

On Begum Zia's Washington Times Article

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It would be appropriate to call Begum Zia's recent article in the Washington Times, an open letter to the US government. The letter contains some truth, some half-truth but most of it is outright ludicrousness. These are words of desperation, ironically from a two-term PM, inviting a foreign power to do on her behalf what 'her' 150 million people supposedly cannot achieve!

She started the letter by giving the US administration a description of the geographical location of Bangladesh, in case the US leaders do not have the knowledge of it. However, most of her 150 million people who remember or learned from history the presence of the 7th fleet in the Bay of Bengal just prior to our victory in 1971, failed to understand how "the United States was one of the first nations to recognise our right to self-determination."

Apparently, referring to Bangladesh government's recent trade pacts with Russia, she accused the United States "of standing idle while Bangladesh's economic allegiance shifts toward other growing world powers." May her 150 million people know what role the United States should have played in preventing the country's economic allegiance, steered by a duly elected government, to "other growing world powers?" As the leader of the parliamentary opposition, did she raise her voice against the "economic allegiance" in the floor of the parliament; the appropriate forum to do so?

A significant space of her letter is devoted to Sheikh Hasina's removal of Prof. Yunus from the Grameen Bank. Bulks of our citizens have sided with Prof. Yunus on the tussle. But Grameen Bank is not an international financial institution, and is governed by the statutes of the partly state-owned bank of the country and therefore the wrangle was solely an internal affair of the country.

Here again, what did Begum Zia expect from the US to do to reinstate Prof. Yunus to his position in Grameen Bank?

In the limited space of her piece, she has not forgotten to bring the issue of war crimes trials portraying the accused who are on trial, once again as innocent victims of political persecutions. She suggested that supporters of the accused of a "local" war crimes tribunal "would question Ms.



Hasina's right to the Nobel Prize," a childish statement to say the least.

It seems she is dejected by the recent US government statement acknowledging Bangladesh's right to put the ones accused of committing crimes against humanity in 1971 on trials? She put the US government on the dock for its inaction in stopping the trial, despite, according to her, the earlier condemnation of the US ambassador for war crimes of the ongoing trial as prosecution of the "opponents of the regime."

In fact, this is one of her multiple contradictory stands on the trials. Many at times the proponents of the trials have urged Begum Zia to disclose the names of those, in her knowl-

edge in Sheikh Hasina's camp, who should be tried for crimes against humanity committed in 1971, which she never did.

She has rightly opined that Sheikh Hasina should not be awarded Nobel Prize since "300 people have been registered missing (allegedly) at the hand of RAB," which, incidentally Begum Zia created. In the same token according to

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reports of Human Rights Groups, 957 people were killed in so-called crossfires during her last rule, 56 people died "out of heart attack" in the operation clean heart and 170 people died in the police custody, aside from the scores killed in the August 21 mayhem, and thousands suffered torture and death in the hands of her supporters in the aftermath of her election victory in 2001.

The most ludicrous of the assertions came when she wrote: "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." The simple response should be:

look who is talking.

In fact, it is a rare consensus among the citizens that it is not one, but two families who are "levering the power" of the country and the forefront of the two happens to be her own one, not the other way around.

It was during her own tenure when there were two seats of power, one official and another unofficial. It was she who put her son as the senior vice president of the party, the heir apparent. What "seniority" does he possess, in education, in experience, in honesty, to hold a position which even does not have a slot in the party's constitution?

On the contrary, no one in the other family holds any position in the party. Their presence in the party and in the country, for that matter, is almost nonexistent. Her other son possess the unique distinction to make a place in the World Bank publication named "Asset Recovery Handbook." This World Bank-UNODC publication mentioned the alleged embezzlement of several million dollars by her son as an example of stealing national assets.

She also brought the allegation of corruption in the Padma Bridge project for which two Canadian citizens (not the company) are awaiting preliminary trials in a Canadian court under the Corruption of Foreign Public Officials Act (CFPOA). Incidentally in June 2011, Niko Resources, a Canadian company, was fined C\$9.5 million in a Canadian court after pleading guilty to bribing a Bangladeshi minister of Begum Zia's cabinet. It was the first and so far only plea deal struck by a corporate defendant under CFPOA.

While elaborating on the caretaker government (CTG), she has rightfully said it

was Sheikh Hasina "herself [who] helped institute this rule," but forgot to acknowledge that it was she who spearheaded its destruction. She is probably banking on the short memory of "her" people regarding how she manipulated the then President Iajuddin Ahmed to destroy both the letter and spirit of the system.

She has urged the Western countries in general and the US in particular, to intimidate the government to withdraw "general preferences for trade (the most important lifeline for Bangladesh's Economy)" if the "opponents of the prime minister are not allowed to express their beliefs," a suicidal proposition indeed!

Moreover, are the rights of the opposition groups any less than what used to be during Begum Zia's regime; if not more? She has urged the Western power, to "consider targeted travel and other sanctions against those in the regime who undermine democracy, freedom of speech and human rights."

Paradoxically, the virtues she has mentioned above were the primary casualties in her tenure. Even at the current rate of depravity, it would take years for the current government to lead the nation to the darkest era of human rights where her government plunged the nation into.

In conclusion she has urged, "the world, led by America, to act and ensure that democracy is saved in Bangladesh." Dear leader, it is not any foreign power, but the people of the country themselves who are the guarantors of democracy! Our people themselves reestablished it in December 1990 removing an autocrat, they prevented its undermining in March 1996 after the farcical election of February 15, and they preempted once again an impending farcical election by rallying behind the change-over of one eleven when the essence of the caretaker system was wrecked by Iajuddin-led CTG at the behest of nobody else but Begum Khaleda Zia herself.

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Development vision vs confrontation mission

ZAHURUL ALAM

VISION is planning the future with wisdom and each nation needs a vision to "[...] turn resources into blessing [...]" Long-term socio-political and economic development needs strategic planning and a sustainable and genuine implementation of it. In a reverse case, the nation continues to remain within a vicious conflict leading to sustained poverty. The quote, "When a nation does not have a vision, small minds take over" (Abdul Kalam), is a perfect reminder about the need for a nation's vision.

A country's vision routes fundamental needs of that state and through political consensus that materialises.

Formulation and implementation of a nation's vision is a well practiced matter. All national success stories had a vision at the inception where Bangladesh's War of Independence was based on the nation's vision to free itself from colonial exploitation.

More than a dozen countries have precise formulated development visions and are proceeding forward with those in mind, where Singapore, who falls very well within that group, attained its development through long-term planning and national consensus; leading it to achieve a per capita GNI of of USD 42,930 -- the highest in the world.

None but the politicians are mandated to provide political leadership with a vibrant civil society, other patriotic social elements and efficient government machinery; acting as facilitating forces. The visions have therefore been set forth by the political forces; as it happened during our struggle for independence, since 1949: the Language Movement, formation of the United Front and its victory in the national elections of 1954, students' movement of 1962, Six Point Movement of 1966, and the mass uprising of 1968.

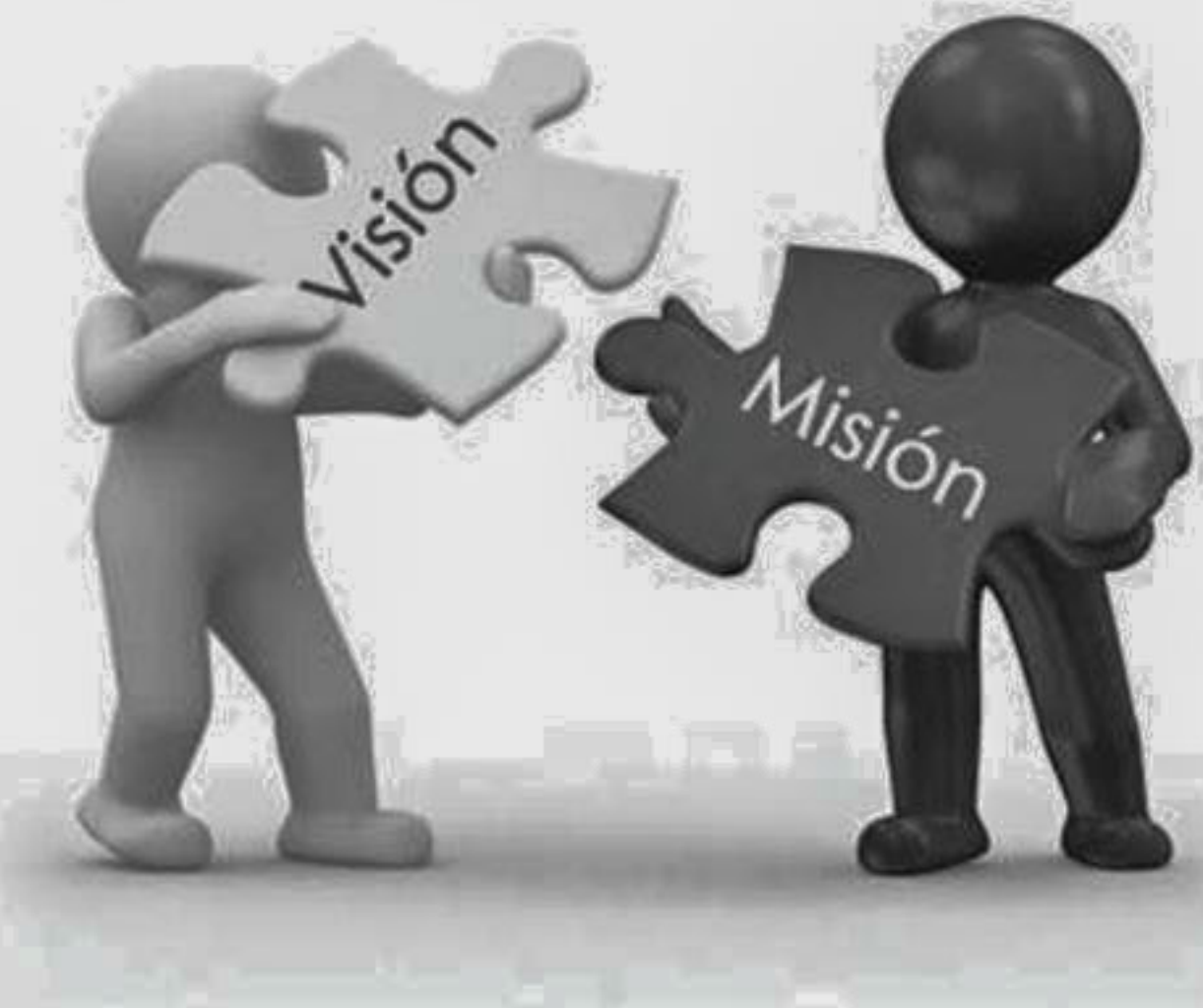
The culminating point of all forms of our national struggle for independence was the War of Independence in 1971. All political forces were united under the banner of our vision for attaining different milestones, except a tiny section of well known collaborators.

Democracy endorses differences of opinion and democratic actions to the extent that those do not distort democratic norms and values. The strength of democracy is in its capacity to synchronise differences of diverse actors through constructive actions. The sine qua non is the welfare of the people at the end of the day.

Bangladesh's current socio-political and economic development is proceeding in accordance with "Vision 2021" that encompasses achieving multi-sectoral milestones within set deadlines. There are both achievements and disappointments, but the judicious political decision should be to capitalise on the achievements, identify the impediments, and remove those for attaining accelerated development in the coming days, rather than negate the achievements and push the development process behind. They should search for developmental innovations putting aside all positive gains that benefited the country.

The political leadership of the country needs to be in possession of the strategic document

Bangladesh's political leadership mandated to lead a democratic Bangladesh needs to seize advantage of the country's inherent and create through developmental practices opportunities, rather than continue with the politics of conflict and contradiction.



and should strive to attain the goals of converting the country into a middle-income one by 2021. "Vision 2021" should be considered as a national agenda, rather than branding itself as a party manifesto by the successive governments.

The issue of political ownership of "Vision 2021" is important from the viewpoint of a doomed political culture of reversing the achievements of the previous governments by the new leadership; irrespective of the merit of those successes.

Notably, none of the previous governments could be re-elected for consecutive terms in Bangladesh and thus the development cadence

created by the predecessor was mostly discredited and made null and void by the successor.

This "one step forward and two steps backward" culture had been one of the major developmental impediments so far, which had always been instrumental in aggravating the miseries of the people putting the issue of national development further away.

Unconstitutional power capture and continuation of authoritarian regimes for a considerable period of this nation's history fuelled slow growth rate.

During the military rule, the country's growth rate accounted for around 3%, against an average of around 6.2% during 1991-2013. One of the most promising economies of Asia thus remained underdeveloped and the people remained in the vicious circle of poverty.

A recent achievement in the social sectors has been poverty reduction by around 10% and attaining a strong macro economic stability, despite global recession, which have saturated additional confidence in people's mind to believe that the country can attain an accelerated development of 8% to emerge as a middle-income country by 2021.

However, to materialise that aspiration, the political leadership needs to behave more intelligently: avoid confrontation leading to political volatility, social backwardness and economic injury that concerns loss of resources and time.

Bangladesh's per capita GNI of USD 848 in 2013 against USD 676 in 2008-2009 is certainly a remarkable progress over four years, however, it is not at par with the potential that the country has. It could be USD 8,770 as in Malaysia or even more with sensible democratic culture and good governance in place.

Bangladesh's political leadership mandated to lead a democratic Bangladesh needs to seize advantage of the country's inherent and create through developmental practices opportunities (economic, demographic, socio political, geo-political, etc.), rather than continue with the politics of conflict and contradiction.

Democracy has provided ample scope for the parties and political leadership to mediate differences in the parliament, which is the most important decision-making forum. Street agitations avoiding parliament would certainly instigate political confrontation, which is clearly not at the interest of the nation.

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Crazy news



EXECUTIVES at China Merchants Bank created a genius programme that automatically transfers husbands' earnings to their wives' accounts.

Every time a husband's account balance reads more than US\$160 (HK\$1,248), the extra

cash automatically moves into his wife's account. Not only will this system enable couples to save up for a house, the bank said, it should be good for relationships between men and women.

There was a huge outcry from young adults over this idea, including 170,000 complaints on Weibo, China's version of Twitter. The bank will probably have to withdraw the scheme.

Shame, because it's actually a brilliant idea. But they should have replaced "husband" and "wife" with other terms like "the sensible spouse" and "the other one."

The idea certainly makes sense to older Asians. Traditionally, in this region, women are in charge of family finances. Men are allowed to retain a small amount of their earnings to buy drinks, arak, newspapers, etc.

By the way I am writing this from my suite at the Shangri La hotel in Futian, Shenzhen. It's huge. I could get all my readers in here with me. Next time we should plan this better. Good hotels are the traveler's reward for all that queuing up in airports...Anyway this is a typical Asian leader philosophy: We make laws. You obey them.

Bosses at McDonald's in Japan sent a stern memo to all staff, banning them from discussing their work with outsiders.

But they did offer one "recommended remark" that staff were allowed to use: "This chicken tatsuta is delicious!"

As a result, the Twittersphere and chat-rooms in Japan are now full of that phrase.

It's only a matter of time before someone tries to rob a McDonald's in Japan and this happens.

Robber: Hand over the money.
Staff: The chicken tatsuta is delicious!
Robber: This gun is loaded!
Staff: The chicken tatsuta is delicious!
Robber: What's the password or code to open the safe?
Staff: The chicken tatsuta is delicious!
Robber flees, screaming.

On other news, a wacko guy who stands up and flaps his arms while driving his motorbike at top speed around Dhaka, Bangladesh, has become a YouTube star. The world has gone crazy.

In the past, when South Asians acted deranged, we didn't make them stars -- we called them sadhus (prophets) and worshipped them.

Wait. Maybe it's the same thing. But because I'm in China, I'm not allowed to give you the YouTube link, but look up "Bangladesh" "Motorbike" "Crazy" and "Djinn" to find the video.

Heading back to Hong Kong in a couple of hours -- apologies for people whose emails have not been answered, etc, you know what it's like trying to communicate with the outside world from mainland China....

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