

Aroj Ali Matubbor, the rustic rebel

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

WITH his scraggly beard, the dark, gaunt man, clad in rumpled punjabi and pyjama, a fountain pen sticking out of his breast pocket, could very well be a teacher of Islamic education at the village *maktab*; his roughly hewn, sunburnt face, would place him in any number of other rural callings. But Aroj Ali Matubbor, primarily a farmer who had done stints as a land surveyor, was no ordinary villager. Behind that rustic exterior lay an extraordinary intellect and a remarkable human being. He is barely known in his own country, except among a handful of liberal intellectuals. This is unsurprising in a society that is not overly fond of people who ask awkward questions on matters of faith — matters thought to have been settled for eternity.

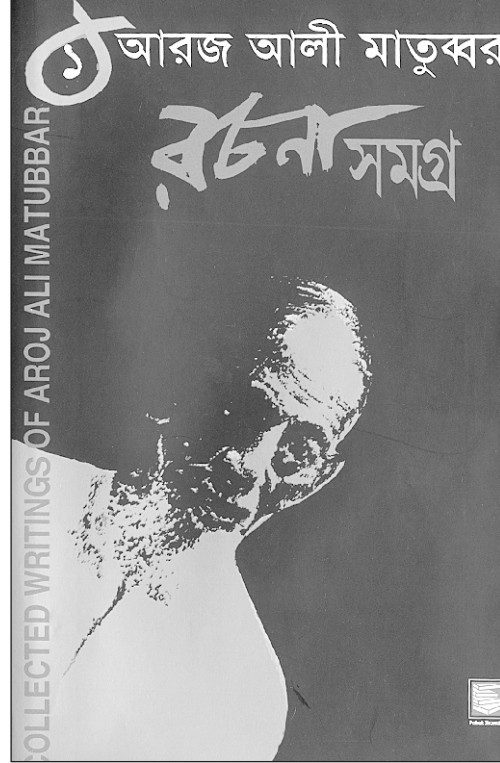
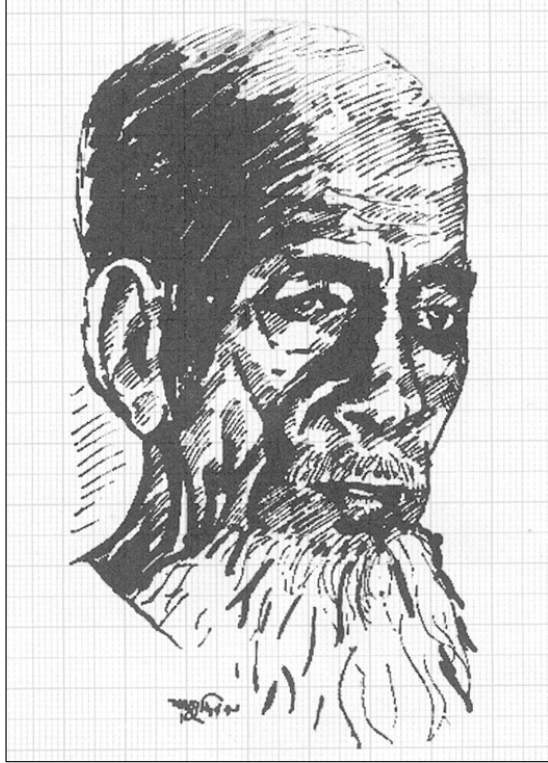
The man probably loved nothing better than to ask why. It is unclear where he got that often discomfiting habit from, but a tragedy in his adolescent years must have turned him on. His mother had died and an all too human desire to preserve her memory led him to have her photographed before the burial. This, the religious leaders of the village community declared, was a great sin for which there was no requital. They therefore refused to perform the *janaza*, the obligatory congregational prayer for a Muslim deceased before his or her burial. Why? Aroj Ali asked. Why should his mother, a devout Muslim, be deprived of the last prayer that was her due? His entreaties were in vain. His mother was buried without the *janaza*.

In other circumstances and places, the matter would probably have been resolved and his mother would have been given the customary *janaza*. But the incident was real enough for Aroj Ali. And he soon realised what happened to his dead mother was only a small reflection of the irrationality and obscurantism that pervaded the society. The custodians of religion in his native village never answered the agonising question he asked. That did not prevent him from asking some more questions. In fact, his propensity to inquire grew and spread. As he put it, "For eighteen long years after my mother's death, I strove hard to melt down certain blind religious beliefs with the heat of philosophy, poured the contents in the mould of science, and came up with a list of questions". These questions were later elaborated in his "In the Quest for Truth", his most important little work. His questioning was often met with hostility: he was summoned before a court of law, the publication of his book was prohibited, and he was threatened with physical violence. But, the rebel that he was, he went on asking questions.

The range of his inquiry was large. On the other hand, the man never seemed to worry about finessing the formulation of his inquiry, or of its results, with the intellectual sophistication that comes naturally to philosophers of the same genre as his — the rationalist-humanists of the west. He was more interested in spelling out some truths, including home truths, and cared little about a label for his thinking. And you could smell rural Bangladesh, his home and audience, in much of what he expounded. Consider the metaphor he uses: "Just as a hungry ox tears his tether and gorges himself on crops growing on other's land, so does the mind of man transcend the bounds of religion and rush to philosophy and science to relieve its hunger." One only wishes the Bengali propensity to reason and inquire were as strong as that.

The themes that his critical mind probes range from simple religious beliefs to biology and the theory of evolution, to notions of creationism, to physics and astronomy. It is,

Aroj Ali proved by his art of living that it is quite possible for an individual to live an honest life without necessarily having to bind oneself with the trappings of ritual dominated faith. He was a totally honest man as well as a self-made one. His dealings with fellow human beings in financial matters were above reproach. But his honesty extended well beyond that. In the final analysis, I believe his honesty lay in the utter congruity between how he reasoned and how he lived. In the matter of his own death too he strove for a rare consistency of reasoning. Aroj Ali Matubbor died nineteen years ago this month.



however, religious concepts and beliefs that occupies him the most. Is it true, for example, he asks, that the land as well as human effort in Bangladesh is less fruitful today than before — there was less *barkaf*, in parlance of ignorance — because people do not any longer have religious faith, or *iman*? If the answer is yes, as many 'God-fearing' people believe it is, one needs to ask why then nations who have no *iman* at all, the infidels, are far more productive? Or, if it is true that a particular angel of God has been assigned to control the wind and the rain, why then do cyclones ravage Chittagong, mostly inhabited by Muslims? Had Aroj Ali lived today he would have asked how was it that the recent Asian tsunami wreaked havoc mostly in the Aceh province of Indonesia, which was almost entirely Muslim, and home to resurgent Islamic fundamentalism?

These are hardly teasers. They deserve serious consideration because they touch what Aroj Ali considers the heart of the matter: these beliefs and notions fall the test of reason. He does not flinch from extending the test to beliefs far more fundamental to religion. These include questions as diverse as the nature of being of God; what distinguishes Him from humans; the nature of His will; His kindness; Heaven and Hell; predestination; the duties of the angels; the ascent (the *meraj*) of the Prophet Muhammad (SM) to the high heavens to meet with God; the supposed virtue in slaughter of animals; and a host of other ideas. It appears that there are no sacred cows in his scheme of thinking.

He shows how orthodox thinking falls short of a good answer to the questions he raises; it is also ridden with contradictions. To pick a few examples: in Islam, as in other religions, God has no shape or form. The non-corporeal Nature God makes it impossible for Him to sit or stand in the sense in which we use those words. Yet, in the holy books He is sometimes depicted as one sitting on his throne. How is one to reconcile the two irreconcilables? I am not sure whether Aroj Ali was aware of the following riposte to that question

by Malik Ibn Anas, founder of the Maliki school of Islamic thought: "The sitting [God's] is well-known, its modality is unknown, belief in it is obligatory and questioning it is a heresy". But he was well aware of the broad argument, which has been repeated many times, and which of course has nothing to do with reason. Similarly, he asks, if God is omnipresent, why was it necessary for the Prophet to ascend the high heavens to meet with Him?

The critical questions that Aroj Ali often raises on certain facets of religion are not meant to mock or "hurt the religious sentiments of pious Muslims", the kind of allegation that has largely been responsible for a lack of critical thinking on religion. He is only calling for honest answers to what he considers legitimate questions. He also takes a critical view of received wisdom in other religions, making forays into the tale of Bhagwan Indra, the Ramayan tale of the struggle between Rama and Ravana, where he unreservedly sides with the latter, and the mythology of gods in various religions. And he examines issues picked from religious beliefs with the same instrument of logic and reason as when he discusses what causes tides or lightning and thunder, always juxtaposing the scientific reasons behind natural phenomena and popular notions.

Neither does his critical examination of religious beliefs distract him from the social ills of his time. His brief discussion on *hila* marriage brings out the innate social injustice of the system that is weighed heavily against women. His discussions on baseless popular religious notions are often motivated by an urge to rid society of superstitions that have hindered social and economic progress.

Born in a remote village of Barisal to a poor farming family, Aroj Ali had no formal education. A self-taught man, he bought books whenever he could and begged and borrowed them when he could not. The spirit of inquiry led him to read everything he could lay his hands on. A tremendous thirst for knowledge drove him, and

that too in a society where book learning is a privilege of a few, and hankering after the truth is limited to fewer still. It was therefore a fitting that he donated just about all he owned at the end of his life to build a public library in his village. Characteristically, he declared: "In my view, a library is far superior to a *mandir*, a mosque or a church".

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In the matter of his own death too he strove for a rare consistency of reasoning. The thought of death rarely fails to concentrate the mind. Its approach would also enfeeble the thinking in the most rational of individuals. Not so with Aroj Ali. He donated his corpse to Barisal Medical College. He also gave his reasoning, which was primarily that the body would be useful to the college as a teaching institution, while, in any case, it was unlikely to receive much respect from the religious establishment, if it were to be buried.

Aroj Ali Matubbor died nineteen years ago this month. Sadly, the forces of obscurantism that he was so ready to battle, have only gained in strength in our society over these many years. In his last will and testament there was a small wish: that his death anniversary be commemorated, humbly, with expenses met from the tiny trust fund he had set up. We ourselves do not need to be humble about it.

[Notes: The quotations from Aroj Ali are from *Collected Works of Aroj Ali Matubbor*, (in Bengali), Pathok Shomabesh, 1993. Translations are mine. The Malik quote is from Majid Fakhr, *Averroes: Ibn Rusd, His Life, Works and Influence*, Oneworld, Oxford, 2001.]

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Two bays, one world: Struggle for life

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IN a wintry November morning last year, the spectacularly ornate Benjamin Franklin Room of the U.S. State Department in Washington DC was abuzz with the excitement and chattering of youngsters. As a Bangladeshi, I found it quite surreal to hear from a group of American middle school students about, yes, the ecology, environment, and culture of a quintessentially Bengali frontier: the Bay of Bengal (hereafter BoB). The State Department hosted a colorful reception for the students who gathered to celebrate the completion of what the Department evocatively called the "Two Bays, One World" (hereafter TBOW) project. Sponsored by the State Department's Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, in fall 2004, the TBOW project provided middle school students from the U.S. capital region and the William Carey International School in Chittagong with a multi-cultural educational forum to compare and contrast Maryland's Chesapeake Bay and the BoB.

In this intriguing pilot project juxtaposing two important water bodies on opposite sides of the globe, middle school students from two disparate cultural regions were asked to see beyond received knowledge that often fails to underscore how far-flung geographies and their peoples reveal common human traits or, conversely, what environmental, social, and economic issues make them unique. The project was designed to foster collaboration and increase cross-cultural understanding between the youth of the United States and the youth of Bangladesh — an effort especially poignant in a current ideologically divisive world.

The project proposed that the young generations must be made aware of the need to conserve the earth's geographic riches. John Turner, Assistant Secretary of State for Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, summed up the objective eloquently: "It is our duty as stewards of this precious blue orb entrusted to our care to give young people — the Earth's future caretakers — the tools necessary to ensure its conservation for generations to come." A collective consciousness of the interconnectivity of geographies and peoples across the globe was the *locus classicus* in the speech of the ceremony's chief guest: former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, a forceful man with a disarming sense of humor. Quoting Rabindranath Tagore, Secretary Armitage presented a compelling idea to the local as well as Chittagong students who were tuning in via satellite (although it was well past their bedtime): "Tagore once wrote, 'The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world.' Indeed, just as soil erosion in the Himalayas can cause flooding in the Port of Chittagong, or runoff from a stream in New York can pollute the waters of the Potomac, we are all part of a great human watershed where what happens on distant shores can have a direct effect on our daily lives here at home." Armitage's Tagorian viewpoint encapsulated the mission of the TBOW.

Alongside its core components — geographic and cultural studies carried on by middle school students and their teachers — the TBOW invited a number of guest speakers to reflect upon various aspects of the Chesapeake Bay and the BoB. My good friend Adham Loufi at the State Department, one of the organisers of the TBOW project, invited me to speak on the coastal life of Bangladesh. Would

not it be illuminating, I thought, to explore how the harsh, austere, and often anonymous life in the coastal *chars* plays out in the Bengali imagination?

The BoB is literally our frontier. The meeting point of the Bay and the complex river system of Bangladesh, the vast estuary comprises the *chars*: a maze-like network of silt islands or landmasses. Home to over five million of predominantly poor, migrant, and landless people

lates between danger and faint hope. For the disenfranchised and the downtrodden, the *char* is a utopia, where they can at least eke out a minimal existence by dueling with nature and destiny. There are few opportunities for employment, yet the resilient people of the *chars* survive by growing crops, raising cattle, and harvesting fish. Within the bureaucratic alleys of governmental policies and in the mainstream media, the *chars* have

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of Bangladesh, these low-lying, barely-above-the-water *chars* have no lasting boundaries, no sense of permanence, and are epitomised by an extreme set of conflicting conditions.

On the one hand, the *chars* are highly vulnerable to sudden and forceful tidal surges as well as erosion and loss of land, which make life in the *chars* both hazardous and insecure. People endure extremely inhospitable environments. Uncertainty perpetually hovers over their meager lives. Lacking energy and communication infrastructure, health and government services, employment oppor-

consistently been perceived in terms of their natural and social vulnerability. Ironically, what has often remained silent in the official narrative is the *char*-life as a heroic tale of human endurance and struggle. In my presentation at the State Department, I chose to highlight this aspect of the *chars*.

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The phenomenal *chars*



tunities, and economic prosperity, the *chars* are both literally and socially the fringe of the country: the *terra incognita* of the marginal people. As if the extreme hostility of the land is not enough, the *char*-dwellers often find themselves at the mercy of the *jotdars* — greedy, brutal land-grabbers — and their armed cadres, the *lathial bahini*.

Yet, on the other hand, the *chars* are also an opportunity for the landless mass that simply has no other alternative but to embrace a peripheral life that constantly oscil-

lating deltaic land's popular imagination. These figures recur across the spectrum of Bengali literature, painting, poetry, drama, songs, and films.

The legendary Bangladeshi painter, S.M. Sultan, has poignantly captured the essence of the mythical peasant, the original settler of the *chars*, who cultivates the land and rises against all forms of social injustice and poverty. While the peasants in the *chars* are in reality the epitome of impoverishment and skeletal victims of *jotdars*, Sultan's

peasants are vigorously masculine and resolute in the face of destitution. For him the muscular physique represented the visual crystallisation of the peasant's superheric struggle against natural calamity, economic hardship, and social deprivation. The Bengali nationalism has political roots in the mythical peasant. He was a nineteenth-century protagonist in the fight against the British colonial rule: When the colonial traders forced him to grow the coveted indigo-producing plant instead of the rice paddy, he waged an unrelenting fight against the alien masters until 1859 when the British government ratified a legislation in favour of the protection of peasants from enforced cultivation of the blue plant.

The intertwining saga of the coastal belt, riverbanks, and the struggling rural populace is fundamental to understanding the Bengali vernacular. Bengali classic novels and films are, in one way or another, the stories of the water, rivers, boats, and the people who survive the wrath of nature and social injustice that afflicts their lives. Ritwik Ghatak's *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* (1973) chronicles the classic survival story of the people of the riverbank. Drawing upon the lives of the fishermen, their dreams, aspirations, and agonies, Ghatak painted a penetrating portrait of the Bengali psyche itself. The winner of Bangladesh's first national film award, *Lathial* (1975) depicts the archetypal fight between the *mohajons*, *jotdars*, and *morols* on the one side and the landless peasants, the victims of an oppressive feudal nexus, on the other. *Lathial* offered an insight into the evil design of the landlords to cleanse the *chars* of the hungry, oppressed people who desperately cling on to their last refuge — the land itself. Based on a novel by Shohidullah Kaiser and directed by Abdullah al-Mamun, *Sareng Bou* (1978) was another epic film that captured the quintessential role of the water, boat, and people in collectively forming the archetypal Bengali narrative.

Life on the coastal belt or the riverbank is not the whole story of Bangladesh since in the past three decades or so the country has witnessed rapid urbanisation. Far away from the country's political and social centres, the *chars* are a seldom understood periphery where the downtrodden's sagas of frontier spirit continue to unfold — stories that rarely impact national politics. Yet, the *char*-dwellers' concomitant struggle against nature's vengeance and predatory *jotdars* defines the notion of *shongram* that has long inspired the Bengali literary mind.

It is exceedingly difficult to convey the Bengali sense of *shongram* in English. The word embodies a unique sense of resilience of the Bengali people in their fight to survive. Each nation has its own imagination of *shongram*. Ma Joad, John Steinbeck's protagonist in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), comes subliminally close to defining *shongram* in American history. The embodiment of the deep anxiety caused by poverty, unemployment, and social alienation in 1930s Depression-stricken America, Ma Joad insisted, "We're the people that live. Can't nobody wipe us out... We'll go on forever." Perhaps it is the notion of *shongram* — expressed in various hues, tones, and shades across nations and languages — that makes the world One World. I did not anticipate that my lecture for the TBOW project would eventually allow me to inquire into my own culture from the multi-focal vision of a global citizen.

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Lebanon: In search of a future

FATIMA CHOWDHURY

THE political uncertainty in Lebanon rests like an ominous cloud over the volatile region of the Middle East. It had seemed that the memories of a brutal civil war that ended almost 15 years ago had almost receded into the background of a more stable Lebanon. But the recent assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafik al-Hariri in Beirut has now set off a chain reaction of events that threaten to destabilize Lebanon to the brink of another political chaos.

The ruling pro-Syrian Lebanese government taking into consideration the changing political mood of the nation had resigned with new parliamentary elections being slated for May 2005. It had been followed by the Syrian government's announcement to redeploy its troops to the eastern Bekaa valley. An initiative that was taken after almost three weeks of opposition protest urging the departure of Syrian troops from Lebanon and the growing US and international pressure on Damascus to do so. It is strongly believed that Syria is responsible for the death of Mr. Rafik al-Hariri although there is no evidence to substantiate the assumption and Damascus has continued to deny any involvement. But there is an air of unease as anti-Syrian sentiments increase in contradiction to the hundreds of thousands of people that turned out

for a pro-Syrian rally organized by the Hezbollah, a Shia militia group with considerable political and military influence in Southern Lebanon. As the drama of conflicting political ideology unfolds, the present is balanced between the shadow of a turbulent past it cannot leave behind and the aspiration for a promising future it must embrace. But every conflict has a history that has defined its present and influenced its future.

In context to the Lebanese conflict, Syria is a crucial part of that history. The Syrians have always looked upon Lebanon as part of "Greater Syria" that had been divided by the French colonial rulers and having strategic significance to defend the vulnerable western border. In 1976, Syria became militarily involved in the Lebanese civil conflict. The initial intervention was on the request of Lebanese Christian leaders concerned with Palestinian presence that threatened to change the equations in the conflict. In 1978 and again in 1982, Israel along with its Maronite Christian allies invaded Lebanon. The Syrian forces soon returned as peacekeepers under the auspices of the Arab League to restrict the growing Israeli influence. In 1987, Syrian forces had entered Beirut to end the fighting between Shia and Sunni Muslim factions. By 1990, Syrian forces had not only brought the Lebanese civil war to an end but

also maintained the peace. However, according to the Taif Accord signed at the end of the conflict in 1989, Syrian troops were to make a gradual withdrawal from Beirut to the Bekaa Valley and the mountains of central Lebanon by 1992. This would then lead up to a total withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanese territory. But the accord was not literally followed through and when Israel withdrew its forces from

presence in Lebanon is far from desirable but nonetheless must be dealt with realistically. Lebanon is a complex nation fiercely divided on sectarian lines and traditional clan loyalties. It has already gone through a devastating civil war in which Syria has played a prominent role to bring about peace and stability. The Syrians have over a period of time developed an influence that cannot be simply discarded by an immediate

and alliances are created to deal with the changing times. It is also most likely that Syria will continue to be an important element in Lebanon although its role will be redefined as the political, social and economic context begins to change. However, Lebanon's quest for sovereignty and independence must be from within rather than imposed from outside.

The idea of democracy that the US has been constantly drumming

ideology one can encourage nations to adopt, but not impose upon them, for that itself defies the principles of a true democracy.

Lebanon has to make the political transition to freedom and sovereignty in its own terms and pace and within the prevalent historical, social and political context in place. The US belief that "freedom will prevail" as soon as the Syrians withdraw their troops is rather an idealistic view of global politics and overlooks the political implications of a power struggle. It is a serious misconception that a Syrian withdrawal will lead to a smooth transition towards democracy. The first step would have been taken but it is still a long road to be travelled. The US needs to be more practical and pragmatic in its approach instead of being half-hearted and partisan, in larger interest of Lebanon and world peace.

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Israelis and Palestinians, which are often derailed due to lack of participation of groups with different ideological approach to peace. Therefore, efforts will have to be made to bury political differences and comprises accepted for the greater good of the country.

Lebanon's President has once again invited the pro-Syrian former Prime Minister Omar Karami to form a new government. The move comes a few days after Mr. Karami had resigned in the midst of anti-Syrian protests. The demonstrations have ended but not the aspirations for Lebanese sovereignty and freedom. As Syria begins the historic withdrawal of about 1/3 of its troops, Lebanon has awakened once again to an uncertain future. It is now to be seen if Lebanon can reconcile to the differences of the past by uniting to confront the turbulence of the present, carving a new destiny defined by its own aspirations to be the stable and progressive nation it was truly meant to be. Lebanon has taken a step forward where there is no turning back but to move with assured steps to a future it holds the power to define.

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Southern Lebanon in 2000, the Syrian were being pushed to do the same. The continuing presence of Syrian troops and the clear influence it exerted had begun to cause resentment within Lebanon. By 2001, Syria in an effort to ease the growing tension withdrew some of its troops from Beirut. In September 2004, a UN resolution was passed calling for withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon and Syria responded with a further withdrawal.

In the present scenario, the Syrians have already begun to withdraw their troops from southern and northern Lebanon towards the eastern Bekaa valley. The US has described this withdrawal as a "half-

intervene in the matter. Many in the Middle East see the US as not only an occupying force in Iraq but also a nation biased by its own close alliance with Israel. In such circumstances, the US intervention is bound to be seen as hypocritical and a case of the pot calling the kettle black. The international community on the other hand, reprimands Syria for failing to adhere to international law and UN resolutions but remains silent to similar violations by countries such as Turkey and Israel. This kind of inconsistent response undermines the credibility of the international community of a fair play to justly intervene in a conflict and ensure that justice and peace prevail. There is no doubt that the Syrian

troop withdrawal. The process has to be gradual and systematic, whereby the Lebanese security forces have the adequate space and time to establish control. This is another American folly of short-sightedness, unless proved otherwise in the forthcoming election by means beyond doubt.

At present, there seems to be no strategy in place to deal with the unexpected implication of a Syrian withdrawal and the probability of a power vacuum. Lebanon is far from united as the conflicting demonstrations have proven. Although many would like to believe otherwise, the transition to a sovereign Lebanon will be far from easy as new structures

up and loudly reiterating in the Middle East is also resonated in Lebanon. The concept of democracy is best illustrated by the celebrated words of Abraham Lincoln: "Democracy is the government of the people, by the people, for the people." However, democracy is a complicated political ideology filled with contradictions, myths and complexities. It is not just about elections but maintaining a fragile balance between good governance, rationality and the aspirations of the people. There is no doubt that democracy remains the most stable and desirable form of government and in late Sir Winston Churchill's words A tool of great power.... However, it is a political