

Heartening social measures

But there is no room for complacence

THE Washington-based Social Progress Imperative would have us know that we have of late done better than many other countries in ensuring upward social mobility for our people. Since we would not want to be looked upon as cynics, let us say it is good news. We are, after all, in 99th place among a total of 132 nations. We have done better than India, Pakistan and Nepal, though we have lost out to Sri Lanka. Our achievements are something that should encourage us for the future.

And here is where we have made advances. The child mortality rate has gone down and so have human trafficking and child marriage. Our women are today privy to a greater degree of respect than before. Add to that the parity we have been striving to bring about in secondary school level enrollment. Fewer people die of infectious diseases than before and awareness of birth control among women has gone up to an admirable level.

Those are the bright spots. But lest we feel complacent with all these facts, there are some hard, even bitter truths staring us in the face. Our religious minorities are more insecure today than at any other time in recent years. Our media, despite all the loud statements suggesting it is free, is yet hampered in some important areas. And crime remains a major concern.

That said, on our part we will suggest that the level of sophisticated political behaviour necessary for the growth and consolidation of democracy to spur on further socio-economic growth is yet to be part of our culture.

Bring all risky buildings under scrutiny

Address problem before lives are lost

A large portion of buildings in the city are disaster prone. Studies have shown that more than 70 per cent of the buildings will suffer significant damage should an earthquake measuring more than 7 on the Richter scale hit Dhaka. In the midst of all this anxiety, we are informed that due to a trilateral argument over jurisdiction among RAJUK and the two city corporations, 321 already identified risky residential buildings are not being demolished. What is particularly frustrating to note is that even after the collapse of Rana Plaza that cost more than 1,100 lives, we remain blissfully indifferent to what the probable casualty rate will be for the residents if those unsafe buildings were to start collapsing.

Houses and buildings, both commercial and residential continue to be erected violating the building code. The estimate of 321 buildings made by RAJUK in the aftermath of an incident in 2010 is considered by many experts to be grossly understated. Indeed, a statement by the head of RAJUK stated that there were as many as 5,000 illegal structures in the city. The magnitude of the problem truly hits us when we look at a research report by Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme (CDMP) that puts the number of vulnerable buildings at 78,000, of which 6,500 are in the red. It is high time the government sort out this bureaucratic mess and assign one authority to be responsible for dealing with identification and demolition or retrofitting of structures considered a threat to public safety, for we do not need any more avoidable disasters.

Unilateral declaration of independence

ABDUL MATIN

DURING the medieval period, any provincial governor of a sovereign state could make a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) and become the ruler of an independent and separate state provided he could stay in power and resist possible attacks by the central authority or other invaders. Those days are gone. If we look at recent history of UDIs, we observe a different pattern.

In the case of the United States of America, it was not an individual who made the declaration. The Congress adopted the declaration on July 4, 1776. George Washington, who was fighting a revolutionary war as the Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army against the British, didn't declare himself as the president of the USA on the day the declaration was adopted. Instead, he continued to fight till 1783 when the Treaty of Paris was signed and the sovereignty of the United States of America was recognized. He took office as president on April 30, 1789, having been duly elected in 1788.

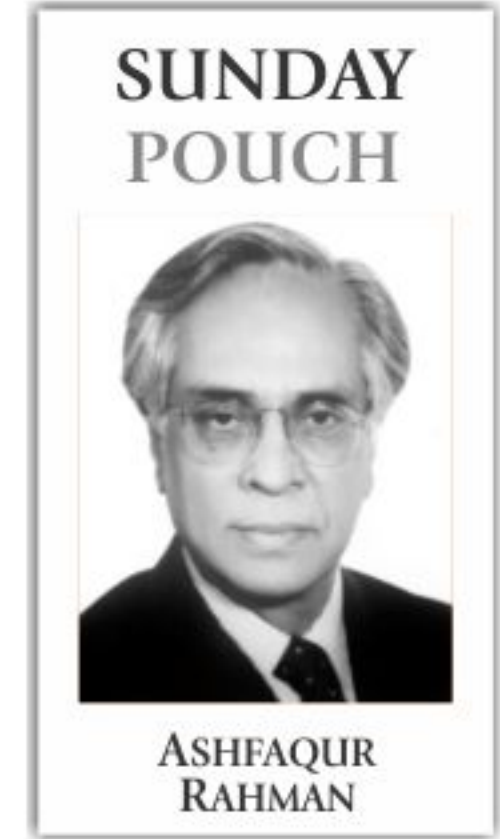
The minority government of Ian Smith of Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe also adopted a unilateral declaration of independence on November 11, 1965 in order to deprive its majority African citizens of their due share in the government. The declaration was, therefore, deemed as illegal by the British, the Commonwealth and the United Nations. No country recognized Rhodesia. A guerrilla war between the illegal government and two rival African nationalist groups began. The war continued until Rhodesia revoked its UDI and the UK granted independence to Zimbabwe in 1980. There are similar examples of unrecognized UDIs like those of Ireland in 1919, Biafra in 1967, Northern Cyprus in 1983 and Crimea in 2014.

All recognized recent UDIs were made either by an act of parliament or by individuals who were elected representatives of the people and/or recognized legendary leaders like Ho Chi Minh of Vietnam (1945), Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta of Indonesia (1945), Tunku Abdul Rahman of Malaysia (1957) and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of Bangladesh (1971). An UDI by an individual carries no significance unless it is endorsed by a duly elected parliament. All UDIs must also be recognized by a vast majority of countries and the United Nations.

In recent history, there is no example of a country becoming independent through a UDI made by a hitherto unknown individual. Moreover, none becomes the president of a country simply by announcing a UDI on radio or television. Any such claim by anyone is simply a travesty in historical perspective.

The writer is a former chief engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission.

China combats corruption: Lessons for us?



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

A sensational news item appeared in China last week. Authorities reported that they had seized \$14.5 billion in assets from associates of Zhou Yongkang, a retired Politburo member. The politburo is a nine member group that governs the country as the supreme authority. It includes the president, the prime minister, the chief of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) among others. Zhou controlled China's vast internal security office (read Home Ministry), which has a budget more than the Ministry of Defense of China. Thus Zhou's conviction means the purging of the most important man in the People's Republic for corruption.

Last week, prosecutors formally charged General Gu, who was until recently the Deputy Chief of the PLA General Logistics Department, with bribery, embezzlement, misuse of state funds and abuse of power. He had enormous influence over contracts and procurement of the world's largest army. China has so far prosecuted hundreds of communist party bigwigs and PLA leaders for corruption.

So what is happening in China? Those who follow developments there know that President Xi Jinping is leading a sustained campaign against big time corruption. Before he became president, he had pledged to take robust steps to curb corruption within the Communist Party and the PLA. The prime minister had declared recently that together they would go after 'flies and tigers' who indulged in corruption.

President Xi knows well that if he is to remain in power he must clear the country of corruption. He remembers that the protests that led to the crackdown in Tianenmen Square in the 1980's were because of the complaints about corruption by the people and students. He wants the PLA to be a lean and mean fighting force capable of projecting power in the world. With corrupt generals, he will not be able to do so. He also does not want anyone pointing an accusing finger at the Communist Party, which will degrade it before the people and bring down his rule. So he has started a system of monitoring all local government expenditures as well as financial institutions. Audits and investigative reporting have been introduced and he has encouraged party cadres and PLA to self-criticise anti-corruption measures.

But President Xi is aware that he faces a great risk in attacking corruption. The old guard in the party are not happy with what he is doing so stridently. Many of them, or their sons and grandsons, are part of this corruption nexus. Also, his political rivals are already speaking up and stating that it is being done to dislodge his political

colleagues. Many of them are digging up the past and the present activities of the president in order to accuse him of any malfeasance.

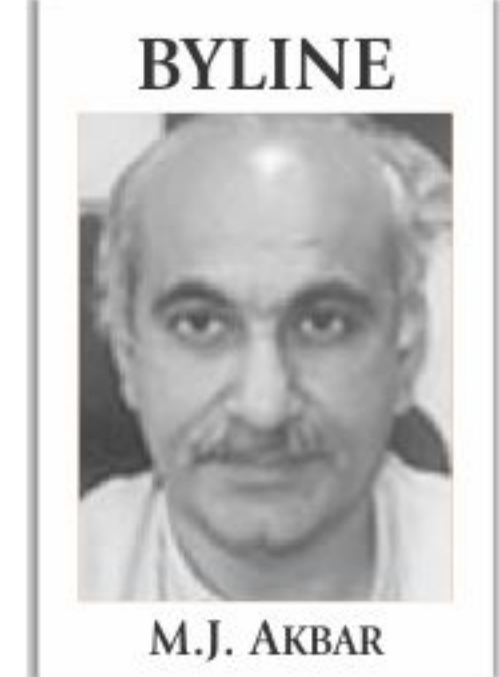
Historically, corruption is not new in China. The spread of corruption had been connected to the Confucian concept that profit was a preoccupation of base people. According to them, true followers of Confucianism are to be guided in their actions by moral principles of justice. But this high standard of morality could only be delivered by a minority. Wang Anshi, a Chinese economist of the Song dynasty (1021-1086), therefore wanted to institutionalise a monetary system for the state in order to reduce corruption. He was derided by the Confucian elite. Slowly, therefore, corruption spread to the Imperial court and also among the elite. During the Tang dynasty the imperial examination system was polluted with corruption. When China became a republic in 1949, corruption was not so pervasive. But when Deng Xiaoping, the great reformer in 1979, started his economic policy changes it was widely accepted that corruption was the price that was to be paid for economic development.

Can Bangladesh learn anything from the great exercise against corruption taking place in nearby China? Our country ranks 136th in the global corruption perception index out of 178 countries (2013). This is much worse than China, which ranks 80th. Transparency International, in its 2012 'Global Corruption Barometer,' placed our political parties followed by the police and the judiciary on top of the corruption list. But the silver lining in all this is that the people here are keen to see the end of corruption.

We must, therefore, consider unleashing social forces against corruption. There must be total political commitment at the highest level to end corruption. It also means that our constitutional bodies as well as state agencies like the Anti-Corruption Commission should be adequately empowered as well as funded to implement policies that contain corruption. Our investigative agencies and secret services as well as our judicial system, especially the procurate, should be fully geared to this task. Our youth must be inspired to fight corruption. This can be done when TV programmes, books, films and the social media work in tandem on this issue. Educational curriculum should also include anti-corruption themes.

Perhaps one of the best ways to combat corruption is to create a healthy and competitive business atmosphere. A policy that rewards fair competition and punishes those who violate the principles of good competition will go a long way in combating corruption. Isn't all this in consonance with the spirit of our Independence, in which fairness and equality are cardinal principles of state policies?

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M.J. AKBAR

A young media professional, his face creased by the worried thought that he might soon be turning 30, was quite certain about the precise moment at which Rahul Gandhi lost the trust of the young. That point, he said, came in the passionate aftermath of the brutal rape of a young lady on a Delhi bus, a rape which this heroic woman eventually did not survive.

All Rahul Gandhi had to do, he said, was show solidarity with the thousands who had come out to protest. The young wanted him at their side at a pivotal moment in their consciousness. But Rahul Gandhi was missing, from both the scene and the ensuing debate. In retrospect, it does not much matter whether Rahul Gandhi was on another holiday, or at home. He was not on the streets. Is this a Delhi-centric explanation? Perhaps. But when Delhi was watching what Rahul Gandhi would do, the country was watching what Delhi would do.

Was this an aberration? It soon became evident that it was part of a pattern of indifference which the government displayed towards the young who had voted the triumvirate of Dr. Manmohan Singh, Mrs Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi into power in 2009.

The Congress leap to 206 seats in 2009 was powered by the youth vote. This was most evident in the cities, but the ripples extended into the adjoining countryside as well. There is a youth vote now, which extends beyond geography, and is rising above the traditional metrics of caste and creed. Its priorities are centred around the principal objectives of a young person's life: jobs and the cultural freedom to live life without the tensions of a moral police.

If any observer has any doubts about this phenomenon, clarity will come after the 2014 elections. There are going to be 150 million new voters in the general election starting this week. This is more votes than any party got in the last election. Add the numbers of votes of the second-time voter and this bloc rises from formidable to phenomenal. No one can win an election, regional or national, without its support.

The bad news for any establishment is that this is also an unforgiving vote. If its hopes are powerful, then punishment for betrayal is merciless. This vote is also mature beyond its years. It does not decide on either a whim or emotional high. It examines its options through the experience of governance. Frustration with Congress and UPA did not emerge overnight, but slowly, as it quietly discovered that the government was not interested in creating an economy which could generate jobs.

Rahul Gandhi was blessed with extraordinary good

A youthful shift

A young media professional, his face creased by the worried thought that he might soon be turning 30, was quite certain about the precise moment at which Rahul Gandhi lost the trust of the young. That point, he said, came in the passionate aftermath of the brutal rape of a young lady on a Delhi bus, a rape which this heroic woman eventually did not survive.

fortune, since for ten years he has had a national government at his beck and call. Even if he was unwilling to join the ministry, he could have led the public debate over jobs, and demanded -- to give just one specific instance -- that infrastructure projects, a fertile breeding ground for employment, should become a reality instead of repeatedly being aborted on government files because of the whims and fancies of individual ministers.

This simmering, and possibly subaltern, frustration became volcanic lava with the revelations of corruption. The Lords of Theft should take care not to leave jokey metaphors lying around political space. The purchase of toilet paper at heaven knows what outrageous price for the Commonwealth Games is still good enough to kindle some bitter laughter. It has become an epic reference point for radio disc jockeys.

A survey by the American institution, Pew, done in the second week of December reported that 63% of India wanted a BJP-led government in office, as against only 19% for Congress and its partners. This huge gap can only be explained by the drift of the young vote away from the establishment, since the young consti-



tute such a large part of the electorate. If Narendra Modi has become the new icon, it is primarily because he delivered on the economy. The interesting bit is that Modi succeeded in the same decade during which the Congress failed. The environment was same for both; the financial climate similar; and Gujarat's bureaucracy emerged from the same schools as the nation's. The difference lay in the culture of decision-making. You knew where you stood in Ahmedabad, while you ran from obsolete pillar to mute post in Delhi.

It is too late for promises now. There is nothing you can say in the ten days before an election that can negate a gloom thickened by layers over ten years. So when Rahul Gandhi suddenly offers 100 million jobs in the next five years, the sceptical response is inevitable: why did this not happen in the last 10 years? Modi will harvest this anger now, but the danger is obvious: he will have to deliver faster than his predecessors. The difficulties in winning an election are nothing compared to the excruciating pains of delivery when in power.

The writer is Editor of The Sunday Guardian, published from Delhi, India on Sunday, published from London and Editorial Director, India Today and Headlines Today.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Our costly friendship with India

No doubt, India helped us greatly in our War of Independence. Since then we consider India our good neighbour. But nowadays it seems they want to dominate us in each and every sector. They are depriving us of our rightful share of water and diverting water from Teesta. Where we are supposed to get 5000 cusec of water, we are only getting 500 cusec.

Besides, killing our people by the BSF is taking place continuously on border areas. Issues like Tin Bigha Corridor, Farakka Barrage etc are remaining as irritants. We expect that India would treat us as friend and our government should take necessary steps to protect our rights.

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RMG sector should diversify export markets

In recent years, Bangladesh RMG sector has faced many internal and external difficulties and remedies appear to be far to reach. Problems have stemmed from suspension of supply orders from Europe, USA and Canada, the largest buyers of our RMG, due to alleged substandard working conditions prevalent in our RMG factories and their poor management. The ongoing crises in the global market are more complex and deep-rooted than before.

The government should introduce new package deal offering cash incentives to encourage the RMG sector to explore new markets suited to the emerging international conditions. Other market areas like Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Arab countries should be explored alongside Brazil, China, Chile, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea and Turkey.

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Gates's stress on agri-research

Recently Bill Gates, the billionaire philanthropist and Microsoft co-founder stressed the need for raising investment in agricultural research. He observed that small farmers around the world need to be made more productive. Gates said, "Investments in agriculture research show a great way to reduce poverty. Until the children get proper nutrition, you're not going to end poverty." He further informed that his foundation (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) has increased investment in agricultural research in recent years.

I appreciate the interest shown by Gates in agri-research. He also talked about agricultural education. I strongly feel investment in agricultural research, education and extension work needs to be increased by every government of the developed or the developing world, for enhancing food production, resolving nutritional problems and reducing poverty.

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Comments on news report, "Mobarak sees no unnatural deaths," published on April 1, 2014

Mofi

EC is a champion of uttering words like 'Alhamdulillah', 'Thanks to Allah's endless mercy'. What a character! He would really do much better as a minister in the government.

Bangalee1971

When someone is appointed not on the basis of merit but on political connection, people cannot expect anything better from this type of appointees.

Aasfisarwar

The acting EC has lost both his ears so there is no more shame left for him. He is simply walking through the middle of the road!

Deep Purple Blue

The Awami League claims to be the champion of the spirit of the Liberation War of which democracy and free elections are cardinal principles, but alas! AL and its stooge of an EC have worked to destroy the same spirit of Liberation War. These election engineers deserve exemplary punishment. The sooner it's meted out, the better.

"They blush only in journos' presence" (April 1, 2014)

Mofi

"Not only the AL men barred the polling agents of the opposition camp, but also acted as pro-BNP polling agent to give the impression to journalists and magistrates that the polls were being held in a free and fair manner" -- very interesting observation. It's something new and very creative; all credit goes to government and EC.

Abdur Raquib

An illegitimate government showing its true face.