

May Day: Spirit and reality

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MD. ANWARUL KABIR

THE spirit of May Day lies in the establishment of the basic rights of the working class. After about 140 years of awakening of the working class to their basic rights, it is time to assess the extent of progress in this regard. If we objectively analyse the world labour market, correlating the overall socio-economic and cultural advancement of the world, then the outcome will not definitely be an optimistic one. For instance, the ILO defined eight-hour working day has not yet been truly enforced in many sectors of employment worldwide. In fact, the elongated working hour -- stretching up to twelve hours or even longer -- is still followed in many of the formal sectors, especially in developing countries.

Just consider the RMG sector in Bangladesh, where more than three million workers are employed -- of whom about 90% are women. According to a report of the National Garments Workers Federation (NGWF), in most cases, work-

ers in the garments factories are forced to work 14 to 16 hours per day, and sometimes even all night. Overtime work is compulsory. Though the law prohibits engaging women workers after 8 pm, in most cases the owners do not follow it.

Although the NGWF has suggested that the minimum monthly wage should be Tk. 2,117 per month, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) has fixed it at Tk. 1662.50. But most of the garment factories have not yet implemented even this minimum wage. This can be a classic example of extracting absolute surplus value. On creation of surplus value Karl Marx noted: "The prolongation of the working-day beyond the point at which the labourer would have produced just an equivalent for the value of his labour-power, and the appropriation of that surplus-labour by capital, this is production of absolute surplus-value. It forms the general groundwork of the capitalist system." (Karl Marx, Vol 1, Part 5, chapter 1)

Contrary to ILO conventions the garment industry employs child labourers,



The spirit is in speeches, the reality is here.

restricts the right to organise trade unions, fails to provide the workers with healthy working atmospheres, and deprives the workers in various ways. However, this scenario is not limited to Bangladesh only. In fact, the overall scenario of the labour-intensive employment sectors, be it the electronic or toy factories in China or Hong Kong, or be it construction industries in Middle East, or the agriculture sector in Malaysia, the scenarios of employment as far as the working class concerned are more or less same in the developing countries.

The above is the case of the so-called blue-collar jobs. What about the other end -- the white-collar jobs? Though apparently the overall condition of employment in white-collar jobs has improved much, an in-depth analysis will reveal signs of exploitation by the corporate culture of neo-capitalism. To assert this, we can analyse the employment scenario in the private banking sector in Bangladesh.

Since the legalisation of private banks in the early 1980s, the growth rate of this sector has been ranked as very high com-

pared to other service sectors. In fact, this is possible at the cost of exploitation of the employees. Elongated office hour has been noticed in this sector too. Though, legally, this sector is bound to follow an eight-hour working day (from 9 am to 5 pm) most of the banks on average engage their employees for 10 to 12 hours. Moreover, in addition to discharging the routine duties, each officer has to do some marketing by collecting deposits from the clients. In return, whatever the employee gets as remuneration is peanuts compared to their contribution.

As the job market in the country is small and the unemployment rate is very high, most of the employees of the banks do not dare protest against such exploitation. So, in essence, it can be postulated that the creation of surplus value by exploiting the employees in this sector is also predominant. A similar scenario will be found in other sectors too.

The prevalent corporate culture is one of the major barriers to promoting the spirit of May Day. All-pervasive consumerism -- the consumption of products/services to fulfil the artificial demand created in the human psyche -- is also working as an instrument for exploitation. Even the middle-income groups in developed countries like the USA and the UK have also been victimised by consumerism. Many people voluntarily work for longer periods, or opt for a second job to enhance their

income -- following the dictates of consumerism.

Behind most of the governments in developed countries and international institutions like WB, IMF, ADB, multinational corporations regulate strategic policies against the interests of the working class. For instance, a policy of Gatt, chalked out by the Clinton and Bush administrations, prohibits penalties for goods produced by substandard labour and under environmentally harmful conditions, and is in line with the demand of the corporate interests.

To sum up, to uphold the spirit of May Day, we have a long way to go. To bring a change, we need to fight against the rapid expansion of neo-capitalism and chalk out a new ideology in favour of the working class. In the recent past, the working class dreamt of its emancipation in Marxism. But at the fag end of the last century, the fall of the communist bloc has brought utmost frustration for the working class. Marxism is still the major creed that addresses the various issues of the working class. So, we should revisit Marxism with a view to evaluating its shortcomings. This, in turn, will help us in formulating a new ideology in the context of the present complex socio-economic and cultural dimension for the complete emancipation of the world's working class.

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Obama's 100 days and 3 Cs of change

We hope the Obama way has a positive effect on our politicians as well as on us. Unless we change for the better, this country will never change. Obama's "change" is embedded in 3 Cs -- commitment, consistency, and credibility.

SYED MUNIR KHASRU

THE first 100 days of a presidency can't be used as a comprehensive yardstick for evaluation of a 4-year term. This 100 days evaluation started from the inauguration of John F. Kennedy. It has a symbolic, rather than functional, value as it can show how much the president "means business" and "means what he says."

Obama built the momentum of his campaign through one word, "change." Clinton did the same successfully in 1991 by harping on "economy" against George Bush Sr. The difference is that Obama's message of change appealed to a broad section of people in and outside the US.

Hence, people's expectations from Obama have been much higher than they would be in the case of an average president. Obama faces the daunting task of delivering after a period that saw Americans becoming increasingly dispirited and US losing respect in the outside world.

During transition, Obama rightly maintained a respectable distance from the decisions of the outgoing administration. When Bush met heads of state from developed countries to discuss the global economic crisis, Obama refrained from making any public comment and stated: "We can't have two voices coming from the White House." Even before assuming office, he sent a powerful signal on appropriateness of conduct and need for restraint. Something our politicians can take a lesson from -- when to remain silent and how to respect the incumbent, even when he is on the way out.

Obama has inherited an economy in recession, not only in US but also around the globe. He initiated a mammoth stimulus package of about \$800 billion. He proposed a fundamental shift from a purely market driven to a moderately interventionist economy whereby the state leads the way by investing in public goods and services, resulting in employment generation and economic stimulation.

Given the apathy of ordinary Americans towards Wall Street's greed culture that led to the collapse of the financial market and resulting bailout package with taxpayers money, this was a timely move that will restore people's faith in the government as the provider of social and economic security in times of crisis.

Defying the influence of lobbyist groups, the White House put a cap of \$500,000 on the salary that can be drawn by CEOs of companies that have received money under the bailout package. Another move was the firing of GM CEO Rick Wagoner for failing to restructure the Detroit auto giant that is fighting for its life. Obama sent a signal that gone are days of unfettered free market economy dominated by greedy CEOs, irresponsible bankers, and reckless borrowers.

Obama has started regaining America's lost clout by using two words, "listen" and "respect." This is a U-turn from the Bush era's policy of "dictate" and "arrogance," which literally divided the world as per Bush's naive policy prescription of "You are either with us or with them."

From gradually shaping an even-handed Middle East Policy to giving European counterparts the respect they aspire for, from shutting down infamous Guantanamo Bay to closing CIA operated overseas "secret prisons," from not hiding his middle Muslim name of "Hussein" to visiting a mosque in Turkey, from respond-

ing to the Kyoto Protocol on environment to accepting responsibility for US failure in checking guns smuggled to Mexican drug cartels, from sending new year's message to Iranians on the 1st day of the Persian year to shaking hands with Venezuela's Hugo Chavez -- Obama has proven to be a smart foreign policy activist as opposed to the inexperienced commander in chief that Republicans tried to portray as him during the election campaign.

The lesson? If one has to "change" the dynamics of relationships, he has to lead by example and not merely preach through rhetoric. Domestically, will we see our two leaders shake hands in the next five years? We can't give up hope -- can we?

Obama has lifted the ban on federal funding of stem-cell research. He has opened up the possibility of putting to trial those officials who had authorised torture under the blanket of "war on terror."

He said: "We will fight our wars maintaining our values and not by abdicating them."

Obama will speak to students of Arizona State University (ASU) during the convocation, but ASU has declined an honorary degree to Obama as they think that he is "too young and inexperienced." Obama, a Harvard educated lawyer and ex-editor of Harvard Law Review, is going ahead in any case. See the beauty in the modesty and humility of the most powerful politician of the world. Imagine such a thing happening in Bangladesh, where our

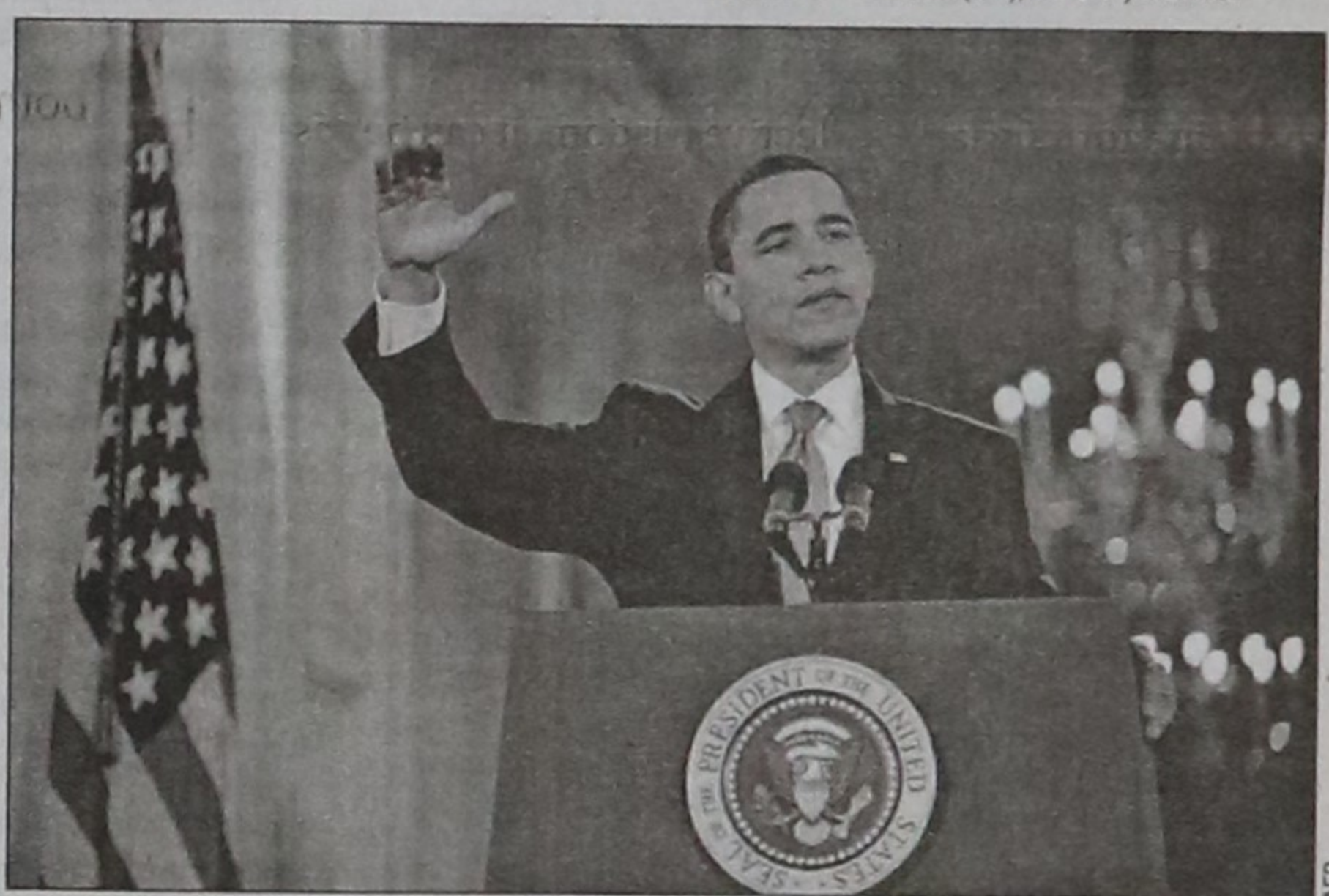
vice-chancellors are busy inventing degrees and accolades for their masters on whose mercy they get appointed, particularly in public universities.

The essence of the first 100 days of Obama's presidency is that, if one has firm commitment in his causes, consistently pursues the agenda and sends credible signals to prove it, the world pays due attention and respect. While Obama has been saying less and making more "change."

On the 100th day, Obama said: "The answer to the challenges America faces today lies in the character of the Americans."

We hope the Obama way has a positive effect on our politicians as well as on us. Unless we change for the better, this country will never change. Obama's "change" is embedded in 3 Cs -- commitment, consistency, and credibility.

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An 'A' for the 100 days?

Eminent domain: The other side of the story

In civilised countries the most common uses of property taken through eminent domain are for public utilities, highways, railroads etc, and "building houses for rehabilitating the widows and children of the slain army officers in the Palkhona mayhem" simply does come into that category.

TAYEB HUSAIN

MY good friend Prof. Abdullah A. Dewan, in his article "Khaleda's house and eminent domain" (The Daily Star, April 28), asked: "How can a political party survive when its leaders are organising a month long countrywide political agitation against a house eviction notice, when

there are so many issues -- dire water shortage, power shortage, and price spirals of many daily essentials -- crying out for attention?"

I quite agree with what the professor has said, and I know well that Khaleda's last government was a bad one and she failed to address many important issues, because of which the country has suffered and will continue suffering.

I shed no tears for Khaleda's problem, but I must call a spade a spade. It is also true that there never was a good government in Bangladesh, and there may not be one in the near future. If Prof. Dewan expects a new dawn in Bangladesh's history with Sheikh Hasina's present government, he might be disappointed.

I want to say a few words only about Khaleda Zia's house and the points related to what the professor raised.

The cantonment house was given to Khaleda Zia on lease. This giving away itself was wrong and a megalomaniac gave it to show generosity to the wife of a slain leader.

For all these years Khaleda Zia was living in this house and nobody raised any question. "It is true that she had the house duly registered, but what every-

body should know is that she had duly registered an illegally allotted house," Professor Dewan writes. Whatever it is, why was this order issued now?

"Khaleda must be evicted from this property for a great cause; rehabilitating the widows and children of the slain army officers in the Palkhona mayhem," the professor says.

Why is it so important to build houses for these widows and children? The prudent thing to do, for a wise leadership of course, is to give suitable financial assistance to these wives and children.

It is surprising that the professor did not see any sign of "taking revenge" on the part of Sheikh Hasina in this issue. I am not a supporter of either of these ladies, but I suppose Hasina's action is what we in our village would call; "break-

ing Karim's leg in the name of ha-du-du game."

Should not "dire water shortage, power shortage, and price spirals of many daily essentials" need more urgent attention from the government, rather than evicting Khaleda Zia and inviting political turmoil? Our problem is, we are all partisans and we cannot see a problem as neutral judges. That's very sad.

In the conclusion of his article the professor has suggested what to do if Khaleda Zia fights the case in the court of law and wins the battle of eviction. "If she wins the case in the High Court -- the Parliament must pass a bill empowering the state to enforce what is known as 'eminent domain' in the US."

"Eminent domain" (in US) or "compulsory purchase" (in UK) is a legal term by

which the state can seize private property of a citizen. By this law, the government can even snatch a citizen's rights in a property with due monetary compensation without the owner's consent.

This seizure is for the government's use or, by delegation, for third party use where the property will be devoted to public or civic use or, in some cases, just for economic development.

In civilised countries the most common uses of property taken through eminent domain are for public utilities, highways, railroads etc, and "building houses for rehabilitating the widows and children of the slain army officers in the Palkhona mayhem" simply does come into that category.

Tayeb Husain writes from Sweden.

24 signs you are a post-modern Asian



MY friend Andy told me he goes to the Starbucks coffee shop every day. I told him he was a coffee addict. He shook his head. "Actually, I can't stand the stuff," he whispered. "I order tea."

Andy is your typical modern Asian yuppie fashion victim, or what I prefer to

call "an idiot." You may think that's harsh, but anyone who pays US\$5 for a cup of tea just to look trendy deserves to be dissed.

But then I realised I was no different. I go to trendy Western restaurants, but sneak in a bottle of chilli sauce to give the food a chance to bite back. (Warning: If you do this, do not keep the chilli sauce in your trouser pocket.)

It's funny: the inhabitants of cities in Asia look totally Westernised these days. Yet scratch the surface and you find traditional Asians underneath.

So here is a list of Signs That you are a post-modern Asian.

1. If you haven't eaten rice at least once a day, you feel hungry.
2. You have black hair but think of it as dark brown.
3. Many members of your family have politically incorrect nicknames, such as Fatty-Uncle.
4. Your number one guilty secret: you enjoy karaoke.
5. You have lived next door to someone for five years but know nothing at all about them.
6. Your older relatives still think that you have to shout into phones to make yourself heard.
7. You drive a German car in your

8. You think wearing a Rolex Oyster is a legal requirement for Asian businessmen.
9. You have Western pills in your medicine cabinet, but also strange smelling rocks, seeds and a bit of sliced deer antler.
10. You have never even thought about paying full price for a DVD or CD.
11. Your parents don't realise that there are other things you can study at university other than business, medicine, law and engineering.
12. You have at least one friend whose first name is a noun, as in Diphtheria Chan.

13. You never realised that Solitaire could be played without a computer.
14. There are jars of dried leaves in the pantry of your family home.
15. Your mobile phone has a different ring tone for your main spouse and your "minor" spouse.
16. You know more European designer labels than any of your European friends.
17. You have no time for organised religion but take the feng shui of your office seriously.
18. You think there's nothing odd with an adult buying a Nintendo DS or a PSP for his or her own use.
19. You think of all software as freeware.

20. Your friends think use what they think are trendy, popular Western names, such as Winnie, Gilbert and Connie.
21. You are amazed at what your Western friends pay for designer Asian clothes that look like the stuff in your grandmother's wardrobe.
22. You have no interest in classic music.
23. All your Western friends think you are good at math.
24. And you are reading this in a designer coffee shop drinking a US\$5 cup of tea.

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