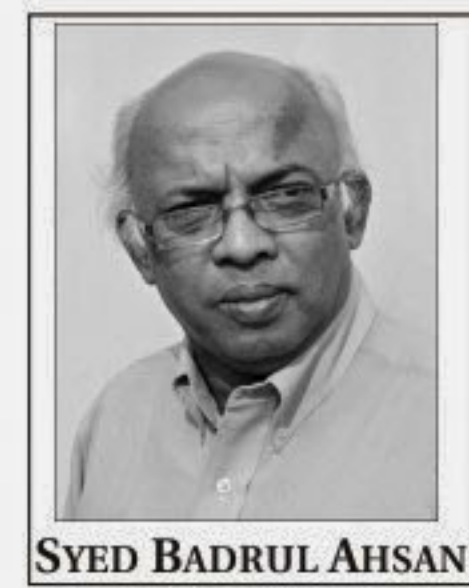


GROUND REALITIES

We do not live in Egypt



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

FORMER vice president, former prime minister and former law minister Moudud Ahmed detects light at the end of the tunnel for

politics in Bangladesh. He observes Egypt and is cheered by the fall of the much despised Hosni Mubarak. And he believes that what has happened at Tahrir Square can be replicated in Bangladesh. The people of Bangladesh, he informs us, will rise in revolt just as the people of Egypt did, and having risen will put Sheikh Hasina and her government to flight, just as Egyptians compelled President Mubarak to capitulate and flee to Sharm el Sheikh.

Moudud Ahmed honestly believes that conditions are ripe for a mass upsurge in Bangladesh, of the kind that led to the collapse of the Mubarak dictatorship. He has merely echoed the sentiments of his present party leader Khaleda Zia, who told us some days ago that the Awami League government should be learning a lesson from the chaos in Egypt.

Moudud Ahmed and Khaleda Zia are indulging in a serious misreading of history here, despite all the vulnerabilities Sheikh Hasina's government may be caught in right now. Their argument that there could be an Egypt in Bangladesh is seriously flawed. And here are the reasons why we can afford to be dismissive of the points they make.

In the first place, Bangladesh, unlike Egypt, is a democracy. Yes, it is a flawed democracy, prone to manipulation by those who happen to be wielding political power at any given time. But it is a resilient democracy and reasserts itself at fairly regular intervals, either through public protests in various



AFP

No, we do not live in Egypt. And this is not Pakistan circa 1969 and 1971. Or Bangladesh 1982-1990.

forms or through general elections.

That is something you cannot say about Egypt, where democracy has been a permanent missing factor and where stage-managed elections have consistently kept dictators in office and their opponents in incarceration. In Bangladesh, the men and women who have exercised power through elections have never put their rivals behind bars despite all the chasm of differences which has underlined their politics.

In the second place, at this point of time, Bangladesh is no home to autocracy. If it were, politicians opposed to the government and media people unhappy with the performance of the administration would not be practising the degree of freedom they have exercised so far. Yes, of course the country is not in good shape. And of course life has been taking a battering because of the ineptitude as well as the arrogance of the government now presiding over the fortunes of the country.

Prices keep going up; ministers demonstrate a woeful lack of competence in the way they work; crimes do not abate because the home minister and the minister of state do not have their fingers on the pulse of social conditions; diplomacy is floundering; someone is engaging in duplicitous games with stock market shares; and the prime minister has failed to reach out to the country as a whole and convince us that she has graduated from being a party leader to a national leader.

And yet we do not live under an autocracy. Yes, parliament does not function because the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party is determined to keep it ineffectual. Moudud Ahmed will tell you that his party wishes to go back to the Jatiyo Sangsad once a "proper" atmosphere is created for its return.

The BNP calls general strikes for reasons that are as spurious as they are politically hazy. Its lawmakers make it a point to attend sessions of the parlia-

mentary standing committees, but will not walk over into the House proper. And thus it is that in its queer way, democracy muddles through in Bangladesh. It is not a throbbing democracy. It is pluralism stilted by the efforts of the opposition to bring down an elected government through agitation on the streets only because it has lost the election and does not feel comfortable out of office.

It is democracy systematically whittled down to a threadbare condition because the ruling party is determined about ensuring an emasculating of elected local government bodies and a haemorrhaging of the Anti-Corruption Commission. It is, again, democracy where extra-judicial murders take place with a fair degree of regularity, a truth the government denies as loudly as it can. No one believes its protestations.

And we, as the huddling masses, often rise up in protest. We are, yes, hostage to syndicates of all sorts... in the market, in business, in politics, in education. We observe in fury the impunity with which religious fanatics impose medieval-era fatwas on female victims of rape. We are outraged by the intimidation of the Ahmadiyyas, by the spectacle of the young putting vehicles to the torch for no good reason.

To be sure, our democracy has never been in the best of health. But it is there. It is in the consciousness of the people. Rupganj and Arial Beel are the proof.

No, we do not live in Egypt. And this is not Pakistan circa 1969 and 1971. Or Bangladesh 1982-1990. We turf out incompetent and corrupt politicians through a focused exercise of the ballot every five years. Of course, within the space of those five years we send out powerful messages of anger or good cheer, as the case may be, to the powers that be. Think here of the recent municipal elections and a couple of by-elections.

The writer is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsantareq@yahoo.co.uk

On Eid-e-Miladunnabi

We rededicate ourselves to values

WE celebrate today the life and times of the Prophet of Islam. Eid-e-Miladunnabi is not only an occasion to recall the birth of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) but also his departure from the temporal world. Rare is the instance of one born on a particular day and then seeing his life coming to an end on the same day years later. In the case of the founder of Islam, there is a special resonance in remembrances of him because of the light he brought unto the world through preaching anew and yet in vibrant form the message of the Creator of the Worlds. Submission to the will of Allah, meaning in broad measure a life lived in a totality of piety and truth in the service of mankind, was what the Prophet preached before us.

Islam was, and is, fundamentally a message of peace and equality for all mankind. That is the underlying theme of the message the Prophet preached in the years he lived after receiving the command of Allah to spread the word among people across the globe. Indeed, even before it was ordained by the Almighty that Muhammad (peace be upon him) would inaugurate a new, complete and final religion for all mankind, the Prophet of Islam demonstrated his sense of piety and devotion to values in the way he conducted himself. His life, when considered in its entirety, was a long tale of an individual's awareness of practical realities as well as spiritual imperatives. He lived his life through setting examples for his followers, a truth which today we need to emulate more than ever before.

That the Prophet preached the message of fellow feeling and love, that he enlightened us on the truth of God's grandeur shining equally on all His creations, is what we recall today. Truth, honesty, tolerance and a sense of morality based on a preservation and upholding of values are the lessons we learn anew on Eid-e-Miladunnabi.

Indifference to Parliament

An unhealthy dimension to it

IN absence of the opposition, who are boycotting the parliament for some time now, the occasional absenteeism of the ruling party lawmakers deals a double blow to the whole idea of a functioning legislature.

The current session of the Jatiyo Sangsad is hit by poor attendance of the ruling party lawmakers which manifested during the question hour on Monday. Only five out of 26 lawmakers showed up to raise the scripted questions for ministers. This is an appalling reflection of neglect shown to the Parliament.

The deputy speaker, who was presiding over the proceedings, did the right thing by not allowing MPs to raise the scripted questions by proxy on behalf of absentee lawmakers. This move should be a strong message to the MPs who remained absent.

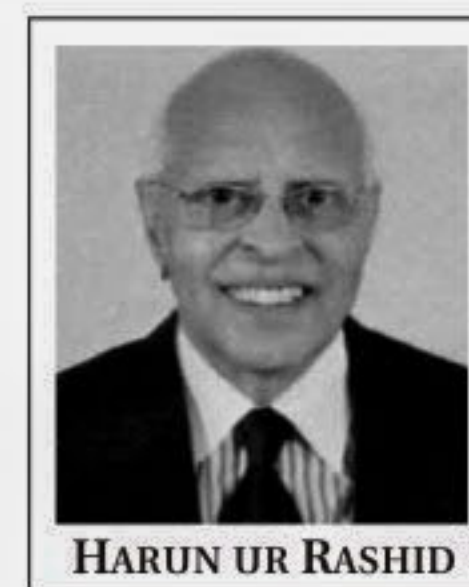
The question and answer session is an important part of the parliamentary proceedings. This is a medium through which the various issues of interest to the constituencies that members represent are brought into sharp focus. The questions when answered by the ministers enable people to grasp the authentic position of the ministries concerning issues put across by the members. In a way this also facilitates dissemination of information and oversight functions impacting on the performance of the ministries. The Prime Minister herself gets an insight into the working of various ministries.

The parliament is the place where people's will finds expression through the voices of the representatives. So any negligence to an important order of business in a parliamentary session amounts to erosion of people's trust. For, in the ultimate analysis, a lively parliament makes a pulsating democracy.

Regrettably, history of our parliament is to the contrary. We seldom witness parliament sessions at work with full house. There has been a constant quorum crisis that makes proceedings difficult. In fact, absence of law makers especially from the ruling party makes the house even

BOTTOM LINE

New dawn on the Nile



HARUN UR RASHID

ON February 11, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak resigned under pressure from mass upsurge and military,

after ruling for almost 30 years. Even after the Tunisian revolution, no one expected that the people of Egypt would revolt because President Mubarak ruled the country with an iron hand and under emergency laws, supported by big powers.

After 30 years of autocratic rule by Mubarak, the only leader young Egyptians have known, the country begins a new day under a military council that promises to lead the country through a democratic transformation.

The fall of Mubarak represents a victory for the protesters and a demonstration of people power in the heart of the Arab world. The news was greeted with a massive outburst of joy and riotous celebration by hundreds of thousands of people in Tahrir Square in Cairo.

After all, it was unthinkable even two weeks ago that Mubarak would relinquish the presidency, and those calling for his ouster -- as some Egyptian activists had been doing for years -- seemed dreamers.

President Mubarak's powers have been taken over by the Higher Council of the Armed Forces. It said it understood the people's demand for radical change. It is assumed that military takeover means dissolution of parliament, scrapping of the constitution and dismissal of Mubarak's cabinet. A process must be in place for free and fair elections.

The opposition figure, Nobel Laureate and former chief of IAEA, Mohammed ElBaradei, described the

resignation of Mubarak as the greatest day of his life, while a Muslim Brotherhood leader said that Egyptians had made history.

It is unclear how the military high command will establish democracy for the first time in Egypt. Reports indicate

The country begins a new day under a military council that promises to lead it through a democratic transformation.

that while they support the demands of the protesters, they have retained the cabinet ministers as "caretakers," and have agreed to honour all international treaties including the 1979 Peace Treaty with Israel.

Observers believe that Field Marshall Mohammed Hussein Tantawi, the defence minister and head of the higher military council, is "one of the least charismatic figures in all the Middle East." He is not known to be a great strategic thinker.

Samer Shehata, an assistant professor of Arab Politics at Georgetown University in Washington, agrees with the above assessment but says: "The people underneath him, including the four other individuals sitting on the higher military council, have much more legitimacy now. If he were to leave, that would be acceptable for the great majority of Egyptians for the immediate period."

The impact of the upheavals in Cairo -- the overthrow of authoritarianism in arguably the Arab world's most important capital -- could have a galvanising

effect well beyond its borders.

Will other authoritarian governments fall? What new pressures for democratic change will the Egyptian example unleash? Instability and uncertainty could be the keynotes of the region for some time to come. But there are many who have long argued that the only fundamental answer to the Middle East's socio-economic malaise is democracy -- genuine political transformation. And here Egypt is pioneering a path towards one possible future for the region as a whole.

The first Arab Human Development Report in 2002 pointed boldly to a region in intellectual isolation, virtually devoid of research in science and technology, persistent in repressing women and abysmally low in bringing global thinking to the Middle East through translation. In 1,000 years, the report noted, the Arabs have translated roughly the same number of books Spain translates in one year.

Diplomatic correspondent of BBC Jonathan Marcus says: "Immediate questions focus on the foreign policy of the new Egypt. Will it be as friendly with Israel? Will it continue to seek to isolate Hamas? Will it continue to be the bulwark of US effort to create an Arab coalition to contain Iran?"

Could it become a more independent actor -- still a friend of Washington, but pursuing its own distinctive path in the way Turkish foreign policy has evolved in recent years? These questions will not be answered any time soon.

The success of "people power" in Egypt is far more significant for Arabs everywhere than its success in Tunisia.

Observers say President Mubarak's resignation and his departure from Cairo do not mean that the Egyptian crisis is moving towards an early resolution. On the contrary, Mr. Mubarak has simply dumped his dilemmas into the lap of the military top brass.

The fall of Mubarak will affect a host

of regional issues -- the Arab-Israeli peace process, the growing influence of Iran, the battle against Muslim extremism -- in ways that are hard, if not impossible, to predict.

The White House insists that the demonstrators represented a broad range of people not dominated by a single ideology, and that there is nothing to fear from democracy.

No one in the administration or Western diplomatic circles echoes the fears of some conservatives that the Muslim Brotherhood is a dangerous force, that could take over and turn an ally into an enemy.

However, observers say the Muslim Brotherhood draws diverse visions together. Younger members of the Brotherhood are open to the world and fascinated by the Turkish ruling party. Furthermore, Egypt's people are not Shi'ia but Sunni, and unlike Shi'ia, there is no Imam for Sunnis. To compare Iran's revolution with the revolution in Egypt is misconceived.

Egypt will never be the same again, US President Barack Obama declared after Hosni Mubarak stepped down, saying that the voices of the people have been heard. President Obama has spoken of the Egyptian people as an inspiration, like Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

Obama said that Mubarak's resignation was just the start of Egypt's transformation. He called on the military to lift the state of emergency and prepare for free and fair elections

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs has stressed that it is important that the next government recognise the peace treaty with Israel. The US president warned that Egypt still faced "tough days ahead" with the former leader's resignation marking the beginning of a transition to democratic government -- not the end.

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 16

1918
The Council of Lithuania unanimously adopts the Act of Independence, declaring Lithuania an independent state.

1934
The Austrian Civil War ends with the defeat of the Social Democrats and the Republican Schutzbund.

1947
Canadians are granted Canadian citizenship after 80 years of being British subjects. Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King becomes the first Canadian citizen.

1959
Castro sworn in as Cuban PM. Cuba's revolutionary leader Fidel Castro becomes the country's youngest ever premier.

2001
Serbs killed in Kosovo pilgrimage. At least seven Serbs are killed in a bomb attack on a bus making its way to a religious ceremony in Kosovo.

2005
Kyoto Protocol comes into force. The Kyoto Protocol that aims to slow down global warming takes effect but the US remains out-side it.