

Dialogue is the only viable option

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THE show off by the opposition on March 12 on contentious caretaker government has paralyzed the capital with rest of Bangladesh. The poor nation has lost tens of millions of work hours. Do not matter who win or loose people are the real sufferer. The capital itself gave ghost look more by the denial action by the government than opposition activities. The nation is earnest in the hope that the major players in politics will find peaceful resolution of the differences on political issues duly stamped by the parliament.

Leaving in vague the possibility of two more national elections under caretaker government the Supreme Court has given a clear directive for negotiations among the political forces. The debate and decision making in the parliament is far below the expectation of the people. Introduction of unique caretaker government that took more than two years of Herculean struggle on the street in mid nineties shut down in couple of minutes in the parliament without bothering to consult the opposition political forces.

The opposition parties are now pursuing the issue on the street, the last resort of democracy. The destructive street politics must be discouraged through a process of meaningful dialogue both inside and outside the parliament. Respect for Parliament is on the wane due its regular failure to be an effective forum of debate on national issues and public concerns. The absence of rigorous debate in the parliament is hurting the democratic political culture and maiming the politicians in the public eyes. How much respect can politicians have if political activities perceived as agents of dislocation and disorder in the public eyes? We are not yet breaking from the culture that opposition to the British Raj was anti-state activity. If we have to go by the colonial culture all political elements regularly rotated to opposition are in fact anti state elements. Pakistan destroyed by the atrocious colonial culture, we are not also making a clean break from the ruinous path. Opposition is



the best watchdog institution of democracy, not merely a mathematical order in the parliament. Number game apart, the opposition must have an exhaustive critical analysis of all major decisions in the parliament. The musical chair of power continuously rotating in Bangladesh has not allowed any particular party or political alliance as the sole agent of patriotism. Every system has a government; only democracy has an opposition paid from the public exchequer.

Due to double-digit inflation, shrinking foreign exchange reserve, high interest rate and power shortages the economy is in a fragile state. The high cost oil in the jittery market due to uncertainties in the Middle East is an additional headache to bear. With high unemployment rate and surging youth entering the labour market, if the economy does not respond to the higher needs of employment, law and order, and social stability may become victim of harms way. Human resources cannot wait for an opportune time. The working generation if not utilized on time will advance to retiring age without being able to contribute adequately for the economic gains. The borderline economy has no capacity to waste or delay the developmental activities. Any dislocation by political heat at this midpoint will be a serious setback for the strained economy. Western economy has barely bot-tomed up, but not turning to vigorous growth pattern anytime soon.

Major projects like Padma Bridge based on international loan are on uncertain grid on one pretext or the other as the flow of foreign aid is drying. Our veteran bureaucrat finance minister knows it better than many of his cabinet colleagues for which he is not smiling much these days. Rolling back of street politics to a tolerable level is must for vitally needed economic growth to the minimum of 5% to maintain the social stability and progress. Many did not understand why Railway minis-

ter was angry when US Under Secretary Robert Blake in his recent visit to Dhaka urged the political leaders for a dialogue on the contentious issues.

US Ambassador Dan W Mozena, few days ago while sharing the concern about the death a Saudi embassy official in the Gulshan area, also mentioned political differences should be peacefully resolved leading towards an acceptable election. Who does not know that Bangladesh do not run on the advice of the foreign friends that our railway minister has angrily rebuffed. We live in the community of nations in the global village. When we are frequently hit by natural disasters and manmade calamities our foreign friends come handy to help us, and we are fond of putting up our battered face to draw more humanitarian aid. Those are the times we do not protest US Marine Corps and their choppers flying all over Bangladesh.

A push towards peaceful election to strengthen democracy will not be less humanitarian than meeting SOS call under distress. If we are failing to resolve political issues, the facilitation of the friendly countries may come handy to our rescue. With evermore-integrated global trade, advanced economics already registered Bangladesh as the cheapest labour force in the world. Once a bottomless basket, we have never been so close to a take off stage. The next decade will be crucial to make or break to the middle-income countries. Cheap labour is a huge asset but quickly can turn into unmanageable liability if not utilized immediately. What we need is less of violence, and more of dialogue and accommodation in our democratic order to convince the world that we are ready to work for mutual benefit.

The born again democrat and parliamentarian cannot afford to make too many mistakes in one life. Witnessing black smoke billowing from the locomotives and poor management in his ministry, best would be to leave diplomacy to the suave foreign minister and let him whip the horse hard on the dilapidated railway tracks of Bangladesh.

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What India's state elections mean for the West

ABHIJIT IYER-MITRA

INDIA'S ruling Congress party was trounced in recent state elections especially in the all important province of Uttar Pradesh. The trends reinforced by the results portent trouble for both India and the West.

Almost on cue as news of the Congress defeat started filtering in, the Indian embassy in Washington went on an unusually aggressive defense of its Iranian oil imports. It claimed a "distorted picture of New Delhi's foreign policy objectives and energy security needs" was being projected."

India's relationship with Iran is neither inconsistent with nonproliferation objectives, nor do we seek to contradict the relationships we have with our friends in West Asia or with the US and Europe.

But the sting was in the tail. "Given the imperative of meeting the energy needs of millions of Indians, an automatic replacement of all Iranian oil imports, is not a simple matter of selection, or a realistic option."

There was some number juggling there to show India's consumption of Iranian oil had decreased of late. The reality is that the decline was due to the inability to pay Iran electronically (as is the norm) because of international sanctions.

Now that a rupee trade agreement with Iran has come into force, expect the graph to skyrocket again. No amount of innovative statistical interpretations is going to be able to explain it away. In fact, given the consolidation of Muslim votes (long seen as a captive Congress vote bank) away from the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, any Indian moves against Iran are a nonstarter.

If this were not bad enough, the policy paralysis that has gripped Delhi since 2009 will continue since the Congress' bargaining position with its own left wing allies has reduced dramatically.

The return of India to the notorious 6 percent "Hindu rate of growth" coincided with a London School of Economics study on "Why India Will Not Become a Superpower." In short, if the Western alliance was hoping for a demographic, democratic and economic bulwark against China, India will not be it.

With prolonged policy paralysis and a looming water and food crisis on the horizon, expect the "rise of India" to turn into something of a nightmare.

Forget also the American-Indian nuclear accord hailed by President George W. Bush as "India's passport to the world," which is now not expected to move forward due to opposition to the liability clause.

Forget also the implementation of the Walmart direct purchase model, that was set to break the baneful influence of middlemen (a prime cause of inflation) and provide a much needed stimulus to agriculture as the Congress is expected to want to keep these middlemen in its good grace. They can, after all, engineer a "strategic" preelection price spike to wreck what little hope the Congress has left. Basically India is in soup and the West bet on the wrong horse.

To be fair, all these trends existed well before these elections. The problem is that the behavior that produced these trends are expected to be reinforced now rather than producing the predicted corrective reforms a Congress victory was to have heralded.

Two more important states go to the polls of which Gujarat may be the key. By all predictions Gujarat will stay with the conservative Bharatiya Janata Party under the leadership of Narendra Modi, a no nonsense development man who has maintained the state's growth rate even under trying circumstances at a stellar 11.6 percent.

Should the conservatives elect Modi as their leader for the 2014 elections, he will be pitted against the severely underperforming Rahul Gandhi, the Congress' crown prince.

The problem is that Modi is weighed down by allegations (nothing yet proven) of his complicity in the 2002 Gujarat riots. Modi, chief minister of Gujarat, the West could snub and name call publicly. But as the possible claimant to the largest democratic mandate on Earth, the West will face a very different problem if he is elected. India will never be Austria and Narendra Modi will never be Kurt Waldheim. Any criticism of him has thus far been painted by his campaign as an insult to all Gujarat and the focus of this demagoguery will presumably shift as he moved to the national stage to focus on external enemies.

In many ways, if India is repainting itself into geostrategic and economic irrelevance, the wWst has blundered badly. Continuing to pressure India on Iran will only lead to further political paralysis in Delhi with significant long term strategic consequences.

At any rate, come 2014, the West will either have created a passively noncooperative left wing India or a passively hostile right wing one.

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1848: History's shadow over the Middle East

ROBERT D. KAPLAN

1848 in Europe was the year that wasn't. In the spring and summer of that year, bourgeois intellectuals and working-class radicals staged upheavals from France to the Balkans, shaking ancient regimes and vowing to create new liberal democratic orders. The Arab Spring has periodically been compared to the stirrings of 1848. But with the exception of the toppling of the Orleans monarchy in France, the 1848 revolutions ultimately failed. Dynastic governments reasserted themselves. They did so for a reason that has troubling implications for the Middle East: Conservative regimes in mid-19th century Europe had not only the institutional advantage over their liberal and socialist adversaries but also the moral advantage.

Conservative orders, epitomized by the Habsburg Austrian Chancellor Clemens von Metternich, had provided continent-wide stability following the Napoleonic Wars, which in proportional terms killed as many Europeans as World War I. Metternich's Habsburg Empire, encompassing 11 different nationalities, was the geopolitical key to a stable European system (even as the Habsburgs themselves were weak as a power compared to Great Britain and France). Nevertheless, the 1848 reformists were -- like people everywhere and in every age -- insufficiently grateful. By 1848, the horrors of Napoleon were more than a generation past, and Metternich was consequently viewed as merely a reactionary. But liberal hopes of 1848 would come to naught amid ethnic and national questions that the weakening of the Metternichian system unleashed -- ethnic and national questions comparable to the inter-communal tensions that plague the Arab world today.

Indeed, ethnic interests in Europe soon trumped universalist longings. While ethnic Germans and Hungarians cheered the weakening of Habsburg rule in massive street protests that inspired liberal intelligentsia throughout the Western world, there were Slavs and Romanians who feared the very freedom for which the Germans and Hungarians cried out. Rather than cheer on democracy per se, Slavs and Romanians feared the tyranny of majority rule. Among the Slavs were Slovaks, Serbs and Croats who were soon at the throats of their new Hungarian overlords. The Habsburg regime in Vienna exploited these divisions, as well as those between Ukrainians and Poles to the north.

There are fundamental differences between 1848 in Europe and 2011-2012 in the Middle East. Metternich, unlike Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Bashar al Assad in Syria, did not symbolize the decadent rule of one man and one ruling clique; rather, he governed through laws and institutions. Moreover, his polyglot Habsburg system, lying at the geographical center of Europe, constituted a morality in and of itself, necessary as it was for peace among the ethnic nations. This is why Metternich's system survived, even as he himself was replaced in 1848.

While there is no equivalent in the Middle East of the Habsburg system, not every dictatorial regime in the Arab world is expendable for some of the same reasons that Habsburg Austria's was not. That is the burden-

some reality of the Middle East today: If conservative -- even reactionary -- orders are necessary for inter-communal peace, then they may survive in one form or another, or at least resurface in places such as Egypt and Iraq.

Iraq in 2006 and 2007 proved that chaos is in some respects worse than tyranny. Thus, a system is simply not moral if it cannot preserve domestic peace. "Progress includes Order," John Stuart Mill wrote in Considerations on Representative Government (1861), "but Order does not include Progress." In other words, nobody is saying that conservative-reactionary orders will lead to social betterment. Nonetheless, because order is necessary before progress can take hold, reactionary regimes could be the beneficiary of chaos in some Middle Eastern states, in a similar way that the Habsburgs were after 1848. For it is conservative regimes of one type or another that are more likely to be called upon to restore order.



To wit, if the military is seen to be necessary for communal peace between Muslims and Copts in Egypt, that will give the generals yet another reason to share power with Islamists, rather than retreat entirely from politics. The overthrow of Mubarak will therefore signify not a revolution but a coup. If democracy falters in Libya, with the state itself crumbling, then a new strongman may emerge over time, barring an informal break-up of the country. (Yemen is already in such disarray. The recent election in Sanaa cannot mask the fact that the regime, such as it exists, has lost control of significant swaths of the country -- to a greater extent than had the old order before 2011.)

While Syria's al Assad is seen as illegitimate, that does not mean that the future in Syria automatically means either democracy or sectarian chaos. It may mean eventually a new form of authoritarianism that alleviates or better manages such instability in the first place. Remember that a system is not defined by the name it gives itself, but by how the power relationships actually work behind the scenes. Thus, Iraq may call itself a democracy, but in truth it is a sectarian "thugocracy" that barely keeps order, and if it continues to falter in that regard, it may eventually be replaced by

a full-fledged authoritarian regime (hopefully one far less brutal than Saddam Hussein's).

Indeed, democratic uprisings in 1848 did not secure democracy, they merely served notice that society had become too restive and too complex for the existent monarchical regimes to insure both order and progress. In Political Order in Changing Societies (1968), Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington wrote that the more complex a society becomes, the greater the number of institutions that are required to govern it.

So one should not confuse the formation of new regimes in the Middle East with their actual consolidation. This will require coercive power in the form of new police forces and intelligence agencies, notes Antonio Giustozzi of the London School of Economics in his provocative new book, The Art of Coercion (2011). And such extreme forms of compulsion are only alleviated by the building of civilian institutions of the kind Huntington talks about, which can then maintain order in a more benign manner. If new bureaucratic institutions do not emerge in a more socially complex Middle East, the Arab Spring will be a false one, and it will be remembered like 1848.

Meanwhile, the authoritarianism of the al-Saud family lingers on in Saudi Arabia, the strategic linchpin of the Arabian Peninsula. And lesser monarchs from Kuwait south to Oman appear not to be in danger. With the exception of the oppressed Shia in Bahrain and in eastern Saudi Arabia, the peoples of the Persian Gulf still broadly associate stability and progress with conservative orders. Thus, the emirs and sultans have the loyalty of their populations and hence the moral advantage.

Syria is at this very moment a bellwether. It is afflicted by ethnic and sectarian splits -- Sunnis versus Shia-trending Alawites versus Druze and Kurds. But Syria also can claim historical coherence as an age-old cluster of cosmopolitanism at the crossroads of the desert and the Mediterranean, a place littered with the ruins of Byzantine and medieval Arab civilizations. The Western intelligentsia now equate a moral outcome in Syria with the toppling of the present dictator, who requires those sectarian splits to survive. But soon enough, following the expected end of al-Assad's regime, a moral outcome will be associated with the re-establishment of domestic order and the building of institutions -- coercive or not. Because only with that can progress be initiated.

1848 had tragic repercussions: While democracy in Europe flowered briefly following World War I, it was snuffed out by fascism and then communism. Thus, 1848 had to wait until 1989 to truly renew itself. Because of technology's quickened advance, political change is faster in the Middle East. But for 2011 to truly be remembered as the year of democracy in the Arab world, new forms of non-oppressive order will first have to be established. And with the likely exception of Tunisia -- a country close to Europe with no ethnic or sectarian splits -- that appears for the moment to be problematic.

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