

Globalization and the Bangladeshi dream

The answer to the problems in Bangladesh lies in Bangladesh itself. In a country of 140 million people is it difficult to find 1,000 politicians who have the same vision as Dr Yunus for transforming society for the better? The Bangladesh dream will become reality one day if all the main political parties and businesses in Bangladesh can overlook their differences and have a united vision for the country by working together against the real axis of evil: poverty, corruption, and illiteracy.

HASAN ALI IMAM

PEACE is achieved when people are taken out of poverty by being helped to develop businesses, thereby enabling them to take care of their families and invest in education. That is why I was pleased to learn that Prof Muhammad Yunus had received the Nobel Peace Prize this year for realizing his dream of poverty elimination.

I watched with interest Dr Yunus's address to the Nobel committee in Oslo a few weeks ago, regarding his experiences in lifting poor people out of poverty, the concept of social business, and the need to invest in education as a way to overcome the root cause of terrorism.

The rapturous applause he received from the audience is indicative of his success, as well as a celebration of the achievements of people who were once impoverished and are now successful entrepreneurs. Dr Yunus's Nobel prize was a breath of fresh air compared to the torrent of bad news that had permeated the airwaves.

Simplicity has made Grameen Bank very successful, and many people have lifted themselves out of poverty. "Themselves" is the operative word here. Poor people do not need a helping hand through charity. Just teach them how to run a business, loan them the money, and they can do it themselves.

Micro-finance is being replicated in other countries, and politicians from other parts of the world have

visited beneficiaries of micro-finance in Bangladesh. At the conservative party conference last October the shadow secretary of state for international development, Andrew Mitchell MP, talked about the need to lift people out of poverty. He mentioned the case of Marjina Begum in Bangladesh a micro-finance entrepreneur who succeeded in business, thus escaping poverty.

The American ex-president, Bill Clinton launched the "Clinton Global Initiative" to end poverty by ensuring that politicians and businessmen from around the world (regardless of political affiliations) converge and share ideas on how to eliminate poverty for good.

I watched Prof Yunus share a platform with US ex-vice president Al Gore, and he cited examples of how people had benefited from his projects, and how Grameen's economic activities attracted the attention of the CEO of Danone (in France) which produces dairy products. The CEO agreed to finance the production of yoghurt drinks for malnourished children by establishing a small non-loss production plant. This is a great example of how successful multi-nationals can play a positive role in developing countries.

Socialism vs globalization

Multi-nationals were once regarded as imperialists who exploited poor workers in third world countries. Such misplaced views tended to be espoused by socialists who didn't believe in profits, entrepreneurial success and private enterprise, but wanted the government to rule the workers (proletariat) rather than the

workers ruling themselves.

When Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848 they had great foresight in accurately predicting the trend of globalization. However, they were mistaken when they asserted that bourgeois capital would dissolve religious and national identities thus exposing the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie.

They thought that this would trigger a revolution where workers would unite against capitalist exploits.

158 years after the publication of the *Communist Manifesto*, a remarkable revolution has indeed taken place. Workers have united with other workers through international business activities, free trade, and the internet. The dissolving that has taken place is the dissolving of the communist-created class barrier between the bourgeois and proletariat.

Whilst Karl Marx regarded religion as the "opiate of the masses," today religion is alive and well, and, when applied correctly, can be a powerful medicine for the masses in a world of ethnic strife, nationalism, intolerance, and terrorism.

Globalization has accelerated mobility of labour, information, products and services, connectivity of businesses and bringing of people together through "flattening" (to use the phrase by Thomas Friedman in his excellent book, *The World is Flat*).

"Multi-nationals" is no longer a dirty word, and private businesses, large or small, are the keys to eliminating poverty. After 158 years of

"socialist vs capitalist" debate the difference between socialism and capitalism can be boiled down into one sentence:

Socialism believes that everyone should be equally poor, and capitalism believes everyone should have equal opportunities to prosper.

Bangladesh was established with socialist ideals in mind. 36 years on it needs a fundamental re-think on its direction. India may set a good example.

The Indian dream

After independence from Britain, Nehru sent a team to Moscow to see how it was run, and since then India has operated on a model where the economy was centrally planned, closed to outside trade and closed to prosperity.

Even as late as 1991, India only had \$1 billion in foreign reserves. Recently, the Finance Minister (now Prime Minister) Manmohan Singh opened up India's economy to the outside world by lifting trade restrictions and allowing foreign businesses to operate freely in India. It now has \$118 billion in reserves, multi-nationals are outsourcing their call-centres to India, poverty is decreasing, and the country is a rising superpower.

Such opportunities have arisen within 14 years through the global network. India experimented with socialism and has now embraced globalization. The debate on whether third world countries should embrace socialism or globalization/capitalism has now ended.

Micro-finance, multi-nationals and the role of government

The Indian example shows that multi-national companies are catalysts for economic growth. The Bangladesh example shows that micro-finance is also a catalyst for economic growth. Another catalyst that needs to be added to the economic mix is good government.

Conservatives generally believe in small government, and that people should have the choice to pursue their dreams without being lumbered by government bureaucracy. However, government can play a positive role by formulating policies that will enable people to be free to achieve and prosper.

A few Canadian friends we had over in Dhaka a few years ago commented: "Bangladeshis are a very resourceful people." It is now up to the Bangladesh government to achieve good governance through sound policies, and to remove protectionist barriers so that international businesses can invest and thrive in a country of resourceful people.

The government can also help home-grown businesses by cutting taxes and reducing bureaucracy so that they are free to reinvest in the expansion of business which would facilitate greater employment opportunities.

Technology, biotechnology, and pharmaceutical companies would also be able to expand much-needed research and development supported by a strong capital market. This can finance the transition of research into products and services, which can then be promoted to global consumers.

The Bangladesh government can also do more to support micro-credit programs like Grameen Bank and other NGOs such as Brac, Asa, TMSS, etc and devise a fast-track national poverty elimination drive.

Micro-finance and inward investment are keys to short-term survival by lifting people out of poverty and securing employment. The long-term survival and prosperity of Bangladesh will depend on investment in technology, biotechnology and medicine, which are engines of growth.

Such initiatives would ensure that educated workers are kept in Bangladesh rather than being brain-drained away to developed nations.

Thus, the cycle of poverty will transform into the cycle of prosperity.

Jump-starting the Bangladesh dream

Bangladesh was created 36 years ago with a view to eliminating injustice. 36 years on the dream seems to have been stalled.

As mentioned above, there was a breath of fresh air when a Bangladeshi TV channel devoted some air-time, which was otherwise clogged up by negative news stories of political fights, demonstrations, strikes, the ever-changing election date and the rights and wrongs of the structure of the caretaker government, to Dr Yunus's Nobel prize.

As someone who watches these events from afar (in the UK), I was saddened to see political turmoil in my country of origin. What was more horrifying was that lives were lost over a simple political process.

During the last couple of months leading up to December the Bangladesh satellite TV channels aired the familiar faces of the two American diplomats who intervened in order to try to resolve a catfight between Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina. How silly is that?

Don't get me wrong; I welcome the help of American aides, as well as the British diplomats and the European Union, in trying to resolve a political impasse. I believe in international intervention when it is needed in difficult conflict situations such as in Iraq, Israel, Darfur, Northern Ireland, etc.

But in this case such intervention is not needed when dialogue between the two main parties can be established, and any disputes can be resolved within 10 minutes over a cup of tea.

Being involved in UK politics has taught me that tolerance and respect of opposing views is a virtue, and the ability to debate disagreements in a civilized manner is a necessary facet of British politics. There is room for debate, and



there is room to cooperate with opposition parties.

Those who want to help society will respect, and cooperate with, other parties. Those who are in politics for themselves will continue political infighting. I apologise if I sound patronizing as it is a statement of the obvious ... you don't need someone from Britain to tell you this.

The answer to the problems in Bangladesh lies in Bangladesh itself. In a country of 140 million people is it difficult to find 1,000 politicians who have the same

vision as Dr Yunus for transforming society for the better?

The Bangladesh dream will become reality one day if all the main political parties and businesses in Bangladesh can overlook their differences and have a united vision for the country by working together against the real axis of evil: poverty, corruption, and illiteracy.

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Situation far from conducive for a fair election

After withdrawal of the grand alliance from the election, the 9th parliamentary election is going to be one-sided affair. Seventeen candidates of the alliance have already been elected unopposed. At the very outset, the credibility of the January 22 election got a big blow with these seventeen parliament members being declared elected unopposed, especially when, on an average, ten candidates vie for a single seat.



NAZRUL ISLAM

AFTER a staggering hesitation in taking the appropriate decision, the Awami League-led grand alliance finally withdrew from the January 22 fray. This threw a huge challenge to the caretaker government and election commission to hold a credible and acceptable election.

Time will decide whether the grand alliance's move was correct or wrong, but I think that they did not have any other option but to stay away from the race. Participation in the poll under the current field conditions would have been a suicidal step for the grand alliance, as well as for democracy.

In the last week of December, the decision to participate in the election and filing of nomination papers by the grand alliance, especially by Awami League, came as bolt from the blue to many independent analysts. This is because the reasons for which the 14-party has been waging movement for the last two years were not addressed.

Rather, some of the important ingredients for a fair election, like preparation of a flawless electoral roll and creation of a level playing field, were messed up in a deliberate manner to influence the election results.

A number of conditions like an impartial and capable Election Commission, a level-playing field, a reasonably flawless voter roll and neutral civil and police administration, must be fulfilled for holding a free and fair election. If these conditions are met then other issues like use of muscle power and black money, voter intimidation and use of religion and other barriers, can generally be addressed.

But this is for the first time in the history of Bangladesh election that a parliamentary election is going to be held without the minimum pre-conditions. The caretaker government, introduced one and a half-decades back mainly to ensure a level-playing field prior to the election, failed miserably this time, or consciously did not pay heed to the matter.

President Professor Dr Iajuddin Ahmed, who has taken over as the chief advisor to the caretaker government, can squarely be made responsible for the failure. Some of his controversial and one-sided actions not only dismayed the 14-party combine but also a number of his advisory council members.

The CA's actions and obstinate attitude angered the four advisors so much that they did not even hesitate to resign from the council of advisors. And with the stepping down of the four advisors, who had

earned acceptance among the members of public as non-partisan persons, the credibility of the current caretaker government hit rock bottom. But such an eye-opener could not wake up the conscience of the CA, who by his every deed proved that he is a partisan person and is working to satisfy a particular group.

A partisan person can never play a non-partisan role unless s/he raises her/his conscience above petty interests. Not only that, but the person would also have to clear his surroundings of partisan people and dissociate himself from the benefactors. But our CA not only assembled the partisan persons around him, but also made one of the most controversial person his personal advisor.

The restructuring of the Election Commission and its secretariat, genuine reshuffling of the civil and police administrations and neutralization of the state-run electronic media remained a far cry.

This instantly shattered the hope of holding a true, fair election through which a widely accepted legitimate government would assume power and ensure transparency and accountability.

In an earlier article published in this newspaper, I gave a detailed account of how the civil and police administrations were made friendlier for the parties of the immediate past government in the name of reshuffling.

Most of the existing field-level officials associated with the election and with maintaining law and order are the "undue" beneficiaries of that government. Their closeness with the parties is well known.

On the part of the Election Commission, we have seen many farces in this constitutional body. But nothing can be compared to the preparation of the electoral roll. Spending the public money at will, bluffing the voters in the name of enrollment, negligence of duty by the election officials while enrolling the voters, deliberate omission and deletion of eligible electors, and inclusion of fictitious ones, are examples of the non-functioning of the Election Commission manned by partisan people.

The constitution gives the commissioners immunity so no

measures can be taken against them, whether they spoil public money, desecrate the constitution, or commit grievous offences. The countrymen would have to endorse their all actions without any question.

Everybody in the country, except the Election Commission and 4-party alliance leaders, is unhappy with the way the voter roll updating and re-updating were completed. Although the print and electronic media exposed the irregularities, the commission seemed to be unmoved, and no action was taken against the defaulters. The EC spent about Tk 100 crore for making an electoral roll, but at the end of the day they could not present the nation a credible voter list.

It is really astonishing that the EC failed to prepare a reasonably flawless voter list despite spending huge sums of money and employing huge manpower. Is it due to the lack of skill of the enumerators deployed to enroll the electors or a negligence of the enumerators to carry out the task, or is it a deliberate act of keeping the voter-eligible supporters of a particular party out of the list?

Then, what duties did the district; upazila and EC officials carry out to make the voter list flawless? We may now conclude that all the people involved in preparing the list are guilty of committing the offences mentioned above. And, as citizens of the country, we are demanding their punishment for not carrying out their duties even after taking money from the public exchequer.

The secretary to the Election Commission said recently that the latest deletion and inclusion of the voters will not be included in the printed lists as the printing of the roll had already been completed. He told the press that the names of new voters will be supplied on hand-written papers, and there will be three lists in the polling centers.

Is it practically possible to hold an election with hand-written voter lists? I can simply say that the country would have witnessed a bloodbath on the polling day had the grand alliance participated in the poll. Thank God the grand alliance decided to skip the election.

The decision of the grand alliance to enter into election race despite such uneven field and overall adverse situation was dubbed by many as stepping into the trap laid by the 4-party through the CA. Because, this time, not the voters but the officials will deter-

mine the election results.

The administration has been rearranged to carry out the task. How? The task is very simple. The election officials in Bangladesh, if they want, can change the election results through scores of means, including intimidation, allurements, suspension of voting, and stuffing of ballot boxes. This allows casting of votes by fictitious voters and altering the result sheets. None could challenge those and, if challenged, there would be no remedial action.

After withdrawal of the grand alliance from the election, the 9th parliamentary election is going to be one-sided affair. Seventeen candidates of the alliance have already been elected unopposed. At the very outset, the credibility of the January 22 election got a big blow with these seventeen parliament members being declared elected unopposed, especially when, on an average, ten candidates vie for a single seat.

Probably no other election in Bangladesh had seen so many MPs elected unchallenged. This proves that the election-boycott decision by the grand alliance drew widespread support from the intending candidates.

The one-sided election will not get acceptability, and thereby legitimacy, at home and abroad. Despite all these setbacks, the caretaker government and 4-party alliance will go ahead with the election and form a government within the next two and a half-weeks. We do not know how long the government will last, but we can say that it would try to resist repetition of the February 15, 1996 election experience.

In doing so, we can definitely expect more brutality from the imminent government than that of the 2001 government, as the alliance is going to get almost all the 300 seats on the basis of consensus.

The nation needs an accountable and stable government elected through a credible poll for socio-economic uplift of the people. But such an election seems to be a distant dream as the state-power is with a particular group, which is not at all interested in holding a free and fair election. And until and unless a credible election is held, the countrymen would have to continue to pay heavy tolls in the coming days.

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Side-stepping the surge

In the meantime, Democrats know a classic "wedge issue" when they see one. With 21 Republicans up for re-election, Democrats would be happy to witness full-scale GOP in-fighting, which could catch the Republican 2008 front runner, Sen. John McCain, in the crossfire.

HOWARD FINEMAN

BEFORE Barack Obama was a senator, he opposed the war in Iraq. Now that he is one, he says that sending more troops would be "a mistake that compounds the president's original mistake."

But don't expect Obama -- or most other Dems -- to try to block George W Bush when he asks Congress in the coming weeks for another billion-dollar bundle for the war. The party won't deny the funds, and may not even try to attach conditions to them.

Obama made that clear last week when I saw him in his office, a sunny space filled with portraits of Thurgood Marshall, Abraham Lincoln, Mohandas Gandhi and Muhammad Ali. "To anticipate your question," said the Harvard-trained lawyer, "is Congress going to be willing to exercise its control over the purse strings to affect White House policy? I am doubtful that that is something we are willing to do in the first year."

Marriages of convenience are common in Washington. The war in Iraq is producing the opposite: a divorce of calculation. President Bush has no evident interest in consulting with, let alone drawing in, the new Democratic Congress as a

war partner.

An example: the new chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee -- Carl Levin, an important character now -- sent Bush a private letter three weeks ago offering his counsel. Levin never got a reply.

Bush can be just as deaf to Republicans. At a recent White House ceremony, Sen. Susan Collins offered to brief him on her Iraq visit. He responded by escorting her to the office of his deputy national-security adviser -- and then left before she told her story.

Even as they decry the "surge" and declared that it is "time to bring the war to a close," Democrats offered reasons for staying out of Bush's way. Obama took the safest ground. "I cannot in good conscience," he said, "cut off funding for our troops that are already there." He and others will insist that future requests be included in the regular budget.

Sen. Joe Biden, whose Foreign Relations Committee will launch hearings on the war this week, said that Congress's role is simply too limited to be effective. "It's all about the separation of powers," he said. Last month he told Bush: "This is your war, Mr. President, and there's nothing we can do to stop you."

The Democrats may not really want to. Party leaders (especially

Nancy Pelosi) fear being branded as "weak on defense" if they kicked off in Congress with antiwar maneuvers. Rather than do that, said Biden and Sen. Chris Dodd, the best strategy for now is to try to dig out the facts and educate the public. Only Republicans have the leverage to pressure Bush to change course, Biden said.

In the meantime, Democrats know a classic "wedge issue" when they see one. With 21 Republicans up for re-election, Democrats would be happy to witness full-scale GOP in-fighting, which could catch the Republican 2008 front runner, Sen. John McCain, in the crossfire.

Democratic strategists say it would be politically foolish to help Bush by crafting a bipartisan war policy. "Why should we try to come up with a compromise policy with him?" asks Mike Ward, a former congressman who was back at the Capitol for opening-day festivities. "If we do that, we take ownership of the war. Why would we want to do that?"

Only one reason I could think of: to end the war faster so that the troops could come home.

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