

Save the moribund city Dhaka's existence at stake

WE have used this space repeatedly over last several years to flag the dire straits that the capital city is in and the bleak prospect of its future as a city worth inhabiting. It already is the second worst city as far as the livable index is concerned and given the services rendered to the people living in Dhaka city, one wonders if things can get any worse for those nearly fifteen million of us who happen to endure the trauma that the city fathers inflict on us every day. The bleak prospect facing the city was once again highlighted at a conference titled, "Dhaka for future generations: Our actions" on Saturday, organised by Bangladesh Institute of Planners and Center for Development Communication.

It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that Dhaka city is perhaps the worst governed and most ill organised capital in the world. The traffic system is in a shambles and one can hardly find a major road that is not in a state of disrepair, not to speak of the by lanes. The Detail Area Plan has been virtually scuttled by the way its provisions have been compromised by the government.

We understand that a team of experts would seek recommendations from all concerned on ten related aspects which will be presented to the government for consideration. We would hope that not only would those be attended with due diligence, but those be also implemented without political consideration, something that has made DAP totally irrelevant and hollow.

Poor's access to justice Enabling system needed

NEEDLESS to say, ensuring justice to poor multitudes in our country should be a part and parcel of our quest for establishing a rights based society. While there are efforts to alleviate poverty, implying a modicum of economic justice, they remain vulnerable to other forms of injustices in the social arena.

A survey on the poor under a DFID supported Community Legal Service (CLS) programme has revealed that 95 percent are unable to lodge FIR and 73 percent to file a general diary. More than inability, the issues are lack of awareness of their rights, procedures and diffidence at the other end to extend a helping hand—that's how we will diagnose the inadequacies.

Awareness building and legal aid will help mitigate the circumstances up to a point. Yet considering that the outreach of the formal legal system is more or less limited, there is a marked preference amongst the poor for Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). The traditional local justice system, known as Salish, though popular is yet to dispense fair, objective and impartial verdict in general because of the influence of the rural elite and the reality of local power structure. What we have often witnessed is the degeneracy of salish into coercive and tyrannical method of issuing so-called fatwa.

All these point to the need for a reformed, modernized, legally sound and user-friendly alternative dispute resolution system. Simultaneously, NGOs should strive to empower, with government's help, women and marginalised people to access equitable justice and defend

Army, protesters and the government

EDITORIAL, Dawn

AN emphatic set of statements by DG ISPR Gen Asim Bajwa during a press conference on Friday may help roll back some of the persisting criticism that the army leadership is directly or indirectly backing the anti-government protesters camped out on Constitution Avenue in the federal capital.

At the very least, whatever the truth to criticism directed at the army previously, it appears that the army leadership has, going forward, decided against direct intervention or open involvement in the ongoing political crisis.

To the Sheikh Rashids and Shujaat Hussains of the political class, this is surely a setback. Many an ardent admirer of military rule and unabashed supporter of the army's role in politics have openly invited the military to either take over or keep the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif pinned to the mat—self-serving advice at best, given that it is the military that would have to deal with the fallout from a derailment of the democratic process.

Now, with the army speaking more firmly and candidly of its commitment to the democratic process, the air of conspiracy and intrigue can hopefully begin to clear.

Yet, in a depressing re-enactment of many of its earlier missteps, the PML-N appears to have interpreted the lifeline handed to it by the army leadership as an opportunity for renewing pressure on the anti-government protesters.

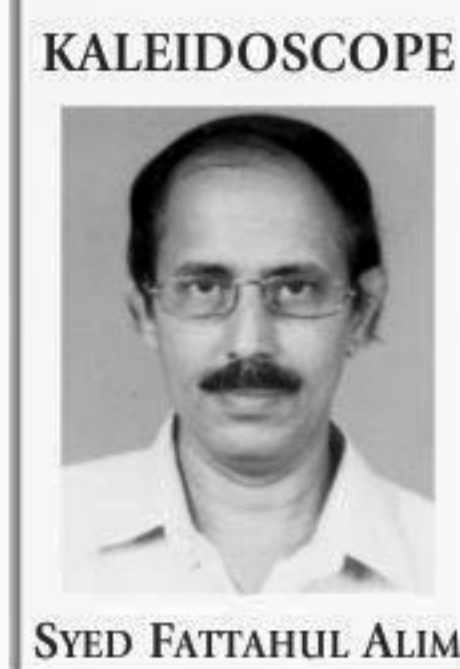
Two things will eventually need to be done by the government: the protesters will need to be peacefully moved away from the present sites they occupy; and those involved in violence on Constitution Avenue and attacks on state property will need to be identified, arrested, charged and prosecuted. Anything beyond that would be an excessive, unnecessary and unwise use of force—and a potentially fatal mistake by the PML-N. Unhappily, the PML-N often appears to have its priorities mixed up: rather than focusing on doing what it will take to strengthen the democratic process and salvage the government's mandate, the PML-N leadership seems more inclined to flex its muscles against the protesters.

Perhaps the PML-N leadership mistakenly has come to believe that the protests are really a numbers game—that if Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri had managed to bring a crowd in six figures into the streets of Islamabad, the government would have fallen. But it is not and never has been a question of a numbers game.

Even when whittled down to a few hundred protesters, Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri have had their voices amplified nationally through the media.

Even if the numbers at the PTI's rally surge over the weekend—assuming the government backs away from its disruption tactics—that would not fundamentally weaken the government's case and the democratic argument that much can be negotiated, but not everything the protesters want. Strategic patience, tactical nous and generosity of spirit—the PML-N still appears to lack all three.

War against the phenomenon of IS



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

US president Barack Obama in his 15-minute speech on September 10 outlined his strategy of expanding the ongoing US campaign against the phenomenon of Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), or in short, Islamic State (IS), assuring, in particular, his home audience that the US will meet the enemy "with strength and resolve."

Evidently, Obama's latest announcement marks a significant departure from his earlier policy of disengaging the US militarily from Iraq as he had promised in his election campaign trail in 2008. And true to his promise, on October 21, 2011, he declared that all US forces would leave Iraq in time to be "home for the holidays".

This apparent shift in Obama's stance is a corollary of his falling popularity at home over his handling of issues ranging from economy, immigration, health care to foreign policy. Small wonder his critics blame the recent mess in Iraq and Syria, especially the phenomenal rise of IS, largely on his poor handling of Middle East crisis arising mainly out of the Syrian civil war.

So, to take the IS bull by the horns, Obama has conceived of a broader alliance with friendly nations. Some 10 Arab as well as other nations will be part of this alliance, it is learnt. However, the US has not yet committed any ground troops other than the ongoing air strikes against ISIS militants. Neither have the allies in this war committed any.

With no foot soldiers on the ground either from the US or from its alliance partners, one wonders how the expanded campaign against the IS will be fought. Seemingly, it is all depending on the Iraqi army and Kurdish Peshmerga forces as well as the moderate rebel fighters of Syria. But given their present state of organisation, firepower and morale vis-à-vis those of the IS fighters, each of these armies will have miles to go before they become an effective force against the battle-hardened and highly motivated IS army. It is understood from Obama speech that the US and its allies will provide the needed guidance, training and weapons to the Iraqi and Peshmerga forces. And it is also understood that the moderate Syrian rebels will be sufficiently equipped along with extended air coverage within Syria to fight the IS effectively. These are undoubtedly nice ideas, but there's a snag. How, for example, will the moderate Syrian rebels in their present state of disarray regroup and fight on two fronts—Syrian government forces on the one hand and the ISIS, on the other—when the US or its allies are yet not decided what they are going to do with president Assad of Syria? It is worthwhile to note that Assad has skillfully cornered the Syrian rebels with financial, military and moral support that he has been receiving from Iran and Russia.

The US-led Western powers consider the IS as military problem and as such seeking a military solution to it. Unfortunately, there is no such solution. One has to get to the political roots of the insurgency that lie in Damascus and Baghdad.

And to the Syrian rebels' dismay, combatants of Lebanese Shia militant group Hezbollah have also been fighting shoulder to shoulder with Syrian troops against the rebels.

On the Iraqi front it is being expected that the Sunni population along with their rebel fighters will eagerly join the new Iraqi premier's national reconciliation efforts. But what is the guarantee that they (Sunnis) will instantly respond to the initiative of Haider al-Abadi's, who is also another Shia leader from present ruling coterie representing the Islamic Dawa Party? Will not the Sunnis rather choose to wait and see what Abadi can really deliver towards national unity, especially through sharing of power with them? One should not forget that the IS thrives on the support of minority Sunni community which has been marginalized by the highly sectarian Shia-led former government of Nouri al-Maliki.

But why is it proving so hard to encounter the IS? Who are they?

Disparate Iraqi Sunni insurgent groups drawn mainly from various al-Qaeda factions formed IS in April 2013 under a new leadership that distanced itself from al-Qaeda central command. The leader of this new jihadist group is Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai, popularly called Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The method the IS uses to terrorise and subjugate its adversaries, mainly Shia's and non-Muslim minorities, is so ruthless that even al-Qaeda disapproves of it.

Imbued with an extremely puritan interpretation Islam, the IS, since its creation has emerged as a formidable force taking advantage of the festering civil war in Syria and sectarianism-ridden vicious political atmosphere in Iraq. From its battle victories against demoralized Iraqi army and poorly equipped Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, IS now rules a large land area (between 40,000 to 90,000 square kilometers) spanning north and northwestern Iraq and northeastern Syria. Basically a ragtag fighting force of a few hundred fighters in the beginning, the IS now now commands a fully-fledged army of some 31,000 jihadist fighters, who have been streaming from across the globe into the region over the last three years and a half that the Syrian civil war has been raging. With every passing moment they are growing in strength, thanks to the prevailing political chaos in Syria and Iraq.

The US-led Western powers consider the IS as military problem and as such seeking a military solution to it. Unfortunately, there is no such solution. One has to get to the political roots of the insurgency that lie in Damascus and Baghdad. So, towards finding an answer to the IS problem, the US and the West must prevail upon Syria to end the civil war as well as install a government in Baghdad that enjoys the trust of all Iraqi communities—Shias, Sunnis, Kurds, Christians, Yezidis and all. Once these two political problems are resolved the IS will automatically lose the ground on which it stands.

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Asia's democratic dark spots



SHASHI THAROOR

DEMOCRACY in Asia lately has proved to be harder than many might have expected, with free and fair elections enabling the large and divided societies of India and Indonesia to manage important political transitions. But some Asian democracies—notably, Thailand and Pakistan—seem to be losing their way.

Indians have plenty of experience with changing their government through the ballot box, and this year's election—the country's 16th since independence in 1947—was no different. In the world's largest exercise of democratic franchise, Indian voters rejected the United Progressive Alliance, which had served two terms, in favor of the Bharatiya Janata Party, led by Narendra Modi.

The second-largest such exercise followed in Indonesia. In the country's third presidential election, voters—familiar with both strong-arm military rule and weak-willed civilian governance—chose the populist mayor Joko Widodo over the former general Prabowo Subianto.

Even war-ravaged Afghanistan held presidential elections to guide its first democratic transfer of power. Though the apparent loser Abdullah Abdullah is vehemently challenging the results, which favor Ashraf Ghani, the dispute has not turned violent; indeed, both parties are participating in US-mediated talks about the possibility of establishing a national-unity government. It is reassuring that, in a land ravaged by civil war and terrorism, neither of the contestants is reaching for his gun.

These countries finally seem to recognize, to varying degrees, that the way that elections are conducted matters as much as the outcome. An election expresses the hopes, promises, commitments, and compromises that underpin the sacred compact between the government and the governed. Accepting the results is a vital part of democracy. You fight to win, but you accept your loss with grace.

Unfortunately, this trend is not consistent across Asia. Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej effectively signed Thai democracy's death certificate by approving a new interim constitution—by some counts the country's 18th since 1932—that grants absolute power to the National Council for Peace and Order, the military junta led by army chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha. Prayuth can now "prevent, suspend, or suppress any actions that will destroy the peace and order, the national security and monarchy, the country's economy or the country's governance."

Even if elections are held next year, as the ruling junta has promised, it is unlikely that they will be free or fair. Thailand—which has experienced more than a dozen military coups in the last 82 years—now has a constitution that is effectively a charter for indefinite military rule.

Meanwhile, Pakistan has been paralyzed by a protracted standoff between Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's elected government and its critics. The charismatic former cricket star Imran Khan, whose Movement for Justice party came in third in May's general election, and the Canada-based religious leader Tahirul Qadri are leading mass demonstrations that have brought Islamabad to a standstill—a situation that Khan and Qadri have pledged to sustain until

Sharif resigns.

A glimmer of hope lies in the response of the main opposition Pakistan People's Party, whose government Sharif supplanted. Instead of joining the protests, the PPP has backed Sharif's refusal to allow extra-constitutional pressure to force him to resign.

But in Pakistan, as in Thailand, the army's shadow looms large. Indeed, Pakistan's army has ruled the country directly for half of its existence, and indirectly the rest of the time. So far, however, the army has yet to intervene directly in the current unrest, suggesting that significant elements of the top military brass have condoned the agitation.

In fact, there is a fundamental difference between the military's current relationship with democracy in the two countries—one that bodes well for Pakistan. In Thailand, the elites, including the military, opposed consecutive democratically elected governments, because voters had inconveniently chosen populist politicians—notably, Thaksin Shinawatra and his sister Yingluck—to lead them. After several unsuccessful attempts to engineer different political outcomes by manipulating the democratic process, these powerful groups decided that it would be easier to eliminate the pretense of democratic elections altogether.

In Pakistan, by contrast, the problem began only when elected civilian governments pushed back against the supreme power of the armed forces. Given its pervasive control over Pakistan's key political, economic, and intelligence institutions, the military has plenty of tools at its disposal to constrain—overtly or otherwise—elected governments' ability to act against its interests.

It is probably no coincidence that, when an increasingly restive Sharif appeared to be testing the limits of the military's authority, protests erupted. If he shows the military that he understands who is boss, and that he will adhere strictly to whatever red lines are drawn for him, the protesters will not be allowed to overthrow him; the army will quickly drive them from the streets.

It is thus too early to mourn the death of Pakistan's democracy, which will likely continue as a kind of "guided democracy" for some time to come. But, in order to preserve and strengthen it, all of Pakistan's political parties will have to learn to conduct free, fair, rules-based elections—and abide by their outcome.

That is precisely what Pakistan now needs from Khan, whose party has only 35 seats in the National Assembly, fewer than the PPP's 45 and far fewer than the 166 held by Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League. Surely a cricketer would understand that, with those scores, he cannot be declared Man of the Match. Unfortunately, Khan appears to expect the khaki-clad umpires to swing the game for him.

Democracy in Asia has made impressive gains in recent years. A generation ago, half of Asia's governments had seized power by force; today, a return to military rule seems inconceivable in South Korea and the Philippines, and unlikely in Bangladesh. Even Myanmar, for all of its problems, has broken definitively with praetorianism. But it will take a lot more progress in Thailand and Pakistan before the continent will truly have turned the democratic corner.

The writer is a former UN under-secretary general and former Indian Minister of State for Human Resource Development and Minister of State for External Affairs, is currently an MP for the Indian National Congress and Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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A tribute to the nightingale



John Keats said, "Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard are sweeter". Feroza Begum, the legendary Nazrul sangeet exponent, has entered the realm of eternity. She will sing no more but her melodies will always remain alive and inspire us.

May Allah bless the departed soul of Feroza Begum and give patience to the bereaved family members to bear the loss.

Sohel Rana Raj
Lecturer of English
Alamgir Mansur (Minto) Memorial College
Mymensingh

Introduce meters in CNG-run taxis

In Chittagong CNG-run taxi drivers ask abnormally high fares as they have no meters and passengers have to give in to their demands. As the battery-run rickshaws have been withdrawn from the streets, the passengers now have to depend on CNG-run taxis. Those battery-powered rickshaws were cheaper than these CNG-run taxis.

We hope the authorities will take measures to install meters in the CNG-run taxis to mitigate the problem.

Zabed Wali
Chittagong

AK Khondokar's book on 1971

I highly appreciate the articles published in your esteemed daily on AK Khondokar's book (1971: Bhetore Baire). I was present at the then Race Course Maidan on the historic day of 7th March 1971. I can assure that Bangabandhu never ever said "joy Pakistan".

A sincere advice to AK Khondokar: Before you speak, let your words pass through three gates. At the first gate, ask yourself, 'Is it true?' At the second, ask, 'Is it necessary?' At the third gate, ask, 'Is it kind?'

Jamshaid Taher
Banani, Dhaka

*Comments on news report,
"Pesticides used 15 times the limit,"
published on September 11, 2014*

Sayed Rahman

We should find a way that can be replaced with the indiscriminate use of pesticides. Pesticides are not only killing the pests, they are helping to destroy various kinds of species.

*"Tearful goodbye to Feroza
Begum" (September 11, 2014)*

M. Akram Khan

The passing away of Feroza Begum is an irreparable loss for the entire sub-continent. May Almighty Allah bless her soul and grant her eternal peace.

Sayed Rahman

Feroza Begum will remain as a legendary Nazrul sangeet exponent. Her demise will create a great vacuum in this arena.

*"Enlarging terrorist footprints in
South Asia" (September 11, 2014)*

M. Akram Khan

An excellent overview and analysis of the situation. The pragmatic advice deserves consideration from the highest level.

*"JP in the soup"
(September 11, 2014)*

Genuine Musafeer

An old man's somersault. Nothing new.