

ARAB SPRING

Division, violence and collapsing economy

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THE world usually welcomes the New Year with feelings of optimism and joy, but this may not be the case in the countries of the Arab Spring; having just completed two years of revolution.

Even though the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya successfully overthrew their regimes, the people of these nations are still dominated by frustration and anticipation. With the escalation of conflicts and political divisions, violence and faltering economies -- bankruptcy threatens some of these countries -- are being inherited in 2013.

While internal challenges vary from one country to the other, frustration is the main theme in the region due to the lack of political and social change -- the fear of the rise of Islamic currents and threats from fundamentalist groups against civil and liberal groups. All this lies parallel to the increasing rates of poverty and unemployment rates, which in fact were seen as main factors that prompted the uprisings.

If we look at Egypt, we will find that the political and social divisions, and the violence that prevailed over the past two years, have actually helped form political alliances and will hopefully achieve their aspirations for democracy in 2013.

Another less optimistic view is that Islamists, led by the Muslim Brotherhood, will continue to climb to the top of all state institutions after their "constitution victory" until they completely dominate the country.

It is also not likely that Islamists will divide -- especially now that the Brotherhood won a victory on its own --, this may lead to confrontation between the different groups which would be a disaster especially at a time where the economy is struggling with the ratings of 'Standard and Poor's' dropping significantly in Egypt. Although Tunisia managed, after a brief

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period of successful revolution, to topple the former regime, form a ruling coalition of the Islamic -- renaissance -- movement and two secular parties, and elect a constituent assembly to oversee the transition and the new constitution, which could make the Tunisian political experience or transition the best between the other Arab Spring countries, Tunisia begins its third year after the revolution without the adoption of the constitution -- this has risen fear of a delay of 2013 elections amid the escalation of political rivalry.

This comes at a time while the country is on the verge of economic collapse, where a quarter of Tunisia is currently living below the poverty line and the unemployment rate is at 19% -- the highest in five years -- which contributes to increased rates of suicide and violence.

The security situation is still one of the most important priorities needed to achieve stability, whether in Libya or Tunisia, Yemen or Egypt, where some of these countries are facing the risk of continued flow of weapons into its territory across the border, with the rising influence of Salafist and jihadist currents; most stringent in power.

Meanwhile, Libya was able to conduct elections of the National Congress General last summer and resume its oil production. It is still suffering from the spread of weapons and illegal militias and growing separatism and security threats, while more than a third tribal forces and the local authority of the surge are fighting among themselves, with piercing warnings of Libya turning into Iraq or another Somalia. In Yemen, sources confirm that in

Sanaa, there is a possibility of proposing a new constitution for the country during the third quarter of 2013, but disappointment still controls the Yemeni people due to failure of national reconciliation to the inability of the new leadership to deter attempts secession of the south and increase of terrorist activities.

Disappointed in the outcome of revolutions of the Arab Spring, particularly in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Syria, as well as anxiety and fear of the future, the common man now wishes for the former regimes. They long for the toppled regimes saying they were better than the revolution which they lived their lives wishing for.

The result of the Arab Spring to date is: Escaped president, another in jail, another slain and a lion (Assad) staggering. With a glance of the events of fallen

leaders, and those who are yet to fall in the Arab Spring nations, we find the sentence of a former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, who was sentenced to life imprisonment in June for his role in the killing of peaceful protesters during the uprising that erupted in 2011 to remove him from power.

Mubarak was toppled in February 2011 of the same year and is the only president who is being persecuted in a manner somewhat civilised inside his own country.

The president of Tunisia, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, fled to Saudi Arabia on January 14, 2011, after a popular uprising following a man who set himself on fire (Mohamed Bouazizi) against a police assault. The street vendor was desperate and frustrated after he was forced to remove the vegetable truck that he worked on.

The president was then charged of corruption among other crimes that he committed during his rule which lasted 23 years.

The fall of Ben Ali's regime had a huge impact on other Arab states leading to what is today called the Arab Spring, and has seen dramatic changes, yet there is one fact that is indisputable and that is that the current government is the first in the entire history of Tunisia to reflect the will of the people.

The other reality that emerged first time in the history of Tunisia was the strength of the opposition to the government, who made every effort possible to prevent the formation of a coalition government in order to create a constitutional vacuum by leaving the country without a government.

As the biggest winner of the protests being the Renaissance Party, this was meant to prevent the coalition with other parties to form a government, but when it failed to maneuver, it was left describing the parties allied with the Renaissance as traitors.

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Priorities at hand

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THE governance of a country requires setting priorities and implementing a plan to advance the prioritised goals. The purpose of this commentary is to explore key dimensions of this process.

Priorities matter since they are to guide the operational dispositions of or governance by the government, in legislations, policies, development plans, budgets, and various projects, initiatives and campaigns during the current and expected future mandates. They should simultaneously reflect the ruling party's comprehensive vision and its deliverables to the people.

The defining characteristic of a set of priorities is its rank ordering of the issues, from the highest to the lowest.

As a matter of practice, however, only a short list of key priorities is often identified by a government, without any ordering. Once the key government priorities are determined, they should then be reflected as such in the actual workings of the government. Without this essential consistency, the country could very well wander into precipitous circumstances.

Bangladesh examples of grave inconsistency or lack of priority include the Padma Bridge financing, the banking scandals and the RMG factory fires.

Of course, the priorities themselves need to be consistent with each other. Absurd disregard for this consistency is illustrated by the recent government's approval of a host of new private banks while forcibly acquiring greater control of the member-borrower owned Grameen Bank.

Similarly, the government continues to rely heavily on the state owned commercial banks for its own finances and then defy greater regulatory power of the central bank over these banks; despite their chronic poor performance and massive banking scandals.

Setting key priorities and acting upon them involves tradeoffs that can be costly and unpalatable. An important area of priority tradeoff in Bangladesh is clean governance, the lack of which has been a constant enigma and a severe impediment towards harnessing the development potential of the country.

As influence peddling by the members of the ruling regime is the most dominant and prominent source of governance failures, a ruling party may find it extremely unpalatable and even unacceptable for the long-term sur-

vival of the party to seriously arrest and punish influence peddling by its own members.

Instead, strategically, it dawns as an attractive tactic to ceaselessly persecute the current opposition for their alleged misdeeds when in power previously. One potential way of resolving this dilemma has been discussed elsewhere [M. Chaudhury, How to establish clean governance, Financial Express, September 08, 2012].

A very challenging aspect of prioritisation is that the priorities may vary over time depending on the needs and aspirations of citizens, evolution of the philosophies of political parties, and the ever shifting global developments.

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For Bangladesh, political self-determination and cultural liberty followed by economic fairness in the spirit of socialism were the overarching priorities during and immediately after the liberation war in 1971. But in 2013, the prioritisation process needs to start with the priorities of the post-liberation generations of Bangladeshis in the new millennium.

The need for this crucial transition is best understood by noting that the remarkable economic and socio-cultural achievements of Bangladesh since liberation are at odds with and at risk due to chronic and severe political turbulence, governance failures coupled with rampant corruption, alarming deterioration in the sanctity and security of life for ordinary citizens especially in the urban areas, fatally compromised consumer food chain, daily life and businesses paralysed by sharply reduced mobility and vastly inadequate power supply, and an ever shrinking stock of cultivable land and other non-renewable resources including below and above ground waters.

Lastly, the key priorities need to be designated as immediate, medium-term (five to ten years) and long-term. Some priority issues such as transportation, health and education

infrastructures can be addressed over a medium-term while others, such as power and water supply, can only be satisfactorily addressed over an extended period of time.

Nonetheless it is important that the work starts today as the first phase of a planned capacity that should prove to be excess capacity for a long time since adding or reconstructing such capacities is usually expensive and time consuming, and may even be nearly impossible (e.g., reconstructing Dhaka city with high rises and wide boulevards). The London tube and the New York City bridges and subway system are worth noting examples in this regard.

Arguably the greatest risks to the well-being of future generations of Bangladeshis are the lack of adequate power supply and physical mobility network.

Almost surely, the immediate priorities need to include:

Redeployment of the law enforcement forces (and possibly the BGB and the armed forces) from managing political activities and protecting corrupt ministers and government officials to improve the sanctity of life and security for ordinary citizens and safety of the food chain;

Ensuring compliance with the governance demands of the international financiers so that the Padma Bridge and numerous other development initiatives may progress;

Improving safety measures at the all-important RMG factories; and

Privatisation of the state owned commercial banks or failing that allowing the Bangladesh Bank to exercise stringent regulatory oversight over them.

Additionally, the prosecution of the war criminals of 1971 should be fast tracked to serve the long-awaited justice once for all so that the country can stop fighting the old battles and instead engage, without distraction, in the challenges of the new millennium.

To conclude, it is time that the political and governance dialogue in Bangladesh shift from litigation of the record of prior regimes and constant mud slinging to articulating visions of managing the present and the future, preferably through a set of mutually consistent key priorities (immediate, medium and long-term) and action plans.

Eyes glued to the rear view mirror may not be a smart way to drive a nation forward.

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Wackiest tales of the past 12 months



AS work/ school starts for many people at the start of this year, let's review odd news events of 2012, by far the most bizarre, weirdest year I can remember -- since 2011, that is.

In January last year, Japanese scientists

created a car seat that memorized the driver's bottom shape and refused to start if the wrong person was in the driving seat. But there were fears for post-holiday productivity. "Sorry boss, can't come to work this week as my behind is too fat."

In March, three Japanese tourists in Australia obediently followed the instructions of a satnav machine and drove straight into the sea.

Also in March, a thief in the UK was caught by a cop dressed as a giant banana. (The part-time police officer had two jobs, the second being in supermarket promotions.) Bananaman said of the thief: "He looked surprised."

In April, it was revealed that an Indian man named Ramu Shinde had been jailed for two years for a crime committed when he was behind bars.

Prosecution: "Do you have a scrap of proof that you did not commit this crime?"

Defendant: "Er, I was in a maximum security jail on the other side of town."

Prosecution: "Other than that?"

In May, Mumbai air passenger Kamal Basha Ahmed, 23, leapt from seat 28D, overpowered a flight attendant, opened the plane door and stepped out -- but the still-moving plane had just landed and the steps were not in place.

In June, it was revealed that the Chinese province of Yunnan had started a Groupon-style bulk spouse import-export industry, with bargain rates for multiple spouses "in a single order." The service proved popular with Yunnan peasant farmers.

In October, newspapers said a woman had been murdered by her seafood appetizer, a live octopus. But the courts decided that her boyfriend Kim suffocated her and framed her dinner. The octopus declined to comment.

Still in October, it was revealed that thousands of families in Assam, a state in the northeast of India, were growing super-hot chilis to sell to the British army for use in weapons.

The same month, staff at Beijing Wildlife Zoo in China were shown to have attached an apparatus to the back of the peacock so that it only displays its tail for visitors who pay cash.

In November, a newspaper claimed that a man who annoyed the new leader of North Korea was vaporised by having a missile fired at him.

In December in Hong Kong, the price per square meter of car parking bays rose higher than the cost of apartments.

Early portents say 2013 will be even weirder. I can hardly wait.

For more whacky news, visit our columnist at: <http://www.mrjam.org>