

# Dead Utopias Rule Bangladesh

Dr Badrul Khan writes from Sydney

**If it is not the liberation of the soul, then it is certainly the liberation from the politics of dynasties that is warranted for Bangladesh now. And never before did the middle class and the intellectuals need, as they do now, to oppose their role of a sycophant conforming to either of the political divides so that a genuinely neutral civic approach to all that takes place in our social space is guaranteed. It is possible to blow the cobweb of dynastic politics but possible only through a strong civil society, independent of politics.**

economic development and democracy.

There is however a propensity in many quarters, though with a touch of disdain, to wily - nilly accepting the skein of difficulties such state of affair continues to be present. Many in Bangladesh refer to this as part of our history and culture. Folls reflecting public opinion tend to suggest people's keenness to listen to and draw pleasure from the ongoing bickering and give a full nod to news that paints their political icons as heroes of great vision and champions of democracy. Most intellectuals and "guardians" of popular culture seem surprisingly contented to share the benefit of this division, siding with one of the divides and keeping preoccupied with the illusion of a great fulfillment that they believe such contestation presents. Divided into various opposing groups, elite is prepared to revenge against any intrusion into their chartered territory and by doing so remain happy to share an illusion of accomplishment. This is the spirit, the true Geist, to use Max Weber's language, that appears to rule Bangladesh. This is how a perverted obsession with politics is cherished and draws full endorse-

ment from academics, students, doctors, engineers and all other professions. Yet, it all takes place in a climate where millions are to watch as silent observers the destructive power of this force galloping past them unheeded. Attempts to counter the spread of these rotten vices and to talk the ruling elite into compromise or force them think in terms of logic, democratic practice and accountability have failed in the past and will fail in future. The inherent strategy of blaming or throwing dirt at opponent's face will duly prevent all efforts at mediation and the business of politics will continue to remain as usual. Any conscious mind would however have been keen to see this as a one off case, one that is characteristic for a generation that has grown as a Nouveau Bourgeoisie by way of thievery and plunder. Yet, events unfolding at present tend to suggest that it is more of an endemic nature and is hard to change quickly.

What remains behind this epidemic increase in personalism and idol worshipping is the belief in utopias of various colours and shapes, which unless stopped will continue to erode all hopes of a democratic future. Each of the utopias people came to know during a torrent of patriotic fervour was coined by the middle class at different stages of country's history and helped the elite to ascend to power. Flirtation with these utopias (left utopias built around communism, nationalist utopia such as Sonar Bangla or religious utopia of Islamic fundamentalism or its milder version, Pakistan) was meant to liberate larger and larger areas of human life. Yet, they soon turned nonsensical, disjunctive and skewed in content as the better part of the middle class itself joined the ranks of the elite, leaving its mainstream in disarray.

Two significant developments can be highlighted to show the vacuity and moral bankruptcy, which the elite has endured over the last few decades. One is - it has managed to vacate a social space previously occupied by the voice of the middle class so as to access power without being constrained by the weight of ideology or accountability. The disillusionment that followed kept the middle class stranded in a quagmire of political snobbery as each of the utopias that it revered transformed

into an idea of dynasty, falsely promising a lot, yet failing to deliver any therapeutic solace to the populace in earnest. This utopia is dead by now or jaded, with its life force being utterly exhausted. Yet we live by constantly referring to their carcass and reviving the content that is empty. Its ruins are still formidable in terms of a political force that draws an air of conformity by apotheosising the leaders and the alleged vision many think they imbued.

The end of the middle class is also due to the way the economic, social and cultural life has been politicised so that there is no scope for it to engage in civil protest independent of politics. Having lost its own voice the middle class is disabled to the extent that it has to identify, endorse and toe with politics pursued by either of the two dominant political parties, a non-classical case for a social class in the Third World societies.

The other development relates to this void in power that has duly been filled by the underclass, whose place in social hierarchy has proved uniquely appropriated for a politics dictated by violence and anarchy. The assemblage of uprooted people from various

parts of the country has given cities a major boost in recent years by increasing their power significantly in a pragmatic sense. The alliance of the ruling elite and the lumpen social groups now characterising politics in Bangladesh has allowed the elite to talk of certitude, which brings threat and violence both from the detractors and the partisans. Because all certitude in history is littered with violence which in anticipation of an opposition has to resort to violence and the opposition itself can't be realised without being violent. The only way one can liberate Bangladesh of the ills such alliance has provided is by dissociating with politics per se and building a civil society capable of playing role of social deterrence. As Max Weber remarked "he who seeks the salvation of the soul, of his own and of others, should not seek it along the avenue of politics, for the quite different tasks of politics can only be solved by violence". If it is not the liberation of the soul, then it is certainly the liberation from the politics of dynasties that is warranted for Bangladesh now. And never before did the middle class and the intellectuals need, as they do now, to oppose their role of a sycophant conforming to either of the political divides so that a genuinely neutral civic approach to all that takes place in our social space is guaranteed. It is possible to blow the cobweb of dynastic politics but possible only through a strong civil society, independent of politics.

## America's Longstanding UN Dues

### At Last a Breakthrough Achieved!

by A M M Shahabuddin

**The recently concluded agreement is expected to open a new chapter of cordial relationship between the UN and the new US Administration, just taken over by the newly elected president George Bush. It is for the new Administration to show its sincerity to the world community in paying off the dues of over four billion US dollars, during the current year. Let not America, under Bush Administration, shift its "goal post" again on some plea or other.**

**T**HE world's richest country, and the 'be-all-and-end-all' of power that be in the UN, America has at last been successful in making a breakthrough in its efforts to shift some of its burden of billions of dollars UN dues accumulated over the last several years, to some 18 poor countries (compared to America, of course), like South Korea, Singapore and Brazil and the poor descendant of a former superpower: Russia. The US Congress, which is still dominated by the Republicans widely known for their 'purse-control' policy, had consistently obstructed any attempt for the payment of the dues to the UN, to both its annual administrative budget as well as the fluctuating peace-keeping budget.

This hostile attitude on the part of the Congress became more harsh when it adopted a legislation in 1999, demanding that US would not pay its dues unless its fixed share of contributions to the annual budget is reduced from 25 per cent to 22 per cent, and its contributions rate for the peace-keeping forces budget is cut to 25 per cent from 30 per cent. This legislation ultimately became a juggernaut to force the UN General Assembly last month to reduce the contribution rates as demanded by the US Congress. The US policy of dilly-dallying in paying the UN's legitimate dues (not charity), has been bitterly criticised in and out side the UN General Assembly (the UN parliament) by America's friends and foes alike. But nothing could change the US stiffness. It is not true that the slight downward change in the rate of contribution would be a great relief for a country like America. Perhaps, it was a

show of 'egoism' that 'what I say, must be done.' So the UN General Assembly followed meekly the time-honoured maxim, "what must be, must be."

#### Kofi Annan Happy

However, the new accord will go a long way to put an end to the prolonged tension and tussle between the UN and the US Congress which always opposed the payment of the dues to amounting some four billion US dollars (\$1.1 billion for the annual budget and 3 billion dollars for the peace-keeping forces budget). It was indeed a tussle between the two forces, one for survival and the other bent on its bullying practice. But what is play for one is death for others, as the saying goes. And the UN Secretary-General, perhaps the most battered person, Kofi Annan, was the happiest person when the accord was reached and he joyfully announced: "Now we are home. We are home," adding, "the agreement should remove a major source of tension.... we now look forward to normal and constructive relations with the US Administration."

Thus, after a prolonged tug of war between the US and the UN, the breakthrough had come, with a

long sigh of relief for many, when the UN General Assembly went full hog in December last year, accepting the US Congress demand for reducing the rates of contributions to both the annual and peacekeeping budgets the former to 22 per cent from 25 per cent, and the latter to 26/27 per cent instead of the 25 per cent, from 30 per cent slightly higher than demanded by the Congress. The 189-member UN assembly approved this cut in the US contribution rates for the first time since 1973. Undoubtedly, the accord would be able to save the world organization from total bankruptcy, unless US finds out some other plea to delay the payment. For example, the Congress might accept straightaway a slightly higher rate of contribution (26/27 per cent, instead of 25 per cent for the peacekeeping budget, or raise the question of meeting its demand in full. It is not yet clear how far the Clinton Administration, before its exit from power, had been able to convince the Congress to amend their 1999 legislation on US arrears, or it had passed the buck on Bush Administration for decision. The United States has moved the goal post so many times in the past. If it does so again there will be tremendous disappoint-

ment," warned Singapore's Ambassador to UN, commenting on the agreement. So let not America pull the goal post again, when it had been able to transfer part of its load on the shoulders of some of the developing member states.

#### Gain for US, Loss for Others

What is gain for America is definitely a loss for Russia and some 18 developing countries, including Singapore, South Korea and Brazil, as they had agreed to pay at a higher rate of contribution to make up the gap to be created by the reduction in the rates of US contributions. It would, indeed, be a big burden for the eighteen developing countries, plus "poor" Russia, to pay at a higher rate with their much less GNP compared to America's economic prosperity and resources. However, these countries deserve 'kudos' for their great sense of responsibility and flexibility in agreeing to carry extra load just to save the UN from financial ruination and ultimate collapse. As the world organization runs all its activities with the financial contributions by its member states, fixed by the UNGA, any lapse in regular payment, resulting in huge dues of

billions of dollars, naturally creates an adverse situation, threatening its very survival. The world organisation has been salvaged literally from the sea-bed of total bankruptcy.

On the other hand, a 'surprise gift' of \$34 million was offered to Washington by billionaire Ted Turner, founder of CNN, that would be able to cover one-year's gap left by the reduction of the US dues in the UN annual administrative budget. This offer by Turner at the last moment helped America largely to 'clinch' the agreement.

#### How Right are Assessments?

It may be mentioned here that the UN assessment for the fixation of rates of payment by the member states to the annual administrative budget as well as the larger and fluctuating peacekeeping forces budget is made on the basis of a member country's ability to pay, calculated on the basis of its GNP (Gross National Product) and population. Hence the rate of payment by a country may vary from one assessment to another because of a change in these two key factors. For example, under the 1992 assessment, Bangladesh's

rate of contribution was 0.01 per cent, whereas it changed to 0.010 per cent in the 1998 assessment. Similarly, it affected contributions made by other member countries.

But the most striking feature of this periodic assessment is that Japan pays at a much higher rate, when compared with America. The contribution rate of Japan, with a far less GNP, was reduced from 20.5 per cent to just under 20 per cent. With an economy less than half the size of America, the Japanese parliament may not 'swallow' Tokyo's paying nearly at the same rate as Washington's, the Japanese negotiators apprehended. It is, therefore, questionable under what pressure the General Assembly made Japan pay at such rate. Of course, it is up to the Japanese parliament to 'swallow' it or throw it up. Only future will show how Japan reacts to it. It may be mentioned here that Germany, another blooming economy in Europe, pays 9.630 per cent under 1998 assessment as against its contribution rate of 8.93 per cent fixed in 1992 assessment.

Anyway, all's well that ends well. The recently concluded agreement is expected to open a new chapter of cordial relationship between the UN and the new US Administration, just taken over by the newly elected president George Bush. It is for the new Administration to show its sincerity to the world community in paying off the dues of over four billion US dollars, during the current year. Let not America, under Bush Administration, shift its "goal post" again on some plea or other.

The writer is a retired UN official.

## To the Editor ...

### US embassy incident

Sir, In relation to the report of a businessman dying after a traumatic incident at the US Embassy in Dhaka, I would like to relate that my son, Zayed Abedin, who is studying at the University of Texas, Austin, also had a meeting with the same visa officer.

Zayed had been given a RFI visa on June 17, 1999 for four years, expiring on June 16, 2003 in his Bangladesh Passport No. M 0718260. This passport is stolen during a burglary at his residence, 3401 Speedway # A1, Austin TX 78705, duly reported to Austin Police Department under incident report number: OF 004300701 Agency: Ap. on May 18, 2000, I had informed the Visa Officer, US Embassy, Dhaka, of this incident. When Zayed returned to Bangladesh during his summer holidays with a new passport bearing number O 0725103 issued at Washington DC on June 2, 2000, he applied for a visa on July 27, 2000 but he was found ineligible for a non-immigrant visa under section 221(g), which states "You have not presented all the documentation necessary to issue you a non-immigrant visa. If you have any additional evidence in support of your application you can show it to the interviewing officer when you next apply".

According to Zayed, the behaviour of the Visa Officer as described in the news report, in particular the reported 'sarcastic laugh', sounded very much like the person who had interviewed him. Accord-

ing to Zayed, the Visa Officer "is a pure sadist."

The concern expressed by the Visa Officer when Zayed applied for a visa, was that he might not return to Bangladesh. Through your columns, I would like to assure the U.S Embassy that we at Summit Group look forward to Zayed's return to work at Summit Group's Information Technology Company, Summit Sactel IT Systems, after completing his education in the US. I have enough assets, properties and established business in Bangladesh that shall be inherited by him, my only son, and that should be reason enough for Zayed's return.

Eventually, the US Embassy in Dhaka gave my son a single entry visa for only five months. This meant that he would have get the visa extended halfway through his course. My son went to the US Embassy in Mexico on December 17, and they gladly re-issued his visa till 2003.

Mainul Abedin  
Dhaka

### Freedom fighters' wives

Sir, The wives of the Freedom Fighters suffered much during the War of Liberation, risking death, facing the Pakistan Army at gun point. Their contribution to the nation should be recognised and honoured. The Freedom Fighters Council has issued identity cards for Freedom Fighters and their wards. I request the Council to

issue similar identity cards to the wives. I would also request the Council to kindly publish in the newspaper the privileges granted to card holders as per government order, so that holders could avail of the facilities.

M Shahjahan Bhuiyan (FF)  
Mukti No: 0212041172  
501/515 Dhania, Demra  
Dhaka.

### Missed opportunities

Sir, In the early seventies, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat presented a piece of land in the Suez Canal zone to Bangladesh. The objective was to enable Bangladesh to erect an international transit godown to facilitate export-import of Bangladesh goods through that route. Sadat's aim was to open up the Mediterranean commercial route to this country, and boost the economy of Bangladesh.

Another well-wisher, Iranian president Rafsanjani, promised Bangladesh a commercial route through his country to the newly independent Muslim states that had emerged in the former Soviet Union.

Bangladesh has received ample opportunities to advance the economy. But which government has utilized these golden economic opportunities? May the people of this country ask what, if any, progress has been made in this respect?

S. A. Hussain  
G-21 Pallabi Extension  
Mirpur, Dhaka-1216.

## OPINION

### Practicing Democracy within the Parties

Ahsanul Karim writes from Chicago

After the fall of the long reigned dictatorship and the formation of the new government through a democratic process, it was every one's hope that democracy would prevail in Bangladesh. A new Bangladesh will be born where true democracy will be practiced in every sphere of life.

Unfortunately hope remained hope. How will democracy prevail when the preachers do not practice themselves what they preach? How will democracy prevail when lawmakers do not abide by the laws of the country? If we look at all the current activities of all the major political parties, we do not see any sign of practicing democracy or abiding by laws within the parties. Politicians of Bangladesh could not establish a democratic culture among themselves but they are talking about democracy all the time in public meeting.

Let's look at the recent activities of the student wings of the two major parties BCL and JCD. On December 15, 2000, all the major newspapers published the news of terrorizing the country by the BCL members following declaration of verdict in Bangabandhu murder case. One online newspaper reported,

"Liton (27... a tempo driver was shot dead and at least 25 others were injured, in gun shots and beating as members of the Awami League-backed Bangladesh Chhatra League brought out processions protesting the split verdict of the High Court Division bench in the Bangabandhu death reference case yesterday".

For those who might pin their hope on the opposition, is the opposition's behaviour/conduct any different? On December 26, 2000, another newspaper reported, "A group of the dissatisfied students led by Sohail and Munir exploded two bombs in Sher-e-Banglanagar Agricultural College area yesterday morning when the new committee members went to place wreaths at the mazar of the late President Ziaur Rahman". Neither the leader of the biggest opposition party, Khaled Zia's, act of formation of a new committee was democratic nor was her party cadres' reaction.

Two separate incidents but the results are the same destruction of lives and property. Most of the members of the political parties, regardless of their political affiliation, are involved in all sorts of crime, abuse of power and what not. Therefore, one has to

wonder what kind of political culture we have in place.

Dr. Farooq, a Professor of Economics at Upper Iowa University, USA, has quite aptly dealt with this matter in his concept paper, "Toward Political Transformation in Bangladesh: The Demand and the Supply Side of Healthy Politics" where he writes, "Bangladesh currently has political institutions that are supposedly 'democratic'. However, democracy (simply defined as a system of government in which power is vested in the people, who rule either directly or through freely elected representatives) in Bangladesh is dysfunctional, primarily due to its political culture. What is holding back Bangladesh from genuine and functional development is its dysfunctional political system. What we need is a political transformation: a fundamental qualitative change for the better." Whatever the ideologies of the two parties are, they are just the two sides of the same coin no big differences. Understanding the irrelevance of the existing political parties and looking beyond are critical for our viable and better future.