

Khaleda's call for transition

BNP must go back to JS

BEGUM Khaleda Zia has demanded a mid-term election in order for the government to avoid what she called a disgraceful exit. She has hinted at a major uprising, of the kind that has lately taken the Middle East by storm. Such an uprising, she thinks, can be avoided if there is a power transition without delay. We are surprised by the opposition leader's reading of current conditions in Bangladesh. It is with incredulity that we observe her attempts to draw a comparison of the situation here with what has been happening in Tunisia, Egypt and now Libya.

The BNP chairperson's call for a peaceful transition of power raises some very critical questions about her party's attitude to democracy. The important thing now is for the BNP to concentrate on playing its due role in parliament. There can be no short circuiting to power for anyone and especially for an opposition leader who has been prime minister more than once. Besides, of considerably greater significance is the fact of what record Begum Zia and the BNP have set where playing their proper role in the Jatiyo Sangsad is concerned. To demand, therefore, that the government step down immediately is not only ludicrous but also naive par excellence. It is indulging in fantasy with no bearing on reality.

We believe that the BNP and its leader should be taking a long, hard look at the politics they have pursued since the last elections. The party's stubbornness in boycotting parliament undermines its loud concerns about democracy. It should be in the House to put the ruling party to the test on the issues of the day. Additionally, it has a moral responsibility to speak for its constituents in parliament. By giving short shrift to that reality and by agitating on the streets, it is giving a bad impression of itself. Again, its attitude suggests a preponderance of personalised politics where the national interest should have been. The idea that democracy is fine when a party wins elections and becomes pointless when it loses them must be binned at the earliest.

Congrats, Tigers!

A long way to go, though

IT was not until the last Irishman Boyd Rankin was brilliantly caught at short midwicket by Junaed Siddique off the bowling of Shafiul Islam that much coveted victory was sealed. The turning point came when Tamim made a spectacular diving catch in the deep to dismiss Niall O'Brien. Then on, Tigers fought back with all ferocity to keep the dreams alive for Bangladesh to play on in the World Cup.

The toss was won well and things started with a great bang! Tamim was on fire and all looked set for big figures on the board. Alas! It was again a tale of batting letdown on part of the much estimated middle order that lost its way. Imrul, Junaed, Shakib and Asharful gave a dreadful account of callousness. A paltry 205 and that too against a middling side is unforgivable! The party was just about over for Bangladesh.

After Bangladesh's paltry score little did Ireland know that a surprise was awaiting them. Tigers roared in desperation as their right to stay in contention was at stake. The nation was in meditation. All eyes looked to the Heavens through the dark veils of the night sky and wished their boys rose from the dust.

Although Ireland set off to a good start, it could not handle the pressure from the resurgent Tigers. Bowlers were brilliant and fielding dazzling. The electrifying match went on wires as Irish wickets began to tumble after its 150 runs mark. Little lad Shafiul bowled with all his passion, force, belief and what have you; he picked up four prized scalps to save Bangladesh from certain defeat.

We cheer for the Tigers. Nevertheless, we voice our concern about the mindless strokes that our premier batsmen sometimes play in spite of knowing the consequences.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 27

- 1700** The island of New Britain is discovered.
- 1860** Abraham Lincoln makes a speech at Cooper Union in the city of New York that is largely responsible for his election to the Presidency.
- 1900** The British Labour Party is founded.
- 1922** A challenge to the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, allowing women the right to vote, is rebuffed by the Supreme Court of the United States in *Leser v. Garnett*.
- 1951** The Twenty-second Amendment to the United States Constitution, limiting Presidents to two terms, is ratified.
- 1991** Free and fair general elections are held in Bangladesh under the Caretaker Government of Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed. The BNP is voted to power, with Awami League going into opposition.
- 1991** Gulf War: U.S. President George H. W. Bush announces that "Kuwait is liberated".
- 2002** Godhra train burning: a Muslim mob kills 59 Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya.

SUNDAY POUCH



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

IN the 1780's, when France produced the mother of all revolutions, we saw the first breakdown of the old order. Then was a period of constitutional reform. This was followed by counter revolution. Radicalisation was the next phase. But then came

terror and reaction. Finally, a military dictatorship was ushered in, followed much later by democracy.

In Tunisia and Egypt, if we follow the French road signs, we can say that they have barely entered phase one of the revolution. Both have a long way to go.

The other countries who are lining up for bringing change, like Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Algeria, are just in fermentation. For them, phase one is the people's immediate destination.

But why should all these revolutions follow the French road map? In fact, each of these countries has its own reasons for triggering change. Each looks at its unique situation and has been designing its own revolution. The cause of immediate revolt could be bungled leadership, unforeseen consequences or just contingency.

Yet, all the countries of the Arab world seem to share some key grievances. They are rampant unemployment, unaffordable food and consumer goods, endemic poverty, lack of basic services, political repression etc.

Some of the governments which are yet to face the wrath of the people are therefore scrambling to meet the rising expectations by making piecemeal reforms. The rulers of Jordan, UAE, Saudi Arabia are addressing the frustrations of the middle class, the alienated intellectuals, the divided elite, the "unworkable reforms" of the past and of course the price of bread.

But a new element has also crept into the mechanics of revolution, which has panicked the dictators in the region. Computer-savvy activists are now setting the pace of revolutions, which was not the case in 1780's. These young people are manipulating the latest media and turning the screw, taking the uprisings to higher levels.

On January 25 this year, a Google

executive called Wael Ghonim showed a mutilated corpse of one Khalid Said in Cairo, a victim of police brutality, on his Facebook page. He had immediately created "We are all Khalid Said." The revolution in Egypt was immediately recharged and reignited.

From Facebook to YouTube to Twitter, messages and pictures are travelling everywhere. Public emotions which dictators could keep confined and concealed in the past are no more containable. The cell phone camera photos used by the revolutionaries are acting as hammers to breakdown the citadels of the rulers in these countries.



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It is clear that it is not just aspiration for democracy that has been driving the people to seek change. They have been suffering economically also. They also want to live honourably with heads held high among the comity of nations.

But there are deeper reasons for the revolts taking place not in any one country but simultaneously in a group of countries.

To begin with, tensions had been simmering among the people for several years now.

The main reason was galloping food prices. Agricultural productivity had fallen drastically between 1990 and 2007. Added to this was rise in global food prices due to high global consumption.

In 2010, global food supply was further reduced due to poor harvests in Canada, Russia and Ukraine. Hot, dry weather in South America also

reduced soyabean production. This year floods in Australia wiped away wheat crops. Global price of grains today has reached very high levels.

Egypt, the most populous country in the Arab world, had depended on large grain imports to feed her people. In the past she could afford to import large quantities by using her earnings from export of oil. But in 1996, Egypt had reached the peak of her oil production. Since then, her oil output has declined by 26% and the price of food grains has risen in the global market, which did not allow her to import required quantities of grain.

In the meantime, Egypt was also

burdened with an unacceptable level of debt. It was a terrifying 80% of her GDP. The World Bank in the last ten years had also forced Egypt to undertake "structural adjustment" of her economy. Thus, at the time of the revolution she did not have any social safety nets, wages were low and there was no investment in infrastructure. 40% of Egyptians were living on less than \$2 a day.

Similar economic adversity is also being faced by a large number of other Arab countries that do not earn revenue from oil exports.

On top of this there is political repression on the people by govern-

ments in the region. Citizens are unable to speak out about their deprivation and about the unequal society in which they live.

Britain and the USA are partly responsible for this. Since early 20th century both have supported a network of repressive Arab regimes in the region. Their purpose was to ensure through cheap supply of oil "at all cost" as well as to protect Israel. Thus, pariah governments were set up and nurtured in the Arab world. The ordinary people feel humiliated when their governments, which are non-representative, follow the directions of these two countries.

The moot question now before USA and Great Britain is whether the new democracies that are likely to emerge after the revolutions will retain their connection with them.

Hence we see Prime Minister Cameron of Britain rushing to Egypt to be the first one there, to ensure that the relationship with the new government remains as cozy as in the past. He has also to see that the new governments do the bidding of the USA and Britain.

So it is clear that it is not just aspiration for democracy that has been driving the people to seek change. They have been suffering economically also. Therefore, change in leadership was long overdue to address fundamental economic and social issues that affect their daily lives. They also want to live honourably with heads held high among the comity of nations.

For too long they have lived on the fault line of a severe global ecological, energy and economic crises.

Thus, before revolution grapples the other giant in the region, Saudi Arabia, its leaders will have to go back to their drawing board and make serious changes in the way they govern their people. Only then can a revolution in the holy land be averted.

Oil money can only delay the onset of the changes coming its way. King Abdullah announced a series of benefits worth \$35 billion for the citizens soon after he returned from USA after three months medical treatment.

For many of the others, unknown to themselves, they have indeed become ossified and irrelevant for the twenty-first century.

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ANOTHER Arab regime looks set to fall. With Tunisia to the West and Egypt to the East, Libya lies between the two Arab nations where people power forced out unpopular dictators. Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali ruled for 23 years, Egypt's former president Hosni Mubarak stepped down on February 11 after close to 30 years in power.

But neither of these two autocratic leaders beat Libya's Colonel Muammar Abu Minyar al-Gaddafi, who's been in power since 1969. Gadhafi, with almost 42 years in office, holds the record as the longest currently serving non-royal national leader in the world. He is also one of the longest-serving rulers in modern history. As we write this editorial, it is possible that Gadhafi's record has already ended. Tricking news reports indicate the Libyan government has lost control of several cities and military bases.

Over the last 24 hours, one of Gadhafi's sons, Saif al-Islam, appeared on Libyan television and conceded that there was an uprising in progress. Saif Gadhafi told the Libyan people that the nation could descend into civil war and blamed outside agitators for inflaming the situation. The younger Gadhafi also accepted that the military had made mistakes in responding to the protests, and promised constitutional

reforms. It's probably too little too late. In Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, Syria, Bahrain, Morocco and Yemen; people across the Arab world are demanding change.

In the two nations that kicked off this domino effect, it was Tunisian and Egyptian young people who galvanised and inspired their fellow citizens. The old world order of the

The world needs to lend genuine, not just moral, support to Arab nations that commit to transitioning to democracy. We cannot afford to be bystanders.

20th century is fading. A person born in 1990 will turn 21 this year. These young people, who became politically and socially aware in the late-2000s, grew up in a world connected by technology.

These are people for whom computers and cell phones are a natural part of their environment. The speed at which they can communicate via

text message, instant messaging, e-mail and social media websites has overwhelmed any attempt at censorship; a crowd of 1,000 people might have more than 1,000 mobile devices on them, each capable of taking videos and pictures that can be instantly uploaded.

Colonel Gadhafi's fall now seems like a sure bet. The Algerian govern-



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ment looks shaky. Syria and Jordan are scrambling to placate their people in a bid to pour water on the fires of revolution. These are exciting times, but now comes the difficult part of figuring out what replaces the old order.

In 20 years will tourists be sunbathing on the pure white-sand beaches of a democratic Libya? Or will the

nation become another Somalia? There is hope for the future. The effects of globalisation, the Internet and modern telecommunications could give those who favour democratisation some powerful tools to achieve their aims.

But the biggest challenge for any new government in the Arab world is jobs. Egypt's youth unemployment rate is around 25%, in Tunisia it's 30%. Statistics are unavailable for Libya but reports claim rates they are similarly high.

The young people who sparked these revolutions are demanding freedom, but while free and fair elections are politically empowering, they don't put bread on the table. Millions of disaffected young people now understand the power of protest; a threshold has been crossed and there's no going back.

For the sake of the region and world peace, the international community must take an active interest in assisting the forces of change. The world needs to lend genuine, not just moral, support to Arab nations that commit to transitioning to democracy. We cannot afford to be bystanders. From the Russian Revolution of 1917 to the Cambodian genocide, the world has seen more than one popular uprising evolve from lofty ideals to mass slaughter.