatory countries to intentionally create environment that is conducive for the nurture, protection and enjoyment of human rights by the citizens in their respective countries.

This universal document was declared by the comity of nations on December 10, 1948. I am really interested to deal with the

month of December since we won our victory against the Pakistani occupation army in 1971. Most of the documents concerning rights of people made by the UN have been made in this month. We as a nation have now been struggling to hold our democratic election. This is also the month when our freedom fighters and our great intellectual leaders made their supreme sacrifice for liberating our country from foreign domination a generation ago.

Let our nation be imbued with the great sense of patriotism and democratic spirits to join hands together and create an environment where we will be able to have our vision for a prosperous and peaceful Bangladesh for everyone. For we hope to see a parliament, which will reflect the will of the people and will ensure a government which will provide the best, and who will truly minister to the needs of the people and create newer visions for the future that will enhance our lives.

Kentucky fried globalization

Once again, reporters and broadcasters have played up the irony of an icon of U.S. enterprise being welcomed by a once bitterly anti-American Communist Party. Once again, they have speculated that a wholesale "Americanization," particularly of local youth, is imminent.

JEFFREY N WASSERSTROM

For anyone who follows the American media's treatment of Asia, coverage of President Bush's recent whirlwind visit to Vietnam was bound to trigger a sense of deja vu. Why? Because the approach reporters took to Hanoi's embrace of capitalism with authoritarian characteristics was so similar to the one they took to Beijing's moves in the same direction when Bill Clinton visited China back in 1998.

What remains to be seen is whether, over time, the American press corps will find a better way of handling the complex cultural dimensions of Vietnam's re-engagement with the West than the approach it took to China's in the 1990s.

Will reporters manage to avoid,

as some have failed to do so far, two pitfalls that marred treatment of China during Clinton's presidency? First, equating globalization with Americanization. Second, assuming that American products continue to mean exactly the same things as they do at home after they cross the Pacific.

Eight years ago, what might be called the "burgers and bowling" storyline shaped reporting on Clinton's trip. The idea conveyed in words and backed up with photos of Chinese eating Big Macs and shots of billboards for new Beijing bowling alleys, was clear: whatever was happening politically, American ways were transforming cultural life in China's cities.

Fast forward to the present and we find reports on Vietnam that

take the same basic approach. McDonald's isn't there yet and bowling hasn't caught on. But stories about the first KFC to open in Hanoi have often read just like reports that appeared whenever a new American fast food chain gained its first foothold in China.

Once again, reporters and broadcasters have played up the irony of an icon of U.S. enterprise being welcomed by a once bitterly anti-American Communist Party. Once again, they have speculated that a wholesale "Americanization," particularly of local youth, is imminent.

It's natural that there should be carryover from 1990s China reporting to coverage of Vietnam today. After all, Hanoi has taken a page from Beijing's post-Tiananmen playbook. The

Vietnamese Communists, like their Chinese counterparts, strive to stay in power by limiting political freedoms while increasing the choices that people have about what to consume and how to spend their private time.

One thing that should not be carried over, though, is the burgers-and-bowling approach to cultural change. This approach, with its emphasis on Americanization and its failure to note that even something as generic as a Big Mac can mean very different things depending on the context, should be retired. There are more accurate, and more interesting, ways that the story of an Asian Communist country's re-engagement with the West can be told.

Yes, some Chinese learned how to score strikes and spares in the 1990s, but a far more popular leisure time novelty was karaoke. A more appropriately complex vision of globalization would have been conveyed by stories focusing on that cultural import. It's an activity that has roots in the Philippines and has become

associated above all with Japan, but in China involves play lists that include some American songs.

When it comes to generic products taking on localized meanings, the cases of Chinese McDonald's and Starbucks are illustrative. Thomas Friedman of the New York Times insists that a Big Mac is a Big Mac is a Big Mac wherever it's bought and whoever eats it. But UCLA anthropologist Yan Yunxiang has shown convincingly that the same burger means different things in Beijing and in Boston.

In 1990s China, for example, Big Macs were thought of not as meals but snacks (because of their resemblance to pork-filled buns that were never imagined to constitute a main course). And Chinese yuppies (unlike their US counterparts) viewed McDonald's as a good venue for a romantic dinner date.

The arrival of China's first Starbucks six years ago was often told as a simple tale of Americanization. But, again, this



was misleading. The management company that oversaw Chinese branches was based in Taiwan, not Seattle, and local guidebooks in Shanghai classified these outlets as "European-style" as opposed to "Japanese-style" cafes.

So if -- or, perhaps more realistically, when -- burgers and

bowling alleys follow buckets of the Colonel's chicken to Hanoi, let's hope American reporters learn from past misreadings. It is seductive to contemplate the imminent Americanization of a country governed by a once intensely anti-American regime. But reporters and broadcasters owe it to their readers and view-

ers to come up with a better way than burgers and bowling to frame this tale of globalization.

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Sustainability of caretaker concept

AFTAB ALAM KHAN

The concept of caretaker government is a unique innovation for holding not only a truly free and fair national election, but also for maintaining and promoting good governance in every sphere during the interim period. The existing caretaker government has totally failed to deliver any good to the people and the nation, instead there is total chaos, confusion, and controversy.

Political instability, stalemate in academic programs, heavy loss in commerce and trading, abrupt reverse momentum in revenue earnings, and various social hazards are the outcome. The CTG model is not practiced anywhere except in Bangladesh. However, the question that arises is whether or not this model can maintain its present form in future!

The Gettysburg address by Abraham Lincoln, on November 19, 1863, expressed the hope

that "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." This proclamation is unlikely to hold true for the caretaker government concept and model.

The caretaker government might be of the people, but it is, by no means, by the people. The rules and conditions set forth for the caretaker government format provide scope for misinterpretation, reinterpretation, or interpretation for self-justification. The provision for the caretaker gov-

ernment was not prepared after debate in the parliament.

The chief advisor of the CTG, as per the constitution, should be the immediate retired chief justice. The chief advisor would appoint a maximum of ten advisors. Ideally, the chief advisor should consult the political parties prior to the appointment of the advisors.

Obviously, the political parties would make suggestions with their party's interests in mind. In the process, the CTG loses its

non-political, non-partisan, and neutral character. Instead, if the chief advisor appoints advisors on his own judgment he should do so from the social elite represent-

ing sectors of socio-economic practices. Looking at all such sectors it is hard to find people with absolutely non-political and non-partisan outlook.

Holding political views and ideologies is the basic democratic right of individual citizen but cannot be at the expense of democratic rights and duties towards the

nation as a whole. Political partisanship emerges from the political ideas and views, and the success of a political party depends on how best it can sell the political programs to the people.

But if the political programs bring miseries and sufferings to the people, it is hard to gain any congenial sympathy and support. The non-political and neutral character of CTG model is hard to achieve under the present political and socio-economic status of the country.

Since the prime objective of the

caretaker government to hold and gift a free, fair, and fearless election to the nation, the very existing political and socio-economic status contradicts with the CTG concept and model.

In order to achieve a free, fair, and acceptable election, it is of importance to make Election Commission an absolute independent one bestowed with definite power and duties under an act and ordinance by the Parliament.

Likewise, the Anti-Corruption

Commission needs to be given independent power and duties under separate act and ordinance set by the parliament. The Public Service Commission needs to be reframed with amend act and ordinance to uphold and ensure quality and standard in selecting public servants.

These three institutions should be accountable directly to the president, hence the president needs to be elected through separate electorate.