

Culture of shamelessness or forgetfulness?

The public acceptance is as regrettable as the forgetfulness of the public. Are we too forgiving as a nation, or just forgetful? Or, have we developed a culture of shamelessness? Or, is it a variation in the theme of the culture of impunity?

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

IN 1946 American anthropologist Ruth Benedict published *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*. Six decades later -- a plethora of debates notwithstanding -- the book is remembered for highlighting Japan as a "shame" culture as opposed to "guilt" culture. The opposite of shame is honour.

The duality of shame and honour plays an important role in many East Asian societies. In China, public shaming of discredited leaders or deviants of various other sorts has been a time-tested punishment. "Losing face" is something people carefully try to avoid in most societies, but has a great resonance in the East Asian culture.

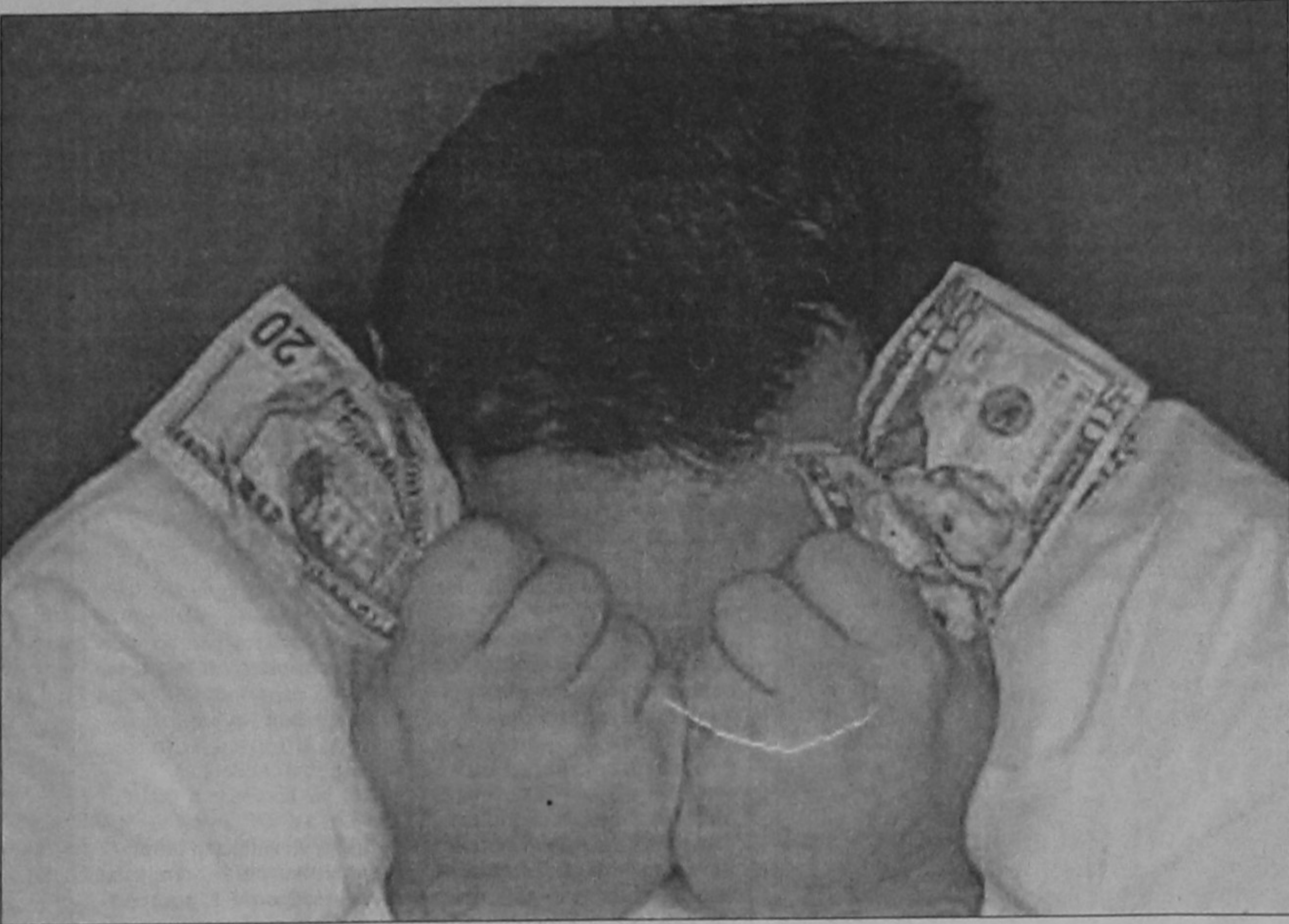
In Singapore, which is known as one of the least corrupt countries in the world, when Mr. Teh Cheang Wan, an architect by profession and minister for national development, was accused of corruption. As the government under the premiership of Mr. Lee Kuan Yew was getting ready to launch an open investigation in late 1986, the accused minister committed suicide.

Mr. Teh, rather than subjecting himself and his family (and, presumably, his Party) to shame, preferred to take his own life. Hara-kiri or suicide to protect

one's honour is an age-old Japanese Samurai tradition. The protection of honour and avoidance of shame feature in all self-respecting societies in varying degrees, but the East Asian societies stand out.

On May 23, Mr. Roh Moo-hyun, former president of South Korea, went hiking in the hills at dawn and jumped off the cliff to his death for protecting his honour. Mr. Roh was the president of South Korea from 2003 to 2008. During his presidency, he fought tirelessly against corruption, sending bigwigs to jail, and remained untainted by corruption in a society where big-business and government often have an incestuous relationship. Scandals of corruption involving Mr. Roh's family members surfaced recently, leading the prosecutors to interrogate him on April 30. His visit to Seoul for that event was trailed by television camera.

In the face of allegations, Mr. Roh -- who, unlike his family members, remains untainted -- took the drastic action because he wanted to protect his honour and the cause he associated with. In his suicide note he wrote that he did not want to be a burden on others. On his blog, according to the Economist (May 30), he apologised, admitting that members of his household had received money to settle a



public eyes they are innocent. All those who were charged and investigated under special circumstances without legal counsel were innocent.

Similarly, those in the interim government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed who were responsible for flouting laws and thus -- in retrospect -- embarrassing the short-lived regime should also apologise publicly and stop taking a moral high ground. Some of the advisers then were founts of sarcasm and helped delegitimise some of the good deeds that the interim-government should be credited for.

Some of the politicians who were at least tainted by accusations of corruption and wrongdoings, as well as some of the rogue advisers, are now back to dominate the airwaves and seminar floors. They are being rehabilitated by the media. The public acceptance is as regrettable as the forgetfulness of the public. Are we too forgiving as a nation, or just forgetful? Or, have we developed a culture of shamelessness? Or, is it a variation in the theme of the culture of impunity?

Some of the important lessons that can be drawn from the recent history of Bangladesh politics are: For the rulers of the day, please ask yourself, can my present actions be defended legally in the court of law and morally in the eyes of the public in the future, especially when I will not be in power. For the public, the lesson is; please learn to disaggregate. Do not lump the good and the bad. Please be more discerning and accept the fact that not all politicians are bad, nor are all of them angels. And ditto for business leaders and advisors.

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Do the corrupt ever say, "Oh! What have I done?"

debt. He wrote: "I feel ashamed before my fellow citizens."

When was the last time we heard a case of a public official feeling ashamed and expressing regrets to fellow citizens in Bangladesh over corruption that he or she had committed. Under the interim government many politicians and businessmen were accused of corruption, yet only a small number of

them were convicted and sentenced.

Surely, the interim government dealt with the investigations and trials in a high-handed manner, using the indefensible logic of "ends justify the means. In some cases, even family members were summarily thrown into jail. In one instance, Sheikh Hasina publicly criticised the locking up of the wife and daughter of Iqbal Mahmud

Tuku, a former BNP state minister. Questions have been raised on the legality of the interim government itself.

It is true that some of the allegations of wrongdoings and corruption against the big-wigs in Bangladesh politics and business were politically motivated. But not all. The failure to prove charges of corruption does not mean that in the

Ban Ki-Moon returns from Yangon empty-handed

The general politely informed Ban Ki-Moon that since Suu Kyi was facing charges a meeting would prejudice the trial. The general was also circumspect about Ban Ki-Moon's demands for the release of political prisoners and the 2010 general elections.



MAHMOOD HASAN

BURMA (now Myanmar) is our next-door neighbour but has remained largely ignored in our media and our foreign policy. Burma's notoriously secretive military junta stonewalled UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon on his recent visit to Naypyidaw, the new capital.

Burma slid from the quasi-military

rule of Gen. Ne Win's infamous Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) to full military rule, following massive pro-democracy uprisings in 1988. At that time, the charismatic Aung San Suu Kyi was the undisputed leader of the democracy movement. The military junta led by Gen Saw Maung declared Martial Law, which continues even today after 21 years.

In 1990, Suu Kyi's National League for

Democracy (NLD) won an overwhelming victory at the national elections but the junta, on grounds of it being fraudulent, rejected the results. Gen. Than Shwe now leads the junta. The junta has held Suu Kyi in detention for 13 years and systematically strangled the pro-democracy movement.

In May this year, Suu Kyi's detention was supposed to have ended, but that opportunity was lost when an American -- John Yettaw (53) -- swam across Inya Lake and intruded into Suu Kyi's lakeside house. He spent two nights in the compound before being detected and arrested by the military police. The junta accused Suu Kyi of violating the house arrest terms and put her on trial. If convicted Suu Kyi could be imprisoned for five years.

Outraged governments and activists from around the world called for her immediate release. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, speaking on Suu Kyi's 64th birthday last month, described her as "perhaps the most renowned prisoner of conscience in the world," and pledged to step up sanctions and take further measures against the oppressive military regime. A joint statement agreed by EU leaders said that unless Suu Kyi and 2,100 other Burmese political prisoners were released the credibility of the elections scheduled for 2010 would be undermined.

The United Nations has been speaking to the military regime for quite some time now without making any headway. Special envoys were sent to Rangoon to persuade the junta to be more flexible and establish democracy.

Razali Ismail, the Malaysian diplomat who was appointed UN special envoy to Burma in 2000, had some success. His repeated entreaties with generals led to the release of Suu Kyi in May 2002.

But the ruthless military arrested her again in May 2003. A frustrated Razali resigned in 2005. The secretary general then appointed Ibrahim Gambari, a Nigerian diplomat, as special envoy to Burma in May 2007. Gambari visited Burma several times but his talks with the secretive generals did not succeed in obtaining the release of Suu Kyi or improving the massive human rights violations in the country.

Ban Ki-Moon's second visit (July 3-4) to Burma came at the invitation of the Burmese government. He had high hopes that he would be able to meet Suu Kyi. Ban Ki-Moon first visited Burma in May last year after cyclone Nargis. He met General Than Shwe twice and asked him for a meeting with Suu Kyi. The general politely informed Ban Ki-Moon that since Suu Kyi was facing charges a meeting would prejudice the trial. The general was also circumspect about Ban Ki-Moon's demands for the release of political prisoners and the 2010 general elections.

The secretary general left Rangoon a deeply disappointed man. "I believe the government of Myanmar failed to take a unique opportunity to show its commitment to a new era of political openness," he said to the media in Bangkok on July 4. He also affirmed that he had conveyed the concerns of the international community "very frankly" and "directly" to General Than Shwe.

It will be naïve to assume that the

generals will give up power just because the international community wants it, but there may be two ways the generals can be forced to relinquish power. One, the people of Burma rise, as they did in 1988 but with greater vigour, and force the military to hold fair elections followed by the formation of an independent political government. Two, an external power compels them to quit.

Neither is possible at this stage. The Burmese people have few demands and are happy with whatever little they have. Decades of military rule has made them apolitical, though their yearning for democracy has grown over the years. Educated youths are still keen to join the army -- they can wield unlimited power and make lots of money. Besides, the people of Burma are quite aware of the brutal strength of the military. Any uprising will definitely be harshly quelled.

As for an external intervention -- the possibilities are non-existent. The generals have developed strong relations with China. The economic and military cooperation between China and Burma since 1999 has been the kingpin in determining Burma's foreign policy. Through agreements China has gained access to Burma's vast natural resources and obtained a gateway into the Indian Ocean through the naval bases in Coco Island, located in the Andaman Sea.

Burma has also become a member of regional organisations -- Asean (July 1997) and Bimstec (Dec 1997). Its relations with India can be termed "friendly." Relations with Bangladesh are cool and laced with elements of

distrust. At least recent incidents between the two countries point in that direction. Neither India nor Bangladesh, both democratic countries, has been critical about the junta's policies towards democracy, Suu Kyi or the human rights situation in Burma. Thus Burma, though isolated, is secure in a region where it has no serious criticism.

It is, therefore, no wonder that the military junta has been able to shrug off international criticism and condemnation. It is, indeed, unfortunate and distressing to see that Burma -- a founder member of the United Nations, which gave the UN its third secretary general (U Thant, 1961-1972) -- now violates all tenets of human rights.

Ban Ki-Moon will now face criticism for undertaking the visit, and hoping to make a breakthrough and nudge the generals towards establishing democracy. He was advised to undertake the visit after the generals had made meaningful concessions, not before. Ban Ki-Moon's unassertive diplomatic style failed to strike a chord with Than Shwe.

The isolated military junta of Burma successfully used the high office of the secretary general to its advantage, providing him oriental hospitality but firmly refusing to give into his demands. He has gone back empty handed -- Aung San Suu Kyi will continue to be under detention, political prisoners will languish in the notorious Insein jail and the elections of 2010, if at all held, will not lead to the establishment of any political government.

Mahmood Hasan is a former Ambassador and Secretary.

Ruled by our stomachs



CALLING all cops: there is a new, super-easy way to defeat criminals. Simply set up fast food shops near all major banks. Getaway cars will be unable to proceed past them.

This is all to do with a huge change in the way humans operate. For millennia, people have been divided into two camps: those controlled by their heads and those who follow the dictates of their hearts. But this generation is different. We are controlled by our stomachs.

Here's the evidence. A criminal was recently speeding down a road in the US

state of Indiana at 144 kilometers an hour. Police were in hot pursuit in a car chase worthy of Hollywood. Try as they might, cops could not catch up with the villain.

Suddenly the bad guy saw a fast food shop. He may have been a criminal, but deep down he was also a typical modern urban automaton. He did what city-dwellers are trained by years of marketing to do. He skidded to a halt, parked the car and lined up at the counter for a massive hit of calories and cholesterol. Police arrested him and laid down a range of charges, including fleeing from officers, making poor decisions and having lamentably bad taste in food.

The same day, a reader emailed me a cutting about a petty thief in Taiwan who committed a pointless crime because he had an insatiable craving for cheap jail food. "I cannot forget police department boxed lunches," he told reporters as he was happily led away. Similar cases have been reported in

both south and southeast Asia. The food involved is never haute cuisine, but always cheap nosh.

This doesn't just happen to criminals. Your columnist last week was inexorably drawn to a famously ghastly canteen after getting an inexplicable craving for a rice lunch box meal that my dog would have turned her nose up at, and she eats live bugs.

Most shockingly, a mildly famous animal rights activist of my acquaintance admitted that she had recently dined at McDonald's. I said: "I thought you would only enter a McDonald's with the sole purpose of smashing it up as a symbol of imperialist capitalism."

She replied: "Normally, yes. But I had a craving for chips and ketchup. And chips are vegan, if you think about it." She told me not to print her name, scared that members of the vegan society would not approve. "They'd eat me alive," she said, interestingly.

A doctor friend told me that cravings

come when our bodies cry out for specific nutrients (taking that term broadly). The messages are most powerful in pregnant women.

A quick survey of people at the bar that night produced a huge crop of pregnancy craving tales. One guy knew a woman named Julia who ate a box of tissues.

Another woman ate chalk and talcum powder.

A third ate cheese and ice-cream sandwiches.

A fourth drank salt water.

A fifth put Miracle Whip on her salad.

A sixth ate laundry soap.

A seventh ate gravel.

And most horrible of all, an eighth ate fast food every day for months.

If her child ever grows up to be a robber, he'll be in trouble if there's a burger shop near the bank.

To know more about new kind of food, visit our columnist at www.vittachi.com.

