

CONNECTING THE DOTS



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GOING into last week's presidential election in Russia, two things were almost certain: Vladimir Putin would win the election and the opposition would protest the results. This is exactly what happened. As Putin won about 64% of the votes, the results were immediately called into question by the opposition who alleged ballot stuffing, carousel voting and irregularities in vote counting.

International observers like the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) said there was no real competition in the election and that it was not a level playing field for all the candidates. Of course, the Putin camp disputed these claims.

Setting aside the claims and counter-claims of fraud in the election, what let Putin get the plurality of votes? Many people voted for Putin not only because they thought he was the pre-destined winner but also because there was no one else worthy enough to vote for. The Kremlin's two-pronged strategy of first destroying the political playing field and then bemoaning the lack of real competitors has worked quite well.

How will Putin interpret the mandate he received in this election? Will we see a shift toward a more pluralistic Putin, a Putin capable of coalitions and concessions, or will we see a retrenchment, a caricature of the old Putin, who rules by diktat? Will the Kremlin's political concessions in the face of popular protests -- the return of gubernatorial elections and easier party registration procedures -- have credence? Or will Putin continue to tighten the screws by cracking down on independent media and opposition activists?

However, the most important question that needs to be asked is whether this election will give legitimacy to his administration. The question of legitimacy is crucial for Putin. Since coming to power in 2000 he has seen his popularity rise each year, projecting his image as a defender of common Russians, a good nationalist bringing law and order and suppressing the unpopular oligarchs -- business tycoons who made their money after the breakup of the Soviet Union.

As luck would have it, without the need for any major reforms Putin could claim credit for improving

Russians' living standards thanks to record-high energy prices, a great boon for Russia as the world's largest energy exporter. His assertive foreign policy, too, has appealed to Russians displeased with what they see as the West's condescending attitude towards their country. Maintaining this overwhelming popularity has been essential for Putin to rein in those oligarchs that could pose a political challenge to him, as exemplified by



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Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Boris Berezovsky and others. But his popular mandate also gave him a free hand to centralise political power in his own hands, scrapping direct elections of regional governors.

So the question now for those watching events in Russia is, with the election over, what is the next step, both on internal policy -- dealing with the opposition -- and externally, how Russia positions itself on key foreign policy questions vis-a-vis the West. Will he conclude that he now has a strong new mandate from the Russian people that allows him to relax and show some flexibility? Or might he feel vindicated by his election win, assuming that what Russia needs is a strong leader, willing to impose order at home and lash out at foreign enemies?

In the international front, perhaps the two big test cases are the foreign policy challenges which in recent months have seen Russian vetoes at the United Nations blocking international attempts at exerting pressure on Iran and Syria. Of the two, Syria is probably the more urgent issue. The potential Iran nuclear threat is existential, but still theoretical. The humanitarian crisis in Syria is real and immediate.

And what of those long overdue economic reforms?

Following the claims of fraud in December's parliamentary elections, the ruble and the stock market plunged. However, both have regained lost ground due to rising oil prices and increasing global risk appetite. Putin's pledges to raise wages for doctors and teachers, increase child benefits, expand student grants and ramp up defense spending have raised economic growth projections, at least in the short run. Still, controversy surrounding the elections will keep political uncertainty elevated.

Unfortunately, despite Putin's pledge for reforms, higher oil prices will not give him much incentive to move through, while vested interests will make the path to reform difficult. Rising social unrest, however, could force Putin's hand.

Furthermore, the more Putin promises increase in government spending, the higher the oil price needs to be to balance the budget, leaving the economy increasingly vulnerable to an oil price shock, the impact of which was clear during the global financial meltdown and collapse in oil prices in 2008.

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United World Colleges

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KURT Hahn was a genius of experiential education in the 20th century, whose legacy shines forth through four institutions of renown -- the Gordonstoun School in Scotland, the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, the United World Colleges in thirteen nations, and Outward Bound, found in thirty five nations on all five of the major continents.

Although a German citizen, Hahn decided to settle down in Britain in 1933. Once a man of means, he had overnight become a penniless refugee. His days at Christ Church, Oxford University, from 1910 to 1914 had left him a wide circle of influential friends in Britain. Discouraged and emotionally exhausted he decided to go to north of Scotland, where he had convalesced in the summer after illness in his Oxford years.

Throughout the history of the United World Colleges, notable world leaders have been instrumental in furthering Kurt Hahn's goal of producing goodwill and world peace among youngsters of an impressionable age.

His fortitude began to return. With a friend, Lord Malcolm Douglas-Hamilton, he inspected the partially empty castle at Gordonstoun, which was badly in need of repair. Less than a year later, in April 1934, Gordonstoun opened as a school for boys; by September there were 21 students. Among them was a Greek prince of Danish blood, Philip, who would in 1947 marry Elizabeth, later to become a queen of England.

Now, coming to our topic of the day, another tribute to Hahn's educational theories is the United World Colleges (UWC). In 1962 Hahn pioneered, with the help of Sir Lawrence Darball and many others, the opening of the first United World College, The College of The Atlantic at St. Donat's Castle in Wales. As an Air Marshall in the Royal Air Force, Sir Lawrence Darball had been Commandant of the Nato Staff Training College, where he had experienced, at first hand, the



the International Council of the United World Colleges in 1965. He was succeeded by his grand nephew H.R.H. the Prince of Wales in 1978. In 1995, Prince Charles passed the title to Nelson Mandela and was succeeded by H.M. Queen Noor of Jordan.

I have had the privilege of being a member of the Selection Committee of the United World College Society for Bangladesh for nearly 25 years now under the chairmanship of A.B.A. Siraj Uddowlah. Each year we select 6 to 10 students for scholarships to the 13 United World Colleges spread worldwide across 5 continents. The scholarships are intended for the most outstandingly brilliant students aged around 15-17. For me, the interviews are an extraordinary experience as the boys and girls have incredible educational achievements, are most articulate, and also proficient in extra curricular activities.

The scholarships are advertised in the newspapers

and presentations are also given to the prominent schools of the country. The entry requirement is a minimum of 6 As in the GCE O level or GPA 5 in the SSC examination. The applicants have to sit for the written test and those who qualify are required to go through an oral test. In practice, we have found that for the boys and girls getting 9 As or 10 As or GPA 5 is more the rule than the exception. Our better schools where the entry requirements are quite severe have extremely good results.

One phenomenon is that our girls do far better than our boys in the tests. Most of the successful applicants end up in 5 or 6 of the 13 UWCs worldwide. In almost all the UWCs the boys and girls are required to complete the International Baccalaureate, which is presently universally accepted as the entry qualification to all the universities of the world. Since the intake of UWCs is of such a high standard, the results are also comparable. The UWCs are the springboard for full scholarship to the top universities of the world including, the IVY League of the US and Oxford and Cambridge of England. Our alumni, particularly the girls, have done so well in the universities that they invariably end up with top jobs in the US, UK and international organisations like World Bank, IMF, UN etc. If you have a meritorious student in your family there can be no better route to the best education other than the United World College. There are UWC committees in over 130 countries which select candidates for the 13 UWCs spread over 5 continents.

For recent regional meetings of the UWC Country Committees held in Hanoi in 2008 and Singapore in 2011, I did some research about how well our alumni were doing in life. Almost without exception the majority of them end up in either IVY League Universities of US or Oxford and Cambridge in UK. A few examples -- Syed Tanveer Hussain's daughter got first class first in English at Oxford and first class first in MA in Chinese, and ended up with a job in an international organisation with a salary of over £100,000 per year. Former managing editor of *The Daily Star* Fahim Munaim's son got 100% scholarship to Harvard and is presently Vice President of Deutsche Bank in New York.

More than 90% of the UWCs students go on to graduate from university, many from the top universities of the world, and more than 50% have post graduate qualifications. Many universities have scholarship schemes intended specially for UWC graduates. So far, over thirty thousand students have graduated from the UWCs. They can be found in all walks of life -- in medicine, business, politics, education, international relations, NGOs, arts and media -- and they all share a determination to make a difference.

The writer, a scholar and researcher, specialises in the history of the Subcontinent.

(Persons interested in UWC may contact UWC Society for Bangladesh www.uwcbd.org)

Remembering a pioneering sociologist and a dedicated teacher

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

THE prestigious Ekushey Padak awarded to Prof. A. K. Nazmul Karim in 2012, three decades after his death, was a fitting tribute to a great social scientist and a remarkable teacher. I remember a particular conversation I had with Professor Karim when he told me: "You can come to see me anytime you want -- day or night -- to discuss sociology, but if it is to discuss politics, you are not welcome." I narrate this to my students often, reminding them that my doors are always open to them. I remember fondly the time when we were students of Professor Nazmul Karim, who dedicated himself to teaching and promoting social values when at a time when the entire society and social values in particular were up against great challenges in the post-independence Bangladesh.

Once, I followed him to the faculty lounge after a class and asked: "What is existentialism?" To which Professor Karim responded by saying: "What a coincidence! I asked the same question to Professor Herbert Marcuse once." Although I was hugely impressed by knowing that the person I was talking to knew Herbert Marcuse, one of the gurus of the student movements in the United States and Europe in the 1960s, an émigré philosopher from the Frankfurt School to Columbia University, New York. In the excitement of the thought I forgot that I did not get an answer to my question. Late in the day, after class hours, I saw Professor Karim checking out a bunch of books from the Dhaka University library. I felt sorry that I asked him that difficult question. But Professor Karim was part of a generation of teachers who would not give a perfunctory answer to a question. He would check facts, read, reflect and then answer. Students were always important to him. And he wanted to impart knowledge. He was a model teacher.

A teacher is a mediator of meanings, said Pierre Bourdieu. Professor Karim was a great teacher as he would prepare his class diligently and would always give his best. On many occasions, his lectures were, perhaps, above our heads but he would not water down his materials. He wanted us to rise to the occasion, which we tried. He was a reserved man -- we mistakenly perceived him as petulant. Once, as an undergraduate student, I visited his office with some trepidation. As students, we kept ourselves away from the head of the department's office. I needed a letter of reference for an overseas scholarship. He looked at me, perhaps slightly surprised at the affront, and asked: "What have you learned about sociology?" "Economic kinship is stronger than blood kinship," I replied promptly, almost instinctively. He agreed to write a letter. His own research, as I later found out, was on class and elite.

Born in 1922 in a family given to education, Professor Karim studied in Dhaka University, Columbia University and London University. His Columbia professors included, Seymour Lipset, R.M. MacIver and C.Wright Mills apart from Herbert Marcuse. At London University, he studied with Professor Tom Bottomore, the leading British sociologist at that time. Professor Karim also studied with sociologist Morris Ginsburg and anthropologist Raymond Firth.

Once, as our relationship became somewhat informal, he asked me about my family. I told him that my father did not hold a high position in the civil service. He was somewhat annoyed at the foolishness of my reply and admonished me: "It is not the rank but the human quality that matters." My grandfather Khondker Ali Mohsin was, probably, the first Muslim head master of Murshidabad Government High School at a time (probably in the late 1930s) when Muslim graduates were scarce. Coincidentally, Professor Karim's father Abu Rashid Nizamuddin Ahmed was a School Inspector around that time with a sojourn in Murshidabad. We shared such family histories over tea at his Fuller Road residence.

Apart from several scholarly contributions, Professor Nazmul Karim wrote highly readable introductory sociology text in Bangla. He was a stickler for correct Bangla spelling. Once he came to class troubled by the wrong spellings in the Bangla posters that adorned the Arts faculty walls. He taught us the value of language. He even gave us some tips on Bengali grammar and asked us to read literary magazines published in Kolkata. He would contribute to both English dailies as well as Bangla publications. He confided in me his deep admiration for Professor Saaduddin who would come to class with copious notes in English but would deliver a superb, well-crafted lecture in Bangla without using a single English word. Another teacher we had, a practitioner of sophisticated Bangla was Dr. Borhanuddin Khan Jahangir. Professor Karim stood for quality education in social science and championed bilingualism.

In his twilight years, frail from diabetes, Professor Karim was particularly perturbed by the declining social values in Bangladesh. He stood for social justice, human dignity and humane values.

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