

## The ghost of Biaka-Boda

Sixty years later Victor Biaka-Boda's ghost is here and it's screaming. It's asking our politicians not to take their constituents for granted. If they can hear, the constituents are getting fed up with them. They are getting weary of political leaders using the government as a weapon of mutual destruction and of national politics being dragged in the mud for individual, not collective, interests.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

VICTOR Biaka-Boda, a witch doctor from Ivory Coast, was elected to the French Senate in 1948. After spending two years in Paris he returned home and toured his nation's hinterlands. He wanted to touch base with his electorate who were long complaining about food shortage. Biaka-Boda never returned from the tour because the hungry constituents ate the man. Truth is always stranger than fiction.

Lucky for our politicians, the constituents don't have that kind of an appetite for their elected men or women. These politicians are safe to return from their constituencies, and they are also safe to return to them for re-election. But who knows, the patience of these constituents may be wearing thin. It's not unlikely that the thought might cross their minds every now and then.

Nobody knows what our politicians are thinking, and where exactly they intend to take this country. But I can tell that people are not convinced. In the past few weeks I have heard more people than ever before express their resentments. It's no longer about partisanship. It's no longer about loyalty. The people still love their leaders, but they are also worried about the country.

Can the politicians guess that their constituents are fatigued? First, it was between two rival political parties, and then it was between two families, afterwards between two political leaders and now it appears to be between two personalities. House against house, harassment against harassment, hubris against hubris, politics has been reduced from an art of public governance to a science of private vengeance.

Last May Columbia University professor Alan Brinkly appeared on the Real Time with Bill Maher show in the United States, and he said: "The capacity for compromise has disappeared in politics." He was talking

about his own country but it sounded like an epigram on ours.

The irony of our politics is that the word "compromise" has been thrown out of the window. Here politicians form alliances so

that they can become more divided. This is a bizarre twist in the game. Like-minded politicians compromise with each other to grind the axe with their opponents.

So, it cannot be said that our politicians have entirely lost their capacity to compromise. It's only that their compromise has the capacity to harbour contention. They join hands. They forgive and forget. They make alliances.

But they do everything so that they can hate their common enemies. Birds of the same feather stick together. Politics makes strange bedfellows. All of these work fine, except for one thing. Our politicians are always busy settling scores, but they can almost never get even.

Because vengeance, like money, begets

vengeance. And that has undermined our politics. Gone are the days when the political air rang with sublime utterances such as democracy, poverty alleviation, nationalism, gender equality, rights of people, so on and so forth.

Compare those days to these days. We are hearing about houses, pornographic magazines, wine bottles, threats and counter threats. We hear about eviction. We hear about conviction. National politics looks like neighbourhood brawls, lowdown showdown of basic instincts.

One can always argue which came first between contentious politicians and confrontational politics. One can always argue whether the politicians have dragged down politics or politics has dragged down the politicians. Whatever it may be, one thing is clear that ideological politics has become exhausted. We may not expect anything better from either of the two main political parties.

It could be a blessing in disguise. May be this is the turning point for our politics. May be people will be constrained to look for alternatives. It is said that cow manure is always good when rotted. May be our politics has rotted beyond which it can only get better for us.

Where can politics go from here? Either the ruling party will get re-elected or the opposition will return to power. What does it mean for us? Under the first scenario, tyranny is a forgone conclusion. Under the second, politics of vengeance will go one notch up.

So, the future looks bleak, caught between a rock and a hard place. And, the decisive hour has come for the constituents. It is said that people always get the leaders they deserve. Time has come for people to decide what they want. Do they want more of the same? Or, do they want change?

Sixty years later Victor Biaka-Boda's ghost is here and it's screaming. It's asking our politicians not to take their constituents for granted. If they can hear, the constituents are getting fed up with them. They are getting weary of political leaders using the government as a weapon of mutual destruction and of national politics being dragged in the mud for individual, not collective, interests.

People are angry. Politicians, please pay attention, before they pay attention to you.

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People are angry. Politicians, please pay attention.

## Asean manages China's assertiveness

Having close historical ties to both China and the US, Asean members frequently find themselves at the receiving end of Chinese and American actions, for better or worse. As a result, they have developed a keen sense of pragmatism, granting them flexibility in maneuvering between these two major powers.

PICHAMON YEOPHANTONG

RECENT US affirmation of its "national interest" in maintaining the "freedom of navigation" and "respect for international law" in the disputed South China Sea has brought a new challenge to China. It also widened the margin of maneuver vis-à-vis China for the Association of South East Asian Nations (Asean).

Predictably, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi responded with an angry outburst, labeling US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's statement as a diplomatic "attack on China." Beijing also tried to spin the Asean reaction in a positive way -- indicating the contours of the new diplomatic struggle it triggered.

Amidst the rhetoric, media of each country portrayed Asean member responses as favourable to their side. The US news media lost no time in affirming how the US potential role as "honest broker" to mediate the dispute was well received by Asean members. The Chinese media reported how Asean delegates had "congratulated" Yang after the meeting, praising China's stance. Despite such contradictory references to the attitudes of Asean members, noticeably missing was an actual account of how the Southeast Asian states themselves understand the issue.

After months of high-level tension and verbal jousting between China and the United States, Southeast Asia now witnesses a new phase in international resource politics. From the Mekong River's critical water levels to management of regional fisheries in the South China Sea and the Tonkin Gulf, resource issues are crucial to regional stability. One only needs to look to the recent spat between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands to see how resource politics can quickly escalate into diplomatic confrontation.

Sensitive disputes surrounding the

South China Sea -- specifically in relation to the Spratly and Paracel islands -- collectively constitute another major challenge for the region. Three main factors are responsible for rising tensions in the area -- increasing friction over access to fishing and potential energy resources as a result of overlapping Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), rapid modernisation of the PLA Navy, and most importantly, the equivocal nature of Chinese claims and actions.

China, a signatory to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, often sends mixed signals to its neighbours. That China refused to submit a joint claim with Vietnam and Malaysia to the UN commission on extended continental shelves, but later filed an objection, attached with the notorious nine-dash line map claiming most of the sea, is an example of Chinese unpredictability.

Contrary to polarised views that see Southeast Asia as either on the US bandwagon to balance against a rising China or engaging the latter to constrain the former, Southeast Asian responses to China's erratic behaviour are far more nuanced. Having close historical ties to both China and the US, Asean members frequently find themselves at the receiving end of Chinese and American actions, for better or worse. As a result, they have developed a keen sense of pragmatism, granting them flexibility in maneuvering between these two major powers. Maintaining low-key diplomacy, whenever possible, is vital.

The decision to keep the South China Sea issue off the agenda of the inaugural Asean Defense Ministers (ADMM+) meeting that took place this month -- though maritime security was a topic -- reveals a prevalent status quo attitude. Malaysian Defense Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi observed, even if dispute were to arise, that Asean's approach remains one of cooperation through "non-emotional dialogue."

For members like Brunei, Thailand and

Singapore, only indirectly involved in the disputes over the various atolls, a stance of neutrality prevails. In such cases, peaceful dialogue and negotiations, coupled with references to legal agreements and international law, are called upon as means to resolve the issue. Bangkok, for instance, has clarified Thailand's position as supporting the development of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea into a regional code of conduct, notably as a means to reassure Beijing.

This suggests that despite China's growing assertiveness and the dubious nature of its claims, there remains a willingness to engage with it constructively, to the extent of accommodation. Though Southeast Asian states are wary of China's expanding reach, they're equally aware of the economic ties that bind. As implementation of the China-Asean Free Trade Agreement demonstrates, this is not merely a case of Asean states being dependent on China, but also of China's dependence on Southeast Asian trade and investment.

In light of this, it's not surprising for Asean members to act pragmatically by maintaining close military ties with the US, while cultivating closer economic relations with the People's Republic. Inherently linked to this reality of interdependence is the broader concern of securing regional stability. China's peaceful rise is undeniably crucial to the region's development and security. It's a matter not only of what China should do to assure others of its intentions, but also of what China's partners can do to manage the rise in a way that benefits the region as a whole.

Even states like Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, which have a direct stake in China's overlapping EEZ claims, still opt for Asean to avoid Sino-US spats, in hopes of preventing a tripartite confrontation with Asean caught in the crossfire. Manila, for one, was markedly forceful in trying to keep the US at arm's length, with Foreign Affairs Secretary Alberto Romulo declaring that negotiations should strictly be between Asean and China. He did advocate implementation of a code of conduct for resolving the issue.

This is a cautious policy, but necessarily so. Placing too much pressure on China or supporting a US interventionist role, would

only harden China's stance. It's imperative to keep China at the negotiating table and, in so doing, gradually co-opt it into Asean through mechanisms like Asean+3, ADMM+ or the Asean Regional Forum.

At the same time, the US shows an obvious desire to reinvigorate its role in Southeast Asia through involvement in the South China Sea affair, which has become not so much an issue of Southeast Asian countries wanting to keep a US presence, but of the US wanting to safeguard its presence vis-à-vis China's growing influence in the region. This has, in one sense, made it easier for Asean states to maintain profitable ties with both China and the US. It's not that Asean members need the US per se as a hedge against China. Rather the US, by pursuing its own interests, already acts the part of a natural leverage.

Southeast Asian nations cannot escape the fact that, geographically and geo-strategically, China has a huge presence. Unlike the US, Asean members share territorial and maritime boundaries with China, and China has a deeply-rooted presence in the region, with relations going back centuries.

Outright confrontation with China has ceased to be a viable option. Rather, constructive engagement and cooperation, with the aim of socialising China into Asean's regional governance mechanisms, is essential to managing the rise of this re-emerging great power.

Beijing should take note that even the friendliest of neighbours have limits to their tolerance. Hanoi, which rarely criticises China despite having its fishing boats seized numerous times in recent years, dismisses China's latest seizure as "irrational," "infringing on Vietnamese sovereignty." Hanoi reinforces its increasingly assertive posture with growing ties with the US, Russia and France, as well as initiatives to strengthen its military capabilities. Too much unreasonable behaviour in the South China Sea -- or elsewhere -- ultimately damages Beijing's interests.

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## Post-verdict BNP politics

Days of old style politics is no more

IF ever there was a moment for BNP to introspect and seriously look within for a renewal of their party's politics, the time is now. It is true that the party is in disarray but it will be mistake to think that it has lost its capacity to play a major role in the future politics of Bangladesh. There is no denying that BNP is facing perhaps the most serious crisis in its short but eventful life. But it is a crisis that the party has enough internal strength and public support for it to recover from.

However for that to happen the party must take a deep look into what it purports to represent and how much energy and democratic space will be given by its leader to others to organise the party.

For years now the only slogan BNP proclaimed was that the country's sovereignty was being either threatened or bartered away without ever bothering to explain how. Its main stance during last election was to try to capitalise on the latent anti-India feelings and play the fear factor that AL will barter away our sovereignty. It did not work and the party suffered its severest defeat. It never asked why, and found a scapegoat in the caretaker government and the army for its defeat. That may have served as a face saving device but did nothing either to remove the malaise that caused the party's decline nor inject any fresh idea or leadership that could bring some energy into it. Hence, since the election defeat two years ago the party did nothing to give any new direction to its workers or to the people whose vote it seeks.

On the organisational side it basically stagnated. We all know that the anointed successor, Tareq Rahman, practically runs the party from London (a la MQM party in Pakistan, whose leader runs his party sitting in London), still some new faces should have been put in charge to act on his behalf. Mirza Fakrul who it was expected would be made the secretary general has been kept in the sidelines. The party continues to be faction ridden with each leader vying for Khaleda Zia's favour by maligning others with the chief not being able to take any decision as she does not know who to believe.

However the its main challenge remains formulating a policy that will help galvanise the party anew. Here there appears a serious absence of any new ideas. Its position of "Remove the government now", three years before the mandated term is another sign of bankruptcy as neither BNP or AL has succeeded in forcibly removing the other from power.

The ball is now squarely in Khaleda Zia's court. Hartals are part of the old style politics that has become increasingly unpopular and unacceptable. Absence of cars or people on the road and closed shops only signify fear of property loss and not of public support. Trying to galvanise public support on the house issue looks too personal and with the court's verdict the "expulsion" has acquired a legal status. Resigning en-masse from the parliaments will be BNP's biggest mistake. It will remove one powerful platform from which to point out government's failures.

It is time for BNP to do some serious introspection.

## University teachers playing truant

It is ethics and professionalism that suffer

THE move by the Dhaka University authorities to recommend the dismissal of six teachers from service because of the latter's staying abroad and not reporting back for duty once more draws attention to an old issue. This is not for the first time that DU has spoken of action against academics who, once they go abroad, at some point decide not to return home. There have been recurrent reports down the years of many of these teachers (there are exceptions, of course) finishing their higher studies abroad and then taking up employment there. The fact that not all of them may be taking up jobs at the university level, that in fact they might be veering off into other kinds of work, is irrelevant. What matters is that by not returning to their actual places of work, in this case Dhaka University, they are certainly displaying a poor sense of responsibility to themselves and to their students.

There are all the ethical as well as professional issues which arise as a result of the teachers' long absence abroad. It is simply unacceptable that university teachers, who have in most cases been able to travel abroad for higher studies because they are part of Dhaka University and have been granted leave of absence to pursue their studies abroad, will see nothing wrong in not coming back home. When they do not return, it is their students who suffer, for the simple and good reason that these teachers are responsible for handling significant parts of the syllabus. Indeed, during their absence, generally no new teachers are employed by the university authorities. Teachers going abroad remain on the faculty and in fact remain entitled to salaries. When they do not come back or when they do not inform the university that they do not plan to come back, the university incurs financial losses as well. A particularly disturbing fact is that sometimes some teachers, at some universities, have come back, collected their accumulated salaries and then gone back abroad. Such behaviour demeans not just the teachers themselves but society as a whole because from our teachers we expect the highest degree of integrity.

The authorities of not only Dhaka University but also of other universities in the country must from here on devise clearly outlined policies about recalibrating teachers. It is inconceivable that teachers will stay abroad for years on end, with little intention of returning home, and yet have their jobs safe and secure for them. Steps must be considered whereby the universities can contact the foreign universities to which our teachers proceed for higher studies in order to make sure that they cannot overstay their period of studies and must come back home.