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Abandoning the sculpture project

How long will we allow religion to be so misused?

HE removal of five baul sculptures, including that of Lalon Shah, from around the traffic intersection in front of Zia International Airport under threats from a group of zealots flies in the face of our commitment to age-old cultural and religious values and pride in our national heritage. There may have been genuine questions about the aesthetic deficit, flawed design or lack of proportion in the cluster of structures raised, but the real reason for which these have been ultimately pulled down is far more insidious and unacceptable than any artistic naivete or design fault. This is pure genuflection before the forces of orthodoxy topped off by some ulterior political motives that the nation needs to take guard against.

Actually, a whole range of issues arise here: it was not a question of any deities being placed, it was not meant ever to hurt any religious sentiment but to recognise, honour and showcase iconic figures of our rich cultural heritage. The issue is of the detractors' attempted imposition of values on others through a narrow and expedient interpretation of Islam. This is an impingement on artistic flourish and creative freedom, a certain refusal to acknowledge the need for and value of modernity anchored in best of our traditions. They must know majority of Muslims do not subscribe to their views tainted by political motives to spread their influence among simple, religious-minded people of Bangladesh. The Islamic heritage of Bengal, and especially of Bangladesh, is far more liberal and enlightened than what is sought to be propagated by sectarian interest groups having ulterior political designs.

A point about the culture ministry's approach to and handling of the project; needless to say, these have been rather naïve, even shameful. They took a month sculpting the figures and spending Taka half a crore which is going waste now. And, by succumbing to the pressure of the zealots, and abandoning the project half way, the government has sent some wrong signals to the public about its capacity to hold the ground

against elements of orthodoxy. The very foundation of all forms of intellectual freedom that lies at the core of all creativity is now being threatened under the guise of religion. The moot question is: how long will we allow such political use of our religion to continue?

The unending crisis in Thailand

Elected government must not be runoutofoffice

HE political crisis in Thailand appears to have taken on increasingly serious overtones. Ever since the army overthrew Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006, Bangkok has gone from one governmental experiment to another, with of course the soldiers playing a clear role in the process. The fact that the judiciary at one point banned Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party did not deter his followers from quickly forming another and romping home to victory in a new election. But that was swiftly followed by an opposition campaign aimed at toppling the new government. Eventually, it was on a technicality (the prime minister was found guilty of conflict of interest by taking part in a television culinary programme) that the courts ordered the head of government out of office. Meanwhile, Thaksin Shinawatra and his wife, having travelled to China on bail to watch the Olympics, suddenly made their way to Britain, where they have now sought political asylum.

It all is a sign of how confusing politics remains in Thailand. The present prime minister, Somchai Wongsawat, has for days been battered by a rising opposition movement aimed at forcing him from office. But the prime minister has defiantly refused to quit, even as 5,000 supporters of the People's Alliance for Democracy marched in Bangkok calling for him to go. Obviously, their anger had been aroused by the police action on protesters on October 7, when two persons were killed and close to 500 were injured. But what seemed to be giving the opposition fresh ammunition against the government was the hint from the army chief the other day that the prime minister needed to go in the national interest. Which brings up the interesting question of the future of Thai democracy given that the military continues to play a dominant role in determining the nature of politics. A nurturing of democracy demands that politics and political parties be given the opportunity to shape the course of governance in Thailand. In the past too, the country's attempts to carve a pluralistic future for itself were scuttled by the army. Today, it appears that the soldiers are still loth to give up control.

That will not bode well for Thailand. When an elected government is in place, it is patently unhealthy and dangerous to try to run it out of power.

Is capitalism on the wane?



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

EVELOPING countries, particularly the least developed among them, are often torn between the promises of a capitalist society in which it is not a sin to be rich and where people like Warren Buffet who spent about \$26 billion in the last eight months (Buffet just bought \$5 billion perpetual preferred stock of Goldman Sachs that has a dividend of 10% and is callable at any time at a 10% premium) are worshipped and the practical realities of everyday life full of want and desire that cannot be

About a year back Nobel laureate Paul Krugman said that the "fruits of the growth had been remarkably small for most Americans" and though the people are materially better off than before they are no where near the boundary of prosperity that they should have got "the extent to which we are a more productive economy."

Why, one may ask, capitalism lost its way from the protestant ethics of hard work, ploughing back profits into business instead of spending it on sensual pleasure? Instead, both the haves and the have-nots, in the name if individual freedom,

GOING DEEPER

The ethical transformation to "greed is good" and the intrusion of large numbers of businesspeople into politics and parliament led, certainly in Bangladesh, to an indifference towards and marginalisation of the great majority of the people, and the promotion of the business interests that these members represented.

have started giving preference to consumption to production, sensual pleasure to the abandonment of ethics preached by all religions of giving and sharing, of iniquitous living amongst the hungry and the unclad.

Political theorist Benjamin Barber termed the new style of capitalism as "infantilism": money is made to satisfy infantile desires that in an orderly society (meaning a not strictly regulated lifestyle or even one practiced in the time of Victorian morality) would be seen as

his argument that while early with the working men's "robust motion of agency and spirited grittiness,"the decay that spells latter-day capitalism suffers from a paradox -- "the needy are without income and

recover, calls for, in the words of humanist Josie Appleton: "Today's capitalist culture present[ing] ample possibilities for new kind of political theory and practice, for those curious marginality, helplessness,

enough to explore it."

It would be imprudent to dismiss Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" because humankind have reached its final evolutionary journey in search of the best political system just because Wall Street has crumbled due to the greed and lax supervision by those entrusted with public finance.

not convinced by the conservative claim that assurance of equality of opportunity is enough and one should not be childish exuberance for extrava- worried about inequality of omies it has been found that in outcome. But it has been found the US, half of children born of Barber's criticism rests on that students coming from highstatus households with low test low-income adults, four in ten in capitalism encouraged virtues scores get better opportunity of going to college than students from low-status household with high test score. Such cases are dime a dozen in countries like Bangladesh where many bright students ply rickshaws, ferrying the well-heeled are without passengers who were their classmates once upon a time. The The global economic melt- concept of the culture of poverty down, from which we are yet to suggests that the poor remain poor because of their adaptation to poverty.

> According to one analyst, the people trapped in the culture of poverty have a strong feeling of

dependency, and the feeling of alienation within one's own society. Closely associated with the concept of culture of poverty is cycle of poverty also known as "development trap" denoting low income, poor education, poor housing, and poor health. Since these disadvantages work in a circular fashion it becomes difficult to break out of this Many like Paul Krugman are cycle.

> Obama is an exception among many African-Americans in the US. But even in developed econlow-income parents become the UK and, one-third in

US presidential hopeful Barak

It, therefore, becomes incumbent upon the government in countries like ours to exercise their influence to bring the children out of the poverty trap by making provision for skills required initially to meet the demands of the market and subsequently of the society at large. It is, however, easier said than done.

Consequent upon the global meltdown, the developed countries had to infuse billions of dollars into their economies to



Back to the future?

shore up confidence of the people in the banking institutions and in the leadership ability of their elected representatives. It may take a while for the credit crunch to go away.

less from foreign sources. This possible scenario would affect RMG and textile sectors in Bangladesh.

If the housing sector, both in Bangladesh and in the Middle East, were to shrink, then direct effect on remittance cannot be avoided. In such a situation the Danish example of "flexicurity" i.e. to reconcile job flexibility with employment, spending 50% of its GDP on public outlays and the world's second highest tax rate after Sweden, one of the world's most equal distribution of income, (the social compact arrived at after century of political conflict),

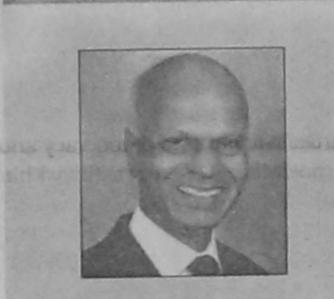
could be explored. One can argue that what is possible for a small developed country like Denmark cannot be replicated in Bangladesh.

Paul Krugman reminds us that In the interim period, the deliberate compression of medium and small business the wage differential during would be cagey to borrow (the World War II was the result of banks may have more stringent societal demand for a more lending conditions) and import equal society during the 1930s and 1940s.

The ethical transformation to "greed is good" and the intrusion of large numbers of businesspeople into politics and parliament led, certainly in Bangladesh, to an indifference towards and marginalisation of the great majority of the people, and the promotion of the business interests that these members represented. One hopes that the promised December elections would bring the curtain down on the inequity and corruption of the past.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and

Too late for a two-state solution



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM writes from Madrid

T never imagined that anything that an Israeli politician could say or do would surprise me. But a few days ago, when I heard on the radio that Mr. Ehud Olmert, the soonto be ex-prime minister of Israel had said in a farewell statement that Israel "will have to pull out from almost all the territories (in or an oppressive colonial power the West Bank), including in East ruling over an increasingly hos-Jerusalem, including in the Golan tile Palestinian population Heights" -- I just could not believe my own ears.

This was an extra-ordinary statement coming out of the mouth of a hard-line Israeli politician who, thirty years ago, voted in the Knesset even against the Camp David accords which gave back Sinai to Egypt. So what caused this sudden change in Olmert's thinking?

LETTER FROM EUROPE

Therefore, under the current circumstances, the Palestinian Authority has no other option but to recast itself as the African National Congress of South Africa under the apartheid regime and prepare its followers and sympathisers across the world for a long struggle for democracy and equal rights.

Israeli politicians except the ultra-right have reached the slow but painful realisation that because of demographic reasons (the Arabs are expected to outnumber the Jews in the former British mandated territories of Palestine in a few years' time), sooner or later Israel will be forced to make a choice between having a democratic Jewish state through a militarily enforced apartheid system. Hence this change of heart.

Many Kadima and Socialist party members now believe that a two-state solution is the best guarantee for the survival of Israel as a Jewish state. It is tragic that after forty years of death, destruction, suffering, and humiliation inflicted on the

coming round to the idea of a two-state solution.

But this is probably not a viable proposition any longer because of the facts on the ground created by Israel's aggressive settlement policy over the last forty years. During this period, the lives and the future of the Israelis and the Palestinians have become closely intertwined. In the words of a Fatah politician in Ramallah: "Where will the Palestinian state rise up? The Israeli nation is inside us already."

While paying lip-service to peace negotiations, Israeli politicians (both Conservatives and Socialists) have vigorously pursued and are still pursuing a policy of ruthless colonization. Israel has dotted the whole of the West Bank with hundreds of garrison-like settlements, fenced Some analysts think that most Palestinians on a day to day basis highways connecting the settle-

watchtowers and checkpoints.

settlers have taken over the best to the Palestinians not even some land and water resources in the occupied territories. By relent- style living conditions of the lessly pursuing this policy Israel has unwittingly created a monster of its own over which it has ment has become so powerful and so entrenched in the occupied territories that its radical members are now openly defying the Israeli government.

A recent rise of settler violence against Palestinians and Israeli soldiers stationed in the occupied territories has been reported by human rights activists. The settlers vehemently oppose any talks about an eventual pull-out from the occupied territories. It on the occupied territories. The will require a full-scale military operation by the Israeli army to hold will become even tighter. So force the settlers to leave the what is the solution?

occupied territories and it is inconceivable that any Israeli politician will have the guts to order such an operation and far less to carry it through. Many analysts think that time

has come for the Palestinians to deconstruct certain myths and accept certain realities. Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority no longer exists. It was destroyed by most of the Israeli leaders are now ments (for settler use alone), Ariel Sharon. The Palestinian Authority in its current shape or In the process, heavily-armed form is unable to deliver anything improvement in the apartheid-Palestinians. The current peace process has no future because Israel will never allow the crelost control. The settler move- ation of a truly independent Palestinian state in the occupied territories.

> The Israelis have actually used the foreign-funded Palestinian Authority to hide the crude fact -from international scrutiny -that Palestine (the occupied territories) is, in reality, an oppressed colony. Likewise, they have cleverly used the neverending peace process as a cover to consolidate their stranglehold longer it continues the strangle-

Actually, the solution, at least from the point of view of the Palestinians, was proposed a few years ago by Professor Edward Said, perhaps the most prominent Palestinian intellectual of the last century. In his brilliant treatise Culture and Resistance, he put forward the idea of a onestate solution, i.e., the creation of a multi-ethnic, multireligious and multi-cultural state in the whole land of Israel/Palestine.

Unfortunately, because of his sudden death in 2003, Professor Said did not have enough time to elaborate on this idea. But to make his idea more acceptable, more cogent and more democratic (yes, democratic), I propose that the rights of all the minority communities be guaranteed by the constitution of this new secular state.

Therefore, under the current circumstances, the Palestinian Authority has no other option but to recast itself as the African National Congress of South Africa under the apartheid regime and prepare its followers and sympathisers across the world for a long struggle for democracy and equal rights.

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Obama is winning the debates, but the polls remain close

LETTER FROM AMERICA

The worry for Obama campaign is the fear of a catastrophic domestic or international event in the next few days that rivets Americans attention to John McCain's strengths in national security and foreign affairs. The gift of "October Surprise" came in early, in September, for Barack Obama this election year. Obama hopes that there are no more surprises until November 4.

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

Y all account, Barack Obama won the third and final presidential debate against John McCain on October 15 handily. Yet, the polls continue to show a tight race.

McCain needed a "game changer" to reverse the momentum that has been building up in Obama's favour ever since meting. McCain pronounced that the "fundamentals of the economy are strong" a month ago.

Since then, there has been a worldwide financial meltdown, several US financial institutions

have collapsed, the banking system needed an infusion of \$700 billion and the stock market crashed -- 20% in one week alone. The American people held the party in the White House and the Republicans some elements of the crowd in responsible for their misery. Since then, Obama's stock (no pun intended) has been skyrocketing and McCain's plum- McCain/Palin rallies, which

campaign has been to sow doubts about Obama's fitness for the presidency by attacking him tangentially -- over his association with a 1960s radical, his

"foreign" roots, "Muslim" name and his otherness ("he is not one of us.")

By stoking fires of hatred, the McCain campaign succeeded in eliciting dangerous vitriol from their rallies. Shouts of "traitor," acknowledged their passing "terrorist," "off with his head," and "kill him" were heard at question around and went on to have become hate-fests. Under The focus of the McCain severe criticism from the media, Buffet on economics, Joe Biden the McCain campaign has reluc- and Republican senator Dick tantly toned down the rhetoric Lugar on foreign policy, and

offered 90-minute free commer- for bad associates.

cial for both the candidates. McCain came out swinging, and for the first 30-minutes succeeded in putting Obama on the defensive. Obama's was the classic rope-a-dope strategy made famous by Muhammad Ali in his heavyweight boxing championship fight in Kinshasa, Zaire in 1974. Ali, leaning against the ropes took Foreman's best punches, and when Foreman ran out of gas punching, Ali knocked him out. After parrying McCain's initial barrage, Obama counter-punched and won going away. When McCain brought up

Obama's association 1960s radical William Ayers, Obama acquaintance, but pivoted the name his real political associates: billionaire investor Warren former Fed chairman Paul The third and last debate Volcker on Wall Street. So much

The problem for McCain in the debate was his body language and reaction shots. Under attack by McCain, Obama would flash his disarming, film-star smile. Attacked by Obama, voters are undecided because McCain did an impersonation of they have reservations about Inspector Jacques Clouseau by Obama. The smear tactics are grimacing, rolling his eyes and meant to feed into their prejupresenting an overly animated dice and wean them away from face! Every after-debate poll showed Obama winning by a McCain's decreased to 50%.

chance the McCain campaign to be cocky, reminding them that sees of turning things around is although the polls had him by demonising Obama. In key ahead by 10 points in the New swing states, the McCain cam- Hampshire primary in February, paign is making automatic Hillary Clinton beat him by 4%.

phone calls to voters accusing Obama of "palling around with terrorists, such as Bill Ayers."

The McCain campaign believes that the undecided

Obama towards John McCain. That the McCain campaign margin of 2 to 1. 80% of the keeps on going that route sugrespondents thought McCain gest that it must be working to attacked Obama persistently; some extent. Although a recent only 7% thought Obama did so. New York Times/CBS poll After the debate, Obama's showed Obama ahead by 14 favourability went up to 64%; points, a Gallup tracking poll released on October 16, showed The more Americans see Obama ahead by only 2 points. Obama, the more they like him, The average of all polls had are reassured, and think he can Obama ahead by 7% last week; be president. With 20% more this week it is 6%. Therefore, any Americans thinking that Obama talk of a Obama landslide is will do a better job on the econ- premature. Obama cautioned omy than McCain, the only his supporters on October 16 not

Then there is the question of resonates with the Americans the "Bradley Effect" which refers to the gubernatorial defeat of Angeles, Tom Bradley, in 1982, when election eve polls had him winning by double-digits.

A new generation of Americans has come of age since 1982; they are far less prejudiced than their fathers and grandfathers. And they are Obama's staunch supporters. Although the young are more liberalminded, they are also notorious non-voters on election day. Obama campaign thinks that things will be different this time around because the young are not only Democrats, they are Obama-Democrats. They turned out in huge number for

Obama during the primaries. A lot can happen in two and a half weeks. It is worth remembering that a month ago, before the financial crises overtook the McCain campaign, McCain was actually leading Obama by 2-4%.

John McCain is desperately trying to find a message that Daily Starcolumnist.

voters. His "experience" has not helped; experience belongs in African-American mayor of Los the past and the election is all about the future. Because of his accomplishments in the military and civilian fields, McCain believes he is a far superior candidate. However, the voters see it as a contest between two equals. It is a race where the starting line is the same for both the candidates; despite his achievements, McCain does not start 30 yards ahead of Obama in the 100-metre race.

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