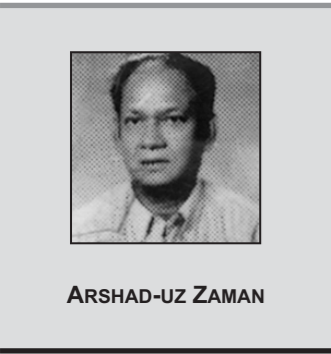


Domino syndrome in Central Asia



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

WITH the latest turmoil in the Central Asian Republic of Kyrgyzstan, it would appear that the domino effect in Central Asia is unstoppable. The remarkable fact is that Russia, which is the main player, appears more like a spectator than a player.

Kyrgyzstan is one of the poorest entities of the former Soviet Union, which collapsed sensationally in the early nineties. More than half a dozen states, known as Turkic states, because of linguistic and racial affinity with Turkey, emerged. In the beginning Turkey, not only because of historical, ethnic and geographical links, made a bold effort to draw those newly independent countries closer. A new department was set up with the Foreign Ministry in Ankara and Turkey entered virtually in foreign aid field. It was in the construction field that she made a great headway and Turkish entrepreneurs have made large foray inside Russia and the former Soviet Union. In Istanbul Turkey set up the Black Sea Economic Council and members around the Black Sea and near neighbours like Greece joined the organisation.

Russia, whose territory these were until 1990, could not remain indifferent to these developments. She set up a more tightly knit organisation with Moscow as the headquarters and it embraced all the former states of the Soviet Union. The truth is that the collapse of the Soviet Union came so suddenly that most of the states were quite unprepared for it. I remember that Bangladesh sent a

THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

Changes have taken place there in the recent past and the hand of the US is clearly visible. The changes in Kyrgyzstan are so strange that they border on the farcical. Here the President Askar Akayev is accused of manipulating some elections and some people take to the streets and President Akayev, who held power for more than a decade, vanishes from the scene. We are living in a chaotic world. There is nothing in sight that something is going to emerge to steady the globe. We can only keep our fingers crossed.

delegation to the former Soviet Union immediately after its collapse and I as a member of that delegation visited nearly all the states. I recall that the Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan, who loved to play banjo, openly telling us that they did not need to be independent! In fact most of those far flung areas were blissfully ignorant of the events taking place in Moscow. In Moscow itself a pall of gloom had descended by the rapid unfolding of events and from the present developments it would seem that gloom has not lifted.

The United States, which had little interest in the area since it was part of the Soviet Union, has had a big change in her foreign policy since the events of Afghanistan. The US has become a Central Asian player and every time a new

delegation takes place in any of the Republics, the name of the US automatically figures. We have seen this in the recent past in Ukraine. Indeed the importance of this big country for Russia can hardly be over estimated. Yet changes have taken place there in the recent past and the hand of the US is clearly visible. The changes in Kyrgyzstan are so strange that they border on the farcical. Here the President Askar Akayev is accused of manipulating some elections and some people take to the streets and President Akayev, who held power for more than a decade, vanishes from the scene. It would also appear that there is no taker for the White House!

The collapse of the Soviet Union was a major event of the last century as the birth of Marxism-Leninism was in the beginning of

the century. Marxism was a bold experiment in carrying the message of equality throughout the world. It crashed out and has created a yawning vacuum. The lone superpower the US by the event of 9/11 has seen losing her superpower status. For the first time in her two century-old history the US was attacked from within on her own soil and fortress America crumbled.

The world has become a far more dangerous place because the bipolar balance has vanished. We are living in a chaotic world. There is nothing in sight that something is going to emerge to steady the globe. We can only keep our fingers crossed.

Arshad-uz-Zaman is a former Ambassador.



President Askar Akayev: Vanished from the scene



Kurmanbek Bakiyev: Acting President

English for all?

ALAM KHORSHED

I have returned back to the country of my origin a few months ago, putting an end to a rather long expatriate life in the Americas. Everyone back there warned me of a huge culture shock and a definite disillusionment within the shortest possible time. Fortunately none of the above could get the better of me yet as I was very much aware of the ground reality of Bangladesh and never ever dwelled in any kind of Utopia. However one thing caught my attention early on: that is the miserable condition of our current education system, which seems to be in complete shambles, to say the least.

As soon as I stepped out of the airport premises I was being continuously greeted with ubiquitous banners, hoardings and signboards of countless private universities, schools and colleges with fancy, Anglo-centric nomenclatures underscoring their proud allegiance to the language of our once colonizer. Curious, I soon found out that in Bangladesh, unlike any other country on the planet that I know of, three parallel education systems were in place simultaneously: Bangla medium, English medium, and the madrasa education with its emphasis on Arabic. To my utter dismay I also came to realize that in major urban areas English medium was fast outpacing the once all-pervasive Bangla medium. Everyone was proudly flaunting the marvelous monikers of their offspring's early educational institutions and was unabashedly discussing these school's astronomical fees and mandatory donations in not so discreet a manner. It seemed that the whole city was buzzing with this inescapable topic.

It is a universally accepted truth that the best education for a child is the one imparted in one's mother tongue. There is simply no substitute for it. In fact our greatest literary figure and himself a renowned educator Rabindranath Thakur unequivocally compared education through vernacular to the sacrosanct mother's milk in terms of its unsurpassable quality and value. Not only it is easier for the kids but also it makes their whole learning experience an enjoyable one. Moreover, language is not just a mere medium of instruction, it is also the

language today and mastering it can use only benefit one. However, to learn the language itself and be able to speak it is one thing, and using it as a medium of instruction, especially for the early learners, is another. In reality the majority of the students will never have to use English language to either conduct their daily life or earn a living working in Bangladesh. Why should we then burden their learning process with a rather redundant subject?

Even if we decide to do that for a greater good, then the existing

go beyond that mark and learn and use it to its full potential then he or she can easily take a comprehensive English language course in any of the accredited language institutes of the country. And if they are in short supply then we can pressurize our government to set up more of those nationally.

During my extended stay in the Occident I have come across plenty of immigrant students from China, Eastern Europe, Russia, and Latin America who had virtually zero exposure to English language prior to their arrival to the West and yet were able to master it within a year or so by simply following an extensive language course. The same is true for the numerous Bangladeshi students who went to Russia and other non-English speaking European countries for pursuing higher studies. They all had to undergo a one year intensive language course after which they were not only able to speak the language as fluently as the natives themselves, but also were fully capable of even writing their academic dissertations in that newly acquired language. This only proves my point that to learn a language one doesn't have to make that particular language his or her medium of instruction.

I hope our leaders and policy makers will realize this sooner rather than later. Otherwise we will soon be confronted with a national crisis. The general standard of our education will go down further. At the same time a whole generation will grow up without affinity and respect for their own language and culture. They will consequently indulge in the mindless imitation of the alien culture, thus causing more harm and permanent damage to our social fabric. The development and enrichment of our language itself will also be impeded because of its non or lesser use. On top of it, a tiny English speaking minority, grabbing all the lucrative jobs and positions, will be wielding their unstoppable financial and social power on the less fortunate majority.

This is indeed an ominous sign for the nation as a whole. We should therefore take all measures in order to avoid this doomsday scenario. Our first and foremost responsibility will be to establish a uniform, universal, and secular education system, with Bangla as the primary medium of instruction. We should even strive for using the vernacular as the medium of instruction for the higher education too by writing more textbooks in, and translating others into, Bangla. At no cost can we afford to disgrace the supreme sacrifice of our language martyrs by relegating Bangla to the back burner. By the same breadth we have no right to disregard the spirit of our glorious liberation war and compromise with the very founding principle of the independence: upholding our linguistic and cultural identity and autonomy.

Alam Khorshed is a freelance writer.

A momentous move to cut down smoking

DR. M. AMINUL ISLAM

VARIOUS health related programmes for the masses in Bangladesh have been widely acclaimed world over. Yet another step that will have far reaching effect on the teeming millions of the country has been taken. The Jatiya Sangsad on 14 March passed a bill imposing a ban on smoking at public places and in public transports and on advertisements of tobacco products. Health and Family Welfare Minister Khandakar Mosharraf Hossain introduced the bill titled 'Smoking and Tobacco Usage (control) Act, 2005'. Implementation of the new law will definitely curb smoking in Bangladesh and thus will have positive impact on the health and life expectancy of Bangladeshi people.

Smoking cigarettes is a severe burden on our society. It works like a double edged sword particularly for the poor. On the one hand it takes its toll on their health, on the other it diverts money away from the purchase of food and other essential items. Think about the rickshaw pullers. Their hard labour demands more calories and nutrition. Many of them are heavy smokers and buy more cigarettes and less food. They deprive themselves of nutrition and calorie and inhale poison instead. Thus they are doubly affected and fall easy prey to tuberculosis, asthma, bronchitis and broken health at an early age.

It has been proved beyond doubt that smoking cigarette is much more harmful for health than it was first thought of in the fifties of the last century. Tobacco smoke contains more than 4000 chemicals, many of which are known to be cancer-causing agents. Smoking cigarettes increases the risk of lung cancer. It may cause other types of cancer like leukemia and cancer of the kidneys, pancreas, stomach and cervix. Lung damage from smoking increases the risk of pneumonia, bronchitis and emphysema, a

disease that slowly rots the lungs. Smokers are also more susceptible to getting colds and the flu. Smoking substantially increases the risk of cardiovascular disease including stroke, heart attack, aortic aneurysms and sudden death. Smoking cigarettes increase the risk of poor blood circulation and hardening of the arteries and lowers the level of high density lipoprotein (HDL), the "good" cholesterol. Smokers are also at great risk of developing stomach ulcers. Two leading causes of blindness in older adults -- cataracts and macular generation -- are more common in

smoking seems to be a criminal act. You may hurt yourself knowingly, but you have no right to hurt others. Indirect smoke or passive smoke poses threat to the health of the nonsmokers. It is often found that insensible people puff smoke in a crowded bus or the like. They do not even have an iota of consideration for women or children around. Smokers do not pay any heed to those who even politely request them not to smoke in that environment. Not only that, we frequently hear the loud voice of defiance of the smokers. The newly introduced law will give moral courage to a

In spite of lobbying and pressure otherwise, the bold step of the government to introduce this historic law is highly commendable. We are hopeful that the law will be implemented effectively and will not be flouted or ignored. This law has given the opportunity not only to free the nation from the burden of smoking, but to set an example for other developing nations where the curse of smoking is ever increasing.

smokers. Smoking may cause complications form diabetes, wound infections and reproductive problems. Thus smoking can cause disease in nearly every organ of the body.

The new law that Dr. Mosharraf Hossain piloted through parliament bans smoking in public places and transports with provision for penalty. The category of public places include educational institutions, government, semi-government and autonomous offices, libraries, lifts, hospitals, clinics, court buildings, airports, sea and river port buildings, railway stations, bus terminals, ferries, cinema halls, covered exhibition centres, theatres, children's parks and other places designated by gazette notifications.

Prohibiting smoking in public places was long overdue. Such

sufferer to oppose such offenders.

The purpose of an advertisement is to promote a product, allure people to buy it and boost the sale. The flashy billboards, colourful ads for cigarettes in the dailies and on the television with 'Statutory Warning : Smoking is bad for health' is a mockery and hypocrisy. It entices smokers to buy more cigarettes; it allures young nonsmokers to fall in the trap of smoking. Arranging competition and making any offer of scholarship or donation to publicise tobacco products offend a sensible mind. The net result of all these is constant rise of number of smokers and increase of consumption of cigarettes in the society. According to the new law, putting up billboards and printing leaflets and handbills or any other documents, including

films and videotapes containing advertisement of tobacco are banned. This new law will definitely help to curb smoking in Bangladesh.

Along with the restriction on smoking and ban on advertisement of cigarettes, there should be an increasing awareness campaign against smoking. Let there be a culture of dislike for this multifaceted evil. Particularly let the young generation develop a distaste for the destructive habit. Habitual smokers should be motivated to quit smoking. Smokers often fear that they have smoked for so long that it is too late to derive benefit from stopping. They are wrong. It is true that the sooner in life a person quits smoking, the greater the benefit he or she will gain. However, in most cases, no matter how long or how heavily a person has smoked, quitting smoking reduces a smoker's risk of disease and increases life expectancy. Smokers who quit also avoid exposing their families to passive smoke and set a good example for their children, who are less likely to smoke if their parents do not.

In spite of lobbying and pressure otherwise, the bold step of the government to introduce this historic law is highly commendable. We are hopeful that the law will be implemented effectively and will not be flouted or ignored. We share the dream of Dr. Khandakar Mosharraf Hossain that the new law will have effect on the health and life of mass people in the whole of the country. Bangladeshis as a nation have a hunger for doing something good collectively, achieving something that will enhance their image. This law has given the opportunity not only to free the nation from the burden of smoking, but to set an example for other developing nations where the curse of smoking is ever increasing.

Dr. M. Aminul Islam Pro-Vice-Chancellor, National University

Confrontational politics
Persisting authoritarian legacy?

A B M S ZAHUR

WE see little improvement in the state of law and order despite killings of terrorists in "cross fire" by Rab. People have started saying that in dealing with the incidents of grenade and bomb blast, government is not taking "pragmatic and holistic" approach. It is rather concentrating on symptoms. It has failed to secure places of occurrences or protect physical evidence. The sincerity of the government remains doubtful till it can prove through some concrete actions such as activating the intelligence network for proper apprehension, collection of material, physical and circumstantial evidence, effective laboratory testing and expeditious investigation. Before it is too late government must realise that functions of state cannot assume a partisan character.

Confrontational politics is a positive hindrance to democratic culture. Yet government appears to be determined to resist opposition parties on the street. Hartal rallies of opposition parties are to be stopped by the anti-hartal rallies of alliance government strongly supported by law enforcing agencies. Necessity for such show of muscle power is questionable. In fact it can be argued that by launching anti-hartal processions the government party is assisting the opposition to draw sympathy of the common people because such repressive measures are publicised as government's attempt to gag people's voice to hide itself from exposition of misdeeds in almost all cases.

Despite full awareness of their limitation the opposition parties are striving hard to force the government either to announce its resignation or early national election because of deteriorating lawlessness, wide spread and blatant corruption in administration, increasing fundamentalists' militancy, declining standards of bureaucratic efficiency and performance and increase in political violence and disorder. It is said that in governing the greatest difficulty lies in enabling the government to control the governed and oblige it to control itself. Bangladesh is unable to perform the first function, much less the second. The primary problem is not liberty but the creation of a legitimate public order. People may have order without liberty but they cannot have liberty without order.

Modernising countries like Bangladesh the administration cannot avoid pressures due to change in the lives of people economically, socially and politically. Increase media exposure, increase in literacy, urbanisation give rise to enhanced aspirations which, if unsatisfied, galvanise individuals and groups into politics. Such increases in participation often result in instability and violence. In Sri Lanka the school system expanded rapidly between 1948 and 1956. Increased number of students graduating were directly related to the

electoral overthrow of the government in elections in 1956. Similarly in Korea students and unemployed graduates led to political instability in 1960s. The problem posed by the rapid expansion of primary education compelled Nigerian government to reassess its policies.

Social mobilisation increases aspirations. Though economic growth increases capacity of a society to satisfy those aspirations it can be argued at the same time that economic development itself is a destabilising process because rapid economic growth (a) disrupts traditional social groupings, (b) produces

Modernisation affects economic inequality and thus political instability in two ways. First, wealth and income are normally more unevenly distributed in poor countries. Social mobilisation increases awareness of this inequality. Second, though economic development produces a more equitable distribution of income the immediate impact of economic growth often results in increase of income inequalities. The gains of rapid economic growth are often concentrated in a few groups (as in Bangladesh) while losses are diffused among many. This results in actual increase in number of poorer people.

With more than two thirds majority in the parliament why the government always points at AL as the destroyer of all its pious wishes? Instead of confrontational politics the only option that remains open for the BNP-led alliance government is to start work in right earnest to retrieve its position to an acceptable level.

nouveaux riches who want political power and social status commensurate with their new economic position. (c) Increases geographical mobility, literacy, exposure to mass media and fall of standard of some people, (d) aggravates regional and ethnic conflicts over the distribution of investment and consumption.

Political participation assists advancement of socially motivated individual. Social frustration leads to demands on government and expansion of political participation to enforce these demands. Lack of mobility opportunities and low level of political institutionalism produces a correlation between social frustration and political instability in a modernising country like Bangladesh.

Despite loud claim by the present government of very bright prospect for foreign direct investment (FDI) it is difficult to accept it because of existing political instability and failures of the administration for the last three years. After all registration with BOI is only meaningful after the start of implementation of the projects. The attitude of the donor countries and the donor agencies toward Bangladesh appears to be very discouraging. By attempting to put all the blame on the opposition parties, particularly AL, the government is losing credibility. How the opposition can be more powerful than the governmental missions? Failure of the missions may be due to politicisation of administration. What about foreign press?

Do they rely on local source of information only? Government itself admits about the serious problem of governance.

It is an open secret that much talked about anti-corruption commission could not start working though it was set up three months back. At last the government has taken action against JMB JMB. It has been suggested by the government that AL has been responsible for postponement of 13th SAARC Summit. How can we believe that Indian political machinery can be easily influenced by a political party of another country? Why should we ignore the fact that this is not the first time that SAARC summit has been postponed. Thus such immature comments do not create good impression about the government.

With more than two thirds majority in the parliament why the government always points at AL as the destroyer of all its pious wishes? Though too late the government should wake up from its slumber and see for itself that its dilatoriness or inertia during the last three years has brought us to this stage. Instead of confrontational politics the only option that remains open for the BNP-led alliance government is to start work in right earnest to retrieve its position to an acceptable level. As a government of a crisis ridden country like Bangladesh the only worthwhile exercise will be to give full attention to bring law and order to an acceptable level, to help start operation of the anti-corruption commission, to implementing separation of judiciary and if possible to rightsizing the government. Unnecessary confrontation with opposition parties will never bring for it political or economic benefit. It is better to be late than never.

ABMS Zahur is a retired joint secretary.

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