

Repositioning Bangladesh using soft power



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

It is forty years since the birth of Bangladesh. During this time the country has travelled from Henry Kissinger's basket case to being almost a granary. From a non-existent industrial base it has moved to a country which produces much of its essential consumer items.

Our exports have burgeoned to an astonishing \$16 billion each year and our imports to \$21 billion annually. We now have foreign exchange reserves that can meet five months of import requirements. Remittances from our 8 million workers abroad amount to \$11 billion each year, in spite of a world wide economic recession. Our economy is on course for near 7% GDP growth in financial 2011 alone.

Look at our society at large. We have people from four different religious persuasions living side by side. Yet we do not have communal troubles. Terrorism in general is rare and religious extremism is on the wane. We are a democratic polity that has been voting regularly in elections since 1991. We have a vibrant media as well as a dynamic civil society. We Bangladeshis articulate our views on every subject on earth and can get away with verbal murder.

Although nature is not always kind to us, we Bangladeshis have survived natural calamities like flood, cyclone and drought at regular intervals. The people and our institutions have shown extreme resilience to disasters. We have demonstrated how much we are able to bear the burden of extreme pain and misery and then get on with our life.

Although we remain poor by any international standard, we are working to achieve middle income status by 2021. Our social indicators are well on the way to meeting Millennium goals. The people of Bangladesh who were once derided for being unfit for military service, have been fielding one of the largest UN peace-keeping forces for several years.

We have a Nobel Peace Prize recipient from among us. There are two

Bangladeshis who have scaled Mount Everest and we also have a Test playing cricket team. We have given the world the winning concept of microcredit which has now swept into 100 countries and made Bangladesh a household name in poverty alleviation and women empowerment. And don't forget we have protected the world famous Royal Bengal Tiger in our Sundarban and a Bangladeshi has mapped out the sequencing of the jute genome.

So how have we been able to do all this in spite of all the constraints?

Those of us who were privileged to visit or stay abroad for long periods in different countries have come back to Bangladesh to realise that in several matters we seem to be better than many other countries in the world.

In the long run it is our soft power or the attractiveness of Bangladesh through its ideas, ideologies and interests that can help us climb higher in rank among the comity of nations.

Take the case of our people. Bangladeshis are known for their simplicity, intelligence and spirituality. It is not that we do not have bad eggs among us. But time and again we have proved ourselves extremely reliable in many areas.

Many people do not know that Bangladesh is a world class paymaster. We have never defaulted on our international debts. We have also never overcharged our international trading partners. In fact, in many cases we have made the least possible profits only to get business for ourselves. Our manpower has also charged less in spite of having the same or similar qualifications as workers from our region. Our private sector is becoming a darling to many around the world.

It is in this context that Bangladesh needs to now assess its own characterisations, which also happen to be elements of soft power. We need to see if we can use them cleverly for our own good in the future.

But what is soft power?

Soft power is the ability to get what

you want, through attraction rather than coercion. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced. It is much more than "image, public relations and ephemeral popularity." It constitutes very real power -- a possibility to attain national objectives in a global context by a country.

It was Joseph Nye an American who in his seminal book on soft power outlined this concept and its ramifications. For example Nye says that Chinese students demonstrating in Tiananmen Square in Beijing used a replica of the Statue of Liberty as a symbol, and the Afghans fighting the Soviets asked for a copy of the Bill of

Rights. The Chinese are now using soft power to make themselves welcome throughout the world.

Thus, when you get others to admire your ideals and to want what you want, you do not have to spend as much on sticks and carrots (hard power) to move them in your direction. Seduction is always more effective than coercion.

Former US House Speaker Newt Gingrich aptly described the concept of soft power when he said: "The real key is not how many enemy do I kill. The real key is how many alliances do I gain."

But doing this requires well designed strategies and skillful leadership. Yet strategies are often inadequate and leaders frequently mis-judge.

Thus, if Bangladesh wishes to use soft power in international politics it has to display its dominant values, internal practices and policies and the manner of conducting foreign relations. If a country's culture and ideology are attractive, other nations are more willing to follow. Precepts

and teachings found in the literature of Tagore, Nazrul and Jashimuddin could be significant sources of our soft power.

All power has limits and soft power is no exception. It is much dependent upon the existence of willing interpreters as well as receivers of the power. Soft power is also volatile. Public perceptions of another country's values can change quickly.

But in all fairness it must be said that the attractiveness of Bangladesh to others is a composite of different ideas and attitudes. It lies partly in culture, in part on domestic policies and values and in part on the substance and style of our foreign policy. In any case, soft power is never static.

So how does one generate and effectively apply soft power?

We know that soft power resources are usually outside the control of governments. They are in the hands of individuals and non-governmental organisations. Soft power, therefore, works indirectly and can only shape the environment for policy. It can take years to produce desired results. But the government of Bangladesh through the conduct of cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy can enhance the image of the country and bring quick results.

The Bangladesh Diaspora is an effective medium to showcase our soft power. The internet can also bring many of our ideas and ideology to the attention of foreigners.

Setting up more libraries and information centers both at home and abroad as well as translating more Bangla literature into English are the other ways to project Bangladesh's soft power. Our visual and performing arts, fashion, cuisine and folk tales are also elements of this power.

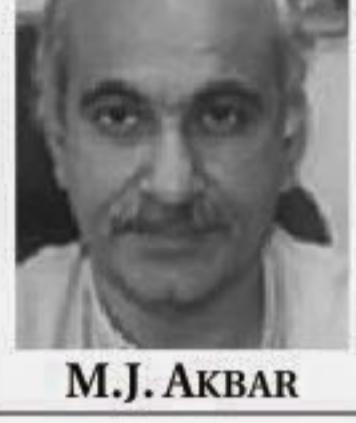
In the long run it is our soft power or the attractiveness of Bangladesh through its ideas, ideologies and interests that can help us climb higher in rank among the comity of nations. The concept of Grameen has shown the way.

Are we willing to build on such success and race ahead to further glory?

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BYLINE

You can't get bail at Guantanamo



M.J. AKBAR

THE rich are, as was well said, different from you and I: they have more money. In India, they have more lawyers.

Does this mean that they are also more guilty? The law must take its course; no argument about that. What happens, however, when law becomes part of the public discourse?

Justice is not merely judgement, but also process. If the process is flawed the verdict is vitiated. Courts accept this and warn against the inequity inherent in a "witch-hunt" or "trial by media." Civilised jurisprudence is based on evidence and statute, not individual or collective emotion.

Justice rests on a fundamental principle: you are innocent until proven guilty. No wrong can be corrected by an absence of rights. The concept of pro bono has been devised to help those who cannot afford legal counsel, so that they can defend themselves in a trial. A police charge-sheet is the start of a trial, not its conclusion.

If DMK MP Kanimozhi consults astrologers, then she has probably been told that every planet in her constellation has turned retrograde. In the summer of 2009 she was a queen in Chennai and a princess in Delhi. Today, she is defeated in Chennai and the most high-profile prisoner in Delhi. But she is in jail as an accused, not as a convict. There is

a world of difference between the two. If she is found guilty after due process, the judges must send her to prison as long as the law permits. But until that decision is made, she is innocent. In the interim, custody can only be a minimalist option, for a special set of reasons, for a finite and reasonable period. Instead, the CBI is demanding, and getting, what seems to be turning into an infinite extension of custody. This is injustice.

the gravity of an accusation, not the gravity of the crime. Crime is yet to be proven.

There is more than one opinion about what happened.

The government of India's official stand, stated in Parliament by telecom minister Kapil Sibal, is that there was no loss to government.

We all want to, and must, end corruption. But should we destroy the legal process in this effort?

There is one prison in the free world where you cannot get bail: Guantanamo, America's preferred penitentiary for suspected terrorists. We are, fortunately, nowhere near that ominous stage yet. But the road to many destinations, including hell, can be paved with good intentions.

India lives by a Constitution that guarantees life and liberty. Bail is not a gift from those who wield temporary power (fortunately, power can only be temporary in a democracy); it is a right. Otherwise, we are one step away from a police state, in which any citizen can be locked up at the arbitrary will of authority. This has happened before, during the Emergency. We thought it would never happen again.

The CBI wants all the accused in the 2G case be kept in jail indefinitely, despite the fact that their interrogation is over, or should be. The courts comply, citing two reasons. One of them is "gravity of the case." This is inaccurate. As it stands, there is only

The CBI is selective. There is evidence that Congress ministers were complicit in the decision through which 2G licences were granted. No action has been initiated against them. There is, however, neither administrative restraint nor legal constraint against the DMK, an ally which has been turned into a scapegoat to appear an outraged public.

The second official reason for denying bail is that the accused might tamper with evidence, or pressure potential witnesses. A. Raja and Kanimozhi were free for many weeks after proceedings began. If they did not tamper or pressure then, how can they do so now? This excuse is too thin to stand without an artificial prop.

Indian courts honour the right to bail. Wazlul Kamar Khan, whose name was on home minister P. Chidambaram's "Famous 50" list of wanted "terrorists" sent to Pakistan, has been given bail in Maharashtra. Terrorism, one presumes, is more worrisome than corruption, whichever way you want to draw the chart of judicial gravity. No one has called Raja or Kanimozhi a terrorist. Why should an accused in a terrorist case be given bail, but not them?

Very Important People get into trouble everywhere. The police are rarely polite; it isn't in their training manual. But the law respects the rights of an accused. Former IMF director Dominique Strauss-Kahn was arrested from an airplane, locked up in a small cell and paraded before cameras, unshaven and haggard. He has been indicted on seven counts, including sexual molestation of a hotel maid. But he is out on bail. Recently, American billionaire Raj Rajaratnam became the face of financial corruption when he was convicted for insider trading. But the New York police did not seek to jail him before judgement.

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The columnist is Editor, *The Sunday Guardian*, published from Delhi, *India on Sunday*, published from London and Editorial Director, *India Today* and *Headlines Today*.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 29

1453

Fall of Constantinople: Ottoman armies under Sultan Mehmed II Fatih capture Constantinople after a 53-day siege, ending the Byzantine Empire.

1918

Armenia defeats the Ottoman Army in the Battle of Sardarapat.

1919

Einstein's theory of general relativity is tested (later confirmed).

1948

Creation of the United Nations Peacekeeping Force the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation

1953

Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay become the first people to reach the summit of Mount Everest.

1964

The Arab League meets in East Jerusalem to discuss the Palestinian question, leading to the formation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

1988

U.S. President Ronald Reagan begins his first visit to the Soviet Union when he arrives in Moscow for a superpower summit with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

1990

The Russian parliament elects Boris Yeltsin president of the Russian SFSR.