

How our reckless politics gives India an edge

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THE recent visit to India by the leader of the opposition Khaleda Zia has become a much talked about subject in the political arena of both Bangladesh and India. Given the general public perception of BNP being "anti Indian" and Awami League being "pro Indian," Khaleda Zia's conciliatory tone and friendly overtures towards India have been looked upon with both positivism and scepticism by different quarters.

This article will look into how the existing corrosive political culture in Bangladesh and, in contrast, the matured behaviour of Indian politicians have worked to the advantage of India at the expense of Bangladesh due to failure of our leaders to rise to the occasion on issues of vital national interest.

Khaleda Zia's itinerary, the people she met, and statements that were made in India speak of the fundamental difference in how

party politics and national interest are played out in these two countries. The lunch that Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh hosted for Khaleda Zia was attended by BJP stalwart L.K. Advani. Both Sushma Swaraj, leader of the opposition BJP, and BJP President Nitin Gadkari held meetings with Khaleda Zia. During the meeting with Khaleda Zia, Dr. Singh said that India was trying to achieve political consensus on both Ganges water and stopping cross-border killings by BSF. He assured that Bangladesh would be informed and consulted on Tipaimukh. Interestingly, in all these three issues, BJP President Gadkari extended support to Khaleda Zia's concern.

Neither was Dr. Singh dubbed as "weak and meek" by the opposition BJP for his conciliatory stance towards Bangladesh, nor was Gadkari termed as "traitor" or accused of "selling out India to Bangladesh" by the ruling Congress for expressing support to the legitimate concerns of Bangladesh. No matter how ideologically divided Congress and BJP may be, on issues of national interests they discuss, consult, and positively respond to each other. Now let's look what has been happening at our end.

Our minister for environment and forest accused Khaleda Zia of having links with Shiv Sena and said: "We have learned that Khaleda Zia had a secret meeting with the Shiv Sena. If the Shiv Sena unleashes repressions on the Indian Muslims it will stir an anti-Indian sentiment in Bangladesh, which can be capitalised on during next general elec-

tions." The degree of irresponsibility of a minister in making such reckless comments is mind boggling. Even if we were to assume that the statement is true, is it something that should be publicly uttered given the negative fallout such communal remarks can have in both India and Bangladesh? Is this expected from an erudite politician with a PhD degree?

Our foreign minister stated that anti-Indian insurgents were patronised during BNP's tenure and the government was "delighted" that Khaleda Zia had admitted her mistake. She went further by asking Khaleda Zia to apologise for her government's support to militancy as that had tarnished Bangladesh's image. She alleged that the opposition leader had patronised terrorism whenever in power. Dr. Dipu Moni may have little respect for Khaleda Zia, but she can't overlook the fact that, in a parliamentary democracy, Khaleda Zia is the shadow prime minister.

By belittling her, Dr. Moni may have scored high with her political mentors but at what price?

Through showing that our internal politics is too acrimonious to leave any room for respect and courtesy for our national leaders, what kind of country branding is she doing? Does she realise how our powerful neighbour is benefiting from such open display of fractured national unity at the highest level of the state? Again, this is coming from another PhD holder in the cabinet.

BNP is not above these partisan sins either, as reflected in statements that the party made before and after the visit by the Indian prime minister last year. Just as AL did not have the political sagacity to take BNP

into confidence on the contentious bilateral issues that were to be discussed during Dr. Singh's visit, BNP also did not have the wisdom to react to the visit in a matured manner.

Khaleda Zia is entitled to communicate her disappointment to Dr. Singh with the outcome of his visit as in her opinion no tangible solution was achieved on the key issue of river water-sharing. However, worn out statements like "AL is selling Bangladesh to its foreign masters," "no Indian transport will be allowed to cross Bangladesh," are nothing but political stunts that have lost their relevance and appeal at a time when people are better informed and expect more sensible statements from our leaders. While our rival parties were busy undermining each other, let's look at what was happening at the Indian front.

Before leaving Delhi, Dr. Singh met BJP leaders Sushma Swaraj, Arun Jaitley, and L.K. Advani.

Sushma and Arun issued statement supporting the prime minister's visit and wished him success. After the visit, Sushma stated in the Institute of South Asia Studies, Singapore: "The beginning has been very, very good.....relations between the two countries have strengthened.....There was some communication gap, that is why she (Mamata) did not join the delegation. Since she was not in the delegation, the prime minister thought it would be safe to just keep it (Teesta deal) aside for a later period." While Dr. Singh was being criticised for not having anticipated the last minute U-turn by the mercurial Mamata, it is the BJP leader who was defending the Indian PM in a foreign forum. Is this conceivable in the Bangladeshi political culture?

On Dr. Singh's return to Delhi, Sushma criticised the PM's visit by highlighting the "internal contradictions" of the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) which negatively impacted his visit, and demanded that details of land boundary agreement reached during the visit be made public. Later, when asked to explain Sushma's earlier praise, BJP spokesperson Prakash Javadekar told media: "During a visit to a foreign country, the government is not criticised. This is part of diplomacy."

One wishes that our leaders could have shown the same decency and diplomacy in dealing with each other. In October 2011, BJP rejected the Indo-Bangla land-swap deal on the ground that it ignored the sentiments of the people of Assam and West Bengal and, in its opinion, rights and interests of the local population had been severely compromised. However, that did not stop BJP from constructive engagement with the ruling UPA on Indo-Bangla relations through continued participation in the government initiated consultative process.

Bangladesh is smaller than India in almost all major parametersize, population, economy, global clout etc. If we are to deal with such a big and powerful neighbour in an effective manner, it has to start by synergising our inner strengths and reflecting the same through political statesmanship that makes political leaders across both sides of the aisles coordinate, consult, and cooperate on matters of vital national interests even if there are differences in their ideologies and strategies. Otherwise, our fractured national identity, resulting from reckless politics, will continue to weaken our position with a powerful neighbour with whom we need to engage on many vital issues like water, trade, transit, and terrorism.

When a big neighbour has the advantage of national unity and matured understanding among its key political actors and the smaller neighbour is weakened by a divisive and self-destructive political culture the outcome is not difficult to perceive and, much to the peril of the nation, inevitable as well.

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Earth for sale on auction site



A man put the planet Earth up for sale on a Japanese internet auction site last week. The seller listed the Earth as "used" and warned that there was a "no-return" policy. Buy it and you're stuck with it.

On the information page, he explained that God had appeared to him in a dream and told him to sell the place. People being people, many took it seriously, reports Rocketnews24, a Japanese news website.

A questioner from Saitama asked: Q: "I love cigars. Is it possible to sell off just Cuba as a special package item?"

A: "Thank you for your question! After placing the winning bid, I think Havana can be moved to Saitama, Japan."

Q: "Hello. This is a really interesting item! If I buy the Earth will I become a god?"

A: "Thank you for your question! This item can't make you a god."

One questioner, apparently from a different galaxy, asked whether the Earth could be delivered to his home planet.

Q: "Is it possible to ship this via Altair? Thank you for your time."

A: "Thank you for your question! Because it would take 17 light years just for the bank transaction to complete, I think you should forget shipping."

(Notice that everyone is polite in Japan, even wackos.)

At the time of writing, the price for planet Earth has soared from 69 cents to US\$2,700.

In real estate terms, it may sound cheap, but think of the maintenance, etc. Do you really want all that responsibility?

For more on mid-air crisis, visit <http://www.mrjam.org>

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Making sense of EU's Nobel Peace Prize

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THE Norwegian Nobel Committee's decision to award the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize to European Union (EU) has generated mixed responses. For EU officials, the Nobel Committee's decision makes sense since the peace award goes to an institution that really deserves it. EU supporters are delighted by the fact that EU is the only regional intergovernmental organisation to win the prestigious peace prize. Senior EU officials, including EU President Herman Van Rompuy, European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso, and European Parliament President Martin Schultz, said it was a recognition that was long overdue.

In order to grasp the importance of the Nobel Committee's decision, one has to look into two contrasting approaches to peace: negative peace and positive peace. Negative peace refers to absence of war or violence, while positive peace implies promotion of social justice and inclusive policies. It is interesting that the Nobel Committee and EU's supporters tend to highlight EU's contribution to negative peace. This is because historical enmity between France and Germany caused many wars on the European continent. In the postwar era, the EU and its predecessors, such as the European Coal and Steel Community, the European Economic Community, and the European Community, facilitated rule-based cooperation among member states. Greater economic cooperation has created an incentive for stable relations while reducing the likelihood of war. This led the Nobel Committee to conclude that: "Today, war between Germany and France is unthinkable. This [the European integration process] shows how, through well-aimed efforts and by building up mutual confidence, historical enemies can become close partners."

EU's contribution to positive peace cannot be ignored altogether. This is exactly why the question of promoting democracy and human rights comes to the fore. Evidence can be found in the way EU membership is extended to countries in the Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe. More than one-third of EU's 27 member states joined the organisation after the end of Cold



War. Political democratisation and economic liberalisation were set as important preconditions for EU membership candidacy. It is thus no surprise that today's democratic Hungary, Lithuania, and Poland, for instance, look completely different from and arguably better than their autocratic past. Democracy and human rights are valued so much for their role in expanding individual liberty, freedom of speech, and economic choices.

For cynics, the Nobel Committee's decision to award the peace prize to EU is nonsense and an irony. Although critics appear to speak in one voice, there are many facets of EU's Nobel critics, such as anti-colonialists, economic nationalists, and Euro-sceptics. Much of the historicist and anti-colonialist criticisms come from Afro-Asian political analysts. African observers are particularly unhappy at the Nobel Committee's decision. For them, Europe's long history of colonialism, slave trade, and military intervention have undermined African development.

Hebert Zharar, political editor of *The Herald Online*, criticises the "predatory behaviour" of some EU member states for creating two world wars and interfering in the internal affairs of other states. Economic nationalists in Greece, Portugal, and Spain have derided the EU's Nobel prize, saying it was untimely when the

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Eurozone crisis has revealed divisions rather than unity. Nationalists are concerned with the EU's role in imposing austerity measures in their countries, which have led to riots and social unrests.

Great Britain is well known for harbouring sceptical attitude toward the EU. In fact, on many international issues, the United Kingdom appears to be more Atlanticist than Europeanist. This means, in the conduct of international affairs, the UK attaches more importance to the United States of America and its principal military alliance North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato) than Britain's European neighbours and the EU. It is thus no surprise that British Prime Minister David Cameron offered an unenthusiastic comment on EU's Nobel Peace Prize. In a belated statement on October 19, 2012, Cameron remarked that the EU was not the only institution to be credited for making peace in Europe. He made it categorical that Nato deserved the credit too!

Turkish critics have joined the chorus saying the EU should be prized for its duplicity and hypocrisy. The source of Turkish anger is obvious: Ankara has long been kept waiting for EU membership. The European Commission has made it clear that the EU will not extend its membership to Ankara until Turkey improves its human rights standards.

Proponents of the EU respond to the critics by emphasising the past achievements of EU in stabilising Europe. They acknowledge the magnitude of economic challenges faced by the EU and its member states, but are hopeful that a strong EU, rather than a divided Europe, can better handle the economic anarchy. For them, absent European institutions, parochial national interests and right wing extremism will challenge the ethnic diversity and cultural plurality of Europe.

Contrasting images from EU's supporters and critics offer a fresh opportunity for South Asia to examine the effect of economic integration on regional peace and stability. Established in 1985, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) is yet to show visible progress in creating a free trade area. Saarc leaders can follow the EU's footsteps and examine how the Europeans have put aside their parochial national interests to move toward the formation of a regional community. Such lessons are particularly important for India and Pakistan two South Asian archrivals who have fought three wars since independence in 1947, and have often boasted of their nuclear arsenals as the ultimate guarantors of national security. Today, the Kashmir dispute remains at the heart of bitter Indo-Pak relations, foiling the prospects for a strong Saarc process.

I contend that, like France and Germany in Europe, India and Pakistan in South Asia should come forward with a gesture of goodwill and friendship in constructing a strong foundation for Saarc. As a founding member of Saarc and an enthusiastic promoter of South Asian identity, Bangladesh should help bring New Delhi and Islamabad closer to the negotiating table. The EU can also extend its political clout and diplomatic support in this effort. Such efforts should aim to create a strong Saarc, which will not only reduce conflict possibilities between India and Pakistan, but also promote democracy, free trade, and people to people contact in the region. Regardless of the negative image painted by the critics, the EU is likely to be seen by many South Asians as a role model of regional integration and a success story of peace.

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