

# Return to democracy and the premonitions



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

There is no dispute as to the imperative of returning to a democratic polity, notwithstanding the increasingly discordant voices of the important and the forces of bails of important corruption suspects. Howsoever corrupt and disconcerting it may be to punish the corrupt, we have to remember that punishing the bad hats is an urgent priority because we have to once for all put a stop to the rise of half-educated arrogant predators in the political arena. Surely we do not wish to see the return of the likes of those criminally disposed young members of parliament of Dhaka city and its periphery of the not-too-distant past. These fellows are now behind the bar and the sense of relief consequent upon their absence is there for anyone to see and appreciate.

We must not make the mistake of thinking that those who hunger for political profit or profit in the form of power are less dangerous to society than those who seek monetary profit. It is time to stall the unbridled ambitions of unscrupulous money-makers. Politicians who have very visibly plundered national resources and did not feel uneasy with their ill-gotten wealth need to be exposed and punished. Ministers who have helped and connived at the transfer of prime government land at token price for doubtful use by near relatives have to answer for their highhandedness and flouting of rules.

We have to remember that the sense of propriety and the distinction between public property and private gain needs to be restored. If the constraint of legality is not effectively established by ensuring punishment of the corrupt then the crown would always go to the loudest-voices, the biggest sticks and the readiest fists. The greatest social purpose is served when wrong is detested.

The state needs to disqualify and debar a significant number of suspected politicians from participating in electoral politics in order to ensure the growth of a healthy polity. That goal cannot be achieved if it is not possible to criminally convict a substantial number of politicians before the year is out. The premonition is that once the environment becomes

relaxed with the withdrawal of restrictions on political activities, the investigation and enquiry of corruption-related cases and also the trial of such cases would slacken and slow down. The last months of any government's tenure are never an appropriate time to take strong measures.

The state needs to mobilize the best trial lawyers and experienced and capable investigators for successful prosecution. The financial

between the civil society and the ruling establishment. They must not continue with the misconception that brute force, fear, coercion and corruption are the only sustaining factor of the governing system. Our new dispensation must not seek the support of discredited politicians and individuals having criminal record and not indulge in relaxation of rules for furthering a culture of loot and plunder.

ization of politics of the country. The penetration of business interests in politics made possible through a policy of distribution of political patronage and bureaucratic support continued on a wider scale and the emerging business class not only attempted to control politics through donation to party coffers, they displayed a greater readiness to join politics themselves. We now have politicians and parliamentarians who

There were shameless efforts to settle all issues beyond the accepted forum of arbitration and financial propriety was nobody's concern. National resources were for the loot and the opposing political forces were at each others throat.

The danger facing Bangladesh is that it combines economic underperformance with fragile institutions and a constitution which is looked upon by the politicians as so pliant that it can be bent to any whim or caprice of the ruling class. Added to that is a scenario in which ignorance, incompetence and dishonesty are no disqualifications for high public office, either in the ministerial rank or elsewhere.

The question that agitates many concerned citizens is if our quality of life should continue to suffer by the denial of basic human rights and civil liberties that are an integral part of our fundamental rights as enshrined in the constitution. The deficits of democracy that were so visible in the yesteryears, particularly between 1991-2006 do not create the hope that a quick recovery out of the polluted waters of our public life and the slime and sludge of a corrupted economy would be possible by simply reverting to pre 11 January 2007 situation.

We have not harboured those objectives that push upright men and women to wander beyond the safe provision of personal gratifications. We have not permitted institutions to grow and as a result we witness a political temper that presses partisan advantage to a bitter end. Our political culture has not fostered the habit of understanding and respecting the other side.

Our democracy deficits to gradually lessen and disappear, the political parties have to make the crucial choice between absolute power on one hand and the restraints of legality and the authority of tradition on the other. It has to decide on whether to constitute a moral association maintained by duty or a physical one kept together by force. They have to say whether executive action violative of the rule of law has to be tolerated and if the balance between legislature, executive and the judiciary has to be rudely shaken.

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## STRAIGHT LINE

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remuneration for such job should be significant and there must not be any bureaucratic encumbrance in this regard.

The premonition is, shall we continue to remain positioned on an ominous fault line, that is, a disconnect between the state and society? Such apprehension assumes significance when one sees the widening gulf between the ruling class and the people and the waning of people's confidence in the establishment.

We would do well in remembering that the crisis of governance at several levels during the supposedly democratic rule was caused not by lack of resources but due to the absence of institutions of governance and the lack of accountability. So when the democrats return to power they will have to decide if in order to promote and protect their interests, they should continue to use coercion, bribery and nepotism and policy and go on nourishing a culture of opportunism, deceit, duplicity and plunder. They need to ponder seriously as to the mechanisms of strengthening the political institutions.

Our democrats should engage in self-introspection to find out how regulatory state outfits have shown progressive decay while only succeeding in suppressing political dissent. They need to understand why in Bangladesh we neither had a democratic setup in the conventional sense nor a state which has the capacity to effectively improve the living standards of the people and arrange security. They have to decide about ensuring political stability and creating space to differing groups.

Our elected representatives of the not-too-distant future will have to compensate for the lack of legitimacy of our weaker democratic system and remove the disconnect

Our potential members of parliament will have to appreciate that they will be dressed in brief authority and that they are not supreme. Therefore, they have to ensure the supremacy of the constitution and thus the eternal human freedoms. In doing so, they will respect the people who have given the constitution unto themselves.

Our political predicament is the result of the inability of our political class to keep pace with the changing times. The main thrust of this class has been towards maintaining the status quo and consequently all our institutions have weakened. Therefore, it is not surprising that three decades after independence we do not see major changes in the mode of governance, all claims and political rhetoric notwithstanding.

We have to admit that our ethno-linguistic and religious homogeneity factor has not succeeded to bring the dynamics of socio-political relations within a manageable limit. Presently, our society is characterized by significant elite-mass gap. A small segment of society influences the decision making, allocation and distribution of resources. The failure of democratic experimentation in the initial years of independence led to a succession of military and quasi-military rule by a coalition of the higher echelon of the military and civil bureaucracy. Political leaders joined later to complete the "coalition of convenience". The first two groups remained dominant.

The elections of 1991, 1996 and 2001 may have restored the supremacy of political leadership but in the meantime immense damage has been caused in our political culture by the combined onslaught of corruption, criminalization and commercial-

have business interests. This commercialization of politics has become the safest and convenient vehicle of achievements.

Our present ground reality is that while one major political party cries for maintenance of law and order, protection of national interest, the other fights for the democratic rights of people in relentless agitation, work stoppages and violence. Therefore, policies, postures, statements and actions of the political parties and ruling regimes have significant role in conflict aggravation and its transition from one phase to another.

We have to remember that in 1991 there was rising expectations that the virtues of democracy would be appreciated and the potentials of the nation would be rightly tapped in a democratic environment. The new democrats, however, proved to be tougher taskmasters than men in uniform. The bewildered nation witnessed a farcical election in February 1996 after which the government was forced by people's power to abdicate.

From 1996 to 2001 there was a democratic government but dialogue and discussion between politicians of the divide was never a strong point. Instead, the nations had to bear bouts of acrimonious deliberations, both in and out of parliament, bordering on outrageous slander and calumny. Indeed many wondered how Bangla deshis, the proud inheritors of a lofty constitution could be so foul-mouthed in political discourses. Decency and decorum apparently took leave of us.

From 2001 to 2006 there were renewed efforts to politicize all vital state institutions thereby effectively blurring the demarcation between right and wrong and Bangladeshis became the inhabitants of a perilously polarized polity.

# The price of survival

GEORGE WEHRFRITZ

It's hard to imagine a balance sheet where the accounting matters more. In Asia, despite an ongoing boom, hundreds of millions of people still subsist on such meager incomes that any shift in the official poverty line can make conditions suddenly look brighter or bleaker—at least on paper.

That point was made dramatically last week when two leading development banks revised their definitions of what it means to be poor. Through the studies differed methodologically, both significantly increased the number of Asians estimated to be living without adequate nutrition, clothing and shelter, a change that could complicate UN-led efforts to halve the global poverty rate by 2015.

The revised poverty lines don't reflect a sudden drop in conditions. Instead, they represent an attempt by development economists to, as Robert Zeigler of the International Rice Research Institute in Manila puts it, get their "arms around the definition of poverty and articulate it in a way that (policymakers) can use effectively."

To accomplish that, the Manila-based Asian Development Bank (ADB) proposed scrapping the \$1-per-day poverty measure popularized by the World Bank in 1990 as an estimate of the per-person cost of procuring the 2,100 calories a day deemed necessary for human health. The ADB's new Asian Poverty Line raises the bar to \$1.35 per day. And the World Bank study raises its global poverty line to \$1.25.

Though both poverty lines are based on purchasing-power parity (the comparative cost of similar goods in different countries), their methodologies and focuses diverge. The World Bank extrapolated poverty levels from general consumption patterns in 15 poor countries around the world, only

**The new poverty lines also underscore the risks posed by the latest threat to emerge: runaway food prices. This year's spikes in the cost of rice, wheat and corn have hit the poor hardest for the simple reason that they must devote the bulk of their meager incomes to food. In Bangladesh, according to the ADB's consumption survey, each 10% rise in cereal prices results in a 2.5% jump in the national poverty rate.**

two of which were Asian, whereas the ADB surveyed poor households in 16 Asian countries, arguing that this better identified specific purchasing patterns.

For example, the study found that struggling households typically procure inferior grades of rice in small quantities (a kilo or less at a time) from local traders, whereas average Asians increasingly buy their grain in the 10-kg. sacks from supermarkets (as a result, the poor often pay less per calorie). The result of the ADB approach is a

poverty line tailored specifically to Asia, where the bulk of the world's poor still live.

Both new standards suggest the number of Asians barely surviving is far larger than previously thought. In India, for example, some 319 million people get by with less than the old \$1 per day. Use the World Bank's new \$1.25 standard and the tally jumps to 455 million, it's 622 million if you use the ADB's \$1.35. The ADB standard also pushes up poverty rates in Bangladesh, Indonesia and the

Philippines by 6.6, 20.1 and 15.9% respectively.

"What makes headlines are (Asia's high) growth numbers," says the ADB's chief economist, Ifzal Ali. "But there are two faces of Asia: an Asia that is shimmering and an Asia that is shivering." The new statistics show how many people have been left out in the cold.

The estimates also raise new doubts about the ability of the world's poorest countries to achieve their Millennium

Development Goals for poverty reduction set by the UN back in 2000. By the World Bank's calculation, the global target is only being met today because China has far exceeded its benchmarks. By contrast, poverty in both South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa remains stubbornly high even though both regions have achieved impressive growth in recent years.

As for solutions, banks note that the vast majority of Asia's poor are rural, and that the Asian countries with the best track records for tackling poverty -- China and Vietnam -- did so by reforming agriculture and drawing surplus rural labor into manufacturing.

Theoretically, their strategies are transferable to the Indian subcontinent, where poverty rates remain among the world's highest. But that has proved hard to execute due to corrupt and inefficient governments and closed markets.

The new poverty lines also underscore the risks posed by the latest threat to emerge: runaway food prices. This year's spikes in the cost of rice, wheat and corn have hit the poor hardest for the simple reason that they must devote the bulk of their meager incomes to food. "People end up spending more of their incomes on rice and less on other foods, education, housing and medical expenses -- or they eat less," says Zeigler. "Any way you slice it, people's standard of living drops dramatically."

In Bangladesh, according to the ADB's consumption survey, each 10% rise in cereal prices results in a 2.5% jump in the national poverty rate. Food, both studies agree, weighs heaviest on the budgets of the world's poorest households. That's part of the reason the current poverty equations look so grim.

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LEST WE FORGET

# Prof Noman -- a teacher extraordinaire

SYED ANWAR HOSSAIN



There are some persons in this planet of ours who do not need direct acquaintance for you to know them. I am not talking about a famous statesman or a celebrated writer or even a big artist. Rather I am talking about a professor who was truly educated, a real connoisseur of learning with high ethical standards. That a man of letters would prove a connoisseur of learning is not to be taken for granted in our given social context; because, for most of the educated class here, education is only a means to make a living. But the professor I am referring to here was a man of learning as well as a connoisseur of education; though he was not the one to make newspaper headlines. He was a renowned man, one who was and continues to be, honourably enshrined in our hearts.

He is Professor Mohammad Noman. I did not have a direct acquaintance with him, but he was known to me. He might not have known me; and had no reason to. The gap of generations was the reason. Moreover, I was not a person to be reckoned by him either. But, even being unacquainted, I had reasons to know him; and respect him.

The first reason was perhaps the affinity of the profession we shared. A feeling of proximity to someone famous in the same profession is spontaneous. Yet, the height of Professor Noman's personality and the uniqueness of his character played a decisive role in generating this feeling of proximity. I am not a believer in blindly taking one as a teacher only because of one's being in the teaching profession. I am unwilling to recognize as teachers those who have taken teaching simply as just one of the jobs and tend to pass their professional career as such. They are mere service holders. On the other hand, those who combine their teaching with a sustained engage-

ment to pursuits of knowledge and to ethical standards are the ones deserving to be called 'teachers.' Professor Noman was a teacher of this description; which is why I was drawn to know him.

His experience in teaching was varied and outstanding; which took him to teach at different colleges across Bangladesh. His teaching career did, however, began and concluded at two separate universities. Starting his profession as a Lecturer at the Dhaka University, Department of English, he called it a day as the Vice Chancellor of Jahangirnagar University. It is worth noting that his profession of teaching was intertwined by his involvement in the profession of education administration. He achieved unquestionable successes in both of these related fields. Besides, he held the office of the Secretary of Bangla Academy, the apex research institution of the nation, for about a year. It was a very tough and delicate responsibility requiring to perform the very basic administrative functions.

In recognition of his outstanding successes and achievements in teaching as well as educational administration, Prof Noman had occasionally been honoured with various national awards. Awards are manifestations of recognition. But it is widely felt in our country that such recognitions often prove unjustified or that the awards do not go to the deserving hands. There happens to be some political diplomatic manoeuvres in the

dispensation of awards. Exceptions are, however, there and I tend to believe that the awards going to Prof Noman were some instances of exception. The awards and recognitions in his case were more than justified.

The second reason of my knowing Prof Noman was his unique personality blended with the twin virtues of honesty and righteousness. I need to mention here that I have found the experiences of those who had been fortunate to be his direct students as the source of my knowledge about his personality. When a teacher is the architect of building a man, he cannot limit himself in being only a source of knowledge, he rather has to raise his own self to a real human being. Devoid of honesty and integrity, a man may become a scholar of international stature; but cannot be an architect of building other men. His credentials would be limited to printed texts alone; he would not find himself in the height of touching the people's hearts. That Professor Noman was a teacher in the truest sense of the term is evident in the simple fact that I am offering my homage to this noble soul despite myself not being one of his direct students or close acquaintances.

I have a third reason for knowing Prof Noman: the unique blending of scholastic traits and humility in his personality. Prof Noman was a striking exception in the crowded arena of our scholars. It is hard to find a happy combination of knowledge, humility, righteousness and the skills needed for role performance. But, as far as I could go in knowing Prof Noman, I can quite safely and confidently state that he was a man of outstanding height. I feel privileged to have availed of this rare opportunity to pay homage to Professor Mohammad Noman.

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# Georgia conflict: Spectre of US-Russia cold war?

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the then US President George H.W. Bush proclaimed the start of a "new world order." Now that unbounded feeling of optimism perhaps has gone with the wind with the recognition of break-away regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia of Georgia by Russia a couple of days back. This dramatic decision came following a big demonstration on August 20 by over 50 thousand people in Sukhumi, capital of Abkhazia province, demanding its recognition as an independent state by Russia. This demonstration was followed by the decision of the Parliament of Abkhazia to request Russia for recognition. The situation has been further complicated by Georgia breaking diplomatic relations with Russia.

A new cold war seems to have begun between the West and Russian Federation over the issue of the Georgia-Russian five-day war, which ended with a ceasefire. The Bush administration has taken a stand against Russia although Georgia escalated the conflict by launching attacks against South Ossetia, where Russian peacekeepers have been stationed since 1994. The Georgia and Ossetia ethnic conflict has deep historic roots.

Refugees who fled to Russia gave evidence that Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili had intended to wipe out Ossetians from breakaway South Ossetia. During the elections, Mikheil Saakashvili pledged to take back the breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia into Georgia. Former chancellor of Germany, Gerhard Schroeder, said hostilities broke out between the Russian Federation and Georgia because of provocation by Georgia. Eduard Shevardnadze, former foreign minister of the Soviet Union and former president of Georgia, blamed the Georgian president for sending troops to South Ossetia and suggested fixing of relations with Russia.

Russia withdrew troops from Georgia following pressure from western countries, but refuses to leave Abkhazia and South Ossetia unless security measures were ensured to protect their people. This decision goes against the Security Council draft resolution,

which says that Abkhazia should cooperate with the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia while implementing the ceasefire and separation of forces.

Abkhazia broke away from Georgia in 1992-1993, but de facto independence has not yet been recognised by the world community, including Russia. Now the picture has changed with the recognition by Russia.

Russia was the first country to join President Bush's war on terror immediately after 9/11. Russia and some breakaway countries of former Soviet Union, offered unconditional use of their air bases by US forces involved in operation against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Recent decisions by the Bush administration have caused frustration in Moscow despite its good relations with the US. First, the Bush administration recognised Kosovo in spite of the fact that Serbia and Russia were close allies. Neither country accorded recognition to Kosovo. Now Serbia has sought interpretation from the UN court of justice about declaration of independence by Kosovo. Second, the Bush administration wants to establish a missile defence system in the neighboring countries of Russia in spite of Russian objection. The US has finalised an agreement with Poland for establishing a missile shield on Polish soil, where 10 missile interceptors will be set up and linked up with radar in the Czech Republic. Poland has expressed solidarity with Georgia in the conflict. Moscow, however, says that the arms race in Europe will increase because of the US defence shield in Eastern Europe.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, when met with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on August 20 to express solidarity with Russia, offered to set up a Russian defence system in Syria. The relation has become tense between Russia and the US on this issue. Members of the Shanghai Cooperation Association -- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China and Russia -- backed Russia's peace keeping role in South Ossetia. Members of the European Union like Italy, France and Germany are not interested in punishing Russia.

The Bush administration is taking a confrontational line

against Russian Federation on the issue of South Ossetia to show solidarity with the small neighbour of Russia. Although French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Merkel visited both Moscow and Tbilisi, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited only Tbilisi.

It appears that US and European leaders are at loggerhead over the conflict. The Financial Times of London reports that the tone and contents of US and European statements on the Russia-Georgia conflict have been subtly diverging all week, with France and Germany less inclined to isolate or punish Russia while US has been openly confrontational.

While US has floated the idea of expelling Russia from G-8, the French Foreign Ministry said that it did not subscribe to such an idea. German Chancellor Angela Merkel says that Russian actions are disproportionate compared to Georgian actions against South Ossetia. She mentioned the possibility of accepting Georgia in Nato soon, which goes against the interest of Russia. Pro-American Harvard educated Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili has, in fact, carried out a proxy war on behalf of Bush to test Russia because it is becoming hostile towards the US policy for including more former Soviet bloc member countries into Nato.

Russian Premier Vladimir Putin made a startling disclosure in an interview with CNN that the US might have staged the Georgian conflict to secure victory for one of the presidential candidates in the US. He said preliminary reports showed that US citizens might have been present in the combat zone in South Ossetia.

Western countries, which depend on Russia for oil and gas, are now in a dilemma. Russia controls the pipelines linking oil and natural gas producers in former Soviet Union. The planned pipeline through Georgia to transport gas from the Caspian Sea has been possibly shelved in view of the Russian attitude.

Historically geopolitics plays a role in international politics. Russia, which is more powerful now than a few years back, will not surrender its sphere of influence and allow allying with the West.

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