

Yunus' withdrawal from political mission

But his goals remain relevant

WE are disappointed to learn the Prof. Yunus has decided to stand aside from his plans to join politics. We are sorry that he could not form a party, for whatever reasons. But the Noble laureate's intention to start a new political party and his subsequent decision to reverse the idea have thrown up a message for us. We should all recognize the compelling circumstances that motivated him to be persuaded to give up a calling of so many years and embark on a venture altogether new to him.

For one thing, his decision to start a political party had not only caused a stir among all the major political parties in the country it also caused their leadership to sit up and take note of the fact that there was a need for political reform in the country including the reform of the political parties and of the character of politics in Bangladesh. Although he has decided to give up on his idea of joining politics we believe that his stated goals remain relevant nonetheless.

In his call for 'clean politics,' a slogan he popularised, he touched the psyche of the common man and reflected his desire for seeing a clean political environment established in the country. Very few, indeed none, would disagree with him that politics in Bangladesh must undergo sea change; that the nature of our politics should change and that the politicians must move away from their confrontational relationship, that saw the near collapse of democracy in our country, to one that would help the process of nation building by putting the interest of the nation and the people above every one else's.

That to be possible there is no alternative but for the political parties to immediately initiate intra-party reforms to bring in more internal democratisation. This is essential if they want to regain public support. There is also no alternative for the parties either than to nominate clean candidates in future, whose priority would be the furtherance of the interest of their electorates, not their own.

Although Prof. Yunus has departed from his political goal we believe that he has an important role to play in all aspects of the national life. We would like to see him very actively engaged in the great role of guiding the nation towards modernity and progress.

Death on the Buriganga

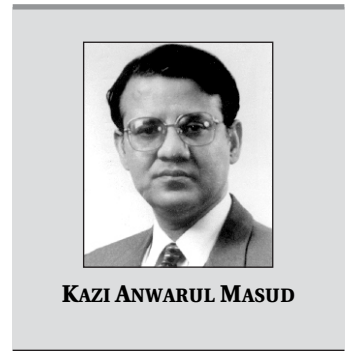
We need to be wary of such trips

THE tragedy which occurred on the Buriganga on Friday leaves us all sad. The sadness is in the knowledge that quite a few people lost their lives in an accident that should not have occurred at all. As we understand it, a large group of picnickers, after what had clearly been a chaotic day involved in arguments and the like, reached Sadarghat in the late afternoon. It was just at that point that about twenty five persons entered the launch carrying the picnickers and went into a frenzy of violence that left at least four individuals dead and many others missing. A good number of these individuals simply jumped into the river to save themselves. A few others, worried about their safety, leapt on to the boats near the launch, which eventually overturned and added to the tragedy.

A few rather pertinent questions arise from the whole sad incident. The first of these relates to the manner in which the picnic was organized by some individuals in the old part of Dhaka. Anyone interested in going on the picnic, which basically meant a river cruise, could do so on payment of about three hundred taka. The whole enterprise thus took on the shape of a business venture on the part of the organizers. As for those who paid up for the trip, it appears that not all of them were known to one another. In other words, it was a whole big group of about 200 people, mostly strangers, all going on a journey of pleasure. The second question revolves around the cause of the incident. There are reports that some stray remarks regarding some women in the group caused the flare-up. Yet other reports suggest that inebriation on the part of some in the large party led to the tragedy. And our third question relates to what role the Ansar guards on the launch may or may not have played in the whole sordid affair.

A three-member probe body has been formed to look into the causes of the incident. That is a fine step, but what must now be ensured is that merry-making of this kind is not repeated. Of course the tragedy was an unforeseen one, but should the organizers have not been a little careful before planning out their programme?

A fractured world



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

BRITISH Ministers have been advised never to use the term "Islamic extremism" lest it give it offence to "decent minded people." Many scholars object to the use of the term "Islamic fundamentalism" on the grounds that fundamentalism is not peculiar to Islam, and had not only originated in Christianity but has also been embraced by factions belonging to many religions.

Besides, going back to the fundamental teachings of any faith, however incongruous it may seem in the post-modern world of today, cannot be debatable as long as the journey back is made voluntarily by those convinced of the ultimate uselessness of the material benefits offered by today's world.

The problem arises when, in the name of religion majoritarian, religious belief is imposed on the minority community through violence in any country, and also when violence having multi-national character spreads its wings to other countries where people do not subscribe to the

GOING DEEPER

One cannot but wonder whether paying obeisance to Robert Kagan's thesis of US muscularity and Liam Ferguson's entreaty to the US to take up the call of history would not, after all, bring anew the metropolitan-peripheral relationship of a different variety. Some day in the near future the developing countries (barring those who would be embraced by the First World) would have to decide on the course they would be taking for the welfare of the future generations.

extremist faith the corruptors are bent upon inflicting upon the people.

Not to oppose these people would constitute, in the words of Tony Blair, "a doctrine of benign inactivity," and he picks up the cudgel against the majority view of a large part of Western opinion which regards American policy since 9/11 as gross overreaction, George Bush as much of a threat to world peace as Osama bin Laden, and that the bloody conflict is understandable in the light of US/UK imperialism.

Blair tells these people, and especially the deviants from the Muslim faith, that their attitude towards America "is absurd, their concept of governance is pre-feudal, their position on women and other faiths reactionary and regressive."

In Tony Blair's mind, what is happening in the world is not a clash between civilizations but a clash about civilizations. "It is the age old battle between progress and reaction," he says, "between those who embrace, and see the opportunity in, the modern world and those who reject its existence, between optimism and hope on the one hand and pessimism and fear on the other."

The British prime minister knows that not to fight the menace which has afflicted many countries, including Bangladesh despite the hanging of six JMB terrorists, would be in Churchillian language wasted opportunities, and that the future generation would describe this inaction as "The Locust Years."

Tony Blair's enunciation in 1999 of the doctrine of international community the basic thesis of which is the defining characteristic of today's world through its interdependence, yet while the economics of globalization is well matured, the politics of globalization are not, and therefore unless a common global policy based on common values is articulated, "we risk chaos threatening our stability, economic and political, through letting extremism, conflict or injustice go unchecked."

British foreign policy of late,

climate change is an act of aggression by the rich against the poor. This grim scenario becomes grimmer if by 2020 half of the world's oil production is controlled by countries currently running the risk of internal instability.

But then British foreign policy, even if one were to look at it from a benign point of view, may not carry Gordon Brown, the anointed successor to Tony Blair, very far if Nicholas Sarkozy succeeds in taking away the far right votes of Jean-Marie Le Pen in the second round of the French presidential election.

Under Sarkozy, who has a comfortable lead over Socialist Segolene Royal, family reunification may become a thing of the past and foreign workers would no longer have access to welfare payments.

Given last year's race riots that left French multiculturalism in tatters, a majority of French voters believe that mastering immigration would be the greatest challenge for the next government and, hence, the race to the right has taken center stage in French politics.

Added is the continuing intransigence of President Bush, displayed through his vetoing the Congress resolution asking for a time frame for withdrawal from Iraq. One cannot be sanguine about Western munificence towards developing countries, so necessary for their economic development and future survival. Australia has refused to take in few thousand people from Vanuatu, an island in the South Pacific, which is being slowly

submerged due to climate change.

In the ultimate analysis, while the optimists may hold on to their hope that the clash about civilizations may ultimately be resolved without resorting to brutal Hobbesian struggle and the mechanism of social Darwinism, the pessimists may have less confidence in a just international structure and believe in the thesis of former State Department official Mark Lagon that where consensus cannot be achieved in the United Nations, US efforts to enforce norms constitute leadership rather than "license."

Some hold the view that it is a positive development that the UN recognizes situations in which national sovereignty loses legitimacy, paving the way for the Responsibility to Protect that was affirmed at the 60th UN anniversary World Summit of September 2005.

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Some day in the near future the developing countries (barring those who would be embraced by the First World) would have to decide on the course they would be taking for the welfare of the future generations.

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Strengthening state autonomy

What emerges from this discussion about autonomy of state under neo-liberalism? The key message is to prepare the ground for social democracy. Class coalition, greater role for state, subjecting market under democratic public interests, and greater alliance of local level initiatives towards tangible change are key focal issues of the social democracy project. The ultimate result is a democratized democracy. Liberal democracy does not offer an opportunity to people from various professional groups (not just politicians) to join in power dynamics. The representation of various classes will ensure stronger role of state.

OMAR MOHAMED

IN *Development as Freedom* (1999), Amartya Sen emphasizes the role of democracy in enhancing the pace of development. He says: "Developing and strengthening a democratic system is an essential component of the process of development" (p. 157). Sen's proposition encourages me to move beyond the domain of so-called liberal democracy, which may not always be able to make positive changes in the lives of masses.

The conventional diagnosis of this problem is one-dimensional. It focuses on institutional problems of political parties and other institutions but is blind towards neo-liberal policy ideals. In this perspective, the critique of corruption has gained momentum nowadays.

It misses some crucial aspects of power dynamics at national level. In liberal democracy, the formation of a decision-making group at national level does not ensure the representation of various groups in a society. Against this backdrop, I sketch a draft agenda to initiate the practice of social democracy. The objective is to enhance our understanding of democracy to achieve a democratized democracy.

Liberal democracy ensures politi-

cal freedom that lays a solid foundation for development. Such a framework ignores structural issues within a society. This is what Professor Richard Sandbrook and his colleagues, in their book *Social Democracy in Global Periphery* (2007), label "system-level problem." This "system-level problem" is ignored by neo-liberal thinkers.

Neo-liberal ideals provide us specific policy options for a "good" society, which is a kind of ideal construction of neo-liberalism. This is colonial in attitude, since it makes a comparison between the North and the South. To accelerate the pace of development, we need a program of action that spreads over time and space. The combination of temporal and spatial agendas in development planning ensures greater benefit.

The changing political context in Bangladesh provides an opportunity to rethink about liberal democracy. Certainly, an assessment of 15 years of democracy will not paint a rosy picture of institutional reform, democratic political culture, and social development.

Under the circumstances, we can think of an alternative to liberal democracy: "social democracy." Instead of the domination of the elite, it will introduce a cross-class coalition, which will enhance a broader agenda of social development.

Under liberal democracy, it is hardly possible to implement the three major themes of development: equality and social justice, freedom, and solidarity. Social democracy is based on a broader framework of democratic principles. We should not confuse equality and social justice with equality under law, as the promoters of liberal democracy do. It means economic and social equality. Equality under law minimizes the scope of democratic principles.

Social democracy moves beyond the interpretation of freedom as meaning only individual freedom, and strives for freedom from discrimination and dependence. Keeping these ideas in mind, we should make a thorough examination of democracy as practiced in many developing countries.

Social democracy could be viewed as counter-ideology to neo-liberalism. It offers people-oriented capitalist principles. It will accept market economy, but subject it to public interests, which democratic governments rarely care for. Their agenda is to serve market interests, and the vested quarters will exploit national policies.

To achieve benefits, neo-liberal

thinkers stipulate some common assumptions: individual as unit of analysis, market exchange, and individual as rational being. They ignore power hierarchy in society and in the market.

Critics say that a state can fulfill democratic public interests, but under the hegemony of neo-liberalism it faces enormous crisis. The elite, who are always at the center of power dynamics, share the same assumptions. But they cannot exert influence over external forces, and seem indifferent toward promotion of equality and social justice.

Can socialism be an alternative to neo-liberalism? Socialism, in which the state plays a leading role in development planning, can be a counter to neo-liberalism. However, there are not many successful cases of socialism, except Cuba.

The socialist principles had collapsed in Russia. China is developing a mixture of capitalism and socialism, and has achieved high economic growth, although it results in inequality within society, which critics call "two countries within one country."

Economic growth, unless it promotes equality and social justice, fails to offer greater benefit. Social democracy offers equality and social justice, and moves beyond the principles of socialism. A congenial democratic environment is needed to raise such a coalition to state level. Under liberal democracy, there is little room for engaging a cross-section of people in governance.

Corruption is a by-product of liberal democracy and produces new types of inequality in developing countries. Liberal democracy cannot eliminate the problem of corruption. Social democracy can introduce a

new system, and can spawn changes in governance to eliminate corruption.

Specific measures have to be adopted at local, national and global level to ensure social democracy at all levels. This can ensure participation of people from all sections of society.

However, we have to create links among these three levels. Local level initiatives may not reach national level unless there is an effort to enhance smooth relationship between them. The formation of power dynamics at national level is crucial, since it will negotiate the rules of games at global level. Thus, national level will play double role: enhancing local level changes and maintaining negotiation at global level.

Today, many political analysts advocate the consolidation of democracy in developing countries, which, rather than promoting a solid foundation for development principles that benefit society, serves the interests of neo-liberal agendas. After a careful analysis of democracy in newly democratic countries, Fareed Zakaria (1997) labels it "illiberal democracy" for its failure to ensure greater public interests.

When we talk about the consolidation of democracy, we have to keep in mind the results of liberal democracy that we have experienced since 1991. Liberal democracy cannot bring about tangible changes in the fortunes of the masses, which was the chief aim of Bangladesh's liberation war. Gradually, mainstream political parties have detached themselves from that dream, and have devoted themselves to serving the interest of global forces.

Some analysts lay emphasis on reforms to overhaul various national institutions and political parties, and make them democratic and accountable. However, reforms will not offer us much benefit unless there is an ideological change at the national level. We have to rethink democracy, national planning, and development. How could we get maximum benefit from our available resources?

The choice is dichotomous: a) either we would like to be dominated by neo-liberal policy agendas; b) or we would like to make tangible changes at all levels of society. The latter fits well with the interest of the masses, who are more conscious about development policies, outcomes of these policies, and corruption, than they were earlier.

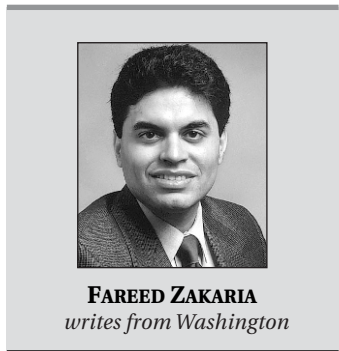
They could strengthen local level initiatives for tangible change. Such a foundation will work as the springboard of social democracy. Who will make these agents of change at the grassroots level?

What emerges from this discussion about autonomy of state under neo-liberalism? The key message is to prepare the ground for social democracy. Class coalition, greater role for state, subjecting market under democratic public interests, and greater alliance of local level initiatives towards tangible change are key focal issues of the social democracy project.

The ultimate result is a democratized democracy. Liberal democracy does not offer an opportunity to people from various professional groups (not just politicians) to join in power dynamics. The representation of various classes will ensure stronger role of state.

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Boris Yeltsin's wrong moves



FAREED ZAKARIA
writes from Washington

MUCH of the fulsome praise for Boris Yeltsin has come from outside Russia. While Russians continue to have a dyspeptic view of the grand old man, foreign leaders have rushed in to remind the world what a courageous and pivotal figure he was.

It was Yeltsin, they remind us, who dismantled the Soviet empire. It was his decision to voluntarily leave office that created Russian democracy. We all remember Yeltsin on top

Why did these two pivotal nations go down the roads they did? Part of the reason is that Russia is afflicted by the curse of natural resources, part that China is a more pragmatic society. History, culture and demography all play a part. But so do people. And it is worth wondering what might have been had Boris Yeltsin, in those critical years, turned Russia along a different course.

on that tank in 1991, when he almost singlehandedly turned back a coup d'état.

I share some of this admiration for Boris Yeltsin. He will surely stand as a figure on the fringe of history -- yet he pointed Russia in the wrong direction. Compare Russia with China. In the early 1990s, they were the two most important countries in the world that lay outside the sphere of democratic, capitalist states.

Russia had by far the stronger hand. In those days it was still regarded as the second most important world power, whose blessings

were needed for any big international endeavour -- whether the first gulf war or Middle East peace negotiations.

It had a GDP of \$1 trillion (in purchasing-power parity), the world's second largest military and its second largest pool of technically trained personnel. Perhaps most significant, it had the most abundant endowment of natural resources on the face of the earth. And with Yeltsin as president, the country had a charismatic leader who could leverage this hard and soft power.

China by contrast was an interna-

tional pariah. It had just gone through the shame of the Tiananmen Square massacres. Its per capita GDP was just one third that of Russia's, making it one of the poorest countries in the world. Its educational and technological system was still in shambles, having been shut down during the Cultural Revolution.

Its leaders -- a group of seemingly narrow-minded engineers -- were cautiously introducing reforms to a country still limping after decades of Mao Zedong's mad gambits at home and abroad.

We now forget that what Yeltsin did on top of that tank was to issue unilateral decrees. While they may have been suited to that emergency, they became standard procedure in Yeltsin's tenure. He ruled by fiat, firing judges, governors and legislators who crossed him.

He pursued an economic privatization program that led, intentionally or not, to chaos and corruption. He waged a ruinous war in Chechnya that still drains Russia. He implemented what the historian (and Yeltsin supporter) Richard Pipes called a coup d'état to install Vladimir Putin as his successor.

Look at the two countries today: though the Russian economy has surged because of high oil and commodity prices, China's is now six times larger. Even more interesting is the political trajectory. Russia, in almost every dimension, has become less free over the past decade. Its economy is increasingly state-

dominated, its polity controlled and its people cowed.

Consider that in the past 10 years, after Iraq, Russia has been the country in which the largest number of journalists have been killed. (And while many of the deaths in Iraq were accidental, this is true of almost none of them in Russia.)

China, by contrast, has seen greater economic, legal and social reform every year. This year, finally, the Communist Party adopted guarantees of private property and greater government transparency. (For those who dismiss China's reforms because they are "merely" economic, recall that for John Locke and Thomas Jefferson, the right to private property was at the heart of individual liberty.)

My point is not that China is freer than Russia. It is not. But for a decade, the arrow in Russia has been moving backward, while in China it

is moving -- slowly -- forward.

This divergence between the Russian and Chinese models has had powerful implications around the world. Russia has become an example -- but a negative example. The Chinese leadership has privately admitted to having watched Yeltsin's reforms, and decided that they produced economic chaos, social instability and no growth. (Russia's GDP contracted by 20 percent during the 1990s.)

Instead of similar shock therapy -- which Bill Clinton's Russia hand, Strobe Talbott, accurately characterized as "too much shock, too little therapy" -- China chose a cautious, incremental path. "We must cross the river by feeling the stones with our feet," said Deng Xiaoping.

Rather than shutting down state-owned enterprises, Beijing chose to grow the economy around them, so that the state-owned portion kept

shrinking and its problems became more manageable.

Look around the world, from Vietnam to Egypt, and you see officials studying China's economic reforms. I have not come across a single official anywhere who has ever claimed to be emulating Russia's path from communism.

Why did these two pivotal nations go down the roads they did? Part of the reason is that Russia is afflicted by the curse of natural resources, part that China is a more pragmatic society. History, culture and demography all play a part. But so do people. And it is worth wondering what might have been had Boris Yeltsin, in those critical years, turned Russia along a different course.

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