

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

Need to read from the same script



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It is not comforting to imagine Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia ship-wrecked in mid-river desperately swimming to reach ashore safely.

This is metaphorical of the plight they found themselves in soon after the army-backed caretaker government had taken over in early 2007. The political tsunami set off by that not-so-interim government swept many political figures, business tycoons and high officials off their feet.

Why revisit what was a nightmarish time for them? The answer is two-fold: The moral of 1/11 has left an impress on the public mind for whatever it is worth. Secondly, it was in those depressive days of the two leaders' incarceration and the perilous plight of Khaleda Zia's sons that they seemingly felt empathetic of each other and shared welfare concerns, even food, courtesy Sheikh Hasina. The latter even advised Khaleda Zia not to leave the country when she herself had gone on treatment abroad. Instinctively, they manifestly took a resistive attitude to attempts at disempowering them and depoliticising the pre-existing national polity.

So 1/11 can be a useful reference point to go back to for the sake of a matured, balanced and wholesome approach to contemporary politics

so that the nation is not catapulted on to an overly confrontational trajectory.

Quite clearly, both our leaders felt politically persecuted, even by a military-propped caretaker government, to say nothing of fully blown military regimes. Although the leadership origins of Begum Khaleda Zia can be traced to a political party emerging from the "barracks," she herself felt persecuted by the military-turned-semi-military regime of former President H.M. Ershad. Ironically but not surprisingly though, earlier versions of military rule were midwifed by two civilian presidents -- Khondokar Mushtaq Ahmed and Justice Sayem.

Despite Ershad's quest for legitimacy through civilianisation, Khaleda Zia felt most persecuted, even driven to move from place-to-place as a fugitive avoiding arrest. That is when she took the label of an "uncompromising leader," something which is now stretched to a new inelastic point despite a sea-change in the objective context. Unquestionably, the prevailing situation demands workable equations between the leader of the government and that of the opposition as perhaps never before.

So, if Khaleda Zia felt persecuted, Hasina suffered through a sense of insecurity, stemming from the brutal annihilation of her father Bangabandhu, mother Fazilatunnesa, her siblings and other close relatives. Occasionally, she seems to be haunted by that memory which in different degrees somehow gets reflected even in



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contemporary scenarios.

All of this recapitulation and analysis is to draw our two leaders' attention to two specific emerging prospects for radicalising the stagnant politics into a constructive and

sustainable mode.

The first prospect lies in the amendment being incorporated to the Constitution barring military takeover and promulgation of Martial Law. As is common knowl-

edge, this follows the highest court's invalidation of usurpation of authority through unconstitutional means. Perhaps, elected governments might not have been as prompt as the highest court proved to be in initiating the process of setting the constitutional distortion right.

The judiciary has gifted something invaluable to both the Awami League and the BNP. They have a common stake in the amendments (one at a formalisation stage and the other being proposed) to right a historical wrong and an anathema. That way, only politicians will be impregably empowered to effectively resist any attempted military misadventure.

The other most important quality opportunity for democratising national polity and ensuring fool-proof national election is held out by the agenda for reforming the caretaker government system. There are four elements of change that could come under consideration of both parties: making three-month duration of caretaker government (CG) mandatory, with an extremely limited extension in highly exceptional circumstances, striking a balance between the powers of the president and the chief advisor over defence ministry, taking away the power of the virtually interim president to declare emergency, and perhaps disassociating the judiciary from a caretaker role as the first choice in appointing the chief advisor to a CG.

Two public perceptions seem to be gaining currency: first, Sheikh

Hasina has crossed the half-way point of her tenure and has limited time to deliver on her promises. She either does it or risks costing reelection. Secondly, the way the relationship between the ruling party and the opposition is drifting and the postures they are taking against each other conjure up the scenario of an emerging point of no return. This bodes ill.

Such public sentiments need to be effectively reversed with the help of both parties. Ironically, the opposition is taking part in the local government elections with a good showing, which means they are toeing the constitutional line when it suits, but doing exactly the opposite when it doesn't. The contradiction is reflected when they mount pressure on the government to quit and opt for mid-term polls on the scurrilous pretext of its losing legitimacy. Otherwise, a BNP ex-minister threatened a Middle East-type upheaval! As if that was not enough, the members of parliament breezily go about exchanging unprintable epithets, fuelling more duels between the two parties.

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Causes of political turmoil in MENA

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ALMOST every few hours, the media reports on the unfolding saga in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region. In some cases, the political movements are relatively peaceful, such as in Tunisia and Egypt. In the case of Libya, we see pitched battles being fought between the supporters of the regime and its opponents; now, the international community is also involved. We are gripped by developments, and frequently do not sit back to think of the causes behind the turmoil, and of the consequences that may follow.

Despite the advances in technology and communication, the information we have about this region is grossly inadequate. The media there has been strictly controlled through censorship or "governmental advice" -- with occasional absurd situations. On January 26, after violent clashes between the police and protestors in Tahrir Square, Al-Ahram's lead front page story was about flowers being given to the police on their national day. However, on February 12, the day after Mubarak's removal, the newspaper applauded Egypt's youth for their victory. Was it an about-face? It is not unusual for people not to trust newspapers in the MENA countries.

In most MENA countries, the leaderships have not appreciated the implications of the advances in communication and technology. They have not realised that cross-border information flow, through the media and through direct channels that technology now offers, has been a very important source of creating awareness. No longer will people be satisfied only with the information they receive from within the country. This raises challenges for the leadership.

This article looks behind the events and tries to find common threads in the turmoil engulfing many countries in the region. And,

through this process, to lay out possible scenarios for the future -- which is the topic for the next article.

Leadership

In general, when a leader takes over in a MENA country, it is with wide popular support. In the absence of recognised or acceptable methods of transferring power, the leaders continue for decades at the helm. Many have described such leaders as "gerontocrats," who soon lose touch with the common man. When they want to hand over power, they choose their sons or favourites.

In the past few decades, there have been three successes: Jordan's King Abdullah II took over from his father Hussain (1999), Morocco's King Mohammed VI took over from his father Hassan (1999), and Syria's Hafez al-Assad was able to transfer power to Bashar (2000). There has not been any successful succession since.

Arrangements for similar dynastic succession were clearly underway in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya when the crowds spilled onto the streets. Allegations of corruption associated with such long-serving leaders are not uncommon, and give rise to resentment among the underprivileged in society.

Economic reforms

In order to keep pace with the process of globalisation, most MENA countries have undertaken economic reforms. This disturbs the traditional social and economic order. Simultaneously, it creates a middle-to-rich upper class, increasing income and wealth inequality, laying the foundation for unrest. It is interesting to observe that unrest usually does not take place till the country achieves middle-income status. In Iran, the revolution occurred in 1979 as the country was reaching middle-income status; the rulers were not enlightened enough to ensure that the benefits of reforms

reached the poorest.

Deprived youth

In most developing countries, the under-25s constitute the majority. Young men and women coming from the upper classes, whether economic or political elite, are often the best educated and are able to compete for, or otherwise secure, the best jobs available. The youth coming from the poorer segments do not have access to the best education and are unable to compete. As a result, the unemployment among the poorer youth is extremely high -- a ripe pool from which to foment a revolution. The

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is the focus of attention in international affairs. The root causes of the turmoil need to be examined carefully to understand where we may be headed.

25-35 year-olds are frustrated by bad governance (corruption, etc.) and see no chance of a better lifestyle for themselves if the current regimes persist.

Tribal and religious divide

Tribal, ethnic or religious divisions complicate domestic politics. In Iraq, Shias comprise over 60% of the population. Saddam was apparently fiercely secular, and did not allow divisions to surface. After his fall, however, divisions were encouraged, and have now become a hydra-headed monster. In Bahrain, the Shias constitute about 70% of the population, but the ruling family is Sunni. The Bahraini Shias have taken great pains to publicly disassociate themselves from the Iranian Shias. Saudi Arabia, according to media reports, is home to a restive Shia minority. Reports also indicate that, in Yemen, the population is 52% Sunni and about 46% Shia -- however, it is not clear how this division may have contributed to the present turmoil against President Saleh. In Syria, President Bashar is from a minority Shia tribe,

and the majority Sunnis appear to be oppressed. In Jordan, the tribal loyalties are still very strong, while Palestinians form about two-thirds of the population. In Libya, the current unrest is led by groups who felt oppressed by Gaddafi's minority tribe. In the past, political leaders may have exploited differences; they now face the backlash.

Religious groups

The influence of religious groups was most prominent during the Iranian revolution of 1979. The MENA region did not allow political opposition, but did not disturb religious groups. This encouraged

opposition groups, even secular ones, to unite under the same umbrella and use the medium of mosques and madrassas for expressing their political views. The Muslim Brotherhood is one such example. With restrictions on political expressions being removed, the Muslim Brotherhood will need to redefine their role as well as their partners.

Food prices

Rising food prices have sometimes been a major contributor to riots. Net energy and food importing countries are particularly vulnerable when rising world commodity prices hurt the low-income people. Such countries (Yemen, Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia) typically have budget deficits which do not allow further subsidy at times of rising prices. The oil/gas rich countries, on the other hand, can avert such potential threats by subsidising food prices or by transfer grants.

Role of technology

Technology -- internet, satellite TV, phones -- have allowed people to

see what is happening beyond their borders. This has created a wave of rising expectations, both for political freedom as well as for economic opportunities. Phones, SMS, e-mails, Facebook, blogs, micro-blogs, etc. have been used effectively for internal coordination among the protesters.

Before such technology became available, revolutionaries used their own methods of information dissemination -- as we could see in the 1986 Philippines revolution. Even if governments imposed controls on electronic communication, the youth would inevitably converge in common meeting places, such as squares, and engage in mass demonstrations.

Economic structure

In most oil-exporting MENA countries, the ruling elite control the nation's oil wealth; in other countries, the elite have monopolistic or oligopolistic control of businesses. In oil-rich countries, the technology and projects are generally capital-intensive, and neither diversifies the economic base nor provides suitable employment to the local people. In general, the rent-seeking behaviour of the ruling elite alienates the masses, as the latter do not have the opportunity to share in the benefits.

Oil-rich countries have sometimes countered such feelings by cash transfers to the poorer segments. For instance, The Economist reported that, upon return to Saudi Arabia during the Egyptian crisis, the Saudi King announced a \$36 billion allocation for young people to marry, own homes, and to start businesses -- it is difficult to foresee a young man with such grants taking to the streets in support of a revolution!

Role of the West

The relationship of the MENA countries to the Western powers presents a fascinating study. On one end of the spectrum are countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt which were regarded as staunch allies of the West, while at the other end we

have countries such as Iran and Syria. When it suited them, the West even supported autocratic leaders, who gradually lost touch with their own peoples.

As demands for democracy in a country increased, and the leaders were unable to contain the situation, the West quickly reversed their policies of support to the leaders -- Tunisia, Egypt and Libya are clear examples. Unconfirmed reports indicate that Saudi leaders are unhappy with the change in US policy in the MENA region, particularly withdrawal of support for Mubarak.

Wrapping up

The triggers for a conflict to surface in any country will be specific to that country. For instance, the very presence of Arab and non-Arab communities in a country can lead to unusual circumstances. In Algeria, the Berbers have always been resentful of the oppression from the Arab-dominated military. In Bahrain, the Shias are Arab, while the Shias in Iran are non-Arab. In Iran itself, the Arab and the Sunni groups are the deprived minorities. In Lebanon, the complexity of politics of the religious and ethnic groups can be quite baffling to an outsider.

While we recognise the specificity of the circumstances in each country, we nevertheless find some common threads in the MENA countries. In fact, some of these causes are also appearing in the other developing countries, leading to considerable latent unrest, which occasionally surfaces as demonstrations in a specific area. There are important lessons for others.

The forthcoming article examines the impact of these disturbances, on the countries themselves and on the world as a whole, and hazards predictions on the likely scenarios that may unfold.

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