

On names, pet names and politics

Of course, connection, or correlation, to give the matter statistical sophistication, does not necessarily imply causation. But surely, the line of causation could not have run from increased corruption to proliferation of caudal pet names. It is far more plausible to argue that an influx of proper nouns of this variety has somehow contributed to the rise of improper politics over recent decades. Socrates mellowed a bit. Perhaps the term correlation was a bit too much for him. But I had still to explain how caudal pet names of politicians might lead to increased corruption of politics.

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

MY perennial interlocutor, Socrates, no relation of his more illustrious namesake, advised me strongly against writing this piece. Why must I indulge in such trivialities, he argued, especially when the pages of The Daily Star were so full of learned discourses on momentous events in the country? I had only to read Cross Talks, Straight Talks, and the editorials in the newspaper, for example, to realize how trivial this talk would look in comparison. I pondered over his arguments for a long while before finally rejecting them. I concluded that it was not bunkum to talk about names. Names dominate our ethos, the subconscious of the individual, and our political thinking. Grand

designs have founded on grand names. Petty politicians have made great personal fortunes under pet names. What is wrong, then, with writing about names? So I wrote. Socrates watched. Take, for example, the great labours of Professor Muhammad Yunus, the Nobel Laureate and our national asset, to create a political party that would be squeaky clean of corruption. Those were the days when talk of a break with the sordid national politics of the past was on just about everybody's lips. People, not least the laureate, began to proclaim that the award of the Nobel Prize had, overnight, transformed the country beyond recognition. Soon, there rose a clamour for a new political party under the leadership of the Nobel Laureate, and composed of the pure and the uncorruptible.

Professor Yunus duly floated the idea of a party. He also chose a great name for it: Nagorik Shakti. In his enthusiasm for an eye-catching name, however, he seemed not to realize that the Bengali acronym of the new party would be a jinxed Naash, which, translated into English, is destruction. The party soon self-destructed. To vary the imagery, the idea sank no sooner than it was floated. The name doomed it. Which is not to suggest that there weren't other more weighty reasons. But don't let them detain us here. We Bengalis have a great fascination for names. The choice of Nagorik Shakti suggests as much. The fascination is not limited to names of political and social organizations and institutions but extends to those of individuals. A

blind child may not be christened "lotus eyed" in Bengal, but the very existence of the Bengali ridicule "name a blind child *padmalochan*" actually confirms the fascination. Parents generally choose long, flowery, or glorious names for their children. More often than not, they also choose a pet name (*daak naam*, in Bengali) for them. Rowshan Gulshan Ara Begum might have a pet name of Beli (the flower) and Abul Hasanat Abdullah Mahmud might be given an additional Benu (flute). Pet names -- I prefer the term to nicknames -- are actually terms of endearment bestowed in childhood, that carry with them the added advantage of being much shorter than the main, or official, or "good" name (or *bhalo naam*, in Bengali) which tend to be rather long. In fact, the pet name, once given currency, takes on a life of its own, often eclipsing the *bhalo naam* except to the close relatives of the named. A strange thing appears to have happened in recent years, however: the pet name began to be appended, sort of umbilically, to the *bhalo naam*. Thus, the aforesaid Rowshan would become Rowshan Gulshan Ara Begum Beli, while her male counterpart would be known

as Abul Hasanat Abdullah Mahmud Benu. Such umbilical appending of the pet name was almost unknown to my generation, whose members are now in their early or mid-seventies. At this point Socrates came back with a loud interjection: "What on earth are you talking about?" I told him this was what had been bothering me for quite some time: a surge of politicians with pet names caudally attached to official ones in our national political arena. I reeled off a long list of such names, with no particular order in mind -- Bulu, Falu, Khoka, Maya, Pintu, Alal, Dulu, Minu, Lobi, Tuku, Mintu, and, most tellingly, Poto. The list could easily be lengthened, but there wouldn't be any point in doing so. Suffice it to note that members of parliament, ministers, and mayors are among the bearers of these pet names. Note that the pet name does not have to be particularly attractive. Poto is, after all, a vegetable. In fact, the *daak naam*, coming at the end of a gorgeous *bhalo naam* can look like a descent from the sublime to the ridiculous. Note also that since the name comes at the end of the full name, it works like a surname and this makes it somewhat

embarrassing to use it as such. It hardly looks respectful to address someone as Mr. followed by his pet name. One might expect these considerations to diminish the attractiveness of pet names to politicians. This has not happened. My interlocutor still looked distinctly unhappy. "So?" he frowned. I asked him to consider the number of politicians against whom the present administration of the country has taken action on charges of corruption. Among them, there appears to be a disproportionately large number of politicians with pet names attached to their official names. Observe at the same time that the surge in corruption in the country over the last few decades has coincided with the deluge of pet names among politicians. It is reasonable to conclude that there might be a significant connection between the increased use of pet names among politicians and the spread of corruption in the country. At the very least, the hypothesis of such a connection cannot be rejected outright. Of course, connection, or correlation, to give the matter statistical sophistication, does not necessarily imply causation. But surely, the

line of causation could not have run from increased corruption to proliferation of caudal pet names. It is far more plausible to argue that an influx of proper nouns of this variety has somehow contributed to the rise of improper politics over recent decades. Socrates mellowed a bit. Perhaps the term correlation was a bit too much for him. But I had still to explain how caudal pet names of politicians might lead to increased corruption of politics. My reasoning here had, of necessity, to be *a priori*. I insist there is nothing wrong with this type of reasoning. It is used even in academia, especially when hard facts are not easy to come by. Pet names are of course terms of affection, as I mentioned earlier. But they can manifest themselves in various others, less innocent, and protean ways. In public life, a pet name conjures up a closed, playful circle of chums and sycophants, a coterie, a clique with the pet-named politician at the centre. Other politicians, those with more mature names may, of course, be surrounded by chums and scoundrels. But the circle of politicians with caudal pet names seems to belong to quite a different

world. Barring some honourable exceptions, they will probably replicate in their new role as politicians the lives they once led in their drawing rooms, or *boithok khana*, as gregarious children or young adults, dreaming of power but oblivious of responsibility to society. The very fact of their dogged insistence on keeping their pet names of childhood firmly appended to their *bhalo naam* tends to ensure that the replication is complete. Young politicians who make a transition from childhood fancy for power to responsibility of adulthood would dump their pet names at the very first opportunity and get on with their job. Those who dreamed in their childhood of service to their country would probably cast aside their pet name even faster, as something unworthy of adults. "So, what do you suggest? Abolish pet names of politicians?" Socrates demanded to know, before storming out. I did not have an answer. I still do not.

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Cricket lessons

Like the Bangladesh cricket team, which earned a great deal of love and admiration from the fans after its tremendous victory in the world cup, the post 1/11 government earned huge support and tapped the reservoir of public admiration. Just remember the guest-list of the inauguration of the post 1/11 administration. The government must try hard not to squander the invaluable resource of good will and support.

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

A point worth remembering for both scientists as well policy makers is that we can learn as much from failed cases as we do from successful ones. For students of economic development, both Singapore and Somalia are useful case studies. The former for success, the latter for failure. Able, honest and pragmatic leadership, some help from favourable external conditions, a dash of luck, explain Singapore's remarkable economic development. Warlordism that grew out of years of political instability and economic malaise explains the quagmire in which Somalia is stuck. Bad decisions and poor performance in cricket only hurt the fans. Bad policies and decisions in politics can lead to serious consequences. The two are surely not comparable *in toto*; yet the lessons of the rise and fall of the Bangladesh cricket team may provide some lessons for the caretaker or interim government in Bangladesh. After the success of the Tigers in the cricket World Cup, the team

was given so much attention and was lavished with so much praise that it failed to take things into perspective. When a friend of mine in an Internet group discussion quoted a *Daily Star* analysis of the cricket team after their initial thrashing in Sri Lanka, the patriotic Bangladeshis rose to action. And predictably, the media was blamed for not portraying our team favourably. Alleged negative media coverage was also the whipping boy of the BNP-Jamaat coalition government, who even invented the term "media terrorism." In the end, the corrupt regime that sponsored real terrorism was exposed, and the media were vindicated. The present government headed by Dr. Fakruddin Ahmed deserves unstinted credit for its indefatigable fight against corruption, and for steering the country towards a fair and free election before the end of 2008. It is no secret that the military is supporting the present government. I hate to be self-referential, but I wrote -- apart from "cricket as a metaphor" in these pages -- in my blog soon after the new government took office that it should be

advised not to pay heed to excessive criticism nor to obsequious flattery. Bangladesh is well-known for both. It is sickening to see some corrupt politicians on talk-shows praising the "patriotic" military to the sky. General Moeen U. Ahmed should remind them -- in his usual polite manner -- that the "right to freedom of information" is not the same as the "right to flattery." Surely, the military does not need any testimonial from the discredited politicians. Lessons from the Bangladesh cricket team Do not get carried away with success in one-day cricket. Ireland defeated Pakistan in the world cup but did not engage Pakistan in a test series. Bangladesh should have basked in the glory of the world cup success for a while before taking on India and Sri Lanka in quick succession. Failure is demoralizing, and demoralization breeds further failure. Playing one-day cricket is qualitatively different from test cricket. Remember, the 100-meter sprinters are not necessarily



champion marathon runners. Don't fall for excessive praise. Too much praise is never good. Flatterers are not your friends. Mouthing good ideas and backing the talk are two different things. Talking less and working hard is better than the reverse. Irresponsible talk must be avoided all the times. Never say: we will win the next match. Remember that chance plays a big role in cricket, but chance also favours the stronger team. Good intentions are different from practical actions. Assessing one's limitations is a better strategy than projecting grand ambitions. Lessons for the Bangladesh government Do not fall for flattery nor worry about negative press, but do pay heed to what reasonable people are saying, and what journalists and intellectuals with proven integrity are writing. Dhaka University teachers are reasonable people. Do not want to accomplish too many things in one go. Critically assess the limitations and try to rectify the failures before it is too late. Restrain some advisers from making irresponsible statements. What did Barrister Moinul Hossain, the adviser in charge of law, mean when he gave two absurd choices: Hasina had to either run away, or get arrested -- what was that? Why should she run away? How? (Sudha Sadan was cordoned off, if not sealed). Stop repeating, "no one is above the law". This is a truism. Yet, this truism has a ring of absurdity in the context of Bangladesh.

Remember, the murderers of Bangabandhu were given diplomatic assignments. For years, inquires into the murder of Bangabandhu, his family, and important national leaders in jail, were stonewalled. More recently, investigations into the murder of Mr. Kibria are still pending, as are those concerned with the bombings that almost killed Sheikh Hasina in August 2004. Like in cricket, chance, too, plays a role in politics. No one predicted that the prices of essentials would remain high after the catching of the crooks. Things will go wrong, for which the government must be prepared, but not contribute to. Like the Bangladesh cricket team, which earned a great deal of love and admiration from the fans after its tremendous victory in the world cup, the post 1/11 government earned huge support and tapped the reservoir of public admiration. Just remember the guest-list of the inauguration of the post 1/11 administration. The government must try hard not to squander the invaluable resource of good will and support. As far as we know, there is only one national cricket team in Bangladesh. It is not entirely clear that there is only one government in power.

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A.K. Faezul Huq: We mourn his loss



When he was a state minister, he was able to win the confidence, respect, affection, and the hearts of public officials within his ministry. In many respects, he was ahead of his times. He did not break any rules, but sought solutions to ensure good outcomes which reflected judgment and good sense. According to colleagues, he was easy to work with.

HARUN UR RASHID

A.K. Faezul Huq, son of late Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq, passed away suddenly on July 19 due to a massive heart attack. We are deeply saddened by his untimely passing from this earth. Faezul Huq was a lawyer, an academic, a politician, and a former state minister of the Awami League government during 1996-2001. Whatever position he took on, he carried out in a simple and courteous fashion. He was a prolific writer on a variety of subjects in newspaper, magazines and a regular contributor to the print media. His articles were incisive and easy to read and comprehend, and his message was direct and to the point, whether one agreed or not with his views is a different matter. Politics did not seem to be his "cup of tea," as he was a person of great candour and honesty. Honesty and politics hardly mix. He had an exuberant style of life -- he loved life, enjoyed the company of people and everything about it. When he was a state minister, he was able to win the confidence, respect, affection, and the hearts of public officials within his ministry. In many respects, he was ahead of his times. He did not break any rules, but sought solutions to ensure good outcomes which reflected judgment and good sense. According to colleagues, he was easy to work with. He was friendly in his dealings, and was never vindictive. Passionate about the future prospects of jute, he attempted to make the "golden fibre" of the country a diversified exportable commodity. He was a great traveller, and it is no accident that a lot of stories about Faezul Huq involve, as he would call them, "foreign parts." He was a past-master at combin-

ing keen observation of culture and traditions of the foreign countries with the pleasures of tourism during his holidays. He wrote many anecdotes of his travels. Faezul Huq was the very essence of urbanity. He was charming, articulate, witty, and generous. I used to meet him in parties/dinners of common friends. He was always available for political analysis and assessment. He was always great company, keen to explore and experience something new. To his family, he was a loving and inspiring figure. He could also be stubborn. He refused to grow old, and ignored his doctor's advice. Born in 1943 in Calcutta, he did his secondary education in Dhaka and at Notre Dame College. He obtained his honours degree in political science and took a masters degree in English from Dhaka University. Faezul Huq was elected as MNA (Member of the National Assembly) in 1970 from his Banaripara-Swarupkathi-Nazirpur constituency. In 1996 he was elected as MP from the same constituency and was made a state minister. His passing away has caused dismay and shock to his friends and acquaintances. We all pray to Allah for eternal bliss for his soul, and may his bereaved family have the courage and strength to bear the irreparable personal loss. About human beings, Shakespeare writes through the words of Hamlet: "What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form, in moving, how express and admirable! In action how like an angel!...And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?"

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Reducing the alarming trade gap

We strongly feel the need for reducing our trade imbalance with India, but not at the cost of our people's interests. As the present Indian proposals are sensitive the people will have to be taken into confidence. It is, therefore, advisable that this government, being a caretaker government, should avoid taking decisions in such sensitive matters. The government is already under heavy pressure due to handling of issues like curbing corruption, reform of political parties, and containing price-hike of essential commodities.

A.B.M.S ZAHUR

In recent times, India has increased its effort to convince Bangladesh that the existing trade imbalance between Bangladesh and India could be reduced to an allowable limit if Bangladesh accepted various Indian proposals. Since the elected governments could not be convinced of its proposals, India is now sparing no effort to influence the CTG, which is supposed to handle mainly routine matters, but no policy issues. However, because of the necessity of levelling the field for a free, fair, and credible election, scheduled to held by the end of 2008, it has undertaken some essential and urgent reforms in various fields. Because of time constraints and lack of adequate support from

the bureaucracy, all the advisers are working extremely hard to achieve their goal. In the Election Commission, all-out efforts are on to maintain the election schedule and other related matters. With full support from the army, the CTG has been able to achieve a lot. However, it is now facing heavy pressure from the major parties on the issue of reform of political parties, because the chiefs of both the major parties want to avoid reform. The CTG appears to be firm in bringing true democracy to the country, a democracy not in words but in deed, a democracy for the people not for some privileged families, a democracy of the people. Attaining freedom is a tough job. To establish a democratic order in a least developed country

appears to be a tougher job. India, no doubt, assisted Bangladesh in attaining freedom, but it misread the people's spirit of independence. They can never accept Indian hegemony. Thus, real understanding will develop only when India starts respecting properly the sentiment of the people of Bangladesh. Farakka, occupation of Talpatti island by India, Tipaimukh project, non-settlement of border disputes, frequent killings of Bangladeshis near the borders, and high non-tariff barrier on import of Bangladesh products indicate the unfriendly attitude of India. The Saarc is ineffective and limping because of the Indian attitude. On the one hand, India signs the water sharing Ganges Water Treaty; on the other, it is

proceeding with the Tipaimukh project without even informing Bangladesh, which is facing desertification due to the project. Duplicity may pay temporarily. In the long run it may bring bad results. In recent times, we heard some inspiring statements about greater assistance and cooperation from India. India says it wants to see a democratic, peaceful, and prosperous Bangladesh. At least, it sounds nice. We are well-wishers of India as a neighbour. But how we can make a sacrifice for it without hurting the interests of our people is bothering us. We lost our deal in Farakka, and we were losers in the Ganges Water Treaty. Bangladeshis are suffering in our enclaves. We are trying hard to sort out all the problems with India but, so far, the result has been disappointing. Unfortunately, even the India media is not friendly to Bangladesh. The Indian state minister for trade, Mr. Joyram Ramesh, came to Dhaka with five proposals for reducing the massive trade gap and raising bilateral trade between the two countries to \$ 20 billion in five years. The proposals are as

follows: Granting India transit facility. Agreeing to Tata company's \$ 3 billion infrastructure project. Access to New Mooring terminal in the port city of Chittagong. Opening additional land customs stations. Supply of electricity to Bangladesh from its 1110 mw power plant being set up outside Agartala. The first two proposals are old ones, and Bangladesh experts will have to carefully and closely examine the other three. (If necessary they may also be examined by foreign consultants.) In fact, our experts should closely examine all the five proposals. Simple dialogues may improve understanding of each other's points. But the real solution needs political will. We cannot develop closer trade relations with Bhutan or Nepal because of Indian non-cooperation, and we are suffering from shortage of water for irrigation because of Farakka and Tipaimukh projects. Some of the peasants living in border areas cannot cultivate their land because of hostility of the BSF. In the absence of a friendly atmosphere the proposals do not

appear to be readily acceptable. Existing problems need to be solved as early as possible for successful negotiations in future. We strongly feel the need for reducing our trade imbalance with India, but not at the cost of our people's interests. As the present Indian proposals are sensitive the people will have to be taken into confidence. It is, therefore, advisable that this government, being a caretaker government, should avoid taking decisions in such sensitive matters. The government is already under heavy pressure due to handling of issues like curbing corruption, reform of political parties, and containing price-hike of essential commodities. Thus, it appears to be advisable to inform Mr. Joyram Ramesh that the government is awfully busy with lots of reform programs and, as such, it would not be possible for it to give due attention to the proposals which needs thorough examination. In fact, it would be more appropriate to take up these sensitive proposals with the next elected government.

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