

Selected extracts from the April issue of Forum

Throes of volatility

QUAZI ZULQARNAIN ISLAM

FOR yours truly, perhaps the most symbolic moment in a World Cup at home soil came in the game against the West Indies. It was unfortunate, but a sparkling Friday afternoon was bastardised beyond repair by an inept performance from the Bangladesh side, which saw them capitulate to a nine-wicket loss, and more worryingly for the thousands, for a total score of just 58.

The details of that game are already fuzzy in my head, courtesy of a concerted effort to erase systematically my worst experiences, but the single image that is impressively burned in my memory was what transpired at the fall of the last Bangladesh wicket.

The mock cheers from the thousands who stayed on were yet to come, as was the blatant expression of anger by using the inimitable Bangla chant of "bhua bhua".

But when lanky left-arm spinner Suleiman Benn castled Rubel Hossain to snap up the last Bangladeshi wicket, the crowd were still too shocked to do anything but react instinctively.

It had all happened too quickly, almost in less time than it takes for

you to say 'daylight robbery' and the fans expressed their collective shock and disgust in the most instinctive of ways; hurling their 4 and 6 placards towards the playing field in unison.

The moment was truly amazing; a sudden outburst of confetti coming about in such perfect synchronisation that it created a flashbulb memory for those lucky enough to witness it. And best of all, it happened with a sense of timing that you could not teach in the best cricket schools, for this was harmony born out of the most collective of frustrations.

Sitting in the stands I could feel it too, and at the risk of sounding like a soothsayer, it was quite evident that this collective frustration that was emanating in droves from the faithful would take very little to spark into something far more dangerous.

And that was exactly what happened.

The West Indies team bus was stoned, Chris Gayle was upset and gave us the 'kiss-teeth' of disapproval - a World Cup, where Bangladeshi fans were continually being referred to as the best in the sub-continent, suddenly looked like



ANSUR RAHMAN

going kaput. The scenes were disheartening; many fans vented their frustrations almost as expressively as they had celebrated what was supposed to be a routine win against Ireland a week earlier. The public took to the streets as the cricket world looked on concernedly. Even the Bangladesh bus was

supposedly stoned as controversy and ill-feeling reigned supreme. Thankfully though, the situation was salvaged later, thanks to a wonderful show of solidarity and condolence from a set of level-headed fans who visited the West Indies team with flowers and sent a bouquet to Shakib Al Hasan as well. But

on that Friday afternoon you could tell that a storm was coming.

Most times, the average fan in Bangladesh is really an exceptional individual. In all probability, he has very little going for him; a tough job, if a job at all, shoddy living conditions, low pay, rising prices of essentials, suppressive family pres-

sures and no place to release such pent-up frustrations.

In such a scenario, the decked chairs of the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium, which in primary markets sold for less than BDT 250 a pop, proved an able conduit. This would give fans the opportunity to channel their latent frustration in the most constructive of ways; cheering on their national team to glory.

For this reason alone, many stood in line for upwards of 48 hours to land a precious voucher. Then they stood in line again to use that voucher to get an even more precious ticket. And then they stood in line again, to get a chance to get into the stadium. During the opening ceremony, some unlucky ones failed to get in even after going through the ordeal of the first two scenarios. During matches, some were stuck in lines so long that they missed their favourite players bat. Some fans bought cheap memorabilia off the streets only to find those and many other personal belongings snatched by security at the door.

For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum, available free with The Daily Star on April 4.

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Democracy and dogma in the Middle East

JALAL ALAMGIR

HERE are many among us who, at the first mention of religion and politics, wiggle their forefingers and shake their heads and tell us that the two should never mix. Religion is a matter of faith, they assert, and politics -- well, politics requires crafty calculations. Religion is a matter of rules, but in politics, anything goes and everything's negotiable.

The same wise people, educated in the West and "secular" like me, might point to the Muslim world and say, look what happens when dogma guides decisions: thieves get their hands chopped off and women are stoned to death. How can democracy take root in countries where medieval faith still shuts out modernity and reason?

The argument contains a truth and an irony. The truth is that dogma and faith have indeed shut out democracy in the Middle East for a long time. What's ironic is that the dogma of the "modern" West has been as anti-democratic as that of the Mullahs that the West likes to vilify.

Three beliefs, in particular, have conspired against democracy in the Middle East. First, Western leaders believed that

the world's oil flows would freeze unless pro-America governments controlled Arab countries. This belief goes back to 1945, when US President Franklin D. Roosevelt reached a deal with Saudi King Abdul Aziz to protect the Saudi regime in exchange for US access to Saudi oil.

The continuity of this belief overlooked the plain logic that oil-producing countries are critically dependent on oil revenues, and so it would be suicidal for them to stop selling oil regardless of who is in power. It also overlooked the fact that Western military adventures in the region have produced bigger spikes in oil prices than have Arab nationalisation of oil fields. Nonetheless, the faithful of the modern world have supported dictatorships across the region, and kept oil wells out of the reach of the masses.

The second belief was that right-wing dictatorships are preferable to left-wing nationalism. This belief originated in the Cold War and in postcolonial politics. In the 1950s and the 1960s, many newly-independent countries, fresh out of their colonial experience, took a strong position against capitalism and imperialism. Western countries intervened frequently across the

Third World to stamp out these

sentiments. Along the way, the West supported brutal governments, from Iran's Shah to Egypt's Mubarak to Indonesia's Suharto to every dictator in Pakistan from Ayub Khan to Pervez Musharraf. In a memorable sentence, US President Lyndon B. Johnson described this approach of keeping dictators as pets: "They may be bastards, but they're our bastards."

It is evident that the pursuit of this belief has not made the world more secure. Quite the contrary: it has left a thick trail of blood that continues to breed fierce anti-West spirits. In Indonesia alone, Suharto's government massacred half-a-million people, after branding them as communists and then denying them the right to organise. Pakistani generals, supported by the Nixon administration, sanctioned the massacre of millions of Bengalis in 1971. Add all these up, and you get an anti-democratic history of the West that is, as Arundhati Roy put it, "spongy with the blood of others."

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On the right side of history

IKHTIAR KAZI

ORTY years ago, the then Eastern "Wing" of Pakistan was fighting for the same ideals people from countries in the Middle East are fighting for today. The fight was for freedom -- the freedom to democratically choose their government, the right to hear their own voice and the desire to shape their destiny. Like all great fights, the fight began in the hearts of ordinary people, eventually boiling over into the streets. Just as those in East Pakistan, facing genocide may have wondered why the world stood in silence and why no one came to their support, those in the Middle East may be asking us the same questions today.

Throughout history, those with courage stood on the right side of history, while the silent majority opted for the easier option and watched with inaction.

Bangladeshis need to stand in support with the people of the Middle East, especially given its own history from just 40 years ago. By standing with the people of the Middle East, history will judge Bangladeshis to be on the right side of history.

As the people's movement in the Middle East takes hold and spreads,

those in power will do whatever is necessary to crush the movement, the same way the dictatorship in unified Pakistan had. The circumstances that led to the liberation movement in Bangladesh may be different from the circumstances that are driving the movement in the Middle East, however, the thread that unifies all revolutions are typically the same. In 1970, when Awami League leader Sheikh Mujib Rahman clearly won the national elections (the first election in unified Pakistan in over 10 years), Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People Party refused to allow the East Pakistan leader to ascend to Prime Minister. The leader from the Eastern Wing was a challenge to the status quo and the establishment of the Western Wing. Mr. Bhutto's "diplomatic" compromise: was to have co-prime ministers (one in the Eastern Wing and the other in Western Wing of Pakistan). As ridiculous as this idea was, it only highlights how the mind of dictators work; they will do whatever is necessary to hold on to power. In the end, the uprising of the ordinary Bengalis (and those of East Pakistan) led to the second partition of Pakistan in less than 25 years (India and the two wings of Pakistan

were partitioned for the first time in 1947).

Today in the Middle East, leaders such as Muammar al-Gaddafi of Libya, Bashar al-Assad of Syria and King Abdullah II of Jordan have a grip on power without being elected. Some of these leaders are charismatic and speak as if they are the rightful voice of the people they oppress and suppress. Many of these leaders are supported by the same democratic governments (of the West and East) that speak of universal freedom, liberty and justice. These Middle East rulers are given the highest level of reception when they make state visits, while other leaders of the same stripe are vilified as oppressive dictators.

Sure, there are different shades of dictators and authoritarian rule, as there are different shades of democracies; but we cannot support these unelected leaders regardless of the justification they give us or benevolence they claim to have.

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Transcending the current conflicts in the microfinance sector in Bangladesh

SYED M HASHEMI

The backlash against microfinance

IN spite of the great success of Microfinance Institutions (MFIs) in Bangladesh in providing financial access to over 20 million poor households, and that too through financially sustainable methodologies, the reaction here in Bangladesh, very interestingly, has been extremely ambivalent. While many celebrate the global focus Bangladesh receives in being one of the pioneering countries in promoting financial access, others, especially many policy makers and academics, see it as exploitative (through charging high interest rates and employing coercive repayment strategies) and ineffective (in

improving client conditions and reducing poverty). In fact there has recently been a renewed spate of criticism, based often on flimsy evidence. This stems on the one hand from an over selling of microfinance by advocates, and on the other a failure of opponents to truly understand poor people and their financial lives coupled with a limited vision on how best to facilitate a democratisation of the financial sector.

Microfinance impacts and poverty alleviation

Probably the greatest disservice to micro-finance stems from over-enthusiastic advocates claiming it to be a magic bullet for clients' economic improvements and poverty alleviation. Many case studies and client testimonials and anec-



tested through rigorous impact assessments, it becomes difficult to establish causality and state unambiguously that microfinance and microfinance alone leads to poverty alleviation or significant increases in incomes. This then becomes ammunition in the hands of critics who then point to the irrelevance of microfinance.

What critics and many advocates fail to appreciate is the real *raison d'être* of microfinance. It is about financial sector deepening, about opening access to the nearly three billion people in the world still without formal financial services, it is about providing a range of services -- credit, savings, remittances, domestic transfers, insurance, pensions, etc. -- that we take for granted, but that is unavailable to

the majority of the world. And even with credit and savings, it is not just about borrowing to set up economic enterprises. It is about payment for school and books, for health emergencies, for buying food stock when prices are low, for travel to the city to look for employment, and so many other activities that we use finance for. It is really about ensuring poor people have the same access and the same choices in the financial sector that we the privileged have. It is about democratising the financial sector.

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