

# Yunus dedicates US Congressional Gold Medal to the people of Bangladesh

MUNIR QUDDUS

WORLD renowned Bangladeshi economist, Professor Muhammad Yunus, was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal in a joyous and glittering ceremony on April 17. The occasion took place in the large hall beneath the Dome, or the Rotunda, in the Unites States Capitol building in Wash- ington DC. Democratic and the Republican leaders were present, along with a large number of distin- guished personalities and ordinary citizens -- all admir- ers of Prof. Yunus and his life work in alleviating poverty in his home, Bangladesh, and globally. Adding to the occasion, his daughter, Monica Yunus, sang the famous song “A beautiful dreamer.”

Former speaker Nancy Pelosi said that Prof. Yunus was not only one of very few who had won the US Presi- dent’s Medal of Freedom, the Congressional Gold Medal, and the Nobel Prize, he was also the first Muslim to win the Congressional Gold Medal. The Medal’s antecedents go back to the American Revolution, when George Washington became the first person to be hon- oured with this award in 1776.

With his family and friends watching, Prof Yunus humbly accepted the award on behalf of the 160 mil- lion citizens of Bangladesh. He said he could hardly contain his tears of joy and felt immensely blessed for the honour.

A number of congressional leaders spoke glowingly of Prof. Yunus’s work. Senator Durbin said that anyone could come with a complicated model, but only a genius like Yunus could come up with a simple idea that would change the lives of millions. A speaker said that Prof. Yunus was more than just a dreamer, he was a doer and a man of action. Another speaker described him as a banker and a revolutionary -- two words that seldom go together. His ideas are so revolutionary that

they have caused a tsunami of positive change, and the world is better for this change. Senator Reed described him as a unique businessman, one who was not inter- ested in profits, but in lifting people out of poverty.

What was amazing was that these leaders, with very different ideologies and ideas on the role of govern- ment and free markets, found many praiseworthy aspects of

microcredit and social business -- the two ideas Prof. Yunus is best known for. While democrats tended to emphasise the positive impact on women, and the notion that capitalism did not have to make only a few businessman rich, rather it could very well be an agent for social change, the Republicans spoke of microcredit’s role in creat- ing entrepreneurs, strengthening free mar- kets, and changing individ- ual lives, and thus the world.

What an occasion! I found that the security was tight, as expected, but the staff and the guards were friendly. Even though the lines were long on this beauti- ful spring morning sporting cherry blossoms and trees full of flowers in the nation’s capital, the mood was festive. I spoke to a number of guests who had travelled from Texas, California and New York. We all eagerly exchanged stories connecting the man and his work. The ceremony started with prayers offered by the Chap- lain, who prayed movingly for the honouree’s long life and continued success.

In the audience I spotted the former president of Mexico, Vicente Fox, among other dignitaries. Also present were a large number of Bangladeshi Americans, staff members of the Grameen Bank who had travelled with Dr. Yunus, his family members, friends and admir-

ers. The colours and dresses were beautiful and global - - women in saris, some with scarves, men in suits, a few in *punjabi* and *kurta* as sported by Prof. Yunus, along with men in the army, navy and air force uniforms.

Congressman Rush Holt, a long time supporter, has worked with members of RESULTS, a citizen’s advocacy group which has worked passionately over the years to introduce Prof. Yunus and microcredit to the Senators and Congressmen, making this day possible. Mr. Holt said that the good professor had been confounding pundits for years and critics still disbelieved him. He has demonstrated that his ideas work since he has produced uncommon results, but many still fail to take his ideas seriously. Senator Durbin of Illinois, a co-

sponsor of the Bill in the Senate, spoke of his visits to villages in Uganda and other countries, where women told him personal stories of how microfinance had empow- ered them to overthrow the shackles of tradition. Microcredit has been a

game changer for millions of poor women.

Minority leader Nancy Pelosi focused her remarks on the importance of microcredit and social business on women’s liberation and emancipation. She said the highest compliment she could give Prof. Yunus was that he was a “disruptor,” someone whose ideas and work have completely upended the status quo. His ideas and work have revolutionised and disrupted the traditional old fashioned conventional wisdom, for the greater good. Mitch McConnell, the Senate minority leader, spoke of how Prof. Yunus’ work had created millions of women entrepreneurs, and freed many from the “prison of poverty.” The host, Speaker John Boehner, said that the professor’s ideas had allowed people to

take their lives in their own hands, instead of looking up to the government for handouts. He pointed out that microfinance was now a cornerstone of US interna- tional aid policies.

In his acceptance speech, Prof. Yunus thanked the American legislators for the high honour bestowed upon him, and accepted the award as an honour not just for him as an individual, but also for all of Bangla- desh. He spoke of his first visit to this historic building nearly forty two years ago when Bangladesh was in the throes of a violent liberation struggle. Leaving his job as a university professor, he had come here as a complete novice to plead the case of the people of Bangladesh with the legislators, and to oppose Pakistan’s military regime that had unleashed death and destruction on the people. The legislators were very understanding, even through the official US policy at the time was not in favour of the Bangladeshi struggle.

Now he had returned as a proud citizen of Bangla- desh -- a nation that was once given up as a “basket case,” but one that has confounded all predictions and is well positioned to achieve the UN Millennium Devel- opment goals by 2015.

He thanked his family and supporters, and ended with a resounding call for action. The motto “we will send poverty to the museum,” that is engraved in Bengali on the back of the gold medal, reflects an endorsement by the US Congress, he later joked. However, he was serious when he concluded that poverty was created not by the poor but by the sys- tem we had built and if we could change the system, we could do away with poverty and unemployment. He urged all to join the struggle as much work remained to be done.

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## Memories of a dictator

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FIELD Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan, Pakistan’s first military dictator, died thirty nine years ago on April 20, 1974. In all these years, not much has been said or written about him, though his putative diaries were published in Pakistan a few years ago. And then there is his son Gohar Ayub Khan’s ‘*Glimpses into the Corridors of Power*,’ where certain references to the man who imposed the very first martial law on Pakistan and who thereby set a very ugly precedent for ambitious soldiers in Pakistan and Bangladesh, have been read with interest by subcontinental scholars of history.

How do we remember Ayub Khan in Bangladesh? Our memories of the man necessarily have to do with the manner in which he and Iskandar Mirza undermined constitutional politics through seizing the state of Pakistan by force on October 7, 1958, at a time when the country pre- pared for its first general elections scheduled for February 1959. Twenty days after the coup, Ayub elbowed Mirza aside and pushed him into exile. For the next ten years, Ayub’s fiat ran throughout the two wings of Pakistan, with political parties and leaders bearing the brunt of his excesses. Under the Elective Bodies’ Disqualification Ordinance (EBDO), he put well-known political figures out of circulation. A young Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was a particular target of Ayub’s wrath and would suffer till 1969. The respectable Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy was carted off to prison. Adult suffrage was replaced by a pliant electoral college called Basic Democracy.

As Pakistan’s president, Ayub Khan presided over a wholesale change in the coun- try’s political tradition. A culture of sycophancy grew and was promoted to the hilt by the regime. In East Pakistan, a non-entity like Abdul Monem Khan served as governor, to the intense embarrassment of the Bengalis. A horde of other Bengalis hitched on to the Convention Muslim League bandwagon, Ayub’s political vehicle, and naturally stayed in thrall to the dictator. In West Pakistan, it was a similar picture that shaped up. Manzur Quadir, Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada, S.M. Zafar and others came to prominence in Ayub’s shadow. His favourite minister, the young and brash Z.A. Bhutto, called in 1963 for Ayub Khan to be declared president for life. Only three years later, he would turn against his benefactor on the basis of the lie that a secret clause in the Tashkent Declaration had undermined Pakistan’s case after the 1965 war with India.

In 1967, the field marshal produced a book, which some believe was ghost written, he called ‘*Friends Not Masters*.’ It was an exercise in self-adulation. It was, for the Bengalis, the ultimate insult, for Ayub made it clear in the work that the Bengalis were a non-martial race. A mere four years later, these non-martial people threw the mighty Pakistan army out of East Pakistan to create Bangladesh. In 1966, Ayub dismissed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s Six Points as a secessionist conspiracy and vowed to exercise the language of weapons against its votaries. Three years later, he had not only withdrawn the Agartala conspiracy against Bangabandhu but was also to welcome him to the Round Table conference in Rawalpindi and, at one point, offer him the position of Pakistan’s prime minister.

Ayub’s hand-over of power, in the midst of a relentless popular movement against him, was a violation of the constitution he had devised for Pakistan in 1962. Rather than trans- fer power to the speaker of the national assembly, he had General Yahya Khan, the army chief, impose yet one more spell of martial law on Pakistan. That was in March 1969. After that, Ayub Khan was not seen or heard of again, save for his appearance in 1972 before the Hamoodur Rahman Commission set up by the Bhutto government to inquire into the causes behind Pakistan’s battlefield defeat in Bangladesh in 1971.

In retirement, we have it on impeccable authority, Ayub Khan advised Yahya Khan that a political solution be found to the crisis as it erupted in the country in early March 1971. Yahya ignored the advice. Over the next few months, the fallen dictator wrote to his successor twice, suggesting that with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman being in Pakistan’s captivity, the regime should work out a deal with the Bengali leader to save Pakistan in its tottering eastern wing. Pakistan, thought Ayub Khan, might not remain a federation any longer. But perhaps a deal with Mujib could lead to a confederation of the two wings? Yahya stayed silent.

Ayub Khan’s funeral was well-attended. His former protégé Bhutto stayed away from it, though. A few days later, he turned up with wife Nusrat at the Ayub family home, offering the excuse that he was absent because issues of his security were involved. Thus did the field marshal pass into the backwaters of time.

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EARTH day is being celebrated all over the world today, with the theme “The Face of Climate Change,” to create awareness for making the earth a safe place to live in. It has now become very important to protect our planet from unnecessary pollution and degradation. Nowadays, climate change is the biggest challenge for the earth’s ecosystems, all forms of life, and the economy. But what effective steps are we taking to tackle climate change? Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emis- sion is escalating worldwide, but financial flow for adaption in developing poor countries is inadequate.

Climate change can seem like a remote problem to developed countries, but the fact is that it is already impacting people, animals and ecosystems in the developing and poor countries. These problems are multiplying every day. Fortunately, other factors are multiplying too: those stepping up to do something about it. Help us personalise the massive challenge climate change presents by taking a photo and telling your story. How has climate change impacted you? What are you doing to be part of the solution?

Climate change is defined as the changing pattern of climate in major climatic regimes all over the world due to global warm- ing as a result of anthropogenic emission of GHGs. Climate change is observed as variability of climatic phenomena such as rainfall, temperature and humidity in the atmosphere. Climate is the annual average/estimate of activities of different factors of climate such as sunshine, temperature, rainfall, humidity, and wind direction and flow. Cli- mate change refers to change in the intensity of the phenomena that result from interaction of such elements, for example storms, floods, etc., and their frequency and seasonal distri- bution in a year.

In fact, no new hazards due to climate change have emerged but normal hazards are taking place in a more severe and more frequent manner. For example, seasonal distribution of rainfall bringing about early or late floods in Bangladesh, which causes huge crop loss. However, due to climate change, rainfall pattern, occurrence of drought, salinity ingress and flood are making the lives and livelihood of millions of people difficult.

Global warming is the process of the earth becoming warmer. This may be due to various reasons. Emission of GHG into the atmosphere since the industrial revolution is responsible for present day anthropogenic warming. This is not a natural occur- rence though, in the past, the temperature of this planet had risen many times in the geological timescale. Rather, global warming is taking place due to human development activities, and is increasing at a considerable rate, as observed by scien- tists.

The natural warming that had taken place in this planet was a slow process, spanning over thousands of years. As greenhouse gases like CO2, CH4, and N2O are released into the atmosphere due to anthropogenic activities such as industrialisation, defor- estation and intensive agriculture, they trap the heat of the incoming energy from the sun and make the earth warmer. Global warming is well documented and there is no scope for confusion over whether it is a result of increased levels of GHGs in the atmosphere. Global warming is pushing climate change. Adaptation to climate change is changing our lifestyle and ways of livelihood in relation to the changing climate. As the process of climate change is gigantic, an “earth scale” process

that cannot be stopped overnight, we must formulate policy, invent technologies and restructure our whole system to adapt to the changing climate. For example, Bangladesh has a long coastline. Salinity ingress along the coastline is taking place due to sea level rise. Coastal agriculture is getting more difficult with time. We need to invent salinity tolerant varieties of rice to ensure food security of the coastal areas. This is adaptation.

In contrast to adaptation, “mitigation” means arresting cli- mate change in the first place by reducing GHG emission. Most of the GHG emission is caused by the developed countries. Because GHG emission and economic activities are tied together, it is difficult for the developed countries to reduce emission. Mitigation projects aim at emission reduction in fuel and energy, industry, agriculture, waste and forestry sectors.

Though developed countries are mostly responsible for cli- mate change caused by GHG emission, the developing countries and most particularly under-developed countries are victims of the grim of effects of climate change. However, industrialised and developed nations are reluctant to take the responsibility of undertaking remedial measures.

The United Nations, through United Nation Framework Con- vention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), is trying to establish a system for actions needed for climate change management on a global scale, where the developing countries would need to take mitigation measures. The role and responsibility of developing countries should be the same as those of the developed coun- tries.

It is praiseworthy that UNFCCC is trying to put climate thoughts into actions through the UN system. However, since it

has not been able to safeguard the poorest countries from adverse impacts of climate change, of what use is the UN to the world and the masses? All the responsibilities are being placed on the developing coun- tries that do not have even the economic condition and gover-

nance system to run their countries without a climate neutral environment. Then how can we expect the developing and poor countries to be able to respond to climate change?

Bangladesh is highly vulnerable to global climate change impacts. Rural communities are at high risk of facing natural hazards like flood, cyclone and salinity ingress in the coastal regions. Though the government’s capacity is well proven in disaster management, it may not be able to perform its duty in an efficient manner during a change in the pattern of disaster occurrence.

Special attention should be given to disaster preparedness, ensuring food security through promoting adaptive agricultural practice in the rural communities, supply of safe drinking water by adaptive water supply and sanitation (WASH) programme, and low carbon manufacturing system. For financing climate change mitigation as well as adaptation projects, we need to ensure fund flow from international organisations as well as donors.

Climate change is one of the harshest calamities being faced by mankind today. Already, numerous scientific studies have substantiated that climate change is taking place as a of result global warming pushed by persistent GHG emissions into the earth’s atmosphere. Climate change is the output of an aggre- gate of environmental problems, which is why addressing it also needs a holistic approach, regardless of whether it is through adaptation or through mitigation.

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