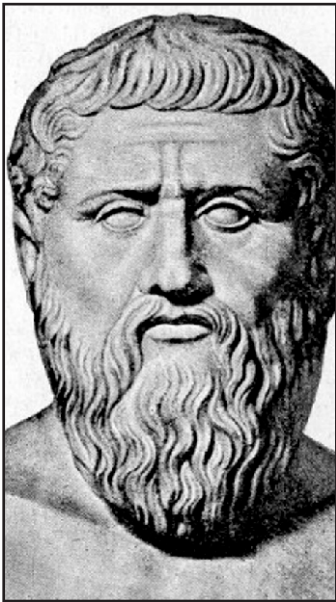


What ails Bangladesh?



However, the Platonic ideal of a just ruler is as much an exception to the norm as war is to peace in the annals of human history. Still there is no denying the fact that the greatest advances in human civilization in all parts of the globe occurred during the reigns of philosopher kings or men of letters as rulers. In our subcontinent, Emperor Ashoka in the pre-Christian era and Emperor Akbar in the post-medieval era are resounding proofs of this theory.

HABIBULLAH KARIM

SIMPLY put: incompetent governance! For the last 20 years Bangladesh has seen a succession of governments mired in corruption, nepotism, reactive planning and disrespect for the rule of law. From the highest seat of the government down to the lowest ranks in the bureaucracy, the continuous erosion of values -- ethical, moral, religious and social -- has left us with a state machinery that is bereft of any higher purpose other than serving the petty personal interests of those in power and ways to perpetuate that power by any means.

More than two thousand years ago, Plato in his writings declared that the head of the government and state must be men of learning steeped in philosophy. He also declared who are eminently not qualified for that post, namely, military generals, men of poor learning, and men whose only pursuit is pecuniary gains. Two thousand years of human history has vindicated Plato's vision of an ideal statesman.

However, the Platonic ideal of a just ruler is as much an exception to the norm as war is to peace in the annals of human history. Still there is no denying the fact that the greatest advances in human civilization in all parts of the globe occurred during the reigns of philosopher kings or men of letters as rulers. In our subcontinent, Emperor Ashoka in the pre-Christian era and Emperor Akbar in the post-medieval era are resounding proofs of this theory.

On the other hand there is a notion that democracy does not elect the best man to public office but the man who is best representative of the people s/he is to govern. In other words the elected officer embodies the general qualities -- good or bad -- of the electorate. If this be the case then the platitude, "the

people gets the leaders it deserves," bodes ill for our nation in the foreseeable future. With the exception of a few, most of the political leaders we have had since independence, including the top echelons of the major political parties of the day, are symptomatic of the virtues or the lack of them, in our general populace.

And the general populace is in the throes of decaying social mores, which many say, has been prompted by those in the highest seats of power in the country as they routinely rewarded rampant corruption over honest stewardship, servile ineptitude over professional competence, personal and party loyalty over merit and all other vices that fly in the face of ethical conduct, meritocracy and rule of law.

The overall perception of foreign observers about the state of affairs in the country is at best "a country with vast potential" and at worst "a soon-to-be failed-state." Neither is very flattering as the first pre-supposes an under-par development while the latter is the verdict given by the doomsayers based on the increasing trend of lawlessness in the country over the last decade or so.

Our lawlessness is of utmost importance to the global community, specially the so-called West (the "West" as a civilization is as much an academic invention of the economically endowed countries of a certain genre as the "Third World" is a subtle denigration of the less endowed ones -- this can be the subject of another paper another day).

Our importance in the geo-political context stems from:

a) The fact that we are the third largest Muslim-majority country.

b) The inherent distrust and fear of the Islamic civilization by the so-called Western civilization (never more forcefully stigmatized than by Samuel

Huntington in "The Clash of Civilizations").

c) Our lack of geographical space making ours the most densely populated country in the world.

d) Our passion for democratic self-governance, especially since the turn of the 20th century.

e) The global empathy for our language movement -- now enshrined as the world mother language day -- and our war of liberation, one of the most bloody and hard-fought independence struggles of the 20th century.

f) The risk of mass exodus of refugees counting in the millions if the country subsides into total anarchy, first to neighbouring countries and then to all over the world.

g) The dilemma of the so-called West (and also neighbouring countries) on how to refuse entry to such migrants on humanitarian ground and on the other hand absorb the economic shock this will entail.

Seen from the above perspective it becomes clear why we are seeing a flurry of activities by the diplomats from certain countries engaging the caretaker government to do their bidding.

But what is it that we the citizens want from those we put in the offices of the state? By accepting the fact that we are citizens of a country we are the unwitting (true for most people) parties in our "social contract" with the state. As Rousseau pointed out two-and-a-half centuries ago, such a contract can only be binding if it is voluntary and for the collective good of the citizens.

Of course for the large majority of citizens in any country, the voluntary aspect of the contract is a mute one but no officer of state can escape the responsibility of discharging their duties for collective good. It is here that we find a lot to be desired and huge gaps in institutional checks on the exercise of powers vested in

public offices.

In democracy the basic idea is for people to choose their rulers, judges and legislators with the expectation that such chosen i.e. elected officers will uphold and safeguard the interest of the electors. This fundamental premise of democracy breaks down when such elected officers are not held accountable for their performance and are not forced to be transparent in their dealings.

The institutions of accountability and transparency make free press the fourth pillar of democracy. Under the watchful eye of the free press the elected officers are required to discharge their duties, tempered by institutional checks, to ensure collective public good.

However, what we experienced and witnessed during the last three elected governments felt as if electing public officers was tantamount to giving certain individuals unbridled licenses to plunder state resources for self-enrichment. A sad testimony indeed for democratic governance one might argue. But in a broader context one can see that it was the people's democratic movements that resulted in the proviso of the non-party caretaker government (CTG) in our constitution as a safeguard against those public officers who behave like licensed concessionaires of state resources. As such it is within the democratic aspirations of the nation that the current CTG exclude most of the avenues of perpetuating public office that are contrary to the principle of collective public good.

To that end the CTG is clearly within its rights to restructure and strengthen public institutions to create a level playing field for all aspirants to public office, where the field is free from the adverse influence of money (especially from ill-gotten wealth), intimidation (of physical threats) and inequitable media access (especially important in countries with large populations such as ours).

Bangladeshis at home and abroad have been quick to express their solidarity with the recent spate of detentions of public officers alleged for corruption and other crimes against the state. The process of restructuring the Election Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission, and the bureaucracy is certainly a welcome relief from years of frustration fomented by legendary incompetence at these state institutions.

What the citizens want, however, is a clear roadmap of the CTG's endeavours, now that the intentions of the administration have been laid bare. One can only hope that through creation of the level playing field, the political playground will attract sufficient number of even-keeled patriots to crowd out the pretenders.

Habibullah N Karim is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Can we really get back on track?

I do not want this government to rule for more than a year or so. But I do want it in this time span to put a fully literate nation on an egalitarian bicycle track and then quit. Thereby this government will live forever in the memory of the nation and in the history of the whole world as a caretaker government that put the nation decisively on the road to unity and great moral height from which to develop all together, and to show the whole world what the meaning of civilization and of development should be.

MD. ANISUR RAHMAN

I was encouraged by Army Chief General Moeen talking against the Mercedes Benz and Ford cars plying in the streets of Dhaka while exchanging views with representatives of various sections of the society at Bandarban Cantonment on February 8.

This nation fought its independence struggle against the principle of disparity and to build an egalitarian society. The nation's constitution enshrines the principle of egalitarianism as a fundamental state principle. Its first prime minister, Tajuddin Ahmed, tried to put the nation on the egalitarian tract by an egalitarian incomes policy. He was one of the two high ranking persons at that time who came to office on a bicycle (the second one was a member of the Planning Commission). After return of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from Pakistan and his assumption of the office of prime minister the nation was derailed from the egalitarian track. The incomes policy was progressively abandoned, and the elite of the society was allowed to start amassing fortunes and displaying luxuries while the ordinary people were asked not to ask anything from the government for three years.

Pleas were made by some quarters including the present writer as a member of the Planning Commission, toward declaring a national austerity policy (see the writer's memoirs Pathey Ja Peyechhi, Book 2). In a note to the prime minister, the writer had argued that in the days of national scarcity in England after the Second World War even the Queen's consumption of eggs was rationed to two-a-day, and the scarcity in Bangladesh after the freedom war was much more acute. Eminent civil society leader Professor Kabir Chowdhury also pleaded in public for an austerity program. The leadership did not respond, and race of the nation's elite to catch up with the highest world consumption standard started.

Within one year after independence the sight of luxury cars plying the streets of Dhaka that one could see from an aircraft landing on the Dhaka airport started putting to shame the sight one saw while landing on Kolkata, Delhi, and Bombay in neighbouring India. Finally came the BMW, Mercedes Benz and Ford cars that General Moeen has, almost in tears, alluded to, to mock the poverty of our ordinary people. The three years that the ordinary people were asked to wait never ended, and the nation today has sky-high disparities mocking the very principle for which it fought its independence war.

But egalitarianism still remains a fundamental principle in our constitution, trampled and groaning in the dust while there is no dearth of political figures and others appealing to the constitution for so many rights and procedures.

The nation not only got derailed off its self-promised egalitarian track -- it also missed the great opportunity it got after independence to mobilize its people for development if only the effort and joy of it could be shared by all. We have witnessed how another poverty-stricken nation, China, rose from the filth of Shanghai to become the world's economic leader that it is becoming, by riding on the bicycle -- the whole nation, including the elite party leaders and ministers, bicycling on the streets of Peking.

Our elite, including our political leaders, raced for the Mercedes Benz right from independence, only to jam our road to development with high cost imported steel and pollution and the hijackers looking for their prey. This proud nation that it was, having liberated the country with immense sacrifice but with a high head, led by equally proud and patriotic members of our armed forces, soon turned into a beggar nation with the elite selling the nation's "poverty" to earn its middle-man's booty rather than leading the nation's pride to scale great heights on bicycles that was possible.

Yes, General Moeen and Dr. Fakhruddin and your team: are you seriously trying to bring the country back on track? It is certainly possible if you really want to. Clear the roads of the Mercedes Benzes, please, and let us, those who are physically able, ride the bicycle -- you lead the way. I shall join you even at my age of 73 plus. There is no shame in doing so -- the top-most leaders of China rode it in their journey to national greatness, and even in America and Europe the very rich also ride it to preserve good physical and mental health. And complement this with provisions and culture of a very good public transport system. Take this both literally as well as symbolically, to redefine the nation's march

to civilized progress.

And let me also tell you another thing you can do even in the short period you are in power or backing it: you can make this nation fully literate in a very short time. Invite every class of students in the country from high school up to universities, to take one hamlet or village in their charge to make all in this unit literate -- to be able to read and write. Such a movement by students and village youth had started in the country right after independence, but political turmoil and anti-people orientation of subsequent governments derailed this movement also. Even now isolated efforts by student and teacher communities are being reported, but this can easily be made into a national literacy campaign if the CTG would give the call. This will cost no government money -- just tell the students that they should do this with their own resources and brain and by roadside collections from whoever will contribute to their campaign. And after a student group has accomplished its task it will inform the government of this, and government will send independent newsmen to go and verify the claim. And upon positive verification, the particular student group will be given a national citation.

The head of a past government promised the nation full literacy in ten years, and I had written to her saying that there was no certainty she would rule for ten years, but if she launched the above kind of literacy campaign she could make the country literate in one year, and her ten-year rule would also be assured by a grateful nation. This advice went unheeded, and I had been told that in response to someone telling the leader that she should listen to the advice of intellectuals she had responded: "How many votes do the intellectuals represent?"



Democracy cannot grow in a country where the elite alone can read the newspapers and the ordinary people can't, so that the voice of the "shushil shamai" alone is heard, and the people cannot communicate their views as individuals to each other and across the nation through letters to the editors, and through personal letters to the nation's leaders which are all to be answered in a truly democratic country.

Finally, on our fundamental constitutional principle of egalitarianism again. As it stands now, this is only a principle, but not justiciable, so it can be, and has so far been, merrily trampled by our elite. Can the CTG give an operational meaning to it that will be legally binding? Otherwise this principle has no meaning, and wouldn't it more respectable then to delete this principle from the constitution rather than allow it to be trampled upon?

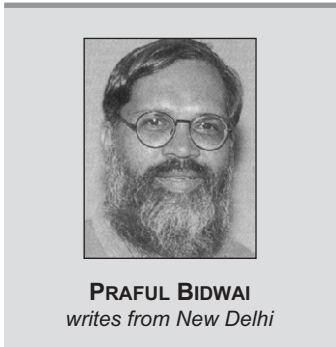
Can one even request our Supreme Court to be a bit more pro-active and ask the government to operationalize this principle so that it has a real meaning that the court itself understands? Or should the two Nobel laureates of the soil be invited to jointly give an operational meaning to this principle that the nation must honour by some judicial mandate to be formulated thereafter?

I do not want this government to rule for more than a year or so. But I do want it in this time span to put a fully literate nation on an egalitarian bicycle track and then quit. Thereby this government will live forever in the memory of the nation and in the history of the whole world as a caretaker government that put the nation decisively on the road to unity and great moral height from which to develop all together, and to show the whole world what the meaning of civilization and of development should be.

If anyone disagrees with what I have said, I shall be happy to discuss, in order to learn the meaning of development, as a teacher worth his name always learns from his students.

Mr. Anisur Rahman is an ex-Professor of Economics, University of Dhaka and member of the First Planning Commission of Bangladesh.

BJP scores own-goal



PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

The BJP today is rudderless. Mr Rajnath Singh isn't capable of leading a national party. Yet, for secularists, this may not be quite time to rejoice. Mr Modi could strike back after the Gujarat elections. He could use dirty means, including communal violence. Already, Mangalore, Gorakhpur and Bangalore show what low-intensity communal violence can do. The BJP may stoop to such violence -- while brutalizing Indian society.

knockout punch to the Shiv Sena-BJP, now in its worst-ever crisis.

The saffron coalition's victory in five cities was a bad setback despite the fact that the Congress-NCP seat-tally and vote-shares have grown. The secular bloc didn't win a decisive, comprehensive victory, when it could have.

Disunity wasn't the sole reason for this. The voter wasn't impressed by the Congress-NCP's elitist plans to turn "Mumbai into Shanghai."

The eviction of thousands of families from city centres to make way for shopping malls and the growing urban crisis also played a role.

The election result should be a "wake-up call" to all secular parties. If they don't get their act together through pro-people policies and

coalition building before 2009, they will erode the advantage they today collectively enjoy.

According to an end-January Hindustan Times-CNN-IBN poll, the UPA enjoys a 43-to-28 percent lead over the NDA. (An India Today poll also gives the UPA an edge, albeit smaller.)

However, the secular parties have one reason to be happy. Just when recent municipal elections have rejuvenated BJP cadres, party president Rajnath Singh has poured cold water over their enthusiasm through a reshuffle of office-bearers, triggering discontent.

With full Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh backing, and with Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee's endorsement, Singh has

marginalized his rivals, and weakened the pro-Advani grouping in the party.

Having declared a month ago that he too aspires to lead the party's return to national power, Mr Singh was in an unseemly hurry to establish himself as first amongst equals in the second-generation BJP leadership.

This includes Narendra Modi, Arun Jaitley, Sushma Swaraj, and M Venkaiah Naidu. Of these, Mr Modi -- the sole leader to wield state power -- is pre-eminent. Mr Jaitley is his close ally and friend.

Mr Singh struck at the duo. He removed Mr Modi from the parliamentary board, the party's highest decision-making authority, and the central election committee. And he

replaced Mr Jaitley as the BJP's chief spokesperson.

Mr Singh has forcibly and artificially altered the internal BJP power-balance, but didn't want to antagonise Mr Modi too much. Thus, he removed Keshubhai Patel and Kashiram Rana, Mr Modi's main detractors in Gujarat, from the national executive committee.

He also removed general secretary (organisation) Sanjay Joshi -- as always, an RSS nominee. Mr Joshi was a bitter critic of Mr Modi.

Mr Singh thus attempted a "balancing act." However, this was heavily tilted against Mr Modi and Mr Jaitley. Removing a few irritants to Mr Modi -- who has centralized all decision-making in Gujarat -- doesn't compensate for his removal from the parliamentary board.

Nor does Mr Jaitley's "added responsibility" as secretary to the board neutralise his removal as chief spokesperson. The PB meets twice a year. The spokesperson is on TV screens virtually daily!

Mr Singh's larger game plan was to strike at the silent authority

behind Mr Modi -- Mr LK Advani. Mr Advani has long represented Gujarat's Gandhinagar constituency and is close to Mr Modi.

Because Mr Advani clearly nurses prime ministerial ambitions, Mr Singh sees him as a potential rival. That's why he needed him by inducing Advani critic Yashwant Sinha as vice-president.

When Mr Advani's relations with the RSS soured after his speech in Pakistan extolling Jinnah as "secular," he got even closer to Mr Modi, who has become unpopular with hardcore sanghis.

There are no ideological differences between Mr Modi and the RSS. Indeed, no other chief minister has implemented the RSS's communal agenda with greater fanaticism. No other state rivals Gujarat's status as "Hindutva's laboratory."

The RSS hates him because he has become larger-than-life, defiant, and super-authoritarian; it disapproves of his "character."

The VHP hates Mr Modi because he doesn't take its sadhus seriously. But the RSS knows that

Mr Modi remains indispensable to the BJP's election agenda in Gujarat (where Assembly polls are soon due).

Mr Singh has no worthwhile following anywhere. His closest supporter, Pramod Mahajan, is dead. But he shrewdly exploited RSS-Modi tensions to his own ends.

He behaved like a petty provincial politician. Schooled in district-level manipulation, he cannot understand the limits of his own authority.

Tomorrow, if Mr Modi or Jaitley publicly insults him, Mr Singh wouldn't know where to look. If Mr Singh had a less demeaning and sordid purpose -- not to speak of a secular one, which he's incapable of -- he would have still deserved support for marginalizing Mr Modi.

What really stands out is less Mr Singh's pettiness than Mr Vajpayee's. There's no doubt that Mr Vajpayee was consulted before the reshuffle. He defended the new team as "balanced" and "formed after a lot of thought."

Mr Vajpayee backs Mr Singh out

of petty factional calculations. He too wants to cut Mr Advani to size. He dislikes Mr Modi and prefers to keep the BJP in disarray so that he can "rescue" it.

The BJP isn't democratic enough to have/accept factions contending with one another on ideological, organisational and tactical issues. It's only unified by Hindutva and denial of India's greatest historical assets: multicultural plurality, religious diversity, and inclusiveness.

The BJP today is rudderless. Mr Rajnath Singh isn't capable of leading a national party.

Yet, for secularists, this may not be quite time to rejoice. Mr Modi could strike back after the Gujarat elections. He could use dirty means, including communal violence. Already, Mangalore, Gorakhpur and Bangalore show what low-intensity communal violence can do. The BJP may stoop to such violence -- while brutalizing Indian society.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.