

GROUND REALITIES

Political confrontation

Leaders oblivious of impact on the economy

WHILE the rest of the world is bracing for the coming economic crisis, we are bleakly staring at the prospect of a severe political confrontation. Our political leaders are behaving as if we live in an isolated world not linked to a global market, as if global economic turmoil has no impact on us. Already rising oil price is straining our foreign exchange reserve and the protests in the Arab world have negatively impacted on our manpower export. Garment industry having done well is nervous about the impact of the financial crisis in the Eurozone.

Given all our vulnerability we are blissfully moving towards a political confrontation. Yes, Bangladesh's economy has done well in spite of the global recession. But it is well known that our economy is extremely fragile and the slightest of changes and turbulence in the external situations can cause havoc in the domestic market.

It is in relation to the economy that we find the activities of our political leaders quite incomprehensible. The opposition has been asking for this government to quit from the very beginning. Why, we have never been able to understand. On the government's side abolishing the caretaker system, without consulting the opposition, was a decision that no opposition in Bangladesh would ever accept. The AL would not have accepted such a decision if BNP had done it while in power.

We are greatly relieved that BNP's car march to Sylhet went peacefully. We are also happy that AL did not try to obstruct it. More of such car march in the future will increase the possibility of clash and violence. Before the political situation gets more volatile and political parties get more entrenched in their respective positions can we plead for some sort of dialogue. As we have seen in the past, political conflicts were never resolved by force. At the end, there had to be some understanding.

The simple truth is that our economy will not be able to absorb a prolonged political strife, and most of our gains may be lost because of this mindless confrontation.

Passing of a musical legend

The void will be difficult to fill

LEGENDARY Ghazal singer Jagjit Singh's sudden passing due to a brain hemorrhage on October 10, 2011 leaves millions of admirers around the world deeply saddened.

Known as the "Ghazal King", he was famous for having revived the more traditional, classical Ghazals. However, one of Jagjit Singh's biggest talents and attributes was the fact that he popularised the art of singing Ghazals on a large scale, reaching millions of people of all age groups and social backgrounds. Many younger artists today have begun blending Ghazals and popular music but it was Jagjit Singh who can be credited as the pioneer in doing so. The serene quality in his voice reached far beyond the borders of India, his homeland, spanning half a century.

Born into a Sikh family in 1941 in Rajasthan, India, his innate musical talent was first noticed by his father, who sent his young son to learn music from talented musicians such as Pandit Chhaganlal Sharma and Ustad Jamal Khan. This gradually gave rise to the beauty and grace of the singer who truly grew into becoming one of the most talented Ghazal singers the world has ever known, giving this form of music an innovative and original style.

Among his many admirers are Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his wife. Perhaps Mr. Singh said it best when he said that Jagjit Singh would be remembered for his "golden voice". He also added in his condolence message that Jagjit Singh "made Ghazals accessible to everyone and gave joy and pleasure to millions of music lovers in India and abroad."

The world has genuinely lost one of the greatest musicians of his time. We deeply mourn the death of this musi-



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE Bangladeshi air force caused quite a bit of a stir a few days ago when it came forth with its views relating to the controversy over the planned metro rail network in the nation's capital. It sought to explain to the nation why it thought the network would benefit citizens if the route went by way of the khamarbari area. That was a fine expression of sentiment. But the surprise for us is in the fact that a defence force suddenly thought it wise to acquaint citizens with news of all the good that could accrue from a project undertaken in the public interest. Interestingly, the air force said not a word about the uproar caused by its reservations about the original plan of the metro's following a path around Bijoy Nagar. Air force flight operations, it was said at the time the reservations of the air force came to be known, would be at risk if the original metro plan was followed through.

It is not a pretty picture, for reasons that should be obvious. The country has been informed that the prime minister has acceded to the air force request that the metro rail be re-routed through khamarbari. Of course, it is the right of the head of government to decide any and all issues having a bearing on the public

Metro rail and the public interest

interest. The bigger matter here, though, relates to the authority of government to take a decision and then see it enforced. Democratic governance is all about the nation and its interests as a whole. It is never about a part of the governmental structure (and the air force is part of that structure) taking upon itself the role of a pressure group, leaning on the political leadership and influencing policy makers into shaping objectives or changing decisions already taken by the adminis-

tration. The prime minister and her cabinet colleagues ought to have made it known to the air force that while it is all right for an arm of the government to come up with its suggestions on an issue, it is all wrong for it to make those suggestions when the larger public interest is involved.

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what had been marked out by Louis I. Kahn as a park hugging a lake. However you might wish to take a walk there today, you cannot escape the feeling that the place has mutated somewhat into a large, single-grave cemetery. And there is too another cemetery on the other side of the parliament structure. Not long ago, very proper questions were raised when the government of the day cheerfully went into the job of building homes for the speaker and deputy speaker of parliament on the

Jatiyo Sangsad premises. Must one more blow now be struck at one of our last remaining emblems of aesthetic grandeur? Speaker Abdul Hamid has given us, somewhat, reason to think that the Jatiyo Sangsad just might be spared the humiliation of seeing part of its land, with all the canopy of trees there, commandeered by the metro rail only because the air force has put its foot down on the original plan. The speaker informs us that he will not allow parliament land to be lost to the metro. One does hope he will be as good as his word, that he will be able to convince the prime minister that having the metro go by or across parliament land will degrade not merely the Jatiyo Sangsad but also the environment. For her part, the prime minister assures us that the metro will not affect Parliament and its surroundings in any way. Should it not have been a much better proposition for her to have assured the air force that a metro under the original plan would pose no security risk to it or the army?

The charm of elected government comes through its ability to exercise authority over every department and every facet of administration. This beauty is marred when elected government is seen to be ready and willing to wilt under pressure. That is a dangerous condition to be in. And it is because something of the irrefutable comes into the business of administering a country.

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Ten years in, Afghan myths live on

BENJAMIN D. HOPKINS AND MAGNUS MARSDEN

TEN years after invading Afghanistan, on Oct. 7, 2001, the obvious question is whether or not the United States has won the war. Osama bin Laden's death suggests the defeat of al-Qaeda. But even after the planned withdrawal of 30,000 American troops by late 2012, nearly 70,000 will remain on the ground.

Despite all the talk about counterterrorism, the war has never been so narrowly conceived or fought. The United States and its allies have consistently pursued a mission of state-building. The current American strategy of handing over "ownership" of the war rests on obtaining local "buy in" -- both to the counterinsurgency as well as the larger state-building project -- by winning Afghan "hearts and minds."

But this approach has been tried, and failed, in the past. Indeed, the British Empire followed the same flawed strategy more than a century ago.

Nearly all elements of the current counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan, from "clear and hold" tactics to arming "tribal militias," have their origins in the activities of British colonial administrators. The most important of these was Sir Robert Groves Sandeman, who in 1891 insisted that to control the people of the Afghan frontier, the British had to appeal to their "hearts and minds" (and pockets).

By "knowing the tribes," Sir Robert believed he could rule them through their "traditions" -- something both more legitimate in the eyes of the tribesmen and cheaper for the colo-

nia state. However, many of the "traditions" he employed were at least partly colonial creations.

Sir Robert recruited locals into state-sponsored militias to police themselves. But rather than bolstering state authority, Sir Robert planted the seeds of discord. Arming local factions proved a poor instrument for establishing central control. The people of the frontier came to inhabit a nebulous no-man's land where the state exercised little control over them. Today, this area is known as Pakistan's Tribal Areas.

The United States and its allies have largely mimicked the policies of British India's frontier administra-

Kunduz told us: "Before, there were people who were with the government by day and Taliban by night. Now there are people who are *arbakai* in the day and thieves at night." Even authority figures in regions where the *arbakai* is indigenous, like Paktia Province, told us that it "won't work now: 30 years of war means that everybody acts independently, not according to tradition."

Afghanistan is not a country of primitive tribes cut off from the modern world. The singular focus on tribes, the Taliban, and ethnicity as the keys to understanding and resolving the conflict misses the

important economic roles at home and abroad. They export used Japanese cars from Dubai to Central Asia and precious stones to Hong Kong and Sri Lanka. They sell medicinal plants to India and Germany and regularly cross the region seeking new economic opportunities, connecting Afghans with the world beyond. In spite of Afghanistan's poverty, these traders are central to the economy and critically important to the stability of the Afghan state.

Like the fixation on tribal tradition, the West's obsession with corruption obscures the intricate social and economic networks that define modern Afghanistan. As the British experience of the late 19th century shows, a simplistic and unceasing focus on "tradition" as an exit strategy will not establish a stable Afghan state.

If America and its allies hope to identify and partner with Afghans who are willing and able to build a stable political and economic future, they must set aside the stale caricatures about "tradition" that have long dominated thinking about the region.

Unless they do, 10 years of fighting, an investment of over \$400 billion by American taxpayers, and the deaths of more than 2,700 allied military personnel, not to mention an unknown number of Afghans, will have been for naught.

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tors. They have made extensive use of what they understand to be "native traditions" to bolster their authority. American soldiers sit in tribal *jirgas*, or assemblies, to win the support of local elders; tribal militias called *arbakai* are recruited to police the populace. But rather than showing the sophistication of the military's cultural knowledge, these efforts merely demonstrate to Afghans the coalition's poor understanding of local cultures.

The *arbakai*, an institution foreign to northern Afghanistan, may in fact lead people there to consider the Taliban favourably. As one local from

nuances of the region's past and present. Rather than fanatical tribesmen or poor victims in need of aid, many of these people are active and capable participants in a globalised economy.

The international focus on "corruption" tends to paint Afghan merchants as venal and incapable. Afghan entrepreneurs are dismissed as immoral profiteers, cronies of warlords or international drug smugglers. Such views are dangerous: These are the people who will fill the void left when international subsidies to the Afghan government end. In fact, Afghan merchants play

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

October 12

539 BC

The army of Cyrus the Great of Persia takes Babylon.

1960

Cold War: Nikita Khrushchev pounds his shoe on a desk at United Nations General Assembly meeting to protest a Philippine assertion of Soviet Union colonial policy being conducted in Eastern Europe

1983

Japan's former Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei is found guilty of taking a \$2 million bribe from Lockheed and is sentenced to 4 years in jail.

1984

Brighton hotel bombing: The Provisional Irish Republican Army attempt to assassinate Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her cabinet.

1986

Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom and Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh visit the People's Republic of China.

1999

Pervez Musharraf takes power in Pakistan from Nawaz Sharif through a bloodless coup.