

The New Year's Resolution

RUBY AMATULLA

WHEN Mandela was freed in 1990 after 27 years of imprisonment, he found his country at the brink of civil war. South African society was dangerously polarised, with its economy on the verge of collapse after a long anti-apartheid struggle with international sanctions.

Mandela embarked on this daunting task and led that divided society towards vibrant democratic success, achieving status as a pluralistic 'rainbow' nation with a thriving economy that would triple its GDP within the next 18 years.

He utilised three powerful principles that integrate a nation -- legitimacy, inclusiveness, and generosity.

Legitimacy provided strength that would gain a nation's trust, inclusiveness brought about win-win scenarios for all groups making a system dynamic, and generosity inspired and revitalised people to create a fair, stable, and long-lasting system. Mandela became a leader of our time through understanding the power of these timeless principles.

Bangladesh has a different story to tell the world. Even though the peace-loving people in this nation fought valiantly against West Pakistani domination and won their independence in 1971, our leadership has failed to keep our nation integrated and on a steady course of democracy. In 1991, once again, the nation ended a two-decade-long trail of autocratic or civilian-military rule through a popular uprising that intended to give democracy another chance. But unfortunately, little has changed. The people remain under the grip of extreme partisan politics, polarisation so bad that it even affects governmental infrastructure itself, and increased authoritarian rule poorly disguised as democracy. Rampant corruption and human rights violations have rendered the government dysfunctional and the society volatile and disoriented.

It is long overdue that we -- the people of Bangladesh and our leaders -- reflect on the ways in which Mandela brought about conflict resolution and constructive engagement to a nation that had remained polarised and confrontational for a long time. It is critical to note the enormous power behind these ideas as they brought about the miracles South Africa needed badly at that time.

The legitimacy

Mandela remained absolutely firm and unflinching while negotiating with the then-white government to establish an impartial rule of law that would uphold rights, liberty and dignity of all people irrespective of colour, race, religion, gender, or other factors that separate people. He declared his intention to make South Africa an integrated nation long before he became a free leader.

The legitimacy of impartiality derives its strength from the powerful concept of 'inalienable rights' (such as liberty, dignity, among others) of all people irrespective of their differences. Whenever nationhood is defined giving credence to the idea of equality of all people who live in the country the nation becomes fast integrated, progressive and successful as it minimises conflicts arising from differences. If the governance of a society is based on such universal principles it is democratic and legitimate.

In Bangladesh we can learn to live with others who differ with us. That is the essence of pluralism: an integral part of a functioning democracy. Let us recognise all the people who live in Bangladesh as equal citizens of our country. Let us constructively engage with each other to create win-win state of affairs. In that process we may become more inte-

grated and productive. No nation has attained its true potential without being integrated.

The birth of the constitution: An inclusive process.

Mandela expounded: "In its proper meaning equality before the law means the right to participate in the making of the laws by which one is governed."

The Multi-Party Negotiating Process (MPNP) came into existence and worked from March to November 1993, and produced in nine months a negotiated constitution for the transition. Parties and organisations formerly bitterly opposed to one another had finally reached a compromise.

Even though Mandela was the leader of the ANC, he remained above the fray of partisanship in his actions and maintained a delicate balance among differing forces. People from all sides trusted his integrity and sincerity and depended on his leadership. The outcome was a constitution that was profusely praised by an American Supreme Court judge, Ruth Ginsburg, implying that it was a better constitution than even that of America. A good constitution is an instrument that serves people and empowers them.

The Bangladesh constitution itself is the issue today for us. If an article or a part of the constitution is responsible for nationwide turmoil and violence thus making a whole electoral process unacceptable to the people, it should be changed

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since it fails in its purpose. Save for a few exceptions, most of the constitutional amendments were framed and enacted by a ruling party -- irrespective of who is or was in power -- to create an undue advantage for itself to retain power. It is long overdue that the constitution should be conclusively amended to get rid of the terms that compromise the very foundation of democracy. And the process involving such a change needs to be fair and legitimate. A constitutional review committee should be appointed for such an undertaking.

Before enacting the amendment, it should be put to a referendum. That may not be enough. There are some glaring examples of constitutions validated by a referendum that failed to serve the people. The reason is that the people who voted for such a change did not understand the true meanings or intended purposes of the referendum. Therefore, there should be a period of approximately three to six months during which the nation should engage in an extensive dialogue and discussion on the constitution and the proposed amendment. The media and grassroots operatives and precincts should be fully devoted and utilised to educate the public and to help raise a national consensus. A referendum would then establish the legitimacy and the strong foothold of good governance.

Integration through inclusiveness and reconciliation

In South Africa the 1994 election -- the very first election after the Apartheid was abolished -- was hailed as free and fair by both the people of

South Africa and the international community. Yet, even though Mandela's party ANC got the landslide victory [252 seats representing 62.2%] and the mandate, he still decided to share power with others. For example, F. W. de Klerk, the former president from the white National Party, became the vice president.

Bangladeshi political parties can definitely learn from this spirit of generosity and inclusiveness to accommodate others as legitimate partners in the system. A healthy political culture is vital in the pursuit of good governance. Instead, our long tradition of partisan bickering has polarised the nation and done tremendous disservice to its interests and welfare. It is long overdue this counterproductive modus operandi be changed. We can definitely learn from Mandela.

After the enactment of the constitution and the 1994 election, Mandela's focus then turned to creation of a reconciliation process for those who oppressed people and perpetrated crimes against humanity. To help the nation heal from the deep wounds of the Apartheid era, he established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC] in 1995 under the dictum of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The commission heard and exposed many stories of brutality and injustice from all sides, and offered catharsis to people and communities shattered by their past experiences.

There should have been a similar redeeming process in Bangladesh soon after the independence for those who perpetrated crimes during the Liberation War. Since that was not done then we still can embark on a process to achieve reconciliation. However, forty years' inconsistent policies and attitudes have made the present situation complex and difficult. What could have been achieved easily forty years ago cannot be achieved so easily now. We now need a visionary and creative process that can empower the moderate elements and marginalise the extremes in a group. Civil society leaders can initiate such a process to help bring about the needed reform and bridging the gap between the liberals and the Islamists, among the rival political groups as well as between the old and the young generation.

Our political parties must recognise each other's historic legitimacy and treat each other respectfully and amicably as each of them has followings in our society. Cooperation and dignified discourse not only uplift the political culture but also serve the society better.

The generosity of giving up power

Mandela voluntarily stepped down from power in 1999 after one term. To maintain continuity and to help develop a next generation of leadership, he took a visionary approach similar to that of leaders like George Washington.

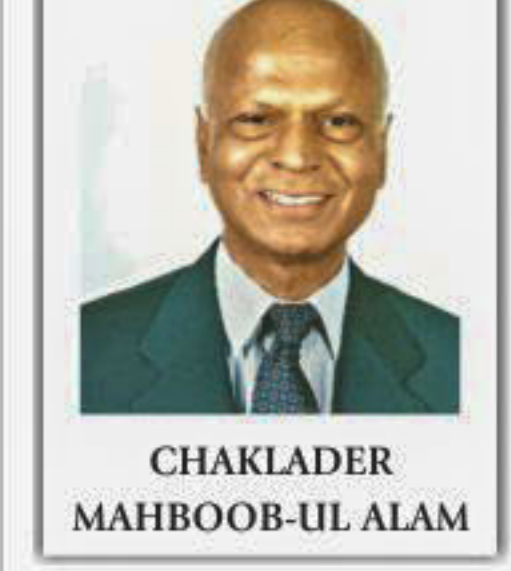
This kind of gesture of generous accommodation and compromise -- instead of fighting tooth and nail to retain one's own power and interests -- is what is most needed now in Bangladesh to create a political culture of trust and integrity. Someone needs to step up to the plate and to remain magnanimous in order to reverse this trend of volatility and violence that has robbed the potential of this country. We must remember that Bangladesh is considered by many international experts to have the potential to be a fast-progressing nation in the world.

What is needed is an arousal of the people against the exploitation of the majority of Bangladeshis by a minority of vested interests. A sincere and devoted leadership remains a must at this time. That leadership exists but remains dormant in our society right now. We need to find it and make it alive.

The writer is Executive Director, US-based Muslims for Justice, Peace and Progress.

WTO: How successful was the meeting in Bali?

LETTER FROM EUROPE



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM

I have read some rosy reports in the media on the outcome of the recent (December 7, 2013) meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in the Indonesian island of Bali. This piece is meant to state

some facts and figures so that the readers can judge whether the results of this meeting merit so much enthusiasm.

True, after twelve years of hard bargaining and relentless haggling, 159 member countries of the WTO reached a partial deal on "trade facilitation." The delegates made commitments to streamline their countries' official procedures for speedier passage of goods through customs which, some analysts believe, will cut shipping costs by more than 10% and bolster the world economy by hundreds of billions of dollars and create millions of jobs. (These figures, in my opinion, are too optimistic.)

But the crucial question is: How far does it go to meet the objectives of the Doha round?

Before we try to answer this question, a little bit of background information will help.

The movement to dismantle the complex structure of trade barriers and to promote free international trade owes its origin to the International Trade Conference, held in Geneva in 1947, where a multilateral treaty called the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (the GATT) was signed by 23 countries. The treaty provided an international forum for member countries to pursue a policy of trade negotiations with a view to minimising new and existing trade barriers. In order to increase the volume of international trade, the GATT members agreed to extend the most favoured nation status among all its members.

The World Trade Organization (WTO) was established in 1995. It replaced the GATT forum and incorporated all existing GATT treaties. But there was an important difference between the GATT and the WTO -- the WTO was given legal powers to enforce the treaty obligations. Actually, in theory, the WTO's goals are even more ambitious than those of the GATT -- which are to promote and enforce global multilateral trade including services, intellectual property and investment.

WTO has 159 members, with the so-called developing countries constituting more than three-quarters of the membership. So far there have been nine rounds of negotiations. The latest one, called the Doha round (also known as the Doha Development Agenda), started with much fanfare in 2001. Its principal objective was to help millions of people in poor countries to lift themselves out of poverty by eliminating the wrongs of unfair

trade. From the very beginning, the negotiations centred on three principal subjects -- gradual elimination of tariffs on high-tech manufactured products from the highly industrialised nations to the developing ones; gradual elimination of tariffs and other restrictions on farm products, textiles and other low-tech manufactured product from the developing nations, where they have significant cost advantages, to the developed ones; and abolition of domestic subsidies to agricultural products in the rich nations.

Under the Uruguay Round Agreement of 1994, the poor countries took significant steps to lower barriers and opened their markets to manufactured products from the industrialised countries. Over the years, the rich nations have taken some steps to lower tariffs on textiles and other low-tech manufactured products.

Agriculture is most certainly the area where the rich nations in general, and the United States and the EU in particular, have played and are still playing a hypocritical role. On the one hand, they "impose tariffs on imported farm products that are eight or ten times higher than those levied on industrial products," which effectively rigs the trade game. On the other hand, the powerful lobbies in these rich countries force the governments to spend billions of dollars on export farm subsidies

This protectionist policy punishes the farmers in poor countries in more than one way. It generates vast surpluses in rich countries, which are dumped on the international market at prices far below the real production cost. Farmers in poor countries cannot compete with these subsidised products -- cotton, wheat, corn, etc. -- even within their own countries. This policy literally ruins the possibility of farmers in poor countries of ever getting out of poverty.

The situation becomes even more acute in countries where their economic survival is closely linked to one single export crop. This domestic farm subsidies policy practiced by the rich nations is primarily responsible for persistent poverty in some of the West African countries, whose cotton farmers, according to many experts, are considered as the most efficient cotton producers of the world.

On September 14, 2005, President George W. Bush declared: "The United States is ready to eliminate all tariffs, subsidies, and other barriers to free flow of goods and services as other nations do the same. This is the key to overcoming poverty in the world's poorest nations."

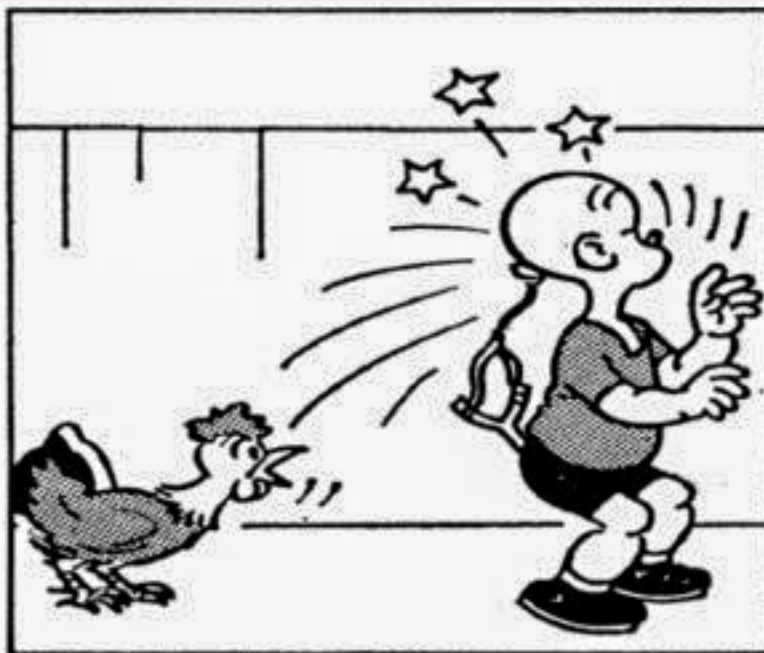
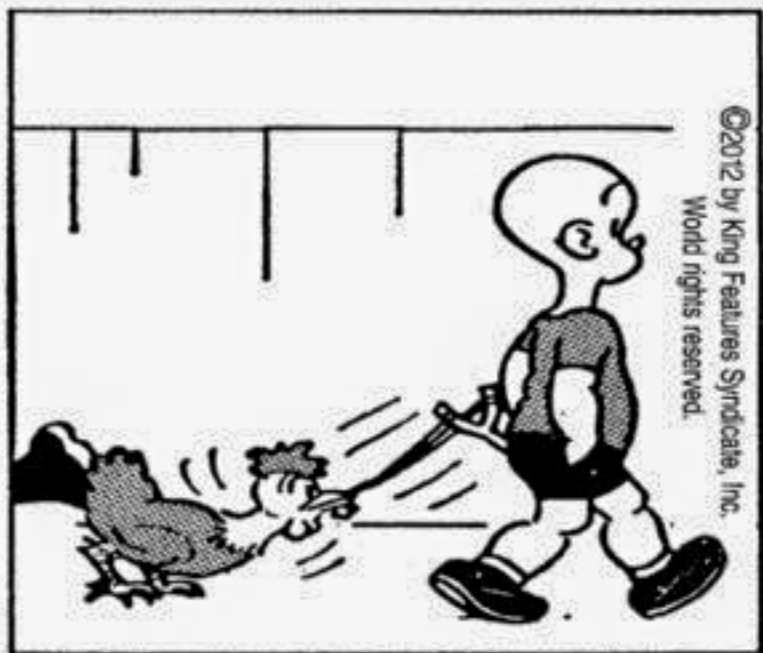
At the December 2005 meeting of the WTO in Hong Kong, the industrialised nations made a solemn promise to eliminate all agricultural subsidies and tariffs by 2013. By the time, this article goes to print, it will be 2014 and I am unhappy to write that none of these promises have been kept and the WTO meeting in Bali failed to resolve this intractable issue.

The writer is a columnist for The Daily Star and an Officer of the Royal Order of Isabel la Católica of Spain.

BEETLE BAILEY



HENRY



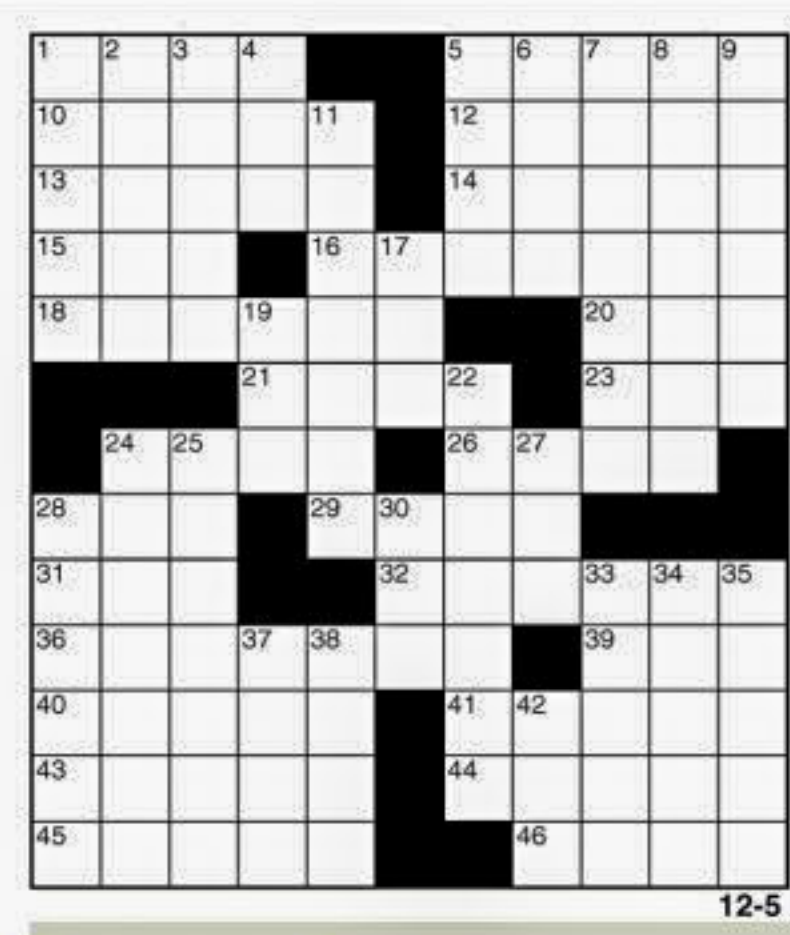
QUOTABLE Quote

Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured.

--Mark Twain

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

- | | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| ACROSS | DOWN | |
| 1 General Bradley | 1 Did in | 11 Creator of the Grinch |
| 5 English country | 2 Sasha's sister | 17 Numerical prefix |
| 10 Prominent | 3 Surrounded by | 19 Obtained |
| 12 One of the primates | 4 Old auto | 22 Game outings |
| 13 Elevator stop | 5 Former home of the Mets | 24 Shakers, tumblers, and the like |
| 14 Make law | 6 Suspended | 25 Close enough to hit |
| 15 German article | 7 John Lennon song | 27 Sister of Jo, Amy, and Beth |
| 16 React to a punch | 8 Arrived quickly | 28 Non-attender |
| 18 Macbeth prop | 9 Catch | 30 Playwright Burrows |
| 20 Cider girl of song | | 33 Potential raisin |
| 21 French affirmatives | | 34 Bother |
| 23 Winter air quality | | 36 Reacts to a punch |
| 24 Comic's stock | | 37 Incite |
| 26 Prayer ender | | 38 Seed-removing machines |
| 28 Photographer Goldin | | 42 Yank's foe |
| 29 Ump's call | | |
| 31 Bruins | | |



Yesterday's answer

BATTLE ADORER ROWING MADE TOOK TO OLE JOYRIDE RIM AWE ODE AVOIDED NUN LET ME AS PS INDIAN ALOE OLD AGE LYNX WEEVIL LEST ASSETS

CRYPTOQUOTE

RXS PHLAFS YHAASPR ZNMYFSC HL KMCCGLHKDRHML HP RXS HFFGPHML RXDR HR XDP RDJSL ZFDKS.

- ASMNAS YSNLDNV PXDT

Previous CRYPTOQUOTE: Only kings, presidents, editors, and people with tapeworms have the right to use the editorial "We." Mark Twain

A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

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