

Moral eclipse and reforms

Moral enlightenment coupled with spiritual commitment can help us build a society free from political and economic exploitation.

Z.A. KHAN

OUR country is once again sinking in the marshy political tract for the quietism pursued by all concerned. With the return of democracy after two years, one hopes that the sanity and order that the caretaker government (CTG) tried to bring about in our political culture by reforming the flawed and decayed practices will be maintained with unremitting zeal.

For nearly four decades we have had our share of sorrows and trials. We still observe that our leaders, regardless of the party tag that they wear, are subjecting us to their whims and whips. I fear that it is because of their utter disregard to peoples' aspirations that the nation now seems to be hovering on the brink of a revolution.

Our resilient citizens have given a pause to allow the political leadership to tame the political turbulence, however outrageous it was, by crafting calmness. Casual observation can easily sense the mood of our people, which expresses scorn and at the same time an enormous passion to free our vicious politics from the shackles of skulduggery and wantonness of the cronies and sycophants.

I do not see any possibility of chastisement of those political rank and files who have got used to persecuting the conscience of our people by making lofty pledges and planning scams to bag

benefits.

Given to self-aggrandisement, these leaders are beefing up their cronies by giving them the opportunity to be proactive to discourage any attempt for transition from intolerance to incredulity and from obedience to discussion.

Now that we know who is responsible for our humiliating climb-down from the apex of our pre-liberation aspiration to the nadir of our current frustration, how do we convince them to practice morality instead of lubricity?

I think reforms in all sectors of our national life must take root, albeit gradually. The quintessence of the reforms should be development of social taboos that will make one morally bound to cultivate the reforms, and a political culture that will assure an all-encompassing integration of social values with moral bindings.

Although I am saturated with deep awareness about what I must do, I at times feel inclined to ask myself whether or not I am trying to catch a glimpse of snowflakes in the middle of a blizzard.

When the last CTG demonstrated an inclination towards bringing about some reforms, we thought that it was going to be a watershed in our history, and hoped that they would act as a formidable force to implement our common vision. Their efforts ended in fiasco as they took up too many tasks at a time without ensuring availability of strong institutions and people committed to the hilt to translate

the vision into reality.

The forces of evil were up and about to add riders to the list of tasks to compound the problems. Leading lights and the conscience keepers of our society suddenly vanished, and the CTG was left high and dry to plough a lonely furrow.

It seems to me as if reforms and the CTG's detractors were on a collision course, and that is why the CTG's move was defeated. Let us not forget that defeat is not extinguishing the light but putting out a lamp, because success may come with the emergence of precursors to lead the way to victory.

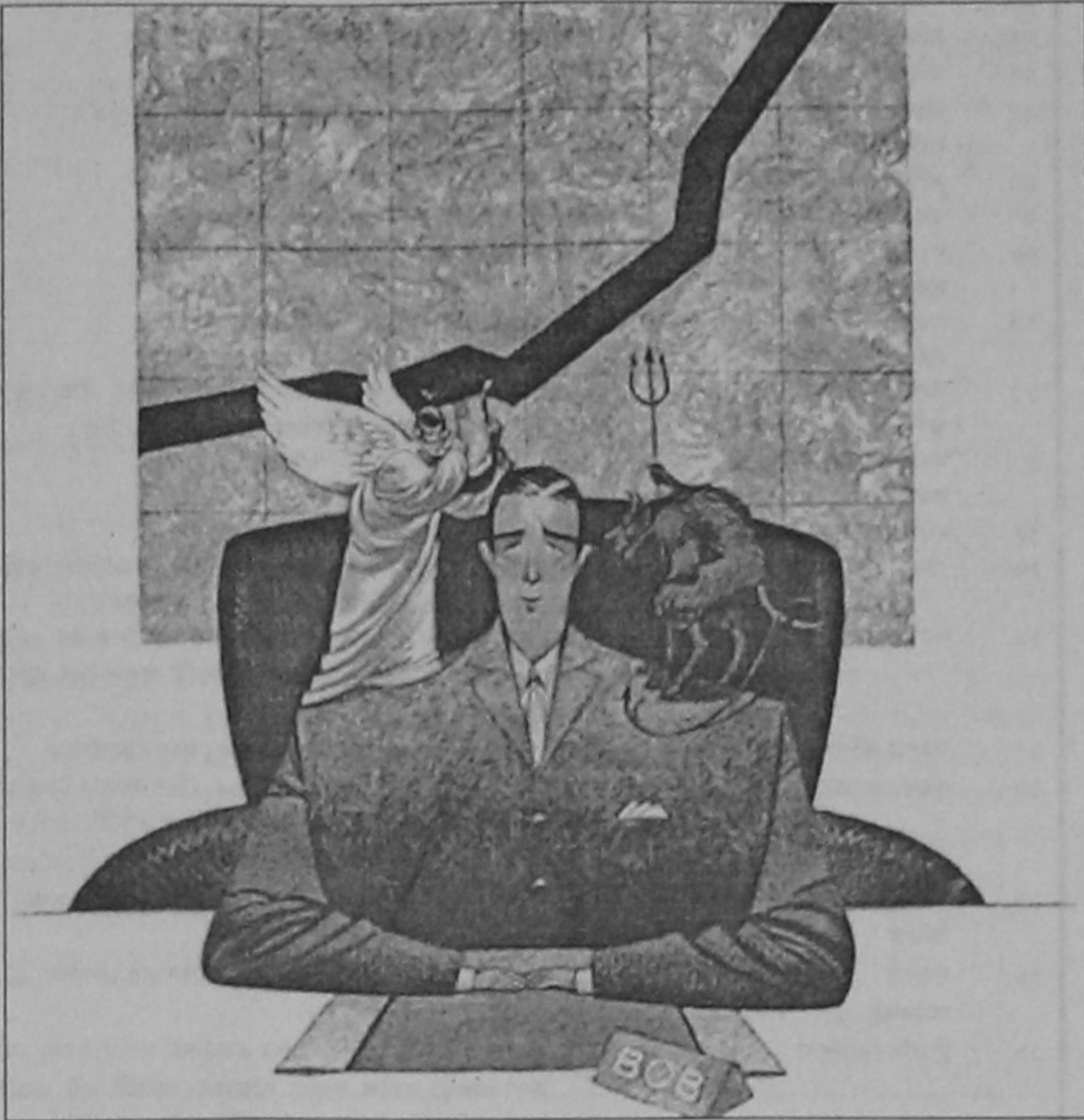
Let us try once again to seek a new cure for the old epidemic, or at least a new prophylactic regime, lest our nation finds itself submerged in the thick slush perpetually. How do we purge the rottenness in our politics and governance? Our nation is tired of the conventional model of democracy and development, which failed to mitigate the deprivation and poverty perpetrated at the behest of the politicians and experts. Let me list the reasons that led to the dismal performance of our governments. These are:

- Political polarisation along two party lines made dialogue among the parties a far cry,
- Lack of practice of democracy within the parties led to sycophancy and cronyism that helped the leaders to consolidate absolute power,
- Absence of financial transparency,
- Accordance of priority to party security over state security,
- Assigning state security apparatus in informal tasks, and
- Lack of mutual trust between leaders and the led.

To enable development of democracy and to ensure good governance, the

following should receive attention:

- Over-concentration of power by electing the leader of the party as the head of the government should be avoided,
- Efforts should be made to manage political differences between the two major political parties by promoting mutual understanding and mutual trust,
- Parliament should be allowed to function on the merit of the subject, unhindered by the force of the majority,
- Criminalisation of the legislators should be guarded against by active monitoring of the parliament, party and concerned government agencies,
- There should be no decline in the power of the court,
- Bureaucracy should not be politically patronised,
- Formal tools of the government should not be assigned to informal tasks;
- Media should be allowed to be vocal and vibrant,
- Civil society should be encouraged to play a non-partisan, intellectually enlightened and issue based role,
- The president should remain involved, and presidential activism should be reckoned with to guard against over exuberance of the head of the government,
- The Election Commission should be designed and geared to function independently of government interference, and
- The Anticorruption Commission, Rights to Information Commission, Human Rights Commission etc. should be encouraged to act without fear or favour to identify the red herrings that may make their task complicated, and suggest to the government to remove them. Reforms do not take root overnight. We



The graph rises towards the devil.

all know that reforms for democracy and development crystallise over a period of time, deriving sustenance from the nation's history and culture and from the peoples' collective experience over the years.

We should nurture an attitude of positivity, and make sure that the institutional foundation is not eroded and that any rise of identity crisis is blunted.

Moral eclipse due to perceptive dynamics can distort a good set of rules.

Moral enlightenment coupled with spiritual commitment can help us build a society free from political and economic exploitation. So let us reform ourselves before it is too late.

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To whom does the 21st century belong?

The fact remains, however, that the world is indeed on the cusp of great changes, and many of them are emanating from Asia. It is not a question of cutthroat competition, but cooperation with America.

IFTEKHAR AHMED CHOWDHURY

THERE is an on-going debate in the global analytical community about who the 21st century belongs to. America is in "elegant decline," as Robert Kaplan would have us believe, and in this post-American period the great story is "the rise of the rest" as Fareed Zakaria has powerfully argued. Some would hold that this "dichotomy" of the world between America and the rest is too lopsided. Also, "the rest" requires a sharper definition.

Kishore Mahbubani suggests that for "the rest" read "Asia," in his book *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East*. Almost a decade ago, Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn had predicted that the "centre" of the world would eventually "settle in Asia" in their book *Thunder from the East: Portrait of a Rising Asia*. So is Asia to be the new Rome to America's Greece?

Many Asians hope so. It imparts them a sense of pride that they have longed for. They believe it will make up for their having missed out on the fillips to civilisation provided to the West by the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution, partly on account of their lethargy and partly, and this is a view much prevalent among Asian intellectuals, due to the fact that for much of the period through those phenomena they were under colonial domination.

But this does not explain why Asia was

conquered so easily by the Europeans in the first place. How could a few hundred English soldiers under Lord Clive defeat Nawab Sirajuddowla of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa at Plassey in 1757, or how did the mighty Moghuls of Delhi succumb to the British onslaught a century later? When Lord Byron had thought that the Greeks deserved a "blush" and a "tear" because "all except their sun was set," the same was true of the Indian or the Chinese empires!

So there was something terribly wrong with Asia. It was that somewhere along the line Asians had lost the leadership in thoughts and ideas. Perhaps, having their works fall into European hands after the sacking of Constantinople in 1453, Asian minds ceased to stimulate the world, be it in the sciences, politics or later economics! And ideas rule the world, as the Italian statesman Guiseppe Mazzini had said in the nineteenth century.

Amartya Sen speaks of a misconception nourished by some that India is the land of uncritical faiths and unquestioned practices. He speaks of some cultural theorists, "allegedly highly sympathetic" (in his words), who are happy to demonstrate the strength and superiority of the faith-based and unreasoning culture of India and the East, in contrast to the "shallow rationalism" and scientific priorities of the West. Sen asserts that even if this line of argument was inspired by sympathy, it ends up suppressing large parts of the sub-



It's mine! It's mine!

continent's intellectual heritage.

In *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History Culture and Identity* he shows how pluralism and the dialogic tradition of the land support democracy, secularism and the pursuit of mathematics and science. Thus, Asia may be strong on spiritualism, but by no means confined to it. Indeed, it is in its ability to

cultivate the other virtues, and blend those with its indigenous strengths, that the future of Asia will lie.

Contemporary times provide opportunities for Asia to leapfrog many of the stages of progress it may have missed out on, and come to the dominant position it has aspired to for centuries. The current global recession and the accom-

panying dizzying economic successes of India and China have spurred Asian confidence, as did the earlier economic miracles of Japan and East Asia. Asian spirits are currently buoyant. Politicians, academics, and analysts are abuzz with the talk that the Asian Century is already here!

The truth is, not yet. Though there are many possibilities, but they do not make a probability. In a recent article in *Foreign Policy* magazine, Minxin Pei has urged calm. He has provided some statistics to make his point. He says per capita Asian GDP is \$5,800 compared to \$48,000 in America.

He further states that it will take the average Asian 77 years to equal the income of an average American. The Chinese and the Indians would need 47 and 123 years respectively. Professor Pranab Bardhan has expressed similar sentiments in *China, India Superpower? Not so Fast!*

The fact remains, however, that the world is indeed on the cusp of great changes, and many of them are emanating from Asia. It is not a question of cutthroat competition, but cooperation with America.

The flip side of America's success story is that there is no salvation for those who cannot make the grade. The Asian tale must be one of growth with equity. This would be in consonance with the Asian value of the responsibility of those who govern. This is why the report in the Financial Times of June 25 that a study funded by the Asian Development Bank has found that India had 50 "dollar billionaires" controlling wealth equivalent to 20% of GDP and 80% of the stock market capitalisation was so disturbing!

There is a prevalent Asian value, irrespective of ideologies, that those

who rule should take care of those they rule. If there are gaps in their capability to do so then other private or civil agencies must be facilitated to undertake those tasks. That is the origin of Professor Mohammed Yunus's "Grameen" movement involving micro-credit in Bangladesh or the "Edhi Foundation" of Abdus Sattar Edhi in Pakistan, or Mother Teresa's Home in India. Confucianism also propagates this in East Asia.

In many of these countries the state seeks to "walk on two legs." They try to follow market principles on the one hand, and spread the social safety-net on the other. This could be Asia's great contribution to human civilisation, the simultaneous and comprehensive advance of the society and the individual, helping create harmony rather than friction.

In an essay entitled *America's Edge: Power in a Networked Century in Foreign Affairs* of January-February 2009, Anne-Marie Slaughter has turned all the above arguments on their heads, and has affirmed that this century will be an American one because of America's unparalleled "connectedness." But then, how long must this argument continue?

The time may have come to put the debate on claims and counter-claims as to which continent this century belongs at rest. We may conclude that the century and futurity must belong to the totality of humankind, drawing upon America's skills, Europe's reason and Asia's spirituality, even though no region of the world can claim complete ownership to any one of these attributes singly, and also ensuring that no one, not even deep in the heartland of Africa, is left behind!

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Food labelling has arrived



SHOCKING news is on the way for fans of one of the world's most popular leisure activities: eating. Changes in US labelling laws means Asian branches of international restaurant chains are set to reveal to customers what they are actually putting into their mouths. They are not going to like it.

I mentioned this to a restaurant investor I know. He just shrugged. "Logically, this should be bad for business," he replied, using his teeth to pick the meat off a roast leg of something or

other, probably his accountant. "On the other hand, we make up our own rules in Asia, so who knows?"

Sniffing a story, I headed to McDonald's at Hung Hom train station in Kowloon. There was no nutritional info on any menu boards or printed food lists. It seemed to be a false alarm.

I decided to stay for lunch.

Five minutes later, a stray breeze (or a sneeze from the swine flu sufferer at the next table) lifted the edge of the paper mat under my burger and fries. It was covered with tiny, faded marks.

Intrigued, I finished my meal and took the grease-stained sheet back to the office. It was a puzzle. McDonald's had managed to print the top of the sheet in full colour with large pictures of tempting foods urging you to eat more, but had oddly only managed to print the

text on the underside in tiny letters in light blue ink.

Using an electron microscope to increase the size of the text about 10,000 times, I could just about read it. Yes! It was the missing nutritional information I had been tipped off about.

After reading it, it was easy to see why they had made it so hard to decipher. The meal I had just eaten had more calories than a bus-full of deep-fried Texans. It could have fed Ethiopia for a week. I worked out that I wouldn't have to eat again until December, 2015.

Swallow two burgers in quick succession and you would explode. Even the little packet of salt was bad for you, having shockingly high sodium content.

I phoned the restaurant investor. "They have started providing nutritional information, and it's stunning

stuff," I told him. "A portion of large fries gives you the same amount of calories as eating a herd of wildebeest with full-fat mayo."

He wasn't worried. "Rules about eating are not interpreted the same on this side of the planet," he said. To prove his point, he emailed me some information about new food laws in Taiwan, in which vegetarian dishes have to be completely free of "meat, eggs, onions and garlic."

I called him back. "I don't get it," I said. "Since when have onions and garlic been types of meat?" He replied: "told you, this is Asia. We make up our own rules here."

Can you imagine what fun a US lawyer would have in Taiwan? "our staff served my vegetarian client a dish containing a bit of onion and he has been

left traumatised by nightmares of the suffering he has caused these innocent vegetables."

Bon appetit.

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