

Guantanamo: An American gulag? The Dubai port deal fiasco



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE once dreaded gulags in the now-defunct Soviet Union had an assorted lot of inmates lodged within their precincts, the most important being the Soviet dissidents. When one of them, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote his famous "Gulag Archipelago" the abominations of the gulags were known to the outside world for the first time.

Ever since then, the existence of the gulags became the staple of US propaganda against the Soviet system and they disappeared with the latter's collapse. They were then remembered only as an aberration of history. Few, however, thought of their reappearance at the dawn of the 21st century, and that too under aegis of the "free world" with the US at its helm.

It is an irony that the United States that once decried the Soviet system and all which were subsumed in it is at the forefront of the resurrection of the gulag. At least, human rights activists have likened the long irregular string of CIA detention centres from Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib and Bagmar in Iraq, to many other interrogation facilities across Europe and Africa to a "gulag archipelago" reminiscent of Soviet days.

Obviously the gulags, with their concomitant horrors, are back in full fury and same ugliness. In the name of hunting down Al-Qaeda terrorists, also back are sudden disappearances, indefinite incarceration, and odd-hour knocks on the door.

PERSPECTIVES

In Soviet gulags, the detainees were subjected to protracted solitude used to be exhausted and subsequently broken down. But in Guantanamo, the inmates are, in addition, subjected to "extraordinary rendition" where they face aggressive interrogation, meaning pure and simple torture. America, in the forefront of the military technological revolution couldn't but excel in its techniques. Guantanamo will continue to remain not only a colossal disgrace for American values but a colossal liability for its conscience.

Whatever way one approaches the matter -- even if one believes that America is under existential threat from Al-Qaeda and all measures are justified in the "war on terror" -- it must be accepted that the prison on the little plot of Cuba is now doing America far more harm than good, because it is an outright slur on its image of being an open society promoting human dignity.

Although the UN was not allowed access to Guantanamo, its experts have compiled a 54-page report as a result of an 18-month investigation based on interviews of the former prisoners, detainees' lawyers and families, and the US officials. It concluded that the violent force-feeding of hunger strikers, incidents of excessive violence used in transporting prisoners, and combination of interrogation techniques "must be assessed as amounting to torture."

The report said the simultaneous use of several interrogation techniques -- prolonged solitary confinement, exposure to extreme temperature, noise and light, forced shaving and other techniques that exploit religious beliefs or cause intimidation and humiliation -- constituted inhumane treatment and, in some cases, reached the threshold of torture.

The UN, therefore, called upon the United States to shut down its detention centre at Guantanamo Bay "without further delay." The UN also urged the US to bring all the prisoners to trial or release them and stop subjecting them to abuse. The Human Rights Commission

report charged Washington with violating international human rights treaties. According to the report: "The United States government should close down the Guantanamo Bay detention centre and refrain from any practice amounting to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment."

However, of concern are the attempts by the United States to redefine torture in the framework of the struggle against global terrorism in order to allow certain interrogation techniques that would not be permitted under the internationally accepted definition of torture. The confusion with regard to authorized and unauthorized interrogation techniques has already become alarming in recent times.

Amnesty International (AI) in a statement said that Guantanamo Bay had become a symbol of injustice and abuse in Washington's "war on terror." It must be closed down. AI said that the unlawful detention of "enemy combatants" at the US Naval base at Guantanamo Bay had now entered its fifth year. Hundreds of people of around 35 nationalities remain held in a legal black hole -- many without access to any court, legal counsel, or family visits.

Many of these detainees state that they have been subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment. In desperation, many attempted suicide while others went on prolonged hunger strike, being kept alive only through painful force-feeding measures like placing the striker in a "restraining

chair."

But in the White House, no one seems to care about the observations, either of the United Nations or Amnesty International. On the contrary, Scott McClellan, the White House spokesman contemptuously called the UN report a "discredit" to the organization: "Did it not have better things to do?" he asked.

There is every outward sign that the dreadful place called Guantanamo is there to stay, notwithstanding the unanimous feeling of America's allies that Guantanamo should be shut down.

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DURING the 2000 election, President George Bush, Jr. promised to bring Americans together. It took him more than four years, but he finally did it. We would give President Bush some credit, but unfortunately he didn't bring Americans together in exactly the way he wanted. Americans overwhelmingly came together against a Bush administration sponsored deal that would have sold some cargo port operations at three major US seaports to United Arab Emirates, a foreign government.

According to a major poll, Americans opposed the deal by an overwhelming 4 to 1 ratio, with 39 percent of Americans calling the deal a "major threat" to US security. It was quite amazing to be in the teapot amidst the tempest. Conservative and liberals who normally disagree -- and often strongly -- about how the Bush administration is fighting the War on Terrorism, did agree that Bush Jr. must have been out in the Texan sun too long when he agreed to the Dubai deal and expected it to be consummated without any trouble or opposition.

Actually, Bush was out to lunch again. He didn't know about the deal until it was brought to the public's attention. But then in his typical stubborn manner, he swaggered before the press and announced that he was pushing full

INSIDE AMERICA

The botched deal added to the average American's growing lack of confidence in Bush's leadership. The polls show that Bush's job appeal is at its lowest point during his tenure. Many more Americans now realize that the would-be Emperor isn't wearing any clothes when it comes to national security. That's bad enough. But more disturbing -- there has been little real discussion and no action on how to really protect our ports, where only three percent of the cargo is checked for security reasons.

steam ahead. He would not back down.

Bush did have some support. The powerful big business lobby was behind the deal. But, of course, Big Business would be in favour of selling the Statue of Liberty to Communist China in the name its new religion -- globalization -- if it could make a buck.

Some prominent politicians backed the deal. Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and Bob Dole, for example. Carter, bless his kind heart, must have been at that same lunch Bush attended. Slick Willie, on the other hand, had credibility problems, since he recently gave two speeches in Dubai for \$250,000 a pop.

Meanwhile, Dole was going to make a bundle as a high powered lobbyist who was going to try to persuade Congress of the deal's merits. Some of the prominent conservative columnists who have been quite happy to have the Bush administration force American style democracy and Western values upon the Arab world, were now whining that opposing the Dubai deal was equivalent to Arab bashing. As the great Irish playwright Oscar Wilde might have said: Screaming xenophobia where more important issues need to be addressed is the last refuge of the unimaginative. In other words, the Bush apologists were more content in trying to shoot the messengers rather than critique the message.

The fact was that the Dubai port

fiasco was marine security version of the Bush administration's handling of the Katrina disaster. Many Americans were stunned and even shocked to learn that the process of turning over port security to foreigners has been going on for awhile, that all the country's major ports are controlled by foreigners, and that a mysterious committee had made the port deal decision in secret.

The ideological hypocrisy of the proposed deal was quite evident. Bush would use the name of Karl Marx in vain before he would allow the US government to be -- heavens to mercy -- responsible for the country's port security. But here we had the Bush administration championing a deal that would make his nemesis Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez nod in approval -- a state-owned company operating some of our more important and security vulnerable ports.

There is no doubt that the failed Dubai port deal is one of the major blunders of the Bush administration. This is saying something, given the many blunders committed by the Bush administration, from the Iraq War to relations with other countries to disaster response. Harry Reid, the Democratic Senate leader had it right when he called the Bush administration "incompetent." Of course, that's something I've been writing about in this column for three years.

Remarkably, Bush's lack of diplomatic skill has broken up the governing Republican Congress

coalition. As the respected American newspaper columnist David Broder pointed out: "The harmony that prevailed during most of Bush's tenure -- the deference a Republican-controlled Congress has generally shown to his wishes -- disappeared. Even the normal circumspection with which congressional Republicans treat the White House withered in the unexpected heat of this dispute."

And the botched deal added to the average American's growing lack of confidence in Bush's leadership. The polls show that Bush's job appeal is at its lowest point during his tenure. Many more Americans now realize that the would-be Emperor isn't wearing any clothes when it comes to national security. That's bad enough. But more disturbing -- there has been little real discussion and no action on how to really protect our ports, where only three percent of the cargo is checked for security reasons.

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Castro's comeback

Because Cuba has defied consistent efforts by the United States to isolate it, the country does retain an aura of independence that many Latin American nations, buffeted by waves of globalization, believe they've lost. But none feels any great need or pressure to emulate the Cuban example economically. Mexico, which once cultivated close ties to Cuba and is host to the region's second biggest economy, is in fact one of the few major countries that has not warmed to Fidel. Indeed, the enduring Castro mystique in some Latin American circles has always been rooted more in attitude than ideology.

JOSEPH CONTRERAS

ANYONE who doubts that symbolism matters to the Latin American left need only have looked to Venezuela, where fire-breathing President Hugo Chavez forced several critical changes to the country's flag through a pliant legislature. The new banner will incorporate a machete, bow-and-arrow and tropical fruits and flowers, to acknowledge the nation's peasantry. From it will shine eight stars instead of seven -- the last added as a homage to Venezuela's 19th-century independence hero Simon Bolivar. And most important, a galloping white horse that once faced right -- "into the past," according to Chavez -- will now look, naturally, to the left.

So, too, does much of the region today, from Brazil to Bolivia. And the symbol that has benefited most from the new perspective is not a horse, but the left's reigning lion in winter, Fidel Castro. Not so long ago the Cuban leader, who will turn 80 this summer, seemed a shrinking figure on the Latin American stage. As recently as 2002 Chavez was his only ally in the hemisphere; his neighbors widely regarded him as a Stalinist dinosaur whose heyday had long since passed. But since then, Castro has experienced a remarkable resurgence. Chavez and new Bolivian President Evo Morales openly hail him in speeches; Havana was Morales' first port of call in his post election tour of foreign capitals this winter. Even more mainstream leaders, including Argentina's Nestor Kirchner and Brazil's Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, are no longer afraid to grip-and-grin for the cameras with the Caribbean strongman. "The map is changing," a pleased Castro exulted after Morales' December victory.

How it's changing is the question -- and the answer says as much about the supposed strength of Latin America's leftward tilt as it does about Castro himself. Fidel's comeback began a year ago when the European Union, at the urging of Spain's left-wing President Jose

Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, lifted diplomatic sanctions it had imposed on Cuba in the spring of 2003 to protest a sweeping crackdown on internal dissidents. Moderate governments in Uruguay and Panama restored full diplomatic relations with Cuba later in 2005, and Castro scored a diplomatic coup at a recent summit of the 15-nation Caribbean Community. Leaders there issued a communique calling on the Bush administration to extradite a jailed Cuban exile accused of masterminding the bombing of a Cubana Airlines plane in 1976.

An unabashedly pro-Cuba documentary about the US trade embargo premiered in Buenos Aires in November with the backing of the Argentine government's film institute. And these days even an openly right-wing, Bush-friendly president like Colombia's Alvaro Uribe Velez can see the benefits of having a working relationship with Cuba. Late last year he accepted Castro's offer to reopen peace talks in Havana with one of Colombia's leading Marxist guerrilla factions.

The Cuban leader can thank his traditional bete noire, Washington, for much of his bolstered reputation. "In the last decade we've paid less attention to Latin America than we should have," says Jaime Suchlicki, director of the University of Miami's Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies. "Castro is a big beneficiary." The Bush administration's bring-'em-on approach to foreign affairs has inspired visceral scorn across the region -- and a grudging respect for the one leader who consistently rails against America.

If the sorry state of the Cuban economy remains a black mark against Castro, he can always blame it on the long-standing US commercial boycott of the island. Elsewhere, many in the region believe they are seeing no greater benefit from the market-oriented policies aggressively promoted by Washington and have been throwing out pro-US politicians in election after election. The Bush administration's clear distaste for Morales -- expressed openly during his failed

bid for the Bolivian presidency in 2002 -- certainly boosted his campaign this time around. "To a certain degree the Americans have abetted the political career of Evo," says Bolivian political analyst Carlos Toranzo. "They seem incapable of understanding the changes that are happening in Latin America."

Still, Castro's return to respectability contains a hefty dose of irony. In the 1960s Havana funneled arms and equipment to communist guerrilla movements in Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia and other countries in a fruitless bid to spawn like-minded regimes across Latin America. In the 1970s Castro supported the Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua, and in 1980 he helped broker the union of El Salvador's five guerrilla armies, who were fighting to overthrow a US-backed military-civilian junta. By contrast, all of Latin America's left-of-center leaders today, apart from Castro himself, have gained power through the ballot box instead of the barrel of a gun. "Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and Uruguay's Tabare Vazquez are democrats," notes Harvard government professor Jorge Dominguez. "It is very important not to confuse them with Castro because they really do believe in competitive elections and the free exercise of public liberties."

Many of those leaders now clearly praise Castro for their own purposes. In the current political climate, a photo op with the graying patriarch of the Latin American left can go a long way toward establishing a president's credibility with his more militant followers. Brazil's Lula, for instance, took a giant step toward ending Cuba's diplomatic isolation in 2003, when he visited Havana during his first year in office. That trip took place at a time when the Brazilian leader faced mounting criticism at home that he was reneging on campaign pledges to boost economic growth and aid the country's poor.

Such gestures are made easier by Castro's weakness, not his strength. "Many of these newly elected governments don't see Cuba as an adversary," says William LeoGrande, a Cuba expert

who heads the School of Public Affairs at American University in Washington. Cuba no longer has the funds or the energy to foment revolution; now it exports doctors and nurses to its neighbors.

Because Cuba has defied consistent efforts by the United States to isolate it, the country does retain an aura of independence that many Latin American nations, buffeted by waves of globalization, believe they've lost. But none feels any great need or pressure to emulate the Cuban example economically. Mexico, which once cultivated close ties to Cuba and is host to the region's second biggest economy, is in fact one of the few major countries that has not warmed to Fidel; ties have remained frosty ever since Mexican President Vicente Fox condemned Cuba's human-rights record and asked Castro to leave a UN-sponsored summit in the city of Monterrey one day before the arrival of George W Bush.

Indeed, the enduring Castro mystique in some Latin American circles has always been rooted more in attitude than ideology. In the 47 years since he overthrew a pro-US dictator, only Nicaragua's Sandinistas tried to copy elements of Castro's socialist model -- and that effort was a half measure at best. Chavez to date has shown no appetite for expropriating the assets of foreign energy companies operating in Venezuela, and in the run-up to his Inauguration, Morales backed off from earlier talk of nationalizing Bolivia's natural-gas and oil industries. "These new presidents who like to pay their respects to Fidel are not products of him," says Eduardo Gamarra, the Bolivian-born director of Florida International University's Latin America and Caribbean Center. "Their rise is largely rooted in domestic factors, and Fidel is less of a main driving force."

The current crop of Latin America's left-wing leaders is distinguished more by a rhetorical concern for economic inequality than for drastically different economic policies. Michelle Bachelet may be a card-carrying member of Chile's Socialist Party, but following

her Inauguration last week as her country's first female president she promised to maintain the same free-market economic policies that have made Chile the darling of foreign investors in the region. Lula has adopted prudent economic policies since he took office three years ago, and his government recently paid off the country's outstanding debt to the International Monetary Fund. So too did Argentina's Kirchner, a radical Peronist militant in his youth who has presided over three consecutive years of impressive growth since taking office. "There is no real risk of another Cuba," argues Lula's predecessor Fernando Henrique Cardoso in his newly published memoir, "The Accidental President of Brazil." "No country in Latin America wants to follow Cuba's path anymore."

Small wonder. Cuba today is a shabby showcase for socialism. Two major hurricanes in 2005 exacerbated the island's housing shortage of 500,000 units, and many Cubans publicly grumbled last summer over the worst spate of electrical blackouts in recent memory. Warning his listeners that "this country can self-destruct," a worried Castro announced in November yet another crackdown on rampant corruption and a thriving black market fueled by chronic scarcities of consumer goods. And as if he didn't have enough on his septuagenarian mind, the Cuban leader is constantly having to deny persistent rumors about his health, fanned by a recent CIA report suggesting that he is suffering from Parkinson's disease. As an icon for the left, Fidel Castro is enjoying a rare moment in the sun. The same can hardly be said about the society he created, or the appeal it retains beyond the shores of his native land.

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In praise of true democracy

Our independence is hard-earned and so is our democracy. Democracy has provided us with the very weapon whereby we can make them mend their ways. Professor Yunus has urged the people to lobby to the leaders. To me, people can and must go further. Coming out of the stereotyped absentee landlord role, we can very well assert ourselves to be the real owners of the country. For that to happen, however, we have to grasp the true meaning of democracy in that it is not just consigning power from one group of corrupt politicians to another. We will have to be ruthless in dumping the tyrant leaders while being unswerving in nurturing and promoting the good ones.

KAZI SM KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

I am against the brand of democracy where the people have become something of a plaything in the hands of the mighty and moneyed politicians. All of them are mighty because we rally behind them and most of them are moneyed thanks to the money we decided to put in their keeping. However, we should not forget about the fact that we are living merely on their mercy! Their orientation as well as temperament towards the people implies nothing less.

Feudalism became history centuries ago. But is it an overstatement that our leaders still deem the country to be their fiefdom and the people and resources of the country to be their spoils? So, they are at liberty to treat the masses however they feel comfortable. They have, however, unity in diversity and that is in the job of exploiting the common people.

Tedious platitudes are their weapons for which we fall consistently. They claim to have the license and wherewithal to save our sovereignty, democracy, liberty, religion, and what not. Would you mind my suggesting that many of them might well be the forerunners in fleeing the country if the sovereignty and territory of the country were ever under assault?

Most of our leaders remain heavily guarded by cadres. The masses find it really difficult to even approach them. Their cadres and family members extort us heavily and many of the leaders enjoy a good portion of the booty. Their cadres and family members capture people's property at will. They are to be regularly greased for public services especially in getting allotment of land, ration, etc.

Their cadres and family members unleash a reign of terror in their localities and beyond. Their cadres and family members are above the law. They even nurture and back up militants to supplant law enforcement agencies. What a civilized democratic polity has been presented to us by our champions of democracy! Should we stop short of calling it tyranny personified in the name of nurturing nascent democracy?

They come to power, they lose power, and they again come to power. We often get slightly cross with them at their perceived negligence of us. We at times exude our frustration and anger. They use their guile to assuage our anguish. They again dish out promises. We resolve to teach them a good lesson. However, our determination evaporates before it is

mature. Another election approaches and we again crowd the polling booths to vote for most of the seasoned imposters. They brutalize our hopes and aspirations and pile up assets. They keep on deceiving us and we continue to believe in them all in the hope for betterment of our lot.

We look to them in such a servile manner that our lot hinges upon their sweet will. Actually, previous observation is true to some extent, as we rely upon them to rule the country and repose in them all our trust and hopes. Whenever we are faced with a difficulty, we start entreating them with folded hands and they tend to relish our predicament. When misfortune befalls us even for their faults, they remain more interested in justifying their false position than in mitigating our sufferings.

To be precise, most of them can stoop to anything for getting their ends fulfilled. Even after such hammerings, we are not reluctant to worship them because they are the messiahs (!); but, the politicians' brand of democracy has by now become so heavy that we are persistently being hurt by it.

We are gasping for breath but no respite seems in sight as there seems to be no escape from the iron cage of their brand of democracy. The question haunts me: whether their brand of democracy is a necessary evil or we can discard it. Can't we really trigger a change in the nature of our democracy?

In fact, we can and we can do it exceptionally well. I believe the people hold the key to bringing the derailed leaders to their knees.

Our independence is hard-earned and so is our democracy. Democracy has provided us with the very weapon whereby we can make them mend their ways. Professor Yunus has urged the people to lobby to the leaders. To me, people can and must go further.

Coming out of the stereotyped absentee landlord role, we can very well assert ourselves to be the real owners of the country. For that to happen, however, we have to grasp the true meaning of democracy in that it is not just consigning power from one group of corrupt politicians to another.

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