

Muhammad Yunus at DU

Why debate is a stimulus to knowledge?

PROFESSOR Muhammad Yunus' remarks at the 43rd convocation of Dhaka University on Wednesday are certainly a commentary on some very serious issues involving our education system. The Nobel laureate has brought in some much-needed intellectual content into a discussion that ought to be engaged in all the more from here on. A focal point he has made is the place of debate in a society. Given the fact that we happen to be part of a world that is getting to be increasingly knowledge-based, it makes sense to argue, as Yunus does, that a primary condition for the growth of knowledge is debate. The idea of debate is indeed what the founder of the Grameen Bank has lately floated through his reflections on politics and the other elements that define life in this country. With the state of the nation none too healthy at this point, debate and intellectual exchange can surely play a useful role if we mean to redefine the concept of university education in Bangladesh.

The Nobel laureate's stress on innovation as a way of taking the benefits of technology to the poor should be seen as an impetus for the young as they step out into the real world of work and experience. This is important because the abstraction which has so long underpinned education has really not created the kind of opportunities that can enhance the quality of life not only for the young but also for people by and large. It is from such a perspective that Yunus' belief in the creation of an education system that will provide young men and women with opportunities of internship at various organizations takes meaning. Such an approach will not only bring us in line with modernity but also provide a meaningful new dimension to our social attitudes to education and what follows it. Dr Yunus' point about social businesses may be looking a little too far ahead at this stage, but that in no way means it cannot be tried out in the future. The Grameen concept, after all, was an innovative idea once.

We are glad that the DU convocation is finally over and that it ended well. But we do regret the fact that a section of academics went ahead with their boycott of the programme despite a reversal of the decision to have Muhammad Yunus as the convocation speaker. It does not make us happy to suspect that partisan politics can sometimes mar some very real achievements, such as coming by the Nobel Prize. Let us hope that our universities will someday return to being symbols of the universality they used to be once.

Demolition drive by Rajuk

Go after men behind the scene

THE massive drive undertaken by Rajuk to demolish unauthorised structures built without permission on government land has brought many illegal structures down in last couple of weeks. Rajuk bulldozers are breaking down extended structures of shopping malls and residential quarters by the side of the roads done without any authorization whatsoever.

In general, common people have appreciated the drive as it gives a visible display of vulnerability of the so-called high and mighty when law comes to play its due role. For years together vested quarters having political clout have been going around taking possession of prime spots to build private structures. While doing so they have grabbed government land

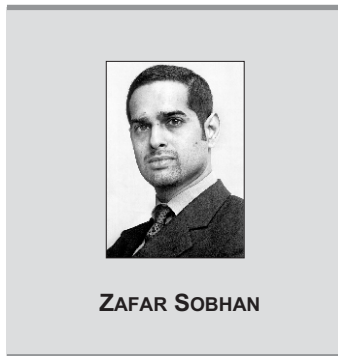
With impunity because of absence of good administration. The drive against illegal structures, whether on government or private land, should have been a never-ending exercise but Rajuk and DCC have a long tradition of remaining indifferent to such crimes for obvious reasons.

But it has been noticed from the way demolition of shops and extended structures have been going on in the past days, that it is mostly tenants who are being affected by the drive as it is their movable possessions that are going under the bulldozers. It needs no emphasising that tenants have suffered for no fault of their own.

This is common knowledge that quite a large section of corrupt Rajuk and DCC officials have been involved in preparing faulty design plans and arranging clearance certificates from the authorities but these people seem to have changed their allegiance overnight escaping the wrath of law. The same people are now appearing on the demolition sites with a holier-than-thou attitude and serving relevant notice to the landowners.

We strongly feel that the present government should go all out to identify the corrupt officials of Rajuk and DCC who have been involved in all sorts of shady deals with unscrupulous land owners. Today, because of their greed national wealth worth crores are being turned to rubble.

The ripple effect

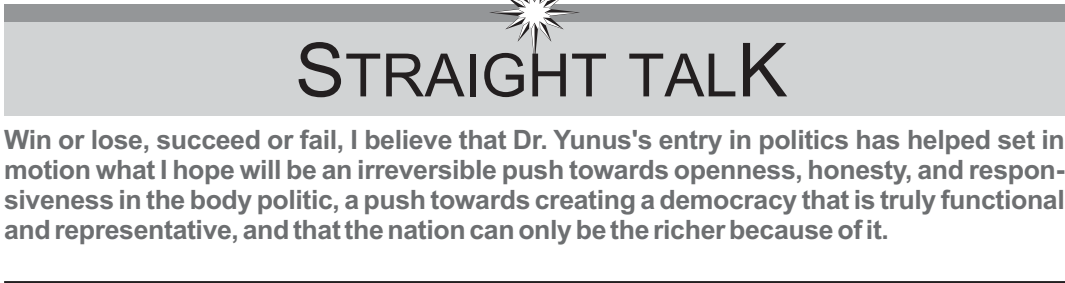


ZAFAR SOBHAN

EVER since Dr. Muhammad Yunus's announcement earlier this month that he would be launching his own political party with a view to contesting in all 300 constituencies in the next general election, the entire country (or at least the chattering classes) seems to have become embroiled in the question of whether this is a good idea or not and whether this move by Dr. Yunus will be beneficial to the country or not.

I have to confess that I find the question as to whether Dr. Yunus's entry into politics will be good for Bangladesh or not to be a little puzzling. Honestly speaking, I simply don't get it. Why would it be bad for Bangladesh for one of our most eminent citizens to aspire to serve the nation in a political capacity?

There appears to be some notion that as a Nobel laureate, Dr. Yunus should remain above controversy and above the fray. The best response to this line of argument comes from a pithy and sardonic blog-post by Naeem Mohaiemen: "So we should wrap



our 'only' Nobel laureate in tin foil and put him in the glass cabinet in drawing room, so that *mehmans* can see it and go 'aha aha'?"

The whole point, surely, is that for years the nation has collectively bemoaned the fact that good people do not get into politics and that politics is filled with crooks and gangsters. At the same time, when Dr. Yunus (or anyone else) made one of his infrequent critiques of the political system, the snide rejoinder was always: "Well then, why don't you enter politics, if you think you can do better?"

Well, now Dr. Yunus has entered politics and the knives are still out for him. I guess the first lesson of politics is that you can never please some people.

I think that the more good people we have in politics and the more political parties committed to the common good, the better. In Dr. Yunus, I see a man who has worked for the common good for thirty years, who has engendered a social and economic revolution in terms of how the potential of the rural poor (specially women) is viewed both by themselves and by others, who has not enriched

himself in the process, and who is of unimpeachable personal integrity and accomplishment.

How we could be worse off due to his entry into politics, I really don't see. If Md. Zafar Iqbal or Prof. Jamal Nazrul Islam or Abdullah Abu Sayeed or Fazle Hasan Abed decided to enter politics I believe that we would be similarly blessed. Why not? These are individuals with demonstrated commitment to the public good and integrity. How could we be worse off if they decided to try their hand in government?

So far it is unclear exactly what will be the platform of Dr. Yunus's new party, but I presume it will be something a considerable portion of the country will be able to get behind. And if they feel that they want to vote for such a platform, all well and good. Others might not. They may have a difference of opinion on the issues or believe that one of the other political parties will be able to deliver better governance. That's all well and good, too.

That is what democracy is all about. Choices. One of the problems we have faced in the past was

that too often we were not given much of a choice. Take a look at the major party nominations for the abrogated January 22 elections. In constituency after constituency, the voters were denied a true alternative, and would have had to choose between candidates who were corrupt if not criminal.

Right now we are in a unique period in Bangladesh history. The Fourth Republic (1991-2006) has come to a close, and as a nation we need to put lots of thought into how to formulate the Fifth Republic, which will, hopefully, last for a lot more than fifteen years.

We need to go back to the drawing board and start over. We need to think very carefully about what reforms need to be put in place to make the political process more honest and responsive and to make sure that in the Fifth Republic our democracy is more functional than it was in the fourth.

Frankly, I would even favour a constitutional convention to put everything on the table to see what would work (as I wrote in a column as far back as July 29, 2005). One thing which is clear is that the Fourth Republic of caretaker

government and parliament boycott and hartal and non-accountability and court-packing and partisanisation of institutions and impunity for official wrongdoing was neither sustainable nor will it be missed.

But, of course, reforms by themselves are never enough. Reforms only work to the extent that there is honesty within the political culture. The caretaker government is a good example of how even the best intentioned and ingenious of reforms can be subverted and compromised if the political will is not there.

What is needed in this country is reform of our political culture. Come on. When elected representatives import luxury cars duty-free only to sell them and pocket the profits, something is seriously wrong. When political parties feel free to ignore their own political manifestos and election pledges once in power, something is seriously wrong. When people trying to form a new political party have to fear for their lives, something is seriously wrong.

This is not to say that the political system and indeed the existing parties are not capable of reform. There are many, many people of good conscience and integrity in all the political parties in Bangladesh. In many instances, it is these grassroots workers who have been let down and marginalised by their leaders, but the core of honesty and integrity is there.

One thing that Dr. Yunus's entry into politics will do will be to

empower these people within their own party. We are, in fact, already seeing this in the aftermath of the recent anti-corruption drive, with the politicians left standing understanding that the time has come for them to clean up their act and no longer tolerate criminals within their ranks.

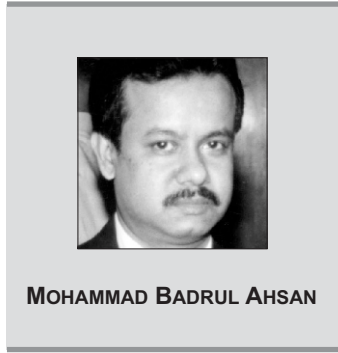
The existing political parties command the respect and loyalty of tens of millions of Bangladeshis, and, more than anything else, they need to be responsive to the public. They need to listen to their voters and their party workers and understand that their mission is to represent the people.

This has not happened much in the immediate past, but now the political parties realise that they have no choice. They were on their way towards irrelevance, but now they have the opportunity and the compulsion to reform themselves.

Win or lose, succeed or fail, I believe that Dr. Yunus's entry in politics has helped set in motion what I hope will be an irreversible push towards openness, honesty, and responsiveness in the body politic, a push towards creating a democracy that is truly functional and representative, and that the nation can only be the richer because of it.

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Going after the thought criminals



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

1984 was the dystopian deadline set by George Orwell when everything was going to turn bad. The world would be ruled by an authoritarian ruler, and his party would change history through manipulation. As the narrator described in the book, the past would be erased, the erasure would be forgotten, and then lie would become truth. People would be brainwashed, thinking only what they are told to.

Winston Smith, the protagonist of the novel, writes in his diary: "Thoughtcrime does not entail death; thoughtcrime is death." Then Winston remarks in another part of the novel, "Thoughtcrime is the only crime that matters." As a matter of fact, thoughts are the birth of actions, and the brain is the breeding ground. Nothing will change unless, first, the change comes in thought.

"The world is not run by thought, nor by imagination, but by opinion," writes American journalist Elizabeth Drew.

Thoughts work by the way of opinion. And opinions are convictions, when the thinking mind is convinced that his line of thinking can't go wrong. It is, therefore, important to look for a criminal in his thoughts. In a funny way, crime is also a matter of opinion.

A criminal, like rest of us, looks at the world through the prism of thoughts, the banality of his crime justified as an expression of how he likes to relate to the world. Some people don't pay taxes because they want to cheat the government. Its called tax evasion. Henry David Thoreau refused to pay taxes because he didn't believe in the government. It was tax resistance.

It is said that society, like fish, starts rotting from the head. It is the same with individuals. It starts with the brain, where thoughts become putrid, when mind becomes crooked and vile, when profane appears as profound, distortion as normal. Henry Kissinger observed that Nixon

could have been a different man "if only he had been loved when he was a child." Whether the distortions occur at birth or during upbringing, whether it's congenital or acquired, the crux of the matter is that thoughts are the way a man is made.

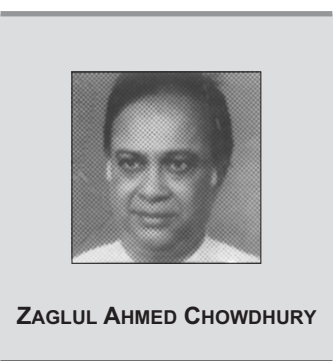
Thus the crime scene is the display centre for what is manufactured in the brain. The five senses are vendors, who provide raw materials for the finished products, and whether the degradation takes place in supply or production, criminal thoughts are concoctions where instincts and impulses let out deadly fumes. When a stinky risk politician steals relief goods, using CI sheets to build cow-pens and stables for his horses, and biscuits to feed those animals, it is irrelevant whether we blame his Maker or his mother. The miserable man has simply lost his soul.

So, I would say it is time to crack down on thoughts. Yes, we are cracking down on crime, going

after people who put formalin in fish, adulterated food, sold expired medicine, grabbed land, abused power or stole public money. But there was a thought behind each of these horrible crimes, the thought which made perfect sense to them when they committed those atrocious acts.

A century ago, Austrian novelist Robert Musil wrote a masterpiece, "The Man Without Qualities," describing the "second reality" that the ideologue creates out of his imagination so he can settle in comfortably in his web of lies and never have to live in, or even look at, reality again. The criminal is also an ideologue of some sort who likes to live in this fabrication, his misdeeds giving active form to his sordid thinking.

If a criminal kills, if he steals, anything that he does and everything that he dares, germinates in the fertile ground of his ominous conviction, which grows in the cover of his false pretension. He becomes an innovator, an entre-



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE results of the state assembly elections in India have, by and large, been along expected lines, without any major upsets but not fully without elements of surprise. This surprise is in the form of the losses suffered by the Congress, which is the main driving force behind the ruling rainbow coalition -- the United Progressive Alliance (UPA).

The party headed by Sonia Gandhi, which saw spectacular success in recent times in both national and state assembly elections, lost in both Punjab and Uttarkhand -- two important states in the powerful northern belt.

The main opposition at the federal level -- Bharatiya Janata

Party (BJP) -- along with its allies has wrested power from the Congress in both the states, dealing a severe blow to the ruling UPA coalition in general and the Congress in particular. The results in the tiny northeastern Manipur are also nothing that the Congress can cheer about.

The development obviously came as a big boost for the BJP, and it is no wonder that the opposition is claiming that the federal government in New Delhi, more than halfway through the five-year term, has lost the people's mandate.

The ruling alliance, as expected, brushes aside this view, and says that the outcome of the state assembly polls in no way reflects the performance of the central

government. Nevertheless, the results have raised questions about the likely scenario in the coming state assembly voting in crucially important Uttar Pradesh and, of course, the national elections in the long run.

Three states went to polls, the outcome of which was a matter of great interest and curiosity, not only in India but outside as well, because of manifold reasons. The voting was seen as a test of the popularity of the major national, and also the regional, parties which generally call the shots in their respective states.

However, the national parties have gained, and suffered, in the polls. The BJP along with its regional ally Akali Dal has romped home in the Punjab, while the BJP

on its own has wrested power in the Uttarkhand.

In both cases, the Congress lost power, and in the process is the biggest loser. Manipur gave a fractured verdict, but this small state does not figure in big way in shaping the pattern of national politics.

Punjab and Uttarkhand are in the crucially important "Hindi" belt, and both the states play key roles in national politics although they are not as big as Uttar Pradesh or Bihar in terms of size and population. Both states have national level key politicians. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh hails from Punjab, where the Congress had a comfortable majority in the assembly and ruled the state.

Many thought that the ruling

party might scrape through in the polls, but it did not happen. So was the case in Uttarkhand. Clearly, the results are a big disappointment to Congress which, however, is seeking to put up a brave face in the face of the electoral debacle.

Since the return of the Congress to power in India in the last elections, it had mixed fortunes in the state assembly elections. The leftists were the major beneficiaries, as they won handsomely in West Bengal and also in Kerala, while the Congress headed by Sonia Gandhi lost power in Kerala and fared badly in West Bengal where, however, it is no more a force to reckon with.

However, the Congress had enough reasons to rejoice, as it is a key ally of the DMK-led alliance that won the polls in Tamil Nadu, and it maintained its strong grip in Pondicherry.

Additionally, party chief Sonia Gandhi was re-elected in a federal parliament (Lokshaba) by-election with a record margin that underscored her growing popularity.

She resigned the membership of the Rai Barieli constituency in the Uttar Pradesh state in the wake of a controversy centering on holding

of more than one office of profit. Undoubtedly, Sonia's victory by more than four lakh votes was a shot in arms for her and the Congress.

Another aspect of her election was her son Rahul Gandhi's increasing visibility in party activities. Already a member of parliament from the nearby Amethi seat, Rahul worked hard in his mother's by-election, and the outcome was also seen as a measure of success for him as well as his sister, Priyanka Bhadra, who was also involved in the campaign as a part of her peripheral role in politics.

The Congress sought to maintain the trend of improving its popularity, but several factors in the last few weeks contributed to its electoral debacle in the "Hindi" heartland states, causing speculations that it would fare badly in the coming state polls in India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh.

Although Congress is not a strong force here, as it could not form a government in this critically important state for many years, there were signs of it's slowly improving image that might eventually bring the party back to Uttar Pradesh, home of illustrious

Congress leaders like former prime ministers Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi and now Sonia Gandhi and her children. Sonia, although Italian-born, is considered as the present heir to the famous Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty.

Recently, Congress fell apart with Mulayam Singh's Yadav's Samajwadi party, which rules the UP state. Sonia Gandhi's subsequent effort to bring the state under direct president's rule drew flak, and this weakened the party in northern India to some extent, in the sense that Congress failed to implement its agenda in the state although it is in power in India.

Understandably, there has been a reflection of this scenario in the polling in Punjab and Uttarkhand. Inflation has been high in India in the last two or three years and this had an adverse effect in the voting for Congress, while price-hike was certainly another factor.

The return of the "Bofors" scandal in discussions, alleging massive corruption by the Congress government during Rajiv's premiership, also affected Congress. Of late, an Italian businessman suspected of having links with the

huge kickbacks in the deal was arrested in Argentina, and this also caused enough discomfiture for the Congress.

The state assembly polls will demoralize Congress to some extent although party chief Sonia and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh are seeking to put up a brave face, saying that this was no reflection on the performance of the federal government.

They do not deny some fall-outs of the failure of Congress governments in these states, but see no threat to the party's popularity. Their belief notwithstanding, the outcome of the state assembly polls is a kind of wake-up call for the Congress, and it must pay heed to it to avoid a reversal of earlier success.

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