

Bell-ringer for the dictators

Z.A. KHAN

UNPRECEDENTED people's revolts in Tunisia and Egypt and the brewing revolts in the Middle East (ME) and North Africa have shaken the dictatorial regimes and monarchies in the region. Even regimes in countries that are ruled by one political party are under severe stress to accede to people's demand for greater political freedom and economic empowerment.

So far, the ruling elites have crushed people's revolts by brute force. It seems that dictators and monarchs may not be able to hold fast any longer even by using strong-arm tactics.

When facilities like Twitting, Facebook and cell phones were not available, quick passage of messages of denial of freedom and protection of life and liberty could be crushed with impunity. Today, it will be enormously difficult due to availability of means of communication at lightning speed. Whiz kids of Tunisia and Egypt, who have already become a byword for freedom movements that have rocked the very foundation of the power brokers and palace intriguers, used these gadgets as their armoury.

Governments that ruled for decades without answerability could do so as they structured their state institutions and organs to be so complicated and secretive that the people failed to identify which of those should be redesigned to make them work for the people's benefit. These institutions of Byzantine complexity helped to consolidate the power of the dictators.

When they were climbing from power to power, glory to self-propelled glory, they forgot that the "worms" (or sycophants) were at work to instigate the dictators to develop the conceit that they were invincible and enjoyed

unsurpassable popularity. A sea of people was pulled wherever they went and flashy developments were shown in and around the capitals where they lived. Causes of public dissent and frustration were not conveyed to them. The "worms" thus catapulted the one time revolutionaries into tin-pot oligarchs who established demo-

cratic tyranny and paid no heed to cogent reasons to change gears of their homespun democracy.

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cratic tyranny and paid no heed to cogent reasons to change gears of their homespun democracy. This time around it has been proved in Egypt and Tunisia that even if the legitimate popular leaders are banished or vanished to make the opposition rudderless, Phoenix does rise from the ashes. Although I am not unhappy that Egypt's or Tunisia's longtime allies did not lend support to Hosni Mubarak or Ben Ali in the face of cataclysmic opposition against them, it has at least unraveled one fact that actors of the great game run with the hare and hunt with hound and ultimately side with the

friend or foe but only the enduring interest. This realisation is unlikely to dent the ambition of those who dance to the tune of the Pied Piper.

The West led by the US should have condemned Ben Ali and Mubarak in harsher words soon after they ordered crackdown on the opposition. Except for advising Mubarak to make a peaceful transition to democracy, the West did not threaten them with dire consequences like travel ban, confiscation of properties or economic sanction. Even till the end the West did not ask them to step down. 300 people did in Egypt and an odd 100 in Tunisia, which could

have been avoided if the West persuaded Mubarak or Ben Ali to respond to the people's call to step down and to amend constitutional provisions to usher in democracy. Mubarak refused to do so, saying that the country would plunge into chaos and anarchy if he stepped down before the national election, which was due in September 2011.

The West's position on Egypt remained an enigma. Egyptians did not believe that West would ever make a move to encourage democracy in ME. They say that West would only support such governments in ME that would ensure protection of Israel's sovereignty and would assure continuous supply of petroleum. The West fears that if democracy prevails in the ME, the probability of nationalist forces taking control of state affairs would loom large, which would not augur well for it. The West fears that if Muslim Brotherhood returns in the election in Egypt, it will carry out state

party to power why should democracy loving people elsewhere in the world object to it? After all, it is the privilege of the people to exercise their rights of franchise to elect a party that they think would do best for the people. People in ME say that the wars fought there were ignited by the West.

According to them, if they are let alone, there will be no interstate war. If the West fears Islamisation of the ME, why should it bother them? There are large Muslim majority countries, but are not minorities living peacefully there? West is well advised to keep away from hotspots of ME, the stake-

holders there will mutually settle their issues for the sake of survival. As a devil's advocate I may say that Israel will become friendless in the ME with Egypt severing its relationship with her and therefore will be highly susceptible to aggression. I may further argue that unless there is peace on the border in Sinai and Gaza cross-border trade will shrink, which will create a perilous situation for both the countries. For the moment the West should not worry about Israel's security as it can survive on its own with its nuclear arsenal.

The other significant lesson learnt from the changing situation in ME is that no political party should dare to consolidate state power by utilising state apparatus as this would breed cronyism. We should let democracy champion the people's aspiration. We should see that democracy does not create demons. State organs that are supposed to oversee government performance to deter it from leaving the path of justice and fairplay should be allowed to function unhindered.

Revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia have once again proved that pursuance of strong-arm tactics to consolidate power does not sustain for long. The situation there should serve as a bell-ringer to all ambitious rulers that those who stifle people's will or democracy do so at their own peril. A large number of people in our society feel that erosion of values paves the way for corruption, horse-trading to cling to power and rise of political criminals. So they anchor hope on those who can face the challenges to restore the belief that flagging hopes will be restored by laying bare the inadequacies and frailties of the leadership that corrode the very ground that they stand on. I can hear the people saying "sound of freedom is calling."

The writer is a former Director General of BIISS.

Making Constitution secular

M.A.S. MOLLA

OUR Constitution adopted in 1972 is regarded as a very good one in the democratic nations. But unfortunately, it underwent about 14 amendments, at least three of them being very bad ones, including the 4th (done during the reign of the founder president himself), the 5th (during General Zia's rule) and the 8th by General Ershad just for perpetuating his self-declared presidency. The previous Awami League (AL) government with the help of the opposition, cleared most of the black provisions of the 4th amendment; and a recent Supreme Court verdict declared the 5th amendment null and void. Accordingly, a 15th amendment was imperative to "go back" to the spirit ("going back" literally is virtually impossible).

However, the present government is said to have just "reprinted" the Constitution without going through a formal constitutional amendment. The government also claims that such reprinting would make our constitution "secular" again, having revived Article 12 (secularism). But to my understanding, without repealing the notorious 8th amendment, we cannot have a truly secular constitution. Therefore, I propose some amendments to the Constitution so that we can really make the state constitutionally secular or non-communal -- whatever term the legislature deems fit.

Our Constitution begins with "Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim." This was inserted under the 5th amendment and has apparently been a sign of Islamisation of our otherwise secular constitution. It would be very good if we were able to repeal this. However, this good saying in Arabic doesn't have much bad impact on the state principles and can be taken as a benign insertion. Asking for its repeal might

aggrieve a major group of politicians. So the government's decision not to repeal this is a wise one. Nonetheless, the provision of

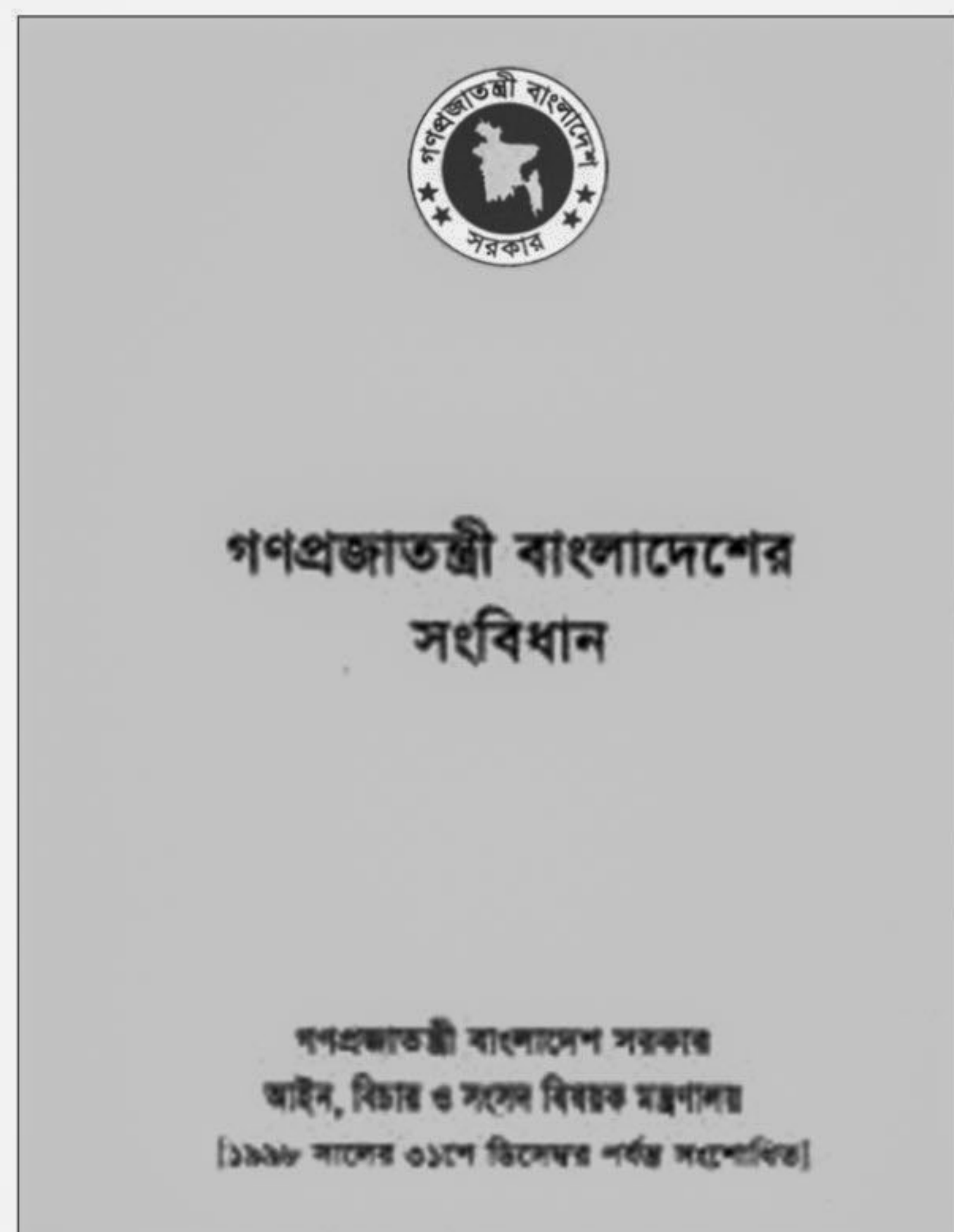
practicing lawyers, cannot overlook this anyway. Then why doesn't this AL government even try to repeal this bad provision? It is understood

deeper into the case. So far as I understand, the people of this area of the earth are non-communal by nature. From a study of history, I know about many Hindu-Muslim communal "riots" in British India and also of some just before and after the partition of 1947. I myself am a witness to a tiny version of a "riot" during the India-Pakistan war of 1965. What I observed was that a very few people, mostly very poor and having no schooling or habit of practicing religion, were about to attack the neighbouring Hindu village. Then my uncles and other neighbours regularly went to that village to stay for the night to guard the lives and properties of those Hindus. Thus the fear of a "riot" could be averted. Such is the fellow-feeling and non-communal nature of the majority of our people.

No one in the Bangladesh electorate would respect General Ershad as a champion in working for Islam. Then how did he manage to make Islam the "state religion"? It was a political ploy; but once it was inserted, even the secular AL government has been afraid of losing majority Muslim vote by trying to repeal this. There are some supporters of "state religion" in the country. I would ask them to note the intention of the amendment concerned (not the generosity of Islam). The intention was badly aimed at bluffing the nation, and Islam or Muslims have nothing to lose from repealing of Article 2A.

We can do away with the above feelings of the minority just by repealing it. The present government would also gain full support from the knowledgeable, high-thinking section of the society; this section cannot be fooled by saying that the Constitution can be made "secular" just by re-inserting Article 12.

The writer is a contributor on social issues. E-mail: momas71@yahoo.com



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"state religion" in Article 2A inserted by the 8th amendment cannot be treated as benign. The AL, being founded in the field (i.e., general people) and having many

that Bangladesh population constituting of about 87% Muslims "may be" aggrieved by such a move! If this is the point the government fears much, we can delve a bit

95pc of murders on Saturdays



TODAY, boys and girls, we'll consider an amusing New Year tradition from the United States: the release of the annual murder statistics. The latest batch says there were 532 murders in New York last year. Eight out of ten victims were male, and nine out of ten non-white.

So, boys and girls, whatever you do, make sure you are born female and Caucasian. Refuse to do this and you can't blame me for what happens when one day you visit the West.

Anyone who stubbornly insists on being male and/or non-white, should at least arrive at New York's JFK airport disguised as a white female.

Asian guys should wear Meladerm skin whitener, lots of make-up, a baggy dress and high heels. Even if the disguise doesn't work, at least you'll have fun. And you'll be way more popular in jail.

Another statistic: 95% of murders happened on Saturdays. Amazing. Murderers have a one-day work week, followed by a six-day weekend. Big round of applause to their union rep. If this news gets out, pilots will want the same. (Oh, they already have it!)

This reporter's New York brother has been visiting, so the place has been on my mind. I told him to tell Mayor Mike Bloomberg that he can get rid of all the murders by simply abolishing Saturdays and going straight from Fridays to Sundays.

It would be great for productivity. And birthdays would arrive 52 days earlier every year, so everyone would live until they were 110, which would be kinda neat.

My brother told me that New York didn't feel dangerous if you actually lived there, so I took a closer look at the statistics. Fifteen of last year's murders didn't happen last year. For example, a guy called Howard Brevard was attacked in 1977 but only recently died. Now that must be the slowest murder in history -- from striking the blow to the victim's death took 34 years.

Good thing it didn't happen in India: there'd be another 30 years until the court hearing, 40 years for the appeal, etc. With luck, the whole case would be completed in as little as two or three centuries.

On a related subject, my "dumb criminal of the month" is a US citizen: Mario Miramontes of Dallas. Wanted for petty crimes, Mario, 22, was nervous when police stopped him on the road, so he pretended to be his clean-living cousin, Chris. Unfortunately, his cousin had just been charged with a serious sex crime. Enforcers locked Mario up and threw away the key. He spent 13 months telling officers they had locked up the wrong guy, but they just said: "Yeah, right."

Boys and girls, this story has a vital lesson for all of us. As well as making sure you are born white and female, it's even more important to make sure you are born into the right family. No crazies. Mario Miramontes failed to do that and look what happened to him.

My children have just read this column and are looking very worried indeed.

For more crime statistics, visit our columnist at: www.vittachi.com