

Beckoning of democracy and past failures



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

EVENTS preceding 1/11 and disclosures made thereafter show the banality of evil that has come home to us with a strange poignancy. As a nation we displayed scant concern for public good and few citizens were interested in public welfare. The erosion of our national character could not be checked. The eloquence of our public leaders flourished most when our public affairs were in the worst condition.

Is there a fear that election and its allied corruptions and the power and tyranny of wealth will make life hellish as soon as freedom is given to us? Citizens, anxious-eyed ask the question whether freedom's foundations will stay. The staying power of democracy varies depending on the resilience of political institutions achieved through age and tradition. A democratic society cannot perhaps afford to have substitute for knowledge and integrity in public life.

Would it be an impracticality to hope that our democratic

STRAIGHT LINE

The elected government of the not-too-distant future has to ensure that power and hunger for more resources does not become an end in itself. Protecting the status quo from all challenges shall not become the prime activity of the government. Devoting the energy and resources of the establishment for solving people's problems and maintenance of order in the society should be the main focus of rulers as against the use of government machinery to keep the rival claimants to power in check.

society will harbour a certain extravagance of objectives so that real and potential leaders wander beyond the safe provision of personal gratifications? Shall we see group cohesiveness and work and achievement? Will our democracy involve the cooperation of all perceptive citizens?

If we would like to benefit from past mistakes then we must ensure that arbitrary power shall never again be able to wear the grab of constitutionalism. One has to realize that our free nation can be stifled by indigenous autocrats only through our own apathy and folly. An authoritarian regime in Bangladesh will be only as puissant as the sycophants and the time-servers, the cringing and the craven can make it. We must come to grip with the reality that no human being can be more powerful than his henchmen will allow him to be.

The important question is, shall we maintain discipline or shall we witness the mindless 'hartsals' when government

ceased to govern, mobocracy displaced democracy and townships were paralyzed by groups of men who regarded themselves above the law? We have to learn to ensure the rule of law while providing liberty under law. It has to be demonstrated that liberty is not an "optional extra" in a democracy and that human rights are not a luxury intended merely for the elite and the affluent.

It is time to seriously ponder whether by voting ignorant professional politicians to power we have ensured the continuance of poverty and inaction. In other words, the survival of unworthy politicians must not be co-related to the continuation of the forces of ignorance. The mercenary actors of our political scene must be replaced by persons of honour and knowledge.

It is the duty of every Bangladeshi citizen to not merely vote but vote wisely. He must be guided by reason alone and vote for the best person

irrespective of any other consideration and party label. In fact, the right person in the wrong party should be preferable to the wrong person in the right party.

The disgustingly loud and unreasonable voice of a minority must no longer be mistaken as the voice of majority. This has been so because thinking persons have not taken the trouble to give public expression of their views and felt contented by living at the mercy of fools. They may console themselves by believing that truth shall ultimately prevail but incompetence cannot be allowed to play a very long innings.

Identity of views on national subjects may not be possible but harmony of aims can. Therefore, there must be nationwide campaign to disseminate correct facts and right ideas among the public at large. This way people would be able to face any crisis. Ultimately, standards of rationality and fair dealing of social justice and individual freedom will progressively be achievable.

Politically speaking, a democratic nation will progress when knowledge and power will be combined in the same set of individuals. As in the past we will face a grave crisis when some will have knowledge and others have power. We have to remember that people will be very soon disillusioned with democracy unless it results in rule by meritocracy.

The task, therefore, is to transform our apathetic and lethargic democracy into an anticipatory and participatory one. An anticipatory democracy would foresee the issues ahead and equip itself well to meet them; and a participatory democracy will be one in which the people are not content merely to vote at the time of elections but participate in the continuous process which goes to the making of decisions and the formulation of policies.

If one cares to find out one will see that a phenomenal change has taken place during the last ten or fifteen years in the thinking and behaviour of the general masses. And it is a positive one. While things at government level are deteriorating or stagnating, at societal level there is a yearning for change -- a realization that this is our own country and we have to do something to improve it.

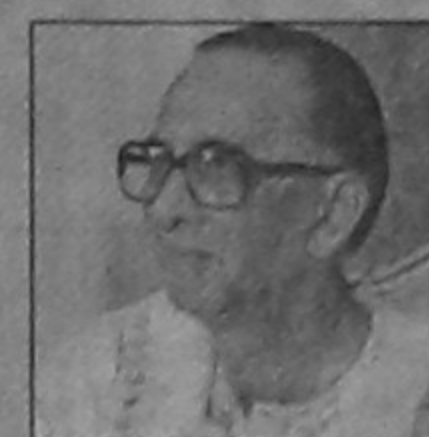
To the discerning eye there would appear an unfortunate disconnection between the state and society. There is a wide and growing gulf between the ruling

elite and the people. The government with all its power, mandate and huge resources has very little clue about the ground situation: how people think, how they perceive things, what are their needs, what are their priorities. People on the other hand, have little faith in the government.

The elected government of the not-too-distant future has to ensure that power and hunger for more resources does not become an end in itself. Protecting the status quo from all challenges shall not become the prime activity of the government. Devoting the energy and resources of the establishment for solving people's problems and maintenance of order in the society should be the main focus of rulers as against the use of government machinery to keep the rival claimants to power in check.

We have to remember that a bad government is the inevitable consequence of an indifferent electorate. Politics will never be cleaner, and economic future will never be brighter, unless and until our citizens are willing to give of themselves to the land which gave them birth. Finally, we would do well to remind ourselves that "democracy is always a beckoning goal, not a safe harbour. For freedom is an unremitting endeavour, never a final achievement."

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a columnist for The Daily Star.



MUHAMMAD HABIBUR RAHMAN

Let the world be reflected in Bangla

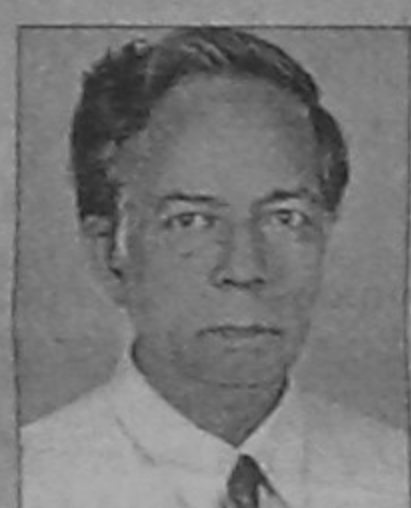
Roaming all over the world
Roaming all over the world
And coming back home
I feel let the world
Be reflected in Bangla
And let the world
Be reflected in Bangladesh

Is it possible
To learn all the knowledge of the world
Through the medium of one language?
May be impossible
May be possible.
Whatever is possible
Let it be known through Bangla.

All the knowledge of the world
All the knowings of the world
Let them be known through Bangla
Let the world be reflected in Bangla
Let Bangladesh be reflected in the world.

Muhammad Habibur Rahman is former Chief Justice and head of caretaker government.

Poor governance fuels corruption



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

BITTER TRUTH

The top tier of bureaucracy constructed by the colonial rulers and often referred to as "steel frame" has now turned into a "rubber frame." They are always bending before their political bosses. And politicians often use the threat of transfers and punitive posting and withholding promotion to bend the officers, and often make them comply with unethical and illegal orders.

ties taking hold these days, political parties are unable to attract genuine talent.

There are grave deficiencies in the working of the three branches of the state. While recounting the failure, the role of the Parliament in the past days necessarily features prominently. The essential business of any parliament is the legislative one. The parliament in the country in the past days devoted very little time to legislative business and when it did it rushed through bills without debate and without mature consideration. And some bills imperative for good governance remained pending for years.

At the judicial level also there are deficiencies that contribute to lax governance. The biggest failure is the huge backlog of cases. The Registrar of the Supreme Court in a press conference in his office at the High Court premises on May 11 last made it

plain that there are about 6 lakh 33 thousand cases pending in the lower court, and the number of cases pending in the High Court stands at 2 lakh 33 thousand and 297 and the number of cases pending in the Appellate division of the Supreme Court is six thousand and five. Shockingly there are long delays in disposing of even the most urgent cases.

The failing of the legislative and judicial branches pales into insignificance in comparison with the failing of the executive branch. It is at this level that there is little intellectual or moral support for any kind of reforms. A rigid hierarchy aggravates the problems at the administrative level. If a minister is unfamiliar with the subject, the bureaucracy virtually takes over his functions and reduces the minister to a rubber stamp. No one in the civil service holds his tenure based on performance. It is possible for a sole joint secretary

or secretary to keep at bay for months or even years investment proposal running into thousands of crores of taka. In fact, that is precisely what happened to the investment proposals that came to the government during the alliance rule from independent power producers. It seems the administrative system does not allow for talent to rise to its natural level. Nor does it allow for outside talent to be inducted into the system.

A hint of how rotten the system is can be gauged from three reports published in The Daily Star on May 10 last. Reports have it that criminals are using uniforms, caps and even handcuffs and other accessories used by the law enforcers now freely available in several shops at Kochukhet, Kafrul and Polwel Market run by the Police Welfare Society. As reports indicated, a youth wearing police uniform

attempted to snatch the rifle of a policeman in the city's Kafrul area on April 16 last but his attempt was foiled by the instant effort of the locals. Terming the trend as something very serious, DMP Commissioner Naim Ahmed admitted that there is no restriction on the sale of uniforms and other items used by the law enforcement agencies.

With governance taking a sideline, corruption has invaded all spheres of the society. Its ways and means boggle the mind. One could attribute the menacing rise in the crime wave relating to acid throwing in the storage and sale of corrosive acids without licence. A report published in The Daily Star on May 10 indicates that 600 businesses in Bogra including jewelers are using these corrosive acids without licence. A senior police official in Bogra has admitted that due to easy availability of these materials, acid violence in Bogra is higher than in other districts.

But corrupt measures, when it concerns the life and death of citizenry have to be dealt with a firm hand. Unfortunately people see hardly any such effort in the offering even in these days. The Daily Star reports indicated that the country's Drug Administration Department which oversees 6000 crore taka

drug business is ill equipped due to lack of necessary infrastructure and facilities -- especially drug testing laboratory -- and shortage of skilled work force in each division. The only two laboratories located at Dhaka and Chittagong are swamped with testing jobs all year long. As reports reveal, because of the lack of adequate control and testing, fake, spurious and under-quality and under-weight medicines have flooded the market causing irreparable harm to humans consuming that.

Involvement of some dishonest physicians enjoying commissions from the manufacturers has fueled the racket of this spurious drug business as disclosed by Prof. Muniruddin Ahmed of the Department of Clinical Pharmacy and Pharmacology, University of Dhaka. Even when the pharmaceutical companies numbering 167 in total, pay the government 600 crore taka in VAT, monitoring of quality must take precedence over anything else. Let us glance at any organization in the country either in the public sector or private sector, we will notice that the rot has spread from the lowest clerk to the highest echelon of the society and government.

The procession and marches conducted by ACC chairman with either school children or general

public in different districts of the country will have little remedial effect unless the head of the organization is made accountable for the ills accumulating in his office or department.

There is no point in overlooking this terrible reality and taking refuge in the old truism that corruption is a way of life in an underdeveloped country like Bangladesh or bureaucratic corruption is not as serious and massive as political corruption. There is a great difference here. In a democracy people have the power to punish a corrupt politician even if the state fails to carry out its legal duty. There are no institutional checks and balances to contain bureaucratic corruption. The argument that it is the under-paid public servant who falls to criminal temptation is not valid. The most shameful cases are from the top echelon which is certainly a privileged lot.

The top tier of bureaucracy constructed by the colonial rulers and often referred to as "steel frame" has now turned into a "rubber frame." They are always bending before their political bosses. And politicians often use the threat of transfers and punitive posting and withholding promotion to bend the officers, and often make them

comply with unethical and illegal orders.

It is because of ill-governance and privileges extended to party politicians, sycophants and near and dear ones of the chief boss that corruption flourished beyond anybody's imagination. Now after the take-over by the army-backed CTG in Jan. 2007, and with the Task Force launching probe in different organizations, explosive incidents of looting of public properties and amassing wealth by the officials and a group of politicians beyond their known sources of income have come to light. As the process of booking the guilty officials goes on, the government also needs to reduce the powers that our officials enjoy by making our laws simpler and more citizen-friendly. Because governance is at stake, corruption has corroded not our whole system of governance, but the very soul of Bangladesh. The problem has assumed enormous proportions. If the future elected government with sufficient political will does not attempt dramatic change, the administration may increasingly be seen by the common people as their enemy.

Md. Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET.

The rise of the rest: The next American century

FAREED ZAKARIA
writes from Washington

Generations from now, when historians write about these times, they might note that by the turn of the 21st century, the United States had succeeded in its great, historical mission -- globalising the world. We don't want them to write that along the way, we forgot to globalise ourselves.

America has benefited massively from these trends. It has enjoyed unusually robust growth, low unemployment and inflation, and received hundreds of billions of dollars in investment. These are not signs of economic collapse. Its companies have entered new countries and industries with great success, using global supply chains and technology to stay in the vanguard of efficiency. US exports and manufacturing have actually held their ground and services have boomed.

The United States is currently ranked as the globe's most competitive economy by the World Economic Forum. It remains dominant in many industries of the future like nanotechnology, biotechnology, and dozens of smaller high-tech fields. Its universities are the finest in the world, making up 8 of the top ten and 37 of the top fifty, according to a

prominent ranking produced by Shanghai Jiao Tong University. A few years ago the National Science Foundation put out a scary and much-discussed statistic. In 2004, the group said, 950,000 engineers graduated from China and India, while only 70,000 graduated from the United States. But those numbers are wildly off the mark. If you exclude the car mechanics and repairmen -- who are all counted as engineers in Chinese and Indian statistics -- the numbers look quite different. Per capita, it turns out, the United States trains more engineers than either of the Asian giants.

But America's hidden secret is that most of these engineers are immigrants. Foreign students and immigrants account for almost 50 percent of all science researchers in the country. In 2006 they received 40 percent of all PhDs. By 2010, 75 percent of all science

PhDs in this country will be awarded to foreign students. When these graduates settle in the country, they create economic opportunity. Half of all Silicon Valley start-ups have one founder who is an immigrant or first-generation American. The potential for a new burst of American productivity depends not on our education system or R&D spending, but on our immigration policies. If these people are allowed and encouraged to stay, then innovation will happen here. If they leave, they'll take it with them.

More broadly, this is America's great -- and potentially insurmountable -- strength. It remains the most open, flexible society in the world, able to absorb other people, cultures, ideas, goods, and services. The country thrives on the hunger and energy of poor immigrants. Faced with the new technologies of foreign compa-

nies, or growing markets overseas, it adapts and adjusts. When you compare this dynamism with the closed and hierarchical nations that were once superpowers, you sense that the United States is different and may not fall into the trap of becoming rich, and fat, and lazy.

American society can adapt to this new world. But can the American government? Washington has gotten used to a world in which all roads led to its doorstep. America has rarely had to worry about benchmarking to the rest of the world -- it was always so far ahead. But the natives have gotten good at capitalism and the gap is narrowing. Look at the rise of London. It's now the world's leading financial center -- less because of things that the United States did badly than those London did well, like improving regulation and becoming friendlier to foreign capital. Or take the US health care system, which has become a huge liability for American companies. US carmakers now employ more people in Ontario, Canada, than Michigan because in Canada their

health care costs are lower. Twenty years ago, the United States had the lowest corporate taxes in the world. Today they are the second-highest. It's not that others went up. Those of others went down.

American parochialism is particularly evident in foreign policy. Economically, as other countries grow, for the most part the pie expands and everyone wins. But geopolitics is a struggle for influence: as other nations become more active internationally, they will seek greater freedom of action. This necessarily means that America's unimpeded influence will decline. But if the world that's being created has more power centers, nearly all are invested in order, stability and progress. Rather than narrowly obsessing about our own short-term interests and interest groups, our chief priority should be to bring these rising forces into the global system, to integrate them so that they in turn broaden and deepen global economic, political, and cultural ties. If China, India, Russia, Brazil all feel that they have a stake in the existing global order, there will be less

danger of war, depression, panics, and breakdowns. There will be lots of problems, crisis, and tensions, but they will occur against a backdrop of systemic stability. This benefits them but also us. It's the ultimate win-win.

To bring others into this world, the United States needs to make its own commitment to the system clear. So far, America has been able to have it both ways. It is the global rule-maker but doesn't always play by the rules. And forget about standards created by others. Only three countries in the world don't use the metric system -- Liberia, Myanmar, and the United States. For America to continue to lead the world, we will have to first join it.

Americans -- particularly the American government -- have not really understood the rise of the rest. This is one of the most thrilling stories in history. Billions of people are escaping from abject poverty. The world will be enriched and ennobled as they become consumers, producers, inventors, thinkers, dreamers, and doers. This is all happening because of American ideas and

actions. For 60 years, the United States has pushed countries to open their markets, free up their politics, and embrace trade and technology. American diplomats, businessmen, and intellectuals have urged people in distant lands to be unafraid of change, to join the advanced world, to learn the secrets of our success. Yet just as they are beginning to do so, we are losing faith in such ideas. We have become suspicious of trade, openness, immigration, and investment because now it's not Americans going abroad but foreigners coming to America. Just as the world is opening up, we are closing down.

Generations from now, when historians write about these times, they might note that by the turn of the 21st century, the United States had succeeded in its great, historical mission -- globalising the world. We don't want them to write that along the way, we forgot to globalise ourselves.

Fareed Zakaria is Editor of Newsweek International. This piece is part four of a four-part series.

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