

Challenging the autocrats

M. ZAKIR HOSSAIN KHAN

It was Ben Ali first, then Hosni Mubarak, who is next? This question is in the minds of all the freedom-desiring citizens of the world. Unchallenged autocrats are really being challenged by the suppressed, deprived, poor and suffering citizens, irrespective of religion, political ideology, age, sex and education or professional status. The only demand of those revolutionary people is a free and just society where citizens can enjoy freedom and better living standards.

Revolutionary people are not bothered whether the protesters are Islamic or non-Islamic. This is the concern of the western society and Israel, who are the real source of power of those autocrats. Why do those western countries support illegal rulers, and for whose interest -- the people of the country or western countries or Israel?

It is clear that the problem has been created due to the blind support from the western countries to those illegal autocrats, who have been abusing power for their personal gain. Just after the resignation of Hosni Mubarak, the Swiss government froze his bank account. Obviously, Mubarak did not ask them to freeze it, nor was there a formal request from the Military Council of Egypt. So, why did they do it?

Analysts are now concerned about the real outcome of those revolutions in the future. Will the people get real freedom and better lives, or will it be a shift from one regime to another pro-western regime? This concern has been prominent due to the recent disclosures by WikiLeaks about the US-Israel plan in 2008 over the current changes in the Egyptian government, along with the assistance to the youth leaders of this revolution. No doubt the Egyptian people had no choice except revolution, but still there is a chance that the achievements may be hijacked by agents of occupational forces.

Why has the Obama administration intervened in the regime shift in Egypt? The answers are:

- US is losing its control over the poli-



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tics of the Middle-East due to invasion of Iraq and unconditional support to Israel. To restore its image, US is now trying to establish a so-called democratic government, but it will ultimately serve the interest of US and Israel;

- The Obama administration is becoming more concerned about the attacks by terrorists, whose breeding centres are autocrat-run countries. If those autocrats are ousted the US can control the extent of risk for the next several years;
- Due to prolonged economic crisis and resistance from the opposition, the Democratic government is losing popularity and the people have

started criticising it for not withdrawing from Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, Obama has not closed the notorious Guantanamo and other secret prisons. Citizens of US, especially of Asian and African origin, have started to think whether they will vote again for Obama or not. In this situation, the "recovery of the so-called democracy in the Middle-East" will be considered as a historical step by the US. The people of the US will obviously appreciate this step, which will ultimately help Obama to return to power the next term;

- The fall of the Egyptian government was imminent as the suffering peo-

ple were angry because of the drastic fall of their living standards and oppression by the law enforcing agencies. If the change had been brought about by the general citizens under the leadership of the Islamic Brotherhood it would have been a really significant loss for US-Israeli interests in this region. The US and Israel understood this clearly, which is why they want to control the forthcoming changes in Egypt and other autocrat-run countries in such a way that at least neutral governments come into power. Realising this, Islamic Brotherhood and El-Baradei have already said that they will not challenge the Israel-Egypt peace-treaty;

- Finally, Obama is keen to establish democracy as well as justice for the citizens of the Muslim world, which may be the reason for intervention of his administration in Egypt and other countries. Moreover, Obama will also be able to bring peace between Israel and the Palestinian government if an Islamic Brotherhood-led coalition comes to power in the next election. Any significant peace treaty between Israel and Palestinians will take him to an unreachable height.

Now, the million-dollar question is whether the Arab world will really able to enjoy the freedom and build a knowledge-based society or not. How far will the changes sustain in the long-run if US and Israel lose interest due to the policies of the forthcoming government? Will this change actually enhance the rule of the people of autocrat-run countries, or will new forms of occupation capture the world? What will be the impacts of the changes in China and other closed countries? Can these revolutions really challenge the rule of the so-called unchallenged autocrats? We have to wait for the final outcome. We can say surely that the people's sacrifices and peaceful movements can't go invain.

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BIRTH ANNIVERSARY

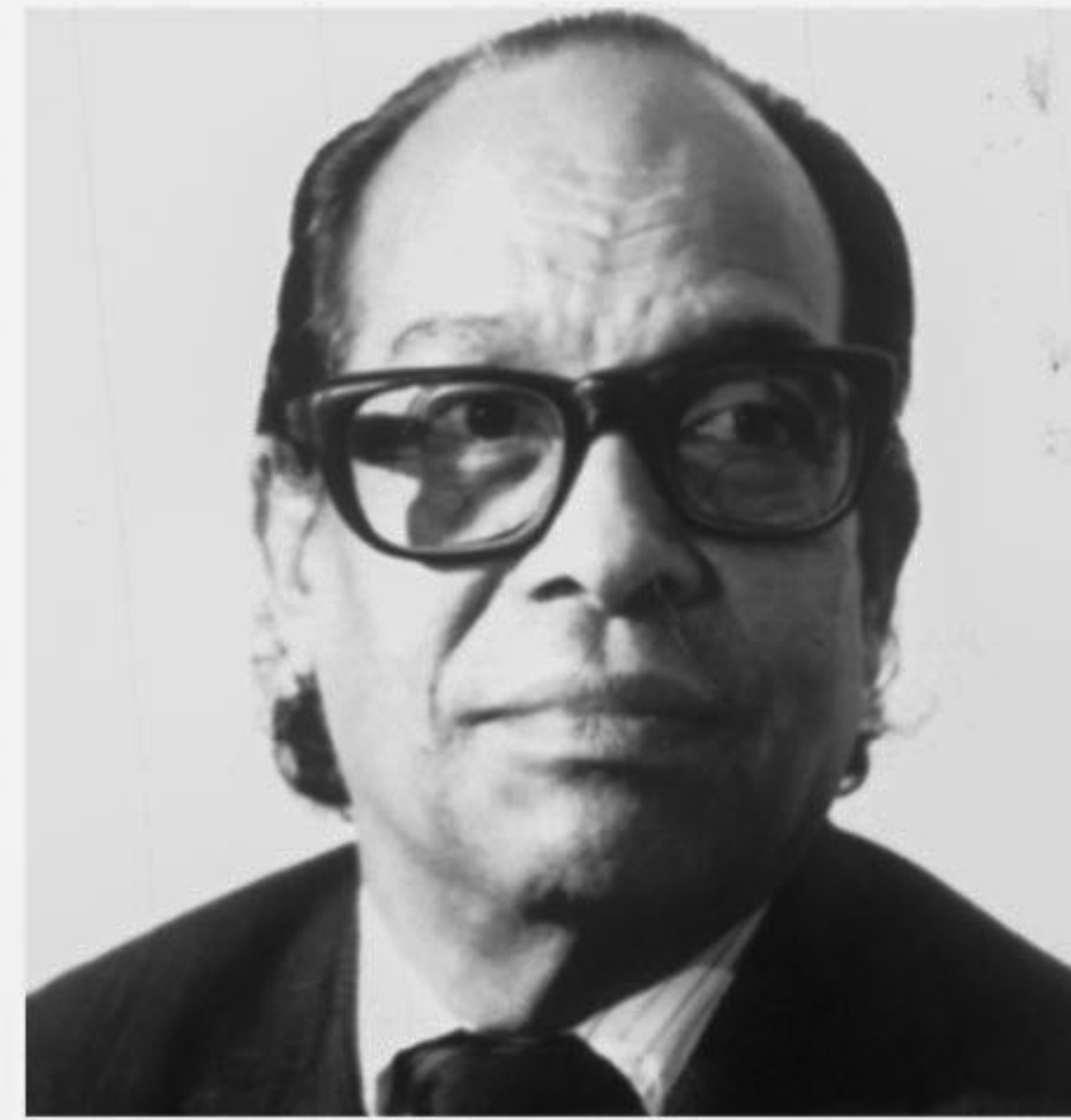
Dr. Ahmed Sharif: An ocean of wisdom

HASAN FAKRI

FEBRUARY 13 was the 90th birth anniversary of Dr. Ahmed Sharif, a researcher, teacher and renowned writer. We had gathered at his residence in 1999 to celebrate his birthday. Even though there was singing and recitation of poems our revered sir was very thoughtful. Someone proposed that we observe this day somewhere outside the resident of Dr. Ahmed Sharif, and everyone agreed. At this, Dr. Sharif said: "Surely you may celebrate the next birthday in grandeur, but at that time I may not be alive." His prophecy came true when he died 11 days later.

Great persons are a few in a crore. One such person was Dr. Ahmed Sharif, who left for us and posterity his numerous ever-bright achievements as philosophical lessons about the problems gripping our lives and the world. Today, he is alive for us not only as a historical figure but also for all his creative and thoughtful works.

Dr. Sharif used his pen and rationality against fatalism, abstract ideas and emotion till the moment of his death. He was a free agent and bold writer who was conscious of self-dignity and freedom. The rebellious writer wrote many articles against fascism, martial rule, imperialism and class-disparity. Ahmed Sharif wrote innumerable articles on society, literature, culture, politics, philosophy and history. "Lily Majnu," written by Ahmed Sharif, was the first book



Dr. Ahmed Sharif

published by Bangla Academy in 1957.

Ahmed Sharif was born at Shuchakri village of Chittagong in 1921. His father Abdul Aziz was a brother of the reputed literary genius Abdul Karim Sahitya Bisharad. Young Sharif was looked after and brought up by his uncle Abdul Karim. He grew up in the midst of an invaluable store of Punthi-Sahitya and contemporary magazines, periodicals and other literary works.

Dr. Ahmed Sharif drank deep and quenched his thirst for knowledge from Abdul Karim, and earned an astounding depth of erudition for which he became so noted and popular among the people of West-Bengal that the Rabindra Bharati Bishwabidyalay honoured him with D. Lit degree in 1993.

Ahmed Sharif passed the M.A. Examination in 1944 from the Department of Bengali Language and Literature of Dhaka University, and earned the PhD in 1976. He started his professional career as a lecturer of a college. He joined the Bengali Department of Dhaka University in 1950, where he worked for 34 years.

During his longstanding service in Dhaka University he was honoured and entrusted with the responsibility of Chairman of the Bengali Department and as a member of the University Syndicate and Senate and President of the Teachers' Association. He was elected Dean of the Faculty of Arts for four terms. He was also honoured with the dignified post of "Kazi Nazrul Islam Professor" in Chittagong University.

Dr. Ahmed Sahrif was not only a teacher and researcher, he was also the pioneer of the progressive movement of Bangladesh. He was active in almost all the resistance and revolutionary movements that took place in the country. His contributions and achievements during the liberation movement are unforgettable.

He formed the Shadhin Bangla Biplobi Parishad. His article "Itihasar Dharay Bangalee" (Bangalees in the trend and course of history), for naming East Pakistan as Bangladesh, also referred to our national anthem -- "Amar Sonar Bangla, Ami Tomai Bhalobashi." Dr. Ahmed Sharif was one of the organisers and speakers in the protest meet of the writers and artists in 1968 against the repression and interference of the Pakistani rulers.

Even after liberation Ahmed Sharif stood beside the people of this country against any undemocratic behaviour and defied all fascist laws forced upon by the rulers of Bangladesh. He was a real spokesman of the sentiment of the people. Ahmed Sharif formed a committee for seeking justice and protecting the basic rights of the people during the famine in 1974. He was at the vanguard in the resistance against Martial Law, and formed a committee for resistance.

His sympathy towards the exploited, oppressed people spread up to the furthest corners of the world. He expressed his hatred for aggressors in severe language. Dr. Ahmed Sharif boldly declared: "The American cult of imperialism is responsible for poverty and illiteracy of Africans, Asians and Latin Americans." He was the symbol of free thought. He wanted the rise of revolutionary forces in suppressed nations of the world.

Ahmed Sharif never used to bow his head to any power. He fired us with the lesson not to yield to any evil force. He taught us to hate injustice. He was uncompromising in his personal life and social activities.

Firm in his thoughts, words and actions, he shattered all chains of false traditions and culture. He donated his eyes and corpse for the benefit of mankind. It was mentioned in his will that the "eyes are chief organs and blood is the nucleus of life. It is wise to use the total dead body for human need than to let it be eaten by worms in the grave."

The writer is a poet.

Who moved my cheese?

MAMUN RASHID

RECENTLY, I called on Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhiith. I was amazed to see this over 75-year old "youngman" maintaining appointments in his digital diary. This is exactly what he meant in 2008, in a television interview, while talking on his party's election manifesto with reference to the party's commitment towards building a "Digital" Bangladesh. How far have we moved towards this goal? We don't have any definitive answer.

We also don't have definitive answer on achievement under public-private partnership, or when our entrepreneurs and business community can stop lamenting because of irregular supply of gas and electricity. Added to these could be elevated expressway to ease the traffic gridlock in Dhaka city, will Padma Bridge finish within the stipulated time, is the nation's journey towards "middle income country" status on schedule? Will the common people get justice from the court of law or even the law enforcing agencies? Will the kids get quality education in the rural places to come out of poverty and up the speed, etc? The list could be pretty big.

Yes, the government has passed two years without any major debacle; rather it has had successes in agriculture, furthering relationship with those who matter -- US, China and India -- forward looking education policy, Annual Development Programme (ADP) implementation, and higher revenue collection.

I think that the prime minister is well aware of "where the shoe pinches?" I got this feeling while trying to read between the lines of her recent speeches in the country and even at the climate change conferences abroad.

Economists and policy planners all over the world are being challenged to draw a balance between state and the market. The situation is much worse in countries where there is poverty when the government is committed to private sector-led growth, and thereby wealth

creation, though equitable distribution remains a question.

In a transition economy like ours, each government comes up with long "will do" and "laundry lists," however, the execution is often constrained by "capacity" issues in civil bureaucracy, excessive politicisation, regulatory bottlenecks, vision disconnects, failure in team work, lack of proper planning and focused execution with the fear of being unpopular. In the same way, the present government led us to dream more than what is possible with the country's "capacity" level and intellectual solvency.

That is exactly why we are seeing that monetary policy while trying to address price spiral possibly cannot do equal justice to growth agenda, or that the regulatory body at frequent intervals

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remains mum about addressing the "fixing issues" in capital market. Added to these are the law and order situation, infrastructure deficiency and more importantly lack of a forward looking policy which could accelerate growth. In a labour surplus economy a government has to focus on employment creation. It is imperative for a savings surplus coun-

try like Bangladesh to create a congenial environment for investment, domestic or foreign.

More importantly we need to attack the archaic laws which are not supportive of growth, education system which does not accommodate future needs, and public health system which does not reduce the number of "passenger community" or disabled, challenged and malnourished population. The government often fails to maintain the "fire wall" with the political party, more significantly from the bad influence of the party rank and file on judiciary, civil administration, police or even state-owned entities.

Way back in 2002, I read a book titled "Who Moved My Cheese?" by Dr. Spencer Johnson. It was about people looking for

beforehand, and change himself accordingly. The next one's was to jump to conclusions, another's was to fight the fear of change and deal with it, and the last one's was to stay in the comfort zone and not deal with the change.

Few days back, I was spending time in my study, when suddenly I happened to catch a glimpse of the same book. And as I was going through the book again, a thought struck me.

The current government has three more years to go. It came up with a "big bang" about "change." It was, of course, very popular at the beginning with an "emerging vote bank" with lots of "cheese" (!!!) around. So far it is managing well. But if it is not focused on execution in togetherness and constantly being reminded by "body clock" to



"cheese," which was used as a metaphor for what people want in life: satisfactory job, loving relationship, peace of mind; and where they look for it: within the family, community, or organisation. The book revolved around four characters; each character signified the personality traits in human beings. One character's trait was to be able to predict the change

"wake up" in time and get back to its promises to change for better and execute plans to take the country to next trajectory of growth. Who knows, the government may be asking itself in end 2013, "who moved my cheese?" And that may be too late.

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