

## Of democracy and politics

### LIGHTEN UP

**"For this is not the liberty which we can hope, that no grievance ever should arise in the Commonwealth, that let no man in this world expect; but when complaints are freely heard, deeply considered, and speedily reformed, then is the utmost bound of civil liberty attained that wise men look for."**

#### MEGASTHENES

**T**HE post Cold-War years were in their initial phase characterized, almost with a touch of euphoria, as a period of democratic renewal. Extravagant claims were made for democracy.

Democracies do not make wars against one another; there are no famines in a democracy. There may well sound theoretical and even empirical grounds for such contentions. Democracy may not have an identical meaning or connotation for all, and may come in varying forms and shapes.

Some essential features, however, are constant. It means a political dispensation that is accountable, a certain degree of transparency in government, and the participation and support of peoples.

It means policy-formulation and decision-making through debate and discussion, and not rule by fiat. The element of consent is crucial; ideally there should be a consensual approach in respect of some basic issues.

Democracy is inextricably linked

to politics, which is the obverse aspect of politicians. If the end of all political effort is the "well-being of the individual in a life of safety and freedom," then surely politics is a noble calling and vocation, deserving of the utmost respect from all.

It is thus a singular irony that politics -- and, at one remove, politicians also -- in general are viewed more with scepticism and a sense of distrust than respect. And this would apply not just in developing countries or present times either. Comments of some eminent personalities of different ages -- who were not entirely removed from politics -- would underscore this point.

W.E. Gladstone, in his time The Grand Old Man of British politics, once took his young granddaughter to Parliament. The House of Commons in those times opened with a prayer to which only members were admitted. Perhaps it still does.

The small girl asked her grandfather the reason for prayers. Gladstone replied that the Speaker looked at the members and prayed for the country. Gladstone's great

rival -- and Queen Victoria's favorite -- Benjamin Disraeli was quite assured that in politics, nothing was contemptible; or in other words, anything goes.

Disraeli is credited with having coined the term "practical politics."

Mark Twain was never known to be brimming with reverence for anything or anybody. In a brief satirical paragraph on Satan, Twain professed neither any special regard for him, nor prejudice against.

Twain did express respect for Satan's talents though, as the latter had "for untold centuries maintained the imposing position of spiritual head of four-fifths of the human race and the political head of the whole of it," and thus surely possessed "executive abilities of the loftiest order."

For Swift, it was a Machiavellian

holy maxim of politics that "some men should be ruined for the good of others." According to Lord Chesterfield, politicians neither loved nor hated, and were directed not by sentiments but interests. R.L. Stevenson believed that politics was the only profession for which no preparation was thought necessary.

sary.

To Emerson, politics was a "deleterious profession." Jefferson found a likeness between politics and religion, to the extent that in both, "torches of martyrdom" were held up to the "reformers of error."

Writing in the 18th century, Cowper had no doubt that the "age of virtuous politics" had passed. Prior to the age of Cowper, the situation does not seem to have been particularly edifying though.

Sallust, a better historian than politician, lived before the Christian era and observed that in public life instead of "modesty, incorruptibility and honesty", it was "shamelessness, bribery and rapacity" that held sway.

Louis Howe, a close associate of Franklin Roosevelt, in an address to the Columbia School of Journalism, could not have been more blunt when he asserted that one could not adopt politics as a profession and remain honest.

And historian Henry Adams wrote in 1907 that politics, "as a practice, whatever its profession, has always been the systematic organization of hatreds." I should perhaps include a few comments that pertain to more recent times and closer to our region.

The penultimate Viceroy of British India, Field Marshal Lord Wavell, in his diary quotes RA Butler telling him that politics was a "dishonest business." Butler was perhaps the great prime minister that Britain never had.

Wavell himself felt that politics changed the ethical code of men who would regard "themselves

normally as men of honesty and principle." To him the political art was "necessarily empirical and in a sense dishonest." To be sure, Wavell was not exactly enamored of politicians in general, whether British or British Indian.

Four months into independence, Mahatma Gandhi lamented that politics had "become corrupt" and anybody getting into "politics gets contaminated." In 1970, General de Gaulle dryly observed: "In order to become the master, the politician poses as the servant." And in this century and millennium, the majestic New York Times commented editorially that it was "risky to credit any breathing politician with an altruistic moment."

Democracy is a culture, mindset and a continual process, and certainly goes beyond any quinquennial or quadrennial event. Elections though constitute the touchstone of democracy. Pandit Nehru writing in prison during the Raj, described elections as extraordinary phenomena that had a curious way of upsetting tempers and ordinary standards.

He confessed that the more he saw of elections, "a wholly undemocratic distaste of them" grew within him. His comments related to the 1926 elections the Legislative Assembly and Provincial Councils. In tone and tenor, Cicero of old conveyed a very similar message, when he deplored "our electioneering and scrambling for office." To him, the entire process was "a most wretched custom."

Every statement or quote on the nature of politics may not be taken literally. Allowance has to be made for hyperbole and lampoon. Some of the above comments may even have been made in a moment of bitterness, disappointment or despair.

Even so such assertions do suggest a certain trend in public perception, across the globe and over centuries. Democracy does not always afford the most efficient means of governance.

By its very nature and definition it has to cater to a variety of interests. It thus falters and vacillates all too often; difficult but much needed decisions tend to be deferred. Democracy cannot, as mentioned, be de-linked from politics.

The late president of Pakistan, Field Marshal Ayub Khan, at the time of making the transition from martial law to constitutional rule, had mulled over the advantages of party-less politics.

He did not persist when he found that his own supporters were not overly enthusiastic in this respect. The constraints and functioning of a democratic polity were summed up -- somewhat facetiously -- by Sydney Smith, a clergyman, writer and wit, who lived in the 18th and 19th centuries. Smith feared that no one could "affect great benefits for his country without some sacrifice of the minor virtues."

And yet democracy, as a concept, as an ideal and as a functional polity, has extraordinary resilience. It has endured for centuries, in large measure because there really is no other viable option of sustainable governance.

Democratic governments enjoy

an acceptance and legitimacy, the like of which even a most effective authoritarian government cannot claim or enjoy. Democracy provides, unlike autocratic rule, for peaceful, orderly and constitutional transition of power. And perhaps most importantly, democracy is an ideal.

The ideal may not always be wholly realized or even approximated, but it invariably charts the right course for peoples and nations.

Bengalis, including, of course, the people of Bangladesh, are said to be individualistic, given to emotions, and highly sensitive and conscious politically. GK Gokhale, president of the Congress in 1905, the second youngest person to hold that office, once suggested that Bengalis were more nimble of mind than any other people in India.

Not everyone would concur in such lavish praise. Macaulay's notoriously intemperate observations in respect of the "people of the Lower Ganges" can still rankle. Some would even discern undercurrents of racism in his comments.

Lord Wavell's comments on Bengali and Bengalis, as recorded in his diary, are not laudatory either. All this may not be relevant today. What is undeniably true is the fact that good men and women, the world over, share the same dreams of lasting peace and happiness.

One may not expect miracles of any government of any country, although a people can have legitimate and realistic expectations. To be sure, different peoples and nations will vary in their expecta-

tions from their governments.

In government, politics and economics are intimately intertwined. Economic realities, expectations and opportunities, naturally enough, will not be the same in every country. In the purely political sphere, however, some basic standards and parameters are unexceptionable, and would apply to any civilized people and democratic system.

Three centuries or so before the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Milton wrote: "For this is not the liberty which we can hope, that no grievance ever should arise in the Commonwealth, that let no man in this world expect; but when complaints are freely heard, deeply considered, and speedily reformed, then is the utmost bound of civil liberty attained that wise men look for."

Most people of Bangladesh -- indeed one would think worldwide -- do not seek much more and surely do not deserve anything less. The caretaker government is in a true sense a constitutional interlude that separates two elected governments.

And yet it has shown in a matter of weeks what may be achieved if the will exists. Almost certainly this will serve to heighten public expectations of our governments in the future.

## Filtering out the arsenic of corruption

**Will decades of the national nightmare be soon over, and will a new and responsible government usher in an era of enlightened democracy, of accountability, of law and order, of economic and educational opportunity for all? Let's hope that the groundwork is now being laid for such an outcome, so that future generations can look to this interim government as one that, after fits and starts, found its calling and made good on its promise.**

#### HASAN ZILLUR RAHIM

**A**S Bangladeshis watch enthralled the reeling in of the corrupt "big fish" by the military-backed caretaker government, and let out a collective exultation of "finally!" an event in the United States has added to this exultation.

Dr. Abul Hussam, a chemistry professor at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, won the 2007 "Grainger Challenge Prize for Sustainability" for developing an inexpensive, easy-to-make system for filtering arsenic from well water. Of Bangladeshi origin, the concerned chemist plans to donate the \$1 million prize money for distributing these filters to needy communities around the world.

In light of Bangladesh's current attempt to make corrupt kingpins accountable for their past misdeeds, the success of Dr. Hussam's discovery suggests a compelling question: Will Bangladesh finally be able to filter out the arsenic of corruption, greed, nepotism and misrule, once and for all, from its government, no matter who may be in power?

Conscientious Bangladeshis hung their heads in shame when the Berlin-based Transparency International ranked the country as the most corrupt in the world five years in a row, beginning with 2000. They witnessed with horror the powerful and the unscrupulous looting the country's treasury, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and the encroachment of religious dogma in public discourse and government policies.

Both the Awami League and the BNP indulged in thievery and

produced at the rate of about 200 per week, at a cost of about \$40 each. Over 30,000 filtration systems have already been distributed throughout the country.

Coming so soon after Dr. Yunus' Nobel Peace Prize last year, Dr. Abul Hussam's achievement ought to lift the heart of even the most die-hard pessimist.

Now there is hope that the darkness may be lifting, that those who abused power and amassed fortunes at the expense of the nation and its citizens will be brought to justice.

Because it is the army, backed by the interim government, that is spearheading the crackdown and the cleansing mission, some Bangladeshis are already protesting that democracy is in danger.

What planet are they on? Democracy cannot flourish in a vacuum. It can thrive only in the fertile soil of accountability, responsibility, and good governance. When the soil is saturated with the arsenic of greed, nepotism, and solipsism, what thrives is "thugocracy," not democracy.

This has been the sad lot of Bangladesh since 1991, following the overthrow of the military dictatorship of General Ershad.

The country has been kept afloat not by any government in power, but by the innate genius of Bangladeshis -- the human capital

-- and their entrepreneurship and creativity against all odds.

What is critical is for the interim government to proceed with prudence, and not try to bite off more than it can chew. One measure of this prudence can be seen in the systematic way in which the army is being used to snag progressively "bigger fish" with every passing day. Ultimately the biggest fish -- a select group distinguished by unimaginable fraud and corruption across party lines -- will have to be hauled in for justice to prevail.

When I visited Bangladesh last November, friends and relatives told me repeatedly that if only the government got off the backs of the people, and those in power (including the opposition) could be held accountable for their actions, the country could achieve wonders.

While neighbouring India was earning millions of dollars in foreign exchange through call centers and innovative software and hardware, Bangladesh was moving backward through debilitating hartals and plundering of the nation's assets by the priviledge.

Will decades of the national nightmare be soon over, and will a new and responsible government usher in an era of enlightened democracy, of accountability, of law and order, of economic and educational opportunity for all?

Let's hope that the groundwork is now being laid for such an outcome, so that future generations can look to this interim government as one that, after fits and starts, found its calling and made good on its promise.

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## Diminishing hopes in Sri Lanka?

**With the departure of the only influential moderate figure like Balasingham, the LTTE is expected to become more aggressive and stubborn in its approach towards the peace process. Against this backdrop -- and amid growing reports about the government's intentions to do away with the 2002 ceasefire deal as the basis of future peace dialogue -- things are moving towards a major showdown in Sri Lanka -- with diminishing chances of resurrection of the peace process in the near future.**

#### IMRAN KHALID

**I**f viewed against the current aggressive posture of Colombo and the LTTE's obstinacy to resurrect the peace dialogue, Sri Lanka's three-decade-old ethnic conflict seems to be heading towards further escalation in the coming days. Factually speaking, both the LTTE and President Rajapakse's government are simultaneously facing serious internal, political and administrative problems that are pushing the two sides to go for a showdown to defuse their internal issues.

The minority government of the ruling Lanka Freedom Party is still struggling to ensure a simple majority in the parliament. To achieve this objective, President Mahinda Rajapakse has expanded the cabinet to accommodate the defectors from the opposition so as to "secure" a simple majority for his party. Ironically, the 53-member cabinet, so far the largest congregation of ministers since independence from Britain in 1948, is a highly fragile arrangement that hinders the peace process.

The minority government of the People's Liberation Front, which backed President Rajapakse to win the elections in 2005, has withdrawn its support for the government as a protest against the inclusion of right-wing UNP legislators in the cabinet.

Now, without the support of the UNP, it would be very difficult for the government to move ahead with any new proposal to re-ignite the peace process.

The government, which has hardly achieved a simple majority last week through cabinet expansion, will continue to struggle to keep this "majority" intact as nine parliamentarians belonging to the ruling party are austerely annoyed for being left out of the cabinet.

On the other hand, the Norway-brokered peace process, which was derailed last October, has little chance of getting re-started since the LTTE leadership is reluctant to return to the negotiation table with the Rajapakse government that allegedly violated the 2002 ceasefire deal by attacking the LTTE positions last year.

Apparently, the policy makers in Colombo have agreed on the point that until the LTTE is not weakened militarily it would be very difficult to force it into any kind of compromise deal.

This thinking is quite apparent from the recent steps taken by the cabinet.

The current obstinacy in Prabhakaran's stance can be traced to three factors.

One, the government's role in creating and nurturing a breakaway faction of the Tamil Tigers,

generally known as the "Karuna Group," which has now been registered as a Tamil political party.

Headed by Prabhakaran's long-time former deputy V. Muralitharan, better known as Colonel Karuna, who led a split in 2004, the renegade faction is getting full backing of the government in launching anti-LTTE activities and establishing its control in the areas captured from the LTTE.

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Rajapakse government that have stepped up war efforts against the LTTE. The recent military successes, particularly in the eastern areas of Batticaloa, have further fanned the feeling among the Colombo policy makers that they can inflict further military defeats upon the LTTE by shoring up the military operations before re-starting negotiations.

The unusual jump in the defence budget, from an estimated Rs. 96.21 billion in 2006 to Rs. 139.55 billion in 2007, is a pointer towards this thinking of the government. On the other hand, the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), which has been spearheading an armed struggle for a separate state for the minority 2.5 million Tamils in the north-eastern part of the island, has further hardened its refusal to re-start the peace process.

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seemed the only way to mobilize Iraq's Shiite majority as "the insurmountable obstacle, the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy ... The danger from the Shiite ... is greater ... than the Americans ... I come back and again say that the only solution is for us to strike the religious, military, and other cadres among the Shiite with blow after blow until they bend to the Sunnis." Zarqawi was drawing on Wahhabi Islam -- and its offshoot Deobandism in South Asia -- in which there is a deep and oppressive strain of anti-Shiite ideology.

Bin Laden and Zawahiri were clearly uncomfortable with this new line, and the latter reproached Zarqawi directly. Bin Laden remained largely silent on the matter, but by the end of 2004, both had decided that Al Qaeda in Iraq was too strong to rebuke. And, rousing anti-Shiite feelings

weaken Al Qaeda, but they will help most Muslims only if this story ends as the Reformation did. What is currently a war of sects must become a war of ideas. First, Islam must make space for differing views about what makes a good Muslim. Then it will be able to take the next step and accept the diversity among religions, each true in its own way.

The United States should avoid taking sides in this sectarian struggle and aim instead to move the debate to this broader plain. We should encourage the diversity within Islam, which has the potential to divide our enemies. But more important, we should encourage the emerging debate within it. In the end it was not murder but Martin Luther that made the Reformation matter.

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