

Non-resident Bangladeshis

Their involvement in national development is important

NON-resident Bangladeshis have in recent years been creating and burnishing their reputations abroad. It has especially been in the United Kingdom, where a very large number of Bangladeshis reside, that the entrepreneurial skills of our people have become particularly noticeable. Starting off with the restaurant business, much of which is Bangladeshi-owned despite being described as Indian businesses, the NRBs have now moved to other, newer areas of business not just in England but in Wales and Scotland as well. Add to that the new, younger generation of expatriate Bangladeshis coming up in their adopted country of late. Many have opted for careers in the civil service as well as in core areas like banking in such important places as the City of London.

These are facts successive governments in Bangladesh and the population by and large have been aware of for a long time. When, therefore, a visiting delegation of the Bangladesh-British Chamber of Commerce (BBCC) met Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed the other day, it presented a strong case for investing expatriate resources in Bangladesh. To be sure, in the past couple of decades especially, the remittances sent home by these NRBs have in a number of ways made life easier for their families and at the same time contributed a not insignificant percentage to the national economy. It is now time for them to be allowed to come into the economic scene more purposefully. But that presupposes conditions where they will not be obstructed by bureaucracy here. Quite often, the complaints of expatriate Bangladeshis has been that officialdom more than anything else has discouraged them from utilising their resources and potential in helping the economy of the mother country. The CA has asked the NRBs to invest in the national economy. That statement must be followed up by how much of action the authorities in Dhaka take in helping the NRBs carry out their programmes.

Another issue that needs to be settled relates to the rights of the NRBs to vote at national elections. It is a key demand they have made before one government after another. The present administration, we understand, has been considering the demand with sympathy. We expect that a concrete and positive decision about the voting rights of NRBs everywhere will be made and so convince them that they matter in the shaping of our socio-political strategies.

Family planning pitfall

Remove the gender bias

BANGLADESH Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) and the ICDDR,B in two separate reports have recently indicated that while there has been a considerable increase in the overall adoption of family planning devices, the use of the same amongst men has actually declined. Women happen to be the prime user. According to the extensive field level surveys undertaken during the years 2000 through 2005, the ratio of contraceptive use stands at 9:1 between women and men. The experts have made the observation that only 4 percent of married men of Bangladesh use condoms that happens to be one of the lowest in the world.

Against this backdrop, Bangladesh is observing the Family Planning Week with the stated goal of increasing the use of family planning devices by 70 percent effecting a reduction in the existing rate of overall population growth from 3 to 2.2 percent.

Baby boom and poverty are synonymous. Bangladesh is one of the poorest and most densely populated countries of the world. We simply cannot afford any unbridled growth in our population given our limited land and other resources.

Government ought to, therefore, empower the agencies and the people responsible to oversee and monitor the family planning activities and seek to increase participation of men. Let us not only invest more and more in the sector and involve the larger community but also make the Department of Family Planning including its field workers fully accountable and transparent. Efficient counselling and service delivery are key to success of any targeted family planning programme. At the same time government may seriously consider further gearing up the campaign on family planning both in the print and the electronic media aimed at building high public awareness of the need for it across the country.

Muslims gone mild

In Jordan, it runs one of Amman's largest hospitals, offering free medical services to those who might not otherwise receive health care. In Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, it runs schools and job programs. The Ikhwani has not foresworn its former political agenda, to be sure. In Jordan and elsewhere, for example, it advocates an Islamic justice system.

STEPHEN GLAIN

ZEKI Bany Arshead is the Muslim Brotherhood's new man in Amman. The general secretary of the Islamic Action Front, the Brotherhood's Jordanian chapter, might be expected to spout the rhetoric of his predecessors -- heavy on Qur'anic injunctions and talk of a Pan-Arabic Islamic "caliphate."

So what's all this about

democracy? "Our minimum demand," he says from his businesslike offices in downtown Amman, "is for freedom of expression and assembly, real elections with multiple parties, rule of law, an independent judiciary and a free press."

This isn't your father's Muslim Brotherhood. It's still the world's oldest and largest Islamist movement. But as with Arshead himself, these days it's gone heavy on populism -- and light on God.

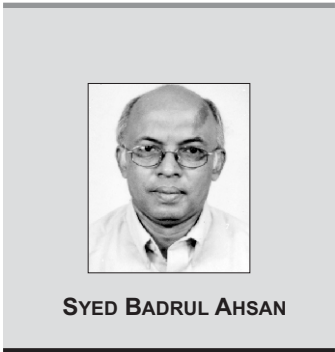
Known as the Ikhwani in Arabic, renowned for its conservative and often backward ways, it now counts women as members.

Once wary of engaging in the parochial rough-and-tumble of politics, it increasingly collaborates with non-Muslim and even secular groups pushing for democratic reform. That "big tent" political pragmatism is now helping the Brotherhood move decisively into the Arab mainstream, scoring big election

advances from Morocco to Egypt to Lebanon as the champion of the little man concerned with such daily life issues as health care, the price of cooking oil and good, clean government.

Washington seems to be taking note. Earlier this month, a delegation of US congressmen met a group of Egyptian lawmakers that included a senior Ikhwani leader -- once at the Egyptian Parliament and again for dinner at the US ambassador's residence. "The Brotherhood has become more moderate as it matures," says Adnan Abu Odeh, a Palestinian activist in Amman. "The new generation cares more about power than God."

The transformation is evident at the polls. In Bahrain, following elections in 2002, the



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

LAW and Information Adviser Mainul Hosein does not think it is right for an individual to become prime minister again and again. To that expression of sentiment, we have a simple question: why not? Men and women who have consistently, passionately believed in parliamentary democracy or cabinet government have known all along that in such a political circumstance, it is quite possible, even natural, for a single individual to take office as prime minister more than once.

We have, in our particular conditions, the instance of Khaleda Zia. There is yet a good chance that Sheikh Hasina, once she gets back home and is able to find her way back to center stage, may serve a second stint as Bangladesh's prime minister.

We will not, at this point, go into the matter of internal political party reforms, for that is fundamentally a matter for the parties themselves to deal with, despite what outsiders may suggest. Neither will we worry overmuch about dynastic politics, for the time to dwell on that will come later. But when some among us suggest that individuals be

stopped from being prime minister more than once, we tend not to agree with them. And we do that because we believe in the essence of democracy, in pluralist politics, as it has defined civilized existence in the modern era.

Now, if the matter were one of a system that approximates the American way of doing politics, we would agree wholly that individuals be prevented by law from carrying on and on in high political office. Yet there was a time when Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected president for four terms.

Once he passed from the scene, America's politicians in Congress made sure that, thenceforth, no president would serve for a total of more than two four-year terms. But that is not what you get, or propose that you have, in a system of parliamentary democracy.

Jawaharlal Nehru served as India's prime minister for altogether seventeen years, through being reconfirmed in office by periodic elections. His long stay in power did not jeopardize democracy but only reinforced it. His daughter may have made a mess of things

Some historians may argue that without Gorbachev's initiatives that were taken years ago, when he implemented perestroika and glasnost, the empire would have not imploded as it did in the summer of 1991.

This article is not about the history of the Soviet Union's self-caused implosion and consequent dismantling of the entire communist bloc, but the time and life of Boris Yeltsin, the leader who was virtually unknown to outsiders.

Yeltsin was born to Russian orthodox peasant parents in the Ural Mountains on February 1, 1931. His father was an activist who was arrested in 1937 by Stalin, but was released later. He graduated from the Ural Polytechnic Institute in 1955, and went to work as a construction engineer in Sverdlovsk, now known by its pre-revolutionary name, Yekaterinburg.

A year later, he married a fellow engineer by the name of Naina Girina. The couple joined the Communist Party in 1961, at the height of the Cold War. In 1969 he became a full-time party official in charge of construction in the Sverdlovsk region. Within 7 years he became top party official of Sverdlovsk region, which made him powerful boss of one of the Soviet Union's key industrial areas.

Not much is known about him, and what he did from 1976 through 1984, but in April 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev brought him to Moscow. Because he was a successful engineer, the president put him in charge of construction

for the entire Soviet Union. After coming to Moscow, Yeltsin rose through the ranks very rapidly and became the party chief on December 24, 1985. He shook up the party machine, fought corruption, and cut back privileges for party workers.

He subscribed to Gorbachev's idea that an economic malaise had enveloped the Soviet Union, and that reforms were needed to boost economic activities. However, he wanted rapid reform. This made him Gorbachev's enemy. On November 11, 1987, he was fired from the position of Moscow party chief.

Three months later, he was dropped from the Politburo, and Gorbachev announced that Yeltsin would never be allowed to participate in politics. Most observers in the Soviet Union wrote the obituary of Yeltsin's political life, but little did they know what lay ahead for this mercurial politician.

Three years later, in March 1989, Yeltsin stunned the world by winning a parliamentary seat representing the people of Moscow. He received about 89.6% of the votes. The government decided to smear him in a disinformation campaign, by reporting that he was inebriated while visiting America.

Some bizarre incidents took place concerning Yeltsin in 1989; unknown assailants threw one being that he the main into the Moscow River. Yeltsin, though, denied any such attack.

Two notable achievements of Yeltsin in 1990 were his election to

through imposing a state of emergency in 1975, but by 1980 Indira Gandhi had learned her lesson. She was elected to a new term in office.

So this whole idea that individuals must not be prime ministers again and again is fraught with risks. What you are basically saying is that even if the parliamentary system is there and even if the electorate is satisfied with reconfirming a prime minister in office, the rules must be amended to limit the exercise of power.

But must that happen? There is the instance of Turkey, a nation, which per courtesy of its military, has happily remained rooted to its secular moorings. Men like Suleyman Demirel, Ismet Inonu and Bulent Ecevit have all been prime ministers more than once. And Turkey has been the better off for the services they have rendered to its people.

For a good number of people, Mahathir Mohamad may have enjoyed prime ministerial power a little too long, sometimes too abrasively for our liking, but you cannot honestly deny that his being there

for the entire Soviet Union.

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Brotherhood captured 17.5 percent of the legislature. In Libya, the Ikhwani has become the largest opposition party, though it maintains a low profile to avoid the capricious wrath of secular strongman Muammar Kaddafi.

In Egypt, the Ikhwani won 88 out of 454 legislative seats in a December 2005 election marred by government fraud and intimidation, making it the largest opposition party there, too. (So fearful is the Egyptian regime of the Brotherhood's influence, in fact, that it recently amended the Constitution to ban political parties based on religion.)

The Brotherhood is expected to win a significant plurality, if not a majority, of parliamentary seats in Jordan's national elections this fall. It's also expected

to win the largest number of votes in Morocco's upcoming parliamentary vote.

If it once was the very epitome of radical Islam, the Muslim Brotherhood today draws its growing strength from precisely the opposite -- its perceived balance between the ideological extremes of Al Qaeda and the administration of George W. Bush. Their cosmic struggle of good versus evil is of scant concern to most Muslims, and the Brotherhood knows it.

Ask an ordinary Arab what it stands for, and the likely response would be affordable health care, schools and vocational training. Far from constituting a dangerous underground, the Muslim Brotherhood increasingly draws its core constituency from the ranks of

transformed Malaysia from a poverty-stricken nation into one ready to come level with the rest of the world.

In Bangladesh, while many among us may have serious reservations about the nature of the politics so long pursued by Begum Zia and Sheikh Hasina, not one among us will question the very historic role they once played in guiding the country back to popular democracy in the early 1990s.

The suggestion, therefore, that they be isolated and kept away from the center of politics is a thought that is deeply worrying. Of course, you may come forth with the perfectly justified argument that the governments they presided over eventually undermined themselves, in varying degrees, through corruption and other vices. But that would be a separate issue, to be tackled through a strict enforcement of the law.

The reality of past corruption cannot, however, be an excuse for the globally accepted conventions of politics to be set aside by executive fiat. That move can only be made through a popularly sanc-

tioned process. We call that democracy. When you reflect on the question of how long prime ministers ought to be in office, you tend to look back at the three terms, eleven years in all, that Margaret Thatcher served at 10 Downing Street. She quit only when it became obvious that her Conservative Party colleagues had risen in revolt against her, that it would be difficult to go on with all her enemies ranged against her on all sides of the field.

Much a similar thing has been going on with Tony Blair. You can see the agony he is going through because of all the pressure on him to hand over to Gordon Brown. Blair has outlived his usefulness and will leave sometime this year. Note, though, that no one has hinted that a British prime minister be limited to a particular number of years in power.

You might come up with the thought that Bengali political culture is quite removed from that in Britain. We will agree with you. But what we surely will not accept is your view that our politicians, in our parliamentary system, be served notice that they must quit office after the lapse of a certain period of time.

The problem is not with having Khaleda Zia or Sheikh Hasina go on and on and on as prime minister. The problem is one of ensuring a political system where clean, free, fair and transparent elections will be organized, and the results will be accepted by everyone who takes part in them.

And yet, we will agree, political systems sometimes become creaky before collapsing altogether. That was one reason why Charles de Gaulle put an end, through instituting the Fifth Republic, to the parliamentary system stifling France between the liberation of the country from the Nazis in 1944 and the changes in 1958.

So far, in Bangladesh, it does not appear that the system has collapsed, that it is indeed time to construct the rudiments of a possible new political structure. And if there is any left wondering whether the country ought to be reverting to a presidential form of government, let them be reminded that Bangladesh's presidents, minus a powerful parliament, have inexorably and inevitably ballooned into authoritarian symbols of power. That certainly did the country little, if any, good. We would not want to go back to all that, would we now?

In a bygone era, Felipe Gonzalez served as Spain's prime minister for a long time. Canada's Pierre Elliot Trudeau was prime minister more than once. In Australia, John Howard remains unstopable in his determination to hold on to prime ministerial office.

There is the story of Sirimavo Bandaranaike we remember. The Papandreuos have held power in Greece term after term; and Hun Sen has been getting elected repeatedly in a country once ravaged by the Khmer Rouge. No one, as far as we can recall, volunteered the thought that they ought to call it a day.

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Later, he underwent multiple-bypass heart surgery. Yeltsin, following the western model, relied heavily on a closely-knit group of advisers. They essentially ran the government when he fell sick repeatedly. He recruited an entire group of academicians from St. Petersburg. Anatoly Chubais, Vladimir Putin, and a few others, also helped the Yeltsin administration.

In 1998, he dismissed the entire Russian government again, amid an economic crisis, and selected Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov as prime minister. All this time his health was deteriorating, and he suffered ailments from multiple disorders. A year later, he successfully fought against an impeachment charge in the lower house of parliament.

His second term was supposed to end March 2000, but he stunned the world by resigning earlier, on December 31, 1999. He named Vladimir Putin, his prime minister and a former KGB agent, as acting president.

Yeltsin went into obscurity after resigning. However, in 2002, he said in an interview that he had no regrets about his role in the breakup of the Soviet Union. He termed it a necessary evil, "to keep Russia whole."

In a rare interview, in June 2006, he said that his choice of Putin as his successor was the right decision because, without a "strong hand," the country would disintegrate. In hindsight, Yeltsin made the right decision, because Vladimir Putin turned out to be an autocrat of tall order.

Yeltsin will be remembered as the man who fought against Gorbachev while speeding up the demise of Soviet Union. Perhaps Russia needed a leader like him, someone who took some unpopular but bold decisions to keep the country intact.

Dr. A.H. Jaffor Ullah, a researcher and columnist, writes from New Orleans, USA

law-abiding professional elites - pious doctors, lawyers, engineers and educators alienated equally by US policies and Al Qaeda's violent intolerance.

"Does Muslim Brotherhood want to be the ruling party?" asks Mohammed Mahdi Akef, the supreme guide of the Ikhwani's Egyptian chapter. "Yes, but only through the ballot box."

In contrast to the region's corrupt and lethargic governments, the Muslim Brotherhood is respected for delivering on an impressive array of social programs, especially for the poor and disenfranchised. It finances a sewage-treatment plant in the slums of Cairo.

In Jordan, it runs one of Amman's largest hospitals, offering free medical services to

those who might not otherwise receive health care. In Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, it runs schools and job programs.

The Ikhwani has not foresworn its former political agenda, to be sure. In Jordan and elsewhere, for example, it advocates an Islamic justice system.

And certainly, Middle East regimes have cause to be concerned. "They are increasingly afraid," says a senior Western diplomat in Cairo -- not merely because the Brotherhood might come to power, but because it might rule more honestly and effectively than those currently in office. But from the point of view of the Arab man on the street, would that be so bad?

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