

ZIA: The thankless role in saving democracy in Bangladesh

Corruption and stealing threaten a once-vibrant nation



WILL 2013 be a watershed in US-Bangladeshi relations? My country of 150 million people, located between India and Myanmar, has been independent since 1971, when the United

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States was one of the first nations to recognise our right to self-determination. Yet in the past year, relations have been strained to the point where the United States may be accused of standing idle while democracy in Bangladesh is undermined and its economic allegiance shifts toward other growing world powers.

This is not to say that the US government, Congress or agencies they help lead have done nothing. Six months ago, the World Bank withdrew nearly \$2 billion in funding for a four-mile bridge project, the largest single infrastructure project in Bangladesh for 40 years, and demanded an inquiry into ministerial corruption and misappropriation of funds.

At the same time, members of the US congressional caucus on Bangladesh condemned the government -- in particular Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina -- for removing Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus from his post as managing director of Grameen Bank, Bangladesh's award-winning microfinance institution that has pulled millions out of poverty. The reason for his ouster? Attorney General Mahbubey Alam said the honour was presented to the wrong person: "If anybody in Bangladesh deserves the Nobel Peace Prize, it is Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina."

Most Bangladeshis would disagree that Ms. Hasina has any claim on the prize. Just ask the families of some 300 people who have been registered as missing since 2009 at the hands of Ms. Hasina's Rapid Action Battalion -- a paramilitary wing of the police. Or consider the family of murdered workers' rights campaigner Aminul Islam, on whose behalf the AFL-CIO is campaigning to overturn US-Bangladeshi trade preferences. Political leaders and their supporters who are being accused by a local war crimes tribunal of involvement in atrocities during

the 1971 war of independence also would question Ms. Hasina's right to the Nobel Prize.

The US ambassador for war crimes has condemned Ms. Hasina's government for trying only opponents of the regime. In December, the Economist published leaked emails and phone recordings revealing the complicity of the Hasina administration in these trials, and how they are abusing them to issue death sentences to Ms. Hasina's political opponents.

The simple fact is that over the past five years, Bangladesh has been moving rapidly away from being one of Asia's most vibrant democracies toward a single family taking over the levers of power. Now Ms. Hasina is attempting to remove from the constitution the need for a caretaker government -- six months before the election. Indeed, she herself helped institute this rule, which calls for a nonpolitical government to take the reigns of power and oversee the electoral process unencumbered by political interference.

Having a caretaker government has been the insurance that elections are free and fair. If the voters decide to vote for a new government, then power must change hands. Despite millions joining in street protests against plans to ditch the caretaker government system before the general election this year, Ms. Hasina seems intent on pushing ahead, believing it will allow her to be re-elected despite popular opposition to her rule.

Bangladesh's neighbour Burma is emerging from exile with the visit of President Obama in the aftermath of his re-election. India continues its growth as the world's largest democracy. If Bangladesh succumbs to the rule of one family, it would be a major step backward for the region. Southeast Asia is now a region full of hope because of the

freedoms America has helped foster. Under a caretaker government, the people of Bangladesh have the chance to express their will through the ballot box.

The United States and its allies, such as Great Britain, have the influence to insist that a caretaker government is instituted so the views of the voters are respected. To ensure this, their words and actions must be much stronger, to keep Bangladesh from slipping away from democracy. Congress and the British Parliament must continue to honour individuals such as Mr. Yunus for what he has achieved to alleviate poverty, while others such as Ms. Hasina have merely coveted recognition.

They also must explain to Ms. Hasina that general preferences for trade will be withdrawn if those who support workers' rights and have political views opposed to those of the prime minister are not now allowed to express their beliefs. The Western powers should consider targeted travel and other sanctions against those in the regime who undermine democracy, freedom of speech and human rights. They should say and do these things publicly, for all our citizens to see and hear. This is how the United States can ensure that its mission to democratise the world continues.

It was once said, "There is a higher court than courts of justice, and that is the court of conscience." It is impossible to say in good conscience that democracy, justice and the alleviation of poverty in Bangladesh under Ms. Hasina are safe. Indeed, all are in grave danger. It is time for the world, led by America, to act and ensure that democracy is saved in Bangladesh.

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Right of a human being

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HUMAN right, and fundamental freedom, is a birthright of all human beings where any government's primary responsibility is protecting and promoting its citizen. This issue has not received the prominence it should have over time and action needs increased alertness of this right through campaigns within the community, so that we all become aware of this right.

There have been repeated attempts to weaken the functions of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission; to narrow the scope of the sex discrimination and remove specialist commissioners such as the Sex Discrimination Commission. Funds need to be increased to support faster resolution and broader education efforts to follow the action against this discrimination.

The increase in life-spans and the changes from pensions to superannuation has increased risks for older women facing poverty after retirement. A massive campaign is needed to ensure appropriate education so that they understand superannuation. An education system talking about superannuation, before a child leaves school, is important so that plans can be made on how to finance oneself after retirement.

We must retain a pension system for those who will not/ do not have adequate superannuation that provides for a livable income. This leads to the gender pay inequity. Also often when women return to the workforce, they take on part-time work, thereby increasing the gap in their superannuation pension.

Accesses to the services provided by government are not always readily accessible to those in need and there appears to be little attention paid to educating and targeting them. This takes us back to the roots of education in our community. Unless people are educated as to where they may obtain help and be encouraged to do so, they will remain in the "poverty trap." There are many families with children growing up without either parent within fulltime work. More must be done to educate people while still at school to develop life skills to seek employment that might not be a traditional job. Also, more training must be given to people to learn skills to obtain different jobs over their life time.

Housing affordability and accessibility has also decreased. The regulation of the rental housing market needs to be thus strengthened and there needs to be an improvement in accessing emergency housing and crisis accommodation; particularly noting the need for services for women from rural, regional and remote areas; and women marginalised by our society.

Best practice standards are needed for residential tenancy legislation and public housing policies; principles of universal housing designs and adaptable housing stocks, community consultation in policy development and implementations; education for tenants and landlords; and the promotion of housing as a basic right.

There needs to be mandatory government provision of basic utilities and services to all households including those in remote locations. Finally, appropriate studies need to be carried out to address the causes of homelessness by funding longitudinal studies of women and housing to produce housing policy and service provision; develop effective and well funded early intervention programmes; integrate provision of appropriate, and accessible housing with protection of other basic rights that are linked to housing.

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PLEASURE IS ALL MINE



BY a straight count, Dhaka is behind London by more than 150 years on livability index. During the mid-nineteenth century, it was Dirty Thames for London it is

stinking Buriganga for Dhaka now. Percy B. Shelley (1792-1822), the romantic poet unromantically said: "Hell is much like London, a populous and a smoky city."

But what was a throwback for the present-day London, is a throw-forward for Dhaka, in a manner of speaking.

Our capital city then used to be as idyllic as Venice, and actually dubbed so, by virtue of its free-flowing beautiful waterways. The fortunes have reversed: Whilst the once-repelling Thames had had a major cleanup operation in good time to freshen up; one and a half century on, Dhaka gasps for a breath of fresh air.

The story about the Thames, the lifeline of British commerce, goes like this: In 1848, "the Metropolitan Sewers Commission mandated cesspools and house drains be connected to sewers, which emptied, unfiltered, into the River Thames. This worsened the problem and affectively turned London's main waterway in to an open sewer."

An interesting tale related how the then British Prime Minister Gladstone (1809-1898) when ambling across to the House of Commons library overlooking the stinking Thames had to press his handkerchief tightly with his nose to ward off the obnoxious odour. At once, he ordered a complete overhaul of the London drainage non-system, so to speak. In fact, the British Parliament had to be prorogued as experts worked at length and got the river to rid itself of the stench.

Nothing short of such a fired up political will can deliver Dhaka from the clutches of polluted hell and land-grabbers paradise that Buriganga, Balu, Turag and Sitalakkhya have become.

On rivers, just as there are High Court directives, there are stay orders, too. Manipulated land documentation has been a curse to be sure. After unsustainable demolition drives and apologetic attempts at demarcation of riverbanks giving leeway to the grabbers and polluters, public interest is trampled. In the process, media and environmentalists campaign for saving Dhaka's lifelines has come face-to-face with its moment of truth. Vested interests, corrupt officials and political cadres go about their singsong handholding as though in a mutually complimentary and supportive society.

When perchance a flicker glimmers that will be short lived. The case in point is Muhammad Munir Chowdhury, the evidently effective enforcement director of the DoE since transferred out. He could not complete his term of three years, in spite (or shall we say) because of, the public and environmentalists demanding his continuation on the job. For, he had provoked the wrath of powerful conglomerates. He reclaimed 300 acres of hills, forest and river land, evicted over 250 illegal brick fields, saved and impelled

300 industries to set up affluent treatment plants. What should have earned him a reward has ended up being his unceremonious exit to Milk Vita.

One wonders, what would have Dhaka looked like to John Gunther if he ever visited the city. For, he was graphic in his description of Addis Ababa (in Ethiopia) looking "as if it had been dragged piece-meal from an aeroplane carrying rub-

gestions.

The built-up Dhaka is even worse with no breathing space, little greens and uncleared garbage. It is coming to a point where a single appointment out of office can take up a big chunk of time which amounts to money being lost, energy sapped and cynicism sinking in. Overall, a very unhealthy feeling.

Even a pleasurable occasion like attending a marriage ceremony or a drama, or a mandatory courtesy call, or taking part in seminar becomes suffering and hardship. The elderly are advised to carry aspirin on the road; medical emergencies can and do arise; and even the ambulances cannot make it to hospitals in good time for medical attention.

The simple forward-looking approach is not to treat ourselves as part of the problem but see the potential of our being part of the solution. One to two thousand people trek to Dhaka city and some two hundred new vehicles come on the road everyday!

Political parties bring out processions, hold meetings, let alone VVIP movements shutting off arterial thoroughfares. So there is a need for leading the way from the top.

The problem is known and the contributors to traffic jam are clearly identified, including rickshaws which cause 66% of the traffic jams with one million on the

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A.M. AHADY DRIK NEWS

bish." Dhaka distinguishes itself being jam-packed as though serpentine endless tailbacks have been frozen as a still photograph. This then leads us to the impossible depressive problem of traffic con-

road. Of these, only 0.2 million are registered.

Recipes like developing growth epicentres to trigger a reverse migration, applying a cap on transport licensing (linking vehicles to number of passengers carried per family), parking lots at the outskirts of the city, having a mass transit system, charging toll on private transports insisting on entry to the city like in London, have been in the air for long.

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Some statistics should be eye openers. Tick these off and you have a picture of denial and loss. Former MCCI president Anis Ud Dowla at a seminar with former home minister Shahara Khatun revealed study estimates that are simply overwhelming. "Of the Tk 19,555 crore (nearly \$3 billion) financial loss, wasted time on the streets accounts for nearly Tk 11,896 crore followed by environmental cost Tk 2,200 crore and business loss of passenger transport and freight industries Tk 2,000 crore each. Excess fuel (at the rate of CNG price) eats up Tk 575 crore and accidents Tk 50 crore. To top these up, 3.2 million business hours are lost everyday."

A city that contributes anything between 20 and 30% of the country's Gross Domestic Product worth nearly \$100 billion deserves much better. Say, which investor will feel encouraged to invest in Bangladesh knowing that the travel time between its premier airport and hotels in the city is equal to an air trip from Delhi to Dhaka or more?

Dhaka really needs to be upgraded, more livable and worthy of investment. We are in a race with time.

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