

Our foreign advisors and their domestic clients

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

THE feverish activity in the diplomatic circles in Dhaka that provided a lot of fuel to the political debates prior to and after the elections seems to have lost its steam somewhat now. A couple of months before the January elections, Dhaka was abuzz with speculations of many kinds that ranged from having the elections under a hybrid of interim government to none at all. The speculations were based on who among our foreign protagonists were more credible in their public utterances and who they conferred with on the day of such public pronouncement. The news commentators and analysts weighed their analysis more on the perceived strength of the foreign protagonist than on the probability of the statement actually taking effect. Sometimes the statement, particularly after this was made by a foreign dignitary following meeting with any political leader, assumed greater significance and was often referred to by the analysts as an indicator of our political future.

Curiously, in most such meetings, there would be no third party observer, leaving us only statements by the foreign protagonist (an ambassador, or a visiting foreign official) on the situation. Our credence of the statement and subsequent speculation on what will happen next would give most of us a feeling that we are guided by not our political leaders but by their foreign advisors.

One wonders whether the current pause in the flurry of diplomatic parlaying in domestic politics is due to the resignation of the foreign protagonists to the new reality or the growing sense of futility among the domestic clients of foreign advice in solving their own problems. This pause may be temporary, only to be ignited by some other event, but this should give us an opportunity to look back at our history and see how such interventions in domestic matters gained prominence in our country with conscious and voluntary lobbying by our political leaders.

Foreign intervention in our domestic political affair is not new. In a sense one can say we owe our birth as a nation due to such intervention. Our freedom struggle was sustained by our neighbour India, and immediately after liberation. Our initial recognition as an independent country by a handful of foreign countries was also made possible due to India's lobbying. We also showed our gratitude by leaning toward India in choosing our allies in

our foreign policy in the initial years. India in its turn showed its respect to us as a sovereign country, starting with the withdrawal of its army as early as March 1972. The Friendship Treaty with India in 1972 reaffirmed lasting peace and friendship between the countries.

There is a big distinction, however, between intervention and interference. In 1971 our political leaders sought foreign support for a cause, preventing suppression of human rights, stopping genocide, and liberating a land that had declared independence from an occupying force. This was intervention to prevent a population from becoming extinct. This was intervention that gave us our freedom. But what followed next in our history cannot be called intervention for a cause, but foreign interference in our own affairs. Sadly this interference was not always at the initiative of our foreign advisors, but our own leaders who could not settle their disputes among themselves.

From the beginning of our history we had seen significant foreign interest in our affairs. In the beginning our international allies worried that an economically weak and politically unstable Bangladesh could become a permanent ward of the international donor community. In subsequent years when our dependence on foreign doles began to decrease as our economy grew, the foreign countries became concerned with our political uncertainties. They worried that a politically weak and unstable country could succumb to chaos and it could become a hub of extremism. For India, our big neighbour, a politically unstable Bangladesh would bring the threats were nearer to its door, and hence it required more active intervention. These are understandable concerns.

While this partly explains the degree or level of foreign interest, particularly that of India, in our domestic politics, it does not wholly explain why foreign ambassadors and other plenipotentiaries play such a big role in the country's politics. A simple answer is because our politicians invite them to do so. This happened in every election cycle.

From the day our parliamentary democracy was reborn in early 1990s every election has been turned down as fraudulent by the losers and the winning party has been labeled as manipulative interlopers. The result has been accusations and counteraccusations, street protests, boycott of parliament, and public venting of frustrations. What was not achieved by election was attempted to be gained by

agitation, and threats of riots and mayhem. To that was added a shameless appeal to foreign countries and their ambassadors to advocate their grievance against the ruling party and seek their intervention.

We had seen this conduct make its public appearance in 1992 in egregious ways and since then this became the tactics of choice of the opposition parties before or after the elections. Our political leaders in their roles in the opposition thought it proper to approach foreign representatives to vent their grievances to the extent that the foreign representatives would consult their home offices and give advice as they were told. Culmination of such foreign intervention came in 2006 in the form of a troika of foreign ambassadors along with local UN representatives who assumed a major role in the changes that came to our political scene and occupied it for two years.

Of late it has been fashionable in many quarters to ask why representatives of foreign countries have assumed an oversized role, sometimes beyond diplomatic protocol, to delve in our domestic politics. A foreign magazine even remarked last year that the emissary of a certain big country had become a de facto member of a political party by his public leaning toward the party. Another envoy was termed a de facto advisor to the other party. These unflattering comments may be totally unfounded, but they resonate among the public when they see the indirect effect of these parleys on our domestic politics, and read about recurring conferences of the emissaries with domestic solicitors of advice from foreign countries.

Sovereignty of a country does not depend simply on its separate geographic and political identity. It depends on the ability of its rulers and political leaders to rely on their integrity, strength of their conviction, and support from their own constituents. Real strength comes from support of the people who the leaders claim to be serving, not from foreign powers who they may turn to time to time to boost their fragile base. Our continued freedom forty three years after independence has been possible because our people saw to it their hard earned freedom should last. Our politicians need to adhere to lessons of history. Bartering national sovereignty for partisan power has never worked.

The writer is a US-based political commentator and analyst.

"The importance of being ordinary"

SHIFTING IMAGES



MILIA ALI

Is it possible to be treated as a second-class citizen in one's native country? Yes, sometimes. A couple of years ago I visited my bank to make a financial transaction. Given the uncertain traffic situation, I started early and arrived a little before the opening hour. The guard asked that I wait outside for five minutes.

While I waited patiently, I noticed a gentleman, probably European, breezing in. The security guard made no effort to stop him. I couldn't resist asking why the man had been allowed to enter. The guard responded: "He is a foreigner and since this is a foreign bank, foreigners enjoy a special preference!" This ludicrous explanation prompted a somewhat resolute reaction from me. I barged inside, announcing: "Well, I, too, am a foreigner and therefore deserve preferential treatment!" I headed straight for the manager's office and lodged a formal protest, suggesting that the bank train its staff to treat all clients equally and with respect.

My intention in recounting this incident is not to demonstrate my ability to throw my weight around. It's to illustrate how the "privilege" system operates in Bangladesh. The discriminatory treatment I received at the bank is reflective of our society's general attitude -- that people with money and status (in this case the assumption of status based on the colour of the gentleman's skin) can act with impunity. They seem to have an almost divine right to bend the rules in their favour or even make their own set of rules. This is true for most situations, whether it's something as simple as admitting your child to school or as complex as seeking Rajuk permission to build your dream home.

The fallout of the "privilege system" has been that most young people are gradually losing trust in meritocracy. They believe that success is an outcome of money and "connections," not effort and talent. Although the issue of corruption has been flogged to death, I cannot help commenting on it. Influence peddling, which is also a form of corruption, pervades every facet of the Bangladeshi life. Qualified candidates are refused job interviews while less deserving people use their "daddy's" clout to land plum jobs. Teachers are inclined to change students' grades because a powerful parent challenges the grading system or threatens to withdraw his support from the school. The fat owner of a SUV rams into a Suzuki but proceeds to beat up the emaciated driver of the smaller car, in full view of a policeman. The list goes on and on.

It's likely that some readers may summarily dismiss my mordant social observations as too harsh. Moreover, they may argue that money and power count in almost any country, including the USA so why single out Bangladesh? However, there are two important distinctions. The preponderance of the private sector in the US ensures that the best and brightest are recruited and promoted. In private companies, which are driven by profit and competition, you either swim or sink on the basis of performance, not influence. More importantly, the daily lives of ordinary people are unaffected by the kind of discrimination that is commonly experienced in this part of the world. For instance, in the United States one does not need a contact to have a child admitted to school and there is no need to befriend the nephew of a doctor to get proper medical attention! Even obtaining a building permit for a home does not require influence or bribe as long as one adheres to the regulations.

I am often asked what I admire most about the United States . It's the fairness and equal treatment that I encounter at the ordinary level. It matters little whether I am rich, influential or well connected. As long as I meet the criteria, as long as I merit the service, as long as I am willing to accept the obligations I have a fair chance. This is true for every aspect of life -- whether it's seeking admission in an Ivy League college or obtaining a mortgage for buying a home or renewing a driving license. An application gets the consideration it deserves, provided the rules are followed. I am empowered not because of my social contacts, professional status, the colour of my skin or the money in my bank, but because I am "me" -- an ordinary, law-abiding citizen.

In Bangladesh, we need a social movement to resist the prevailing culture of influence peddling. Individuals can contribute by protesting against the small injustices in their daily lives, even if it entails risks. I realise that these modest efforts will not reverse the trend immediately. But they may help reinstate trust, especially amongst the young, in Bangladesh's possibilities.

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CELEBRATING RAZIA KHAN AMIN

'Where the mind is without fear'

REBECCA HAQUE

FEALGUN and February in Bengal revive memories of my revered teacher. She was taken from us to her celestial abode on a wintry December day two years ago. I was unaware of her passing at the time, for I was far away in the summer of the southern hemisphere. I heard no tolling of the bells across the waves, nor did I weep upon the alien earth of the island continent. I wrote no eulogy, I wore no mask of grief. Later, knowledge of her demise diminished me. Deprived of the light of her beautiful mind and the sound of her melodious voice, I wept for me.

Now, in Falgun in 2014, I celebrate the life of Razia Khan Amin. I rejoice in her uncompromising pursuit of artistic freedom and personal integrity. I commemorate the strength of her intellect and the wide horizons of her liberal imagination. My mind unfolds the pages of the album of my days and years with her. Like Proserpina bringing flowers to the fabled fields of Enna in Springtime, my late teacher returns to renew and reinvigorate my spirit in this season of bashonto. I hear once again the deep voice and the lilting full-throated laughter. I see once more the graceful figure draped in bright fine silks. I recall with gratitude and veneration the generous gifts offered to a novice by a wise, sophisticated, cosmopolitan mentor: portions of life's truths tested through lived experience, a bibliophile's analytic knowledge, and a treasure-trove of accumulated wisdom, all shared with a touch of maternal love.

Born on February 16, 1936, Razia Khan Amin had fire in her eyes, reflecting the fire in the soul. A rebel and a trend-setter in the Fifties, she dazzled her contemporaries with her strong personality and individual style. Confronted with her fierce intellect and prodigious talents as actor, playwright, poet, novelist, and brilliant scholar-critic, her male classmates have confessed to being in a state of shock and awe, a combination of



admiration and intimidation. At the early age of eighteen, Razia Khan Amin wrote her now famous first novel, Bodtollar uponash, which to date has been through six reprints. I remember how, in the months before her passing, unable to walk without pain, disabled with a fractured thigh and broken hip bone, her creative vitality was undimmed as she translated her first novel into English and was eager to see the translated version published. Winner of the P.E.N. award, the Bangla Academy award, and the Ekushey Padak, Razia Khan Amin's modest attitude towards self-promotion was extraordinary in an age where writers blatantly employ agents to publicise their books, or the electronic

machinery of Facebook and Twitter become agencies of instant global fame.

As both writer and educator, Razia Khan Amin upheld the highest standards of ethics and personal conduct. She believed in a progressive organic society which evolves with the integration of cultural heritage and individual moral probity. Like all great thinkers and philosophers, she detested sham and hypocrisy, and she fearlessly condemned self-serving coteries, coercive politics, tyranny, cultural philistinism, and communalism. All or any of these elements in society can fracture the nation. Society coheres through tradition and innovation, and good governance ensures stability and continuity. Exploitation, economic or political, endangers the nation because it robs the individual of the power to evolve through positive participation as a responsible social and political entity.

Razia Khan Amin was a fearless intellectual. Her contemporary, friend and colleague in the Department of English, University of Dhaka, Emeritus Professor Dr. Serajul Islam Choudhury has defined an intellectual as "someone who has a specific interpretation of life and the world, and who considers it to be her responsibility to spread that interpretation to others." As our teacher, Razia Khan Amin interpreted for us a total and joyful commitment towards progressive participation in culture and society.

She led the young women going out to face the world. Led them into sunshine and self-confident awareness. She interpreted the world for us with wit and anecdote, with original insight and analytic criticism, with profound moral judgment.

She made us whole. She spread the radiance of her enlarged vision. She made us walk on the arched rainbow. She made us climb, without fear.

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CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

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- 6 Brown ermine
- 11 Music's Abdul
- 12 Antilles resort
- 13 Computer key
- 14 Complete
- 15 Court
- 16 Venezuelan river
- 18 Hobbit helper
- 19 Old salt
- 20 Merriment
- 21 Postmark part
- 23 Ham and lamb
- 25 Joaquin Phoenix movie
- 27 Univ or acad
- 28 Kick off
- 30 Office helper
- 33 Hurried flight
- 34 Spot to jot
- 36 General activity
- 37 U-235, e.g.
- 39 Galena, for one
- 40 Lions' prides
- 41 Financier Jay
- 43 Skirt feature
- 44 "The Age of Anxiety" poet
- 45 Panache
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