

Cultural diversity declaration

Dhaka outcome should be built up on

CULTURAL Diversity Ministerial Forum of the Asia-Pacific Region, 2012 concluded in Dhaka on Friday on an inspirational note. It adopted Dhaka Declaration signed by ministers and representatives from 33 out of 44 countries of the region. Kudos to Bangladesh's ministry of cultural affairs and the Unesco for organising such a colourful as well as important event.

As Bangladesh's cultural diversity was showcased through participation by renowned artistes, it provided a glimpse of the universal appeal of culture that knows no boundary. Indeed, respect for and promotion of cultural diversity should be the guiding spirit in the Asia-Pacific region.

The salient features of Dhaka declaration emphasise linking culture to development endeavours; urgent need for collective political will to ensure cultural cooperation for sustained human resource development; developing a platform for cross-sector dialogue and cooperation with the civil society to ensure active participation of myriad voices in the policy-making and implementation processes.

Basically, awareness across the board would have to be raised to promote, protect and support diversity of cultural expressions and enable cooperation on sustainable development and poverty reduction goals. In this context, what assumes critical importance is the "Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions" of 2005 which has only been ratified by 12 out of 44 countries. Happily, Bangladesh is one of the ratifying countries. It is a pity that a vast majority of the countries have not signed up to it.

Our understanding is that it's not only at the people's level but also at the country level that the states should embrace the catalytic role that cultures can play in unifying governments and peoples on a common cause of enriching human material and consequently accelerating inclusive processes of national developments.

The Dhaka Declaration calls for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) to assist in implementing the declaration throughout the Asia-Pacific region. 'Assist' the Unesco would, but the endeavour surely needs to be underpinned through national and regional capacity building efforts. To our understanding, that requires refocusing.

Accidents taking heavier toll

Preventive action sorely missing

ROAD accidents on Friday alone, causing 15 deaths, do remind us again of how perilous our highways and city roads have become. Despite the change of communication minister, road or highway safety conditions remain as abysmal ascribable to poor patrolling and a blind eye turned to reckless driving.

Eight people on the Dhaka-Sylhet highway and five people on the Gaibandha-Palashbari highway were killed in accidents. Both these accidents were due to collisions with speeding trucks, one head-on and the other from the rear-end. In the city, however, two journalists including English daily The Independent's senior reporter Bibhas Chandra Saha, were killed having been hit and run over by city buses. Evidently, the accidents on the highways as well as on city roads were caused by rash driving.

Reckless driving is fed on a sense of impunity since drivers, after perpetrating a crime, often make good their escape, and even if they are arrested for murder, which is aailable offence, face three years of imprisonment at best. Clearly, this law falls short of addressing the gravity of a crime that claims numerous innocent lives every year, including some of our most talented artists and journalists. We demand that the responsible drivers be arrested and punished immediately. We also think the existing law should be revised so as to make the punishment compatible with the gravity of this crime.

The Accident Research Institute (ARI) of BUET has emphasised on several occasions that road crashes can be cut down to less than half if dividers are set up on all roads and highways. We believe that time has come for the communications minister to heed the ARI suggestions because it is his integrity and honest image on which people in general pin their hope for secure road journey.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 13

- 1648** Construction of the Red Fort at Delhi is completed.
- 1943** World War II: German Afrika Korps and Italian troops in North Africa surrender to Allied forces.
- 1952** The Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the Parliament of India, holds its first sitting.
- 1967** Dr. Zakir Hussain becomes the third President of India. He is the first Muslim President of the Indian Union.
- 1989** Large groups of students occupy Tiananmen Square and begin a hunger strike.
- 1996** Severe thunderstorms and a tornado in Bangladesh kill 600 people.
- 1998** India carries out two nuclear tests at Pokhran.

SUNDAY POUCH



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

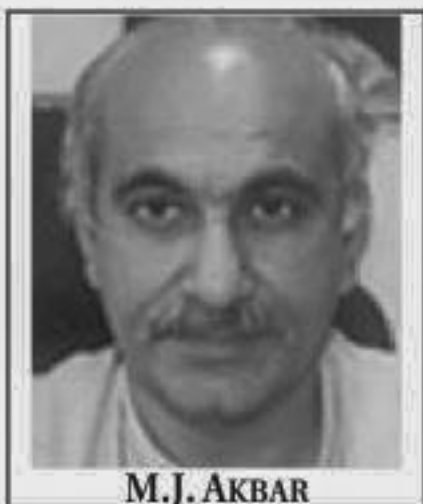
A political storm is at present blowing in China. Toward the end of this year, the Chinese Communist Party Congress, which meets once every five years, will be voting in the 25-member Politburo that virtually rules the country. Within this body is the 9-member Standing Committee. These nine, like in the past, will be the key persons who will turn the political, economic and social wheels of China for the next five years. From among the nine one can expect that a new president and a prime minister will be chosen to take office in early 2013.

So from now till the end of this year, when this choosing takes place, there will be a lot of jockeying for power from the possible hopefuls. A president and a prime minister have been unofficially anointed and are waiting in the wings. But the remaining seven positions in the Standing Committee are up for grabs. This time new faces are expected as the existing ones will retire. Over the last decade, therefore, political head-hunters had been hard at work zooming in on several eminent leaders, who have assumed great power and influence in some of China's big cities and provinces.

One such leader, until recently, was Bo Xi Lai. A tall, handsome and urbane figure, he has remarkable credentials. His father was one of the Eight Elders of the Communist Party of China. He was known as one of the "princelings" in Chinese politics. His strength was in cultivating a casual and charismatic image in the media. This is unlike the staid nature of Chinese politics.

He came to prominence when he was the mayor of the coastal city of Dalian and then as the governor of the province of Lianoning. Then he went to serve as the minister of the powerful Ministry of Commerce in Beijing. Soon after, he was sent as the head of the Communist Party of the mega city Chongqing (population 30 million). It

BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

ANYONE can get angry. But to rise in anger, it helps to be young. The young constitute the heart of any uprising for two good reasons. They have not yet had time to compromise. Their mobility is still unhampered by the usual constraints, otherwise known as the litany of social security that keeps us locked into the conventional, of job, family, property. The second reason is more interesting. The most important stimulant in the complex mix that instigates a mass movement is hope, not anger. Hope is the positive face of anger.

The first two decades of the 21st century will be remembered as the season of volcanic rage across those parts of the world subdued into stagnation in the name of isms (faith, economic philosophy, patriotism) that were often nothing more than pathetic alibis for authoritarian exploitation by local elites. There is a frisson in the air that is reminiscent of the first half of the 20th century, when there was turbulence against colonial power. This time the post-colonial world is challenging those who have usurped authority and denied their people the essence of ferment: freedom. Freedom is not merely independence from foreign rule. It is, equally, freedom from local dictatorship.

Anger, by its nature, is a spur to violence. Remarkably, today's young, from Africa to Asia, have understood what Gandhi foresaw more than a

century ago, when the thought was in Chongqing that he prepared himself politically to take his place as one of the members of the nine-member Politburo.

Bo initiated in Chongqing a campaign against organised crime. He also spent much on welfare programmes for the poor. But his greatest credit was that he could maintain a double digit GDP growth for the city. His political inclination, according to reports, was to revive the "red culture" -- a modern version of Chairman Mao Tse Tung's "cultural revolution." He, therefore, mobilised the Maoists and the social democrats into a Chinese new left. But this and his anti-corruption campaigns led to a degree of lawlessness there. His own larger than life personality made him an object of suspicion of the old guard of the Communist Party at the centre. They became fearful that his style of politics could lead to a revival of the anarchic situation that prevailed in

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China during the period of Mao.

Bo's ambitions came to an abrupt halt recently when the Wang Lijun incident took place. Wang Julin was Bo's trusted aide and Chongqing police chief. He walked into the American consulate in the neighbouring city of Chengdu with incriminating and sensitive documents about the corrupt practices of his boss Bo Xi Lai. He sought political asylum there as he feared for his life. Bo had sent the police to surround the American consulate there. Wang Lijun then sought Beijing's direct intervention to save him. He was then taken from Chengdu consulate and sent to a jail in Beijing.

In the meantime, investigation was started against Bo. His wife, Gu Kai Lai, was also arrested on suspicion of poisoning a British national, Neil Heywood, who knew much about Bo's underhand activities. Bo's son,

who had studied in the expensive Harrow school in London and is now in Harvard University in the USA, is also being questioned.

The moot question raised by the authorities is how a Communist Party chief like Bo, with a \$22,000 per year salary, could afford to send his son to Harrow and Harvard and to maintain the lavish lifestyle of his son, who had been reported several times in the past as splurging in parties in USA.

The story goes that Bo siphoned off ill-gotten money in Chongqing and, through the British national, sent it abroad. In one of the last transactions Neil had asked for a bigger commission for his services, which was refused. It is thought that this could be reason he was done away with.

Wang Lijun in spite of his close association with Bo, was unable to stomach it any longer and so went to the Consulate and spilled the beans.

Bo's downfall has elicited strong reactions from a section of the Chinese public. Many leftist web sites were angry about Bo's dismissal. They termed it as a "plot by the enemies of the state." But the Central Communist Party is adamant that Bo was in the wrong. It has now started to look into Bo's high spending in Chongqing.

Bo spent lavishly on Chongqing's infrastructure and other projects which made up his so-called leftist "Chongqing model." It strengthened state-owned enterprises alongside a host of social welfare programmes. But it also increased Chongqing's debt problem.

According to China watchers, the Bo affair has exposed a deep fissure in high levels of Chinese politics. The world now has a peep into the ideological and personal rifts in this one party political system. Bo had in some ways spooked the Communist Party.

His was a break from the faceless nature of collective leadership. He seemed to be starting a western style of politics that emphasises personal popularity rather than loyalty to the Party. He sought legitimacy directly from the people and not from the Party.

A key aspect of the Bo affair seems to be a remark made by Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jao Bao in a press conference recently. He warned against "a historical tragedy like the Cultural Revolution that may occur again." This was aimed at Bo who, in Chongqing, sang Maoist songs while campaigning against what he called corruption. The remark was to point out that under Bo the Communist Party would move in a Maoist direction.

So, the contest for seats in the all-powerful Standing Committee of the Politburo is heating up. But it must be understood that the spectacular economic gains made by the Communist leadership in China cannot in the long run be sustained if political reforms do not take place simultaneously. For too long there has been a disconnect between economic growth and the political system that facilitates it.

The leadership, being conscious of this, is trying to close ranks and present an image of internal solidarity and incorruptibility capable of delivering what the people in general want. So they are keen to weed out corruption from the highest echelons. Bo's case was, therefore, an appropriate one to seize on.

In present day China, temptation abounds as billions of dollars are spent on major infrastructure projects and on social welfare each year. The top leadership cannot afford to be complacent in taking action against corruption from within themselves. They know that to do otherwise would be to risk their own survival. They are hoping against hope that the apple cart will not be tipped and the changeover takes place peacefully.

For China watchers these are exciting times.

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The writer is a former Ambassador and is a regular

courageous wife Azzizah, paid a terrifying price for dissidence. The extended power of the state tested them with a fire that would have incinerated those of less commitment. If they had any hope, it was faith in the people, and in the promise of unabridged democracy. It is exhilarating to see fear evaporate; one minute, it is a hovering fog, and an hour later it has dissipated into receding memory. It was a privilege to witness a seminal moment of change, and to do so alongside a principal author of this metamorphosis. It is easy to theorise that change can be postponed but not prevented, but it requires deep levels of conviction to believe this.

As, from morning, the citizens began to congregate; as growing groups gathered the momentum of solidarity; as ethnic differences which had been the reference module of the old politics began to visibly melt; as the space on either side filled from street to roof with Malay Muslims, Chinese Christians, Indian Hindus and Muslims, cheering, urging us on; and even when a ham-handed government tried to incite disarray through teargas and swooping helicopters, you knew that this was a day on which another chapter of history had commenced. The young knew that salvation lay in non-violence. They controlled their anger. And Anwar Ibrahim became Anwar, no mere leader up above but a brother in the emerging joint family of a democratic Malaysia.

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