

# Socio-political consequences of the European expansion

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

EUROPEAN Union is perhaps the most successful story of regional integration in world history. From the Treaty of Paris (1951) establishing the European Coal and Steel Community through the Treaty of Rome (1957) establishing the European Economic Community and EURATOM signed by the six founding members (Benelux, France, Germany and Italy) EU underwent successful enlargement with Denmark, Ireland and the UK(1973), Greece(1981), Portugal and Spain(1986), Austria, Finland and Sweden (1995) and finally on May 1st 2004 EU took in ten members -- Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta and Cyprus. The latest enlargement will increase the size of the single market by 40 percent and economic gain to the existing 15 by about British Pounds six billion and to the new entrants by Pounds 15 billion.

Evidently the fall of the Berlin Wall and the consequent demise of the Soviet empire, and disintegration of Eastern Europe and Yugoslavia which reflected the greatest contraction of power and influence in modern history encouraged the wave of Eastern and Central European countries' desire and the Baltic states' irrepresible urge to join the ranks of the richest club in the world. It is not only the prospect of economic prosperity which impelled these countries to join EU but also the asphyxiation suffered by many of the new entrants contributed to the process of integration. The Baltic States always resented the casual abandon with which the victors of the Second World War decided on their absorption into the Soviet Union. Hungary and then Czechoslovakia were victims of Soviet invasions to quell the "revolt" of the local populace seeking freedom. Hungary and Poland were very much within the strong grip of the Soviet Union and also on the edge of the Iron Curtain.

Then there was the question of European values the strength of which was witnessed by the world when Germany, France and Belgium denied Jorge Haider's ambition to become the vice-chancellor of Austria though his party( along with the Conservatives) won decisive mandate in the country's general elections. Jorge Haider's fault was his admiration of Adolph Hitler's SS and his reported devaluation of Nazi atrocities. Austria became a pariah till Haider decided not to join the cabinet.

European values again took

the centre stage when Kosovo crisis was generated by Serbian genocide on the Kosovars and the consequent NATO's subjugation of Serbia and the current trial at The Hague of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic. The new members has to be wedded to the European values of democracy, human rights, rule of law and commitment to market economy and to political, economic and monetary union. Earlier the superiority of the European values were amply demonstrated in the cases of Greece, Portugal and Spain who

of the GDP. It is generally believed that wage differential between East and West Europe will continue to remain in place for another ten years. These facts have been reflected in the political instability in some of the new member countries. Hungary has seen a succession of government since 1991, in Poland the ruling party registers less than ten per cent in opinion polls, Latvia now has the twelfth government since 1991, and the Lithuanian President has been impeached for his alleged ties with the mafia.

Historically Europe in the

**These are early days to predict how an expanded EU will operate effectively given the facts that Germany has more than eighty million people while Malta's population is less than one million as of Cyprus and those of the Baltic states are marginally more in number. Only Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic have reasonable population and resources to make qualitative contribution to EU economy at some distant future.**

rose from fascist rule, primarily agrarian economies and mired in incorrigibly corrupt administration into what they have become today. Last year President Bush in his commencement address at the University of North Carolina informed his audience that the combined GDP of all Arab states was less than that of Spain.

EU membership is not an unimixed blessing. The population of Eastern Europe has already experienced enormous rise in poverty and unemployment, wage cuts and devaluation of social provisions to meet the criteria of EU membership. Wages in the accession countries are five to eight times lower than in the 15 EU countries. Average per capita GDP in the EU 15 (Euro 24250) is substantially higher than that in Hungary (euro 7080), or Latvia (euro 3740). Unemployment in the Czech Republic, for example, climbed from less than one per cent in 1990 to 6.5 percent in 1998 and is now almost 11 percent twice as high as in EU 15.

Then there is highly discrepant unemployment and uneven distribution of income and consequent poverty/ prosperity between the capitals and the outlying areas in, for example, Hungary and Slovakia. Many of the new members are lowering their taxes to attract investment which is being reflected in budget deficit. Estonia's current budget deficit is five times higher than the Argentinean deficit which provoked the financial crisis in 2001. Hungarian foreign trade deficit is already 58 percent and that of Latvia is about 64 percent

Orient, and South Asia is no exception, is associated with colonialism. British, French and the Dutch fought over the colonisation of India in which the British ultimately prevailed. Edward Said saw the Orient becoming Europe's greatest, richest and oldest colonies, a source of European civilisations and languages, its cultural contestant helping Europe to define its contrasting images and personality and its relationship with the Orient in the shape of power, domination and hegemony. Added to the burden of history was Giscard d'Estaing's observation that Turkey not being a European country should not be eligible for EU membership. As if to give life to Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilisations theory only a few days ago seven states led by Italy have urged EU to recognise a "historical truth" and refer explicitly to the "Christian roots of Europe" in its new constitution.

The preamble of the current draft treaty, drawn by Giscard d'Estaing's Convention, refers only to the "cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe". Specifically mentioning Christianity or God was considered too controversial in the face of opposition of secular France and Protestant Sweden and Denmark. They and the British argue that religious references would exclude the Muslims and the Jews. Earlier the European Parliament rejected a proposal to mention Europe's "Judea-Christian roots". But largely Catholic states of Italy, Poland, Lithuania, Malta Portugal, Czech Republic and

Slovakia have written to Ireland, the current EU President that "this issue remains a priority for our governments as well as for millions of European citizens". This issue is not expected to be settled before the Brussels Summit scheduled for June 17th (*Christianity bedevils EU Treaty-Guardian* May 25, 2004).

Perhaps one of the most important effects of the EU expansion would be felt in the European support or lack of it to the Bush doctrine of preemption and its application through Iraq invasion. Donald Rumsfeld's "old Europe" was used to a system of consultation among trans-Atlantic partners and sensitivity to each other's views, respect to international laws and institutions particularly the UN. Under the new system the US decides unilaterally and European allies, often without prior consultation, are expected to obey almost like a royal courtier whose influence is determined not by the force of his argument or merit but by his closeness to the royal being reminiscent of King Louis the XIV's famous remark "L'etat c'est moi" (I am the state). This passage to post-Atlanticism by the US was facilitated by the public support extended to the US position (which was denied by Franco-German entente in the UNSC strengthened by Jacques Chirac's threat to veto any UNSC resolution sanctifying invasion of Iraq) by Rumsfeld's "new Europe" which effectively consisted of many new EU entrants.

The support then extended by these countries has now become muted as realisation has crept in that the Anglo-US misadventure in Iraq has made the world, particularly the West, less safer than it was before the Iraq invasion. Notwithstanding the insistence of the seven countries led by Italy on the incorporation of European Christian roots in the proposed Constitution, Europe would be well advised to steer clear of such clamour as Joseph Rumzo and Arvind Sharma of Harvard and Nancy Martin of Chapman University point out in their collection of articles( Human Rights and Responsibilities in the World Religions- 2003) that religions have too often been used to justify violation of human rights, in part to the hierarchical and selective use of role ethics and the postponement of temporal justice to divine judgment.

If we are to take Huntington's clash of civilisations theory and Bernard Lewis' critique on Islam as the heart of the agenda of the twenty-first century in our quest to find a balance in cross-civilizational and inter-faith conflicts bedeviling the world then the European Union must recognise its multi-racial, multi-religious, and multi-cultural personality. The new Europe has to admit that Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Lithuania and Slovenia were in sporadic contact with the West in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the Classical eras, and in the twentieth century these countries emerging from Hapsburg and German empires did not truly participate in the artistic and spiritual creativity of the West. There would, therefore, be an inevitable cultural impact resultant of EU expansion and like a broken mirror the twenty-five EU members would have to embrace within itself a cultural diversity as India has done successfully for more than fifty years.

These are early days to predict how an expanded EU will operate effectively given the facts that Germany has more than eighty million people while Malta's population is less than one million as of Cyprus and those of the Baltic states are marginally more in number. Only Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic have reasonable population and resources to make qualitative contribution to EU economy at some distant future. While unlike NATO expansion EU expansion is not seen in Moscow with concern the new entrants particularly the Baltic States could be advised to restrain their anti-Russian sentiments however well grounded in history the negative factors may be. The expanded Europe may also have to fashion its American policy beyond Bush era and ensure that the iron curtain which had once descended upon Europe has irrevocably and irreversibly gone with the wind.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and

## Women and parliament

# BNP scores another minus point

A R SHAMSUL ISLAM

WHAT the women leaders of Bangladesh were urging upon the government, with increasing concern, was to enact a law to hold direct election to the reserved seats of women in the national assembly. This demand was neither unjust nor unreal to be fulfilled. Rather it was an election pledge of the BNP. But to the dismay and mortification of the women community the BNP-led alliance government on May 16, 2004 passed the fourteenth amendment to the constitution enacting, inter alia, forty-five reserved seats for women for ten years to be nominated according to ratio of representation different political parties presently have in the parliament. Not only the women organisations, other sects also like members of the civil society, intelligentsia, social and political organisations, cultural bodies etc sharply reacted to this shock decision of the ruling parties.

It is not that the women leaders were caught totally unawares at this measure of the government. In fact they had a positive smell of this design of the chief ruling party. They left no stone unturned to dissuade the BNP stalwarts from passing such a black law. Hot entreaties were directed to them. Finding these were not working well the advocates of women's freedom and progress intensified demonstration, protest rallies, human chains formation etc news of which came in the media quite favourably.

The pioneers of women movements gave representation a number of times to the law and parliamentary affairs minister barrister Moudud Ahmed. He received them well, talked politely and sometimes admitted he was not unconvinced of the cause of the women organisations. But he said there were practical difficulties to implement the wishes of the women leaders as his party's decision went otherwise and it was compulsive on him to obey the party mandate.

In the meeting of Bangladesh parliament journalist association (BPJA) held on May 13, 2004 the minister repeated the same view without caring how it aggravated miseries of eminent women leaders present there nursing a hope against hope to hear something different from his mouth. In that meeting the former law and parliamentary affairs minister Abdul Matin Khosru of Awami League vehemently opposed the bill terming it as a gross violation of human rights. Ironically enough, when he himself tabled the bill in 2001 he did not propose for direct election to reserved seats. He only proposed extension of existing law for another ten years. This proposal, however, passed off without enactment as the AL-led government had not the required majority in the house to effect an amendment to the constitution.

Instead of speaking on the merit of the bill law minister Moudud Ahmed threw all weight to counter the opinion of his immediate predecessor. Thus the core issue practically went lost in the fray between the present and immediate past ministers both practically being birds of the same feather capable

of playing absolutely contradictory roles in power and out of power.

Moudud Ahmed hinted more of the decision of his party to carry the bill. He was better to convince the women leaders of the causes that led his party to arrive at this decision. The minister told he could not go against party mandate. This limitation exposes a basic flaw in the constitution. It speaks of a need to amend article 70 of the constitution practically to free conscience of the lawmakers found mortgaged to the party.

How does a political party

**Our women leaders demanded direct election because it would thrash out efficient and popular female candidates, give them a stamp of authority and genuineness and encourage them to work with confidence and credibility and above all free them from pity and tutelage of male leaders. It is a question of asking men to acknowledge women's dignity and independent entity.**

arrive at a decision? It is presumed that threadbare discussions are held by partymen on the issue particularly when it relates to matter of public importance. Who did take part in the discussions that led to recommend for nomination of female lawmakers? Did it not take notice that the BNP was pledge-bound to provide for direct election to reserved seats of women?

Moudud Ahmed said that there were practical problems to hold direct election. He asked the women leaders how could they arrange the fund required to contest a poll. It was hinted around taka five crore for each candidate. Keeping aside the question of legality of expending this amount grossly contravening the expenditure ceiling fixed by the election commission, this must have posed a genuine difficulty. The question is when BNP put on its election manifesto a commitment to holding direct election to seats of women did that problem of money remain out of place? Or was that merely a cheap slogan meant for lip-service?

It is intriguing to guess how the candidates, male or female, could bear this staggering expenditure. It limits party tickets to be awarded mostly to industrialists, business magnates, rich men. It instigates the lawmakers to dip their hands in corrupt practices to realise their investment with interest and profit. Reality having come to such a pass what sense does it make to talk about fighting corruption from the body-politic of Bangladesh?

In developing countries, to emancipate women from all round bondages in social, political, economic arenas, political empowerment of women is a must. In the past credulous women community relied mostly on counterpart male sect for achieving freedom and an honourable status, if not equality with men, in society. That illusion is gone. Women have by now realised that even the best of men could not digest their women to be rising to at par with men. This is an ingrained prejudice in male psyche. Women have now formed their

own organisations, headed by themselves free from male domination and supervision, to lead their movement. This is one step forward for women to reach their goal.

Almost half of our population is women. Characteristically both the chairpersons of two major political parties are ladies. Still a pledged right of direct election to women seats in the parliament is denied. Doesn't it sound like a paradox? The fact is that majority of women of Bangladesh are illiterate, living in rural areas, and cannot think of contradicting male counterparts. Even a good

passed the bill for fourteenth amendment to the constitution by use of brute majority in the house. The BNP broke its own promise and scored another minus point. The strong sentiments of women organisations, civil society, various socio-political organisations, cultural bodies and above all the main opposition Awami League were brutally ignored. Any amendment to the constitution should be based on national consensus. Otherwise, the nation may be harmed. Further, with the reversal of political fortune the amendment may be done away with.

The bill got through the assembly by 226-01 votes. There was only one vote against the bill that came from Bangabir Kader Siddiki. Amusingly, even the Jatiya Party (E) lawmakers present in the session voted in favour of the bill as opposed to their earlier criticism of the bill and open declaration to protest its passage. It is learnt that the Jatiya Party (E) lawmakers were gained over at the last moment. They reportedly bartered their vote in exchange for assurance from the main ruling party to slacken pending cases against the party chief Ershad and to pay some other facilities to the party members. It epitomises how often ruling parties use the stick and the carrot policy.

Visibly distraught the women leaders have urged women activists of all political parties to refuse to take nomination to reserved seats in the parliament for the sake of protecting the honour of women community. Women leaders have warned to boycott both the taker and giver of such nomination. They have reiterated that women's movement will continue to surge ahead. However, meanwhile hectic lobbying among the lady leaders and workers of the main ruling party to obtain nomination to reserved seats has started off.

AR Shamsul Islam is retired Principal, Govt Mohila College, Pabna.

The alliance government