

What constitutes extortion?

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

FOLLOWING the withdrawal of the ban on Sheikh Hasina's return to her homeland, I wrote a piece for The Daily Star (May 11), entitled "Pragmatism prevails over utopianism." Haplessly, it did not take long for my skepticism to become a reality. On June 13, yet two more cases of extortion, one of the three (two others are reform and remand) buzz words in the current political arena of Bangladesh, have been filed against Sheikh Hasina.

One of the two plaintiffs at this time is a businessman, who until recently, was considered a very close confidant of the accused and was an unsuccessful candidate of her party in the 2001 general election. He was also the tagged candidate of the party for the derailed January 22 election until an adjustment was made to accommodate the candidate of an alliance partner of the so-called mega-alliance. It was until the case was filed there was no indication that the plaintiff in any away was disgruntled with the accused.

It was also reported in the media that the plaintiff was taken in to the custody of the joint forces for some-time and was released on condition that he would make himself available whenever the joint forces need him. Within days, there came the case of extortion in which the plaintiff accused Sheikh Hasina and her two relatives of extorting Tk 5 crore in exchange for mediating between the Power Development Board (PDB) and his firm to finalise a power plant in 1997.

In a similar manner, an AL candidate, a renowned businessman and one of the handfuls of civilian decorated heroes of the famous Crack Platoon of our liberation war, was picked up from his house and his whereabouts was not known to his family for more than three weeks. A few of his valiant war-time comrades of 1971 expressed concerns about his detention through a press statement. However, all on a sudden he was released while his family was busy in the high court with a habeas corpus writ against his presumed detention. Meanwhile during the period of his disappearance, he filed an extortion case with Gulshan Police Station against a detained Awami League presidium member. Notwithstanding the alleged extortion, the plaintiff did not run away from AL's shadow, rather he was able to manage the much-coveted AL nomination bypassing even the first chief of staff of the Armed Forces.

Extortion as defined by Random House dictionary is "an act of wresting or wringing money, information etc. from a person by violence, intimidation, or abuse of authority." The accused in question was the chief executive of the government when the alleged "extortion" took place. Natural intuition would attest the assertion that a chief executive of a government does not have to go to a business firm to extort money. Conversely, there would be a competition among the business firms to get close to the office of the highest authority to extract favour in sealing off any lucrative deal. These are very common phenomena in countries even where political ethics always reins over the laws of the land. The favour of the power of authority in many instances are returned in kind to the person of authority for his/her personal use, which is termed bribery or to the fund of the political institution the beholder of the power of authority belongs, which unambiguously matches the classical definition of political donation.

In the absence of any sate law to regulate the fund of a political party or the independent auditing process of the fund by the parties themselves, it would be almost impossible to differentiate between the bribery and donation, especially if the chief executive of the government and the chief executive of the party happen to be the same individual. Even in model democracies where states provide some funding for the political parties or politicians with some pre-defined support level, part of the funding for the party comes from the donations of its well wishers, while the bulk of it is generated through the donations of the big businesses, unions etc. In some cases business establish-

ments with severe disliking for the party even contribute more for their own strategic interest and to keep their enemies at bay. However, political donations are different from charities; a political donor is not a philanthropist, some form of dividend is implicitly expected in return.

In Bangladesh, in the absence of any funding by the state, donations of the businessmen have always been the main or may be the only source of funding for the major political parties. It is not a new revelation that some business organizations pay regular donations to almost all the major political parties. It is an open fact that even Bangabandhu's AL was funded by some wealthy Bengali business magnates, a few of them even got the party tickets to contest the election of 1970. Late President Ziaur Rahman, considered to be an icon of personal honesty, was able to collect so much donations for his newly formed political party that he made history in the subcontinent by owning a palatial party office which even the India's oldest political party could not do.

The alleged extortion in question occurred in 1997. In the next four years the plaintiff must have been maintaining a steadfast relationship with the accused, or else he would not be blessed with her party's nomination in 2001. The next five years happened to be the hay days for of the opponents of the accused, where scores of legal suits have been brought against her and she was almost physically eliminated, to settle the old scores. Quite to the contrary, the plaintiff presumably got closer to the accused and even was tagged as her party's nominee once again in 2006 overriding even a much wealthier candidate who reportedly was willing to make even a billion taka donation to the party fund to get the coveted nomination. When the basic right of the citizen is re-established, it would be likely to be revealed that the case was filed under duress. At this time, the simple instinct leads to the deduction that the plaintiff does not have a case.

As indicated earlier, in the

absence of state financial mechanism to regulate the party fund, the state lacks the legal jurisdiction to find out if it was a case of bribery or donation if the alleged payment was proven to be made. The incident should only be investigated by the party officials and they in turn should let the people know if it was anything other than a normal donation for the party fund.

The current CTG was perceived to command the wide support of the general people when it was installed. It has carried out some laudable acts of cleaning the mess of a few constitutional institutions. However, a few ill-advised decisions have created some dents on its numerous seemingly undoable deeds and have led to cutting aspersions on its noble intentions. It is no more a concealed fact that, in its reform agenda of the political party, the CTG is more focussed on the individuals rather than the system. The Adviser for law and information, who claimed to have obtained people's mandate (even without an election!), had made no bones about his govern-

ment's priority a few days ago while making observations about the on-going reform talks of the political parties.

It is now apparent that after failing to keep Sheikh Hasina out of the country, the current decision makers are on the process of implementing Plan B and filing of the recent two extortion cases could only be the tip of the iceberg. They are not likely to be the last ones, since the donor's list of AL, over the years, is by no means inconsiderable.

It looks like a fait accompli if good sense, albeit seems bleak at this stage, does not prevail once again. Our people are not at all devoid of the basic faculty to the extent all our government leaders have always presumed. I would have been one of the happiest to see the current ones as rare exceptions.

Dr. Mozammel H. Khan is the Convenor of the Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh. He writes from Toronto, Canada.

Megacities, mega dreams for a connected world

SUKETU MEHTA

ON July 27, 2005, Bombay experienced the highest recorded rainfall in its history -- 37 inches of rain in one day. The torrent showed the best and the worst about the city. Hundreds of people drowned. But unlike New Orleans, after Katrina hit, there was no widespread breakdown of civic order; though police were absent, the crime rate did not go up.

That was because Bombayites were busy helping one another. Slum dwellers went to the highway and took stranded motorists into their homes and made room for one more person in shacks where the average occupancy is seven adults to a room.

Volunteers waded through waist-deep water to bring food to the 150,000 people stranded in train stations. Human chains formed to get people out of the floodwaters. Most of the government machinery was absent, but nobody expected otherwise. Bombayites helped one another, because they had lost faith in the government helping them.

On a planet of city dwellers, this is how most human beings are going to live and cope in the 21st century. Wherever we live, whether it's a hamlet in Holland or a skyscraper in Seattle, we will not be



untouched by what happens in megacities like Bombay. Disease and genius, crime and religion, poverty and wealth, are all maximized there, and, given the cheap availability of air fares, are coming soon to a theater near you.

With 15 million people, Bombay is the biggest, fastest, richest city in India, a city simultaneously experiencing boom and civic emergency;

an island-state of hope in a very old country. Because of the reach of the Bollywood movies, Bombay is also a mass dream for the peoples of India. Everything -- sex, death, trade, religion -- is lived out on the sidewalk. It is a maximum city, maximum in its exigencies, maximum in its heart.

Every day is an assault on the individual's senses. The exhaust is

so thick the air boils like a soup. There are too many people touching you, in the trains, in the elevators, when you go home to sleep.

You live in a seaside city, but the only time most people get anywhere near the sea is for an hour on Sunday evening on a filthy beach. It doesn't stop when you're asleep either, for the night brings the mosquitoes out of the malarial

swamps, the thugs of the underworld to your door, and the booming loudspeakers of the parties of the rich and the festivals of the poor.

Why would anyone leave a brick house in the village with its two mango trees and its view of small hills in the East to come here?

So that someday the eldest son can buy two rooms in Mira Road, at the northern edges of the city. And the younger one can move beyond that, to New Jersey. Discomfort is an investment. Like ant colonies, people here easily sacrifice temporary pleasures for the greater progress of the family.

One brother works and supports the others, and he gains satisfaction from the fact that his nephew takes an interest in computers and will probably go on to America. Bombay functions on such invisible networks of assistance.

In a Bombay slum, there is no individual, only the organism. There are circles of fealty and duty within the organism, but the smallest circle is the family. There is no circle around the self.

India frustrates description because everything said about it is true and false simultaneously. Yes, it could soon have the world's largest middle class. But it now has the world's largest underclass. And so with Bombay: Everything is expanding exponentially: the call

centers, the global reach of its film industry, its status as the financial gateway to India, as well as the slums, the numbers of destitute, the degradation of its infrastructure.

The city's planners have set their eyes on Shanghai as a model for Bombay. The government has approved a McKinsey-drafted document titled "Vision Mumbai," aiming to turn Bombay into "a world-class city by 2013." As the architect Charles Correa noted of the plan, "There's very little vision. They're more like hallucinations."

Bombay needs to upgrade dramatically essential civic services: roads, sewers, transport, health, security. But, as one planner said, "The nicer we make the city, the more the number of people that will come to live there."

Most migrants to Bombay now come from the impoverished North Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Bombay's problems cannot be solved without solving Bihar's problems. And that means that agriculture has to become viable again for the small farmer.

Abolishing trade-distorting subsidies in the US and the EU would go a long way toward making, say, Indian cotton competitive with US cotton. Bombay is at the mercy of national and international factors beyond its control. Its fate will be decided not just locally, but --

given India's overcentralized decision-making -- in New Delhi and in the course of arcane, secretive trade negotiations in Washington and Geneva.

Indian governments could take some immediate steps. There's no reason Bombay should be the capital of Maharashtra state. Shifting the state government to Navi Mumbai across the harbor, as originally intended, would free large amounts of space in the congested office district of Nariman Point.

Beyond that, legislation should establish a strong executive authority for the city, with real decision-making power. The office of the mayor is currently no more than a figurehead; the city is run at the whim of the chief minister, and the state's interests are not necessarily those of the city.

Smart and brave architects and planners attempt to work with the state government. The city, which contributes 37 percent of all taxes paid in India, gets only a small fraction back from the central government in the form of subsidies.

There is also no reason Bombay should have a naval base, which currently occupies a large part of the island city. It could be relocated further down the coast. Efficient utilization of the eastern docklands area could also alleviate the pres-

sure for land; instead of schools, parks, public spaces, the city gets luxury housing and shopping malls. In the city's center, 600 acres desperately needed for public use have instead been given to developers -- a bad augury for the city.

So why do people still live in Bombay? "Bombay is a bird of gold," a Muslim man in the Jogheshwari slum, whose brother was shot dead by the police in the riots and who lives in a shack without running water or a toilet, told me.

A Golden Songbird, it flies quick and sly, and you must work hard to catch it, but once it's in your hand, a fabulous fortune awaits for you. This is but one reason why anyone might still want to come here, leaving the pleasant trees and open spaces of the village, braving the crime and the bad air and water.

It's a place where your caste doesn't matter, where a woman can dine alone at a restaurant without harassment, and where you can marry the person of your choice. For the young person in an Indian village, the call of Bombay isn't just about money. It's also about freedom.

Suketu Mehta is a fiction writer and journalist based in New York.

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Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi and the universal intellect

SYED REZAUL KARIM

THE world is celebrating the 800th birth anniversary of Hazrat Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi in 2007. He was born on September 30, 1207. Unesco has declared 2007 as the Year of Rumi. During these eight centuries *Masnavi-e-Manavi*, the singular literary and mystical creation of the Maulana, dubbed as "the Quran in Persian" by Molla Jami, deeply stirred the soul of man in his quest for spiritual enlightenment, beauty and truth.

William Dalrymple, the novelist and researcher, wrote; "it seems unbelievable in the world of 9/11, Bin Laden and clash of civilizations, but the best selling poet in the US in

the 1990s was not any of the giants of American letters -- Robert Frost, Robert Lowell, Wallace Stevens or Sylvia Plath -- nor was it Shakespeare or Homer or Dante or any European poet. Instead, remarkably, it was a classically trained Muslim cleric who taught the Islamic code of law in a *madrasa* in what is now Turkey."

If the great Maulana had been alive today, he would have described the phenomenon as a miracle; for he defined miracle as a circumstance that transports people from ignorance to the spiritual light, from darkness into enlightenment (*Fih-i-Ma-Fihi*, Discourses of Rumi).

What elements make the human being? One that elevates man to

the rank of superiority over other creatures is "Aql" -- intellect or reason. There are two kinds of intellect. One acquired through schooling, instructions, and from traditional sciences. This intellect or knowledge, known as partial intellect, enables man to achieve the earthly ranks and fortunes. Says Rumi "You stroll with this intelligence in and out of the field of knowledge, getting always more marks on your preserving tablets (*Masnavi*)."

The other intelligence is what the Maulana calls "*Aql-i-Kull*," or universal intellect. Declares Rumi, "There is another kind of tablet, one already completed and preserved within you. A spring overflowing its springbox. A freshness in the

center of the chest." (*Masnavi*, translated by Coleman Barks).

Universal intellect illuminates the horizon, while the partial intellect "blackens the book of action," because partial intellect is imperfect and may lead to unlawful acts. Maulana Rumi considers the whole world to be the outward form of universal intellect. "Normal partial intellect gains strength from there, and it is a solid guide to the 'door of the beloved.'"

Rumi says in *Fih-i-Ma-Fihi*, "whoever possesses partial intellect is in need of instruction. The universal intellect is the giver of all things."

An example is that of the mind being the mover of the organs of the body. "Relative to the mind, this

body is coarse and gross, while the heart and intellect are subtle. The gross surrenders to the subtle, and from there it derives whatever it has. Without the subtle the gross would be useless, foul, coarse and unworthy. Similarly, relative to the universal intellect, partial intellects are tools that are instructed by, and benefit from, the universal intellect (*Fih-i-Ma-Fihi -- Rumi*)."

The Maulana sings in *Masnavi*, "The knowledge of men of heart bears them up, the knowledge of men of the body weighs them down. When it is knowledge of the heart, it is a friend, when knowledge of the body, it is a burden."

God said, "As an ass bearing a load of books." (Quran XII 5)

The spiritual man's knowledge

bears him aloft, and endows him with real knowledge. When learning acquires a soul, it is like a lifeless form coming to life. The Moulana clarifies, the prophets' converse with God in the non-phonetic, non-sonic world in a way that cannot be comprehended by the imagination of these partial intellects. "Knowledge is the seal of the Kingdom of Solomon, the whole world is form, and knowledge its spirit" (*Masnavi* -- translation by Nicholson).

The phenomenal world is the outward form of universal intellect, its essence is the divine knowledge that animates and rules it, as the spirit animates and rules the body. Cries the Maulana, "How long regard ye mere form, O form wor-

shippers? Your souls, devoid of substance, rest still in forms."

Rumi says, the knowledge of man of external sense is a muzzle to stop them sucking the milk of that sublime knowledge. "But God drops into the heart of a single pearl drop which is not bestowed on oceans and skies." If people would realize that this world is frozen, their "partial intellects would behave like a donkey on ice (Divan)."

It would slip and lose its way. Only man is capable of spiritual development of the highest order, as man's spirit was breathed into him by God (Quran), thus imparting something of the divine in him.

The light that lights the eye is also the heart's light;

The eye's light proceeds from the light of the heart.

But the light that lights the heart is the light of God

Which is distinct from the light of reason and sense. (*Masnavi* -- translation by Whinfield)

Prophet Muhammad (pbh) was called "unlettered," says Rumi, not because he was unable to write; he was called that because his "letters," his knowledge and wisdom were innate, not acquired. Those who have united the partial with the universal intellect, and have become one, are prophets and saints.

Syed Rezaul Karim is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Betting big on green: Interview with Vinod Khosla

Since making a fortune as a founder of Sun Microsystems, Vinod Khosla has built on it as an investor with pre-eminent venture-capital firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield and Byers. Now he's emerged as Silicon Valley's biggest enthusiast of green technologies -- no mean feat in an industry where nearly everyone is going gaga over green. Khosla has already invested millions in almost 30 clean-tech start-ups in areas ranging from geothermal energy to synthetic biology. But his most notable bets have been on ethanol. Most ethanol comes from corn, but if the technology becomes readily available, nearly any biological material -- even grass -- could create a viable alternative fuel called cellulosic ethanol. At least that's the way ethanol proponents would have it. As the ethanol movement continues to grow, so does criticism from the likes of the Union of Concerned Scientists and the Sierra Club; they argue that ethanol will simply allow automakers to avoid making more-efficient vehicles. *Newsweek's* Barrett Sheridan asked Khosla for his view of energy's future.

BARRETT SHERIDAN

**Sheridan:** You started a new venture-capital firm, Khosla Ventures, in order to focus on clean technologies. And you're using your own money.

**Khosla:** Lots of people say lots of things about clean investing, but they don't put their money where

their mouth is. It's easy to pontificate when you don't have to bet with your own money. I have to be really objective about what I believe, because otherwise I'll lose money.

**Q:** Everyone's talking about corn ethanol. But its emissions aren't all that clean.

**A:** Even in our corn efforts, we try and achieve at least a 50 percent

reduction in greenhouse-gas emissions, relative to oil. That's twice as much as a hybrid does.

**Q:** Cellulosic ethanol is where the real potential lies. One of your companies, Range Fuels, is building a manufacturing center.

**A:** Yes, it's the first commercial-scale ethanol plant in the world, which should be operational in

2008. And we're already looking at the next five sites we'll be building.

**Q:** Wow. That's much sooner than most expect.

**A:** Yes, wow. And they're going to make it from forest waste that's left on the floor during timber-mining operations, so there's no new land needed.

**Q:** Range is getting a \$76 million

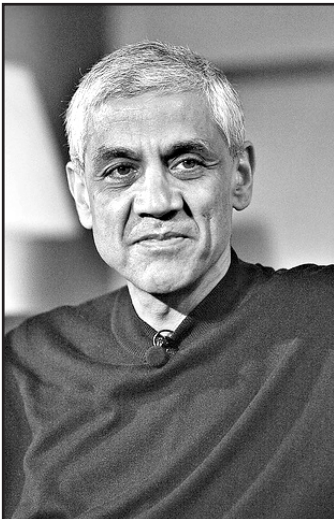
government grant. Doesn't that conflict with your business model of not relying on government subsidies?

**A:** We started building the plant before we won the government grant. We were committed to building it whether we got it or not, because it made commercial sense. But if the government is going to have a program, then there's no harm in competing. If our competitors are going to get it, then we might as well apply.

**Q:** When your cellulosic-ethanol plant comes online, will it compete with gasoline?

**A:** It will be price-competitive with gasoline, assuming gasoline stays where it is. However, I have to make sure that it is price-competitive with gasoline when gasoline declines to the \$30 to \$35 range. There's no question that if you start to substitute a substantial portion of oil (for ethanol), it'll be below \$35 within 20 years.

You know, people debate all this stuff. But if you get (cellulosic etha-



no) working, the poverty situation in Africa will change dramatically, because biomass will have value and they can grow those grasses.

**Q:** So your vision of revolutionizing energy includes revolutionizing the fight against poverty?

**A:** My vision is that biomass completely changes rural-urban development economics.

Hundreds of billions of dollars are going into the Middle East today, often feeding terrorism. Those hundreds of billions of dollars should be going to rural America, rural Africa, rural China, and generating income off the land. That's the grander vision. The bulk of the land in Brazil and Argentina and places like that is pastureland that is underutilized.

**Q:** You've had to deal with oil-company smear campaigns, particularly during your unsuccessful bid last year to pass an initiative that would have funded green projects in California by taxing oil producers. Did that loss dim your hopes for government encouragement of alternative fuels?

**A:** It was a battle, and we lost. But we will win the war. I spend a lot of time talking to policymakers. There are a lot that absolutely want to do the right thing, but frankly, they don't have enough information. So educating them is really critical.

In the end, I expect the oil com-

panies will participate in this business. If I were Saudi Arabia or a Middle Eastern country trying to invest my dollars, I'd invest it in these newer technologies so they can be participants, and they win either way. If they take off, they win, if they don't take off, they win.

**Q:** That seems pretty unlikely.

**A:** I don't see it happening yet, but this is a very new business. Last year, President Bush mentioned cellulosic ethanol in his State of the Union address, and 90 percent of the people didn't know what that was, or what it meant. This is very new. And a lot has happened in a year. Imagine how much can happen in the next three to five years. We're investing a lot of money -- we lose money if it doesn't happen.

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