

Eviction and demolition

Human factors should not be ignored

THE move to have the authorities acquire permission from the advisory committee on law and order before any demolition job is undertaken makes sense. The experience we have gone through in the past few weeks, especially where such demolition has affected the lives of the poor, has not been a happy one. At this point, no fewer than 40,000 people happen to be without shelter in the city owing to the ferocity with which the slums they inhabited have been razed by the authorities. The pretty inhuman manner in which these hapless people have seen their living quarters, if they can be called that, disappear calls attention to the insensitivities which often undermine the matter of basic human rights. While there can be no disagreement with the authorities over an enforcement of the law in any area of life, there yet remains the crucial factor of the responsibility a government bears toward rehabilitating men, women and children whose powerlessness renders them impotent. Moreover, the priority given to slum demolition has obviously not taken into account the role of the influential quarters who built the slums in the first place. In this case, it has been the victims of criminality rather than the criminals themselves who have paid the price.

The bottomline here is that in any action geared toward restoring discipline in society there are certain important factors that should not be lost sight of. One of these clearly is the need to strike where it matters the most. And here we speak of the many influential elements around us who have over time commandeered open spaces, roadsides and even lakes in sheer and brazen violation of the law. It is these people who must be made to answer before the law. We are happy to note that in recent days demolition squads have been going around and knocking down illegal structures in various urban areas in the capital and elsewhere. Such operations must be carried through to a successful conclusion and those who have misused power or taken advantage of their proximity to power must be brought to justice. Any leniency here will set an unhealthy precedent. But where it is a matter of the poor being targeted for eviction, there are all the reasons why the authorities should be exercising caution. There is always a clear dividing line between punishing the graspingly influential members of society and going after the helpless, often innocent sections of the poor. When a young girl, baby brother in her lap, wails at the sight of her hut being bulldozed by the security forces, it is our collective sensitivities which take a mauling.

Let all-out efforts for the rehabilitation of the poor dispossessed be made. More importantly, let the authorities make public the plans they have in hand for resettling those whose homes have vanished in recent days.

Probing Rajuk corruption

Go beyond illegal housing projects and land allocation

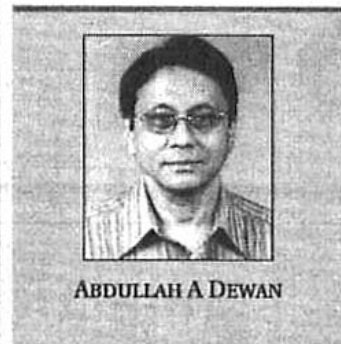
WE welcome the probe into the alleged corruption of some Rajuk officials in respect of allocation of land and approval of housing projects. However, we feel that every aspect of the development authority's activities must be gone into thoroughly. There is need for Rajuk, like many other institutions in the country, to be cleansed of the mess that it has accumulated. It has been used to dispense undue favour on party men and bend rules to accommodate some real estate owners. In the process genuine deserving persons have been deprived of their due.

Much of the woes that people living in Dhaka face are due partly because of either the inaction or action of Rajuk. Where it was their bounden duty to formulate rules, and where rules exist ensure their adherence, in the development of the capital, the dubious link of the corrupt in Rajuk and the interested parties outside it, have seen to it that whatever scope we have had so far to develop Dhaka city as a modestly liveable place, has been destroyed.

The current land recovery and destruction of illegal construction is another manifestation of Rajuk's wrong doing. While we see very gleaming Rajuk officials assisting the law enforcing agencies in demolishing illegal structures now, may we ask how the illegal structures came to be there in the first place, and continued to be there for so long? It is not that these have sprung up overnight. We take the argument that some of these were constructed illegally or without Rajuk's permission. But is it not for Rajuk to ensure that the approved plans are followed and that its lands are not occupied illegally? How is it that even multistoried buildings have come up without anybody taking any notice of it, apparently? The only reason that these could be constructed was because the dishonest officials' palms were greased to turn a blind eye. Of course there might have been political pressure but there was no dearth of the corrupt officer only too willing to oblige.

We would hope that exemplary punishments would be meted out to the guilty officials so that others would be compelled to desist from following their examples in the future.

Bangladesh Grameen Party



ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

FIRST it was "Grameen Bank," then "Grameen Phone," both of which became success stories for Professor Muhammed Yunus.

As we all know, "Grameen Bank" and micro-finance vaulted him to global recognition and earned him the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize.

The name "Grameen" is a stunning success -- 2 for 2, if you will. Hence, as logic would have it, the new political party being contemplated by Yunus may take the name "Bangladesh Grameen Party."

On Tuesday, February 13, echoing a statement from his open letter, Nobel laureate Yunus said: "Bangladesh has immense potential, and we have to tap it by ensuring worthy political leadership and culture."

He even voiced his intention to contest for a parliamentary seat as an independent candidate if formation of his political party is not consummated before the upcoming election.

Columnists and commentators have already rushed to express their guarded optimism about his success in politics, while cautioning that history may ultimately regard his foray into politics as

NO NONSENSE

The country's quandary at this time is multi-faceted, and too deeply entrenched because of decades of endemic corruption by politicians and public servants. Lack of leadership, along with the persistent catering to the interests of family, friends, and party ahead of the country, has brought the present state of emergency which could be a means to sweep away the rubble of past wrongdoings in almost every sphere of governance. The thought of a new party by Yunus was born out of these desperate predicaments.

little more than a misadventure.

It seems that no one wants to fall behind with his prediction of the trajectory that Yunus's political career will assume.

The Nobel laureate should do what he thinks he is capable of doing. I certainly encourage him to bring his vision into a political theatre that has been besmirched for so long by crooks masquerading as public servants.

Certainly he can intuit what impediments in politics lie in wait for him.

The mission to fight corruption, establish the rule of law, and maintain good governance, is what Yunus says is the guiding force behind his decision to join politics and form a new political party.

His statements that the new party would be devoid of corrupt politicians but inclusive of honest and competent Bangladeshis from home and abroad are widely applauded.

There are essentially three factors which form the basis for the formation of a political party. They are: Cost of entry, benefits of office and the probability of receiving electoral support.

This simple model was tested using pooled time-series cross-

sectional data from 22 OECD countries for elections held between 1960 and 2002.

The results show that new parties are more frequent when the cost of entry is low, the benefit of entry is high, and the probability of drawing votes is high.

Of the three factors, cost of entry to politics, especially for Yunus, depends on what would happen to the further expansion of Grameen Bank, notwithstanding the risk to his personal reputation and image at home and abroad.

With respect to electoral support, Yunus said: "I have got tremendous support from the people for launching a new political party. I want to be in politics for the commoners who would be the foundation of my politics."

Party literature stresses that new parties must overcome a host of barriers before becoming significant political actors.

To succeed, a new party must have:

- A distinct party appeal that addresses salient political issues.
- Sufficient human, financial, organizational and media resources.

- Strong mass appeal.

- The ability to take advantage of the electoral environment.

Judging objectively, it seems that the Grameen Party can easily overcome three of the four barriers.

The second criterion would take some time and effort.

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The thought of a new party by Yunus was born out of these desperate predicaments.

Initial public infatuation with a new party is often looked upon with skepticism.

As a result, pledges made by the embryonic party aren't immediately taken seriously by the already cagey electorate.

Yunus's vision of a political party rooted in public service

ideals may be seen, prima facie, to be like any other political party's -- except that Yunus is not like any other politician.

Yunus was born to be an academician. He was, for a while. But could anyone predict that he would be a Nobel laureate? Who are we to predict that he would not be the kind of leader the country truly needs?

It is inconceivable that any political party's failures would ever match BNP-Jamaat's record of misrule or AL's mismanaged governance.

If the existing political parties do not undergo significant structural reforms they will inevitably drift down to politics as usual.

As political scientists Todd Levergood and Thomas Breyfogle point out: "We must realize that our current crisis of self-interested bickering and anarchy derive neither from our own selfishness, nor from the dishonesty and incompetence of politicians, but rather from political institutions that are no longer able to restrain the worst within us."

Although the beneficiaries of his fledgling political party will be "the commoners," there are additional benefits that would accrue for the country's political process.

Princeton University economics professor William Baumal, author of "Contestable Market Theory (CMT)," argues that even if there is one seller of a product, that seller may be self-motivated enough to act as if there were many more.

The threat of potential entry of new firms (assuming entry is not cost prohibitive) may induce the single seller to keep the industry

operating at, or close to, competitive prices and output, thus benefiting the consumers while making entry look unattractive to other firms.

I argue that CMT may also produce an analogous outcome in politics. The fear of being unseated from power may force the ruling party to govern with transparency, accountability and rule of law.

The last BNP-Jamaat alliance abandoned the path of transparency, accountability and rule of law, choosing instead to traverse the unholy path of corruption and sinister politicization to ensure their return to power.

Becoming a lawmaker should be the extent of Yunus's political aspirations.

However, I believe that he should be the chairperson of his party, and so remain as a guiding force and the country's visionary for his lifetime.

The emergence of a party with clean and competent people envisioned by Yunus will pose a formidable challenge to both AL and BNP.

"Politics as usual" may soon be history. Survival of the fittest will ensure competition for clean and competent candidates and political activists. In the process, they will, hopefully, fulfil their pledges of altruistic service to the people with the same spirit and commitment as the current caretaker government.

Once that happens, Nobel laureate Yunus will have achieved the goals all of us have envisioned for so long.

Dr. Abdullah A. Dewan is Professor of Economics at Eastern Michigan University.

Déjà vu



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

If racism, defined as a group's unchangeable physical characteristics having a causal link with its psychological or intellectual development, has led to division and conflict within societies; then, perhaps, throughout the history of mankind more wars and violence have been caused in the name of religion.

Racism in the olden days meant that people of a different colour, among other inequities, were unable to sit beside the people of "superior" race in the same bus till, in the sixties, a frail woman refused to give up her seat to a person of the "superior" race and heralded a movement in the United States, shaking the foundation of the values that American society had taken for granted since it gained independence from the British. So ingrained were those values in the societal genetics of the country that even a stalwart like Thomas Jefferson used slavery in

GOING DEEPER

But then, since American muscularity has not been able to reduce the sectarian violence in Iraq, there is no certainty that the current tranquility enjoyed by the Bangladeshis would not prove to be momentary, unless steps are taken to install a representative government which will enjoy the people's mandate to bridle efforts to use religion for political gains and, at the same time, continue cleaning up the Augean stable just begun by the present caretaker government.

his business, but opposed it in the business of politics.

While the US and South Africa, and many other countries of the world, have traversed a long way from the painful memories of Simon Legree (of Uncle Tom's Cabin), inter and intra-religious differences continue to bedevil global peace and security.

Tony Blair, in his article "A Battle for Values" (Foreign Affairs, Jan/Feb 2007), has defined the "enemy" of the Islamic extremists as not only the West but "as much Muslim as Christian, Jew or Hindu," and adds that the clash is not between civilizations but about civilizations.

Tracing the roots of terrorism, Blair reaches the conclusion that the terrorists "were part of a growing movement -- a movement that believed that Muslims had departed from their proper faith, were being taken over by Western culture, and were being governed

treacherously by Muslims complicit in this take over."

In this sense, the terrorism that one sees in the developing countries is the manifestation of the tussle for the soul of Islam between those who believe in the "purist" interpretation of Islam and those who would like to embrace modernity, without which the Islamic world would not be able to arrest its spiral degeneration into pre-industrial society.

Though Blair correctly diagnoses the reasons for the backwardness of the Islamic world in its reluctance to embrace the politico-economic and cultural developments following the Renaissance, reformation and enlightenment that swept over West Europe, he skips over the colonization of then underdeveloped world by the European powers which, for centuries, established a metropolis-periphery relationship between

the colonies and the colonizers, giving rise to the dependency theory of development that offers an explanation for the continued impoverishment of the South on the ground that underdevelopment is not internally generated but a structural condition of colonialism.

The end of classical colonialism has been followed by globalization that seeks to embrace all the politico-economic structures to the advantage of the developed world that is setting the rules of the game in WTO negotiations and in the G-8 meetings.

The dichotomous policy of the developed world, where subsidy given to its agricultural sector, for example, leads to impoverishment of many least developed countries, while promising to open market access and give 0.7% of GDP as aid is recognized by the critical globalists who neither applaud nor criticize the global-

ization process but who, at the same time, recognize the positive effects of the trebling of the per-capita global income since 1945, halving the number of people living below the poverty level, and increasing global consciousness about democratic aspirations and environmental degradation.

The boomerang effect of 9/11 on the Islamic world, blurring the line between the pronouncements by the Western leaders

about the need for promotion of "good Muslims" and multiculturalism in Western societies, and suspicion verging on fear about next door Muslims as potential recruits of Osama bin Laden fracturing peaceful existence in David Held's "over-lapping communities of fate," is undeniable.

Since economic and cultural conflicts between the Islamic (and developing countries) and the non-Islamic worlds (both developed and newly emerging economies) are expected to become more acute in future, because of their quest for their respective national interests, tension based on religion needs to be marginalized. Religion-based politics, that for centuries past had impassioned people into violence, has to be shunned, and those wanting to go to heaven in the after-life may do their meditation within the confines of religious establishments.

Unfortunately, in Bangladesh one can now witness the renaissance of the fervour of Islamic zeal, reminiscent of the malevolence of the pre-partition days which led to the trauma of the division of the sub-continent into two parts, contrary to the secular belief expressed later in the language movement, the rebellion against Ayub regime, and in the spirit of the liberation war.

It would be frightening to witness, déjà vu, the Al-Badr and Al-Shams of 1971 reappearing in different guise.

While the crusade against the corrupt must continue, watchful eyes would be needed to observe that Eliza Griswold's forecast of Bangladesh becoming the next Islamic revolution, and Bertil Lintner's description of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh running amok, are completely put to rest.

But then, since American muscularity has not been able to reduce the sectarian violence in Iraq, there is no certainty that the current tranquility enjoyed by the Bangladeshis would not prove to be momentary, unless steps are taken to install a representative government which will enjoy the people's mandate to bridle efforts to use religion for political gains and, at the same time, continue cleaning up the Augean stable just begun by the present caretaker government.

The author is former secretary and ambassador.

War clouds over Iran



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

An attack on Iran will have catastrophic global consequences, including a conflagration in the Muslim world. Billions of citizens the world over will turn against the US. An attack will guarantee that Iran develops nuclear weapons. Bombing Natanz and Isafahan will set the nuclear program back by five years. It won't destroy Iran's capacity to rebuild the facilities.

relentless military build-up in the Gulf, where it's mobilising a ready-for-assault flotilla led by two aircraft-carriers.

President Bush has ordered US troops to "seek out and destroy" Iranian "networks" in Iraq. US strategy towards Iranian suspects has shifted from "capture and release" to "capture or kill." The "surge" of 21,500 US troops in Iraq will probably be directed at Iranian targets. The "Patriot" missiles being sent are certainly meant for Iran.

The US has launched a daily barrage of propaganda alleging that Tehran is providing Iraqi insurgents lethal weapons like "explosively formed penetrator" devices. It claims Iranian EPFs have killed 170 Americans since June 2004.

Iraq's No. 2 US general says his troops have captured arms whose Iranian "serial numbers."

This defies credulity. A country which manufactured a particular weapon need not be its provider. Iran fought an eight year-long war with Iraq. Iraq has many Iranian-made weapons -- within a massively armed population.

The US "evidence" on Iran is even flimsier than the "sexed-up" 2002-3 dossiers on Iraq's nuclear weapons, which undermined Washington's credibility.

Iraq's Shias aren't at war with America. The two main Shia militias are controlled by leading parties in the ruling pro-US coalition. It makes no sense for strongly-Shia Iran to arm Iraq's mainly Sunni insurgents who

proactively target US troops.

Meanwhile, the US is making other provocative moves, including aggressive air-patrolling along the Iran-Iraq border. The provocations could escalate, or can be engineered into, into conflict.

Washington's approach to Iran is driven by prejudice and hostility, some of it rooted in the Islamic Revolution -- itself a reaction to the US's imposition of the Shah. The US is convinced Iran wants to become a hegemonic regional power -- and a nuclear weapons-state (NWS).

That's why President Bush in January 2002 called Iran an "Axis of Evil" state -- despite the helpful role it played after September 11. Iran backed the US invasion of Afghanistan. It has always opposed al-Qaeda.

Without Iran's mediation with the Northern Alliance -- which it backed against the Taliban -- it's doubtful, says the latest Newsweek, if Mr Hamid Karzai would have become President.

The US has a paranoid, exaggerated view of Iran's nuclear activities and ambitions. Iran has a primitive pilot plant-scale nuclear program based on uranium enrichment. It's not clear that it can graduate to industrial level. In addition to 328 centrifuges last year, Iran claims to have installed another 328 -- when several thousands are needed to make a few bombs.

According to an International Institute of Strategic Studies (London) report, Iran's basic problem lies in converting uranium yellowcake into pure hexafluoride gas. The gas is probably too contaminated to be centrifuged.

Centrifuges aren't easy to master either. These delicate machines spin at ultra-high speeds like 1,200 revolutions per second. Even India has had trouble in mastering centri-

fuges. Besides, in earthquake-prone Iran, even mild tremors can damage centrifuges.

Iran is probably 3 to 10 years away from the Bomb.

However foul Iran's intentions -- do any of the NWSs have honourable intentions? -- and despite its record of concealment of some nuclear activities -- for 18 long years -- Iran is in no material breach of its NPT obligations. The IAEA has found no diversion of nuclear material to military uses.

The international community's best bet lies in holding Iran down to its commitment to putting all its nuclear activities under strict inspections. But the US and Israel think otherwise. They have drawn up plans for attacking Iran's nuclear installations, and its main military facilities too.

According to The New Yorker and The Sunday Times, the US and/or Israel may even use "tactical" nuclear weapons. Mr Bush is under strong neo-conservative pressure to attack Iran -- to bring about "regime change".

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Fifteen British think-tanks and civil society groups, including the Oxford Research Group and Foreign Policy Centre have produced a report "Time to Talk", which says that war on Iran will create unprecedented instability. It "would be perceived ... as aggression towards the Muslim world, fuelling anti-Western sentiment and giving ... impetus to extremists."

War on Iran will produce "havoc in the global oil market" and send "oil prices over \$100 per barrel." A \$10 increase could prune Sub-Saharan African GDP by 3 percent and push developing countries into "greater poverty."

War will also have grim environmental effects, including severe radioactive contamination, oil slicks and oil-well fires.

The impact on Iranian civilians will be "acute." "Iran's nuclear facilities are located near densely populated towns, and those living or working nearby would be at serious risk." If military assets are attacked, there could be thousands of deaths.

An attack will probably further jeopardise "the prospects of peace taking root in the Middle East", especially in Palestine-Israel, and severely undermine hopes for stability in Iraq.

Iran can create massive trouble for the US in Iraq. Within Iran itself, an attack will bolster hardliners and set back the chances of reform -- just when President Ahmedinejad's position is getting weaker and the reformists' stronger.

It's not clear if many states can and will restrain the US. But civil society mobilization against war on Iran has become indispensable.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.