

Yunus' open letter

New party, more options for the electorate

THE Bangladesh Nobel laureate has sought the opinion and indeed support of the countrymen through an open letter for floating a new party. Dr. Yunus has expressed his desire openly to serve the nation, now in a different capacity. He has reached out to the people, perhaps for the first time an intending politician has done so, to draw up support for the cause of, what he terms as, a new Bangladesh.

There is no doubt that he has been motivated by honest intentions and a conviction that he can bring substantial changes to our politics and lead the nation in exploiting the potential of the country and take it to new heights. Dr. Yunus' international acclaim has given his stature, already high, a boost both internationally and nationally. And no doubt, like all good meaning persons, he wants to put his reputation and his heightened level of credibility, both at home and abroad, to good use.

Dr. Yunus is not a man of politics nor been groomed in it. But given his background, and like any other Bangladeshi, he has been exposed to the various facets of politics in Bangladesh. Therefore, what many may term as a lateral entry of Dr. Yunus in politics will perhaps be wrong characterisation of his sincere intention to join politics.

But there is another reason why his decision to join politics should be welcomed. It is because a new political party would offer more, and hopefully better, alternatives to the electorates to chose their representatives from.

However, we trust that Dr. Yunus will tread with a degree of caution before plunging in what we think is a burning cauldron that is Bangladesh politics. It would not be enough to start a party. Everything must be done to see that it endures, given the vicissitudes of the path of politics. There were other political parties in the past, that were floated only to whither away or to exist in name only. Not only must his new party, should he finally start one, make a mark, he must not overlook the fact that the two major parties have a very deep grassroots following in the country that his party has to contend with. As a development practitioner of international repute he must have very solid proposals to improve the current political climate that has so far proved deleterious to our interest.

We welcome Dr. Yunus' good intentions and commend him for his courage to venture in politics to serve the nation and to build a Bangladesh of his vision.

Hamas and Fatah strike deal

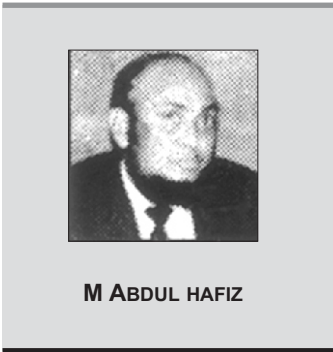
A fresh beginning for Palestinians

THE recent agreement between Hamas and Fatah on the issue of the formation of a government of national unity for Palestinians adds a new and positive dimension to politics in the Middle East. For the first time in the thirteen months since Hamas' shock electoral victory at elections in January of last year, there are reasons to think that Palestinians will be able to emerge free of the economic straitjacket they were pushed into by western donors. A particular objection to Hamas rule by the West was the refusal of the Hamas leadership to acknowledge Israel's existence as a state. While Hamas has as yet given little sign of a change in policy in this regard, there is certainly a new stirring in the wind. With Hamas letting it be known that it will respect all past agreements with Tel Aviv, there are hints of a thaw, however delayed, setting in.

Much credit for the deal between Hamas and Fatah on the unity government must go to President Mahmoud Abbas, Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh and exiled Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal. The strenuous efforts they put into the search for an agreement certainly could not ignore the opposition they faced from their followers in the two camps. Abbas' difficulty was not merely to keep Fatah confidence alive after the battering the party received at the elections. It was also to ensure that Hamas rule did not prolong the national agony brought about by a refusal by the West to deal with Haniyeh and his administration. The long months in which Palestinian government employees and others have spent without salaries as a result of the boycott of the government by the United States and Europe was a huge factor in an intensification of the search for a solution. For his part, Ismail Haniyeh was hamstrung by his party's unwillingness to eat humble pie and accept the existence of the Israeli state and by the resultant ostracism he was subjected to by the West. More pointedly, it was natural for Hamas to view western and Fatah attempts to dislodge it from office as a blatant violation of democratic rules.

The Makkah deal between Hamas and Fatah removes a major hurdle to the fulfillment of some Palestinian aspirations. Let that be regarded as an auspicious beginning for a historically suffering people.

The primacy of the political



M ABDUL HAFIZ

WHEN the Transparency International (TI)'s corruption perception index placed Bangladesh at the top of the list of the world's most corrupt countries for four consecutive years, and third most corrupt country for the fifth year, the governments of those days were still gloating over their achievements, and trying to wriggle out of the judgment on one pretence or the other.

The country was, in the meantime, rotting to the core. The governments were frequently warned by donor agencies and international monetary organizations about the prevalent bribery of public officials, kick-backs in public procurement, and embezzlement of public fund -- thereby encompassing both administrative and political corruption -- but to no avail.

Bangladesh persistently remained in the club of laggards

Whether we like it or not, politics is the force behind all social change and historical evolution, provided it is enlightened and the politicians are above mediocrity. It is, again, the political process through which such politics and politicians can be produced. Even our independence is the product of a political process. An outright condemnation of politics and our politicians will not lead us anywhere. If it is ailing, we cannot escape the responsibility of curing it.

from Central Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Yet, till the end of their incumbency, the fingers of the power-wielders remained stuck in the national pie.

Corruption peaked during the past regime of the four-party alliance, with greedy party functionaries looting whatever came their way -- with both hands. The sleazy business deals, percentage of commission -- a polite term for bribery -- for the patronized agents, and syndicated manipulation of the consumer market were all open secrets, and went on unabashed with the blessing of a particular power centre. Intoxicated by the riches acquired, they inevitably developed the tendency to perpetuate the plunder indefinitely. When that desire clashed with that of the opposition, equally tempted to grab the opportunity for similar plunder -- the deadlock ensued. That caused the present situation of a state of

emergency.

What's up their sleeves, under whose patronization have they come, and for how long -- are some of the questions still being asked. All we know is that it is supposed to conduct the postponed election of ninth parliament on a level playing ground to be prepared by them. A credible election on a level ground pre-supposes many things -- the prominent one being a reformed, reconstructed and strengthened Election Commission, removal of the influence of black money and muscle power, as well as the depoliticization of at least the election-related administration.

With the incarceration of the godfathers of corruption and terrorism the caretaker setup is set to do exactly that, and the anti-crime drive came as a great relief to the public. Notwithstanding these commendable steps the people, lashed in the past by an extra-

political aberration, genuinely want the cleansing operation, being carried out in the military's typical "spit and polish" fashion, to be the prelude to a long haul.

The army chief-of-staff has, however, done a great service by allaying the public fear of an army take-over, and by recognizing the primacy of a political class in statecraft, while condemning its avarice. This scribe had always been optimistic about the patriotism and maturity of the new generation of the military. More than once it rose to the occasion to avert national crises, and shunned the temptation of puerile Bonapartism.

It must, however, be recognized that the present caretaker setup must walk the razor's edge carefully, assessing where to draw the line as a cut-off point of the political catharsis. The signs of relief of the public is no guarantee that it would

Another glorious chapter

It is not the "war on terror," but the war on air pollution and contaminated waters around the world that is imperative. The danger posed by environmental crises is the primary threat to the existence of human civilization. Instead of investing in the war on terror, investing in research on how to stop air pollution, and to deliver safe drinking water to the present and future generations, should be the responsibility of the political leaders of the world community at large.

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

AGAINST the backdrop of uncertain political climate, another glorious chapter has been added to Bangladesh's history when Professor Abul Hussam, an expatriate Bangladeshi, who teaches chemistry at George Mason University in Virginia, was awarded the 2007 Grainer Challenge Prize for sustainability, awarded by National Academy of Engineering (NAE) of the United States of America, the highest body of engineers.

The National Academy accorded the top award, a gold medal and one million dollars, to Dr. Hussam for his research on arsenic and innovation of a sustainable low cost arsenic removal technology known as SONO filter.

This prize for sustainability was launched by NAE which invited the entire American scientific and engineering community to devise a solution for arsenic crisis in developing countries.

The competition ran for two years in four phases. 15 projects were invited to enter the final testing phase of the competition in April 2006.

The prize-winning device and process submitted by Dr. Hussam involves the development of a simple, cost effective and sustainable water filtration system (SONO filter), which can be manufactured with indigenous materials.

According to him, seventy percent of the award of one million dollars will be used for the distribution of the filter through a non-government agency, primarily through Manob Sakti Unnayan

Kendro (Masuk) in Kushtia. 25 percent will be used for further research and development, and 5 percent will go to George Mason University for their support in this project.

Dr. Abul Hussam, who obtained PhD in analytical chemistry from the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania and underwent post-doctoral training at the chemistry department of the University of Minnesota, has been working on arsenic measurement and mitigation for the last ten years, and presented many scientific papers to the international community. It was the laborious work of Dr. Hussam that brought the glory for him and Bangladesh.

Arsenic poisoning is an age-old problem. This problem exists in many parts of the world, including the United States of America.

As reported by Washington Post, in the words of Allan Smith an epidemiologist at the University of California at Berkeley: "Arsenic poisoning is a public health emergency affecting million of people around the world, including South America and the south western part of the United States."

According to one statistic, more than 200 million Americans receive water from one hundred seventy thousand public water systems, while more than ten percent depend on unregulated systems.

The fact remains that the water the people consume passes through rusted pipes. These pipes were laid under city streets 60 to 100 years back, without replacement of rusted pipes.

This being the situation, Americans are inclined to consume filtered or bottled water because of

the fear of contaminated water. Overall, the scarcity of potable drinking water is a world-wide problem, and solving it is a challenge to the scientific and technical community.

After receiving the prestigious prize Dr. Hussam has been getting many telephone calls from California, Florida, and Alaska complaining about the presence of toxic levels of arsenic and sulfur in their groundwater, and seeking his assistance in finding a solution.

Bangladesh, underdeveloped and lagging far behind the technologically developed world, is the worst affected area in terms of arsenic poisoning.

In Bangladesh, Nepal and the northern part of India, the majority of the population in urban and important municipal areas use tube-wells and dug wells for procuring drinking water. Only a very small minority of the population has access to clean drinking water.

At the beginning of the arsenic crisis in Bangladesh, Dr. Hussam felt the necessity of exploring his own hometown, Kushtia, to gauge the extent of this crisis.

Being an analytical chemist by training and helping his brother develop a clinical chemistry laboratory, he devised and installed a sophisticated instrument for the measurement of arsenic in groundwater.

Since then he has been engaged in developing a cost effective and sustainable arsenic filtration system for the poor people of the country who are severely affected by the arsenic hazard.

In his efforts, his younger brother Dr. A.K.M. Munir, a physician by profession, was of enormous help.

Similarly, his brother Professor Abul Barkat, who teaches economics in Dhaka University, has helped raise funds to sustain the Kushtia project.

He also studied, and published a report on, the impact of arsenic poisoning and its socioeconomic consequences.

Dr. Hussam was assisted in measurement and mitigation by Professor A.H. Khan of Dhaka University, and by Professor M. Alauddin of Wagner College, New York, and Dr. S.S. Newaz of Texas in the development of this filter.

According to one estimate, 80 million people in 61 districts of Bangladesh live in arsenic contaminated areas.

Since the Pakistan period, Unicef and government agencies have installed millions (10 million known) of tube-wells to tap underground aquifers for drinking water, and for irrigation of the agricultural fields as well.

This was being done disregarding the technical aspect, which caused ecological imbalance. Over-extraction from this source gradually dried up the aquifers and led to surface aridity, apart from leaching of excessive arsenic in the water, assisted by microbes.

Unicef, in fact, never mentioned to the government that arsenic was detected in groundwater in Bangladesh. Arsenic in groundwater is now a public health crisis in many parts of the world, and 500 million people may have been exposed to this menace.

Interestingly, the French warrior president Napoleon Bonaparte died of slow poisoning by arsenic in 1821.

I have had the privilege of visiting some arsenic victims in 2002 in Bheramara, Kushtia, where Masuk, a non-government organization supported by Die Licht Brucke (DLB), a German NGO, has been distributing Sono filters to the victims.

An article on this visit was carried by The Daily Star on December 3, 2002 under the caption: "Arsenic Mitigation: Kushtia Experiment."

last indefinitely. So the army is acutely conscious of the need for a timely withdrawal before its equation with the public turns sour. More so, when it deals with a public used to democratic political norms during the last fifteen years. Any undue delay in returning to a representative government may backfire.

The arrests and incarceration of corrupt politicians and their cohorts have been an earthquake, registering high on the political Richter scale, sending tremors far and wide. In the debris laid bare by the seismic event one can clearly see the contours of change which, however, cannot be expected to be absolute. There is no polity absolutely free from corruption and immorality. Even if the catharsis has started, it is a continuous process, and an interim dispensation cannot be engaged in removing the debris permanently.

The malaise that the country's body politic suffers from, particularly corruption, is a multi-dimensional phenomena and is related to complex socio-economic factors, the country's moral stand, and the value system. It cannot be wiped out overnight; neither can it be comprehended by law enforcing agencies and addressed by them. It involves social engineering to root out corruption substantially. It

will be a long-term effort, and within the purview of a regular political government.

Whether we like it or not, politics is the force behind all social change and historical evolution, provided it is enlightened and the politicians are above mediocrity. It is, again, the political process through which such politics and politicians can be produced. Even our independence is the product of a political process.

An outright condemnation of politics and our politicians will not lead us anywhere. If it is ailing, we cannot escape the responsibility of curing it. If some of the politicians are corrupt our people have the wisdom to sift them from the good ones, provided they have the opportunity to filter out the corrupt ones through several consecutive credible elections. It would be cynical to brand each and every one bad. It would be counter-productive to write all of them off.

All has not yet been lost. General Moeen aptly says that only the train has been derailed due to the follies of some, but the disaster of a crash has been averted. Let's see how best it can be put back on the rails, and pushed forward towards the desired destination.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.



This article was distributed widely through the web. Zohara Khatun, her 22 year-old daughter, and Momin Sharif, 77, if he is still alive, will be delighted to hear the news of this prestigious award, and pray for Professor Abul Hussam and his team to carry out their research work for the betterment of the victims of arsenic hazards around the world.

It is not the "war on terror," but the war on air pollution and contaminated waters around the world that is imperative.

The danger posed by environmental crises is the primary threat to the existence of human civilization.

Instead of investing in the war on terror, investing in research on how to stop air pollution, and to deliver safe drinking water to the present and future generations, should be the responsibility of the political leaders of the world community at large.

Without pollution-free air and safe drinking water, human beings cannot survive.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, former Bangladesh diplomat, writes from Virginia.

The road to sunset

Yet the banner of human spirit flutters in the breeze and the sunshine of the day left. The human spirit does not succumb but carries on with the many duties of life, with the joys that bloom around and the many pursuits that invite. It is the pride in the human spirit that keeps the effort alive. The duties are many, to the family, to the society, and to the country. And the honest and the brave do not take flight.

SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

ONE of my school friends has shifted to an old home on the outskirts of the city. The other day I went to see him, along with few other friends. We found him in good shape. He looked like a free bird. We talked about returning home. He said that his home was on the other side of the sunset. We returned home lost in our thoughts. It is the road to sunset that we are traveling.

Life is all about time. Twenty, forty, sixty -- and age keeps catching up with us. Life essentially, is regressive in nature. It takes back

what it gives unto us. The ways of life are not fair. Verily, a human baby arrives in the world with a cry. Yet it is endowed with the most precious thing in God's world -- the human spirit. It is this spirit that finds hope in disappointment, duty in distress, and sees light in the sunset.

Every part of life has its own charms. The human baby finds love in its mother's bosom. It is the sweetness of this sensation that inspires us to engage in the pursuit of joy and happiness. We discover love and the denial of love. The toddler takes the first step and utters the first word. It is the blissful

state of human life. The baby, as it grows, understands its importance, and understands well into youth that these are the golden times of our lives. Nostalgia becomes a lifelong trait. By and by we become what we are. Like Chris Gordon in the movie "The Pursuit of Happiness," we learn to strive. Chris came to know his father when he was 28. He wanted his son to be happy in having a father at his side. His pursuit of life revolved around that.

As the baby comes of age it understands that there has to be an effort for everything. A judgment to stand up to, an accountability to

answer. They fret and chafe while the standards go up. Some plod through life, some become the children of wrath, and some become heroes. It is the time that sees the birth of the spirit of enterprise and the power of the will. The many experiences they encounter, the many trials they face, make them or break them. For our friends our faces do not change. We remember each other by our faces well into our old age. Such friends of youth are the gems of our lives and remain a lifelong enchantment.

Adolf Hitler had the promise of a painter. The bonds of his family were fragile. He went to Vienna to get into the art school. But he was refused. Austria would have a son that plodded through life as a middling painter. The world would not have to endure the brutalities of World War II. He grew up a sulking man, and went to war. The war sent him back as a Fuehrer. He muddled through his life, and through the

lives of millions. Grace and poise were missing in his life.

Ronald Reagan grew up in a poor shoemaker's family of two children. His father failed at every trade. Besides, he was a drunken sot. Reagan's mother was a hard-working lady and raised her two children well. By the time Ronnie grew up to be a man he was doing a good job as a sports commentator. And the rest is history. When a bullet struck him he gracefully retained his charm to tell Nancy: "Honey, I forgot to duck." He cultivated a noble spirit and grace that shone through even in the twilight of his life.

It is grace that adds beauty and sense to life, whether one is twenty or sixty or be it eighty. The gifts we bring into life, however, bloom in youth. It is vitality that endows it with freshness. But the many gifts of youth decline with age. Be it beauty, vigour or mental sharpness.

The loss hurts in more than one way, socially, professionally, mentally and, indeed, physically. Nostalgia compounds the despair -- in situations when the aging drop out, or in its extremity, are shut of the mainstream. Every age has its share of woe. It is not only the aging who are traumatized by circumstances of life. The Greek poet Sophocles voiced the truth long ago. He said: "For if men are sensible and good-tempered, old age is easy enough to bear: if not youth as well as age is a burden." Many, therefore, say that grace that goes with wisdom comes with age.

Aging is part of life, as youth is. The brooding or the lamentation that comes with aging is afraid that there is little left. Yonder lies the sunset where death is waiting for its prey. It is not death but dying, with its many forms of suffering, that is dreaded. My heart went out to poet Shamsur Rahman when he spoke of the pains of leaving behind the

many fond bonds of life. Death is our destiny. It is natural that the aging learn to live with the thought of death. When it comes, it robs remorselessly.

Death will come when it will come. It is not only the aging and the old whom it hunts. An angel of a child is lost to leukemia. A young bride is run-over by bus in front of her house. A teenage girl is lost to human beasts. An outstanding national sportsman is lost to a mortal disease. Our valiant soldiers die in their task of peace. The only difference is that they did not see it coming, but the old and the aging see it coming.

Yet the banner of human spirit flutters in the breeze and the sunshine of the day left. The human spirit does not succumb but carries on with the many duties of life, with the joys that bloom around and the many pursuits that invite. It is the pride in the human spirit that keeps the effort alive. The duties are

many, to the family, to the society, and to the country. And the honest and the brave do not take flight.

To speak of the joys of life they are always in bloom for the eyes that seek. The melody is floating around for the hearts that reach out to it. The many splendours of imagination and fancy are ready to soar for those whose minds are keen. Human spirit is the greatest of all virtues. The journey is the business of eternity. They thrive well that celebrate and cherish the human spirit. Let the sunset come when it will come. Meanwhile, strive on as Robert Frost says:

The woods are dark, lovely and deep

But I have promises to keep
And miles to go before I sleep
And miles to go before I sleep.

Syed Maqsud Jamil is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.