

Imagination is more important than knowledge
- Albert Einstein

US Human Rights in the 21st Century: Alternative Visions

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As long as one does not have to pay a high national price, in blood or treasure, to advance human rights, the USA is certainly for them—at least for the civil and political rights congruent with the American self-image.

- David Forsythe

Two Schools of Thought

When assessing the discourse of human rights in US foreign policy the nature of establishing the two dominant philosophies underpinning and competing for the shaping of policies must be taken into account. In analysing the two schools it becomes apparent why in the US political arena the debate has always been about involvement and isolationism or in academia between realism and idealism. The first school, associated with Washington, Jefferson and Patrick Buchanan, calls for a perfection of American society at home and provide an indirect example as a protector for freedom in world affairs. The second, associated with Hamilton and Wilson, which gives rise to the idealist strain in US foreign policy, calls for an active involvement in world affairs that would have a positive impact for the betterment of the world.

Since 1994 with the Republican majority in Congress, the pursuit of international human rights for the US State Department has been difficult, tense and most of the times running into a stonewall. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee and its anti-UN Chairman, Senator Jesse Helms had made any multilateral discussions on human rights problematic for the Clinton administration. Commentators argued that some extreme conservatives of the country wanted a self-imposed isolation where putting resources into solving domestic human rights matters would be the examples for the rest of the world to follow.

Yet one must note that the conservative elements in US politics as not being anti-human rights but clamour for a more accountable and systematic way for US involvement for humanitarian affairs that most of the time 'politicians' human rights. However, within the domestic infighting of accountability and structure of US

foreign policy there is on the other hand, a creation of a vacuum on leadership on important international human rights issues. More importantly, it deepens the suspicion of many activists in the South that the US is hypocritical in its pursuit of justice in world politics and drives a cynicism among the population of the South.

Elements within the US polity that advances a greater role for US involvement in world affairs are more sympathetic to the issues of human rights. They see the positive role of international human rights that advances, promotes and protects democracy, free trade and peace. Of course, the engagement philosophy in the Washington circuit focuses on the hard issues of ethnic conflicts, disarmament and nuclear proliferation but the soft issues of environmentalism and human rights provides negotiations to move beyond the state bound parameters of sovereignty that allows the US to create the necessary spaces for creative solutions.

The truth is that the US foreign policy has not made this option available to them. They have not allowed themselves to progress beyond the state-centric paradigm and have been straitjacketed by the realist paradigm of securing international relations in terms of national security and interests. For example, US involvement in Kosovo had to be couched in terms of defining America's greatness as a symbol of freedom yet at the same time the government adopted military air strikes without ground troops in fear that public opinion might be against the Clinton administration if there were casualties.

Human Rights or humanitarian issues have to go through the furnace of visceral and uninformed (some would even argue misinformed) public opinion before it becomes a muted clarion call for the protection of freedom. It seems to the rest of the world that the American leadership seems to

be hostage to domestic power brokers. As Richard Haass points out, "time has come for a national dialogue on this country's role in the world." Beginning that dialogue will lead to a more favourable world opinion of the 'soft power' of the US. It is crucial because the free world needs a superpower to match the words with the deeds.

In this sense, the human rights issues are caught between the two schools of thought which most of the times reflects the antagonistic tensions between the Presidency and Congress. Yet there is a paradox within this contest. For example, the Clinton administration signed and accepted with reservations the new International Criminal Court after George Bush had

won the election by a Supreme Court Decision. The Clinton administration was not keen to sign for the International Criminal Court fearing a rejection by Congress.

Contrary to that conjecture, in a time when President Bush was forced to take conciliatory positions and with a power sharing Congress, Clinton dramatically not for the first time though, took the initiative by signing and passing the treaty into the lap of the next administration. In a stroke, Clinton dealt a Kafkaesque blow to Bush and the Republicans. Even though the treaty has yet to be ratified by Congress, the symbolism of signing forces the next administration to take up leadership on human rights issues. Retract-

ing would seriously affect American image in world affairs and also force it out of the loop of the administration of justice in international affairs. Clinton could not have felt a greater sense of paying back dues to the Republicans in signing the treaty but the confidence it boosts among human rights activists and the fear it instils in dictators is a commendable achievement albeit 'blossoming' from the muddy waters of partisan US politics.

Squeezing the alternatives out of the paradox

When one understands the paradoxes in the US political system one is moved to judge that the alternative vision becomes harder

to pursue. In fact, on the contrary the opposite seems to be true. How? It is without a doubt that the growth of the numerous NGOs within the US which has not been successfully tapped by regional or national NGOs to form coalitions or pressure groups to lobby the US leadership. For instance, most of the groups in Washington and New York City are more critical of US human rights policies and the 'two faced' nature of human rights diplomacy than some of the governments of the South.

NGOs in the US have strong traditions and vast resources. Some of their personnel come from the Ivy League and most have access to the corridors of power in the US. Of course, their relationship with the state is ad-

versarial but it is largely a part of their legal and cultural system. Moreover, these NGOs have significant vote bank influences and can and do try to shape the behaviour of politicians, power brokers and diplomats. The 'behind the scenes' work these NGOs do for international human rights is without a doubt under rated. Nevertheless, these NGOs have to also contend with powerful business or even labour lobby groups on a variety of human rights issues. Of course there will be tensions but there will be opportunities as well to work together.

For example, George Lister, a veteran diplomat from the State Department presented a lecture that argued for outsiders to continuously present US embassies around the world with letters of instances of human rights abuses. He asked to use the channels of writing directly to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the human rights caucus in Congress and also at the same time give the information to the United Nations. In a sense, George Lister urged the outsiders to participate in pressure politics in a very international way to force the US government to respond to issues that it prides itself on—freedom.

Of course, using George Lister's strategies will put pressure for the US to respond. Yet the same should be applied with a concerted drive by regional and local NGOs of the South to join forces with NGOs in the US. There are two great benefits from this. First, it will show to the US government that certain principles and issues of human rights can transcend beyond the concepts of state sovereignty and national interests. In fact, by working together it will manifest the alternative possibilities available. Second, because of this co-operation it is highly likely to create a greater understanding among the American public that will be able to withstand the scare mongering of some US politicians and extreme segments of US society.

Already a group in Singapore is doing this. The Think Centre, which focuses on human rights in Singapore and ASEAN is now linked with the human rights groups in the US. We are able to learn about issues, exchange in-

formation, provide expert information in the region to our US counterparts and vice-versa, be able to talk about effective strategies to force governments to respond to issues of human rights and also keep the general public interested in human rights issues. We have a website that disseminates information and constantly conduct forums for the benefit of the citizens. There are also constant publications of books and magazines. Now with the link to the US it means new ways of responding to human rights issues not only for the countries in our region but also for the US.

The philosophical debates about cultural and relativistic aspects of rights and how the US responds to them becomes futile exercises as compared to the practical outcomes that can be worked out with the alternative visions when the NGOs of the West and the East co-operate on an equal footing. Of course, along the way there will be setbacks and some teething problems but the state itself has to respond to this new challenge(s) because paradoxically as in the case of the US its very existence and superpower leadership depends on the protection of human security.

The main aim of the alternative is to always occupy the space of the mainstream. It needs to be done for a change in modalities of how human rights works in world affairs. Once again the world will look towards America for leadership. NGOs around the world can help in this process especially when we are into the new century. At the end of the Second World War, it was the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan that went beyond national interests that set the process of economic growth for the free world. At the end of the Cold War, the world is still waiting for the full implementation of that freedom. It has to go beyond the notions of national interests. The alternative visions are begging for a daring political entrepreneurship for the benefit and dignity of humankind from the US—the cradle that first carried the radical child called human rights.

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UN peacekeepers often find them caught in the line of fire.

WOMEN AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN BELORUSSIA

Removed veil

There doesn't exist a single women's rights problem, which could be settled down separately from the rest – through social policy, legislation or policing. Women's rights, overcoming this sex discrimination, may be achieved only through the process of further democratization of our society.

LIUDMILA H RAZNOVA

THE paternalistic veil was placed over the "women issue" since Soviet times. It was long believed that it was necessary to give privileges to women in order to improve their position, to overcome their discrimination. Special quotas were used in politics where they had reserved MP seats "for women only" within the Supreme Soviet, the Council of Ministers and other lower bodies. They singled out certain professions in economy, which were considered for some reason as hurting the women, and women could never get them. In mass media they either glorified female workers, when there was a shortage of manpower or female housekeepers when the shops lacked consumer goods. Depending on the situation in the country women were supposed to fulfill this or that role upon the state's directive. State protection in relation to women can be justified in the case of motherhood. The birth and bringing up of a child is not possible without the state's assistance.

The policy around the "women's issue" has been implemented and is being implemented upon the principle of paternalism, reigning over the Belarusian society. Many women organizations require from the state quotas, privileges and "strong hand policy". The state, not having any economic capabilities, pretends to be a caring father and loving parent, being neither of them. Educated public is watching the political games around the "women issue" with quite natural disdain.

But the "women issue" could be turned all over we consider women's rights as human rights. The paternalistic veil, which confused the issue, must be removed and substituted by the liberal foundation. Human rights are the basis for understanding those problems, which the women face in public mentality, politics, economy and family life.

Mass media reflects public consciousness and those stereotypes of men's and women's behavior, which the society offers.

What stereotypes of women's behavior are dominating? Journalists write most often about women as loving wives and mothers, obedient girlfriends and busy housekeepers. A sovereign woman, who makes her way through life with her own effort, work, career or business rarely becomes a heroine of public odes. It became quite a fashion here to positively compare thrifty Belarusian women with American career-oriented women. Limited patriarchal approach, related to our mass media, can be explained by the absence of freedom of press and weak competition in this field. Given there was freedom and competition, there would also appear new ideas and values, the promotion of liberal views on gender behavior. The public, trained in a new manner, would quite naturally perceive a man as a housekeeper in the kitchen and a woman as a professional diplomat.

Politics could also become the sphere of equal relations between men and women. But it could go on under absolutely different politics, clean from nomenclature games, having become a democratic procedure, where the first place is taken by the most skilled and industrious worker, regardless of one's sex. The scanty participation of women in politics, shameful for today's world, has been disguised by the demonstrative promotion of women to top positions up until present moment. Nobody needs this sort of promotion. Promoted women, not having real knowledge, but faithfully serving their bosses, sit in presidiums as potted flowers on the windowsills. On the other hand, unpromoted women, professionals in public activity, not getting appropriate leading positions, cannot achieve much and thus are of little public benefit. Women's involvement in politics is largely compromised. The masses ironically perceive any women politician, remembering the term "potted flowers".

Economy, sphere of employment, is still a field of unequal relations between men and women. Doesn't it seem weird that wages in some branches are lower

than in others, despite the equal level of education, required in both these branches. Wages in hospitals and schools are smaller than in the army and police. And the reason is not only different social priorities of authoritarian state but women working in one branch, while men employed in another. Women could always be paid less. It is the tradition and common official thinking. The question has been settled down in a different way – with the assistance of market relations and open political decision-making, establishing the equal evaluation of labor by different professional groups.

Refusal to follow market reforms in the country generates great problems of employment and wages for women. The market is narrowed. The sphere of employment is limited. It is not possible for women to be professional in competition for job places and to stay at the cooker in the kitchen for hours, to do clean-up, washing, shopping, spending all of one's free time on these activities. Women cannot survive in such a race – their priority is always household. The professional development of women came to a standstill. They are becoming number one candidates for dismissals.

The lack of market reforms, which leads to economic crisis, gets painfully on women, both employed and baby-sitting. How can they bear and raise children if the money is too little to make their ends meet? How to preserve health and reproductive function if there are no means for decent nutrition of a to-be mother? Over the last four years maternity death-rate increased by two times. The percentage of abortions is unbelievably high. There is no budget allowances for social needs. As long as things keep going this way the women will have to go for abortions instead of bearing forth children, as they can't afford feeding and clothing them.

In private lives all that is happening behind the closed doors is far from being one's personal business too. If every third woman

gets regularly beaten up by her husband, son or another family member then this is a social problem. Police is sick and tired of dealing with family scandals. All the problems in our society are focused and concentrated on family life. The state behaves as an outlaw, violating human rights, while the family members follow this example, using physical force in their relationships. Oftentimes family dictators are men with greater physical power and economic independence. It is practically impossible for a woman to find her way out of this evil circle. There's no money, no house of her own, no shelter or defense (be it moral or legal). Moreover, public opinion does not condemn home violence. This is an unavoidable consequence of our broken lives.

Sometimes men would joke about women hinting at them as the most competitive export. These jokes uncover the tragedy of many women, who work as prostitutes, turning themselves into a living commodity. Traffic in women is the most lucrative business in the world after arms sales and drug trafficking. Poor living conditions made many Belarusian beauties, blonds and brunettes with long legs, provide sex services, being totally submissive to their owners. Quite often they can't get out from this cobweb and return home from some Turkey brothel. This "women's issue" can't be resolved without economic progress, growth of living standards, raising Belarusians' earnings to the European level.

There doesn't exist a single women's rights problem, which could be settled down separately from the rest – through social policy, legislation or policing. Women's rights, overcoming this sex discrimination, may be achieved only through the process of further democratization of our society. Freedom of press, human rights, women's participation in politics, market reforms in economy are the foundations upon which our common public house can be firmly rooted – where every person, irrespective of gender, could live the way he or she pleases.

Soldier Faith

After the court Faith lived for another two month. She, an ordinary soldier of opposition troops, couldn't survive the tremendous tension, exerted on her. Her short life, mutilated by the contaminated air of the casting workshop, family distress, chaos of Soviet and Lukashenko's rule was over a few hours before the turn of the century.

LIUDMILA HRAZNOVA

PRIVATE soldier Faith did not make it into the new century. Her burning heart stopped beating at twelve in the afternoon December 31.

During the Soviet times Faith used to work as a crane operator at the casting workshop of the famous Tractor plant. Enthusiastic lady, already in her forties, skillfully ran the crane operation and was known among her colleagues as a fighter for truth and justice.

Her stormy labor activities compensated for her problems in family life. The first husband left her. She was left alone with two little sons, who needed to be fed and dressed.

To feed her sons Faith worked at a poisonous department, where not everybody could work. The casting workshop of the tractor plant produces so much air contamination and smoke that the drivers, passing by in their cars shut their windows and press the accelerator. But she has been working there for ten years in order to get her salary.

The sons were finally raised. One of them spent a few prison times for thefts, the other didn't make his mother happy, as well. Faith, lethally ill in hospital for a month, was only twice visited by one of her sons. He brought her some soft drinks, which must not be given to patients suffering from stomach pains.

Faith lived in a typical two-room Soviet apartment. When Secretary General Khrushchev came to power in USSR he ordered to build flats for people with little incomes – small, uncomfortable, with low ceilings as dog kennels, where the tenants were living a dog's life. Faith got married for the second time and registered the second husband in her apartment. She thought that hopefully her misfortunes in family life will come to an end now and that the new husband will love her.

Neither her sons, nor her husband had any respect for her kindness and care. No one came to Faith's burial. Nonetheless, she had a decent funeral with crowds of visitors, speakers and

singers, all having arrived under white-red-white national flags.

There was a bright period in her life. Her gift of fighting for truth and justice was flamed up with the coming of "perestroika". In 1991 Faith marched in the front row, when hundreds of thousand of workers came to Minsk's streets. When a foreign journalist approached the workers' procession, Faith ran over to him and said: "We can't live like that any longer. We got to fight for our rights. We are no livestock to them – we are the people and deserve better life."

Her loud convincing voice and energy sparked the hearts of other dissenters. Her voice was heard by millions of people, watching the Minsk event. Faith became known in her city due to street protests and pickets. She achieved this name by being a permanent participant in all the actions of the opposition since 1994.

In 1994 President Lukashenko came to power in Belarus. The Parliament, elected by people, was dissolved, independent press was strangled, and the executive became totally submissive to the President who started ruling like a dictator.

Faith, having breathed a gulp of freedom, felt that her hopes were shattered by the insolent policy of a dictator. So she began her fight.

She was no opposition leader, but an ordinary "street soldier". She had dark hair, brown eyes, quite a good-looking woman despite her age. Her voice was flying over the crowds of protesters. She spoke louder than anyone else not only because she had to speak like that to be heard at plant's workshop where people were always shouting at each other for the noise but also because her soul was aching for others.

Faith realized pretty early that nobody needs such kind of people as she was in her country, which was previously called Soviet Belorussia and now is referred to as Lukashenko's Belarus. The will of the people is not manifest at the elections. Here the problem has never been casting the votes but counting them. All Soviet and Lukashenko's elections are mere

farce and deceit. The fooled voters don't know for whom they vote and who they elect. The main thing is to have a faithful head of the electoral commission, who would draw the necessary statistics in the voting protocol. The will of the people is not considered by mass media. The government never really cared about the right of people to receive objective information. People are simply a biomass, fed with ersatz information manipulated in a weird way. Will of the people on the country's developmental issues is ignored too. During the Soviet times they would promote the thought that Belarusians could only flourish through the brotherly assistance of other USSR nations. In Lukashenko's period they release shameful propaganda on mystical advantages of the union between Belarus and Russia, which not only further separates the two countries but splits the Belarusian society into two parts. Almost every Belarusian family suffers from an irreconcilable ideological war that takes place in its midst: the elders want unification, whereas the young abhor the idea.

There were so many opposition rallies in the past! Faith took part in every one of them. She found herself on the frontline of the most dangerous events. When the men stepped back from fear she courageously went through the riot police cordons. There were so many signature collections: to impeach Lukashenko, for the independence of Belarus, for the freedom of the journalist Pavel Sheremet, for locating the missing politicians Zakharenko and Gonchar. Faith went for it and was always a success. So much effort was wasted on alternative presidential election, run by opposition in May'99. Faith went around

people's home with ballot-boxes, asking the tenants to vote for opposition candidates. So much work was done to beat the election farce in the last year's fall. Mortally ill Faith acted as an observer at the poll station. She saw how the lists of voters were falsified, how the ballot sheets were thrown in dozens into the trash can in order to draw the necessary voting attendance statistics. At last, Faith joined in a face-to-face battle with Lukashenko's mouthpiece – host of a weekly political program of Belarusian TV. She started legal action against him on the charges of slander. What a desperate act by a disillusioned woman.

After the court Faith lived for another two month. She, an ordinary soldier of opposition troops, couldn't survive the tremendous tension, exerted on her. Her short life, mutilated by the contaminated air of the casting workshop, family distress, chaos of Soviet and Lukashenko's rule was over a few hours before the turn of the century.

The new century, which came around 20 hours after Faith passed away, gives us all hope for better lives and changes. In the first year of the new century the political situation in Belarus will hopefully see important changes. People acknowledge that it is no longer possible to live this way, so they will stand for their rights. Tens of thousands protesters rallied and will go ahead rallying until we claim final victory. Faith so strongly willed and desired it, thousands of Belarusians sacrificed their lives, longing to see their country free and happy one day.

You are in our hearts, Faith!

The author is a former Member of Parliament, Belorussia.

The topic of our next issue is: **Re-thinking self-reliance**. Creative suggestions are invited from our esteemed readers. Please send your materials to: Dr Imtiaz Ahmed, Executive Director, Centre for Alternatives, Room No 431, Lecture Theatre, Arts Building, Dhaka University, Dhaka-1000. Tel:9661900-19, Ext 4550; Fax(8802) 831679, e-mail: caller@bangla.net.