

The power of words



SHIFTING IMAGES
MILIA ALI

LAST year I passionately campaigned for Barack Obama's re-election. Not because I was totally convinced that he was the candidate of "Change" but because the prospects of a Republican victory and revival of the Bush era policies were daunting, to say the least. However, a negative motivation does not necessarily rule out expectations. I still cling to hopes that in his second term Obama will not merely act as a lame duck President, but will lead the United States to prosperity and progress within a social equity agenda. And that, as a leader of the free world, he will act with wisdom to promote peace in a world of turmoil.

Having said that I realise that expectations need to be tempered by reality. And the reality is that, despite being perceived as "the most powerful man on earth," President Obama does not enjoy unfettered power. He is constrained by antagonistic congressional opposition, public scrutiny and censure -- perhaps more so than any other US president partly because of his race.

Despite being shackled by opposing forces, President Obama is trying to create a legacy by bringing about substantive and perhaps everlasting changes. He may have failed to get the gun control law through, he may be moving slowly on immigration, he may not have totally succeeded in reigning in the excesses of Wall Street, his health care reforms may have fallen short but he cannot be faulted for not trying. It is in this context that I assess the President's May 23 counter-terrorism speech. Critics have questioned whether the policy assertions were mere rhetoric or was the message authentic. It may be a little of both. However, I took away, at least, three broad messages from the President's speech.

First, as an American Muslim, the most important message for me was the President's call for unity, straddling across the religious divide. He referred to the Muslims of America as "a fundamental part of the American family," iterating that "the success of American Muslims, and our determination to guard

against any encroachments on their civil liberties, is the ultimate rebuke to those who say we are at war with Islam." This is a crucial signal in the face of pervasive suspicion on the nearly 3 million American Muslims, after 9/11 and subsequent terrorist acts in the United States.

Secondly, whatever ambiguity the speech may have contained there was clarity on one critical point. The President firmly articulated that there is a need for reviewing the current US policy on national security to find an "appropriate balance between our need for security and preserving those freedoms that make us who we are." He recognised that 12 years after 9/11 the nature of the enemy has changed; hence there may be a need to make a paradigm shift.

Visionary leaders have the courage and fortitude to admit past mistakes and change course. This is in stark contrast to the blame game that politicians play in most countries, including Bangladesh. I noted that President Obama admitted that the culture of war had cost America dearly in terms of foregone investments in education, health and infrastructure. He accepted responsibility for the civilian casualties caused by drone attacks and acknowledged the flawed premise on which Guantanamo prisoners were being held. In fact, there was a profound moment of introspection when the president asked how history would judge America: "Imagine a future



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source of inspiration for the abolition of slavery, albeit it happened nearly a hundred years later? I believe it's crucial for leaders to articulate a vision for the future in words that can be preserved as "intellectual property" and translated into actions by forthcoming generations.

It's true that President Obama's counter-terrorism speech was brilliantly crafted, leaving room for individuals with diverse views to interpret it the way they want to. As for me, I was imbued with renewed hope that some day we will be done with wars and strife and "Victory will be measured in parents taking their kids to school; immigrants coming to our shores; fans taking in a ballgame; a veteran starting a business; a bustling city street."

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

Live hobbits found



BIZARRE TINY people spotted in Indonesia. Live hobbits have been spotted by jungle rangers in Indonesia. No, it's not actor Danny Devito on holiday, I checked. The tiny people have been identified as living examples of homo floresiensis, a primitive human dubbed "the hobbit" by scientists.

Rangers say they twice saw a group of about 15 impossibly small humans walking through a jungle swamp at the Way Kambas National Park in Lampung during March.

"The rangers monitored their presence for around 15 minutes from a distance of around 35 meters," spokesman Sukatmoko, who uses only one name, told the Jakarta Post.

The little people hide when they saw humans approaching with cameras, apparently averse to appearing on rangers' Facebook pages. (This suggests greater intelligence than homo sapiens.)

Small hominids are common in Indonesia, local environmentalist Mukti Priatna told the paper: "In Kerinci Seblat, they are known as the orang pendek, in Flores as homo floresiensis, and in Bone as members of the Oni tribe." (In the West, they're called Elton John and Prince.)

Some observers described the creatures, who were less than 3 ft (1 m) tall, as "pygmies," so I phoned an expert to ask.

He said they were technically too small, as "pygmies" was a Western term for populations whose adult males were 5 ft (1.55 m) or less. "Some anthropologists refer to people slightly over 5 ft as 'pygmoid,'" he added.

This really annoyed me. It means Westerners would classify many Asians as pygmies or pygmoids. In Indonesia, India, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Bangladesh and Vietnam, men are about 5 ft 5 ins (Mahatma Gandhi was 5ft 3 ins) while women average 5 ft or less. North Asians (Hong Kongers, South Koreans, etc), are 2 inches taller.

Surely it's equally valid to think of Asians as being "proper" human-size while Westerners are grotesque giants?

The tallest country in the world is Holland, where pretty much everyone is 6 ft tall, including newborns. (Births are painful and take days.)

I went to The Hague once. It was like being in the Land of Nod. I kept expecting people to look down on me and say: "Fee fi fo fum, I smell the blood of an Asian man."

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Limits of Saudi oil power

FAHAD NAZER

THANKS to the bountiful oil under its desert sands and an equally plentiful supply of foreign labor -- skilled and non-skilled -- Saudi Arabia has enjoyed a booming economy. Prices of crude oil, nearly \$100 a barrel for two years running, have largely spared Saudi Arabia the ill effects of the economic downturn that stalled many nations across the globe. Thanks to the prosperity, the kingdom has also survived, relatively unscathed, the seismic events of the Arab Spring, spurred in large part by feelings of economic deprivation and political marginalisation among Arab youths.

But as more young adults come of age and expect jobs, as the potential for competing sources of energy emerge around the globe, leaders must plan for a more austere future, raising questions about the Saudi development model. Early casualties of this Saudi rethink include millions of expatriates who have flocked to a booming oil kingdom. While some have lived and worked in the kingdom for many years, the path to citizenship is notoriously inaccessible and most expatriates return to their home countries at some point.

Some observers have argued that the Saudi government's seemingly unlimited ability to spend billions to mitigate political, social or economic crises has been the key to its relative stability. The leaders strive to balance the still-predominant role that oil plays in the Saudi economy with long-term economic planning and demonstrate a commitment to human capital by spending lavishly on education, housing, healthcare and job-creation.

In various stages of planning across the kingdom are 24 industrial cities intended to provide thousands of jobs as well as housing for the estimated 400,000 Saudis who join the labor force every year. An estimated \$134.1 billion is earmarked for water desalination and electricity-generation projects over the next decade. Some 130,000 Saudis study abroad as part of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program. More than half of the Saudis enrolled

in more than 60 colleges and universities across the kingdom are women.

While this may seem like an ideal scenario -- a state willing and able to develop its human capital to the fullest and an increasingly well-educated and eager population ready to take the helm of the biggest economy in the Middle East -- there is one caveat: Almost 9 million residents of Saudi Arabia, or 32 percent of the population, are non-Saudis who perform everything from menial sanitation work to managing the nation's top banks. It's estimated that only about 20 percent of foreign workers are considered highly skilled; in addition, there are up to 2 million illegal migrants. In a society with leaders proclaiming young people are its "future," the role for immigrants is not clear.

Long before the Saudi population exploded -- from 6.8 million in 1973 to more than 28 million currently -- fields in the Eastern province began gushing oil that proved to be among the cheapest to extract in the world. As oil production and prices kicked into high gear by the early 1970s, Saudi Arabia underwent one of the most rapid transformations in modern history. From a sparsely populated, largely barren desert, Saudi Arabia today boasts state-of-the-art highways, airports and communication networks.

Until fairly recently however, the country lacked the manpower necessary to implement this massive undertaking. This so-called "miracle in the desert" needed a massive influx of foreigners from across the Arab world, Africa and Asia to turn rapid development into reality.

Recently, government unemployment-benefits programs confirmed what many have known for a while: An estimated 600,000 Saudis are unemployed, almost 80 percent of whom are under age 30. Many argue that the private sector, long dominated by non-Saudis, is the logical place to absorb citizen workers.

To avert shocks to the system, Saudi officials implemented a program called "Nitaqat," which ranks businesses according to the percentage of Saudi nationals employed. Nitaqat rewards companies for hiring more Saudis and penalises those that do not. While considered a

common-sense approach by many, business owners have protested what they call arbitrary standards that reduce bottom-line profits.

Saudi businessmen have long complained privately about a sense of entitlement among some young Saudis. These youths, they argued, expect high salaries despite inadequate experience and avoid entry-level positions. Many lack the skills necessary to fill technical positions or don't want to perform menial jobs. Hushed debate among business owners, government planners and intellectuals remained behind closed doors for years, but the conversation has since moved onto social-media platforms like Twitter and internet chat-rooms as well as the mainstream media.

In early April, the government began cracking down on workers violating regulations requiring them to work only for their original visa sponsor, intended mostly to free up semi-skilled jobs that citizens were ostensibly willing to fill. Saudis were quickly reminded of the essential role that migrants perform in the kingdom, as news of the arrests spread and hundreds of shops, restaurants and private schools closed.

While many supported the crackdown based on a rule-of-law argument, a small but vocal minority expressed xenophobic views, using the internet not only to rally support for the crackdown but in some cases, launch campaigns vilifying specific groups of non-Saudis, especially illegal migrants who have long lived on the margins of Saudi society. Some pushing this "Saudis first" agenda portrayed illegal migrants and workers as veritable "locusts," invading the nation and engaging in illegal activities, including organised criminal gangs,



Oil competition, dependence on immigrants, high unemployment put Saudi Arabia at risk

prostitution and even witchcraft.

As the animus intensified, other Saudis advised their countrymen not to transfer this hostility to the millions of legal workers who have played a pivotal role in the kingdom's development and urged Saudis to treat immigrants as guests. Among writers asking Saudis to look at themselves was Khalaf Al-Harbi in the Saudi Gazette: "The fault is within us and not within the foreign workers." In the meantime, an estimated 800,000 Yemenis, Indians, Pakistanis and Filipinos among others deported over the past 18 months have added a truly global dimension to what Saudi authorities see as necessary measures to reduce a 12 percent unemployment rate. Officials in the home countries for some nationals voice concern about their own ability to absorb tens of thousands of people into an already tight job market, with leaders in Yemen and the Philippines acknowledging that their economies rely on overseas remittances.

An already emotionally charged discourse was complicated by a number of high-profile cases of alleged abuse of foreign domestic

workers by Saudi employers, along with equally troubling reports of foreign caretakers abusing or even killing children in their care. Some Saudis have even blamed Arab members of the Muslim Brotherhood who fled places like Egypt and Syria in the 1950s and 1960s of "exporting" a brand of militant Islam into the kingdom. In April a government representative reportedly told a local newspaper that imams in mosques in the Mecca region must be Saudi nationals, though prominent foreign clerics continue to preach on a number of satellite television channels.

The uncertainty and panic that followed the crackdown prompted King Abdullah to issue a three-month grace period for illegal workers to rectify status. Still, difficult decisions await Saudis about the millions of non-Saudis in the country legally as the government looks to resolve high unemployment and secure work for its own youth.

The writer is a political analyst at JTG Inc. in Vienna, Virginia.
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ACROSS

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Solution time: 25 mins.

Yesterdays' answer 4-26

CRYPTOQUIP

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**Last Cryptoquip: WHAT WOULD YOU
CALL A TENTACLED MARINE CREATURE THAT
IS ALWAYS HOSTILE? AN ENEMY ANEMONE.**

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: N equals H

BEETLE BAILY by Mort Walker

I'M FINALLY READY TO GO OUT. SORRY YOU HAD TO WAIT SO LONG. THAT'S OKAY. I WAS BUSY.

HENRY by Don Trachte

HOTEL SWANKY. DINING ROOM.

QUOTABLE Quotes

"If speaking is silver, then listening is gold."

Turkish Proverb

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"You learn when you listen. You earn when you listen -- not just money, but respect."

Harvey Mackay