

Post-Arafat scenario



M. M. REZAUL KARIM

FOUR decades of continuing focus of international attention on a legendary soul came to an abrupt end on the 11th instant. Yasser Arafat, the struggling symbol of Arab unity and purveyor of the hopes and aspirations of the Palestinian people breathed his last on that day in a French hospital after suffering from an undisclosed ailment. The undisputed leader of the Palestinian people who was hated by the Israeli government and its allies, calling him a terrorist, paradoxically had the distinction of winning the Nobel Peace Prize, albeit jointly with Israeli leaders Rabin and Peres, ostensibly for his commitment to establish peace in his trouble-torn homeland.

People say death normally ends the enmity of the enemies. It happened so in case of Arafat, who was showered with so much of accolade from all quarters which the deceased leader had never dreamt of in his lifetime. Even the adversaries among his own fellow Arabs, who had been critical of some of his policies, actions and wealth, also had some words of praise or at least made some gesture of sympathy for him. The notable exceptions were the leaders of Israel and America. This was not unexpected. The French government bestowed all the

pomp and grandeur in the ceremony that are normally associated with state functions on the occasion of transporting Arafat's mortal remains, with full military honours, to Cairo for a state funeral prior to the burial in Arafat's last sanctuary at Ramallah.

The deceased leader's last wish to be buried in Jerusalem could not be realised due to Israeli intransigence. So were many of his other wishes. The most important among them

being overwhelmingly Muslim, espoused the cause of fellow Muslims, the Arab people of Palestine, and extended wholehearted support in their struggle for establishing a free and independent homeland, a state of their own. Perhaps, the similar experience of the people of Bangladesh in their liberation war helped in matching the mind of the two peoples. Bangladesh has consistently supported the oft-repeated cause of the Palestine people in the

Yasser Arafat for the first time. The occasion marked the commencement of a happy and lasting rapport and fraternal relations between the leaders and peoples of the two countries. I personally happened to meet him again, much later in 1981, while I was Ambassador to China. Arafat came to Beijing after having visited Bangladesh and we met at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing at a reception hosted by the Chinese leaders. There the vibrant

Bangladesh-Palestine relations are marked by deep-rooted friendship, to which all political parties are committed. The fact that Bangladesh was represented at the highest level by its President at the state funeral in Cairo substantiates this postulate. The death of the Palestine leader will, therefore, make no qualitative change in Bangladesh's relations with Palestine.

Speculation is rife about who is to succeed the great leader. Will there

CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

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was his dream to live in a free and sovereign homeland. Unfortunately, this wish remained unfulfilled for someone, who had struggled relentlessly for decades and lived in exile most part of it. Arafat had manifested qualities of leadership from his very childhood. He founded the Fatah movement and became the first Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation. His meteoric rise was matched only by his megalomaniac determination to pursue his cherished objective. His charismatic personality was made controversial by his foes, as he did not flinch from his chosen path even in the face of heavy odds. Yet, the poor leader stumbled half-way.

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United Nations and all other international forums. The government of Bangladesh was not only among the first to recognise the State of Palestine but had provided material help to establish their diplomatic Mission in Dhaka. Over and above these, a number of Bangladeshis spontaneously went to the Lebanon to fight in the battles alongside the Palestinian brethren.

The first contact a Bangladeshi leader had with Yasser Arafat was in 1974 when Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman went to Lahore to attend the Summit of the Organisation of Islamic Conference. It was an OIC delegation, which had come to Dhaka and successfully brokered the mutual recognition of Bangladesh and Pakistan before Bangladesh sent a delegation to attend the Summit in Lahore. I also happened to be a member of that delegation. It was in Lahore that Sheikh Mujib met

Palestine leader expressed his admiration for the commendable nation-building work undertaken in Bangladesh, at that time by President Ziaur Rahman.

The most distinguishing trait of Yasser Arafat's relations with Bangladeshi leaders was his keenness to foster friendship with all, irrespective of their party affiliation. As his relations had been built up with Sheikh Mujib, these developed into friendship with Ziaur Rahman. It continued with Hussain Muhammad Ershad and reached a high degree of affinity with Begum Khaleda Zia. Sheikh Hasina can also genuinely claim having established cordial relations with Yasser Arafat. All these were made possible due to the personal charisma of the PLO leader and also the genuine desire professed by the Bangladeshi leaders to that end. But in the final analysis, it boils down to the fact that

be a bitter struggle for succession or it will die in a whimper with a unanimous choice of new leadership. No one can say with certainty. It is natural to assume there would be severe horse trading among so many eligible contenders. There is Mahmoud Fawzi, a former Prime Minister and a founder member of Fatah, a moderate and successor to Arafat as the PLO chief, who appears to be a hot contender. The present Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei is also a strong candidate with ample experience and contribution. He already started carrying out some of the Presidential functions. The hardliner Farouk Kaddoumi, who was elected as Head of Fatah, waits on the wings. The Speaker, Faruq Tatouh, who is the interim President, appears to be a lame duck candidate. Then there are some local leaders and yet some others, who belong to the security. The

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Governance: Institutional reform and capacity building

ZAHURUL ALAM

MAJOR global political changes in last couple of decades have prompted major changes in the role of the state. Those political changes have changed the views of governance; shifted emphasis to market economy development, and have recognised an increased role of the private sector and the civil society in governance. The 1997 World Development Report of the World Bank describes the state as facilitator, catalyst and regulator, rather than the engine for economic development.

Institutional reforms include, in addition to public sector policy and structural changes, strengthening of the civil society, private sector and other key governance actors. The process of change requires learning by the national governments lessons, primarily from the countries within the region with similar socio-cultural, political and economic set up. This is essential for reducing mistakes and conducting reforms in an efficient and cost-effective manner. Reforms in India can serve as good examples for Bangladesh.

The national governments in the reform process should always be aware of the rights of the people over national resources. Hence, reforms should adequately address the issues of proper distribution and re-distribution of national wealth. This needs appropriate policy formulation and implementation, aimed at optimal participation of the people. Strengthened democracy can ensure that. Experiences show that despite vigorous reforms in some of the developing countries, the benefits are not successfully extended throughout the population. On the other hand, isolated reform programmes may not yield expected results in the context of enhanced sectoral integration in the society.

It is important that reforms address adequately the ways to

develop modalities and mechanisms for efficient and sustainable use of state controlled resources through equitable sharing. Isolated initiatives at the local and national levels by the government, CSOs, NGOs and the private sector may not lead to needed level of impact on the governance, reforms and development as a whole. It is also inevitable that good governance requires developed public sector management mechanisms, policies and institutions. All these at the end are prime prerequisites for sustainable human development and poverty eradication.

Reform process aimed at attaining expected level of governance should ideally involve i) creation of favourable development relationships among the key governance actors: government, civil society and the private sector; ii) identification of most effective resource use and management modality; iii) decentralisation; iv) effective support to the disadvantaged groups: the rural and urban poor, women and children, the ethnic and religious minorities.

Reforms in the context of globalisation should essentially be aimed at enhanced private sector role. This also involves collaboration among the key governance actors, individual being at the centre and the prime beneficiary. Effective service delivery to the people can only be attained through the creation of efficient, accountable and transparent resource management system at all levels, which virtually is the essence of good governance.

Efficient financial and human resource management is an integral part of reforms. This involves increased transparency and accountability in the budgeting system, decentralisation of tax collection and fund management. At the same time, it is true that only a properly skilled stock of human resources can ensure proper management of resources. The reforms should seriously address this issue.

Decentralisation is one of the most important cornerstones of reforms. This ensures more participation of the disadvantaged people in the management and planning in the designing of their own programmes and their monitoring.

It is important that the governments have the ability and capacity to absorb and make use of the new trends that the new international process produces. The governments should try to benefit from new trends rather than resisting them. Those involve, among others, intensification of international network; emergence of multiple options resulting in increased responsiveness to market conditions; shift to consumer-driven market decisions; shift to market driven economic decision-making; enhanced rural-urban migration; and shift to high technology industries.

Government's initiatives in taking advantage of above trends should include coordination of GO-NGO-CSO-Private Sector activities; formulation and implementation of pro-market and pro-consumer policies; and ensuring people's participation in the

development process, including planning.

The reform processes and initiatives in this country have quite long history and insignificant results. Over the last 20 years various reform initiatives have been undertaken, several projects implemented and reports and recommendations elaborating the ways, modalities, aspects and dimensions of the problem produced. Paradoxically, none of the initiatives produced expected results due to various reasons: lack of political commitment, lack of political and policy environment conducive to reforms, bureaucratic resistance, etc. The absence of constitutional method of political changes, i.e. lack of democracy and people's participation in the state affairs were the main causes of the lack of political commitment of the governments that came to power through non-constitutional means. This is indicative of the fact that political commitment for reforms requires an accountable political system in place. Enhanced democratisation during the last 14 years has impacted positively on the reform process. Constitutional changes of the political leadership have 'to some extent' created an accountable political system in the country, but the country has to go a long way to fulfil the aspirations of the people.

The second major obstacle to reforms, the bureaucratic resistance, however, continues to remain. This results in non-implementation of most of the extremely valid reform recommendations produced by different actors. Many of those recommended

tions concern important macro and micro level reforms.

Apparently, the politicians of the country are now more than ever convinced about the necessity of reform as a vehicle for increased accountability, transparency, efficiency and participation in the public administration, improved service delivery and decreased wastage of public resources. However, the translation of desire of the political leadership into practice is lacking due to various reasons. The reasons are linked to the lack of political consensus on national issues, lack of strong partnership and wise decision-making in the political arena needed for attaining valuable strategic pro-people and pro-poor actions required for poverty alleviation and growth rate.

On the other hand, as reforms, in some way or other, involve rationalisation of the size of civil administration, curtailing certain powers and benefits of the bureaucrats and the staff, reduced wastage in the public sector, directly concern vested interests of a considerable section of the government employees, instigate strong resistances among the affected bureaucrats and such resistances will continue to remain as long as the political leadership continues to lack enormous strength to withstand that incredible power and undertake drastic reform measures, supported by the mass. This requires, on the one hand, creation of a strong democratic system, building and strengthening of democratic and rights based institutions, such as the

electoral system, a functional parliament and strong human rights institutions, independent judiciary, etc. On the other hand, vigorous social mobilisation in favour of the reform process, involving all key actors, the CSOs, NGOs, private sector, social elites, and the general people is needed for expected results. The ruling political leadership is in a position to undertake drastic reform measures provided those are actively supported by all segments of the population.

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IN MEMORIAM

Dr A M M Khan
A dedicated social worker and our beloved chacha

M. AZIZUL JALIL writes from Washington



DR A M M Khan went into a coma a few days ago from which he never came back. He passed away on November 7. He was chacha to many of us, men and women, who did our M.A. from the Dhaka University in the years 1952-55. It included Iftiqaq, Obaidullah, Rabbani, Syeduzzaman, Kazi Fazlur Rahman, Mahtab, Imam, Habib, Sufia, Kulsum Huda, Hosne Ara Karim and many others.

To me he was an elder friend who would give me wise counsel and friendly suggestions on almost all matters. More than that, he would be my constant companion, going together to visit friends (common or uncommon), to the Dhaka Club and even to the shops and restaurants. He visited me and stayed with me in Rawalpindi and Washington many times. Once I took him to Manshera and Abbottabad by car. He was always an enjoyable company. My entire family knew him well and in fact, he became a family member, sharing our enjoyments as well as our sorrows.

He had a deep interest in the country's politics, though he never indulged in it. A joke in chacha's circle of admirers was his oft quoted remark one late night in our common Brixton Lane (London) house in 1955 "tomra amare montri kora na". I believe chacha meant it and most probably passed a chance or two to become a minister. Such was his disdain for some of our politicians who go to power or cling to it only for their self-interest. Another funny story was about the competition amongst us to get his permission to write his "autobiography". We used to tease him constantly but he gave us indulgence and never once took any offence. He was about nine years older than most of us - yet he was not only our chacha, he was often our best friend and well-wisher.

Dr. Khan did his Ph.D from the renowned London School of Pharmacy in 1956 and joined an international pharmaceutical company. In the early sixties, he became the founder/ technical director and later partner of the Pharmapak in East Pakistan (later Pharmades in Bangladesh). Later he started and ran with the assistance of his children and sons-in-law many enterprises including garments, battery, electric metres etc. He was successful in most of these efforts. He held offices in many of these industry

associations and would go as far as Rawalpindi to lobby for their cause.

Dr. Khan was a dedicated social worker. He was associated with and held offices in the Rotary Club, Heart Foundation, Bangladesh Medical Hospital, Daibetic Association, Cancer association and a host of other social service organisations. He made me a life member of one of these. In his own area in Testuri Bazar, he was known as a self-less community leader and highly respected. For all these causes, he would spend his time and energy to get things done whether it was in the government ministries or any other office.

Chacha was a straightforward, and honest man. Even though highly accomplished and successful, he remained ever so humble and modest.

Dr. Khan remained throughout in his Testuri Bazar house near the farm gate. His family would often urge him to move to better quarters in Banani or Gulshan (places actually within his reach). They said that they started life in farmgate without any change, whereas one of their friends had meanwhile moved to the Washington Watergate. Dr. Khan would always decline to do so by pointing out "I do not have to join that race".

Two days before his massive stroke, he called me from Dhaka to enquire about my upcoming Dhaka visit starting from December 1 and to invite me to his granddaughter's engagement party on December 23. He also promised to visit me in Washington in May 2005 when he planned to attend his granddaughter's graduation in Boston. Alas, these ceremonies would be deprived of the attendance of such a wonderful and loving soul. As for me, I would be miserable without chacha's warm and affectionate company in Dhaka.

Face to face with people's representatives



Partial view of a 'Face to face' meeting at Demra union of Pabna district

MD. ABDUL KADER

Union Parishad (UP) is an ancient and traditional institution in Bangladesh. It is known as the nearest government to the common people. Poor people of the rural areas depend on the institution very much. But, a question might be raised now on the activeness and accountability of the institution. The system to elect chairman and member of UP through direct vote was introduced in 1960. That trend still prevails. Seven UP elections have taken place after the independence of Bangladesh. Last UP election took place during December 2002-March 2003. Before this, UP elections took place in 1973, 1977, 1984, 1988, 1993 and 1997. But women in Bangladesh achieved the right to be elected directly for reserved seats in UP only in 1997. Similarly, women have been elected as people's representatives for the reserved seats in the last election as well.

Though UP is the nearest government to the poor, but many suspect UP is an ineffective institution. There is little dynamism in its activities as it is also sunk in the sea of prevailing corruption and is confined in the orders of the central government. Strong and effective local government is now a demand of the mass people for the sake of democracy, poverty alleviation and empowerment of the poor. Though all governments after the independence have given emphasis to strengthening of local government, but unfortunately almost no realistic and effective steps have been taken so far in this regard. UP as a local government institution has many roles to play. But it remains still in the dark for the common people. They seldom can know how much are they being deprived of their rights as this institution remains just not accountable to them.

Samata, a national development organisation engaged in land reform activities, has been working since 2002 in Pabna and Rajbari districts to make the institution of UP strong and accountable. One of its activities is 'Face to Face Meeting with People's Representatives'. Already this lively programme has been able to create excitement among all concerned and has been appreciated too by sections of administration. One of the chief characteristics of this programme is that common people directly ask chairmen and members different questions relating to their problems and demands, and elected chairmen and members, under the situation have to respond to their queries. So far this programme has been organised in 19 UPs in 7 Upazilas of Pabna and Rajbari districts.

Elected representatives have heard the problems of their voters and simultaneously they have also expressed their limitations. Focal

point in this context is that poor people's right to express their opinion has been established through this programme. There are lots of deprived people who had never got a chance to see their chairmen before. It has happened many times that, UP chairmen have been embarrassed as they failed to give befitting answer to the questions raised by such people.

Participation of landless rural women is another brighter feature of this programme. A great number of them have participated beside the male participants. They also asked questions without any reservation and sought replies.

Through this exceptional programme, transparency and accountability of different UPs in Pabna and Rajbari districts have been ensured to some extent. Because, people have questioned on different burning issues like, why VGE VGD cards were not properly distributed, why corruption was alleged in road construction, why steps had not been taken to distribute khas land and on many other vexing issues. Samata hopes this face to face dialoguing between UP representatives and their voters will be replicated all over the country. Then the common people will enjoy much more opportunities to know about the roles and responsibilities of UP representatives and about their own rights.

Md. Abdul Kader is Executive Director of Samata

Changing scenario during Ramadan and Eid

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

COME Ramadan the unscrupulous traders in collusion with toll collectors and some corrupt government agencies would artificially jack up market prices of essentials of daily use particularly food items beyond any conceivable limits. Routinely some very high profile meetings of various committees are held with the explicit promise that this Ramadan "some stringent measures will be taken to control prices." After more meetings and considerable invective exchanged between committee members the matter is put at rest. Ask a trader he would in a most complacent voice tell you that "it is due to the Ramadan". You better not argue with him, he would soon point fingers at several others who without any hesitation continue to make the required purchases at enhanced prices. Incidentally these buyers did the same last year and year before last and before that. For these buyers prices are of no real concern.

Half way through the Ramadan

items, all imported, were selling at prices ranging between Tk 600 and 10,000. I asked the salesman about the state of business. He promptly responded by saying "business was good." Also out in these shopping malls you readily come across buyers belonging to the growing class of "newly rich". With this class of people you can readily associate a kind of arrogance and aggressiveness, which you seldom come across with others less fortunate.

There is yet another class of wealthy people who have made it into a routine to visit neighbouring foreign cities like Bangkok, Calcutta or Kathmandu or even domestic Cox's Bazaar to spend the few days of Eid vacation away from the humdrum of the chaotic city life.

As the Eid draws near, you also come across all kinds of city dwellers mostly belonging to the middle, lower middle class and the fixed income groups getting ready to go to their village homes by bus, trains and launches. Here also too many high profiled and serious "inter ministerial committee meetings are held

year after year and all kinds of promises made to streamline the sale of tickets and regularise the various fares charged for different routes. Yet the situation never improves for better.

A similar dismal scenario also emerges during the Ramadan and Eid season on the streets of the capital. The perennial traffic jam becomes twice more critical with the "sudden" crowding of rickshaws on the main city streets surrounding, particularly, the shopping centers. The DCCG as usual comes up with very strong promises to clear the streets of