

'What I did appriciate was how politically conscious and aware Bangladeshis are'

Patricia A. Butenis has had a proactive presence in Bangladesh as US ambassador to this country. It has been a tale of a bare fourteen months, but within that period she packed a schedule that might have laid any other individual, even a diplomat, low. But Butenis did her job with distinction and with panache. In the following interview, she speaks to Ashfaq Wares Khan of The Daily Star, with candour about her stint here. Thoughts on Bangladesh's politics, a point of view on Bangladeshi fashion, et al, find expression in a diplomat now preparing to take up another difficult assignment on behalf of her government, this time in risk-prone, trouble-tom Iraq.

The Daily Star: What are your thoughts on Bangladeshi culture?

Ambassador Butenis: What I enjoy here is the dancing. Even in my embassy, where I first saw it, every event has to have a fashion show and a talent show. Everyone likes to sing, dance, or show-off their wedding sarees. When you drive through the streets you see the factory workers and women in their colourful salwar kameezes and sarees, and it leaves a real impression on me that Bangladesh is a place for colour.

We had a program called the ambassador's fund for cultural preservation, through which we have been able to make a real impact. We supported the Dhamrai metal casting studio, and I've bought some pieces myself so I can remember it. We sponsored a group of Baul singers; in fact, I was so impressed with their performance at our embassy that I have hired them to perform at my farewell later this week.

We have also funded traditional Bangladeshi boat-making, because those skills are some areas that are in danger of being lost. I have also been interested in the art scene, and I've bought a few lovely pieces that I admire.

The fact that this is a Muslim country points out to me how Islam differs from country to country, and how people respond differently to their religion. Here, it's just a very lively, warm welcoming society, and that will stay with me.

What was your perception about Bangladesh before you arrived here?

I have served in South Asia before. I have done two tours in Pakistan and I spent two years in New Delhi. South Asia itself, to a certain extent, was familiar to me. But each country is so different.

What I did appreciate in Bangladesh was how politically aware and conscious Bangladeshis are, much more so than in the United States. Not just the elite, but everybody. Everyone knows what's going on, and whether they like it or not. That makes me hopeful of a return to full democracy here.

Did your experience on the ground change this perception? I learned a couple of things that I hadn't expected. One was the interest in democracy, and the awareness of rights. I did learn how volatile public opinion is here. People had warned me that Bangladeshis would tell me how people changed their minds over-

night, and you do.

I saw that with the effort, I thought it was an effort, to send the two ladies in exile; the period when there seemed to be pressure on Khaleda Zia to leave, and definite pressure on Sheikh Hasina not to come back. I remember a BBC report about this period, where the reporter concluded that Bangladeshis were indifferent. All this went on, and life kept going on as normal.

But, within a matter of days, things changed. All of a sudden, there was sympathy. People said, look, they're Bangladeshis and they should face charges. Things changed overnight, and that's interesting. It makes it hard to predict how things will go.

Now that you mention it, what are your thoughts on the "minus-two" theory?

I'm not going to comment on that. I will say, as I have said before, I think political parties have to change. I don't know if they understand that or not. They say they do. I think it will be hard, and it is hard, for political parties to change with the current leadership in place.

Last night (June 13 at the American Alumni Association dinner) you mentioned that you endorsed a withdrawal of the ban on politics. A lot of people are saying that it may be a little premature. Why do you so strongly endorse the withdrawal of the ban?

Because I think that you can't reform politics without getting buy-in from political parties. Political parties are a key element of any democracy. I'm not speculating on how many there should be here. Point is, you have two parties, particularly the Awami League with deep roots, which have dominated the politics in this country for 50 years so. Whatever changes they make, they have to be engaged at some level.

I was told that a few years ago our USAID folks had a program on political party reform. They invited middle-level members from four major parties. They asked these people, what don't you like about your party?

These workers said that things were very autocratic; decisions were made only in Dhaka. We don't have input. We don't like the use of money. We don't like muscle because we find it intimidating. But nobody listened to us. This is what they said several years ago. They're still paying, it's still a problem. But you have to get their buy-

in. That's what I'm saying.

I really do think even the Election Commission is ready to talk to the parties. They put out their proposals for reform. The parties are afraid they can't even discuss things, fearing they might be violating the ban. We have a kind of a paralysis right now. I don't think anything imposed is going to work, frankly.

What are the perceptions that you are leaving with, after spending 14 months here?

Part of me wants to say, "who knows?" Because it is so hard to predict where we are going to go. I remember discussing the possibility of military intervention with the parties before the state of emergency.

There were plenty of rumours about martial law etc. The BNP thought it would never happen. The Awami League thought that if the army comes in and cleans up the voter list, why not? My response was, why would the army come in and clean up the mess the parties made, and hand it back? If the political parties could not even predict that we would be here, neither could I. I do think there will be several things that will be constant that may guide this government.

The interests of certainly the US and other friends of Bangladesh in supporting the return to a fully elected government, for example. That's a constant. We are watching, as you know, and some people think we are taking too much interest. But we are very much aware of the need to keep the focus on elections.

We are concerned about human rights violations. I'm not suggesting that this government is particularly unique; human rights violations have been a part of Bangladesh's history. The friends of Bangladesh, the US among them, will continue to speak out privately and publicly on these issues. I think you can count on their support for elections. Everybody felt the relief when the state of emergency was declared, because we had been spared political violence and disaster.

My point to the parties is that you are all to blame. It's not just the one-sided elections that was objectionable, it was also the oppositions' avowed response to it. It was just not boycotting, it was that they wanted to stop the elections. Nobody wanted to see that. That's been another one of my constant themes.

Why do you have to resort to violence? Bangladeshis are very

articulate, you love to talk and analyse. You are very sophisticated in your analysis. Why do we have to get to violence? I think people are relieved with the state of emergency, but I think there has to be a constant focus on moving back to a fully elected government.

What are your experiences through the period, regarding US involvement? I mean, last night you said that you had urged political actors to reach a compromise during the political crisis between October and January. Did you have a formula for such a compromise?

No, no. This is just another myth that I'm sure will live on long after I'm gone. Again, I'm speaking for the US, but I think other missions representing democracies would agree. Our only interest was to avert a disaster.

All I ever did, and I did it constantly, was to beg people, and ask them "can't you compromise?" Can't you come up with a solution that would be acceptable to the opposition, so they would participate in elections to ensure that it was fair.

I'm not making a judgement on whether it was rigged or not. The point is that they said it was. That was their basis for saying they would not participate. The government, the BNP ... well not them, but the government would always say, constitutionally this is the only thing left to us.

I would say to them, for every position you use the constitution to uphold, someone else can use the same constitution to argue the opposite, and I'm not impressed with that. That's no disrespect to the Bangladeshi constitution, but I have to believe that they could've come to a compromise.

Nobody was willing to do it. We tried. I was the promoter, and was trying to facilitate a dialogue early in September. I had no idea whether the political parties were serious. They agreed to talk, I had no idea if they were genuine, but I chose to accept that they were trying and I tried to facilitate that. They had several hours, and it really didn't go anywhere. That was really disappointing.

You said you begged? Yes.

In what sense; could you please elaborate? Well, I said can't you avoid this? Can't there be a compromise? Isn't there a way out? Why are we inflexible here? My message was constant, and I had no secret agenda.

Simply: This is not good for Bangladesh. Why do you want to go ahead with one-sided elections which people will find impossible to believe in. You may not even get to the vote, because the opposition is already calling for the people to stop the election. That's my point. I did not have a formula for compromise, that's not my job. My job was to say, "Please, can't you sit down and work this out."

Did you have any other suggestions?

No. I did not get into ... I didn't have a list of people who could be acceptable as the chief adviser. I didn't walk around with a copy of the Bangladeshi constitution, citing articles the way you all do, like the politicians do.

I saw my job as trying to help a friendly partner nation avoid a political disaster. Not to dictate or to suggest. So my message was the same no matter who I spoke to: "Come up with a compromise. I think that's what people want, can't you do it?"

What were your activities during that time?

I just spoke to a lot of people. I talked to everybody... the political parties, the government, the business community, the civil society, I talked to journalists...everybody.

The military?

I talked to everybody.

At the dinner last night, you also mentioned that you were "discouraged to see that the country's political leadership was perfectly ready to let a disaster unfold." What does that tell you about Bangladesh's political leadership?

I think sometimes the political parties feel that they own politics, and that anybody who wasn't a politician had no right to even offer an idea. I remember their reaction to the civil society, and to some suggestions by people from the NGO community. "Who are they? We are the politicians."

Then it really struck me that everybody had the right to have an opinion. Answer the question? Why are you objecting? We thought about Professor Yunus. We thought about his effort to form a political party ... and the scorn that the parties reacted with ... it was with the attitude, "this is for us, and your only option on voting day is to vote for A or B." That is shocking to me. I think that was the mindset.

Has that changed?

I don't know.

Last night you also mentioned that you thought it didn't apply to "behind-the-scenes" efforts to launch a political party.

I think there are people in the government who are definitely looking for an alternative to the return of ... looking to an alternative from elections with the same old parties. There is discussion going on that people are being pressured to leave their parties and join this third party. I think there is a lot of activity there, which is being allowed to go



on. I think the other existing parties should be allowed to operate. You don't think there is double-standard?

That's not for me to comment.

US perceptions on South Asia. re: terrorism, geopolitics. Where does Bangladesh fit in?

Bangladesh has, unfortunately, its own home-grown terrorism with Bangla Bhai and JMB. Initially, this is before I got here, the US felt that the then government took a long time to acknowledge that there was a problem. But, that changed. They took action and arrested the top leadership, who were sentenced and executed.

I'm encouraged that this government continues to look for the money trail, and the people who supported these folks and allowed them to operate. I am also encouraged that the law enforcement agencies are still following leads and finding arms caches. I think that's smart. I don't think terrorism can be ended overnight.

Bangladesh must remain vigilant, and we will do what we can to support that. Give training, exchange information, etc.

Why is Bangladesh important to the US?

You have a large population. You're in a key position in South Asia. You are a Muslim-majority democracy that we'd like to see return to the full fold. You have a society that is amazingly open and welcoming to other cultures. Yet, you're proud of your own culture.

There's so much potential for being a bridge to go beyond the region. The big obstacle is politics. We are supportive of this caretaker government, and I think they are going in the right direction. We are going to continue to speak out, mostly privately and sometimes publicly, where we think it's going wrong.

You have met several Jamaat-e-Islami leaders during your stay here, as did your predecessors. They are reported to have strong links with militants and are openly fundamentalist on many

religious issues, including the Ahamadiyyas. Why does the US continue to engage with this political group in light of the aforementioned features?

I've said this before. We talk to everybody. We are supposed to be in touch with all elements of society. For two reasons: one is, get their viewpoints; secondly, get them on the park and maybe change their minds and maybe engage them in debate.

With Jamaat, they are a recognised party, they remain a political party and they claim to adhere to democratic principles. Certainly, any activity like anti-Ahmadiyya movements, we will protest. Anybody who has evidence linking individuals to terrorism should make it public, so they can be prosecuted. But they are part of the political landscape.

The plight of rickshaw pullers



ZIAUR RAHMAN

I had been contemplating writing about the plight of the rickshaw pullers of Bangladesh. Two recent issues have made me share my views in this regard. I recently read a piece on rickshaw pulling and how we should not blindly emulate the Western model to stop rickshaws from plying the cities of Bangladesh as they claim that it has accelerated global pollution and ecological imbalance and put severe stress on fossil fuel for a small country like Bangladesh. The second catalyst was a

recent exhibition at the Russian Cultural Center, organized by Neeti Gobeshona Kendra, Dhaka, featuring the life of a rickshaw puller. It was a unique experience for me and, perhaps, for many others who attended. I would like to offer a perspective on rickshaw pulling, the entire trade and the related stakeholders' community.

The exhibition allowed me to dwell on the issue of rickshaw pulling. Some comments really struck me hard, and the cases along the exhibition hall depicted real stories, with bonafide rick-

shaw pullers relating the stories of their lives.

It was painful, needless to say, and many feared that their's and their children's lives would be wasted away in this profession. One rickshaw puller commented that the police tend to think of them as traffic jam creators, and also project the view that before a person becomes a thief the last straw of hope that he clings onto is a rickshaw. This really demeans the profession.

Another puller commented that even their wives felt hesitant in saying that their husbands were

rickshaw pullers. Imagine the pangs of emotion that one may feel, given how the society feels about a "rickshaw puller."

I sense that the society needs to change its mindset, because pulling a rickshaw is a dignified profession, and is much better than stealing, bribing, or conniving to defraud the government and the public. We need to pay respect to someone who deserves it, and not to the rapacious bureaucrats and politicians in Bangladesh.

It was a pleasant surprise when the ambassador of Netherlands called the rickshaw pullers the "real heroes" of Bangladesh, because they (the rickshaw pullers) worked hard to carry a significant number of people from point to point.

The ambassador also said that social justice demanded that we, the informed citizens of Bangladesh, should find ways to raise their (the rickshaw pullers) economic standing, and create social safety nets for them and their families so that they were not left behind in strengthening the fabric of the society.

A rickshaw puller commented that the laws of the land, especially for the rickshaw pullers, were framed with the mindset that the rickshaw pullers were inconsequential human pawns in our society who needed to obey the rules of the city corporation.

The rickshaw puller cited the example of the badge that the city corporation had given him, where it is mentioned that he (the rickshaw puller) needed to behave properly with the passenger, but there was no mention of how the passenger should behave towards the puller.

These may be insignificant issues to the policy makers, but they are real issues of importance for the pride, welfare and sustainability of the rickshaw pullers' community, and their subsequent social acceptance.

Added to these dimensions is the issue of our politicians using the rickshaw pullers as vote banks during elections in the city, and this system of misuse has taken an ominous turn, hurting the proper functioning of effective voting while contributing to the increase of inhabitants in the urban slums.

The huge number of rickshaws also tells of the many backward and forward linkage enterprises that are involved in this profession, perhaps adding low-value service that could have been utilized with proper migration planning to higher yielding productive endeavours.

With regards to rickshaws, I believe, in spite of some people saying that rickshaws were environmentally safe, that they slow down the movement of traffic, thereby causing huge traffic jams

and useless burning of fuel, and depreciation of motorized vehicles.

Needless to say, the time lost is never regained, and the energy dissipated while stuck on a road has far reaching impact national productivity. Additionally, I believe that Bangladesh has become an idle nation, and its citizens, especially the affluent class, do not feel the urge to walk. They take a rickshaw to travel 200 to 300 yards, but never realize that walking is a cardiovascular exercise that the very presence of a rickshaw is stopping them from having.

I believe that our national prestige is being severely lowered by having rickshaws. When the global trend is taking us towards travel at lightening speed, and people are thinking of energizing humans to travel at the speed of light, here we are, trying to retard our progress by thinking of traveling at the pace of a turtle.

Social justice and equity are needed in our journey to make Bangladesh technology enabled, but it is ridiculous to believe that rickshaws are a functional medium of travel in this era of warp-speed and extensive travel.

I feel serious that efforts need to be made to help the rickshaw pullers to move out of this profession and into more value added professions, and allow

Bangladeshis to walk for cardiovascular exercise, become less lazy, and believe and work to invent the next hypersonic age communication platform. Anything less would be insanity on the part of the smart, intelligent humans that we are.

Let us not give the feeling that we, as a nation, are dwarfed by low-tech transportation, and that our fate allows us not to move beyond a rickshaw.

Like Dr. Yunus, I would like to keep the rickshaws in the museum, and build hyper-speed transportation gateways for the future of Bangladesh. My views

were echoed by the editor of New-Age -- a local English daily. I would rather offer these unfortunate rickshaw peddlers a decent life, and not let them be used by the affluent people for their merry rides.

We, as a nation, continue to stay unperturbed while gargantuan loss in our national productivity goes un-challenged, and our citizens toil for a measly living.

A re-evaluation strategy to use the rickshaw pullers' skills need to be put up in front of our faces for social and economic awakening of our policy makers and citizens.

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