

Bangladesh's image: Need a (re)branding?

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CAN we really "brand" a country, the way we brand soap (Tibet/Dove), shoes (Bata/Nike) or orange juice (Pran/Minutemaid)? Experts say we can.

Countries like Australia, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Malaysia, New Zealand, Poland, Scotland, Singapore, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, and many others, have taken proactive branding strategies, hiring international media consultants to change or improve their national images. So far it is working, and gaining popularity.

Most country images are popular stereotypes developed over a long period of time. Country branding either confirms or counters some of these stereotypes. They include proactive actions taken by the stakeholders (business, government, and citizens) of a nation to achieve one or more of the following objectives.

Change the image of a country

Germany trying to change it's Nazi image, and Japan trying to change its World War II aggressor image, fall in this category. Recently, the Canadian prime minister suggested that their national image was best reflected by a wolverine (not beaver which is their national animal), and asked for a "re-branding" of Canada (The Economist, February 17). The "Smile Singapore" campaign was designed to brand a friendly Singapore, countering the serious-looking stereotype of the Chinese people.

Affect the "country of origin" or "made in" image of a country

Italian shoes, French perfume, Japanese electronics, Swiss cheese, are favourably perceived by consumers because of their country's images. This increases a country's exports earning.

Branding is done to create trust in a country's business, products and people. Hong Kong, Singapore and Ireland have specific strategies to expand their exports. Colombia uses "Café de Colombia" campaign to establish herself as a top quality coffee grower. India's Tea Board markets "Darjeeling Tea" with the same intention.

Attract foreign investment

This is one of the most popular reasons for country branding. Multinationals tend to select those countries that have better images and higher international country ratings (for details please see my article in The Daily Star, May 28). Malaysia, Poland, Scotland, and South Africa have specific campaigns to attract foreign investment.

Attract tourism

Popular "destination branding" campaigns fall in this category. The "Selling Australia: Branding a country" video, using Paul Hogan (Crocodile Dundee) to promote Australia as a tourist destination, is a good example in this regard. "Amazing Thailand," "Malaysia, Truly Asia," and "Everything Under the Sun (Spain)," are successful destination brandings.

Branding a country by taking all the ingredients is not easy. The

people, geography, history, literature, art, folklore, music, and culture form a country's image. It is an umbrella concept, where the "spirit of a nation" is depicted. Below are a few issues to consider for (re)branding Bangladesh as a country.

Objective and responsibility of the branding campaign

Our branding campaign can have multiple objectives. It should dispel some of the negatives and underscore some of the positives. The campaign can also be targeted to attract foreign investment and tourism.

Country branding is a combined responsibility of all citizens under a government leadership. The technical details of re-branding Bangladesh can be taken care of by professionally qualified international media firms/consultants, with support from local media/advertising agencies.

The team may consist of representatives from relevant government bodies (Parjatan Corporation, Export Promotion Bureau, and Board of Investment etc.), academia, media, and business. Representation from export oriented firms, and the hospitality and entertainment industries, should be there.

Dispelling the negative stereotype

In certain ways, Bangladesh is stereotyped negatively in the international media. She has been portrayed as a country besieged by poverty, natural disasters, floods and political violence. My daughter tells me that one of her geography

teachers in high school called Bangladesh the "flood capital" of the world. The low-lying Ganges Delta gets flooded, and we are not going to escape this reality.

But we can counter and dispel the negative media publicity about floods, and the miseries caused. We could give a positive twist by highlighting our stories of "struggle and survival" against natural calamities. It is not the "story of the flood" but the "spirit of the nation to live, fighting all odds" that needs to be projected. That should be our branding focus.

Highlighting the positives

There are a few positives that we could highlight in branding Bangladesh. First, we need to underscore our language movement and liberation war, the two great events that we are proud of. It is because of Bangladesh that February 21 is celebrated as Language Day by the United Nations. Also, our liberation war symbolises the fighting spirit of an "unarmed civilian population" against an organized, well-equipped army.

The spirit of the nation, fighting against natural disasters, autocratic governments, or an organised army, is our national heritage. It is a common thread that can be tied together in defining the nation.

Second, we are a peace-loving, friendly people. People have lived in this Ganges Delta for over two thousand years. Bengal has never conquered anyone, or been a threat to any of her neighbours. Lately, we have been holding our stance for peace by being the largest contributor to the United Nations' peace-keeping force.

Third, as a nation we are open

and hold moderate viewpoints. We have not allowed the extremists, whether from the right or from the left, to capture the mainstream. The two major political parties, Awami League (left of center?) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (right of center?) are predominantly centrist parties. Our moderation is also reflected in our tolerance for ethnic or religious diversity.

Fourth, Bangladesh is a very young nation, both politically and demographically. Thirty-six years is a very short history for a nation-state. Despite natural disasters and political violence, the country has enjoyed over 5% GDP growth.

The entrepreneurial spirit of the nation, embracing globalisation, should be highlighted. How education and technology are reaching the masses should be underscored. The success of Grameen could be noted in this regard.

Fifth, our culture, literature, poetry, music, folklore, drama and dance are unique. The richness of our culture has not received good publicity. Here I salute Dr. Yunus's effort of taking a cultural troupe to the Noble Prize reception ceremony. The troupe promoted the richness of Bengali culture. A branding of modern Bangladesh should include our cultural heritage.

Sixth, the two recent events that gave us positive international coverage are Dr. Yunus's winning of the Noble Prize, and the Bangladesh cricket team's excellent performance. Both indicate the promise of a modern young nation. Let us underscore these achievements in re-branding Bangladesh.

Attracting tourism and



investment

These two are the most common reasons for country branding. We can learn from the experiences of more than 30 countries of the world that have specific programs for attracting tourism/investment. A large amount of literature covers the issue. Parjatan Corporation and Board of Investment should be able to address them separately. I refrain from discussing them for the sake of brevity.

Differentiation is the key

Bangladesh is competing with its neighbours, especially India, for tourism and investment. India's mystic image, rich and diverse culture, popular movie industry,

and the recent success of the IT sector, make her a formidable friendly competitor.

We need to differentiate ourselves from India in positioning Bangladesh as a country. Our language, culture and heritage play a significant role in that. We could emphasise the "youthfulness" of Bangladesh as a differentiating point. Our young cricketers have already set some positive examples in this regard.

More promotion cannot not do the trick if the product is a not right. Country branding will be successful if "product Bangladesh" is well accepted. That is, offering safety and security, stopping political violence, developing infrastructure,

and upgrading the quality of the hospitality and entertainment industry, must be addressed.

The purpose of the article is to raise awareness about the importance of branding Bangladesh in a globalised world. Branding is likely to change our national image, improve our country ratings, and attract investment and tourism. For that, we need to work together as a nation. Resuming the stalled democratic process may just be a good start for the purpose. Hope we realize that soon.

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Reinventing the wheel?

S. I. ZAMAN

IN the name of reform, what we are seeing is a rewriting of the party constitutions and conventions. Of course, in principle, these are the fundamental premise on which the very credibility of a political party rests.

It certainly presupposes a benign mindset of the people (the politicians) who advocate and execute the visions of the party. So, rewriting of these constitutional paragraphs (most of which are pretty fundamental) does bring up some germane questions:

- Are not these parties reinventing the wheel?
- Shouldn't this "wheel" have been invented at the inception of the parties?
- Even if the parties were launched without these fundamental principles in place, shouldn't the existing government agencies have outlawed such parties?
- Shouldn't the parties be outlawed forthwith, and be asked to resubmit their applications as new political parties (this

may be too much to swallow for the parties)?

- Shouldn't the government institutions (Election Commission, Home Ministry, Law Ministry etc) that were responsible for endorsing such political parties be held responsible for such monumental negligence (and indeed corruption)?

If a mere rephrasing of some constitutional clauses is tantamount to a reform, then we are living in a fool's paradise. What guarantee is there that the democratic principles which are enshrined in the constitution will be meticulously upheld? What guarantee is there that the next incumbent to power (principally the PM) would not "over-ride" his or her democratic limitation of power?

What guarantee is there that future ministers would not again succumb to insatiable voracity for power? Therefore, it is simply a question of frailty in the character of a politician! And no amount of revision in the party constitution will give us, overnight, a new

breed of politicians who are robust and steadfast in their moral set up.

There has been a lot of hullabaloo recently over the "reform" issue. The parties are meeting behind closed doors, and some have already come up with draft reform policies. Of course, the newly drafted policies are all benign.

But the question is, how far are these achievable, given that the chairperson (or president), general secretary, and the members, would be the same "type" of politicians. It is inconceivable that in the 36 years since liberation, no political parties thus far has managed to evolve out of the hero-worshipping and leader-centric culture of tolerating a continued preponderance, pre-eminence, and primacy of their respective party leaders.

The members of BNP and AL who are now so vocal, and seemingly genuine in their commitment to reform, were the very sycophants who only recently basked in the self-gratification of clinging to their leaders and showering them with adulation and glorification.

None of these latter day "reformists" had the courage to tell their "madam" to reform herself for the sake of the party or, indeed, to make a formal protest against all the shady dealings and corrupt practices perpetrated by her immediate family with her tacit approval.

When all else failed, the only honourable thing to do was to resign from the party as a protest -- however, no resignation was forthcoming! Of course these latter day "reformists" were more anxious to keep their jobs than the credibility of their party. And, had it not been for the present CG takeover in 1/11, the likes of Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan et al, and Suronjit Sengupta et al, would still be tagging along with their respective party leaders.

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The people or the members need to change their own mindsets and attitudes, so as to respect and promote democratic culture within the party.

The policy structures of government departments, agencies and subsidiaries, should also be revamped and bolstered so that the non-political executives do not become pawns of the whims and unilateralism (detrimental to national good) of any incumbent ministers.

The first point is straightforward; however, the second point is easier said than done. The mainstream parties have already begun their reform process as far as the first point is concerned, whereas achieving the second one necessarily involves an evolutionary process. And this will not be achieved in one generation -- a changed political ethos, practice and culture would gradually

ally help to develop a new mindset and attitude conducive to a democratic culture within a party.

- As for the third point, a changed legislation in policy structure is definitely a way forward. There is always a "no-man's land" between the non-political executives and the (political) ministers, and the void is most often filled up by executives who are partisan or aspiring partisans.
- To circumvent this perennial ill within the government the only way forward is to make realistic legislations, which would discourage any partisan tendencies once and for all. And above all, there must be total accountability and transparency across the whole political and governmental spectrum, or else we would always have some "aspiring" minister or executive going for the easy profit under the table -- and then years from now we would have to reinvent the wheel once again -- and that would be a colossal shame for us as a nation!

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MICHAEL HIRSH

US and European officials are still very angry at Mohamed ElBaradei, director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, for appearing to concede that Iran's uranium-enrichment program is here to stay. "Every time he gets up there, he comes out with Iranian talking points," snipes one Western diplomat.

But Newsweek has learned that the British recently drafted a proposal that shifts the West's "red line" closer to ElBaradei's position as a way of breaking the stalemate in the talks.

The draft proposal, which is being circulated among the governments but has not yet been formally submitted to Iran, calls for a "freeze for freeze" rather than an outright suspension of enrichment. The "freeze" concept is similar to the "timeout" that ElBaradei first called for last January.

In order to get talks started, both ideas effectively permit Iran to continue with the uranium enrichment it is doing already, but they demand that Tehran freeze further construction of centrifuges and reprocessing of nuclear material, in exchange for a reciprocal freeze on further UN sanctions.

That seems to mark a concession by the Europeans and Americans, who had previously insisted that Tehran suspend all enrichment activities before they would come to the table to negotiate a broader agreement. Washington and the so-called "EU-3" -- Britain, France and Germany -- also pushed through two UN Security Council resolutions insisting on suspension.

In an interview, a European diplomat who is helping to disseminate the proposal denied that it represents a breach of the US-European "red line," which is to insist that Iran suspend all enrichment before formal talks begin.

"We're talking about choreography here," he said. "We said we are prepared to be flexible over process to get back to talks. That doesn't mean that we're flexible over the substance of the red line. If it would help the Iranians to be able to sell this to their own domestic audience, to say they won this great victory, we can accept that." Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Ali Larijani, has insisted that Iran will never suspend enrichment.

Earlier this year, Iran announced it had reached "industrial-scale" enrichment, with more than 1,000 centrifuges operating.

Despite some technical setbacks, experts feared that Tehran was working its way steadily toward the 3,000 centrifuges it would need to produce nuclear weapons (though Tehran denies that is its aim).

Around that time, ElBaradei outraged European and American negotiators by suggesting that Iran's program was so far advanced that demands for complete suspension were unrealistic. "They pretty much have the knowledge about how to enrich (uranium)," he told The New York Times. "From now, it's simply a question of perfecting that knowledge. People will not like to hear it, but that's a fact."

An IAEA official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told me that ElBaradei is simply recognizing the reality on the ground in Iran that Washington refuses to see. "ElBaradei warned about this a year ago when they had only 20 centrifuges -- in other words, the danger of just letting things drag on.

There is simply not going to be any absolute suspension of Iran's activities, and the longer the United States and others hold out for that the more centrifuges Iran will build," said the official. ElBaradei's worry is that if the diplomatic stalemate continues, Iran could have 8,000 centrifuges by Christmas, a critically high number.

Tehran also seems to be gravitating toward a "freeze for freeze." During a visit last week to Iran, I talked to a senior Iranian official, Mohsen Rezaei, secretary of the Expediency Council, who spoke favorably about ElBaradei's concept of a timeout.

"With old solutions and old arguments, (the nuclear issue) will not be resolved," he said, adding, "I agree with Mr. ElBaradei that you cannot bomb away nuclear technology." Now, sensing they may have an ally at the IAEA, the Iranians are eager to satisfy ElBaradei's demands for further clarity on the illicit history of Iran's program -- so much so that Larijani met twice with him last week.

Larijani also apparently dropped Iran's earlier demand that cooperation with the IAEA would come only after the Security Council referred the Iran case back to the agency. "They can have their surveillance. They can have their inspections," Larijani told me in a separate interview in Tehran. What remains at issue is how much enrichment Iran will be permitted to have.

Adieu Blair, adieu

TARIQ ALI

TONY Blair's success was limited to winning three general elections in a row. A second-rate actor, he turned out to be a crafty and avaricious politician, but without much substance; bereft of ideas he eagerly grasped and tried to improve upon the legacy of Margaret Thatcher.

But though in many ways Blair's program has been a euphemistic, if bloodier, version of Thatcher's, the style of their departures is very different.

Thatcher's overthrow by her fellow-Conservatives was a matter of high drama: an announcement outside the Louvre's glass pyramid during the Paris Congress brokering the end of the Cold War; tears; a crowded House of Commons.

Blair makes his unwilling exit against a backdrop of car-bombs and mass carnage in Iraq, with hundreds of thousands left dead or maimed from his policies, and London a prime target for terrorist attack. Thatcher's supporters described themselves afterwards as horror-struck by what they had done. Even Blair's greatest sycophants in the British media confess to a sense of relief as he finally quits.

A true creature of the Washington Consensus, Blair was always loyal to the various occu-

pants of the White House. In Europe, he preferred Aznar to Zapatero, Merckel to Schroeder, was seriously impressed by to Berlusconi and, most recently, made no secret of his desire that Sarkozy was his candidate in France.

He understood that privatisation-deregulation at home were part of the same mechanism as the wars abroad.

If this judgment seems unduly harsh let me quote Sir Rodric Braithwaite, a former senior adviser to Blair, writing in the Financial Times on, August 2, 2006: "A spectre is stalking British television, a frayed and waxy zombie straight from Madame Tussaud's. This one, unusually, seems to live and breathe. Perhaps it comes from the Central Intelligence Agency's box of technical tricks, programmed to spout the language of the White House in an artificial English accent...."

Mr. Blair has done more damage to British interests in the Middle East than Anthony Eden, who led the UK to disaster in Suez 50 years ago. In the past 100 years -- to take the highlights -- we have bombed and occupied Egypt and Iraq, put down an Arab uprising in Palestine and overthrown governments in Iran, Iraq and the Gulf. We can no longer do these things on our own, so we do them with the Americans.

Mr Blair's total identification with the White House has destroyed his influence in Washington, Europe and the Middle East itself: who bothers with the monkey if he can go straight to the organ-grinder?"

This, too, is mild compared to what is said about Blair in the British Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence. Senior diplomats have told me on more than one occasion that it would not upset them too much if Blair were to be tried as a war criminal. More cultured critics sometimes compare him to the Cavaliere Cipolla, the vile hypnotist of fascist Italy, so brilliantly portrayed in Thomas Mann's 1929 novel Mario and the Magician. Blair is certainly not Mussolini, but like the Duce he enjoyed to simultaneously lead and humiliate his supporters.

What much of this reveals is anger and impotence. There is no mechanism to get rid of a sitting prime minister unless his or her party loses confidence. The Conservative leadership decided that Thatcher simply had to go because of her negative attitude to Europe. Labour tends to be more sentimental towards its leaders and in this case they owed so much to Blair that nobody close to him wants to be cast in the role of Brutus.

In the end he decided to go himself. The disaster in Iraq had



made him a much hated politician and slowly support began to ebb. One reason for the slowness was that the country is without a serious opposition. In Parliament, the Conservatives simply followed

Blair. The Liberal-Democrats were ineffective. Blair had summed up Britain's attitude to Europe at Nice in 2000:

"It is possible, in our judgment, to fight Britain's corner, get the best

out of Europe for Britain and exercise real authority and influence in Europe. That is as it should be. Britain is a world power."

This grotesque, self-serving fantasy that "Britain is a world power" is to justify that it will always be EU/UK. The real union is with Washington. France and Germany are seen as rivals for Washington's affections, not potential allies in an independent EU. The French decision to re-integrate themselves into Nato and pose as the most vigorous US ally was a serious structural shift which weakened Europe.

Britain responded by encouraging a fragmented political order in Europe through expansion and insisted on a permanent US presence on the continent.

Blair's successor, Gordon Brown, is more intelligent (he reads books) but politically no different. There will be a change of tone, but little else. It is a grim prospect with or without Blair and an alternative radical politics is confined to the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales. Its absence nationally fuels the anger felt by substantial sections of the population, reflected in voting (or not) against those in power.

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