

ENIGMATTERS



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WAY back in 2380 BC a popular revolt in the Sumerian city of Lagash deposed King Lugalanda

and put the reformer Urukagina on the throne. History is replete with tales of rebellion and revolts since the dawn of civilisation. People revolt against old orders that get worn out with time. Each decade has witnessed not less than 20 uprisings, rebellions, revolutions, battles and wars.

Some of the modern time revolutions are: the glorious revolution of 1688, the Afghan revolt of 1722 that ended the Safavid dynasty, 1743, Swedish revolt of 1743, American revolution in 1775-83, French revolution in 1789, 1848 saw revolution all over Europe, 1899 Boxer rebellion in Ireland, 1914 Boer revolt in South Africa against the British, October Revolution of 1917 in Russia, Chinese revolution of 1949, Zanzibar Revolution of 1964 that saw the end of 157-year old Arab monarchy, liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971, Iranian revolution of 1979, the Velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia and in Romania. All these brought in new orders replacing the repressive rules in their respective countries. But these mass upsurges could not stop rise of despots.

Once again there's the wind of change blowing across the Arab world. We witness the breakdown of the "Arab Order" after decades of despotic rule. The Arab political establishment has never looked weaker than it does today. The crack is visible. It is widening everyday. The systems are either dying a protracted silent death or collapsing in thunderous explosions.

Sudden outburst of people in Tunisia and Egypt and accelerating movements of protest in Jordan, Algeria and Yemen are clear indications of the great change that is underway in the Arab world. Don't

New Arab Order in the making

miss the increasing polarisation of Lebanon's sectarian politics, to the near-collapse of the state in Sudan, and its complete disintegration in Somalia.

Revolution is on the roll. Either way it will reach all the shores. Soon we shall have many more names added up to the Orange Revolution of Tunisia. The Arab Order -- as I

These groups actually worked as lower house and upper house (as in parliamentary democracies) of the monarchy or the president who is in power for decades. It is through these groups that the head of state or the monarch maintain their grip over the people and the region. But dangers lie in the fact that these rulers



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prefer to call it -- is definitely falling apart and the civilisation is expecting a new world order in the region. This could be democracy in newer form with liberal leadership at the helm. Election in these systems would be fairer and people will find greater expression than now. The new system, or practice of it, may take time to find its root in the tribal mindset.

If we take a closer look at the post-colonial Arab states, we find that there has been no basic change in the character and outlook of the Arab rulers. Changes that had overtaken the world in the past 100 years and emergence of new socio-political systems (parliamentary democracy, that is) could hardly make inroads in these societies. There has been a growth of affluence and continued deficiency in democratic practices. Arab Order has been a system comprising tribal chieftains, local elites and smaller regional groupings all strongly representing a particular religious sect.

never come closer to the people, and they seldom could become leaders "of the people" although it is the people that make them what they are. Only economic advancement has kept them going. But there's always a possibility of downturn resulting in unemployment, loss of jobs, inflation etc., what happens then?

Absolute power leads to absolute corruption is an old adage. And that happened in almost all Arab societies. Even if a few leaders are not inflicted by the virus, it is the system that stems corrupt practices. As a result, freedom of thought and speech and exercise of franchise are not in the best form of practice.

In absence of a strong infrastructure inside, these countries are exposed to foreign influence or even invasion, frequently infringing the sovereignty. This leads to dependence on allied forces, mainly from

the West. And the security allies transport other problems into these overwhelmingly conservative societies. They lose power and confidence to protect themselves. They maintain stability at home and leave the frontiers to alien forces!

Ever since the British and other powers left the colonies, there has been gradual rise of autocrats all over the Arab world. In the formative periods though, leaders like Habib Bourgiba of Tunisia and Gamal Naser of Egypt were by far more liberal and their rule were not repressive as it is today. But the sense of good governance appeared to have deserted the new generation rulers. Repressive measures were order of the day. Persons either from the ranks of the

defense forces or dynastic lines formed the ruling class in the Arab states. Very few questioned the legitimacy of their rule.

Today, questions are being asked. The uprising is a call for change from people who are hungry for food and freedom. Look at the sectarian conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites, Arabs and Kurds, Copts and Muslims. Why are they fighting in the first place? Who made them

take up arms against each other? The people have declared loudly that they want to do away with the despots who had been inciting violence among the groups. This time, the cry for change seems to be real and strong. Whoever is there and whoever steps in anew should have a fresh agenda in hand.

Authoritarianism has to be discarded for good. Radical changes are the only way out to survive. Powers that will have to work in unison with the people and compensate them for the losses they have incurred for decades together due to misrule and oppression of the autocrats and their sponsors.

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The writer is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Derailing Hena's case

High Court steps in

THE HC in a *suo moto* order based on a Daily Star report asked for exhumation of Hena's body to ascertain the exact causes of her death. A three-member committee is to do a fresh autopsy.

At first it was death due to lashing, a brazenly illegal act that was, surprisingly, carried out in public but without the law enforcers or any of the members of the administration or the public making any effort to stop the uncivilized and brutal act. And now, it seems that everything is being done, through collusion, to ensure that the rapist and those that passed the 'sentence' get off free.

The follow-up report in this newspaper on the death of Hena of Shariatpur, who died of trauma suffered due to injuries caused by the lashing, is highly disconcerting. It discloses the obnoxious and odious link between the criminals and the powerful to distort and derail the course of justice.

For example, it seems highly improbable that the trained eye of the police, which would under all circumstances discover even a tell-tale sign of injury would miss injury marks on the body of a victim who was reportedly whipped no less than 50 times, and such marks are more than superficial. But the police have apparently missed that since there is no mention of it in the inquest report. The police have too, reportedly, distorted the FIR by including things that were not stated by the complainant. Even the place of occurrence has been recorded wrongly.

Another perplexing matter is that not even the post-mortem report mentions of injury marks on Hena's body. Given the nature of the punishment perpetrated on the girl, it will leave injury even under the skin which, according to forensic experts, no post-mortem report can miss. But the doctors who conducted the post-report failed to notice.

What is equally alarming is the role of a member of the union parishad who not only held the arbitration closed-door but also prevented the family members from taking Hena to the hospital immediately, and put pressure on them to get her out of the hospital.

We feel that there is a great miscarriage of justice in the making, which should not be allowed to happen. And those that have colluded to spoil the case be punished.

Hartal violence

A drastic change in political culture needed

YESTERDAY'S hartal was no different from the scores of others called over the last two decades except vandalism and violence the night before. The politicians, their activists and the police took the field, while the people looked on, with mostly indifference and some fear.

Despite claims by BNP leaders of the strike being 'spontaneous' on the part of the people, it is obvious that it was only the violence of the preceding night that intimidated people into 'observing' the strike. National property such as public buses have always borne the brunt of the violence of picketers and the fires of this last hartal too were ignited by the 10 buses set alight the night before in the capital. Neither is private property safe, not only on the streets but even in one's own home. This became glaringly obvious in the television news footage which showed several anti-hartal activists vandalising an opposition party member's house while the police looked on with a passivity characteristic of them regardless of the party in power. Indeed, the political parties themselves become indistinguishable when it comes to hartals. What they preach when in power is directly contradictory to what they practise in the opposition and vice versa.

Nothing short of a drastic change in our political culture can foster political engagement of the people. Their apathy -- akin to the calm before a storm -- should be heeded as a warning by our politicians and not seen as a sign of consent. The indifference towards a democracy for which they had fought and which had promised them so much, can hardly be healthy. How much have we grown as a democracy in the last 20 years, we may ask. Judging from our hartal culture, little good and a lot of violence is all that is achieved from such exercises of our so-called democratic right.

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Plus and minus



ABDUL BAYES

THE government led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is now two years old. It came to power with the ardent goal of Vision 2021 -- turning Bangladesh into a middle income country by 2011. The election pledges, among other things, also visualised a digital Bangladesh.

To a large extent, these forward-looking slogans lured the voters, especially the younger generation, and paved the way for the mohajote to come to power. Two years is just 40% of the tenure of a government, and any grandiose generalisations on outcomes must be met with caution.

The successes of the government so far are several, but let me cite a few. First, the efforts at fixing the energy crisis have not yet solved the problem as a whole, but have added few thousand MW to the national grid. From a point of no additional generation of electricity during the previous regimes, the increase in generation is of a tall order.

Second, public procurement deals have been made more transparent, thus leaving no room for any allegation against cabinet ministers. Corruption is still pervasive in the society but so far no complaint could be specifically heard against the top leaders. Streamlining revenue sources to raise revenue/GDP share has produced positive results.

Third, efforts at helping small and marginal farmers through subsidy and credit constitute a landmark. Fourth, the enunciation of the new education policy and, through it, the

introduction of a uniform educational standard and secular, scientific education is a new milestone in the history of this country.

And, last but not the least, the completion of the trial of the killers of Bangabandhu, and putting the war criminals on trial also raised the positive ratings about the government.

But, all said, public pulse is quite different. Most of the time, the people judge not what you have done for them but what you should have done. It is thus no wonder that despite all positive things that I have mentioned, opinion polls show that the present government's popularity has waned although, till now, people continue to prefer this party to others. In other words, there has been erosion in popularity.

What are the weaknesses and what should be done to arrest them? Let me pick up some from "quick and dirty" surveys derived from different stakeholders over a cup of tea or standing under a tree.

The first serious weakness seems to be pushing the local government institutions, especially the UZs, to the sidelines. Nowhere in the world does the central government create growth; it is the people who contribute to economic growth and social development through their spontaneous participation via representative local governments. The row over control of administration, resources

and other things between MPs, chairmen and TNOs is not a good sign. The price may have to be paid in the coming general election.

Second, the PM has a few advisers who reportedly hold no respect in public eyes. The allegation is that instead of advising the PM on different issues, for which they were assigned, they poke their noses in day to day affairs of the ministries. This "duality" in administration should be avoided as far as possible. Besides, the cabinet lacks matured ministers and induction of a few to the cabinet may help stem the rot.

The third serious weakness is the failure to control front organisations of the party in power. Surveys show that half of the erosion in popularity of this government could be due to this factor. Soaring prices of essentials continue to cast a cloud on the horizon.

And finally, the party in power seems to have lost its organisational strength -- its main capital -- in the whirlwind of power games. For example, there is a lack of an experienced and efficient political adviser to brief the PM about the activities of her party men. The sooner an adviser is appointed the better.

Resentment of the people mounted because of the proposal to build an airport at Arial Beel. I am not convinced of the utility of a new airport at the moment. It is also not that

All said, public pulse is quite different. Most of the time, the people judge not what you have done for them but what you should have done.

Vision 2021 cannot be achieved in the absence of a modern international airport. If economics is the study of the use of scarce economic resources in the best alternative way, then the proposal seemingly lacks economic justifications.

Drawing upon comment from aviation experts, it can be argued that Shajalal International Airport could serve another 25 years if only one-third of the stipulated cost is spent. As I am told, only 10 planes take-off and land per hour as against 60 in reputed airports. Only 40% of the capacity is being utilised now.

If traffic jam is a cause for building the airport then a thin slice of the stipulated expenditure would be needed to construct new fly-over from the current airport to face the traffic jam. Second, even if the decision is taken to do it (assuming it is a politically prestigious item), why should it be then in a water body, jeopardising the livelihoods of thousands of people? There is saying: taking a wrong decision may not be wrong but if you stick to it, it would be absolutely wrong.

Bangladesh Awami League has historically been a people's party. In its deeds and deliverances, welfare of people should be the focal point. While the two year rule has produced many good results, many holes still remain to be plugged. There is still enough time to regain the lost ground with a more judicious policy and political mix. Bear in mind that if AL loses the battle the whole nation loses, not the party alone. Mistakes by the party, malady for the people.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 8

- 1622**
King James I of England disbands the English Parliament.
- 1726**
The Supreme Privy Council is established in Russia.
- 1904**
The Russo-Japanese War begins following the Russian rejection of a Japanese plan to divide Manchuria and Korea into spheres of influence.
- 1952**
Princess Elizabeth formally proclaims herself Queen and Head of the Commonwealth and Defender of the Faith.
- 1983**
Ariel Sharon is removed from office in the Israeli government following a tribunal into the 1982 killings of hundreds of refugee in the two Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila in Beirut.
- 2004**
A Framework Agreement on BIMSTEC Free Trade Area was signed in Phuket, Thailand covering goods, services and investments
- 2005**
Mid-East leaders announce truce. The Palestinian leader and Israeli prime minister declare a truce amid hopes of a "new era of peace."