

Women's empowerment in Asia

AUW throws up ideas to be worked on

Women's empowerment has certainly come quite a long way in Bangladesh. Even a cursory glance at the figures relating to women's advancement in the past two decades will testify to this truth. And yet the fact that a whole lot of distance yet needs to be covered by Bangladesh's women as well as women in other regions of Asia was highlighted once more at a discussion organized by Asian University for Women (AUW) on Friday. The plain fact is that there needs to be more investment in women's education and training regarding the varied regions of life and experience. Interestingly, the meeting at AUW, which has just seen Mrs. Cherie Blair stepping in as its chancellor, brought together a number of eminent figures from around Asia and elsewhere to focus on this very issue. The results, we are happy to note, appear rather encouraging.

The AUW has properly focused on the crucial issue of why women matter in the changed perspectives in Asia today. The fact that it has students from as many as thirteen countries in Asia and outside it points to the critically important need for these countries to harness the abilities and intelligence of their women populations if they mean to come level with more developed parts of the world. It is our view that the AUW can, in light of the deliberations on Friday, play a leading role in forming a nucleus programme relating to studies of women's contributions to national development in their countries. Such an approach is now a necessity considering that for all the progress they have made, women in Asia still come up against various hurdles. There is, for instance, the rude reality of very few women occupying decision-making positions in Asian countries even though they may be on relatively higher perches in government and non-government sectors. There is too the matter of how significant the presence of women happens to be in politics, especially in parliament. Obviously, there has been a good increase in women's representation in legislatures, but much of this increase has come through a quota system. That is not bad at all, but it is quite something else for women to engage themselves in politics in the way men have, through participating in competitive, enlightened politics.

The AUW seminar thus throws up some ideas that can be worked on in the coming weeks and months. That Asia is today on its way to being a powerhouse cannot be denied. The twenty-first century, to all intents and purposes, ought to be an Asian century. Given that reality, it is only proper that Asian women blaze a trail that will be followed by those who come after them, within Asia and elsewhere around the globe.

Gunfight in the hills

Tribal groups' turf war takes on lethal form

In what appears to be a disquieting eruption of violence in Rangamati between Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS) and United Peoples Democratic Front (UPDF), altogether seven persons died of gun wounds. Judging by the witness accounts and local administration's version, it was the outcome of a turf war to extend two feuding parties' area of influence. The common aim seems to be collection of tolls; in other words, it is put down by the local authorities to a motive for extortion. This rakes up the memory of the days of insurgency when fugitive tribal groups used to thrive on toll collection. But the people of CHT have come a long distance away from those nightmarish days by virtue of a peace accord.

It is to be noted however that there has been occasionally infighting within PCJSS as well. All this creates an impression of disunity among the tribal community ranks which cannot augur well for themselves, let alone the country. As a matter of fact, the PCJSS is known to be pro-peace accord while UPDF is opposed to it. But for all we know, majority of the hill people crave for full implementation of the CHT peace accord. Thus, it is imperative for the indigenous people to present a united front in order that they can best protect their interests.

In all these years since the signing of the Chittagong Hill Tracts peace accord in 1997, when the prime concern of all stakeholders has been to see it fully implemented, unfortunately that coveted goal remains far from realised. But, by hindsight, the accord ending more than two decades of insurgency and blood letting in the region was swiftly hailed by the international community as a milestone in South Asia spreading an olive branch in a conflict zone through a negotiated settlement.

Successive governments have to take their part of the blame for not giving the priority that the issues of indigenous people deserve they have been lacking in flexibility. High expectations are placed on implementing the provisions of the accord to propel economic development of a highly naturally endowed part of Bangladesh. The indigenous community leadership and the government need to realise that it is much better to have had the accord than not having it at all. Thus we urge all concerned to move forward on fuller implementation of the peace accord in the spirit and the letter in which it was consummated with some realistic adjustments to help bring about peace dividends in the form of rapid and all round development of the hilly region.

Jasmine revolution and expected tsunami

ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

AFTER Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali left office and sought asylum in Saudi Arabia, it was expected that political agitation in that country would abate. Far from it, the situation remains volatile.

Political pundits are now analysing the factors that led to the surprising turn of events which led the people of Tunisia to revolt against their president. They are also discussing the possible fallout. It will be sometime before one can fully understand the changes that are taking place there as this is the first significant political event in North Africa after the Second World War.

The leaders of the countries in the region are also assessing what might await them in the future. Some of them are also busy bringing their own house to order.

Tunisia is the famous Carthage which during Roman times was subdued to become Rome's province and its "bread basket." The Vandals, the Byzantines, the Arabs and the Ottomans occupied the country at various times until, in 1881, it became a French protectorate. It finally got its independence in 1956 and became a Republic in 1957. Habib Bourguiba was the first president.

However, President Zine El Abedine took over from Bourguiba in 1987 and ruled Tunisia with an iron fist, till he had to leave the helm of power this month.

So what had happened that led to what is known to many as the Jasmine Revolution, after the name of Tunisia's national flower, and brought about the overthrow of President Zine after 23 years?

Tunisia is a relatively wealthy country. The people are generally educated but many of them are young and without jobs. Living conditions for the common man are poor and there is no freedom of speech. The young always found themselves at a disadvantage in this society.

The incident that touched off the initial protests was when an educated young man called Mohammed Bouazizi, in the absence of a regular job, was selling fruits and vegetables on the streets of a town called Sidi Bouzid. The police stopped him from selling without permission, confiscated his goods and slapped his face. Bouazizi, in protest, set himself on fire and died before everyone's eyes.

The people of the town demonstrated against the injustice meted out to Bouazizi. They vowed to avenge his death. The public rage soon spread to other towns. New issues like corruption in high places and price hike were added, which brought more people on to the streets.

The president announced price cuts and dismissed some of his ministers and governors. But these measures failed to improve the mood prevailing in the streets. Finally, he



Besides the pundits, the leaders of the countries in the region are also deeply immersed in reading the shifting sands and assessing what might await them in the future.

could not take the political pressure any more and just fled.

A few days earlier, WikiLeaks reported that there was widespread corruption in the president's family. Stark details were given about the president's wife, who used a government plane to frequently fly to Europe for shopping. Other relatives had stolen two yachts from a Marina and no one could get any government contract without the blessing of the highest office. All this added fuel to the fire.

When the president went on exile to Saudi Arabia it was reported that his wife, who travelled with him, had taken away two and half tons of gold. This demonstrated to the world that the president and his immediate family were indeed "kleptocrats."

The question now is whether the

Tunisian uprising would encourage people in the neighbouring Arab countries to rise against their own dictatorial rulers. It is assumed that the people of Libya, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Syria are likely to make such attempts in the future.

Egypt is living with President Hosni Mubarak for the past 30 years. The people there find the changes in Tunisia inspiring. Since 2004, waves of protests by the Kefaya Movement, the April 6 Youth Movement and the

Justice and Freedom Movement had failed to exert pressure on the Egyptian government. But the youth in Cairo are straining to burst into the streets. Like in Tunisia many are without jobs.

In the remaining countries, the political situations are also fragile. The leadership there have become ossified, governance is poor and various oligarchies connected to the top have grown. Several Azizi type self-immolations have already taken place.

Sceptics, however, point out that each country has its own unique political circumstance. The Tunisian upsurge will not easily repeat itself elsewhere. Egypt has lower unemployment rate than Tunisia. The army is stronger there and Mubarak is popular among the armed forces. Egypt

subsidises food, thereby keeping prices down. The political temperature there is low.

There are several other reasons why the Tunisian example will not be immediately followed. An upheaval depends much on contingent processes in each country. How much revolutionary spirit the people of a particular country possess also determines the chances of revolt. An upsurge will also depend on the people's own liking and tolerance for political violence. Besides, governments in each of these countries have become extra vigilant.

History has also taught us that revolutions do not necessarily occur in neighbouring countries immediately after an upsurge somewhere. The seed of revolt is initially sown in the minds of people but they bide their time and look for an appropriate opportunity.

The French Revolution is a great pointer. The forces unleashed by that revolution initially coalesced to form a new type of dictatorship in France itself. But the ideals saw their reemergence after Napoleon and then it quietly slipped into a democratic order. France's neighbours took a longer time to convert to democracy. They regaled in various types of autocracy before old regimes were toppled. Only the Americans far away employed the ideals of the revolution to its benefit.

A deep fear, however, lingers now among the governments around Tunisia. The youth factor, or what can be called the demographic dimension, is challenging the existence of the old order in these countries. The young men and women there, who are highly educated, are not satisfied with regimes that cannot provide jobs and social security. They want change and now.

The big western powers who prop up these dictators to protect their own strategic interests in the region feel vulnerable. They are unlikely to encourage revolutions to oust dictators and restore democratic governance. They are likely to just stall the process as long as they are able to.

The political tsunami which was thus expected to hit the Middle East after the revolt in Tunisia may not happen immediately. It will be delayed just a little longer.

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Should Civil Service training be misled?

SYED NAQUIB MUSLIM

PART of the print media has waxed eloquent on a recent administrative decision of the government in restoring the Rector of Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre (BPATC) to his former position, from which he resigned out of anger and desperation for being transferred to a position not to his liking.

The news covered by two popular dailies *Prothom Alo* (January 18) and *Amader Shomoy* (January 19) contains enough cues that the government attaches less priority to civil service HRD centres, and that it could not but revoke its decision to transfer an officer and not to accept the tendered resignation despite the extant rule that once an officer resigns voluntarily in writing, the resignation cannot but be accepted. However, the indispensability of the incumbent to the apex civil service training centre has now become questionable.

The most important implication is that the government-led HRD centres are confronted with serious leadership crisis of varying degrees. The status of BPATC has reached a point that matches that of the recreational resort where the trainees spend a few days relieved of the hazards of interferences or of gratifying tadbirs or illegal favour-seekers.

Some trainees prefer to respond spontaneously to the invitation for attending a specific training course for professional enrichment, some move heaven and earth to get the deputation order cancelled and to avoid being exposed in the classroom

before their colleagues, while others love to spend a slice of their occupational time at training centres "far from the madding crowd" to concentrate on studies.

The government has to appreciate that because of the misguidance and flawed decisions of a few officers the whole government is put on the dock. When veteran civil servants like Dr.

When meritocracy is supplanted by a capricious decision-making authority, the quality of service delivery system and the fate of the service-seekers become uncertain.

Mashiur Rahman, Dr. Tawfique-i-Elahi Chowdhury, Dr. Muhiuddin Khan Alamgir, and A.M.A. Muhit bejewel the government, the prime minister should not have allowed herself to be misguided by a handful of officers short of intellectual acumen and personal ethos.

Heads anywhere, whether in private or public offices, are expected to be role models to juniors and to trainees. The post of the rector is literally and figuratively significant. The significance of the position cannot be allowed to be marred by capricious persons. Again, andragogy suggests that trainees at the educated adult level learn more by observation or

imitation than by boring traditional classroom instruction.

Policy makers need to be rational in identifying the right person for the right job. That is the natural demand of a meritocratic government. When meritocracy is supplanted by a capricious decision-making authority, the quality of service delivery system and the fate of the service-seekers become uncertain.

HRD centres happen to be the dumping ground for officers to be marginalised. This seems to be only policy commonly pursued by almost all the regimes. On this issue, exception seems a rarity. In other words, the legacy of marginalising the "unwanted" in HRD centres is not new. Almost all the regimes pursued the policy of marginalising the relatively misfit officers (with few exceptions) as heads of the HRD centres.

The Public Administration Training Policy, May 6, 2003, in its provision no 14.2 stipulates: "As training institutions are the engine of human resource development, adequately qualified, experienced and motivated officers should be appointed heads of training institutions." A popularly elected government like the present one should not compromise with this principle.

I (who put in fifteen years at BPATC) can recall ex-cabinet-secretary Dr. Sadat Husain (now Chairman, PSC) saying at a forum that an officer who has never conducted at least 50 training sessions should not be appointed to head HRD centres. BPATC was once led by civil service veterans like Shaikh

Maqsood Ali, A.K.M. Hedaytul Haque, A.Z.M. Shamsul Alam, A.M. Anisuzzaman, Quazi Md. Munzur-i-Mowla, Dr. Ekram Hossain, and Dr. Kamal Siddique. No news item like this was ever published in the press during their tenures.

When a head of HRD centre stays busy playing a flute like Orpheus and compelling trainees to be captive audiences, building musical band to tour with, crossing out the competent guest speakers on the plea that they were invited during the earlier regime to prove affiliation to the existing party-in-power, retaining personal loyalists or sycophants to collaborate with him, punishing the non-conformists by random transfers, and producing no printed messages by himself to guide the young entrants of the Civil Service, the impact of the training delivery can be easily predicted.

When the head behaves abnormally, the "tail" is able to seize chances to multiply abnormality in thought and action. No research or systematic training evaluation is necessary to delve into the outcome of the huge public money sanctioned by the government.

What is urgent for the government now is to see that the public money allocated to HRD activities is used prudently for career-counseling, and for producing professionalised public servants to carry forward its programmes and for aiding to set up a credible democratic government the people look forward to.

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