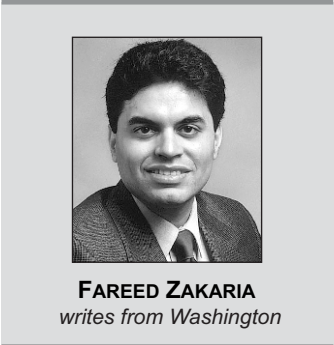


Preview of a post-US world



Two things were missing from this year's world Economic Forum at Davos: snow (which arrived eventually) and America-bashing (which did not). There were, of course, lots of American businessmen, activists and intellectuals filling the panels and halls of the conference. There were even a few senior American officials -- though no star speaker. But, for the first time in my memory, America was somewhat peripheral. There were few demands, pleas, complaints or tantrums directed at the United States. In this small but significant global cocoon, people -- for the moment at least -- seemed to be moving beyond America. "There has always been a talk by a senior American official as one of the centerpiece of the Forum," said a European who has advised the Forum for many years -- and

The world today bears some resemblance to the 1920s, when a newly globalized economy was booming, and science and technological change were utterly transforming life. (Think of the high-tech of the time -- electricity, radio, movies and cars, among other recent inventions.) But with Britain declining and America isolationist, that was truly a world without political direction. Eventually protectionism, nationalism, xenophobia, and war engulfed it. Those who have been fondly waiting for the waning of American dominance -- be careful what you wish for.

who asked to remain anonymous because of his relations with US officials. "And in the past, people eagerly anticipated who that would be -- Colin Powell, Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice. This year, almost no one inquired. We expected disappointment. But there was none. No one even noticed." Part of the reason is that people are moving beyond George W. Bush. Europeans and Middle Easterners in particular used to rail against Bush. Now they think that their views about him and his policies -- whether on Iraq, global warming or unilateralism -- have all been vindicated, so why keep ranting? Besides, he's a lame-duck president, his weakness on full display in last week's plaintive State of the Union address. But there may be a larger phenomenon at work here. This year's conference theme was titled "Shaping the Global Agenda: The

Shifting Power Equation." The emphasis, and some of the talk at the conference, focused on that shift in power, with speakers foretelling the rise of Asia (and implicitly, the decline of America and Europe). We are certainly in a trough for America -- with Bush in his last years, with the United States mired in Iraq and with hostility toward Washington still high almost everywhere. But if so, we might also be getting a glimpse of what a world without America would look like. It will be free of American domination, but perhaps also free of leadership -- a world in which problems fester and the buck is endlessly passed, until problems explode. Listen to the new powers. China, which in three years will likely become the world's biggest emitter of CO2, is determined not to be a leader in dealing with global environmental issues. "The ball is not in China's court," said Zhu Min, the

executive vice president of the Bank of China and a former senior official in the government. "The ball is in everybody's court." India's brilliant planning czar, Montek Singh Alluwalliah, said that "every country should have the same per capita rights to pollution." In the abstract that's logical enough, but in the real world, if 2.3 billion people (the population of China plus India) pollute at average Western levels, you will have a global meltdown. German Chancellor Angela Merkel called for a new round of trade talks and asked that everyone be "flexible." In fact, the United States has exhibited considerable flexibility, relaxing its position on many contentious issues, including agricultural subsidies. On the other hand, France, that eloquent critic of US unilateralism, has refused to budge on its lavish subsidies for farmers. As a result, the European Union is fractured and paralyzed.

For their part Brazil, China and India speak of flexibility in the abstract but have made no new proposals. The ball for every problem is in everybody's court, which means that it is in nobody's court. The problem is that this free ride probably can't last forever. The global system -- economic, political, and social -- is not self-managing. Global economic growth has seen a fantastic boon, but it produces stresses and strains that have to be handled. Without some coordination, or first mover -- or, dare one say it, leader -- such management is more difficult. The world today bears some resemblance to the 1920s, when a newly globalized economy was booming, and science and technological change were utterly transforming life. (Think of the high-tech of the time -- electricity, radio, movies and cars, among other recent inventions.) But with Britain declining and America isolationist, that was truly a world without political direction. Eventually protectionism, nationalism, xenophobia, and war engulfed it. In a provocative essay on Foreign Policy three years ago, the British historian Niall Ferguson speculated that the end of American hegemony might not fuel an orderly shift to a multi-polar



system but a descent into a world of highly fragmented powers, with no one exercising any global leadership. He called this "apolarity." "Apolarity could turn out to mean an anarchic new Dark Age," Ferguson wrote, "an era of waning

empires and religious fanaticism, of economic plunder and pillage in the world's forgotten regions, of economic stagnation, and civilization's retreat into a few fortified enclaves." That might be a little far-fetched. But for those who have been fondly

waiting for the waning of American dominance -- be careful what you wish for. Fareed Zakaria is Editor of Newsweek International. (c) Newsweek International. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

Masters of self-destruction

MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

THE readers must have noticed that immediately after the state of emergency was declared by the president, the BNP high command advised its members, particularly those with criminal backgrounds, to go underground to escape arrest. Mamun and Dipjal, for example, have been on the run ever since. The joint forces have been frantically ploughing through all over the nation to capture these members of so-called young BNP and associates. With this call, the BNP, once again, has signalled that it is not yet ready to dismantle the criminal wing of the party. This publicly announced call by the BNP is nothing but an act of defiance (and arrogance?) against the present establishment, and certainly a move against the welfare of the nation. This move, no doubt, is the last stone engrafted to the roadmap of BNP self-destruction which commenced five years back. There is no need to repeat how a once popular and a promising party like the BNP reached this point in 2007. However, the time has come to reminisce how, step by step and year after year, this party embraced self-destruction, in turn putting the 15-year-old democratic movement into jeopardy. Moreover, it is well known at home and abroad that Bengalis are



an intelligent lot, however, having short memory. I am sure the readers will agree with the former without hesitation, but some would strongly disagree with the latter. With this in mind I would like to remind the readers how a once popular party has surrendered to self-destruction. One wonders, is this assessment necessary now, when the BNP's agenda for the 2007 election 2007 has been thrown into the Bay of Bengal? I will come to this point in a minute. Before this, let us briefly see how this party reached the

stage where it has been in recent days and weeks. If we go back to the period before the 2001 election, the BNP's forming an alliance with Islamists, and with various splinter groups of JP, was the beginning of the end of BNP's own identity. Its philosophy and force, established over the years, as an alternative to AL in national politics, have been damaged forever. The BNP's marriage with two anti-people parties (Jamaat and JP) to fight the 2001 election against the incumbent AL was a move which proved

to be unnecessary (HM Ershad severed all links with the 4-party coalition before the 2001 election). The outcome of this marriage was rosy, since the BNP-led alliance captured two-thirds majority in parliament and claimed a landslide victory against the AL in 2001. There is no need to repeat how a minor partner of the 4-party alliance had been running much of the show from 2001 to 2006. This resulted in increased intra-party feuds between the two major factions of the party, progressives and hard-liners. Subsequently, the BNP has been fractured further and, finally, the birth of LDP has been taken place at the expense of some founding leaders. In the process, the party has lost its image as a party of tolerance, a formidable force to counter the mighty AL, and above all, lost the support of the middle-class society. Finally, the hard-liners steered the party, with the support of Hawa Bhaban, towards engaging in a face-to-face bloody clash with the grand alliance on January 22. The rest of the story is well known. Khaleda Zia's divide and rule philosophy within the party forum has been found to be the mother of all self-destructions. Coming back to the question raised earlier, the readers would have noticed that nowadays the print and electronic media have been flooded with commentaries

and advice for the new CTG, on subjects ranging from clearing the air on the election time-table to unlawful grabbing of Gulshan Lake. Certainly, some of these issues are very urgent and need immediate attention of the new establishment, but for the new CTG, having financial and infrastructural limitations, it is impossible to go for everything in one go. It is better to take them one at a time, and first things first. Having said that, the CTG has most appropriately prioritised the task of purging criminal wings of the political forces to dismantle, once for all, the anchors of cadres and godfathers in party politics. In today's Bangladesh, in my view, this is the number one menace. At this moment the nation desires from the new CTG not to leave this task half done. The godfathers and criminal wings of political parties must go. Without doing this, it would be impossible to create an environment for a free, fair and fearless election. The godfathers have taken shelter in tens and thousands of holes around the nation, at the direction of their masters. These holes must either be sealed airtight, or be smoked out. This type of purging, however, is not new in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, in the past, the work had been left half done due to the intervention of some invisible beings. This time also some have started

making noises for holding election within 90 days of declaration of emergency or as soon as possible thereafter, leaving the cleaning up jobs for the elected government. The mess created during the last five years cannot simply be wiped out completely within such a short period of time. The nation has complete faith in the new CA and has given thumbs up to his inaugural speech. The CA must see his mission accomplished on his own terms, and not in the politicians' terms, since neither he nor the army created this mess over the last five years. In conclusion, I must say, the peace-loving people of Bangladesh should call upon the BNP high command to accept the ground reality, and retract its policy of protecting the criminal wing of the party. They must hand over the criminals and godfathers, including Mamun and Dipjal, to the joint forces. The sooner they do this, the better for the future of democracy. There is no room for denying the fact that the BNP's hard-line faction, together with Islamist elements, must be held responsible for democracy's predicament in today's Bangladesh. These are the people who wanted to hold a unilateral election on January 22 that led to the emergency. Dr Moazzem Hossain is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Man of peace at war?

SHAWKAT HUSSAIN

BANGLADESH'S man of peace, Dr Yunus, seems to have initiated a battle of sorts when he said in an interview that Bangladesh politicians are in the game of politics not because of ideology but because they simply want power and all the money that comes from the exercise of power. Predictably, there have also been letters in different newspapers applauding Dr Yunus for his bold words. So what else is new? The politics/power/money nexus is common knowledge to everyone. It is so common that it is almost trite. A poor politician is an oxymoron, an anomaly. There are some exceptions, but exceptions which only prove the rule. Everybody knows that sweeping generalizations about power and politics and money are generally true. Ask any person on the street and s/he will say the same thing about politics and politicians. Endless seminars and roundtables and talk-shows and speeches and post-editorials have beaten this issue to death, and now we all know that corruption is an almost unalterable reality, a given in our national life. There will be more talk on this topic, and there should be more, if

only to remind the politicians that they are in the public eye and that we know what this game is mostly about. The only difference is that when ordinary people say it, it does not make any difference. Coming from you or me, or even from high-profile civil society mandarins, such comments are seldom newsworthy, let alone controversial. The real question then is: why did Mr Jaill and Mr Bhuiyan react so sharply and shrilly to Professor Yunus's utterance. The simple truth is that the simplest truth falling from the mouth of a Nobel Peace Prize winner, however trite and common and obvious, takes on the note of a grand pronouncement. Professor Yunus has proclaimed, and the world will listen, and indeed the world does. This would certainly make some politicians squirm uncomfortably in their plush towel-covered chairs. It is only a matter of wonder why Dr Yunus spoke so late. He had plenty of opportunities to speak earlier and he didn't. Dr Yunus's denunciation of politics and politicians now must be seen in the light of some of his comments earlier. When the Pope speaks from the pulpit we listen; when President Bush threatens from the White House, Iran quavers; when the new

chief advisor delivers his first speech about what his caretaker government hopes to achieve, we listen with rapt attention. Similarly when Dr Yunus pontificates about the crisis in our national life, we wait with bated breath to catch his words. The Nobel Peace Prize has given the micro-credit guru a transcendence which he did not possess before, and this transcendence has given his words a weight and value which they did not possess either. Words spoken from this position of transcendence can, and often does, carry enormous significance and responsibility. So when Dr Yunus descended to the world of mere mortals -- political mortals in this case -- at a reception at Bangabhaban soon after he won the Nobel Peace Prize, there was an expectation that he would show a way out of the crisis then prevailing. And to some he did. To many more what he said was a complete cop out. He sermonized about how the caretaker government should conduct itself. In avuncular tones, the younger professor advised the older professor, and the latter nodded his head in acquiescence as vigorously as he was capable of doing. "Be hard," he told Professor lajuddin. The Professor's subse-



quent actions were uncharacteristically tough. "Do not listen to anybody, listen to everybody," he further said, cryptically. He offered a formula in another reception organized by the mayor of Dhaka, which he later retracted. And we all know what later happened. The overwhelming perception was that the Nobel laureate had failed to achieve the objectivity and

impartiality that his position of transcendence demanded. He was clearly perceived to be taking sides by putting his moral weight behind the caretaker government when its own legality was questioned by the best legal minds of the nation. When Professor Yunus came back to Dhaka after receiving the Nobel Prize in Oslo, his personal and professional life was at its highest while the life of the nation

was at its nadir. Again, it was the hope of many, that he would at least say something that would point to the failures of the caretaker government. Instead, Professor Yunus gave Professor lajuddin an A+ for his performance when at least half the nation gave him failing grades. When the nation was floundering, Dr Yunus withheld real critique; his equivocation was tantamount to partisanship. At least he has spoken now in clearer terms, though what he has said has been clear for a long time. Even that is important. To deny the truth of his utterance about the nature of our politics and politicians, as Mr Jaill and Mr Bhuiyan have done, is as ridiculous as it is redundant to affirm its validity. The new caretaker government has raised our hopes that eventually an acceptable election would be held. We only hope that Dr Yunus will use his position of transcendence, to the extent it is possible, to push the nation towards a better five years than the last five. We hold no quixotic hopes that corruption like poverty will eventually become a museum piece, but even less corruption is better than more. Shawkat Hussain is a Professor of English.

OBITUARY  
Waheedul Haque  
A mind without fear

MOHAMMAD MOHI-US SUNNAH

LIKE many other wars in history, the Liberation War of Bangladesh had many fronts. But one of the uniqueness of the Liberation War was that it had a cultural front. A front that, is so ubiquitous in character, had kept the spirit of the people of Bangladesh alive throughout the period of war. Waheedul Haque, who died on January 27 2007, was the commanding officer or the General of our cultural front. His accomplishment in laying the cultural foundation of Bangladesh is so much that he is considered as one of the icons of secular culture. At the same time he was an iconoclast and voice for the voiceless, whenever there was an attempt of suppression. In early 1960s, when there was attempt by the then Pakistani government to ban Tagore songs and Islamize Bengali nationalism, Waheedul Haque played a leading role in fighting the conspiring rulers and politicians of Pakistan. Tagore was and is the prime pride of Bengali nationhood. Banning the songs written and composed by Tagore from being broadcast by Radio Pakistan was considered as the first step towards alienating Bengali Muslims from secular culture. Waheedul Haque's organizational capacity brought many Bengali intellectual together to fight against such conspiracy. He realized how important is Tagore for Bengali nationalism to survive in its secular form. Although, the rulers give in to their drive, Waheedul Haque did not stop. He continued promoting Tagore songs in a way so that it became a part and parcel of all cultural activities in the country. He did not stop there, but continued his efforts throughout Bangladesh by establishing Rabindrasangit Sammelon Parishad. This organization has committees in every district, and these committees promote Tagore songs. And by virtue of its own structure these committees disseminate the essence of secular culture. Seeing the strength of Bengali language and cultural movement in 1950s, the then Pakistani government wanted to de-secularize the culture. In order to do that the rulers of Pakistan started to gradually reduce the number of schools and increase the number of madrasas. Number of primary schools decreased down from 32,000 in late 1940s to 24,000 in early 1960s. The mullahs started giving sermon in mosques and religious gathering against all cultural activities. Even yearly Baishakhi Utsab, the nobo

barsha festival (Bengali new year), which Bengalis celebrated for centuries, was considered as something forbidden for the Muslims. People like Waheedul Haque, Sanjida Khatun and other organizers of Chhayonot, a music school, stood up to save the most secular festival of Bengalis. While number of sites for celebrating Baishakhi Utsab started decreasing, Waheedul Haque and friends made it point that a cultural function for celebrating Bengali new year takes place early in the morning of Pohela Baishakh under the banyan tree of Ramana Park in Dhaka. This two hours function of early morning has now evolved into the most important national function of Bengali new year in Bangladesh. No matter who organizes what state function where for the new year, Chhayonot's Barshabaran Tagore songs and Islamize Bengali nationalism, Waheedul Haque played a leading role in fighting the conspiring rulers and politicians of Pakistan. Tagore was and is the prime pride of Bengali nationhood. 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