

Reforms in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has made a good start on the road to democratisation of its socio-political system. The road will be long and there may be avoidable — and unavoidable — lapses and pitfalls. But the beginning announced by King Fahd on Sunday augurs well for this country of 13 million people, one of the wealthiest in the world.

The move provides for the formation of a 60-member Consultative Council that will act as a watchdog over the government. At the same time, the King announced a Bill of Rights that is designed for the protection of Saudi residents — both local and foreign — against interference from the state, including the unauthorised entry of security personnel, such as religious police, into private homes.

If the work of the proposed Council sets the pace for the democratisation of the system, the enforcement of the Bill of Rights lays the foundation of the application of individual human rights to a country which, by international standards, has been considerably behind even some other predominantly Muslim countries in this all-important field.

Although the Council will be a wholly nominated body, it will have the right to initiate laws and review foreign and domestic policies, which, until now, has remained the exclusive area of prerogatives by the King, his carefully-chosen cabinet ministers and members of the Royal family. In yet another significant move, the Council will have a say in the choice of future kings of the country, although the actual selection will be made by 500 senior peers of the ruling family, thus giving an opportunity to the generation of younger princes to rise to the highest office in the kingdom. There are also provisions for wide-ranging autonomy for the country's 12 provinces in administrative and development fields. All these new laws, issued in royal decrees, contained in 83 articles, make up what is called a "Basic System of Government", which is, in effect, may well serve as the kingdom's first written constitution since the country was founded in 1932.

The move raises many questions, mostly about what happens next to give a momentum to the democratisation process. When and how the kingdom will move towards the formation of an elected parliament and start thinking about turning the absolute monarchy into a figure-head head of state, a remote possibility, can only be a subject of speculation. With the King enjoying the power of dissolving the Council and appointing a new one at any time, the success of the present experiment essentially depends on harmony between the administration and the consultative body. At the start, perhaps for months and years, the Council is unlikely to act too courageously. However, one hopes that it does not become too docile to lose its credibility, turning the exercise into a non-starter. After all, the efforts in democratisation have faltered in many countries in that region, especially Kuwait. Let us hope, this will not happen in Saudi Arabia which can provide a lead to other countries in the peninsula on the modernisation process, especially in the context of the country's observance of the basic tenets of Islam. In this sense, the Saudi experiment, if successful, can provide an alternative to the system favoured by fundamentalist groups in some Islamic countries.

No More Bragging, Please

No one is interested in as to who should be hanged for the present mosquito scourge. We are all tired of decades of bragging about the problem. All we now want is the pests to go. Glory belongs to those that have been bearing the unbearable for so long, for the seasonal visitation of Namrud-killers had long turned into perennial permanent presence. And all the world's shame to the same for not speaking up and going into serious public action. For months on end all dwellers of this city had all day long been shaking all their limbs and scratching wherever their hands could reach — resting only when they get into the mosquito nets usually at night.

And what happens to those who haven't nets because they cannot afford one? They spend an interminably livelong night through a veritable hell as is only in God's power to punish with. They cannot help become somewhat neurotic — or shall we say psychotic? And those who can buy nets but still do not, they go for the many brands of spray insecticides giving a damn to the fact that they are doing a little more than killing these infernal parasites — they are releasing CFCs into the atmosphere depleting dreadfully the already dangerously dwindling ozone reserve in the stratosphere.

It is very much immaterial whether DCC is indeed responsible for the unbridled growth of the disease-inflicting and pain-causing insects. The point is Dhaka 'living', with a capital 'L', with that it encompasses and entails, is the substance of all of the DCC's business. That is the universal as well as popular perception of the DCC's reason for existence. And we see nothing wrong with this idea. Now it is the DCC's own headache to choose and activate who would be the agencies they would need to get co-operating. This capital city, in order to be worth its prestige and privileges, must get rid of the mosquitoes, right now. And the Dhaka City Corporation will cause it to be executed without any failure or any kind of pretences to it.

We are sorry to note that the above was not quite the temper of what Mayor Abbas Mirza told a press conference the other day. He, however, promised that once eliminated, the insects would not be allowed to come back ever again. We marvel at his confidence and are confused about the ways he would ensure that. These promises should better be left to be realised than bragged about.

In essence, the prevention of Terrorism Bill 1992 seeks to prevent the threat and the use of violence as a form of political expression that cannot be legally penalised. The bill seems to have been inspired by increasing violence and increasing criminality in the face of which the police and the courts appear to be powerless.

The bill has its opponents. They are drawn from both sides of parliament and claim that, if the bill is passed into law, it will be another "black law", that it will be a breach of human and fundamental rights and that it will, in its advocacy of capital punishment, be "a return to barbarism". At the same time, however, the leader of the opposition in a statesman-like manner has said that the opponents of the bill are not supporters of terrorism.

In the less sophisticated mind of the general public, confusion reigns. If both the opponents and the supporters of the bill wish to prevent terrorism, then why the histrionic display on the floor of the House following the introduction of the bill and why the references to fundamental and human rights? Is it again a story of sour grapes? Are the bill's opponents wishing that they and not the government's front bench had put forward this excellent idea?

In any case, efforts to decipher the self-contradictory and confusing messages being transmitted to the electorate must commence with a definition of terrorism in our national context.

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Terrorism Bill and its Opponents

by S Alam Rashid

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or the threatened use of violence, it seems that the opponents of the bill wish to qualify the meaning of the word "violence". There appears to be a desire to divide violence into two categories: first, the purely criminal variety as committed by the private practitioner and, secondly, the "political" variety as committed by the so-called "activist" operating under the sponsorship of a political party or other special-interest group.

The implications of such a division in the definition of violence and terrorism provide an interesting insight into the mental processes of politicians. We are being told that if members of the public are maimed, crippled or killed or have their private property destroyed by individuals or groups sheltering under a "political cause", there are no grounds for criminal prosecution as no crime has been committed. It has even been said by a particularly vocal MP that such prosecution resulting in capital punishment or the death penalty for the criminal would be "a return to barbarism". There is no redeeming suggestion that terrorism itself is barbaric or that the use of violence is in any way socially undesirable. It is nowhere suggested that violence is unjustifiable in a democratic situation. We are not told how the benefits of

terrorism would be explained to the grieving family of a victim; but we are free to assume, by analogy, that the family of a convicted criminal would receive comfort from the opponents of the bill.

Support of terrorism may be a political tenable position if it is assumed that, (a) those who have their property destroyed are in the wrong place at the wrong time, are vastly outnumbered by the less financially fortunate, are therefore politically insignificant and can lay no claim to fundamental rights; (b) those who get killed are going to be adequately compensated if they are declared martyrs; (c) those who are even seriously injured will be comforted by the thought that they are not actually dead; (d) the terrorists can be assured beforehand of immunity from criminal prosecution.

All political parties in Bangladesh have an interest in preserving and protecting their "soldiers" against criminal prosecution. Indeed such assured immunity is a prerequisite of terrorism and might explain the extraordinary numbers of sociopaths in our political life. Assured occasions for violence, assured illegal financial opportunities and assured possession of unlicensed and untraceable lethal weapons are the additional attractions

held out to aspiring political activists. This political-criminal culture, to a greater or lesser extent, governs the life of the citizen today and it is impossible to imagine politics in Bangladesh without "soldiers" pretending to be students.

It has been observed by the better-informed foreigner that the interests of individuals or groups of individuals have always had an inordinate influence over measures that were designed to benefit society or the country as a whole. The subjective and lesser interest of well-organised groups have always taken precedence over the objective and greater interest of the public. All special-interests share a common characteristic: they all want to be the exception to the rule that is designed to put them on an equal footing with the rest of society. This is understandably and especially true of sociopaths.

The bill's opponents are confused and shaken by what they view as the government's contemplation of political suicide, by the government's radical departure from established and time-honoured usage and custom. There is a feeling that the government is betraying a universally accepted political credo. There is also the suspicion that while the government will try to destroy the

opposition's 'soldiers', it will not dismantle its own. There is the deeper suspicion that it will also dismantle its own.

There is the well-founded apprehension that the Home Ministry will be vastly strengthened and the police, fortified by unambiguous policy and new legislation, will become a less doubtful body. It has been said, in support of these fears, that the laws already exist and there is no need for new ones. The bill's opponents may have a valid point here if they are saying that enforcement of law is the crucial thing and not the mere writing of law into the statute books. On the other hand, it may be asked if the existing laws really do permit the arrest and adequate punishment of violent criminals of all kinds, sponsored and unsponsored.

Perhaps the answers to some of these fears lie in regulating the abuse of power by the police. At the same time the public interest will be best served if the police are assured that they, too, will be protected against financial corruption and official coercion. That is to say that the giver of bribes should be as culpable as the taker as it is hard to hear the sound of one hand clapping. The same kind of rules must apply to the courts and the trial judges.

In certain respects, the bill does not go far enough. For example, the illegal possession and manufacture of and trafficking in explosives, explosive substances, firearms and ammunition should have been mentioned. Will the bill willingly tolerate the disabling or destruction of public utility services (water, gas, electricity), telephone and telegraph lines, fuel storage depots and radio and television facilities? Will squating or the forcible seizure of another's immovable property carry the same penalty as forcible eviction? On the question of capital punishment, it may be asked if it will be extended to cover wife murder and the rape of minor children. What about those who use motor vehicles as weapons of destruction? Is capital punishment contemplated as a deterrent or is it politically negotiable?

There have been constant references to human rights by the bill's opponents. While it is clearly understood that the legal rights of the criminal are causing deep concern, it is not equally clear that the human rights of the ordinary citizen are receiving equal consideration. It is far from clear that the bill's opponents are interested in protecting society against the depredations of unaccountable criminals.

There is a saying that it is better to have an intelligent enemy than a foolish friend. In the case of the prevention of Terrorism Bill, its opponents must take care not to befriended its supporters. The morality of the bill is not negotiable and there is no aid donor in the world who has the courage to oppose it.

Western intelligence agencies. Those now trying to find their own way forward deserve a less arrogant and less ideological depiction of Western political democracy. An end to covert interventions or other political pressures by Western powers would also be more in line with their professions of democratic convictions. The rest of humankind must have breathing space to evolve an endogenously free governance.

NEW YORK — The West's long dominance of our planet's means of communication is again evident in the insistently posed question: how soon will Western forms of political democracy be adopted in Eastern Europe and the Third World? Opinion from those regions, however, reflect caution about this, and point instead to the need for self-reliant construction of culturally appropriate democracy.

Western democracy is magnificently enunciated at the level of principle. Former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere describes Abraham Lincoln's definition of democracy — government of the people, by the people, for the people — as "the most succinct and universally acceptable". But he points out that Lincoln's definition "says nothing about how people organise themselves for their own governance". And the West itself has very limited actual experience of doing so.

Democracy, as defined by voting rights for all adult citizens, women as well as men, has been operational in the West for less than 70 years — a mere blink of the eye in human history. And already the prospects for the Western ideal of an Athenian-quality debate over candidates and programmes by educated and well-informed voters seem to be receding.

Even as the West has achieved unparalleled levels of public education and access to information, its political debate is being reduced to mindless electronic "sound bites" mixed with diversionary tricks by professional campaign consultants. A new political industry now "packages" candidates like stars, and political parties like brands of breakfast cereal, with slick television commercials costing millions of dollars.

Indeed, craggy-faced, poor and honest Abe Lincoln would not stand a chance today. Running for elected office in the West is becoming too costly and morally repugnant and a trial for the dedicated. Intellectually mediocre but telegenic candidates, coached by "image-makers" and funded by special interests, are swarming into the political arena.

In the Western ideal, a "vigilant" free press and the ability of fully enfranchised citizens to turn out tainted or incompetent governments were supposed to constrain corrup-

Whose Democracy — For Whom?

With the demise of communism, the West is urging one and all to take up democratic forms of government which gave the West its current dominance in the world. But whose democracy is this? And for whom is it designed? These are the questions posed by author Erskine Childers, a former adviser to the United Nations Secretary-general.

tion and gigantic mismanagement by public officials but these transgressions too are increasing — and always at the expense of the poor.

In face of all this, pessimism and cynicism about both "politics" and "politicians" is rising dangerously across western society. The percentage of citizens who even use the voting rights of which hundreds of millions elsewhere have only been able to dream is declining. Only Australia has compulsory voting.

Majority rule is not very reassuring when it is based on the votes of a fraction of the eligible population.

If "government by the people" is not doing nearly as well as it should, neither is "government for the people." Support for political democracy grew in the belief that it would bring increased prosperity to all. But one in every 10 US citizens is now on government food stamps, and some 38 million have no health insurance whatever. In the West as a whole, the number of unemployed, abjectly poor, malnourished, and homeless is increasing relentlessly.

It is no longer so easy to argue that this is not the fault of the system, that voters are just getting the economic policies the "majority" votes for. New structural features in the system itself may be beginning to tilt governance permanently in favour of unregulated capitalism.

The huge cost of campaigning, combined with corporate mass media monopolies, make it increasingly difficult for working-class politicians to reach voters. Trade unions have been crippled in many countries by right-wing governments. Conservative media treatment of economic issues forces social democrats into increasingly centrist positions.

Entrenched conservative bias in Western democracy may also result from pre-election polling, which puts a simplistic, laissez-faire twist on complex social and economic issues, further eroding proper debate. And eve-of-election polls predicting defeat for

progressive candidates can deter supporters from even bothering to cast their vote. Few countries follow France's ban on all polls in the final pre-election period.

Only severe limits on private spending by candidates — along with adequate public campaign funding — can halt the ominous trend towards elections becoming the exclusive preserve of the rich or of politicians beholden to special interests.

Fear that "big money and big media" are generating long runs of socially devastating conservative government in winner-take-all systems is also increasing interest in proportional representation, by voters' "preferences" rather than single-candidate "yes" or "no" votes.

Meanwhile, to compound the danger in merely copying a still very imperfect Western system, the most aggressively promoted version includes the premise that democracy only works if accompanied by unbridled market economics. This new Western conservative assertion has neither philosophical nor historical justification. Indeed, most of the threats to the working of Western democracy noted here derive from the impact of capitalism on Western society and its institutions of governance.

Social democracy is now in danger of being crushed between the convulsing jaws of bankrupt statist command economies and unprincipled capitalism, which many Western leaders preach like a new religion. Yet this is a sure path to the kind of fundamentalism that can tear democracy apart — whether Christian authoritarianism, a new white-racist fascism, or an ultra-conservative Islam.

The quest for democracy among hundreds of millions is therefore at an extremely vulnerable stage. Ironically, the West's history of highly undemocratic behavior in other lands is heavily responsible. The Western powers' military invasion to overthrow the 1917 Russian Revolution helped to justify Stalinist oppression.

Western colonialism long denied most of humankind any chance to solve endogenous democracy. And most of the

post-colonial Third World dictators now deplored by Western leaders have in fact been financed and armed by

OPINION

Observations of a Foreigner

Robin Nyles

For many years I have promised my best friend that I would visit Bangladesh. I am American and met my friend, a Bengali, when we were enrolled at Harvard Business School. Bangladesh conjures up images of straw huts, starving children and dirt roads in the minds of insulated citizens of the United States, the vast majority of whom have seen foreign land only on their television sets. Those who do have a passport tend to use it to cross the borders of Northern Mexico (a suburb of California), Canada (without the flag you couldn't tell the difference), Jamaica, and for the really adventurous, Europe.

Last year, my Bengali friend spent Christmas and New Year in Pittsburgh with my family and friends. So this November when he asked me if I had plans for the holidays and I said "no", I knew what the next question would be.

Tickets to Dhaka were booked. Injections, malaria pills, warnings about the water and fresh vegetables. Most of all warnings about some of what I would experience: beggars, deteriorating buildings, lots of people and lots of waiting.

72 hours later I'll tell you the good and the bad while stating up front, these are first impressions — you know what they say about first impressions.

I have been deeply touched and impressed by the people I have seen and met. On the surface, I feel the true judge of the natural beauty of a population can be seen in the faces of children. Children wear no jewellery, perfume or make-up. The Bengali children I have seen in both the city and small villages are some of the most beautiful children I have ever seen on this earth.

What about below the surface? My Bengali friend is a difficult benchmark. He is intelligent, competitive and successful compared against anyone in the world, not just in Bangladesh. Professional success is not the basis for my friendship. He has become my closest friend because of a level of spirituality and understanding of people that I have never seen in the Western world.

No disrespect to my friend. In Bangladesh, he is an extreme, but not unique, I first realised that these qualities extended to his family and then many of his friends that I have met in the last three days. I recognise that he is a member of a small, highly educated minority. But when I went to villages hours outside of Dhaka, although I could not speak the language, I recognised the same basic qualities in the eyes and smiles of the people, in the work ethic of the family on a rudimentary but clearly evident scale.

So what is wrong with Bangladesh?

I had to sit back and ask myself when I had these first impressions.

Population? Maybe, but maybe not. Look at China, experiencing positive GNP growth of 8 per cent, and in the southern province around Guangzhou, in excess of 14 per cent. Look at Thailand, Taiwan and Hongkong. I did not bring the statistics to Dhaka with me, but given Hongkong's wall-to-wall, egg carton stacked population, I think it easily beats Bangladesh in the population density Olympics.

Lazy? Maybe, but maybe not. All you have to do is examine the few islands of pure, free market capitalism that exist: the rickshaw wallahs who work day and night in all weather; the New Market where many shops were open, any business was welcome, on Christmas Day (an official holiday); and in the small countryside villages, where the candles are burning long after sunset in the village tea hut, where one taka or a couple eggs or biscuits will buy you a few cups of tea after a hard day's work.

So what is wrong with Bangladesh?

I got my clues indirectly by overhearing a few conversations that were emotional and sprinkled with English, as is common among those looking for an expression not possible in Bengali. Sensing they appeared frustrated or upset, I would sometimes intrude and ask for a further explanation. Tea growers who are forced by law to sell all of their production at the auction, forcing them to set up a separate auction buying organisation to buy their own tea so that they can then export it. Jute producers forced to 'officially' sell above a minimum price set by the Government, even if world market prices are below this price. Satellite television and communication currently prohibited and "under study" until 1995.

But the force of the market, the desire to match buyers and sellers, is as old as civilisation. The market will always find a way. As stated above, tea growers employ auction buyers, jute producers give 'refunds' to buyers representing the difference between government and market prices, and with a little 'backshish' you can get a satellite dish on your house next week.

So yes, the market will always find a way, at a price. That price is inefficiency. Inefficiency means a waste of valuable, limited resources, time and money. The people who pay the price are not only wealthy business people, but also those employed by the business people and those who sell to the business people. The real cost is economic development. These inefficien-

cies are a constant brake on the wheel of growth.

What's wrong with Bangladesh? Upon further enquiry I have come to understand that more than 99% of the power is in less than 1% of the population's hands. Market reform will result in the loss of a lot of power and 'backshish' from the hands of a few very important people who say 'yes' or 'no' — a few very important people in the government.

I have heard this story before. I am in partnership with an Austrian bank that buys ownership in companies operating in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

If you would have asked me if I have ever seen a political or economic system with problems similar to those in Bangladesh described two paragraphs above, my response would have been immediate — in what was Communist Europe.

A bit of hope. Communism ended for Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia in 1989. Currencies became convertible for foreigners, with free repatriation of capital and profits. 100% foreign ownership is permitted and supported. The government is privatising everything. Prices are free market. These three countries are looking at the highest rates of expected real GNP growth in Europe in the next five years, in excess of 5%.

Now the bad news. Communist Europe ended because the majority spoke with one united voice that demanded change. They realised in the long run everyone would be better off by coming together to oust the few government officials who were the main beneficiaries of the communist system. The government officials always had food, vodka, comfortable homes and cars. The government officials tried selfishly to stop those changes that in the end would benefit the many.

One voice that demands change. People told me if I submitted an article like this, there would be a few loud cries of "CIA" or "You don't understand". Beware of those uttering these accusations. I've heard them before in 1988 by government officials from Eastern Europe who are today either out of job, in jail, or both.

From what I have seen, you have no excuse. Bangladesh has some of the most beautiful, hard working, intelligent people I have ever seen.

What's wrong with Bangladesh? The answer should be nothing.

Speak with one brave voice that demands change.

(The writer is a London-based banker who visited Bangladesh in December '91.)

To the Editor...

Mirpur bus fare

Sir, I remember clearly of a press report some years back when the Link Road connecting Agargaon with Mirpur Sec-10 Golchakkar was under construction. The former President H.M. Ershad visited the site and directed the relevant authorities to complete the work on an emergency basis. The report also stated that the road, when completed would afford the people facility to travel to and from Mirpur at a lesser time and expense.

After the completion, no doubt a shorter time is consumed, but the transport authorities viz. BRTC, Bikalpa and private bus owners are charging equal fare as in vogue for the journey from Farmgate to Sec-10 (Golchakkar) via Asad Gate and Technical.

It is a matter of misfortune that the department which issued the press note has not felt any necessity to ensure

Inspiration

Sir, Obviously it is our duty to express deep gratitude to the Almighty who has kindly created us as able persons. And one of the ways to express gratitude is through helping the disabled. According to the available statistics, more than 500 million people in the world are disabled. We should not hate or hurt the disabled in any way rather we should always encourage them to live normally in the society.

Recently, in a weekly magazine I read a poem of inspiration by Jeannie Miller after she became severely disabled. I am greatly touched by the poem and I would like to reproduce at least portions of it which, I am sure, will not only inspire the disabled but also the able persons who are everyday fighting with the pangs and sorrows of life: There is nothing to stop you from building again When all of your castles have crushed. There is nothing to stop you from dreaming again When the things long worked for have smashed.... Get on with the job of rebuilding your life. It's so useless to sigh, or complain. The best thing to do — is to start out anew. Pluck up courage, and then try again.

that there was comparatively a lesser amount of fare for this shorter journey from Farmgate to Golchakkar via Agargaon. It is therefore imperative that a reasonable fare proportionate to distance should be fixed and the transport people should be impressed upon to follow it with all rigidity. S.M. Hussain Mirpur, Dhaka.

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