

15th Amendment: Trust-building needed

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ON June 30, the Bangladesh Constitution underwent the 15th Amendment. The 15th Amendment Bill-2011 was passed with a huge margin of 291 to 1 votes. With the passage of this bill the caretaker government (CTG) system was banned and the provision of general election under political government was reintroduced.

Earlier in 2000, a petition was filed with the High Court (HC) challenging the legality of the CTG provision. Four years later, the HC declared the system legal but, in May this year, the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court (SC) declared it illegal. To enforce the verdict of the SC, the present government initiated the amendment to be passed in the parliament.

The CTG system, which was introduced through the 13th Amendment, was the ultimate product of mistrust and disrespect among the political parties. The BNP formed the government after the 5th Parliamentary election (1991). But, from the very beginning, the opposition parties in the parliament began to create pressure on the government to include the provision of CTG in the constitution.

In 1993, Jamaat-e-Islami, Awami League (AL) and Jatiya Party (JP) submitted their respective bills concerning CTG. The movement gained momentum after the controversial Magura and Mirpur by-elections during that BNP rule (1991-1996).

On the other hand, the government did not pay any heed to the demand raised by the opposition parties. On November 24, 1995, the government dissolved the 5th Parliament and the 6th Parliamentary election was scheduled for February 15, 1996. Major political parties led by AL boycotted the election and BNP formed the government again.

The country was heading towards massive



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political turmoil. Finally, finding no other way out, the BNP government introduced the CTG bill on March 21 during the first session of the 6th parliament, and the parliament was dissolved on March 30, 1996.

Since then, Bangladesh has had three consecutive general elections under the non-party CTG. Although those elections received wide recognition and appreciation of observers from both home and abroad, none of the losers accepted the election results. In the 7th Parliamentary election (1996) AL won and BNP rejected the result, alleging "massive rigging." In the 8th Parliamentary election (2001), BNP won the election and AL dismissed the result, alleging "crude rigging." In the last general election under CTG in 2008, the AL-led grand alliance won the election but the result was rejected by BNP.

The main disease of our political culture,

"mistrust" and "disrespect" among the political parties, was prevalent before the introduction of the CTG system, and is present even during the elections under CTG. So why should such an illegal and undemocratic provision remain in the constitution?

The CTG system raised a controversy among the main political parties on the issue of appointment of the chief adviser of the CTG. It contaminated not only the political system of our country but also led to the politicisation of the judicial system.

The passage of the 15th Amendment bill ensures the banning of the CTG, but it does not provide assurance of the absence of uncertainty from the political arena of the country.

That's why the responsibility of making the political environment "clout free" lies on the political parties, especially on the party in power. It should hold dialogues with other political parties, especially with the main opposition parties. The main opposition party should respond to

the invitation of the government to resolve the present crisis brought about by the 15th Amendment.

As per the new amendment, the Election Commission must be independent, stronger and more powerful to be able to hold free, fair and credible elections in a peaceful and democratic way. This will be possible only if our political parties can build up mutual trust, mutual respect and mutual compromise among themselves. As a fresh graduate of Political Science, I firmly believe that "trust-building" among the political parties is the perfect way to address any "political uncertainty" and any future undemocratic rule by a third party in the politics of Bangladesh.

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SHIFTING IMAGES

Licence to live again?



MILIA ALI

IMAGINE Sherlock Holmes or James Bond strolling down the streets of Manhattan, ordering a burger at a twenty first century fast food joint. The very thought is bizarre! However, the "bizarre" may not be far from reality. Some literary estates who own copyrights for popular literary characters are commissioning new authors to write "second generation" novels, centered on famous characters from the past. While maintaining the original flavour

of the classics, these novels re-invent the principal characters to suit the tastes and preferences of modern readers.

The most recent example of a licensed novel is Jeffery Deaver's "Carte Blanche," which presents a new version of Ian Fleming's James Bond. The contemporary 007 is a 30-year-old, whose favourite gadget is a mobile phone which performs multiple functions needed for spying. The new Mr. Bond is more "gender sensitive," and is expected to appeal to the modern generation of women. Besides, 007 is no longer fighting the communists or Dr. No -- the setting and plot have changed. The locale is now Afghanistan and the new war is against terrorism.

Bond is not the only one who is getting a new life. Sherlock Holmes, the famous 19th century detective created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, is also being reincarnated by British author Anthony Horowitz. However, unlike Bond, Holmes has not been "retrofitted." Horowitz has decided to keep the character true to its original form. So, what will be new? The author claims that he is going to pen Sherlock Holmes novels with a fresh approach, where the story line will change, although the period and characters will remain the same. Horowitz believes that the forensic knowledge and information base that 21st century writers work with allows them to tread

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into "areas that Doyle couldn't have touched at his time."

Bond and Holmes' new avatars raise some serious questions about the role of authors in creating, shaping and constructing characters that in some ways impact the reader's persona. Most of us read books, not only for the portrayal of the protagonists or the theme of the story, but also for the ambiance the writer creates with a distinctive style. It may be possible to emulate this style by using the same vocabulary, sentence structure, or even plot pattern; but would it really have the same effect on our psyche?

We now know that a brain scan can graphically depict our emotional reactions to music, books or paintings. What if a book is authored, using the basic literary ingredients that would generate the same emotions? Would it still impact us in a similar way? We don't know the answer. However, what we do know is that, when we read Shakespeare or Tagore, we cannot define, in tangible terms, how their works inspire us or what subtleties in their writings make us feel a certain way. Which is why it's a little disconcerting to think that the literature industry believes that by franchising brand names to the best bidder, they can recreate the same magic for the readers.

The prospect of resurrecting famous literary figures from the past in a modern context perplexed me for several days. The question that I was struggling with was basic: the process may be ethically above controversy, but does it, in some ways, diminish the appeal of the original? Are we going to reckon with literary pastiches? I decided to raise the subject in my weekly Literature Group discussions. While most members voted against rebooting famous fictional characters with a new "facelift," my friend Judy, an intense reader and astute critic, offered an interesting viewpoint. She referred to the novel "March" by Geraldine Brooks.

According to Judy, Brooks presents an entirely new dimension to Louisa May Alcott's classic "Little Women." Her story is about the mysterious father, Mr. March, who is mentioned, but never appears in the novel. Thus, Brooks has been able to pen an original novel, which brings to life a famous literary character, whose absence left an aura of mystery in Alcott's novel. The author succeeds in recapturing the nostalgia for "Little Women," without tarnishing the image of the characters.

It would be interesting to examine the topic from a somewhat different perspective. We could draw a parallel between replicating fictional characters and creating human clones. Of course, the prospect of cloning is fraught with many hurdles and pitfalls, not to mention legal and ethical concerns. However, today, genetic scientists believe that, theoretically, it may be possible to create a cloned replica of a human being in the near future. But, even if we could develop clones of notable personalities after their demise, the surroundings they lived and thrived in would have altered to a large extent. Consequently, it is highly probable that they might not have the same impact on people.

This is also true of characters from novels. We may construct literary clones of famous fictional detectives, but the thrill and excitement that an original generates cannot be replicated, mainly because of the changed milieu. Imagine Hercule Poirot (from Agatha Christie's mystery novels) wearing jeans and a polo T-shirt, without his moustache and strong accent, driving a Porsche sports model -- could he be, even, a distant replica of the Poirot that many of us have grown up to admire? After all, Poirot was a creation of Christie's literary genius. And, creativity is impossible to replicate with a franchise!

In fact, I wonder what Fleming or Doyle would say about the reincarnation of Bond and Holmes? We will never know. But I do know one thing for sure -- I don't want my favourite literary character transported to an unknown future, with no prospect of a return trip to his/her familiar comfort zone!

Am I too old fashioned, or just stuck in a time warp?

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Republicans Vs. World

DAVID GREENBERG

AFTER Barack Obama announced new troop withdrawals from Afghanistan last week, it was no surprise to hear rebukes from the mushrooming field of Republican presidential candidates. The surprise came in what they said: Although some predictably implied that he was looking to cut and run, several others declared the move too little, too late.

That break from the usual Republican hawkishness has also been on view in the House, where Republican leaders have faulted the president for using force in Libya without Congressional authorization, especially now that he has run afoul of the War Powers Act. And balanced-budget mania has enabled talk of scaling back defense spending of a sort that Republicans would once have never dared broach.

Suddenly, after the aggressive, militaristic foreign policy of the Bush years, isolationism -- a stance that rejects America's leadership role in the world -- is on the rise among Republicans. But if this comes as an abrupt break, it is also a return to form: The impulse to retreat from the world stage has a long and hardy pedigree within Republican ranks. And while a dose of caution among conservatives can be refreshing, a Tea Party-led reversion to a dogmatic America First stance could damage both the party and the country.

Modern Republican isolationism began with the 1919 battle over joining the League of Nations, when Senate Republicans, led by so-called Irreconcilables like William Borah of Idaho, killed the deal -- even though without American guidance, European affairs were doomed to explode again. A pattern emerged, as liberal Democrats, along with Northeastern Republicans, wanted America to actively manage world affairs, while the Republicans' powerful Midwestern and Western factions viewed cooperative international ventures as dangerously entangling alliances.

The isolationists had complex motives: Congressional vigilance against presidential encroachments on their constitutional powers; a small-town obsession with balanced budgets;

and conspiratorial suspicions of foreigners, financiers and -- in the case of anti-Semites like Charles A. Lindbergh -- Jews. Naturally, isolationism thrived among Congressional Republicans when a Democrat held the White House -- as it does again today -- but it continued through the Coolidge and Hoover years, too.



The doctrinaire call to drastically scale back our global leadership role has usually led us into error, making the world a more chaotic and dangerous place. Following the path of isolationism today won't serve America well. Nor will it help the Republicans.

Later, Republicans resisted Franklin D. Roosevelt's efforts to gird the nation for war, passing legislation that limited rearmament and support for European allies. Only the bombing of Pearl Harbor banished the isolationists to the margins.

Some thought World War II, which proved the need for American leadership, would kill off isolationism. Yet with Harry S. Truman as president and the Republicans running Congress after 1946, members of the party's Midwestern faction -- led by Sen. Robert A. Taft of Ohio -- vainly fought efforts to promote collective security, including NATO and the Marshall Plan.

Right-wing isolationism seemed to die again after 1952, when Dwight D. Eisenhower, an internationalist, vanquished Taft in an epic bat-

tle for the presidential nomination. As vigorous a Cold Warrior as Truman, Eisenhower articulated a staunch anti-Communism behind which most of his party could unite.

Yet the GOP's isolationist strain, though submerged, remained alive. Shattering the Cold War consensus, the Vietnam War not only spawned a new "Come Home, America" sentiment on the left but also brought out the old-fashioned isolationism of Midwestern reactionaries like the activist Phyllis Schlafly and the radio host Paul Harvey. In a 1976 vice presidential debate, Sen. Bob Dole, the Republican nominee, seethed over the century's four "Democrat wars."

A string of internationalist GOP presidents, from Richard M. Nixon to the first George Bush, helped recast the Republicans on foreign policy, but isolationism emerged once more in the 1990s. Several events -- the fall of the Soviet Union, the perception that Bush's foreign affairs focus blinded

him to economic suffering at home -- led Republican congressmen to oppose President Bill Clinton's myriad global initiatives, from the Balkan campaigns to U.N. financing to arms control treaties. Given the Republican chest-thumping after 9/11, it was easy to assume that the party had finally and completely jettisoned its isolationist tendencies. But a decade later, with fear of Islamist terrorism subsiding, they are again in evidence, at a moment when the world needs America to play a stabilizing role. And this time, the GOP's old Eastern wing, which used to provide internationalist ballast, is almost nonexistent.

A healthy democracy needs critics, particularly when it engages in risky overseas adventures. But the doctrinaire call to drastically scale back our global leadership role has usually led us into error, making the world a more chaotic and dangerous place. Following the path of isolationism today won't serve America well. Nor will it help the Republicans.

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