The Compulsive Veneration

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The US Congress broke into a rapturous standing ovation to Israeli Premier Benjamin Netanyahu's as he had finished his address to a joint audience of Senate and House of Representatives last year. The applause went on for what seemed like an eternity with no sign of tapering off, lasting beyond the usual length of time given to such a ritual reserved for endearing or important leaders.

Its reverberations were supposedly meant to reach out to the powerful Jewish lobby in the US as well as the Israelis, albeit for the Palestinians too who have a high stake in how the US deals with Netanyahu. Obama is said to have reservations about the Israeli leader's jingoist predilections. Little wonder, the US Congress has a will of its own, and Obama hasn't got a majority there.

This is between two democratically elected governments but when it came to totalitarian states there was a pompous side to adoration through resounding applauses and standing ovations. Anecdotes have it that when Stalin finished speaking, an applause would break out with no sign of abating for quite a while. The reason was simple; nobody wanted to stand out for being the first one to stop applauding. Such was the awe-inspiring presence and 'eloquence' of Stalin.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

North Korean kings are known for their all powerful infallible persona with almost a divine right to rule their subjects and demand their obedience. The whole country is dominated by larger-than-life statues or cut-outs of painting works beaming sardonically from atop public squares.

When the British East India Company had converted its commercial enterprise into political stake holding in Bengal, the colonial protagonists decided to evoke awe from the locals by a copious show of pomp and pageantry. Thus we saw all the panoply of power and paraphernalia accompanying the British Raj representatives.

The words 'protocol' 'warrant of precedence' and VIP-VVIP classification draw their origins in such conceptual frameworks.

There is the modern-day version of patrician behaviour. For instance, a word of advice from the famous British architect Richard Roger that there be a debate over design for construction of great public buildings, provoked a note from Prince Charles' office curtly saying, "The Prince does not debate."

In the context of Bangladesh, the Prime Minister and leader of the opposition behave like monarchs among officials, lesser party leaders and activists. When they speak even in close-door meetings, the rest of the functionaries are muted as though lock-jawed. Lest they earn the displeasure of their leaders, they balk at the thought of letting out words otherwise raring to spew out of their lips. That is how the leaders end up seeing either half-empty or half-full glass missing out on the full glass.

There is something about our adoration of post-independence leaders which is unique. For, in no other country one gets to see people fighting over national leaders, the passionate way in which we do it. The deification of political leaders has come to such a state that it tends to do more harm than good to their image. They have their niches carved as part of our chronicles and they will each be judged by the touchstone of history.

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