

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

sawing through the branch of a tree he was seated on. Wise men passing him by noticed it and drew Kalidas' attention to a blunder he was about to commit. He was using the saw at the wrong end of the branch risking a fatal fall.

Bangladesh's current political scenario reminds us of that Kalidas story. Is political hara-kiri in the making? We hope not, given the external pressure building on political parties to come to terms.

That said, as Myanmar moves up on the democracy index, rewards and dividends have started pouring in. Thy neighbour will leave thee behind -- such an early warning is flashing a red light, as it were. Bangladesh, a 20-year veteran of democracy, mostly mismanaged though, had better look out to realise what it is squandering. Look, how we are playing around with an established democracy!

Myanmar, our next-door neighbour, has already netted \$40 billion worth of investment pledges from neighbouring countries to develop a deep-sea port. Effortlessly,

THE classical Indian playwright and poet Mahakavi Kalidas used to deliver wise words drawing on stupid incidents. In one such narrative, he found himself

because of the newly acquired magnetism of a once-closed society flung open to the rest of the world. US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, British Foreign Secretary William Hague and George Soros, one of the world's richest men, have been to Yangon. Bill Gates is about to visit the country.

Myanmar is basking in the already glorified appellation of an Asian tiger set to pounce.

Thais, Australians and New Zealanders are setting their sights on "Burma's hidden riches." Investors from Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and India are rushing in to have a part in the "next business story." China has been an old player.

By a glaring contrast, Greece, once the cradle of democracy is in a dire strait with a huge democratic deficit. The country is without an elected government, technocrat Lucas Papademos heads it. A series of ministerial resignations taking place and a general strike becoming a regular feature in the face of swinging austerity cuts, Greece is in an unprecedented abyss.

The Greek national debt stands at a whopping \$350 billion, which is 160% of the country's GDP. Its unemployment rate is 20.9% and the economy has fallen by 12% since 2008 with 28% forecast

decline in GDP.

The first bailout worth \$110 billion was received in May 2010. The second bailout of \$130 billion is in the offing following Greek parliament's approval of the austerity cuts and political parties signing up to the prescription, all under Eurozone pressure.

Greece faces a tri-lemma, as it were -- first, the austerity cuts have slashed the incomes of salaried people by a third, and pensions have been substantially reduced,

of how the state of the economy has hijacked its democracy and freedom of action on the part of the government and its people as well. Lucas Papademos, the prime minister, is grousing about pressure being applied by some countries for Greece to quit euro and manage its economy.

Both Greek and Italian PMs Papademos and Mario Monti have been imposed on their peoples by Eurozone led by Germany

and IMF. It is alarming that democracy is on a decline almost throughout Europe -- Portugal, Ireland, Spain and Italy are threatened by debt crises. Their futures seemed to be mortgaged to heavy debt repayment burdens as the bailouts are linked to huge austerity cuts and stimulus to productivity can be at best staggered.

Compared to majority of European nations, Bangladesh is still better placed. Our gross national debt is \$24.6 billion (2010 estimate); unemployment rate is 5% by a 2011 estimate, that is if we exclude (how can we?), 40% of the total work force underemployed, i.e. work part time as full time work is not available.

Finance Minister M.A. Muhith has told the parliament that in the last three years, government borrowing from banks has been Tk.43 thousand crore. Total bank loan

contracted over the period was Tk.1 lac 79 thousand 303 crore, of which Tk.1 lac 36 thousand 108 crore has been paid back.

There has been a slight reduction in government borrowing from the level of 2009-2010. Couple of years back, the fuel import had been to the tune of 35 lac tonnes but now the figure has nearly doubled.

All said and done, however, the GDP growth is estimated at 6.3% in the very least.

The bottom line is if we destabilise politics further the economy won't be able to stand the strains of a deeper political strife.

The political rhetoric is at its unpleasantest at the moment. Just how bitter Begum Zia can get is reflected by her threat of forcing the government out in a "crippled state" (a sanitised translation of the Bengali words she used in Chandpur). On the other hand, AL law-maker Fazilatunnesa Bappi in her maiden speech to parliament, ostensibly taking her turn to greet the president's address to JS, heaped unprintable personalised epithets on Begum Zia. It is standard parliamentary practice to avoid speaking against anybody who is not present in parliament.

If the exchange of words gets so sorely bitter, how can political chemistry work for any negotiated settlement to clear the deck for a broad-based participatory general election?

The writer is Associate Editor The Daily Star.
E-mail: husain.imam@thedailystar.net

Come-alive Kalidas

Bangladesh, a 20-year veteran of democracy, mostly mismanaged though, had better look out to realise what it is squandering. Look, how we are playing around with an established democracy!

putting citizens of all ages through hardship; second, hardly any development project is on the table and there is little stimulus to productivity; and third, even with writing off of some previous loans, the new debt burden is sufficient to leave the fledgling shoulders of Greek government creaking.

All of this because elected political leaders have mismanaged the economy through corruption, abuse of power and having the country live beyond means. A bleeping message for us.

Greece, in particular, is a classic example

Syrian conundrum

TAJ HASHMI

ONE does not need Einstein's IQ to understand how the American Empire has been destabilising the world for the last sixty-odd years. The so-called champion of democracy, freedom and human rights, the US had no qualms about killing more than a million innocent civilians across the world since Hiroshima, albeit in the name of preserving the elusive freedom and democracy.

What the warmongering and self-righteous America, which for decades has been the biggest promoter of state-sponsored terrorism in the world, is going to do to Syria is not at all comforting to the peace loving people. What it has done so far to the Muslim World since the creation of Israel -- and especially since the beginning of the so-called "Arab Spring" last year -- is good enough to convince us that nothing benign will come off its sleeve for Syria in the near future; and Iran, Pakistan and other not-so-friendly countries in the long run.

Even if we give credence to the assertion that American support was instrumental in defeating fascism during World War II, we cannot forgive this menacing behemoth's neo-fascist and neo-imperialist designs ever since its nuking of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and what it did later to so many other countries during and after the Cold War. As the brutal and unnecessary killing of more than a hundred thousand Japanese men, women and children by incinerating them into pulp and ash was a war crime -- possibly second in magnitude to the Holocaust by Nazi Germany -- so have been the series of unprovoked (hence unnecessary) American invasions of countries from Cuba to Nicaragua, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia to Grenada, Panama, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

In the backdrop of the "impending invasion" of Iran either by America (so far the only country that has used nuclear weapons to kill people) or by nuclear-armed Israel, for Iran's alleged "nuclear ambition," the US and Arab League support for the rebels against the pro-Iranian Assad regime in Syria has further destabilised the Arab World. The Russian and Chinese vetoes against the US-sponsored proposal to impose sanctions against Syria have further complicated the situation in the entire region. These events are significant indications that the so-called regime-change movement in Syria is not just another replication of what Tunisia, Egypt and Libya have already gone through in the recent past.

The American and Arab-League sponsored rebellions in Homs and some other parts of Syria could be the precursors to (a) long-drawn wars between pro-Western and anti-Western/ Sunni and Shiite states in the region; (b) protracted civil wars on sectarian and tribal lines in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bahrain and other Gulf states; and last but not least, (c) the Syrian crisis -- which could be the prelude to a full-fledged invasion of Iran by America or Israel -- has all the potentials to signal the end of the so-called unipolarity, to the detriment of the dying hegemon, America.

An understanding of the Syrian crisis requires an understanding of the "Arab Spring." While the mass uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and else-

where in the Arab World reflected people's spontaneous outbursts of pent up anger and frustration against tyrannical regimes, as the Tunisian revolution was different from the Libyan, Egyptian and Yemeni uprisings, so is the Syrian unrest very different from the apparently similar uprisings elsewhere in the Arab World. Unlike the Mubarak regime in Egypt, the Assad regime in Syria is neither at peace with Israel nor is friendly towards America. Syria also has a mutual defence pact with Iran.

Then again, although the Shiite Alawi minority in Syria (which roughly represents 20% of the population) has been in power for more than four decades, the Assad regime has not excluded the Sunni upper and middle classes from sharing political, economic and military power. Consequently, unlike the impoverished and marginalised Shiite majority in Iraq under Saddam Hussein who went against him in the wake of US invasion in 2003, the Sunni majority in Syria (excepting in certain pockets, especially in Homs) has a stake in the Assad regime.

Syria is not another Bahrain, where the pro-Saudi and most importantly, pro-American Sunni minority ruling class calls the shot to the detriment of the Shiite majority. Again, in comparison

As the Tunisian revolution was different from the Libyan, Egyptian and Yemeni uprisings, so is the Syrian unrest very different from the apparently similar uprisings elsewhere in the Arab World.

to the Arab kingdoms and sheikhdoms, the autocratic Assad regime in Syria provides far better public education, health care, and equal opportunities, freedom and dignity to women.

Nevertheless, all is not well in Syria. Inspired and emboldened by the successful regime changes by the people in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, tens of thousands of Syrians have been genuinely protesting against the government and dying at the hands of government troops. This is, however, equally true but unknown to most people in the world that America and its Arab League puppets, Saudi Arabia and other GCC members have been sending mercenaries and arming Syrian rebels to topple the Assad regime, which is not at peace with Israel and a close ally of Iran, the common enemy of America and its Arab clients. Thanks to the biased and overpowering Western media reports, which the pro-Western regimes and media within and beyond the Arab World untiringly replicate and propagate, the overwhelming majority of people across the world only see the other side of the coin.

They are not aware of that: (a) "Syrian rebels" are using flares and armour-piercing projectiles in Homs, Idlib and Hama to kill troops, foreign observers, journalists and innocent bystanders; (b) a Saudi TV station recently broadcast a Salafist religious leader giving his blessing for spilling the blood of foreign observers, as stated by the

Russian ambassador at the Security Council meeting on January 31st; and most people also do not know that (c) al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in a video recording, "Onwards, Lions of Syria," on February 13th, urged Syrians and Muslims in Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan to help those who are fighting to topple "the butcher, son of the butcher Bashar bin Hafiz."

One wonders, if the Salafists, al Qaeda, America and its allies have discovered common friends and enemies in Syria and beyond. In view of the State Department's stand on Syria and its latest somersault in the Maldives affairs -- it supported the Islamist-sponsored February 7th coup and within 72 hours backtracked on recognition of the new regime -- one tends to agree with the late Senator William Fulbright that "There is a kind of voodoo about American foreign policy" (The Arrogance of Power, Random House, New York 1966, p. 32).

What America and its allies have been trying to do in Syria is not that different from what they did to Libya in the recent past. In the case of Libya, the American "Oil Lobby" achieved what they had wanted since long -- to control the oil fields in Benghazi -- through UN-sponsored sanctions against Libya to justify a full-fledged invasion of the country to topple the not-so-compliant Qaddafi regime.

In Syria, the "Israel Lobby" in America (which is much more powerful than what the White House, Congress and Pentagon represent collectively) is trying to isolate and neutralise Syria, first through UN-sponsored sanctions, and then through open invasion of the country to overthrow Bashar Assad a la Qaddafi. Syria, an adversary of Israel and a close ally of Iran and Hezbollah with 300,000 regular troops and 200,000 reservists, is an impediment to the US-Israeli design in Iran. Unfortunately, for the US-Israeli-Saudi triumvirate, the Russo-Chinese veto in the Security Council is another obstruction in this regard.

Nevertheless, as our experience tells us, America (and Israel) is not going to let Syria go its way. Not only is the overpowering Israel Lobby determined to overthrow the Assad regime, but what we often overlook and undermine, the vicious Military-Industrial-Congressional Lobby in America, the main factor behind all wars waged by America since 1945 (to paraphrase Eisenhower), keeping in view the "profits of war," is also unwavering about waging another war, in Syria, Iran or Pakistan, it does not care. Then again, the US-Israel-Saudi triumvirate seems to be very myopic. As the regime changes in the Arab World have so far strengthened the Islamists (especially in Egypt), Syria would not be an exception in this regard.

Last but not least, it is time that America listens to people like Carter, Chomsky and Joseph Nye to emerge as a soft power. If regime change by mass upsurge is that desirable to America, it should have condemned the Bahraini regime (and Saudi Arabia) for crushing the popular upsurge in Bahrain, which incidentally, is an American naval base for its Sixth Fleet. Otherwise, decent and civil Americans who believe that their country "is not likely to embark upon a campaign to dominate the world in the manner of a Hitler or Napoleon" will be proven wrong.

The writer is at the Department of Public Management and Criminal Justice, Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, Tennessee, USA.

Six signs you are underpaid



THIS is a subject writers know all about. "My psychologist asked me if I was ambivalent. I replied, well, yes and no. Ha ha ha!" Huh? Nobody laughed. I tried again. "The workers at

the mint went on strike today. They want to make less money. Get it? LESS money!" Huh? Still nobody laughed. Which was a surprise, because the jokes were ancient and the hour was late.

You see, I know from experience that prehistoric jokes play better in the evenings, when people are conditioned by Carlsberg-induced brain-pickling to roar at things they register as jokes, rather than things that are actually funny.

But this time nobody in the group of financial people I was with was even mildly amused. "Don't take it personally, son," slurred one guy, putting his arm around my shoulder. "The slump has depressed everyone, and besides, you're rubbish."

Actually, he was not entirely correct. Everyone in the gang was depressed except for a young man who was the only other non-finance person in the group. "I love this recession," said Josh, a teacher. "It's the first one which has hit the rich but left the middle class unscathed."

Interesting. But was he right? On a 3G phone, I called up the internet to check. Have high-pay professionals (lawyers, bankers, etc) been harder hit than mortals? Yes, says the New York Times. Joblessness has been rising twice as fast among the over-educated as among lower-skilled workers.

The really weird thing was that some of the financial guys at that party claimed to be below the poverty line. I expressed my deep sympathy by offering sincere words of comfort, such as: "Ha ha ha, serves you right, you pathetic sofa-stains."

Of course THEIR idea of "no money" is completely different from that of humans'. It's sort of "I could buy only one yacht this week, boo hoo, weep for me." They have no idea what being broke really means.

This inspired me to compose a list of Six Signs That Your Income Has Fallen to a Dangerously Low Level, based on my years as a freelance writer.

(6) When you hand your paycheck over the counter at HSBC, the teller bursts out laughing;

(5) When the Samaritans take the initiative to phone you before you call them;

(4) When the people giving away flags for charity on Saturday mornings on the walkways have your mugshot on their collection boxes to elicit sympathy;

(3) When you work full-time but discover that you still qualify for social welfare payments;

(2) When you pass homeless people who flip their small change in your direction;

And the top sign that your income is dangerously low?

(1) When other people get tax bills from the Inland Revenue Department, but you get a packet of cash and a sympathy card.

Now THAT LINE finally got the group laughing. "None of us have reached those depths, anyway," said one worse-for-wear banker. "Not YET," gloated Josh, who informed us that teachers had just had a pay rise. The bankers' smiles disappeared again. But they returned after I threw my peanuts at Josh, causing everyone else to follow suit. "Food fight!" I yelled and the buns started flying.

Ah yes, the old ones are the best ones.

For more visit my site at www.vittachi.com