

Three years of detachment from the people

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ABOUT a year ago, the AL govern-ment's performance came into serious scrutiny after its dismal showing in a local mayoral election and the two parliamentary by-elections. It was expected that the government would take the people's message into serious cognisance and would initiate drastic steps to metamorphose the mode of governance in coming days in order to arrest its sliding down the slope of popularity. However, a few of the government actions in the midst of those debacles and thereafter did not reflect any signal of change in the means and the modes of the governance.

When the government completed its third anniversary the other day, the decline of its popularity did not surprise any political observer. According to *The Daily Star* opinion survey, the rating of the government performance in all aspects and the overall popularity of the government have declined significantly over the last one year. For instance, a year ago only 29% of the respondents were dissatisfied with the performance of the government as compared to 43% a year later. On the affirmative side, while this year 38.6% said they were either very satisfied or satisfied with the government, last year a huge 48% said so. The results of the two recently held mayoral elections, where people in large numbers voted against the government-endorsed candidates, only validated the findings of the statistical polls.

An advisor to the government disagreed with the poll findings of the two national dailies. I would like to believe that he has only performed his routine tasks by dismissing the poll results or else I would urge him to come out from the company of the government sycophants to the midst

of his party's well-wishers, not adversaries, and from my own experience of their pulses, I can assure him that still more than one-third of the people are satisfied with the government.

The bulk of the sympathisers of AL are guided by some virtues, the values of our liberation war are the driving force of those virtues; their consciences are not easily swayed by any materialistic greed. It is only natural that the expectations of those people from AL, especially when the party is in the helm of the state, would be very high. Unfortunately, AL leadership, instead of taking cue from the criticisms of its well-wishers, set them aside as antagonistic elements.

One of the important election pledges of AL was to place "multi-pronged measures to fight corruption," as was rolled out in the Charter for Change prior to the last general election. But did the government act according to its pledge? In fact, on this front, the AL government has even made its political opponents look like angels. For the first time, a major donor agency brought allegations of corruption against a cabinet minister entrusted to building the most important bridge of the country, an important election pledge of the government.

The reluctance of the PM to show the minister concerned the door made

the party's election promise a mockery, to say the least. In the process, its failure to build the bridge during its current tenure became the worst setback for the government, which otherwise would have been a landmark achievement for the party to sell in the next general election. It was impossible even for the staunchest supporter of the PM to defend her inaction.

In fact, the all-pervasive corruption which has permeated into and engulfed the lower levels of the party's leaders and cadres hardly makes any news in the national dailies, but the local people are very much aware of it.

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The extrajudicial killings in the name of so-called "crossfire" were a menace created by the BNP-Jamaat government. Keeping that in perspective, the Charter for Change categorically emphasised that the "extrajudicial

killings will be stopped." However, this gross violation of human rights and rule of law is going on unabated during the AL government. On many occasions, the concerned ministers, in tune with their counterparts of the previous government, even defended the killings and took side with the perpetrators. Even the premier said more than once, blaming the past government, that "a practice that was initiated during the BNP-Jamaat alliance rule cannot be stopped overnight."

In a report published on January 7, the human rights group Odhikar

revealed that "incidents of extra-judicial killings decreased by around 50% in the last 2 years but occurrence of abduction and forced confinement rose alarmingly." According to another HR group, Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), 51 people disappeared last year, 15 of them were found dead later on. It was the duty of the law enforcing agencies to find out the killers and the reasons behind these killings. Instead, the PM's unsubstantiated assertion of BNP's involvement in these killings does not bode well either for the rule of law or with the people. While the formation of the National Human Rights Council (NHRC) and the appointment of a befitting chairman are commendable, NHRC, devoid of any executive authority, became a paper tiger without compliance from the law enforcing agencies, which are under control of the executive organ of the state.

Trial of war criminals is an issue dear to the heart of the nation. In this front as well, notwithstanding a lot of limitations since the incidents happened some forty years ago, the hope of the masses has been dampened; the hope that propelled millions of youth in particular to give AL-alliance the historic election victory in 2008. People would be more reassured if some of our renowned legal experts who, fortunately, are integral elements of the right side of our history, could work with or advise the prosecuting lawyers.

The next general election is still two years away. If the government takes cue from the recent poll results and the criticisms of its well-wishers, and listens and responds to the pulses of the people, it can still reverse the tide of declining people's support before their hope turns into irreversible despair.

The writer is the Convener of the Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.

SHIFTING IMAGES

And, let there be Art



MILIA ALI

READERS, please don't freak out! This is not going to be a penetrating analysis on art. I must admit at the outset that I am not an art critic. But, being an art lover like many of you, I will take the liberty of leaving you with some intimate thoughts on my recent tour of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, a.k.a. the Met. My visit was inspired by the raving reviews

of the newly renovated wing: "The New Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia." The section contains 15 galleries with historic treasures spanning 1300 years of Islamic civilization. The rare and exquisite exhibits range from Persian carpets, miniatures and Quranic calligraphy to pottery, blown glass, silver work, wood-carving and mosaic.

The title of the new gallery perplexed me, not only because of its length, but because it seemed to zigzag across the globe covering a sizeable geographical region. Interestingly, at the end of my tour I was convinced that the Museum authorities had sacrificed brevity and simplicity to convey an important message: Muslim communities and countries across the globe are different and diverse and it would be a mistake to cluster their artistic creations under the common nomenclature "Islamic Art." As Navina Haider, the curator, explains: "Islamic art is not just the heritage of the Islamic world, but the heritage of the world. We have to get away from the idea of this monolithic culture of Islam and go toward really embracing diversity."

The diversity of the exhibits is amply demonstrated in the displays from seventh century Damascus and Baghdad, Moorish Spain, the Ottoman Empire and, finally, 16th and 17th century South Asia. The objects have been meticulously selected to illustrate both the rich creativity of Islamic art as well as the influence of other religions and cultures on its various aspects. The Museum's aim is to share "information that is historical, so people have an opportunity to come to a neutral space where there is no political point of view." The exhibition is especially relevant in the post 9/11 world where critics tend to view Islamic cultures as rigid, impervious and even intolerant.

In general, a secular spirit pervades throughout the new galleries and the emphasis is on the cultural and geographical diversities within the Islamic heritage. For example, in the South Asian section we see a watercolor

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with a Hindu theme: goddess Bhairavi with Shiva in a cremation ground. The album painting is thought to be a collaboration between two 17th century Mughal court painters, Payag and Abid, one Hindu, the other Muslim. According to the Museum notes, the painting may have been commissioned by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan as a gift to a friend, the Hindu ruler Rana Jagat Sing. In addition to its artistic value, the painting of Bhairavi makes a loud statement about a Muslim ruler's aesthetic tolerance.

I don't want to convey the impression that the exhibition understates Islam's influence on the style and subject matter of the displays. The artistic calligraphy in various editions of the Quran, as well as a Mehrab created by mosaic tiles forming geometric patterns, bear testimony to the fact that the artifacts were crafted by artists who lived in territories ruled by Muslims. It is also true that the artworks displayed in the new galleries have common traits closely linked to Islamic culture. At the same time, the display is not restricted to religious art and includes objects that have an intrinsic aesthetic value and their connection to Islamic societies may have been coincidental.

Having completed the tour of the new wing, on an impulse, I decided to re-visit the works of Vincent Van Gogh. An ardent admirer of the Dutch post impressionist painter, I was once again stirred by Van Gogh's vibrant colours, bold lines and twisted contours. There is a manic quality in his canvases which become more meaningful when one studies them with the knowledge that he suffered from some form of mental illness and died at 37 from a gunshot wound which may have been self inflicted. Despite the challenges Van Gogh struggled with, he succeeded in creating unparalleled rhythm and beauty in his paintings with the help of masterful strokes and uninhibited choice of intense shades.

The two contrasting sections of the Museum triggered an internal dialogue. The treasures of the Arab lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and later South Asia, breathtaking in their splendour and magnificence, demonstrated how art can effectively transcend the boundaries of religion and prejudice. In a similar vein, the creative power of Van Gogh's paintings, although from a different culture and genre, seemed to overturn the barriers of time and space. Both touched the very core of my emotions with their sheer beauty. But, most importantly, the lofty feelings they generated had nothing to do with religion, class, country or race!

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

SELINA MOHSIN

HIGH-end tourism in the Maldives, the largest foreign exchange earner, is now in a vulnerable state. The stunning bungalows beside unpolluted beaches, sparkling aquamarine water, multi-coloured tropical fish in the reefs, water sports and glorious sunsets make Maldives one of the most beguiling tourist destinations in the world. This is now under threat. Thousands of protesters and members of the opposition Adhaalath party gathered on December 23, 2011, to "Defend Islam." The five demands to the government were (i) to stop flights to Maldives from Israel, (ii) to close spas and massage parlours in tourist resorts, (iii) ban the sale of alcohol in sections of inhabited islands classified as uninhabited, like the venue of the last Saarc Summit in Addu City and Favenmulah, (iv) condemn the Chief of UN Human Rights Navi Pillay for her comments against flogging, and (v) remove allegedly "idolatrous" Saarc monuments in Addu city.

The Parliament's National Security Committee passed a resolution advising against licensing of Israel's airline to operate direct flights to Maldives. The government pointed out that the monuments built for Saarc in Addu fell under the jurisdiction of the Addu City Council and only Parliament could issue a statement against Ms. Pillay as she had directed her comments to the Majlis. Her visit was organised by the UN office.

Although Maldives is a 100% Islamic state, historically it was a trading junction for several ancient maritime civilisations including Egyptians, Romans, Arabs and Indus Valley traders. It was a Buddhist state that converted to Islam around 1153 AD. But, it remained an open state with the prevailing customs of the

country as its distinctive features. Home to some 330,000 Muslims, Maldives has a reputation of a paradise holiday destination, but this image has come under question due to minority religious fundamentalists.

By 1993, the country developed economically through the now massive tourist industry and stable trade in fishing. Tourism is strictly regulated and, except for Addu atoll, resorts have been established only on uninhabited islands. The World Tourism Organization cited Maldives as a model for sustainable tourism development.

But, after the recent protests, the tourism ministry instructed resort hotels on the nation's pristine coral islands to close all spas and health centres. Immediately, over 100 spas were shut down. The opposition Adaalath party and Islamists claimed that resorts were fronts for prostitution. This is totally untrue and has been refuted by the Maldives Association of Tourism Industry (MATI). Tourism in the Maldives is a popular destination for wealthy honeymooners where bungalows can cost up to \$12,000 per day. This industry is essential for the national economy. Maldives specialises in winter sun for Europeans making its high season from December to April when the country enjoys dry weather. But numerous reservations have been cancelled after the December 2011 protests, causing "irrevocable damage."

The government has lifted the controversial nationwide ban on spas

with immediate effect. The announcement was made by President Nasheed during a press conference on January 4 at Kurumba Island Resort, the country's first resort opened in 1972. Nasheed rejected religious extremism and urged the people to support a "tolerant" form of Islam practiced in the country for centuries. He added that he was confident that the institutions of state would recognise the importance of upholding national development and not damage this lucrative industry. Information revealed that as soon as the ban was imposed on spas, the

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opposition parties, headed or influenced by resort owners, swiftly changed their stance and stated that they did not want to damage the industry.

The week-long ban made headlines in both national and international media and reported in BBC. "The government does not want the economy to suffer any damage during the time the Supreme Court takes to come to a decision," stated President Nasheed. The government's action woke the nation from its slumber and sparked a healthy debate about the future direction of the country.

Maldives is a middle income country with GDP per capita (2010 est.) of \$4,770 and inflation is 4.7%. In recent years, The country greatly benefitted from tourism, which brings around \$600 million annually. Tourism and related services contributed to

over 29% of the GDP in 2010. But, its indirect contribution is much higher. As a result, this industry is a catalyst for growth. More than 95 islands are operating as resorts and over 790,000 tourist visited Maldives in 2010. The country experiences capacity utilisation rate of over 80% to 95% in peak winter tourist seasons.

A country of many contradictions, tourism flourished for 40 years selling alcohol, pork and promoting spas. It was possible to do this, although contrary to the principles of Islam, by designating resorts as "uninhabited islands" even though locals from the south of Maldives work there. Ironically, the recent protest is not for religious reasons, but is being used as a tool. Seriously divided along political lines, Islamic nationalism remains a strong political card for the opposition parties that could well influence the outcome of the 2013 presidential election. By allowing this political issue to be addressed early and by reiterating the history of tolerant Islam in the Maldives, Nasheed has challenged the rival camps.

With a backdrop of deteriorating fiscal control due to increased government spending and faltering revenue, the budget deficit was about 16% of the GDP in 2010. Government expenditure was 51% of GDP with revenue of about 34%. This has led to a sharp build up of public debt prompting the World Bank and the IMF to classify Maldives as being at moderate risk of debt distress.

In such a scenario, any significant decrease of revenue from tourism will place the country into further deficits with poor growth and increased vulnerability. It is unfortunate that the greatest foreign exchange earner should be a subject of political contention and endangered by power dynamics.

The writer is a former High Commissioner of Bangladesh to Maldives and former Head of Human Resource Development Initiative, Commonwealth Secretariat, UK.