

Is Europe veering towards the Right?

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

Of late people are somewhat worried about the resurgence of 'rightism' in Europe. They detect a trend among some segment of European society -- a nostalgia for the old days when not many people of distinctly other races and colour, and of course religion, did not clutter up the clean streets in cities and small towns. These people beholden to the old ways are outraged that their own language is being spoken by these 'different featured people' no less perfectly than they do themselves. They are distressed that again these 'different featured people' are taking away jobs from them which should be rightfully theirs as these 'different featured people' are armed with academic degrees from their own universities or from the American institutions. They refuse to accept the fact that their forefathers uprooted and brought these people in chains from distant lands into their own. And in the interregnum period the 'different featured people' have moved up the vertical ladder of social and economic advancement despite the obstacles put in every step of their way. The 'different featured people' in turn are no less outraged (and the children confused) as to why they should be discriminated against as they have not known or seen anything different. Many of them are not fully conversant with that part of history when their forefathers were brought in chains to work in the cotton and sugar cane fields. To many it is a part

of history of growing up of their respective nations, albeit a part with which they can subconsciously associate.

The disturbed minds among the Caucasian people have found expression through votes for the ultra-rightist anti-immigration parties. When Jorg Haider's party became the second largest in the Austrian elections there was a political earthquake in Europe. Gone with the wind were concepts of

ultra-rightist (who was recently assassinated) did very well in the elections.

These events could be portents of the future to come. But not necessarily. Vote for Jorg Haider was partly due to people's disgust with the indolence of the Socialists who were in power for too long anyway. In Germany Schroeder's Socialists unseated Helmut Kohl's sixteen years rule notwithstanding the fact that he led the unification of Ger-

many. French and Dutch people's sentiments in some measure had merged with the anti-terrorism wave following the horrific events of Eleventh September. Economic downturn was no less responsible. When people see their prosperity threatened they tend to blame the outsiders. Little they pause to consider that these so-called outsiders do the dangerous and dirty jobs at discriminated pay to make the life of the critics more comfortable. Because immigrants are poor (majority being economic immigrants) they live at the periphery of society, sometimes forced by circumstances to enter the criminal world. Due to poverty they live in ghettos, often stigmatized by criminality. Lifestyle of the 'different featured people' also contribute to the confusion in the western mind.

inheritors of these values and their attendant benefits. Isn't this a form of moral decay, a sort of apartheid? Perhaps in Churchillian language one could say that never in the e history of the world have so few owned so much and denied so much to so many.

I, for one, do not despair that Europe is sliding down the path of decaying values. On the contrary the assertion of primacy of European values following Jorg Haider's victory in the

other forms of inequities. Indeed they may be partially correct.

Yet the events of Kosovo, presidential and parliamentary elections mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, expansion of EU and NATO, establishment of NATO-Russia Council, and innumerable institutions -- international, governmental and private -- acting as watchdogs testify to the belief that "rightism" is a temporary phenomenon in recent European history and its attendant evils can be mitigated by the immigrants in concert with the people of the majority community. It is necessary for the immigrants to try to assimilate themselves with the mainstream of the society of the adopted country. They should speak the local language, adopt the local culture as far as possible, promote inter-marriage with the people of the majority community, and above all try as far as possible not to be too different from the others. While ethnicity and religion, cannot, and indeed should not be abandoned in the name of assimilation, it is necessary to flow with the main stream and not stick out as rocks slowing down the current. As Europeans themselves are mixtures of many races, one can prudently assume that new immigrants, given time, would become integral part of Europeanism and hence the need for occasional rise of so-called rightism would not recur.

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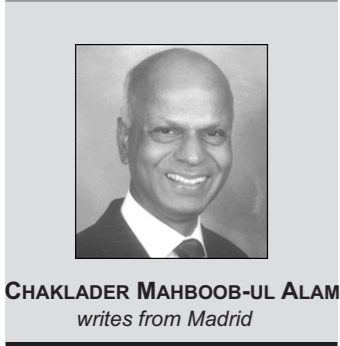
non-interference in the internal affairs of Austria and that unlike many Third World countries Haider's party was actually voted in by the people. 'European values' became supreme. Haider was ostracized. Communication and contact with the Austrian government was downgraded. Haider had to relinquish the leadership of the party. The Austrian President and Chancellor had to assure Europe (and presumably the rest of the world) that the values nurtured by the Europeans since the Second World War would prevail and Austrian aberration would be rightened. And rightened it was. Then followed the French and Dutch elections. Jospin came out third in the French Presidential elections and was knocked out of the race for the second round. In Holland the anti-immigration party led by the

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Dialogue between differing cultures and religions are few and far between in Europe. And if at all they take place these are feeble and muted. One does not perceive any evident urge or movement from either the majority or minority communities or both to communicate in order to transcend the Great Divide. Fear of contagion and suspicion of the unknown have kept them apart. While Europe in concert with the USA has taken quantum leap in technological advancement, there has not been a corresponding vertical movement in values. Whatever little has been achieved in this intangible sector are kept as preserves of the indigenes; zealously and jealously guarded with predatory ferocity in case people from outside the preserves would venture to become borrowers and ultimately

Austrian elections lends courage to the faint-hearted. Jacques Chirac's record setting victory in the second round of the French Presidential elections over Jean Marie Le Pen gives notice to the skinheads that Europe refuses to go back to the aberrant period clouding the Second World War. In times of economic despondency, xenophobia disgusting as it is, almost naturally takes a front seat. But such phases are transients in the history of mankind, visiting us in times of scourge and melting away like deep snow leaving behind for a time their sinful footprints. Many from the Third World who are living the European dream would vehemently disagree and would pour vitriolic criticism on this school of thought. They would argue of facing regular police brutality, job and housing discrimination and

The far-right, immigration and multiculturalism in Europe



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Four years ago, the only major member of the European Union, which had a conservative government, was Spain. Now, after the recent general elections in Holland and Ireland, the old and centre-right will have a majority in the fifteen-member Council of Europe. Jacques Chirac has just been re-elected as the president of France by a huge margin. The socialists have suffered such an ignominious defeat that Lionel Jospin, the socialist contender for the office has felt compelled to leave politics. We do not yet know what the results of the parliamentary elections in France will be. In Denmark, the conservatives have captured power after several decades. It seems that in the September parliamentary elections in Germany, Edmund Stoiber's conservative party will come to power. So a tally of the major European countries shows that the only important country which still has got a socialist government is the United Kingdom. (There are many who have serious doubts about the authenticity of Tony Blair's brand of socialism and his commitment to leftist political ideology.) Elsewhere in Europe, in Switzerland and Norway, the opinion polls indicate a swing to the right. All this indicates that all over western Europe, there has been a clear tilt to the right in a relatively short period of time.

electorate, is probably the most reactionary of all the European extremist groups. It not only wants to stop legal immigration but also deport all illegal immigrants, in particular people with darker skin. The Muslims from North Africa (former French colonies) are singled out for most of the ills that have befallen France. It wants a ban on building mosques. At the same time it also wants to deprive the immigrant workers of their rights to have equal medical and social security benefits. Le Pen also wants to roll back the momentum of European integration. He openly advocates the cancellation of all EU treaties, disbandment of the Union, the abandonment of the Euro and the reinstatement of French franc. Accusing the immigrants for the rise of criminality, he wants to deport them, if convicted, and reinstate death penalty. He wants to build new prisons, give more powers to the police. In short, he wants to turn France into a police state.

Although Pym Fortuyn of Holland held more moderate views, he was virulently anti-Muslim. According to him Islam was a backward culture. He even wanted to repeal part of the Dutch constitution which forbids discrimination on religious or racial grounds. He called for a stop to all further immigration because according to him, "the Netherlands is full" but he wanted to integrate the immigrants who were already there. He fanned the flames of racism by

immigration discourse.

There are several reasons why the far-right has had so much success on the European political stage. A sense of disillusionment about politics among the ordinary people and high abstentions have left the field open to well-organised groups of extremists, as it happened in Austria and France. The complacent and often arrogant centre-right and centre-left political elite had been busy building cosy political consensus through trade-offs instead of addressing the issues that really worried the general public. It gave them (the rightist groups) opportunity not only to oversimplify the issues but also to play on the fears and anxieties of the disgruntled masses. On top of everything else, the far-right leaders are flamboyant personalities. They are populists -- not afraid to use provocative discourse to attract the attention of the masses.

Incessant squabbling and infinite divisions among the leftist groups have also contributed to the electoral success of the far-right. By all accounts, the media also played a significant role in this phenomenon. In France, according to a report published by Le Monde, the television gave so much biased coverage to the apparently deteriorating law and order situation immediately before the first round of the presidential elections that the public decided to vote for Le Pen rather

As long as there is a demand for workers in Europe, which it can not supply because of its self-imposed fertility policy, the South will inevitably supply them either legally or illegally. That immigration of people with different cultural, racial and religious background will create tension in the complacent European society is, in my opinion, inevitable. It is particularly so because of Europe's recent colonial past. Its people have an inherent belief that just by having pink skin, they are superior to the people with different skin colours. Under these circumstances, what is absolutely necessary is to have a comprehensive immigration policy. To counterbalance the ill effects caused by the far-right propaganda against immigration, the EU governments should come out with facts and figures to prove that immigration is necessary for Europe's economic growth and for the sustenance of its unique social benefits system.

There is a widespread fear among the European working class people that the immigrants push down the level of wages because they are prepared to accept lower salaries. This is only partially true. There is hardly any competition between the vast majority of the immigrants and the natives because the immigrants perform jobs like sweeping, cleaning, fruit-picking and other unpleasant jobs which the natives refuse to perform. The locals would rather live on the dole

them. But the problem is that they are often rejected and marginalised by the indigenous population, which breeds frustration and anger among them. They are often forced to live in ethnic ghettos. Having visited the ghettos in London, Paris, New York, Chicago and San Francisco, I am convinced that a society that forces its ethnic minorities to live in ghettos cannot complain that the immigrants do not want to integrate into the larger society. (None-the-less, if Europe really wants to slow down the tide of immigration from the South, it will have to try to keep the would-be immigrants in their native countries by creating job opportunities there. Only effective way to do so would be to open Europe's markets to products from these countries as agreed under the WTO rules. According to reliable estimates, the South loses approximately 150 billion dollars per year because of the industrialised North's protectionist policies.)

As far as the immigrants are concerned, they must try to learn the language and the culture of the host country as quickly as possible. The quicker they learn the language, the better for them. A good knowledge of the host country's history and culture will empower them to interact with the local people in a more positive manner. The host countries, as part of their wider immigration policy, should provide proper facilities and incentives for this purpose. This is true that the

grants feel more secure in their host country, the ties with their home country become weaker. Gradually, there emerges a mixed culture, which usually is not antagonistic to the local one. The local people also accept some of the cultural traits of the immigrants. Therefore, their culture also changes -- perhaps to a lesser degree. I remember, in the fifties in London, it was difficult to find an Englishman with a liking for Indian cuisine. Now for a normal English couple, it has become a standard meal for an outing.

It is highly unlikely that in the foreseeable future the extreme-right will be able to capture power anywhere in Europe. However, it is becoming evident that its relative electoral success will have a negative influence on the mainstream parties. Ten years ago, anti-immigration slogans were not considered respectable and the mainstream parties used to shun the company of far-right parties. (Only a few years ago, Jorg Haider of Austria was ostracised by the EU after his electoral success.) Now some of these groups have earned respectability. The principal parties are entering into coalitions with them (Berlusconi-Fini-Bossi coalition in Italy is a good example), thus inevitably allowing them to influence governmental policies. Italy has just passed a tough immigration law, which has been described even by some conservative parties (El Olivo) as racist and anti-social. In Denmark, the conservative government has already imposed restrictions on further immigration and welfare assistance to newcomers. President Chirac (France) and Chancellor Schroeder (Germany) issued a joint statement on May 28 giving immigration control top priority in the EU political agenda. In a way, Chancellor Schroeder was right when he said that the mainstream parties cannot allow the immigration issue, which willy-nilly has become a major concern of the public, to be hijacked by the extremist groups.

The fact that the majority of European Council members now represent conservative governments (some of them have the extreme-right as coalition partners), will have far-reaching consequences for the future of the EU, because proposals for a complete reform of the Union are currently being studied.

Britain's Labour Party leader Tony Blair has just declared that he is prepared to use the British Navy and the Royal Air Force to stop illegal immigration. David Blunkett, the British Home Secretary has recently expressed fears that the British schools could be "swamped" by outsiders. Other centre-right European leaders are proposing the creation of a special police force with the sole purpose of guarding "fortress Europe's" frontiers against immigration. The current EU president Aznar has just confirmed that immigration will be at the top of the agenda in the meeting of the European Council in Seville, Spain. I only hope that the Council comes up with a plan, which is both comprehensive and humane.

Actually, in post-war Europe (except Spain and Portugal), neither the conservatives (the centre-right) nor the socialists (the centre-left) have been allowed to govern in any country for a long period of time. In most countries, the voters have kept switching their loyalties from the centre-right parties to the centre-left ones or vice versa. The far-right parties have not had much political clout so far. But now it is becoming evident that their relative success in recent elections will certainly have considerable impact on European politics for some time to come.

Your age is your cage

M SHAFIULLAH

In Canberra a retiring Bangladesh diplomat was asked at a farewell dinner his likely pursuit for the rest of life. At 57 he was relatively younger in comparison to an Australian, who retires at 65. Responding to his obligation to make an after dinner speech, he recalled a story of a retired diplomat whose pension was not enough to keep the wolf from the door, not to speak of a life style the family indulged in during his long career abroad. The story runs like this.

One day while scanning vacancy page in the newspaper, the diplomat saw an advertisement which read "National zoo offers a position to a person of discretion. No need to apply. Appear in person". Curiosity had led him to the Keeper of the zoo who asked him to place his hand on a Holy Book. He took oath of secrecy not to divulge the conversation between the two. The Keeper explained that the Gorilla who was popular with the children had died. To avoid disappointing the children it was notified that the animal was under treatment of the vet and would return soon. The skin of the animal had been saved and the assignment involved would be to appear in the guise of the gorilla till a substitute was brought from Africa. In a flash of memory the diplomat remembered the face of his wife who had asked for kitchen money when he was leaving home on an excuse. The family needs superceded complacency. The former diplomat accepted the offer for a try. After a day's rehearsal he took position in the enclosure. The children greeted the return of their favourite gorilla with bananas and coconuts. In return the gorilla made several swings to please the fans.

However, hazard in work place had never been uncommon. One day while he was making swing to amuse the children the face of his wife crossed his mind. She was rather unhappy not being able to tell relatives the nature of the job her husband had taken up to supplement the pension amount. To overcome the episode he made a vigorous swing that landed him in the nearby enclosure of the lion. He was mortally afraid of seeing the majestic move of the lion. Fear of certain death gripped him to forget the oath of secrecy and was about to shout for help. Before he could cry out the lion had covered his mouth with paw and whispered, "if you shout for help, both of us will lose our jobs."

On return to homeland at the age of 57, the wife of the diplomat reminded him of his farewell speech. She insisted that the family would rather starve than for him to take a job of the kind in

Dhaka Mirpur zoo. In circulation were alarming stories of slaughter of animals in the zoo which were passed off as beef in the markets and the skin of many endangered species found way out of the country. Death caused to the endangered species in the zoo however, was blamed on a mysterious virus.

The husband argued that if a retired but needy official appeared in disguise for an animal in Dhaka zoo and was slaughtered in his new work place by mistake of "a virus affected animal", media would highlight his 'sacrifice'. What a sensation the episode would create within the human rights activists and resentment among the government officials would sensitize the democratic government to add three more years to the retiring age raising it to 60. After serving for sixty years the retired officials would not hunt for new job at that stage in life, to eke out a living nor to recourse to bending the law to oblige the political masters for an extended service life. They would be able to serve with integrity and dignity for the benefit of the Republic. Crores of taka would also be saved in transfers and postings to 'neutralize' the administration by a new government. The fund could be spent on access to safe drinking water and basic health care for millions. Except for few dead wood, nation would gain much from the experience, expertise and maturity of the officials. Insight and wisdom can neither be gained over night nor they can be transplanted. Judges of the Superior Court lay down their robes at 65, obviously for such good reasons. Besides, Bangladesh officials would be on an equal footing with their counterparts in neighboring countries who call it a day at 60. Would it not be a 'sacrifice' worth making for the nation which sustained us for so many years? The husband asked.

Wife quipped, "You are volunteering for a 'sacrifice'. Good enough! But what makes you so certain about the positive outcome of your perceived sacrifice?" The Diplomat-husband who was seldom short of words brought her home to the oft-repeated solemn pledges of politicians of all hues to the families of victims of rape, acid throwing, murder, custodial death and 'disappearance from police stations' that "their sacrifices would not go in vain". One has to trust the promises of the politicians. After all Politicians rule the destiny of nations.

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LETTER FROM EUROPE

In post-war Europe (except Spain and Portugal), neither the conservatives (the centre-right) nor the socialists (the centre-left) have been allowed to govern in any country for a long period of time. In most countries, the voters have kept switching their loyalties from the centre-right parties to the centre-left ones or vice versa. The far-right parties have not had much political clout so far. But now it is becoming evident that their relative success in recent elections will certainly have considerable impact on European politics for some time to come.

insisting that immigration was responsible for "all our problems in healthcare, law and order and education" in the big cities. He was also openly hostile to the idea of multiculturalism.

Jorg Haider, the former leader of the extreme-right Austrian Freedom Party, who won 26.9 per cent of vote in the parliamentary elections of 1999 on an anti-immigration platform wants to save Austria from "the dangers coming from outside".

In Italy, Gianfranco Fini, the ultra-nationalist leader of the National Alliance, who won 12 per cent of vote in 2001 parliamentary elections had openly advocated fascist ideas in the past. Umberto Bossi, the leader of the Northern League (a far-right organisation) is considered even more radical than Fini.

In Belgium, Filip Dewinter, the Flemish leader of an extreme-right group called Vlaams Blok, who enjoys the support of approximately 10% of national votes is willing to repatriate the foreigners, meaning immigrants.

In Denmark, Pia Kjaersgaard, leader of an ultra-nationalist organisation called Danish People's Party, who enjoys similar electoral support (12%) is openly hostile to immigration.

Fortunately, in Spain we do not have a Le Pen. But the truth is that anti-immigration (in particular, anti-Muslim) feeling is widespread in certain areas of Spain. The recent events in Alicante, where hundreds of Muslim immigrant workers have been made homeless and in Premia del Mar, where the building of a mosque is still being impeded by the local government (despite prior authorisation) because of public pressure, merely indicate that phobia about Islam is on the rise.

In Britain, the British Nationalist Party has made some electoral gains by using the same anti-

than for Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, who was perceived as the politician responsible for the deterioration. The events of Sept. 11 and the subsequent intoxication of the public opinion by America's so-called war on terror and by the Jewish controlled media, heightened the already existing paranoia against immigration in general and Muslim immigrants, in particular. Communism of the cold war years has now been replaced in the western media by Islam as the evil. There is no doubt that racism and demonisation of "the other" are on the rise in Europe. The populist right has cleverly used this phenomenon and fanned the fear of "the other" to its own advantage.

Failure on the part of the governments to have a comprehensive EU policy on immigration, (which in my opinion is absolutely necessary) explaining that immigration was not the root cause of all their evils has definitely fuelled the fears of the ordinary people. They have also failed to explain to the public that immigration is vital for the European economy. Why is it vital? Well, it is vital because of falling birth rate in the rich nations of Europe. In order to keep its economy moving, it needs workers. If the Europeans do not want to reproduce, it is logical that the workers will have to come from outside. As it so happens the per capita income is fifteen times less on the other side of the Mediterranean, than in Europe. The rules of globalisation have been framed in such a manner that the markets of the rich industrialised countries are effectively closed to the products of the South causing intense poverty, hunger and unemployment in these so-called under-developed countries. Therefore, the situation is as simple as this: In the North, there is a scarcity of workers, of which there is an abundant supply in the South. These are the basic economic facts.

than work in the fields from dawn to dusk. Due to the lack of legal protection, this is true that many immigrant workers often accept low wages. But this is also true of local women. Despite having legal protection, women in Spain, on average earn approximately 30 per cent less than men. Why are women not accused of pushing down the level of salaries? According to the far-right propaganda, the immigrants are unduly exploiting the generous social security system in Europe. Nothing can be farther from the truth. The immigrants, who are legally employed, besides contributing to general wellbeing of the country, also contribute to the social security system. The current ratio between the active and retired population is 4 to 1, but according to reliable forecasts, by the year 2050, this ratio will reach the dangerous level of 2 to 1. Actually the influx of legally employed immigrant workers may eventually improve the forecasted ratio, thereby ensuring the retirement benefits of the future generations of Europeans. I should also add that the immigrant workers, who are illegally employed do not enjoy any social security benefits. It is a shame that they cannot obtain any medical treatment even in emergencies for fear of being deported immediately.

The other argument that is put forward by Le Pen and the like is that immigration is destroying the cultural identity of Europe's nation states. The vast majority of the immigrants are peace-loving law-abiding people. Most of them come to Europe in search of a better life. They are grateful to their host countries for giving them the opportunities to earn a little money and to educate their children. They are in a far weaker position than the powerful institutions of their host countries. They have neither the capacity, nor the inclination to undermine

newcomers tend to live in crowded ghettos and to cling to their native culture, because they are very often rejected by the dominant groups. The best way to avoid extremism among the immigrant minorities is to give them equal opportunity to housing, education and employment. Today, there is much talk against multiculturalism in Europe. Yet, multiculturalism of one type or the other has always existed in most countries of Europe and elsewhere. In Britain, the English, the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish have had different cultures. I have seen the Jewish, the Armenian and the Polish communities in London celebrating their communal and religious festivities without any problems. In France, the descendants of the Italians, the Spaniards, the Portuguese and the Jews still maintain some of their old traditions. In the southern part of Spain, there are communities of wealthy British or German immigrants, where very little Spanish is spoken. No one bats an eyelid for these incongruent situations.

Of course, there are at least three important differences between this rather tolerant situation and the situation created by the immigration from the South. These new immigrants are poor, their skin colour is different and many of them profess a religion, which does not accept the Western conviction (refer to Oriana Fallaci's Anger and Pride, Silvio Berlusconi, Pym Fortuyn etc.) that Christianity is superior to Islam. Multiculturalism is based on greater understanding and tolerance of people from different backgrounds. It implies mutual respect and a certain willingness to give and take. The most important principle for the success of a peaceful multicultural society is not to force my culture on you, nor your culture on me. It is a slow process. Time and tolerance are the crucial factors. As the immi-