

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 Tamanny 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.

We cannot wait for charis-

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.

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 Panchashila 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

consider Tunku's premiership as a critical intervention in the building of a prosperous, multi-racial Malaysia today. It is probably the only example of a multi-racial, multi-religious, but predominantly Muslim, country in modern 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.

More importantly, Tunku ensured that political power would remain with the Barisan Nasional, the coalition party that solidly represented the interests of the majority Malays. One can only speculate on what would have been the consequence in Pakistan if Jinnah had the far-sightedness in 1948 to make Dhaka the capital of Pakistan, and Bangla the national language of Pakistan, whose formation had received solid support from the Bengali population!

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.

At the turn of the century, Bangladesh and its people have

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.

Our farmers have succeeded in raising agricultural productivity against many odds -- rice production has increased at a faster rate than the population. It is not a question any more of producing charismatic, larger-than-life political leaders like Nehru, Soekarno or Tunku Abdul Rahman.

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 realise 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 hearted enough to recognize the rights of smaller communities to coexist.

The challenge is, then, to produce national leaders as well as local leaders who can envision the development goals, set realistic targets, recruit the professional staff required, and sufficiently motivate them in attaining the goals. The first priority would be the elections to the local government institutions, and making those institutions quite strong.

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.

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.



Need for checks and balances

But we would also need institutions like the Anti-Corruption Commission to act as a check on the abuse of political power and public offices, at both local and national levels. A strong local bodies regulatory authority would have to be set up to ensure regular audit of local funds. We would need a realistic agenda to set the priorities right.

We cannot possibly undertake too many tasks at the same time. General Hassan Mashhud Chowdhury, the chief of the Anti-corruption Commission was absolutely 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.

I also worry when I hear that the Chairman has decided to fly to all the district head-quarters in a helicopter. That would also mean a lot of additional expenditure, not only for flying the helicopters, but also for the precious time that would be spent in the pep-talks that would be delivered to awe-struck local officials.

It would be particularly impor-

tant for the newly empowered Commission to put its head together and prepare a practical, achievable work plan to prevent future corruption. The work plan should spell out the priorities in the anti-corruption strategy, including what would be the best means to deter corruption at various levels.

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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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 staunch 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.

The government aggressively favoured Malay businessmen with government contracts, and Malays gained a virtual monopoly on generous government scholarships for overseas study.

At the same time -- in order to enlarge the pie rather than to merely carve out a larger slice for Malays -- Malaysia followed outward-looking economic policies that encouraged foreign investment and export-led growth.

As with other parts of the Muslim world, the rupture with the past, caused by prosperity, rose in tandem with Islamic consciousness. The Opec oil boom of 1973 allowed Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States to bankroll efforts to Arabize the Muslims of South and Southeast Asia.

The ripples of the 1979 Iranian

Revolution were felt directly in Malaysian college campuses. During the 1980s, the headscarf became ubiquitous among Malay women. Meanwhile, in a bid to outdo the Islamist opposition in terms of piety, the ruling party UMNO, United Malays National Organization, went on a mosque-building spree. Religious students made a beeline for the Middle East and Pakistan and, in a show of pan-Islamic solidarity, visa rules were eased for visitors from many Muslim countries.

In the wake of Malaysia's troubles during the Asian financial crisis in 1997, long-serving prime minister Mahathir Mohamad became something of a global cheerleader for anti-Semitism -- publicly peddling conspiracy theories about attacks on the Malaysian Ringgit and accusing Jews of "rule(ing) the world by proxy."

Meanwhile, disregard for non-Malays -- for the most part Buddhist and Christian Chinese and Hindu Indians, who together make up a third of the country's 25 million people -- expressed itself most clearly in the architecture of the new administrative capital Putrajaya.

Gaudy domes and soaring minarets dominate the skyline, and an Isfahan-inspired bridge spans a massive artificial lake. Acknowledgment of other cultures is conspicuous by its absence.

By some measures, Malaysian affirmative-action policies have worked. The Malay share of corporate equity rose from less than 4 percent in 1971 to -- estimates vary and those on the higher end are politically explosive -- between 20 and 45 percent in 2006. Over the same period per capita income -- in purchasing power parity terms --



quadrupled, from about \$3000 to about \$12,000. Malaysia is the world's 19th largest exporter.

At the same time, rather than enabling the Malays to compete effectively as equals, Malaysia has ended up creating a class of crony capitalists dependent on government largesse, and a Malay population that sees special privileges as a birthright.

Often, this supremacism is expressed in terms of religious intolerance. The one silver lining: Liberal-minded Muslims such as the lawyer Malik Imtiaz Sarwar and the academic Farish Noor have joined non-Muslims, and a plethora of blogs is criticizing this trend.

These troubles could not come at a worse time. Malaysia's traditional strength in low-cost electronics manufacturing is being challenged by the rise of China and Vietnam. The government has invested heavily in technology infrastructure in the form of the Multimedia Supercorridor, ambitiously hailed as the Silicon Valley

of the East.

But amid white-hot competition for scientific talent, and despite relaxing some of the usual race laws, Malaysia finds it hard to attract and retain Indian and Chinese engineers.

Meanwhile, many of the country's brightest students -- especially non-Malays -- migrate to Australia, the US and Singapore, where everyone enjoys freedom of conscience and equality before the law.

For Malaysia then, the fate of Revathi Masoosai has wider implications. Its resolution will signal whether Malaysia seeks a future as a prosperous and pluralistic trading nation in the global mainstream, or a country whose inconsistent efforts to modernize ultimately doom them to failure.

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ACC: One man's plight

ZIAUR RAHMAN

THESE days, we notice billboards and newspaper advertisements on ACC toutng the slogan "Akhon-e-Shomoy (Now is the Time)" Based on these strong words of the commission, the general public like myself had come out and shared some real stories of durnite (corruption) or proposed durnite with the commission either by telephone, email, or other means. A month back, I presented to the ACC some information on a probable corruption scenario that my organization was facing with a reputable national institution.

I had been reassured that "we are going to look at it immediately" as

the pending issue was immediate and could not wait beyond a week. Based on the encouraging words of the person at the ACC, I spilled my guts by sending the details by email to all of their email addresses (in case they miss one).

The sad story was, I did not get an acknowledgement to my first letter or subsequent letters to the ACC mentioning my previous letter and verbal communication that the problem at hand was immediate and would need prompt intervention.

Given this scenario, I became exposed completely whereas the commission man who spoke never divulged his name although I repeatedly asked for his identify. Perhaps, it was done as a common practice to shield the official staff of

the commission from external influence, threats or attacks.

However, I felt that the commission also had the responsibility to understand and safeguard the plight of the person who was divulging sensitive matters by allowing the information provider not to disclose his/her name for which he/she could have also been subject to the brunt of the accused.

These issues are important in balancing the plight of the accused, accuser and the ACC. I understand that the name of the accuser has to be disclosed at some point to move the case forward or to ensure that vindication is not lashed at someone, but extreme caution has to be taken by the commission to keep the name of the complaining party as secret as possible.

This act of asking the personal particulars while building the case should preferably be refrained from initially as it will deter most people from lodging legitimate case for fear of reprisal. Given the current scenario of the ACC, I would like to forward some questions and would like them or members of the government to ponder on these issues and take necessary steps.

- Why do you (ACC) promote such catchy phrases when in reality you are under-staffed to handle the volume of work that comes in your direction?
- How do you plan to give security to people who share their stories when nothing happens after details of corruption are exposed?

- Why do you expect the common public to share everything with real identity when you hide behind the telephone lines of your commission?
- How can the public know that you are acting correctly when no identity is shared by your commission?
- Why don't you do a national poll and see what people think regarding the matters raised here and take necessary measures to address them?
- At what extent will the commission bring about its own transparency by disclosing the details of the cases that are being pursued?

Many of us may feel a pang of frustration, but I thought of sharing

this with you and others, so that you can take these issues to the present government for clarification and rectification. I firmly believe that an independent ACC can only work if it is open 24 hours to the media and public scrutiny and posts as much information on its website as possible.

I share my effort through these thoughts so that the independent ACC can transform itself into a citadel of ultimate justice. I have no intentions to undermine the commission's noble intent, but would request them to be transparent and efficient if, at all, it wants to establish itself as the corruption-busting organ of Bangladesh that the public will come to respect.

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With the best of intentions

MICHAEL HIRSCH

PAUL Wolfowitz has always wanted to change the world -- One Big Idea at a time. He started out well. Conscious that he had image issues -- he was the Ugly American architect of the unpopular Iraq War -- Paul Wolfowitz, the now embattled World Bank president, ate lunch in the employees' mess hall rather than in the Bank president's palatial dining room. Always soft-spoken, he listened and encouraged e-mails from colleagues. Whether it was attacking tyranny in the Arab world or poverty in Africa, the last thing Wolfowitz ever wanted was to be seen as a heartless intellectual or a ruthless hawk.

He "deeply, deeply cared" about making the world a better place, says Ray DuBois, assistant to Wolfowitz when Wolfowitz served as deputy defense secretary. Andrew Young, the civil-rights activist and former UN ambassador, says: "If I ever got caught in a dark alley with (Dick) Cheney and (Donald) Rumsfeld, I'd want to whip them. But Wolfowitz is a very sympathetic figure."

He may also be the first president dismissed in the 62-year history of the Bank if its board of directors votes him out this week. Last week a special committee declared that he violated ethics rules by setting up his female companion, Bank employee Shaha Riza, in a high-paid State Department post. He is accused of doing this and then launching an internal-corruption probe, a seemingly hypocritical act that has many on the Bank's 10,000-person staff calling for his resignation. (Wolfowitz's attorney, Bob Bennett, told Newsweek recently that his client believes he did nothing wrong; last week Wolfowitz enlisted not only the help of the White House, but that of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who called European finance ministers on his behalf.

Regardless of whether he leaves, the consensus view is that Wolfowitz has crippled the Bank's operations by turning his staff against him. This is the same charge he faced when he left the Pentagon in May 2005. It is, once again, a dramatic falling off from the high expectations that people once had for the 61-year-old political scientist, a man whose managerial talents do not appear to rise to the level of his analytical prowess.

By most accounts, Wolfowitz is a genteel, brilliant figure who as a young idealist fell "in love with political greatness," says a friend from his days in the Ph.D. program at the University of Chicago, Charles Fairbanks. If Wolfowitz has a fatal flaw, it's an obsession with One Big Idea that would set the

world right. This made him the intellectual center of the neoconservative movement in Washington. But it also, colleagues say, led to a monomania at the Pentagon, where his cause was bringing democracy to the Middle East, and at the World Bank, where it was fighting corruption. "It is always this single-minded agenda with him," says one of Wolfowitz's superiors at the Pentagon during the George H.W. Bush administration, who would speak about his former colleague only anonymously. "Even back then, I can remember (Defense Secretary) Cheney telling him, 'Oh Paul, just shut up,' when he would go off on one of his tears to save the world."

Despite his promising start at the World Bank, it appears that Wolfowitz soon reverted to form. Bank executives describe a moment in February 2006, when "the save-the-world bug overcame him," says a former Bank vice president who also asked for anonymity discussing a former colleague. Wolfowitz decided abruptly to halt a plan to forgive Congo's debt, charging government corruption, even though Congo had met the appropriate standards and had been approved by both the Bank and the International Monetary Fund boards. "He's told these are the rules, and it's not the president's discretion to override them," the former vice president says. "I don't care if they are the rules," he says. "If they are, then they need to be changed." Wolfowitz also began to make increasingly arbitrary decisions, especially on his anticorruption campaign, cutting off countries opposed to the Bush administration's policies.

Some experts in international development praise what Wolfowitz has tried to do at the Bank -- demanding that governments, especially in Africa, reduce corruption as a condition for receiving Bank funds. But rather than moving the whole Bank in that direction -- creating a broad-based consensus as a savvy manager might do -- Wolfowitz sought to achieve this goal by alienating the very institution he was supposed to be running. As he did at the Pentagon, Wolfowitz relied on employees who were ideologically pure political appointees who rejected the regular staff. Wolfowitz has "a Trotskyite mentality," says Sebastian Mallaby, author of "The World's Banker," a 2004 history of the Bank. "You only trust your own particular group of loyalists, and the rest of the world is against you." It's a self-defeating way of thinking, perhaps, if it's the world you're trying to save.

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