

Egypt regains

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army man's rule. Like Mubarak, Ershad had robbed us of freedom and of dignity, but fortunately did not (better still, could not) rule for 30 years.

The point I am making here is that because of our past circumstances we understand the inner joy of the Egyptian people today much more than many others because we, like them, had defeated dictatorship, corruption and oppression, and did so in the same manner of non-violent street based people-power. Their every breath of freedom and every street demonstration, every rally, every full throated slogan resonates in our hearts and in our memories.

As a school boy we used to hear about Gamal Abdel Nasser, his dream of a secular, modern and socialist progressive Egypt. We read about the way he regained control of the Suez Canal from the imperialist power of the era. Throughout the region there was a wind of change that was blowing and there was not a word of Islamic fundamentalism then. But his disastrous defeat in the ill- advised war with Israel and his subsequent death soon after set in motion a range of retrogressive developments in the whole area that led to the Middle East becoming a den of dictatorships and dynastic rule that pushed a once dynamic region into the back burners of history. The oil boom that started in the early 70s instead of spreading the virtues of rights, democracy and freedom only helped to re-entrench those dictatorships with crony capitalism and all its attending vices of corruption, vulgar consumerism, social inequality and foolish arrogance.

Mubarak's crimes are many. He stole from his people many things--- freedom, wealth, self-respect and 30 years from their lives. During his three decades of misrule while the world moved ahead, Egypt remained chained to a level of development that made a mockery of its glorious past. As has been reported, of the 80 million people of today, more than 40 percent are below the poverty line. And this, after three decades of receiving the highest amount of development assistance from the US, compared to the rest of the developing world. In addition, billions of dollars of an annual arms aid also flowed. People of Egypt should and must ask, what happened to all that money and who took them.

Perhaps the most critical thing that Mubarak stole from Egyptians was their self-confidence that they could once again be the master of their destiny. Thus the cry over Cairo's Tahrir Square has been "We could never believe that he will ever go. But we did it, we did it." This is the biggest message of the moment.

Egyptians are once again the masters of their destiny and it is they who will forge its future course. But again, we as people who were there before, can share with the people of Egypt that this opportunity can slip away from them, unless they are very watchful.

There is no question that what we are witnessing are momentous events in the Arab world. Starting from Tunisia and now engulfing Egypt, the wind of democracy and freedom that is sweeping that region must be responded to. The faster the Arab rulers understand that their autocratic ways have outrun their time and that people will have to be given a say in the way their affairs are run the better it will be for themselves and their people. Whatever be the term used, on the ground, these countries must have elected governments who will have to regularly renew their mandates to rule through fixed term elections and that leadership will have to bow to the electorate's wishes if and when they want a change.

Just as there are lessons for the Arab rulers in what has happened in Tunisia and Egypt, there are also vital lessons for the West. While President Obama has been quick in realising the real aspiration of the Egyptian people and has spoken of the

need for change from the start, questions will have to be asked whether Mubarak could have lasted 30 years but for the unquestioned support he received from the US and the West. Why did they support him, and why so blindly? Why were there no insistence for democratic reforms and financial accountability? The West and especially the US will have to answer these questions as much for the people of Egypt as for their own taxpayers, whose money each successive government squandered on such dictators. Even if we understand the West's pre-occupation for a pro-western government in Egypt, what begs the question is: why should such governments be dictatorial and corrupt?

Does it mean that any democratic exercise is likely to throw up anti-western governments in this region, and hence democracy has to be put into the back burners. Such convenient acceptance of democracy is what has robbed the stance of the West of any moral and ethical underpinning in that region.

The West's Islam baiting will have to be revisited. If democracy is once again to be thwarted because pro-Islamic groups may win an election, then Egypt or any other country of the region will never be able to build a secular democracy that is their tradition. Already there are contrived debates as to what type of government the new opportunity for democracy in Egypt will throw up. Some Western analysts are already talking of the possibility of Egypt becoming a theocracy, thus indirectly creating grounds for a greater role for the army in Egypt, which has been mainly trained and financed by the US.

The answer to such paranoia is for the West to learn from Bangladesh's experience. In our case, it has been seen that Islamic fundamentalism spread under military dictatorships and their ideologies got state patronisation and funding during military rule. Conversely, every time there have been democratic elections the Islamic parties were routed, proving over and over again that while we love and respect our religion, we want to run our state and our government in line with modern secular principles.

It is our belief that this will also be proven to be true for the Egyptian people. Our love for Islam and adherence to it is real. But so is the urge for freedom and the desire to have representative and accountable governments.

Though it is much too early to say, yet we want to put on record that what was done in Algeria should not be repeated in Egypt. This is not the 70s. The urge for democracy is far stronger and so also the capacity of the people to run their own affairs.

As we celebrate the Egyptian peoples' victory over dictatorship, corruption and repression, we wish for a smooth and peaceful transition to democracy and genuinely elected government. However, it will not come in 18 days. It will need a lot of patience, maturity and vision. We only hope that just as the revolution had thrown up its instant heroes, so also it will throw up a new leadership that will be equal to the task. Are we asking for too much? Only time will tell.

Bus crushes
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Dhaka-Gopalganj route sped away crushing Sunbeam Hasan Nibir, 5, a playgroup student of Radio Colony Model School and also a son of a teacher of the school A K M Nizam Uddin, on the spot at around 3:30pm.

The driver and helper of the Gopalganj bound bus later ran away leaving the bus at Genda bus stand, around two kilometres off the spot. Witnesses said police charged batons indiscriminately during the clashes. The law-enforcers also detained five agitators. Rabbi Miah also said the road was freed for transport movement at around 6:00pm.

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Lead-up

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of 69 from 50 deliveries before being the lone casualty as Bangladesh eclipsed the total with more than thirty ovens remaining.

Other than the warm-up matches, yesterday's other notable event was Pakistan captain Shahid Afridi's press conference at Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium (SBNS). Afridi expressed his belief that the team had taken the unfortunate events of the previous year in their stride and had now gelled as a unit, with the focus now truly on the World Cup. These words from their captain coupled with Pakistan's recent positive showing in New Zealand, will give hope to their supporters and make for a more compelling World Cup.

Meanwhile, today is the third and last day for ticket collection from City Bank's Banani branch in exchange for the vouchers purchased by those who stood in line in early January.

Others who flocked to Mirpur's SBNS to collect their tickets were disappointed, not knowing that the venue-pick-up option is only for the day before the match and on match days. Those who have selected the SBNS for ticket collection will have to collect their tickets from the nearby Shaheed Suhrawardi Indoor Stadium on the designated days.

The fanfare will only amplify over the coming days, as England becomes the second big team after Pakistan to arrive in the capital this afternoon. The English will play two warm-up games at Fatullah against Canada and Pakistan on the 16th and 18th respectively. Before that, though, will be the warm-up match everyone in Bangladesh is waiting for: Bangladesh vs Pakistan at Mirpur on February 15. Given the two sides' impressive recent forms, it promises to be a cracker and a fantastic preamble to the real show that begins on the 19th.

'Criminal'

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Shahid with his gang members was holding a meeting there, Rab sources said.

A Rab team raided the area around 2:30am. As the criminals saw the Rab personnel, they started firing on the law enforcers. The Rab team fired back.

The Rab members found Shahid lying with bullet injuries on the spot after his accomplices fled the scene.

Sub-Inspector Mohammad Nuruzzaman of Kafur Police Station said the police around 4:10am took Shahid to Dhaka Medical College Hospital where doctors declared him dead.

One revolver, a bullet, a cartridge and a knife were recovered from the scene, the SI said.

Check prices

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They suggested that both the government and the party clearly explain the issues so that the opposition could not create confusion in the public mind.

One presidium member observed that a gap is developing fast between the lawmakers and the party leaders as well as people, and that is a bad omen for the organisation and the government.

Another leader criticised Tofail Ahmed for speaking against the communications minister. He also blasted AHM Mustafa Kamal Lotu for dismissing the prime minister's remarks regarding BNP and the stockmarket crash as a political statement.

Lotus Kamal who was present at the meeting said he was sorry if he had caused any misunderstanding.

Hasina assured the meeting that there would be no major power and gas crises next year.

About the stockmarket, she said they have information about who were behind the manipulation. But as an investigation is on, it won't be wise to make comments.

She, however, vowed none of those responsible for the scam would be spared.

About rebels and crisis in Chittagong AL, the party chief said the problems would be resolved through discussions.

She urged all to cooperate with the World Cup organisers so that the government can successfully complete the prestigious event and improve the country's image abroad.

Govt on food

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She said her ministry has plans to expand cultivation of Aus to an optimum level, so that the third important rice crop after Boro and Aman may provide the country with a much-needed increased output.

The government has moved to enforce anti-hoarding laws to discipline dishonest rice traders and millers, she said.

The government had initially allocated Tk 4,000 crore as subsidy for agri inputs in the current fiscal year. But a rise in fertiliser prices fuelled by oil price hike on the international market made it necessary to add Tk 1,800 crore to the amount.

"Financial support for farmers is a must to make farm inputs available at affordable prices, especially for a good Boro harvest in this season," observed Agriculture Secretary Mustak Ahmed.

According to Bangladesh Fertiliser Association, international prices of urea now range from \$375 to \$400 a tonne, up from nearly \$300 a tonne six months ago. Prices of triple super phosphate (TSP) and diammonium phosphate (DAP) also went up.

The requirement for food subsidy in the current fiscal year is likely to jump to Tk 1,225 crore from Tk 1,088 crore due to an increased rice allocation for open market sales (OMS), fair price and ration cards for defence and law enforcement agencies.

Subsidy for food grains might go up further as the government has to import grains at an increased price, said food ministry officials.

The Food Price Index, prepared by Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, reached a new high in the last week of January.

"We now purchase local rice for Tk 27 a kg. But we have to pay Tk 38 for one kg of rice on the international market. Rising rice prices on the global market will push up the average purchase cost," said a senior food ministry official, seeking anonymity.

The government now sells more than one lakh tonne of rice a month, up from 80,000 tonnes a month ago, at OMS outlets for Tk 24 a kg, said Ahmad Hossain Khan, director general of the food directorate.

Officials claimed government intervention in the market helped check the upward trend in coarse rice prices. The decision to increase OMS price of rice by Tk 1 a kg from the beginning of this month was also postponed.

A hike in OMS price of rice might fuel the price expectations of traders and big farmers, leading to a further rise in prices, feared officials.

The need for increasing subsidy arose as the government had scaled up its food distribution target to 30 lakh tonnes from 27 lakh tonnes this fiscal year.

Essentials'

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impact on the domestic market.

Her government though has been trying its best to keep the prices of essentials within the reach of the common people. It will soon take measures to ensure the stockpiled rice comes to the local market.

Accusing the main opposition BNP of trying to foil the war crimes trial, she said the government is confident about bringing the war criminals to book.

Hasina claimed that late president Ziaur Rahman had brought the war criminals and the killers of Bangabandhu into politics and his wife Khaleda Zia had rehabilitated them.

She urged her party leaders to work together with the people to ensure trial of the war criminals.

Distribution of food grains through OMS and fair price cards accounts for one-third of the amount with an increase in the allocation for the two to 10 lakh tonnes from 5.5 lakh tonnes.

The subsidy is aimed at keeping production cost low, and offering a cushion to the poor through various safety nets. It will also work as a tool for market intervention.

The government has no alternative but to provide this extra subsidy, said Zaid Bakht, research director of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS).

He said the authorities will be able to bear the additional costs within their overall budget for the current fiscal year.

"Low implementation of the annual development plan and high revenue growth will give the government the space to finance within the budgetary framework," he said.

The increase in subsidy will not fuel inflation as the government need not borrow from the market for it, Zaid said.

"It will rather contribute to easing inflation by facilitating an improved supply of grains to the market."

Former BIDS director general Mahabub Hossain said the government is providing subsidy of Tk 15 a kg on rice, which should be cut down.

"Higher the gap between market and OMS prices, higher the chances of pilferage and rent-seeking," he said, suggesting that the difference between the two prices should be Tk 5 a kg.

Mahabub, executive director of Brac, recommended distributing wheat also through OMS, and speeding up import of food grains.

He said although wheat prices have gone up on the global market, they are still lower than rice prices.

If the government starts selling wheat at OMS outlets, it will be able to give the facility to a larger section of the population, he said.

"Market intervention is required for the next couple of months until the new Boro rice is available after April. But if the government interferes beyond that, a supply glut may hurt farmers," Mahabub noted.

Dr Quazi Shahabuddin, another former director general of BIDS, said, "If we can have a bumper Boro production, global market prices will not affect our domestic market."

There is no alternative to widening the safety net programmes and ensuring a corruption-free public distribution system to offset the impact of food inflation on the poor, he added.

Delhi nods

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will be examined at the warehouses of Food Corporation of India in the presence of Bangladeshi officials, Sharma said.

Two Indian trading companies will ship the rice up to Chittagong port, he said adding that now there is no bar to sending rice to Bangladesh.

The Indian commerce minister also asked the authorities concerned to remain alert so that no question is raised about the quality and quantity.

Razzaque thanked him for finalising the procedures. Sharma also said India would soon send over 12,000 tonnes of sugar to Bangladesh.

Bangladesh High Commissioner to India Tariq A Karim, lawmaker Narayan Chandra Chanda and Director General of Food Planning and Storage Unit M Naser Farid were, among others, present.

Earlier, Razzaque met State Minister for Food and Consumers Affairs KV Thomas and State Minister for Environment Jairam Ramesh, said the food ministry statement.



A visually challenged person goes through a Braille book at a stall name Prerona (inspiration) at Amar Ekushey Boi Mela yesterday. PHOTO: STAR

Visually challenged too not left out

RAKIB AHAMMED

Visually impaired Jannatul Nayeem could hardly wait to get her hands on the books as this year the Amar Ekushey Boi Mela displayed books in Braille for the very first time.

Earlier, the fair did not mean much to Jannat, an honours student of the capital's Eden College, except for the joy of listening to the buzz among the enthusiastic readers while walking on the Bangla Academy premises.

However, this year a stall had eight books in Braille and the visually impaired visitors can hardly contain their excitement.

Prerona, a cultural organisation devoted to promoting cultural activities for the visually impaired, has set up the

stall titled Prerona Braille Corner.

"We are getting remarkable response for our effort, but we could not bring many books in Braille as we are a small organisation," said Nazia Jabeen of Prerona.

"However, our target is to create awareness among other publishers so that they bring more books in Braille," she added. Jannatul hoped more books in Braille will be brought in the fair in future to help the visually impaired people get a taste of Bangla literature.

Mofidul Haque, publisher of Sahitya Prokash, said, "It is not very expensive to publish books in Braille."

He said publishers should bring in more books in Braille considering the readers who are visually impaired.

Tremor

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The meteorological department said the tremor measuring 4.3 on the Richter scale began at 4:25pm and lasted about 15 seconds. Its epicentre was 96km south-east of the capital, somewhere near the Comilla-Tripura border.

Our correspondents in Barisal and Chandpur reported that the tremor caused waves in rivers, canals and ponds there.

Our Sylhet correspondent reported that the tremor was also felt in the Sylhet region including Habiganj, Moulvibazar and Sunamganj.

No casualty or loss of property was reported.

Prof Monibur Rahman, lecturer of electrical engineering department of Patuakhali Science and Technology University and in charge of the PSTU seismographic centre, said they recorded a mild earthquake in the region.

ETP exists

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plant shut."

The team found out that the ETP was, in fact, not functioning and the toxic waste of the dyeing factory, about 30 cubic metres per hour, was being discharged directly into a nearby canal.

The chemist and his associates collected water samples from the canal and instantly tested those. The test results showed no trace of dissolved oxygen in the water.

The DoE team fined Simtex Tk 19.58 lakh and asked the authorities to either cancel or suspend its environment clearance certificate.

Hardly 100 metres away, Mozart Knit Ltd had its ETP running in full swing. But when the DoE officials moved around the factory, they discovered that the company was discharging huge toxic waste into nature through a covered drain diverted away from the ETP.

Owner of the company Nazmul Islam immediately confessed to his crime and said he would take urgent measures to treat waste. The DoE enforcement team imposed a fine of Tk 26.88 lakh.

DoE experts calculated that the two companies since their inception have released about 1, 45, 200 cubic metres of untreated waste into nature.

Cairo at ease

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But political power now rests with the military commanders who stepped into the vacuum left by Mubarak's departure, and many people are anxiously waiting to see if they will make good on their promise to respect the popular will.

In Tahrir Square, the epicentre of the revolt, many of the anti-regime protesters who have occupied the city's vast central plaza since January 28 launched a massive cleanup effort with hundreds of volunteers, taking pride in showing the civic spirit in their nation reborn.

In a sign that normal life was returning, state television announced that a curfew in effect since January 28 would be shortened by four hours and the stock exchange was now expected to reopen on Wednesday.

But insecurity lingered, as 600 prisoners escaped from a Cairo jail yesterday after riots broke out and gunmen fired at guards from outside the facility, according to security officials.

The Cairo press, including state-run titles that had initially dismissed the uprising or charged it was being fomented by foreigners, hailed the "revolution of the youth."

In the Suez canal city of Ismailiya, hundreds of members of the widely hated police force marched in solidarity with the uprising, claiming they had been ordered against their will to shoot at protesters.

But if Egypt's revolution is to serve as an example to the region, as Tunisia's revolt inspired Egypt, much will depend on the stance of the junta now in control of the Arab world's most populous nation.

Headed by a longtime Mubarak loyalist, 75-year-old Field Marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces clarified its plans with "Communique Number 4," read by a spokesman on state TV.

The council said Egypt would "remain committed to all its regional and international treaties," implicitly confirming its landmark 1979 peace treaty with Israel would remain intact, soothing fears in the Jewish state and Washington.

The army was widely praised for allowing the massive protests to unfold and eventually shepherding Mubarak out of power.

In the euphoric atmosphere of Tahrir Square -- all night Egyptians had drummed, sang and danced,

firing jets of flame from aerosol bottles -- it was hard to believe the news of Mubarak's ouster had broken just hours earlier.

A grim-faced Vice President Omar Suleiman announced the handover on state television late Friday after more than a million furious marchers took to the streets of Cairo, Alexandria, Suez, Port Said and beyond.

Earlier, the 82-year-old Mubarak flew from Cairo to his Red Sea holiday retreat at Sharm el-Sheikh, his ruling party said.

As Cairo erupted in joy, US President Barack Obama said "Egyptians have made it clear that nothing less than genuine democracy will carry the day."

Egypt's powerful Islamist opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood, hailed Mubarak's resignation and thanked the army, "which kept its promises" during the revolt.

"My message to the Egyptian people is that you have gained your liberty, prominent opposition figure Mohamed ElBaradei told Al-Jazeera television.

Arab League chief Amr Mussa, who last week joined the crowds in Tahrir Square and could emerge as a presidential candidate, hailed fellow Egyptians and the army for their "historic achievement."

Saudi Arabia, a close ally of Mubarak, yesterday welcomed the "peaceful transition of power" in Egypt.

PM's name

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seconds, and the premier remained stranded for that period, just waiting for the power to be resumed from an alternative source.

To ease the situation the PM smilingly said that she doesn't know why the power went just when her name was uttered.

"The power went off, and this happened when my name was announced. This is not all, the power went off at a function of engineers," she noted.

She requested the engineers to be more careful about the power sector of the country. She announced that the government would be successful in reducing the hassles of the people due to power failure in the next year.

"This year you have to bear some problems, but we will have more success in the power sector next year," she said.