

Export of Bangladesh politics

AHMED SHAFIQL HUQUE

THE most prominent exports from Bangladesh are readymade garments and workers. They contribute to the economy and are appreciated as the key force behind the engine of growth for the country. Less known is a third export from Bangladesh, its politics. This export costs the country its image in the international community and can be a source of embarrassment both for the government as well as other Bangladeshi migrants abroad.

While politicians of nearly all shades are running for cover in Bangladesh, a surge of political activity by Bangladeshis is resonating in various parts of the world. Since the declaration of a state of emergency, political activities remain prohibited in the country. Taking advantage of their immunity in the secure environment of faraway lands, Bangladeshi expatriates have become more active than the political activists within the country. They are holding demonstrations, lobbying leaders of various countries, demanding release of those arrested in Bangladesh, and even threatening to stop the flow of remittance to the country if their demands are not met. They have been successful in extracting statements of support from some second-string American, Australian, and British politicians and officials in support of their demands. But there has been no impact on official policies of those governments.

All these acts and much more have been made possible due to a unique phenomenon. Bangladeshi migrants to other countries, mainly for economic reasons, but carry their political

baggage along to their new countries of residence. While they are disgusted at the state of affairs in Bangladesh and move to other countries to escape the ruthless exploitation and corruption of political leaders, they start dreaming of becoming one as soon as their physiological and safety needs are fulfilled. Unable to participate in mainstream social and political activities in their new country of residence, migrant Bangladeshis seek refuge in creating their own social and political environment and this leads to the formation of "wings" of major Bangladeshi political parties in various countries of the world. The leaders and committees of overseas Awami League, Bangladesh Nationalist Party, and Jatiya Party are endorsed by the chairperson/president of the party in Dhaka. Although these parties are unable to hold regular councils stipulated by their constitutions to elect office bearers within the country, heads of parties unilaterally endorse these overseas committees and they become official wings. It is not known whether these overseas appendages are stipulated in the constitution of the parties. Probably not.

Why do the Bangladeshi expatriates get involved in activities for political parties of their choice? Several explanations come to mind. Bangladesh still has a place in their heart, and they are keen to contribute to its welfare. They are loyal to their roots, and remain in touch with developments in Bangladesh. The intention of passing on the language and culture to the next generation, too, might play a part.

A stronger motivator is the opportunity of rubbing elbows with

the high and mighty when leaders from Bangladesh visit their city. They prefer to assume a dominating presence in all activities with the national leaders, and this often helps them to wield influence on the foreign missions. The embassy officials are often petrified of these expatriate leaders of Bangladesh political parties, as they are usually very close to the national leaders. In some cases, there have been reports of these leaders' involvement in unlawful activities. Some Foreign Service officials have been recalled on grounds of complaints lodged by leaders of the foreign wings of ruling political parties.

When these overseas leaders visit Bangladesh, they have ready access to ministers and MPs. Some were even able to secure election nomination from the major parties, although they live away from Bangladesh. Political leaders include such expatriates in their travel entourage. A large number of the United Kingdom Awami League leaders traveled with Sheikh Hasina to Dhaka from London on her last trip. She was also presented with an expensive car by these leaders and the coordinator was rewarded with nomination for a seat in the parliament. It is known from a well-publicised case that a pardon for murder conviction was obtained by virtue of being an overseas leader of the ruling political party. Incidentally, that case appears to have been settled for good, although many other cases from the past have been revived.

The quid-pro-quo continues as leaders who flee Bangladesh for one reason or another (usually to avoid prosecution for crime and corruption) are accorded shelter and support by their expatriate "branch" leaders. It helps them to

ride out political storms under the care of these expatriate leaders from the same political party, and then return to the country when it is safe to do so.

How can the expatriate Bangladeshis afford to devote time to apparently non-productive political activities while engaged in full-time professional occupations? This question puzzles many expatriates who are unable to make time even for their family while holding a full-time job. The general perception is that most of the Bangladeshi political activists overseas have plenty of time in hand and they can travel thousands of miles to participate in meetings and demonstrations, or to simply greet a visiting leader from Bangladesh. It is, indeed, commendable that they are able to devote precious time for the good of the country they had left permanently.

The majority of expatriates view the export of Bangladesh politics as unnecessary, unproductive, and divisive. The style of operation of overseas wings of the political parties is not much different from those in Bangladesh. There are reports of bitter factionalism and even acts of violence as leaders battle for control of these wings. During a visit to New York by Khaleda Zia, unruly acts by overseas supporters of BNP compelled the airport authorities to summon the police for controlling them. However, nothing deters these overseas politicians as the rewards are attractive. On their trips to Bangladesh, these leaders are accorded more privilege than local leaders of AL and BNP in terms of access to the party stalwarts.

What purpose do these overseas wings serve? They celebrate

Bangladeshi festivals and anniversaries of nationally important events, and arrange receptions for visiting leaders from their respective political parties. In some places, they organize social events. All these tasks can easily be performed by a united group of expatriates, but that would reduce the number of leaders, and that is a disincentive for those who seek to gain personal prominence. It gives them a sense of being important and a chance to climb on the podium to address the audience on special occasions celebrated by their political party faraway from home.

Their reaction to recent developments in Bangladesh marks a departure from the past. Soon after assuming office in January 2007, the government made clear its intention to prohibit the practice of forming overseas branches of Bangladeshi political parties. Although the majority of expatriate Bangladeshis were fully supportive, this must have resulted in some discomfort for the expatriate leaders who were apprehensive of losing their perks and privileges. The arrest of Sheikh Hasina and restrictions on the movement of Khaleda Zia provided a window of opportunity for these leaders to hang on to their privileged position. Shajeeb Wazed Joy initiated a movement in the United States to protest the arrest of Sheikh Hasina and demand her release, and overseas Awami League leaders jumped at the prospect of putting up a fight to retain their leadership. The BNP in Bangladesh were constrained by the state of emergency, but Khaleda Zia's telephone communication with overseas BNP leaders helped elicit their support in her favour. Therefore, the overseas leaders of both parties have, by default, become the major

forces in resisting the actions of the Bangladesh government.

Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia are looking forward to a new lease of political career on the basis of support from the overseas leaders of their parties. In return, these leaders will be able to ask for favours once the political storm settles down. In other words, it is entirely possible that the old order could be restored in Bangladesh politics, and the overseas leaders would continue to reap benefits.

This is not desirable for several reasons. The cases of dispensation of undue favour in the form of undeserved election nomination, pardon for murder, undesirable dabbling in the operation of foreign missions of the government, as well as striking business deals and contracts are wrong. With their refuge in faraway countries, none of these leaders pay tax in Bangladesh, but are able to benefit from their political connections. They jump at the first opportunity of seeking prominence by holding demonstrations or press conferences to provide negative information on Bangladesh. As citizens of Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States, none of these leaders of Awami League, BNP or Jatiya Party demonstrated against the violation of human rights on security grounds in those countries.

There was not a single voice of protest from these leaders against human rights abuse by the governments of countries in which they reside. They are careful not to avoid getting on the surveillance list of security agencies in those countries. But they are quick to condemn any event in Bangladesh that could jeopardise their privileges as external beneficiaries of



Londonistan

the unsavoury party politics in Bangladesh.

The majority of expatriate Bangladeshis are looking forward to the prohibition of these self-seeking politicians who exploit Bangladesh and harm its image for their selfish interest. If they really want to contribute to Bangladesh, they should return to the country and work under the same conditions as other leaders do. It is unlikely that these people will leave their life of comfort in foreign countries and suffer the hardship of politics in a developing country.

Therefore, it will be good to see the government succeed in putting a stop to this undesirable trend. Every migrant carries Bangladesh in their heart, but this does not give them a right to defame the motherland and embarrass fellow Bangladeshi migrants.

Ahmed Shafiqul Huque teaches in the Department of Political Science at McMaster University, Canada.

Going underground



Kolkata underground

SHAFIQL ALAM

DHAKA is one of the most densely populated mega-cities in the world. Because of that, it has been suffering from a lot of problems. One of the most talked about problems is traffic jams: whether they can be removed or not is a burning question.

According to international standards, roads should cover

25-30% of the total area of a city, but, in Dhaka, the coverage is only 6% of the total area. This is the major problem in Dhaka city.

On the other hand, the rule of thumb of transportation engineering says that a mass-transit system should be introduced if the population of a city is over one million. Dhaka's population is close to 12 million.

Studies show that buses can carry 5,000-6,000 passengers at

an average speed of 10-15 per hour in Dhaka. In the case of mono-rail or sky-train, the carrying capacity would be 25,000 passengers per hour. If an underground rail is introduced then the carrying capacity would be 70,000 passengers per hour, at an average speed of 45-50 km per hour. This clearly shows that underground rail has a carrying capacity 10 times more and speed 5 times more than that of

buses. Now, the problem is the rate of pollution. In case of underground rail the emission is zero as it runs on electricity. Electricity can be produced by using natural gas or coal at a cheap cost. In contrast to this, the rate of environmental pollution is very high for buses, and it will increase with the increase in the number of buses.

The population of Dhaka will be doubled by 2015, and if the number of buses is increased the environment will become toxic and unsuitable for human beings, and the traffic will become static. The solution is the introduction of underground rail.

Women, children, old men, and handicapped people are not habituated to using buses because no security or facilities are offered to them. Many times, women are disturbed by teasing of other passengers. That is why they use rickshaws. Removal of rickshaws is not a wise decision. If the underground rail is introduced those people can use it easily.

Every day we, in Dhaka, are losing a lot of time due to traffic jams. This causes loss of money. If two working hours are saved in a day then the economic gain would be Tk 5,000-6,000 crore per year. This can be achieved if

and only if underground rail is introduced.

Considering the above facts, India has introduced underground rail in Delhi and Calcutta, and one in Bangalore is under construction, and the fare is less than that of a bus. Why India is not using mono-rail or sky-train is a vital question. Again, if a rapid bus transit system is the permanent solution for jams, then why is India not using that, even though it makes buses?

It is impossible to cover 30% of the total area in Dhaka with roads. But it is possible to reduce the traffic load on roads by up to 50% to 60% by constructing an underground rail network in the Dhaka metropolitan area. Buses can be used for communication with suburban areas. Thus, the number of buses will not be reduced but the traffic congestion would be drastically reduced.

Cut and cover method can be easily applied to construct an underground rail at a shallow depth, without hampering traffic movement to a great extent, and only 3 to 4 years are required for complete set-up. By adopting BOT the cost for an underground rail would be Tk 6,000-7,000 crore, without using government funds. The fare will be less than

that of a bus. The soil of Dhaka is more suitable than that of Bangkok or Tokyo for underground rail.

About 177 cities of the world are using underground rail, some for 150 years. They even have 6 layers of underground rail. If mono-rail or sky-train is introduced by wasting valuable surface space, mega-city Dhaka will lose underground rail forever.

In Dhaka, only 2% of the population own cars. With the improvement of the economy the number will increase significantly, and we cannot restrict it. We cannot make different lanes for heavy and light vehicles (like developed cities, although they have underground rail) because of road width. What should be done in this situation is to introduce underground rail, and surface space can be used for flyovers and roads with proper design.

Earthquakes cannot destroy underground rail and there is always a scope for future expansion. Computerised security and other facilities can be installed. It needs no repeating that underground rail is the permanent solution for traffic jams.

Shafiqul Alam is an engineer.

Notes on a scandal

MICHAEL ISKOFF and MARK HOSENBALL

SINCE its opening in 1957, the Islamic Center of Washington has been the city's most prominent mosque -- a centre of worship for thousands of area Muslims, including many members of the capital's diplomatic corps. President Bush even made a speech at the mosque earlier this summer.

But now the Islamic Center has become immersed in a nasty court battle marked by charges of embezzlement, abuse of women and an alleged attempt to spread radical messages of hate.

The fireworks began earlier this year when federal prosecutors filed a criminal complaint against the recently ousted business manager of the mosque, Farzad Darui. A later five-count indictment charged that Darui, an Iranian native who formerly served as the mosque's security

chief, embezzled more than \$430,000 in five years -- in part by altering checks and diverting mosque funds to corporate entities he controlled.

This week, Darui returned fire. He claimed in papers filed in federal court in the District of Columbia that the charges against him had been manufactured by unnamed Saudi government officials as part of a scheme to oust him from his post. Their goal, Darui maintains, was to claim control over the mosque after Darui resisted Saudi efforts to have "radical" Wahhabi figures deliver messages of intolerance there.

"Because Darui barred Islamic radicals, from the [Islamic] Center, the Saudis, via the Center, have falsely accused him of embezzlement," Darui's filing claims. He seeks to have all charges against him dismissed. The filing was prepared by his lawyer, Washington attorney

Victoria Toensing.

Darui's filing also takes aim at the mosque's long-time director, Abdualah M. Khouj, a Saudi national and former official of the Saudi-funded Muslim World League. Darui claimed in the court filing that the funds he was accused of embezzling were in fact received as repayment of debts that he incurred for the "housing and feeding of Khouj's...wives, or mistresses." In one case, Darui claims in the filing, he made payments on behalf of Khouj to a woman who said she had been held against her will in Khouj's house.

A woman who answered the phone at the Islamic Center today and identified herself as the office manager said neither Khouj nor anybody on his behalf would comment on the allegations in Darui's court papers. "We don't have anything to say about that matter," said the woman, who said her name was Fatima

Goodwin. Repeated phone calls to the Saudi Embassy and a lawyer for the mosque were not returned. A spokesman for the US Attorney's office in the District of Columbia, which brought the criminal case against Darui, said prosecutors would respond to the allegations in Darui's filing in court.

The charges and counter-charges involving the Islamic Center come at an awkward time for the mosque. Only two months ago, President Bush used a visit to the mosque to announce that his administration planned to appoint the first-ever US envoy to the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. Bush had also made a highly publicised trip to the Islamic Center after the September 11 attacks.

But Darui's court filing depicts the Islamic Center as a centre of intrigue and conflict over competing views of its role and message. The filing said that Darui had

worked for the mosque since 1984 and "has been dedicated to preventing radical fundamentalists" from taking it over.

But his efforts, he alleges, brought him into repeated conflicts with Khouj -- who as mosque administrator received \$600,000 a year in Saudi Embassy funds, his filing says. "Darui... had to deal with security issues caused by the Saudi Embassy, particularly the Religious Section," the filing states. "He had to bar from the Center individuals who adhered to a radical form of Wahhabism and whom he considered a serious threat. They were invited to preach by Khouj, but did so at the bidding of the Religious Section. When these radicals preached, it was a message of hate and discrimination against anyone who disagreed."

The two specific examples cited in the court filing involve Ali Al-Timimi, an Islamic scholar who has since been convicted in federal

court on charges involving incitement to terrorism and Osama Basnan, a Saudi who was deported in 2002 after federal officials concluded he was a dedicated jihadi who had expressed sympathy for the 9/11 hijackers.

The conflicts between Darui and Khouj came to a head three years ago when, according to Darui's court filing, he learned that Khouj was planning to leave and the Saudis intended to replace him with a former director of the Institute for Islamic and Arab Sciences, an organisation that has been investigated by US officials for possible links to terrorism. (No charges have been filed against the group.) After Darui sought to thwart the move by calling a rare board meeting, "the Religious Section of the Saudi Embassy began spreading the rumour that Darui was embezzling funds."

© Newsweek International. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.

Things fall apart

POLICE with guns check vehicles at the gate, and inside the perimeter a siege mentality prevails. Yet this is no army camp: it's a school in the Thai village of Tak Bai. Since Islamist extremists launched a bloody separatist campaign in Thailand's south in 2004, schools and other government outposts have become targets, forcing them to fortify themselves.

Unlike the rest of Southeast Asia, fundamentalist violence here is getting worse. The region is now a patchwork of "red zones" -- the military term for areas where insurgents kill with impunity. Experts say that Thailand, a mostly Buddhist country, now faces the worst unrest since it annexed the Muslim region bordering Malaysia in 1902, and that the violence could spread north. Rebels who used simple pipe bombs three years ago have now started deploying much larger Iraqi-style remotely detonated IEDs. "I don't think there's an insurgency outside Iraq that's as lethal," says Zachary Abuza, a professor of international relations at Boston's Simmons College.

The rebels, members of two groups (known by their Thai acronyms, BNR-C and GMIP), want to create an independent Islamist state in Thailand's three Muslim provinces, Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala. In Narathiwat alone, beheadings, bombings and drive-bys now account for an average of four deaths per day. Radicals have gunned down 18 teachers since 2004 and forced 56 schools to close. "They want to destroy our government system," says Sangaun Intarak, chief educator in the area, "and schools are the most obvious symbol of the government."

So far, the country's military leaders -- who have staked their legitimacy on the ability to impose order -- have been reluctant to acknowledge the scope of the problem; officials blame drug traffickers and criminals, not insurgents, for most of the violence. Now the junta has started hinting it might make an aggressive push to regain control over the south, which could raise the level of bloodshed. Experts fear it could provoke the terrorists to strike tourist sites in the rest of the country.

The ethnic-Malay south has suffered bouts of violence since World War II, but the current insurgency is "qualitatively different," says Abuza. Ultra-secretive and horizontally integrated into autonomous cells, the insurgents are now thought to number 3,000. Their leaflets call for jihad against Buddhists and the imposition of Sharia. While their leaders are unknown -- as are their links to outside groups -- authorities have noted an uptick in travel by young Thai Muslims to the Middle East and worry about a Qaeda connection.

Bangkok's policies haven't helped. A 2005 study by the International Crisis Group said Thai Muslims have felt discriminated against for a century. Tensions boiled over after soldiers raided a 14th-century mosque in 2004, killing 33 suspected militants. That same year, 78 unarmed Islamist protesters suffocated when the military stacked them like logs in the back of closed trucks. The brutality alienated moderate Muslims and drove the extremists to launch bigger attacks.

Since then, outnumbered southern Buddhists have clustered in armed enclaves to resist ethnic cleansing by the rebels. The Thai military has set up scores of bases in Buddhist temples while leaving the Muslim population largely to fend for itself. Poorly trained paramilitaries have increased resentment; few speak the local language and they're known for shooting first and asking questions later. Local Muslims have been further angered by the Thai junta's recent efforts to make Buddhism the country's official religion. "Not a good idea," says Yanah Salaimae, a 49-year-old ethnic-Malay village leader near the border. "It makes us feel like kids of a minor wife."

An offensive in the region could be disastrous. Thailand's tourism industry is worth billions annually, and the Bali bombings showed how damaging terror attacks can be. A new rebel campaign could also delay the country's return to democracy, scheduled to follow elections late this year. Locals fear Balkanization, even civil war. "When I was young we all studied and played together," says Salaimae, the Malay leader. But such contact is becoming increasingly rare. Her nieces and nephews now attend a religious school for Muslims, while the few Buddhists who remain in the vicinity huddle in their homes after dark.

© Newsweek International. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.