

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

The roulette of double standards



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

WE are living in an Orwellian world where nothing means anything anymore at all" -- to borrow words from Anne Applebaum's article titled *The Games Authoritarians Play*. Making an incisive analysis on Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's recent mission to

Syria, the writer admits to being in two minds. Interpretatively but not literally, if you know what I mean: Read "we support Syrian democracy" as "we support Syrian dictatorship."

Lavrov has given a clean chit to Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad at a time when the 11-month-long spiraling violence in Syria has claimed countless lives and forced the nation into a deeper abyss of sheer terror. Through it all the invincibility of the popular will is going through a rare baptism by fire.

Actually, the Syrian army's brutality was stepped up during Russian foreign minister's sojourn in Damascus, and so was popular resistance unyielding. A full scale civil war is clearly in prospect with all the ramifications of insecurity in the adjoining region.

If time has long passed for democratic reform in Syria it seems to have arrived in Moscow and St. Petersburg by a none-too-amazing twist of an irony. It was perhaps waiting to happen.

Vladimir Putin's regime is having to face popular discontent over his attempted continuity in power, anticorruption rhetoric and political demonstrations "of the sort that created the Orange Revolution in Ukraine or the Arab Spring across North Africa."

Alexis Navalny (37/38) has turned an overnight hero in Russia, a story that has not received the publicity it deserves. No wonder, he is dubbed the Future Internet President of Russia as 55 million out of 140 million Russian population browse his site of freedom and dissent. His message is to get the hope for justice up and running against the "corrupt regime of Vladimir Putin."

Putin reacted with aggression topped off by caustic remarks. He underplayed the rage calling it "white ribbon revolution like used condoms hanging from tree." Alternatively, he dismissed Alexis Navalny's supporters as "monkeys from Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*."

So, the Putin regime's foreign minister was hardly qualified, given the troubled home front, to be stress-

ing the importance of stopping violence and democratising Syrian society to a deaf monster like Assad.

The sad tale cannot be met with a straight face, especially by those who play by hypocrisy. Actually, world has abandoned the Syrian people. Bashar Al Assad holds shamelessly and brutally on to power against the wishes of the majority of Syrians. Except for intermittent rhetoric denunciations by the West, nothing by way of concrete action to halt violence in Syria is in sight. The UN Security Council resolution calling for sanctions having been vetoed by China and Russia, nothing is on the table except for a malevolent Arab League initiative.

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As for the West, it doesn't find it expedient to intervene in Damascus as it had done in Libya and Egypt because it suited Washington and London then.

Nowhere has the Western double standard been more pronounced than in the case of Bahrain lately. The famous Bahraini footballer Aala Hubail, a powerful voice of dissent, who took up the cause of the liberty and freedom lovers in his own country says it is a shame to be a Bahraini.

The atrocious manner in which the Bahraini demonstrations demanding greater freedom and political liberty had been crushed earlier is testimony to worst form of hypocritical nexus

between the US and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia, fed on US arms, rolled its tanks down the causeway between the kingdom state and Bahrain. The population of Bahrain is only 5 lakh, so it was easy to crush opposition to Sunni rule. Bahrain is 30% Sunni and 70% Shi'ite. Saudi Arabia is predominantly Sunni with affinity towards Bahraini Sunni. But Iran is overwhelmingly Shi'ite. All these countries are contiguous to each other. Although USA is not inimical to Bahrain, its Sunni connection to Saudi Arabia is an important strategic ingredient for Saudi Arabia and by extension for the USA.

The US fifth fleet is stationed near Manama to keep the Hormuz Strait clear, which is under threat of a closure by Iran. Diplomacy and strategic balance do not necessarily have to depend on hypocrisy and double standards.

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BRAC: Embodying the spirit of Liberation War

DEBAPRIYA BHATTACHARYA

BANGLADESH and Brac are just about the same age. The Liberation War in Bangladesh was fought in 1971 to free Bangladesh from discrimination, deprivation and disparity. Brac, imbued with the ideals and spirit of Independence, pursued its efforts to rehabilitate returnee refugees and the households that were affected during the war. And, in the course of its subsequent dramatic evolution, the organisation established itself as a pioneer in identifying and addressing the multidimensional realities of poverty. Brac's initiatives in alleviating poverty and empowering the poor have scaled unforeseen heights in the recent history of global development.

Employing a holistic approach to serve its target population, Brac's development interventions have reached 110 million people in Bangladesh. Over eight million poor, landless people -- most of whom are women -- receive financial services from Brac's Microfinance Programme.

Brac also recognises that there are households that cannot access microloans, and has thus introduced the Asset Transfer Programme to serve that ultra-poor. Over 65,000 rural poor women have been provided with access to national and global market through Aarong -- a Brac enterprise.

One of Brac's key contributions is in creating employment opportunities in rural Bangladesh. The organisation has created jobs for over 6.5 million people -- this number has increased on a regular basis in the recent years. This indicates that Brac is providing livelihood for a significant portion of the one million people that enter the rural labour force every year in Bangladesh. Brac is also the country's single largest institutional employer with over 120,000 employees, and thousands of health volunteers and educators.

Brac's innovative and effective initiatives that meet the essential healthcare needs of the poor people are now being studied worldwide. In the 1980s, Brac revolutionised prevention of diarrhoea by introducing the practice of oral saline intake. The organisation also played a leading role in the expansion of vaccination programmes nationwide to ensure that all children get vaccinated in their first year after birth. Through these health-related interventions Brac has signifi-

cantly contributed in reducing maternal and child mortality rate.

The organisation's education programme has also gained much esteem as a leading provider of quality informal education for the underprivileged children. Approximately two million students are studying in Brac's pre-primary and primary schools and 60% of the graduates have entered the mainstream secondary schools. Brac University, on the other hand, has been established with an aim to bring in world-class quality in tertiary education in the country.

The small and medium entrepreneurs in the country are being provided with access to finance through Brac Bank, while new and improved varieties of seeds, technology and techniques are being introduced by the organisation to boost agricultural productivity and farmer's earnings.

Brac is playing a pivotal role in addressing the commodity market failures and the deficiencies in accelerating the nation's economic welfare. Today, the organisation is almost 80% self-sufficient in financial terms, thanks to the

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returns received from its enterprises and investments. A tax payment amounting to 400 million BDT in 2009 is an example that speaks of Brac's significant contribution to the national exchequer.

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envoy of Bangladesh's remarkable contribution in alleviating world-poverty and South-South cooperation.

The major protagonist of this story of an organisation's spectacular development endeavours is Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, a humanist thought-leader who not only founded an organisation that embodies the spirit of the Liberation War in its nation-wide development interventions, but also portrayed the post-war promising Bangladesh to the rest of the world. Like me, many find Sir Fazle's philosophy of life and his conduct as a source of great inspiration.

We trust that Brac will continue to blaze the trail in the enormous undertaking of eliminating poverty and inequality in Bangladesh, as the nation forges forward to graduate to a middle-income country in the not-so-distant future.

Maldives: Unexpected change of government

SELINA MOHSIN

IN a dramatic move, Nasheed, the first democratically elected President of Maldives resigned on the February 7 after weeks of political turmoil that began from December 23, 2011. The controversy surrounding Saarc monuments being idolatrous, direct flights from Israel and selling of alcohol in inhabited islands began the short saga that led to Nasheed's fall. Religion was a political card to topple the president before the 2013 election.

Nasheed claims he was forced to step down at gunpoint and he would fight to regain power. If that is so, then he had missed some of the danger signals of an impending crisis. His antennae should have forewarned him of the strife within his government as well as the joint efforts by the opposition parties to topple him.

In October 2010, the ruling MDP party appealed for assistance from the international community over the "increasingly blatant collusion between politicians loyal to former President Gayoom and the senior members of the judiciary, most of whom were appointed for life by Gayoom." But, the crisis escalated with the arrest of senior Judge Abdulla on January 17 for alleged

corruption. It is ironical that a judge against whom the former Attorney General, Hassan Saeed, expressed concern in 2005 for his objectionable conduct suddenly became a martyr.

The opposition parties, deeply divisive, joined forces and with religious NGOs to begin agitation against the arrest of Judge Abdulla. Immediately the civil, criminal and high courts cancelled hearings in protest. The Supreme Court, High Court and the prosecutor general demanded Abdulla's release. The Human Rights Commission of Maldives requested authorities to respect Article 24 of the Constitution on human rights. Nasheed paid no heed.

In mid-2010, President Nasheed wanted to reform the judiciary and requested the UN to help the country introduce new canons of law and judicial practices. The government claimed that most of the 170-plus judicial officers were unqualified. During the 2010 crisis, it was found that only 30 out of all the judicial officials had a university degree in law. The Parliament failed to take action to address this void. A draft penal code reflecting Maldives obligation under the international human rights treaties has remained dormant in the Majlis. Even the Judicial Service Commission failed

to comply with their constitutional mandate of vetting and reappointing judges. The Commission was vitiated by political wrangling.

Consequently, the arrest of Judge Abdulla resulted in a political uprising. The opposition parties objected to the unprecedented move by the Maldivian National Defense Forces (MNDF) to arrest a judge of the criminal court and thereby violating the independence of the judiciary.

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Cases were also filed against the MNDF over such arbitrary action.

The Maldivian Secretary General of Saarc and former Attorney General, Ms. Saeed condemned the arrest, but had to step down amid allegations by Maldivian officials for involving herself in the internal political crisis that engulfed the state.

Vice President Waheed Hassan rightly criticised the "extra judicial

arrest" pointing out that such a detention sets a bad precedent for the country's new democracy. He proposed that the judge be released and the government should ensure that the Judicial Service Commission fulfilled its responsibilities.

Despite such controversy, Nasheed remained adamant and justified the arrest. He sought help from the UN to clean up the judi-

ciary. But, his unrelenting attitude was a grave risk. It was illegal, however wrong the judge's activities may have been. It would have been prudent to release the judge and take action by the Commission or through the UN and the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Instead, he antagonised the judiciary and misjudged public opinion of a nascent democratic country. In an unexpected shift, a section

of the police and defense forces stormed the Maldives Broadcasting Service and issued an ultimatum for President Nasheed to resign. Nasheed resigned on February 7 and the vice president was sworn in that same day. Currently, opposition parties have pledged support to the new President Mohamed Waheed Hassan. Gayoom welcomed Nasheed's resignation from Malaysia. Ironically, religion is no longer a concern. The new president intends to govern by the rule of law. The Commonwealth Secretariat and UN are sending teams to respond to the country's priorities, including strengthening the judiciary.

It is relevant to note that the political parties that rallied behind Nasheed during the presidential election of 2008 were soon disenchanted. Most found themselves isolated and left the government to turn into opposition parties. It is felt that they could have been handled with greater political finesse as valuable working partners. Earlier, the opposition leaders were earlier part of Gayoom's government. They turned against him to put Nasheed into power. History re-enacted itself when Nasheed was forced to resign by the same group. The wheel turned full circle. President Nasheed's lack of political foresight

was his weakest stance in the current turmoil.

Nasheed made six major errors: (i) He did not forge close bonds with the coalition parties that brought him to power; (ii) he did not delegate authority appropriately; (iii) he did not introduce judicial reforms in 2010 with assistance from the international community; (iv) he allowed the military to arrest a judge, thus compromising the independence of the judiciary; (v) he could not gauge the opinions of his government and change in public perception; and (vi) he distanced himself from religious issues.

A man, who fought valiantly for democracy and went to prison several times for it was himself caught up in the mire of politics and made massive errors in his political judgment. That was his tragic flaw. He has now asked Waheed Hassan to step down as president. But Waheed has the support of most of the parties. What will be Nasheed's next move after this climax in the political drama? The situation is unfolding with clashes between Nasheed's MDP and the police. What next?

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