

Leadership will not grow from trees

KHALID SHAMS

POLITICAL development in the West was the result of a long evolutionary process. It involved developing institutions, which could exercise checks and balance to prevent abuse of power by the chief executive. Institutions like the Parliament in England, the Presidency in the United States or the Cabinet in UK, the appellate judiciary, Congressional committees, and the political parties themselves have taken decades, even hundreds of years to develop.

The US, in spite of the enormous resources that the European settlers were able to grab from the indigenous people, passed through a dark period that was known as the "wild, wild west."

Corruption was widely rampant, and elections to public offices were frequently rigged.

Even after the Second World War, the Mafia and the Tammany Hall ruled much of New York and Chicago. The scenario of New York city was vividly depicted in Mario Puzo's famous novel, "Godfather," which also became a Hollywood movie and an instant box-office hit.

The civil war in the US -- where the southern whites went to war to defend their rights to profit from slavery -- also delayed the growth of democracy, because it created very deep-rooted rifts between the northern and the southern states.

As a consequence, the blacks were effectively disenfranchised until 1956, when the government forced integration of public schools. Ultimately, it was the quality of the political leadership, and its strategic vision, that strengthened existing institutions like the judiciary, the electoral process and local government.

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matic leadership to emerge

If we look at the experience of newly independent countries in Asia, once again we see how important was the quality of the founding political leadership in building institutions. The names of Jawaharlal Nehru in India, Soekarno in Indonesia and Tunku Abdul Rahman in Malaysia, Lee Kwan Yew in Singapore, come straight to one's mind. Amongst these instances, India's experience would stand apart, because the Indian political institutions have evolved since the British colonial times.

His leadership was directly in contrast to that of Jinnah in Pakistan, where the Bengalis, in spite of their majority, failed to win any recognition from the distant central government. Tunku was able to persuade the ethnic Chinese to accept Bahasa Malaysia, the language of the majority Malays, as the national language of the new country. He made a crucial compromise as well, by giving up the traditional Jawi script, similar to Arabic, in which Bahasa was written in the past, and adopting Roman alphabets instead.

Secular democratic aspirations in India have been quite strong, and these were manifested even during the independence movement. Nehru, who like many Indians of his generation believed in social democracy, was a great builder of institutions. The Indian Institutes of Technology and numerous scientific and research institutions, like the Atomic Research Centre, were set up at his initiative.

Soekarno and Lee, however, were authoritarian leaders from the very outset. But both were charismatic leaders of great vision, and Soekarno's ideal of Pancashila laid the foundation of a secular, modern Indonesia that aimed to unify the vast population in 15,000 scattered islands. His authoritarianism could not ultimately win the approval of the majority. As a consequence, there was chaos, violence and instability following the fall of Soekarno and, subsequently, the collapse of Suharto's regime.

Singapore, which is more of a city-state, forged ahead economically under the able leadership of Lee Kwan Yew, who remains a legend even now. But I would

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succeeded in coping with numerous crises, both natural and man-made. An educated middle class has emerged, which was absent in 1947. There are instances where individual Bengalis have excelled in many fields. There will not be very many nationalities that could claim three Nobel laureates. We have done well with some of the social indicators, and seem to be on track for reaching the Millennium Development Goals.

Every government had agreed to do this, but none had the political will to implement it in the past. Within the civic community, there have been ardent advocates of strong local government, which has been traditionally the school for training of political leaders.

Numerous commissions from time to time have made detailed recommendations about needed reforms in local government. So we know what specifically has to be one to strengthen the local government institutions.

The task, rather, is to develop

institutional mechanisms and democratic processes through which local leaders can emerge in large numbers. They can be selected through a transparent electoral process; they would have a stake in the local communities, identifying their problems and providing the leadership to mobilize local resources in order to solve them.

Elections to local bodies

is our priority

In fact, our nation building problems are far simpler than those of India, Pakistan, Malaysia and other multi-racial, multi-lingual states in this region. We don't often realize that Bangladesh probably is one of the most homogenous nations in Asia today. We need not have any ethnic problems, or any conflict with the minority communities, if the majority community is large enough to recognize the rights of smaller communities to coexist.

It is apparent that the failure of Bangladesh in public governance has been primarily a failure of its leadership. The big question is, why have we failed to produce a credible leadership in a nation of 150 million? Unlike in the West, or even in neighbouring countries, Bangladesh cannot afford to wait for a charismatic leadership to emerge.

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With early elections, new leadership can definitely emerge and take

charge of our metropolitan cities,

the municipalities, the district

councils, upazila parishads and the

union parishads. Electoral rules

would have to be revised so that all

candidates, including women, can

participate freely in the elections.

The local government bodies

need to have their own budgets and

resources allocated directly to them,

based on mobilization of local resources, matching grants and project loans. Before long, the

local councils will begin a healthy

competition amongst themselves,

launching development activities

within their respective constituencies.

With local leadership, they

will try to outdo one another in

achieving their development

targets. In the process, we will have

a new leadership that will be

directly accountable to its local

constituency.

We cannot possibly undertake

too many tasks at the same time.

General Hassan Mashud

Chowdhury, the chief of the Anti-

corruption Commission was abso-

lutely correct when he said: "We

should not bite more than what we

can chew." It makes a lot of sense to

people when the Commission goes

after the big fish and catches those

who had believed that, because of

their political power and position,

they could get away with all the

wrongs that they have done.

I hope that the Commission will become an effective institution in fighting corruption, and would be able to set examples by speedily punishing those who are found guilty. But I am worried when the Anti-corruption Commission says that it will also go after "small fries," because that will mean dispersion of efforts, dissipation of energy, and inefficient use of resources.

It may not be possible to remove all the corruption straight away; but we should be able, in the first instance, to identify the work processes, public services, government facilities like hospitals, electric supply etc, which must be hassle free so that ordinary people will be able to access the services without paying a bribe or "speed money."

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It would be particularly impor-

Malaysia backpedals on modernity

SADANAND DHUME

THOSE seeking a glimmer of optimism amidst the barrage of bad news from the Muslim world often point to Malaysia. It boasts a functioning democracy, a robust economy and a record of peace among its three major ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese and Indians.

Malaysia has done much to deserve its reputation for economic dynamism and social harmony, but a flurry of actions by the country's hard-line Islamic authorities illustrates the contradictions within the Malaysian model, and raises doubts about the country's effort to rise to the ranks of developed nations by 2020.

In a globalized and increasingly competitive world, Malaysia cannot expect to modernize its economy without modernizing its society. In practical terms, this means choosing the universal values of freedom of conscience and freedom of inquiry over the narrow dictates of Islamic orthodoxy.

The most recent example of this ongoing clash between the modern and the medieval involves Revathi Masoosai, a 29-year-old ethnic Indian woman born to Muslim parents but raised by a Hindu grandmother.

Last month, Malaysian religious authorities forcibly separated Revathi from her Hindu husband, Suresh Veerappan, and handed their 15-month-old daughter to her mother. Under Malaysian law, anyone born to Muslim parents is automatically considered Muslim, and converting to another religion is illegal. (No such injunction bars non-Muslims from embracing Islam.) Since Muslims come under the purview of sharia, non-Muslims cannot seek redress from

secular courts.

Revathi's case is only the most recent of a string of similar incidents. In 2005, Islamic authorities deemed that M. Moorthy, a celebrated mountaineer and a practicing Hindu according to his wife, had secretly converted to Islam before his death.

Over his wife's protests, Moorthy's body was taken from his family and given a Muslim burial. In another infamous case, Lina Joy, a computer saleswoman in her 40s, has spent nearly 10 years unsuccessfully seeking official recognition of her conversion from Islam to Christianity.

Two years ago, followers of an offbeat spiritual movement called Sky Kingdom -- best known for revering a giant cream-coloured teapot -- saw their commune razed by authorities who declared their beliefs "heretical."

In recent months, Hindus have taken to the streets to protest a spate of temple bulldozings, including the demolition of at least two that date to the 19th century. In each of these cases, the government of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, who publicly champions a tolerant approach to faith called Islam hadhari, has stood by for fear of angering religious hotheads.

The nub of the problem lies in Malaysia's inconsistent approach to modernization. Unlike neighbouring Singapore, which stands for equality before the law and a strict meritocracy, Malaysia has sought prosperity against a backdrop of deepening Islamization and handouts for ethnic Malays, deemed by law to be Muslim.

Until recently, the Malaysia of vice-squads and apostasy laws did not intrude upon the Malaysia of glittering skyscrapers and high-speed airport trains. But the rise of

China, India and Vietnam, and the demands of a shift from low-cost manufacturing to more knowledge-intensive work, raise serious doubts about the viability of the Malaysian model.

The country needs freedom of inquiry to unleash the creativity of its people. It needs to foster an atmosphere of tolerance to stanch the outflow of the country's brightest non-Malays, and to attract overseas talent and investment. Neither is likely without rethinking the twinned and contentious issues of ethnic preferences and religious supremacism.

Of course, it's too early to write off Malaysia just yet. Its success over the past four decades depended on shrewdly balancing ethnic politics and pragmatic economics. After riots in Kuala Lumpur in 1969, between the prosperous Chinese minority and ethnic Malays, Malaysia instituted a program to raise the Malay share of national income.

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