

Preparing for post-MFA world

NCC recommendations laudable but speedy implementation crucial

ONE point eight million people are employed in the RMG sector, which brings in more than \$5 billion a year in export earnings, with an estimated 15 million more in related industries. There is thus no more pressing concern for the government than for it to formulate a policy to minimise the fallout from the expiry of the Multi-Fibre Arrangement on January 1, 2005.

The establishment of the National Co-ordination Council (NCC) on the textiles and RMG industries was therefore a salutary initiative, and we acclaim the finance minister's pledge to formulate a post-MFA strategy based on the NCC's recommendations.

Now that the NCC has done its job and come up with a slate of sensible proposals, it is up to the government to ensure that these are implemented quickly and efficiently steering clear of any bureaucratic or political wrangling. Too much is at stake and time is of the essence.

The NCC's first recommendation, to set up a central bonded warehouse, has been proposed by others before, and is absolutely critical. Setting up such a warehouse will help RMG exporters reduce the lead-time in the shipment of products by as much as 50 percent and is indispensable to the continuing competitiveness of the industry internationally.

The NCC's next recommendation is to set up a Tk 3000 crore fund to help the industry withstand the challenges of the post-MFA era. Given the centrality of the RMG sector to the nation's economy, we believe that this level of investment (roughly 10 percent of annual RMG export earnings) would be an extremely prudent use of resources.

We would like to see more specifics as to how these funds will be disbursed, but are in strong agreement that the RMG industry merits serious governmental support to weather the coming storm.

It has been suggested that the fund be utilised to lend money to industrialists setting up backward and forward linkages, which is an intelligent use of resources, but we would like to see commitment of money to provide for the retraining and welfare of retrenched garment workers as well.

Let us not lose sight of the human face of the approaching crisis.

In general, the recommendations of the NCC have been well-thought out and are to be adopted as a policy framework by the government for effective implementation. Accordingly, the suggestions have now been sent to the PMO for final approval. As soon as she gives a green signal, implementation of the recommendations should be a matter of utmost priority.

Euro 2004

Gritty Greeks prevail

EURO 2004 had uncorked too many surprises, as the favourites crumbled one after another before the lesser teams. And the two sides that reached the final were indeed strangers to that level of the game. But both Greece and Portugal had proven their class while crossing the big hurdles on the way to that battle royal. The exit of the big teams may have dashed the football fans' hope of watching a clash of titans. But why not celebrate the birth of new titans?

The final turned out to be a keen contest between the nimble-footed Portuguese forwards and a gritty Greek defence which never showed signs of cracking, though Figo and his men's marksmanship left something to be desired. They had faith in collective, not individual strength. The Greeks did not have 'starlight' to find their way through the gruelling battle; but were inspired to put up the very best to make history, which they did with great determination.

The winning goal that the Greek forward Angelos Charisteas scored with a powerful header was in fact scored against the run of the play. The Portuguese must have been really surprised that they had to pay such a price for the first corner that they conceded after dominating the show for a long time. But that is what football is all about -- it's pointless to be in command of the game unless you can convert the chances into goals. The Portuguese lacked that lethal firepower, though the ball was on the Greek half of the field most of the time. Even the desperate attempts to break through the Greek defence in the last few minutes did not bring the goal that the hosts needed so badly. It was a sad ending for the Portuguese who, too, were looking forward to their first major success.

The exit of the favourites does show that football is not a private preserve of a few top teams. More and more challengers are coming up and the game is getting enriched. Can you ask for anything more?

The relevance of understanding Islam



HARUN UR RASHID

ISLAM is a revealed religion like Judaism and Christianity. All these great revealed religions trace their common root to Ibrahim (Abraham) Khalil Ullah (Friend of Allah) who lived around 1900-2200 BC. According to Holy Qu'ran, Ibrahim had two sons, Ismail and Ishaque (Isaac). Prophet Mohammad (SM) belonged to the family of Ismail while Moses and Jesus to that of Ishaque.

Islam is not a new religion, but reiterates the Divine Message proclaimed by numerous prophets in different places and at different times. It is a universal religion and its adherents currently numbering more than one billion have spread over all the continents. Islam has stimulated thought and action of Islamic and non-Islamic scholars since it was first preached during the 7th century in Arabia.

Islam and Arabs

People of Arabia were steeped in ignorance and Prophet Mohammad (SM) was sent to guide them in their language. About Arab people Surah Tauba, Verse 97 of the Holy Qu'ran states as follows:

The Arabs of the desert
Are the worst in un-belief
And hypocrisy and most of
Them fitted to be in ignorance.
(Translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali)

Rift in Muslim community

Although Islam is strictly monotheistic, the monolithic structure of the Muslim community did not survive three decades after the death of Prophet Mohammad (SM). The first rift in the early Muslim community was rather political in character

and arose over succession to the Prophet. A section of the Muslim community supported the case of the Prophet's son-in-law and cousin, Hazrat Ali. Another group endorsed Hazrat Abu Bakr, an elderly close companion and father-in-law of the Prophet. Eventually Hazrat Abu Bakr succeeded the Prophet with the support of the elders.

The group supporting Ali constituted themselves into Shi'ah-i-Ali

Surah Nisa (Verse 93) proclaims: If a man kills a Believer Intentionally, his recompense is Hell, to abide therein Forever.

This verse makes it clear that if a Muslim kills a Jew or a Christian or any person who believes in God, his only place is in Hell.

Meaning of Jihad

Another fact that merits attention is the true meaning of Jihad (struggle).

quickly spread among non-Arab people who spoke different languages other than Arabic because the simplicity of Islamic teachings together with the concept of equality of human beings was attractive to people in different lands.

Many Islamic scholars believe that the principle of Jihad, the use of reason to apply Qu'ranic injunctions to contemporary values is almost absent in most Islamic countries. Muslim people live within a

nantly tribal and is rooted in desert environment. Many Arab Muslims consider Arab culture as Islamic culture. This has created confusion among non-Arab Muslims. Many of them argue that Arab culture is rooted in the land of Arabia and does not reflect Islamic culture. Islamic culture is wider than that of Arab culture. For example, food habits are different in every country and all Islamic countries do not follow what Arab Muslims eat. The mode of Arab

of non-Arab Muslim countries are willing to elect women as their heads of state/government, but the idea of women running a country seems to be an unacceptable idea in Arab Muslim countries. Conservative Muslims maintain that women have no role in politics, let alone running a country.

Sixth, most Arab Muslim states have small minority communities of other faiths. Whereas many of the non-Arab Muslim states have sizeable religious minority communities. This being the case, often many non-Arab Muslims do not hesitate to participate in festivals of other faiths as social and cultural traditions, just as many Muslims participate in Christmas festivities without being Christians. The interaction of non-Arab Muslims with people of other faiths has given an opportunity to respect other religious faiths. The result is that non-Arab Muslims tend to be less dogmatic or rigid in their views of non-Islamic faith.

Finally, all Arab Muslim states (22 in number) are being ruled by political institutions, such as monarchs, Emirates, Sultans, and Presidents. The Presidents in some Arab countries are elected through a process that can hardly be called fully free and democratic. While in most non-Arab Muslim states, people elect their governments through fair and free elections (monitored by foreign observers) once every four or five years.

Conclusion

It is reported that 80 percent of the Muslim population live in non-Arab Muslim countries, and the overwhelming majority of them have tolerant views of Islam. It is noted that extremists in Islam are much fewer in number than the moderates, but their voice has not kept pace with that of extremists. It is a challenge to be taken up by moderate Muslims. It is heartening to note that Bangladesh has joined as one of the moderate Muslim states invited by Singapore Prime Minister to provide moderate and tolerant views of Islam across the world.

Barister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

BOTTOM LINE

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(Party of Ali), a term which came to be known simply as Shi'ah. The rise of Shi'ism bifurcated the Muslim community. The bulk of Shi'a currently live in Iraq and Iran, while the other group of Muslims who are known as Sunnis constitutes majority in other Muslim countries. As the term connotes, they take their name on the basis of their strict adherence to Sunnah or traditions of the Prophet.

Militant Islamists

Regrettably the militant Islamists have hijacked the essence of Islam. The militants hardly follow the Qu'ranic injunctions. For example, in Surah Nisa, Verse 152, of the Holy Qu'ran, the description of a "Believer" is as follows: To those who believe In God and His Apostles, And Make no distinction Between any of the Apostles We shall soon give Their due rewards.

In the verse the word "Apostles" (plural) is employed and it means that any person who believes in God and his/her apostle, is a "Believer." It implies that not only Muslims, but also Jews and Christians are "Believers." Another verse in the same

Jihad does not mean war involving killing people. Many Islamic scholars of repute hold the view that Jihad signifies a physical, moral, spiritual and intellectual effort to conquer the forces of evil in oneself and in one's society. They argue that there are plenty of Arabic words denoting armed combat, such as harb (war), sir'a (combat), ma'araka (battle) or qital (killing) employed in the Holy Qu'ran. The word Jihad has not been used to denote an armed combat or killing.

Jihad means struggle within oneself to get rid of vices. It is an ongoing inner struggle within oneself to remain away from sins and to move towards approved way of life in this world. Islamic scholar Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1872-1953) in his commentary number 1270 of Surah Tauba of the Holy Qu'ran stated that "mere brutal fighting is opposed to the whole spirit of Jihad while the sincere scholar's pen or preacher's voice or wealthy man's contribution may be the most valuable forms of jihad."

Non-Arab Muslims

It is acknowledged by many Islamic scholars that although Islam was primarily preached for Arabs, it

given social, economic and administrative structure of a particular time and place. Accordingly, many Islamic scholars hold the view that Islamic precepts and practices are to be adapted to meet the needs of the day.

I would argue that non-Arab Muslims in general have a different approach in understanding Islam. Many factors have a role but a few in particular deserve mention.

First, Islam in non-Arab countries is influenced by indigenous culture and customs of the people. Furthermore Persian and Turkish influence is visible in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh because at one stage they ruled the undivided India prior to the British rule. Accordingly, in non-Arab Muslim countries, Islamic day-to-day practices often vary from those of Arab Muslim countries. Let me cite an example, the religious ceremony of Milad Mahfil or Milad Sharif is found common in non-Arab countries, while such ceremony does not exist in Arab Muslim countries. In fact Arab Muslims get surprised when they find out that many non-Arab Muslims perform such religious ceremony

Second, Arab culture is predomi-

dress applicable to a desert environment cannot be followed in a humid and rain-drenched country, even though they are Muslims by faith

Third, Arab nationalism is based on Arab race and non-Arabs are not included. The Arab League consists of Arab nation-states. During the Iran-Iraq war in the 80s, most Arab nations supported Arab-Iraq against non-Arab Iran, while most non-Arab states remained neutral.

Fourth, except within the framework of the UN, Arab Muslim states have little opportunity to interact closely with non-Muslim states in view of the fact that most Arab countries have hardly any non-Muslim states as neighbours. On the other hand, non-Arab Muslim states have non-Muslim neighbours. For example Bangladesh's neighbours and near neighbours are all non-Muslim states. Furthermore, non-Arab Muslim states belong to regional inter-governmental organizations, such as ASEAN or SAARC. They interact with non-Muslim states within the regional organisation to address regional issues where religion does not play a part.

Fifth, understanding of Islam is different among non-Arabs and this is manifested in the fact that people

Is America a democracy or a plutocracy?

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED
writes from Princeton

SOMETIMES one has to wonder whether America is truly a democracy (ruled by the citizens) or a plutocracy (ruled by the wealthy). No public office can be won without the expenditure of a considerable sum of money; either one's own, or accumulated through fund raising. Consider this: In 1982, the owner of a company that produced computer-generated pay checks for small companies, Frank Lautenberg, decided to run for the Senate from the state of New Jersey. Mr. Lautenberg, a Democrat, had never held elected public office of any sort before. He poured in 7 million dollars of his own money into the campaign, then a record, and was elected Senator! Senator Lautenberg served three 6-year terms, retired in 2000, but was reelected in 2002 when his Democratic party turned to him in desperation. When Senator Lautenberg retired in 2000, his Senate seat was won by a fellow Democrat, Jon Corzine, a Wall Street banking executive, who had also never been elected to public office.

What is the current price tag for buying a US Senate seat, you ask? Mr. Corzine spent over 60 million dollars of his own money to get elected! (Blame it on inflation!) There have been spectacular failures too. California tycoon Huffington spent a fortune, close to 60 million, in an unsuccessful bid to unseat a sitting Senator a few years ago. Therefore, one should not begrudge President Bush for his single minded determination, with enormous success, to break all the previous fund raising records in the US presidential fund raising sweepstakes!

The money is used almost exclusively, through television commercials and newspaper ads to discredit

one's opponent. Every trick in the book is employed to destroy the opponent's credibility and promote the candidate. When Republican Christie Whitman attempted to unseat Democratic Senator from New Jersey Bill Bradley in 1990, *The New York Times* endorsed Bradley by saying: "Ms. Christie Whitman will make a very good Senator; but New Jersey already has an excellent one in Bill Bradley." In their clever commercial, the Whitman camp said, "The *New York Times* says 'Miss Christie Whitman will make a very good Senator,' implying that the

Bush commercials one got the feeling that not only Kerry could not be allowed to seek the presidency, for doing enormous harm to America already Kerry should be in jail!

In a piece entitled, "The gutter-fighting Bushes," Tom Teepen of Cox Newspapers says: "These guys (Bushes) are gutter fighters and the incumbent president's re-election campaign is extending the family's journeyman skill at first creating a phony version of its opponents and then running against the fake. Kerry is a long time, notably serious U.S

senator; but to hear the Bush campaign tell it, he is a laughably flip-flopping leftwing lion. He wants to counsel Osama Bin Laden, not fight him. Doesn't think there is a war on terrorism. Would repeal the Patriot Act and is straining to increase everyone's taxes. He wants to add 50 cents a gallon to gasoline tax. All of this is dead false.

"Far from wanting to raise taxes, Kerry had proposed only repealing the Bush tax cuts for incomes of more than \$2,000,000 -- to help pay for the war against terrorism, not to stop fighting it. The gas tax idea was one idea he kited 10 years ago in utterly different circumstances and doesn't support now. Some flip flop. Ah, but didn't Kerry try to cut 1.8 billion from the intelligence budget and vote against several new weapons proposals. He did indeed. But when he voted to nix the intelligence budget, congressional

Republicans were proposing a 3.8 billion cut. And Dick Cheney, in Congress at the time, voted against many of the weapons proposals that Kerry opposed. And rather than repealing the Patriot Act, Kerry has proposed only -- and quite sensibly -- installing closer judicial supervision for some of its provisions. (A nuanced position, but Bush -- proud C student -- has boasted that he doesn't 'do nuance.') The list goes on.

"This is politics at its most cynical, taking advantage of the fact that most voters don't do detailed politi-

cal research and, honest themselves, want to believe others are being fundamentally square with them. They figure that, even in politics, matters put factual must be within shouting distance of the truth. Bush the Elder whopped Michael Dukakis for presidency in '88 in part by recasting the Massachusetts governor -- a moderate technocrat indifferent to ideology -- as the next thing to a flag-bating extremist. A concurrent whispering campaign hissed about Dukakis's 'foreign' name -- a bit of nastiness echoed this time by the project to put across the idea that Kerry somehow 'looks French,' whatever that means.

Mr. Teepen concludes: "And the current Bush won the presidency in part thanks to a smear that Al Gore was a serial liar and exaggerator. Gore was said to have claimed that he invented the Internet, discovered the rewards of the ascendancy of the rightwing movement in America which started during the Carter administration over 25 years ago. On the religious side this movement spawned Jerry Falwell's 'moral majority,' and on the conservative side Kristol's pro-Israeli neoconservatives (necons). If Mr. Bush wins reelection in November, the right-wingers will become even stronger.

For a long time the Republicans have been complaining that the American press is 'too liberal.' This does not mean they accuse the media of supporting the Democrats; their gripe is that media is not rightwing enough. For instance, if a black man commits a crime, the general media will report the event without mentioning the race, unless race is relevant (such as in a racially-motivated crime.) The right-wingers would like a crime reported

as, 'Black man kills a white man' regardless of whether the murder is random or not. Right-wingers dominate talk radio. 'Rush Limbaugh, Bob Grant, Sean Hannity and Michael Savage have long used the radio to bash the Democrats and the 'liberals,' and have hogged 'patriotism' for themselves. They take advantage of the fact that in the privacy of their cars, as they listen to the diatribes of these rabble rousers, the white males, their main audience, can be themselves, and share views with likeminded listeners by calling these radio hosts over their cell phones.

Roger Ailes, a top official in the Reagan administration, decided to do one better. He used the Republicans' enormous wealth to buy the Fox (Television) News Channel, which unlike the main media is unabashedly Republican and rightwing. They have a direct line to the White House. The Who's Who of the administration -- the President, Vice President, the Secretaries of State and Defense, National Security Advisor, and all the necons and pro-Bush think tankers and journalists -- are only a phone call away before rushing to the Fox Channel to be interviewed. Fox News, whose motto is 'fair and balanced,' -- they are anything but -- present speculation as news and opinion as fact. That is why in their opinion polls, President Bush is never behind! Who is Roger Ailes, you may wonder? He is the author of the notorious 'Wille Horton' ad, which in 1988 destroyed the presidential candidacy of Democrat Michael Dukakis by portraying Dukakis as someone not outraged by a black criminal raping a white woman! As the voice of money becomes louder and shriller in the American democracy the voice of truth is becoming weaker and fainter.

TO THE EDITOR

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Welcome the new politics

The electrocution of the general elections in India is sending some signals to the political leaders in the Saarc region (and abroad). This phenomenon might denote the beginning of the return to stability of the political culture in the post-Raj era after half a century of roaming in the new wilderness of freedom of self-governance. The curtain might fall on the euphoria chapter of playing with the new toy left by the Empire builders in 1947.

Sonia Gandhi's ascension is a new symbol of awareness in the electorate. The time had come, as the catalyst worked this time. The people in Bangladesh are waiting for a similar type of catalytic action to purge our politics of the traditional garbage and head-load (of parading fossilized leadership).

The rate of change in political events (local or global) is now outside the control of any one group (even the mighty US cannot be fool time and again). What was the invisible new element in the Indian elections? Foreign interest, detached, seemingly remote, and indirect. Saarc is too rich potentially, not to attract interest, specially when its assets could not be harnessed by the regional leaders, for several generations. The phase of the "end of history" is gone; and new history is in the making, although the molds and the models are still experimental. There is active politics in the Third World, while the western civilization has entered the sunset years.

The third platform is already emerging in Dhaka. The message is clear enough to political observers: get the local politics in order, and set the sight for regional coopera-

tion and signboards. The cracks and weaknesses in the whole system of regional politics have to be cemented. It was not a pleasant and easy task for Europe to go in for the EU concept the force of circumstances work beyond calculated risks (the same situation in Iraq under US occupation).

Local politics at the national level has to look beyond the nose. The supposed intruders are rich and vicious, with long-range logistic network control. Losing power and control are nasty experiences, better plugged at the earliest. Vajpayee's noble retreat and acceptance of peoples' verdict is a gesture pregnant with possibilities, which time would unfold phase by phase (yield during a storm, stand up later to survey the debris).

Poverty and financial constraints do not erode much the intuition or hunch of the ruled (but

access to the mass media is lacking). The voter awareness and sensitivity have been rising each successive decade, and today it cannot be ignored as was done in the past. The mass have 'mass' (weight), and it can be very much weighed.

The politicians have to talk to or communicate with the people, without pointing with the finger. "Are you nagging or complaining?" Leaders who sulk cannot carry bulk. Who will solve the leaders' dilemmas? Themselves. Watch the patience of Sonia. It comes from 'eglessness' no obsessions.

Dhaka is not insulated from political magnetic storms. Who are more prepared, the leaders, the politicians, or the masses? Politics is a public service; anything beyond it is untenable.

Abu Abd
Dhaka

Monsoon

This year also the faithful (and unscientific) monsoon arrived in sonar Bangla in due time the second week of June, as I have been noticing throughout my lifetime for a number of decades. I am wondering about the dubious Western publicity of the so-called (hypothesis, not theory), Greenhouse Effect (GE), which is hampering the rapid development in the Third World (like the World Bank prescriptions). What is this scientificism?

I have started believing in the subtle background presence of scientific *gool-baazi* (fraud, hoax, magnified false propaganda). Is our monsoon so powerful that the GE cannot affect it? As a layman, I would like to hear from both western and our scientists, for clarifi-

cations, and awareness of the public.
A Husnain
Dhaka

Air-conditioned clothes!

When we travel abroad, the credibility rating of us individuals is on the low side, as we come from underdeveloped countries. Hence sometimes I get naughty and pull the leg of my foreign acquaintances (can't be friends) with (scientific) hoaxes.

Once, when I went to Japan (decades ago), I was aware of the Japanese custom of offering small gifts during social intercourses. What could a light-pocketed gentleman take from Dhaka? I took a few pieces of cheap handmade caps made from grass leaves (as worn by Bhashani?). I presented a piece to the wife of a Japanese executive who was gra-

cious enough to invite me home for dinner (a rare honor). I stressed two points: hand-made in the village, and environmentally-friendly, made of natural fibre. I even suggested she could use it as a flower basket by affixing a light handle. They were delighted and impressed with a handmade product of Bengalee culture. When I was returning home, he presented me with a very expensive gift worth tens of dollars.

On another occasion, I impishly told a foreigner abroad that at home we used air-conditioned clothes in the hot, humid and tropical climate, without any extra machinery or cost. He was puzzled, and asked for details. I advised him to think about it; and told him at the next meeting that we use hand-made, handloom cotton lungie and gamcha for the lower and upper portions of the body during the hot days at home

(as I am doing so while typing this letter on the computer).

The lower garment has only one straight stitch; and gamcha needed no tailoring. Cotton is best for hot and humid climate, absorbs sweat and evaporates it quickly. The gamcha is better than a sleeveless vest as it could be shaken up (stitchless) and can be used as a wiper or towel.

A root, basic question arises; transfer of local technological culture should be more two-way, than one-way as at present. We are labelled as Third World entities where is the Second World of level communication? Look at the Western mess in Iraq. We should export lungie and gamcha to the industrialized world, along with prawn and RMG! Pack the former set in a jute bag.
AZ
Dhaka

EDITOR TO THE EDITOR