

I wouldn't start from here

ANAM A. CHOUDHURY

WHEN considering our pre-election political mess, with the AL and the BNP locking horns, it would be helpful to remember the story of the Irish traveler who asked a farmer for the quickest way to Dublin. Came the reply: "I wouldn't start from here."

Nobody knows where to start to put an end to this political stalemate. At the heart of this mess is the issue of caretaker government. The BNP reckons that without caretaker government in force during the forthcoming election, the AL government will take full advantage of incumbency and mobilise massive state resources to boost the campaign and get re-elected.

On the other hand, some BNP activists reckon the AL will never agree to reintroduce the caretaker system as it is apparently riding a tiger, and if it loses the tiger will ensure their demise.

Moreover, incumbent governments rarely plan for their own downfall. All the same, the well of mistrust on both sides runs deep. Bangladesh can ill afford this gridlock. Political deadlock may trigger unrest on the streets. This country has been down that road before, with disastrous results. No one has much confidence that our fractious political leaders can actually come to a negotiated settlement. What happens if they prove incapable of coming to a consensus? Such a scenario will at least precipitate "a functional anarchy" at a time of great promise for Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has the misfortune, in terms of its public image, of being one of the world's most corrupt economies. Shame was the first response of many people in our country at the news that the World Bank had cancelled the proposed credit for the Padma Bridge project due to allegations of sleaze.

This decision caught many political observers, and even some members of the governing AL party, off guard. This is because of the government's inability to see a situation in terms of what is good for the country vs. what is good for an individual. It has tarnished Bangladesh's image around the world.

The government's failure to start building the Padma Bridge and other infrastructures to match the growth of the country will play strongly in the next election. It is unfortunate that in Bangladesh both the major parties take power after free and fair democratic elections only to subvert democ-

cracy; and it is no surprise that in election after election the electorate has shown its anger and dissatisfaction by voting out incumbents routinely for the last two decades. The opposition party uses the government's failure, and public anger, to win the election and virtually slide into office by default.

It is rather pleasant to think that the Arab world is gradually embracing democracy and bidding farewell to the arms and dictatorship; but the danger is that some extremist forces will exploit democratic processes to gain power. Islamist parties do well whenever democratic elections are held.

In Tunisia, Ennahda, a once outlawed Islamist party, will lead an assembly to draw up the coun-

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try's new constitution. Party leader Rachid Ghannouchi, who for decades lived in exile, is known to be hostile to the Western ideas and thinking -- for him democracy is un-Islamic.

Egypt's newly elected President Mahammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, another hardliner, pledged to rescind the Camp David peace treaty of 1997 signed by Israel and Egypt. It seems very likely that new regime will harden its stance towards Israel and may not accept continuing occupation of the Palestinian territories conquered in 1967. Arab's mightiest country might drift out of America's orbit and may seek new friends in the region. In such a case, the Middle East may turn into a political minefield for the US and its allies. It is a situation that will make Jordan, Morocco and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

very nervous. The US needs the Middle East to be stable and democratic. The alternative is collapsing countries awash with terrorists and extremists groups.

America is trying to promote peace and secular democracy in the Muslim world, but Muslim leaders are keen to incorporate Islam into democracy, and critics fear that harsher tenets of Sharia law may creep into it in the process.

Malaysia's Sharia courts operate in parallel with civilian ones and deal mostly with moral offences. Muslims caught drinking or philandering face fines or caning. Not to speak of Pakistan, a country that received more than \$20 billion in US aid over the past decade but gave safe haven to Osama bin Laden for years.

Our good fortune is that our constitution was founded on secularist principles and our secularised society makes faith based politics difficult. We can't imagine racial conflicts like those that still divide the African countries and religious strife such as that afflicts certain states of India from time to time. Yet for all the anger about this government's inability to learn from missteps, incompetence, alleged corruption and its misguided attempt to lash out at the media for reminding it of its failure, progressives and alarmists reckon that a vote for the BNP/Jammat alliance is akin to hiring al-Qaeda to take care of airport security. People of Bangladesh and the West Bengal traditionally overstate the danger of faith based politics.

Surprisingly, BJP leader L.K. Advani is trying to build bridges with secular non-Congress players and also trying to convince Shiv Sena and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) that to win the next general election the National Democratic Alliance's PM candidate must be a secular one. That's why Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar is often mentioned as a possible NDA PM candidate and future prime minister of India.

I think there is a deep cynicism among our politicians about the universality of democracy and freedom. It is as if they've forgotten their own experience and lengths to which they had suffered to defend democracy and freedom.

Now the whole nation is looking to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to show them the starting point.

The writer is a former Investment Banker.

SHIFTING IMAGES

Ageless ageing!



MILIA ALI

THREE uncorrelated incidents set me thinking about the process of getting old, or, should I say ageing? Young readers, please don't stop reading -- I don't want to lose you, since my reflections are not exclusively for senior citizens! And, believe me, crossing the fifties can be as traumatically unnerving as crossing the teens. Despite what

many of you may think, old people also have hormones raging underneath their wrinkles -- the difference is that their hormones are, perhaps, moving in a direction opposite to yours!

Let me come back to the point and recount the seemingly mundane occurrences that prompted me to ask myself: How old is "old?"

A few weeks ago I accompanied my husband to his oath-taking ceremony for American citizenship. It was quite a grandiose affair with all the paraphernalia -- pep talk from a congressman, an inspiring welcome address by President Obama (on video of course) and a beautifully choreographed film presentation of the national anthem. While I was soaking all this in, I noticed an old woman in a wheelchair taking her oath and then waving the American flag. I was a little surprised because she must have been close to eighty.

As long as there is life there is hope, and opportunities for growth and development are wide open. I began to feel upbeat and convinced myself that age really is not an impediment to aspirations, as long as one remains enthusiastic and positive.

Why would she be interested in adopting a new country at this stage of her life? I asked myself, somewhat amused. Suddenly, she turned and smiled at me, her face glowing with anticipation. The uninhibited, joyful expression disarmed me. In fact, I chided myself for being judgmental and jumping to the conclusion that old age was an obstacle to discovering new frontiers. Probably, the woman would cast her vote in the presidential election in November and participate in the democratic process of her new country! Who knows? This could be an entirely novel experience for her since many nations in the world still don't have voting rights for their citizens.

The small incident reminded me that as long as there is life there is hope, and opportunities for growth and development are wide open. I began to feel upbeat and convinced myself that age really is not an impediment to aspirations, as long as one remains enthusiastic and positive.

All was well -- until Rajesh Khanna passed away. The news hit me like a bolt from the blue. The actor was my first teenage crush, but, as is often true, being preoccupied with the hard realities of life, I had lost touch with my fantasy world. His death, however, opened up a Pandora's Box. The sweet emotions and romantic passions of my youth gushed forth and hung over me like a melancholic cloud. I was saddened remembering the young Rajesh Khanna -- so vibrant, so handsome and so alive! The debonair heartthrob of the sixties and seventies dead at the age of 69? Reflecting on the fragility of life, I suddenly felt vulnerable. I realised that as we grow older we need to deal with the hard reality of friends and acquaintances battling illness or dying. Just as we have to come to terms with the fact that we are not invincible after all, and many of the dreams and ambitions of our young days may remain unfulfilled!

The next day I walked into my yoga class feeling somewhat despondent and negative. I have to confess that I am one of the underperformers in the class since physical exercise has never been my forte. I started yoga more for meditational purposes than for pursuing athletic feats. Probably because of the aura of negativity that I carried with me, by the end of the class I decided I was going to quit. When I told the teacher, she asked "Why?" I blurted out the first thing that came to my mind: "Because I am too old for this!" The teacher gave me a surprised look and said: "But you can't be older than me. I am 66 and I started yoga only 6 years ago." The revelation shocked me because I would never have guessed her age. "You are only as old as you feel," she told me, "your age is of no consequence, really."

Something snapped within me and I bounced back from my negative frame of mind. So what if the dreams of my youth are never realised? As long as I am alive, I have the freedom to dream new dreams and create new realities.

While exiting the gym I remembered what Mark Twain said: "Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter." And he should have known because he lived to be 75 at a time when life expectancy was less than 50!

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

US economy will suffer

MONAEM SARKER

AS the violence in Syria worsens, Washington is ramping up threats to intervene without UN approval in the absence of international consensus. As reports of a new massacre emerged from Syria, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced a new transition plan that would remove Assad from power completely, possibly signaling that the US was ready to make good on its threats to go it alone.

Washington has made clear its desire for larger intervention in Syria, with Senator John McCain publicly calling for arming the rebels. The US has a history of ignoring the UN Security Council if international consensus does not coincide with American interests.

The real question about Syria is: Why is the United States involved at all? Before we discuss that, we need to know the goals of American foreign policy in the region.

In fact, Syria poses no direct threat to the United States. The US will gain no direct benefit in assisting the Syrian rebels or in overthrowing Assad. On the other hand, US "allies" -- Saudi Arabia and Israel -- clearly want Assad gone. Both those countries have the ability to get rid of Assad on their own. They should feel free to do so, but without the assistance or complicity of the US. Each time the US intervenes needlessly in the internal affairs of another country, it only prolongs the conflict.

Furthermore, it is disturbing that the US and other nations are using the UN to further their foreign policy agenda. The United Nations was set up to moderate peaceful resolution of issues between nations and it should not be involved in internal affairs of sovereign states. For the US and others to use the UN as a tool to get rid of Assad delegitimises the UN and puts its overall mission at risk.

Certainly, democracy and human rights should be promoted through diplomatic means whenever possible. But the process should not be manipulated to benefit the US and its allies. US policy towards Syria needs to be reconsidered.

There is no doubt that Assad is a ruthless despot. However, he is one of the last secular Arab leaders in the most ethnically diverse nation in the Middle East. At the moment, he enjoys popular support because many Syrians view him as the last bastion between them and a fundamentalist Islamic government, like the one just installed in Libya.

The US has targeted Syria, both because of its strategic alliance with Iran and because of Pentagon's underlying strategy of isolating and encircling Iran as a prelude to toppling its current

government. The US has systematically occupied and/or militarised nearly all the countries that border Iran. First, you have US-occupied Afghanistan and Pakistan (the target of a second undeclared US war) on Iran's eastern border. Then you have Iraq, which is still partially occupied, Kuwait (where the US deployed 15,000 troops in December), and Turkey, with its US airbases, on Iran's western border. Finally, you have Saudi Arabia (also host to major US military bases) and Qatar to the south. US military intervention in Syria will spill over and involve the Hezbollah in Lebanon, effectively neutralising Iran's last remaining allies.

The US persists in its occupation of Iraq, in addition to major military engagements in Somalia and Sudan. Presumably, the military intervention in Libya is complete, now that the new US-friendly regime has agreed to privatise Libyan oil for the benefit of US oil companies.

Countries such as Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Iran and

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Sudan became US military targets because they refused to play ball by allowing Anglo-American oil companies unlimited access to their oil resources. In contrast, oil-poor countries like Syria and Lebanon are current targets because of strategic alliances with oil-rich Iran.

US involvement in armed conflict is nothing new. US was involved in the Vietnam War and spent billions of dollars funding that war over two decades. Its aim was to control communism. On the other hand, the former Soviet Union was also spending billions of rubles trying to spread communism in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Both the US and the Soviet Union were interested in spreading their own agenda while disregarding the condition of the people in the countries that they were invading.

We see the same situation today. The US is involved in Iraq. Now it is trying to bring down the Assad regime in Syria. Toppling the government in Iran is also in the cards. This US involve-

ment in the region is not in the interest of the people in the region. The US wants to use the people as pawns in its desire to dominate the region.

But the US should learn from the Vietnam War and Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. Involvement in Afghanistan ultimately contributed to the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Soviet mothers could no longer take the return of their sons in body bags from Afghanistan. The domestic resentment that the Afghanistan war created in the Soviet Union has been well documented in the literature. The Soviet Union never recovered from the collateral political damage that the Afghan war created.

The US economy is suffering because of the wars. Growth is low and unemployment is high. The debt crisis in Europe is also connected to what is happening in the Middle East and the resulting uncertainty in the oil market. If the US continues with this wrong-headed policy of extending the war to Iran and/or Syria, then it will affect the economic condition in the US.

As the US spreads out its armed forces around the world, it also imposes a burden on its own economy, which is suffering from huge budget deficits. The US is forced to borrow from other countries including China. So, continued presence of US armed forces around the world will deepen US budget crisis and prolong the economic hardship of the people in the US.

The CIA and the Pentagon have led the US to war in different parts of the world. The political leadership in the US has been misled by the armed forces over the years. That trend has continued. If the US doesn't change its course, its economic and political situation will remain in a precarious condition.

When Obama was elected president in 2008, the entire world anticipated a fundamental change in the political philosophy of the US government. We thought that he would be able to free the US government from the clutches of the Pentagon and CIA. However, that has not happened. Obama himself has become a tool in the hands of the Pentagon. Not only that, he has also tagged Nato along with him. A number of other Nato countries, especially the United Kingdom, have followed the US lead in extending their military presence around the world.

Tony Blair had to leave office in a humiliating fashion due to the popular uproar created by British involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. If Obama doesn't change course now, he will face the same fate as Blair.

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