

Holy Ashura

Its profound message is timeless

The month of Muharram reminds us of the epic saga of sacrifice made by the Holy Prophet's (Peace Be Upon Him) grandson Imam Hussein (RA) along with his near and dear ones against the vicious machinations of Yazid. It was on this day, Ashura, falling on the 10th of Muharram that he together with his family and companions spearheaded a righteous fight in the battlefield of Karbala against Yazid, a ruler of sinister intent who till this day represents cruelty, greed and injustice. Hussein (RA) thus showed that it is nobler to die courageously in defense of one's faith and conviction than to yield to the nefarious, selfish design of a pretender.

Yazid proved victorious only in material terms and in the sense that with this victory he and his marauding forces could pursue all their sinister motives unchallenged for a while. Imam Hussein (RA) and his companions, on the other hand, fought till their death with their courage unshaken and their faith unfaltering to score a moral victory over the forces of evil.

Today, as the Muslims all over the world mourn the supreme sacrifice of Imam Hussein (RA), we would like to focus on the message this day imparts to the followers of Islam and the mankind in general. It has a transcendental significance in that the world has not ceased to be a place without conflict, often violent between the forces of justice and fair play and those of injustice and expropriation. The event is a glorious historical reference point but more than that it has a moral import as far as the perpetual fight between the good and bad and the ultimate triumph of the former against the latter are concerned. Also, Ashura demonstrates that even though the evil may have an upper hand over good for a time, it can only be hollow and ephemeral. In other words, the holy occasion is a beacon of inspiration for holding on to what is right, just and true and also to live and die for it.

Tipai's efficacy

Move beyond reiteration of assurances

We have now the reported categorical statement of the Indian Prime Minister made recently in Manipur that the dam on Tipaimukh would be built and that environmental clearance has already been accorded to the project.

This, read with the statements of the PM's foreign affairs and economic advisors, that they have returned fully satisfied with the guarantee that the dam would have no adverse impact on Bangladesh, rather it would be beneficial for us, create considerable confusion in ones mind. Apart from the fact that such assurances remain a common refrain of India, there remains considerable opposition to the project even in Manipur and other NE states of India.

Given that studies, whatever there are on both sides of the border on the Tipai project's impact, catalogue a slew of detrimental outcomes of the dam both on the environment and ecology, we are not certain as to what is the basis of such a view. We feel that there should be more than mere verbal assurances. Statements must stem from facts and figures and calculations. We have nothing substantive as far as those are concerned.

Reportedly, two of the Indian agencies, the Sutlej Jal Vidyut Nigam and National Hydro Power Corporation will conduct a study on the project before commencing work. This causes one to wonder why the study now when the decision to move ahead with the project has already been taken.

We are also confused about the joint survey issue. Thus while we are told by the PM's advisors that India is ready to carry out survey jointly, we are told in the same breath that Delhi would inform Dhaka about the 'outcome of the survey.' So where will be the 'jointly' in that survey?

Mere reiteration of assurances can no longer assuage us in this matter. The issue is of serious concern to us. And before Bangladesh can even start considering being a partner in the project it should have its fears allayed in a substantive manner. The stated position of experts in Bangladesh is that the two countries should undertake a joint survey and let the 'good' and the 'bad' of the project emerge from the joint study. Only then should one decide whether it would be prudent to pro-

What you want, what you get

MANZOOR HASAN

INSTITUTIONS matter because economic growth is dependent on economic institutions, and the latter is in turn shaped by the nature of political power and structure, and ultimately by the prevailing political institutions. An authority on institutions, Douglass North, says: "Institutions are the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction." A cursory review of literature on institutions leads us to the conclusion that differing growth in countries is predominantly due to the nature and quality of institutions in existence.

Over the last two decades many scholars have undertaken research on the transforming state of institutions in Bangladesh. Think tanks and civil society organisations have conducted household surveys to assess public perceptions of institutions in terms of either their integrity or the quality of services they are delivering to the general public. Suffice to state that certain critical institutions are performing poorly.

Earlier this year, The Daily Star and Nielsen conducted a survey , which revealed interesting findings. Respondents were asked to rate the performance of the courts, the police and the bureaucracy. 45%, 27% and 27% were aggregately satisfied or very satisfied in metro areas with courts, police and bureaucracy, respectively. Rural respondents were substantially more satisfied and very satisfied (aggregate figures of 58%, 47% and 38%, respectively).

The table below provides examples of citizens' satisfaction of other institutions:

In terms of citizens' dissatisfaction the police top with 50%, followed by parliament (30%) and courts (28%).

	Metro	Rural
Parliament	49%	65%
Anti-corruption Commission	52%	60%
Bangladesh Election Commission	62%	69%
Local Government Institutions	54%	64%

Source: Daily Star-Nielsen Survey, 2011

Respondents were asked whether "the courts are independent from political influence." More than the majority (56%) replied negatively, and only 21% responded positively. When asked whether "there is law and order" nearly half the respondents said "no" (22% were undecided) in the metro areas but the rural respondents were more favourable, confirming a distinct metro-rural divide.

The survey posed a number of

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other questions about various key institutions of accountability, such as, parliament, courts, police, local government institutions, Election Commission and others. 95% of respondents considered the parliament to be either important (28%) or very important (67%). For courts the figures were 90% (total), 36% (important) and 54% (very important). Similarly for police they were 84% (total), 39% (important) and 44% (very important).

Over the years similar surveys have been conducted. The Daily Star-Nielsen survey corroborates previous findings and analyses, which indicate that citizens clearly value well-

functioning institutions. How then do we explain the continuous weakening of essential political and constitutional institutions?

One may think that the answer may be in the lack of proper institutions in Bangladesh. That is not the case. As the 2008 State of Governance in Bangladesh report summarises: "Oversight institutions in Bangladesh enjoy the necessary Constitutional and statutory protection but their leadership has unfortunately not been pro-active enough to exercise this in their favour. Rather, in many cases they are perceived to be partisan and compliant to external pressure. There is exten-

sive evidence of executive influence through avenues of human resources and budget."

How do we explain this continuous weakening of essential political and constitutional institutions? If we assume that institutions are meant to establish certain rules of the game setting "constraints" on human behaviour and "in consequence they structure incentives in human exchange, whether political, social, or economic" then why are our institutions compromised, politically interfered with and under-resourced? A possible answer could be that despite being a parliamentary form of democracy ("de jure" status) Bangladesh is

"de facto" an illiberal democracy with all political power in the hands of a small group. In other words, Bangladesh has remained trapped in the mindset of the first twenty years (1971-1991) of its existence. The second twenty years (1992-2011), despite the façade of democracy and semblance of institutional development, have seen the practice of "Russian-roulette" politics embodying reckless behaviour of a few.

Such a narrow base of political and economic power, which has intensified over the last 20 years, has gradually led to the undermining of the "constraints on behaviour" because it is in the interest of the few to do so -- accumulation of resources by all means. Therefore, with such accumulation of resources the greater the incentive to continue with the "Russian-roulette" politics of "winner-takes-all" and the elimination of rival political power holders. The sad conclusion is that, given such a political power configuration, the key institutions will continue to be undermined. These institutions will fail to serve the majority of Bangladeshis, particularly the poorer segments, until there is "a sufficiently large change in the distribution of political power" within the Bangladeshi society.

Bangladesh, unlike many other comparable countries, has many positives, particularly Bangladeshis' strong faith in democratic governance. Unfortunately, recent history is replete with leadership failure to reciprocate by delivering a better quality of life for Bangladeshis. Changes take time but it is never too late to make a start.

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| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

The US-Russian reset in recess

DMITRI TRENIN

RUSSIAN President Dmitri Medvedev's warning last week of measures Russia will take if the United States and Nato continue with their missile-defense programme in Europe, while sounding tough, is not the end of the US-Russian reset. It is more of a pre-election recess of Russian-American diplomacy.

But his statement, and more broadly the state of US-Russian arms-control efforts, reveals a broad gap in how the nuclear powers perceive each other's importance. For Washington, Russia has fallen far down on the list of priorities. The Russian political and security establishment, by contrast, continues to be obsessed with the US.

In the televised statement, Medvedev warned that should the US continue with plans to base antimissile systems in Europe, Russia would arm its ballistic missiles with advanced defense-penetration systems, deploy tactical missiles on the border with Poland, and possibly withdraw from the New Start nuclear arms reduction treaty.

The tough talk was provoked by Medvedev's widely anticipated failure at a meeting with President Obama in Honolulu earlier this month to secure a formal assurance that the Nato system could not be used against Russia's intercontinental ballistic missiles. Obama's refusal has its reasons, one of which is domestic. In some respects, for the White House to negotiate with the Republicans in Washington and even with parts of the US government on any arms deal with Russia is more difficult than talking with the Russians.

As for Russia, a year after the promising Lisbon Nato summit -- at which Russia and the alliance declared that they were on a path toward a strategic partnership -- and less than a year before the US presidential elections -- the Russians have concluded that they have nothing to expect from Obama on arms issues in the remainder of his term.

As responses go, Medvedev's may not have been particularly smart, but the damage so far is not great, either.

One of the measures listed by the Russian president -- a radar system



PHOTO: THE NEW YORK TIMES

Unless the US-Russian diplomatic recess is used for building channels for intense trust-building dialogue between Russia, on the one hand, and the US and its allies on the other, mutual assured destruction will remain the foundation of security in the Euro-Atlantic.

under construction in Kaliningrad -- is about early warning of a missile attack, not about countering Nato's future missile defenses.

Similarly, giving Russia's new strategic nuclear warheads a better capability to penetrate missile defenses is a long-standing programme, which will continue as long as deterrence remains the mainstay of the US-Russian strategic relationship. As for New Start, there is little that Russia can gain from quitting the treaty. Before it does so, it should look back on the experience of the US-Soviet arms race and its role in the terminal exhaustion of the Soviet Union.

Medvedev's darker, but also more distant threat to deploy Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad and Krasnodar to target Poland and Romania, is, of course, anything but smart. By threatening the countries that will host US interceptors, Russia will refurbish its reputation as a security threat to Europe and help solidify Nato, and it could lead to a new confrontation if the US responds by raising the ante and creating a threat to Russia analogous to the Euromissiles of the early 1980s.

With Europe and Russia having slipped down on the Pentagon's priority list, a new Cuban missile crisis appears improbable. Nonetheless, the failure to agree on missile defenses in the past year has revealed important and troubling things about the American and Russian security establishments.

Beyond Afghanistan, and to some extent Iran, the US sees Russia as a low-value partner. It does see it as a security risk in view of the anti-Americanism of much of Russia's elite and Moscow's close ties with a number of anti-US regimes. But as America becomes ever more focused on the Asia-Pacific region, it is basically ignoring Russia, whose presence and influence there are considered negligible.

The Russians, on the contrary, persist in seeing the US through the old Soviet prism of a superpower confrontation. Most officials in Moscow refuse to accept Iran as the real rationale for the US/Nato missile-defense efforts, and see them as a cover for undermining the Russian deterrent. Hence the insistence on a dual key, which would give Moscow the means

to block Nato's system; or the idea of a sectoral defense, which would ban Nato assets from northern Europe, from where they could threaten Russian missiles; and essentially a demand, in the form of legally-binding guarantees, for a new ABM treaty.

The situation is clearly asymmetrical: While the US does not care much about Russia, the Russians' pride refuses to accept this, preferring to believe that the US is only dissimulating its deep-seated desire to diminish and, if possible, destroy Russia.

One can certainly live with that, but both governments would do themselves a lot of good if they started to amend the state of affairs between them. Russia will not be a US ally, but there are a number of areas in which the Russian connection has been and will continue to be useful for Washington: nonproliferation, terrorism, and regional issues, including in the Asia-Pacific.

For Russia, seeking to regain the status of a politico-military peer of the United States, and, through rearmament, restore the balance of terror as the only acceptable basis for the bilateral relationship, can come only at a high cost, both financial and political.

Despite the lack of progress so far, missile defense continues to be a potential game changer in the woefully archaic strategic relationship between Washington and Moscow. Russia needs to take a hard look at its negotiating position and cleanse it of the unrealistic and essentially useless demands for formal guarantees of US nonaggression. The U S, for its part, needs to hold out a prospect of serious technological transfers to Russia as part of missile-defense cooperation.

Unless the US-Russian diplomatic recess is used for serious homework and building channels for intense trust-building dialogue between Russia, on the one hand, and the US and its allies on the other, mutual assured destruction, as during the Cold War, will remain the foundation of security in the Euro-Atlantic.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 6

1240

Mongol invasion of Rus: Kiev under Danylo of Halych and Voivode Dmytro falls to the Mongols under Batu Khan.

1768

The first edition of the Encyclopædia Britannica is published.

1941

World War II: The United Kingdom declares war on Finland in support of the Soviet Union during the Continuation War.

1971

Pakistan severs diplomatic relations with India following New Delhi's recognition of Bangladesh.

1992

The Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, India is demolished, leading to widespread riots causing the death of over 1500 people.