

18TH SAARC SUMMIT Charter needs to be amended



MAHMOOD HASAN

It is customary during summits for leaders to meet each other bilaterally and exchange greetings and notes. Summits of regional groupings become even more important because their goals are common. Since Summit Declarations etc. are not drafted by leaders (sherpas actually do that) they have ample time to sort out bilateral differences and make breakthroughs.

Regrettably, some leaders at the 18th Saarc Summit did not utilise the opportunity to have bilateral talks on the sideline. Narendra Modi did not have any structured bilateral meeting with Nawaz Sharif. They avoided meeting each other, reflecting strong tensions existing between India and Pakistan. It was only at the retreat that the two leaders shook hands and exchanged courtesies, that too because of Nepali PM Sushil Koirala's efforts. How can Saarc make progress when egos stand in the way and run counter to the concept of regionalism?

To recall, Narendra Modi invited all the Saarc leaders to his inauguration ceremony last May. Nawaz - Modi bilateral meeting in Delhi at that time was thought to be the beginning of better relations between the two nuclear-armed neighbours of South Asia. Soon after Nawaz's Delhi visit tensions between the two countries rose over border shooting in disputed Kashmir. Relations between Islamabad and Delhi quickly soured. Nawaz and Modi carried that sour feeling to Kathmandu.

India - Pakistan relations actually is the major impediment in the development of Saarc. Neither of these members has ever tried to rise above their bilateral political problems to let regional cooperation grow unhindered. It is a peculiar mindset that bedevils Delhi and Islamabad when it comes to Saarc.

At a bilateral meeting Modi assured Sheikh Hasina that the Land Boundary Agreement and the Teesta Water Sharing Treaty will be implemented soon. Modi, however, did not specify any time frame. Hasina also met Nawaz Sharif and discussed bilateral issues.

The Eighteenth Saarc Summit has just con-

cluded in Kathmandu on November 27. Before the inauguration there were high hopes that the hamstrung organisation will get fresh life. The theme of the summit was "Deeper integration for peace, progress and prosperity."

Though the Charter of Saarc requires that summits be held every year this summit came after a delay of three years. The 17th Summit was held in Addu City, Maldives in November 2011. Political instability in Nepal was one of the reasons for the delay. Deeply fractured Nepal's polity is still trying to write its constitution.

All the eight leaders of Saarc attended the Summit, including representatives from nine observers. There is nothing to be excited about the 36-para Declaration adopted by the leaders.

One of the main handicaps of Saarc is Article 10 of the Charter. Article 10(1) requires that any decision to be implemented must be based on "unanimity." This principle has actually paralysed the organisation. Article 10(2) stipulates that all bilateral contentious issues will be excluded from deliberations of the summits. These two provisions have in reality choked the organisation. This article has created a very narrow window to transact regional business.

The failure of the leaders to sign the two Agreements -- Motor Vehicles Agreement and Regional Railways Agreement -- is the case in point. Pakistan failed to get on board over these Agreements. Only the Agreement for Energy Cooperation was signed on the concluding day after hectic efforts.

The Charter of neighbouring Asean has obviated this problem by adopting the principle of "consensus" -- freeing member states to go ahead with a project even if one or two members are not on board. If Saarc has to survive and be effective, leaders should actively consider amending the Charter, and allow consenting members to go ahead with a project. That in effect would be the creation of sub-regional groups under Saarc. The organisation should also be equipped with a larger budget to independently carry through its programmes.

The other problem that Saarc faces is the rank

and status of the secretary general. The secretary general holds the rank of an ambassador. This is equivalent to the rank of joint secretary and above in the diplomatic services of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Nepal. Thus, his interlocutors in Saarc capitals are not beyond the joint secretaries, dealing with Saarc issues in the respective foreign ministries. The secretary general rarely has opportunities to interact with the heads of governments of Saarc countries. The rank and status of the secretary general should be raised to the level of a full minister. That would ensure him access at higher levels in the member governments.

The Saarc region, which accounts for a quarter of world population, is also the world's poorest region, with millions going to bed hungry every night. Freedom from poverty and underdevelopment will no doubt free the people of this region from insecurity -- social, political, economic and national.

Since there are dozens of issues related to poverty alleviation, over the years Saarc was tempted to take up new projects. Since its first summit in Dhaka (1985), Saarc has signed a number of Agreements. It however, failed to push them to logical conclusions because of half-hearted commitment from the member countries.

Summit leaders should have concentrated on SAFTA -- the original idea for which the organisation was created. Full implementation of the free trade area -- which is relatively non-contentious -- would have gone a long way to make the region more integrated and prosperous. It is a pity that inter-regional trade among Saarc countries accounts for only 5% of total world trade, though the potential is many times over. Instead of spreading thin over many projects Saarc should focus on do-able things.

Saarc summit will stop being a talking shop -- making tall promises but ending short on performance -- if the Charter is amended. Let us hope that the 19th Summit in Pakistan in 2016 does not end with old rhetoric. The next summit should change the Charter and convert the small window into a wide door for the regional organisation.

The writer is former Ambassador and Secretary.

Custom-made democracy

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

In a democracy all are equal, but in some democracies some are more equal than others. I say this with profound apologies to George Orwell since this is a spin-off from his most famous statement in his book *Animal Farm* that "all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others." In his book Orwell was not satirising democracy but the Russian Revolution that purported to bring about equality through socialism but in reality it was promoting another class system where the party hierarchy got ahead of the curve suppressing the masses. Had Orwell been alive I wonder if he would have lamented how democracy is being used to bring about a new paradigm of inequality by absolute power.

The Russian Revolution, father of Soviet type of socialism, gave actual power to the party and its members who enjoyed the fruits of labour of the masses who were guiled by the propaganda of socialist equality that never happened. Lamentably, along with the socialist societies, we also saw rise of democracies in our part of the world where in the name of people power actual authority came to be wielded by a chosen few. Equality of law and equality of rights came to be differentiated by class, access to authority, and the political party one belonged to.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the noted French political thinker in the 19th century, had warned that modern democracy may be adept at inventing new forms of totalitarianism, because radical equality could lead to the materialism of an expanding middle class and to the selfishness of individuals. Tocqueville worried that if despotism were to take root in a modern democracy, it would be a much more dangerous version than the oppression under the Roman emperors or tyrants of the past who could only exert a pernicious influence on a small group of people at a time. Tocqueville compared a potentially despotic democratic government to a protective parent who wants to keep its citizens (children) as "perpetual children," and which doesn't break men's wills but rather guides it, and presides over people in the same way as a shepherd looking after a "flock of timid animals."

Tocqueville's fears materialised some hundred years later in parts of the world either with overthrow of elected government by would-be despots and their tinkering with their version of democracies, or with political leaders who used their majority to stifle opposition and rule unopposed. In many countries democracy became a weapon of mass deception when leaders chose to share it with other powerful elements, principally the armed forces, and through political control of all state institutions. Prime examples of such democracy were Pakistan under General Ayub Khan, Indonesia under General Suharto, and Egypt under Hosni Mubarak. In Pakistan, we had seen how the generals dictated democracy and customised the institutions to suit their needs. In Indonesia, the leader established a comfortable power sharing formula with the armed forces in which they would have a sizeable representation in the Parliament (100 members out of 460 were nominated). The sham democracy that Hosni Mubarak installed in Egypt allowed only his own created party (National Democratic Party) to rule for nearly thirty years until his fall in 2011. In Pakistan General Ayub Khan determined that "parliamentary democracy and that the country required a period of tutelage and honest government before a new constitutional system could be established." He therefore initiated a plan for "basic democracies," consisting of rural and urban councils directly elected by the people that would be concerned with local governance and would assist in programmes of grassroots development. He would then go on to use these "basic democrats" to be his Spartan guards to tweak democracy and the state institutions.

Arguments were made by the acolytes of these powerful men that the economic progress these countries made in those periods was possible because the system they installed allowed continuity of the same government (read same ruler), unlike other democracies where government changed frequently with each election. In other words, economic progress and development that these countries achieved, however debatable, had been only possible because these political stalwarts could tweak their system to rule unopposed. The end game was, however, quite different. Indonesia's Suharto fell when his so-called grand stories of economic success fell under the weight of rampant corruption, and suppression of personal freedoms. Ayub Khan of Pakistan was ousted by his own colleagues to stem the tide of opposition to his venal government and his political cohorts. Hosni Mubarak fell because of arrogant suppression of basic liberties of free speech and movement and snuffing the opposition.

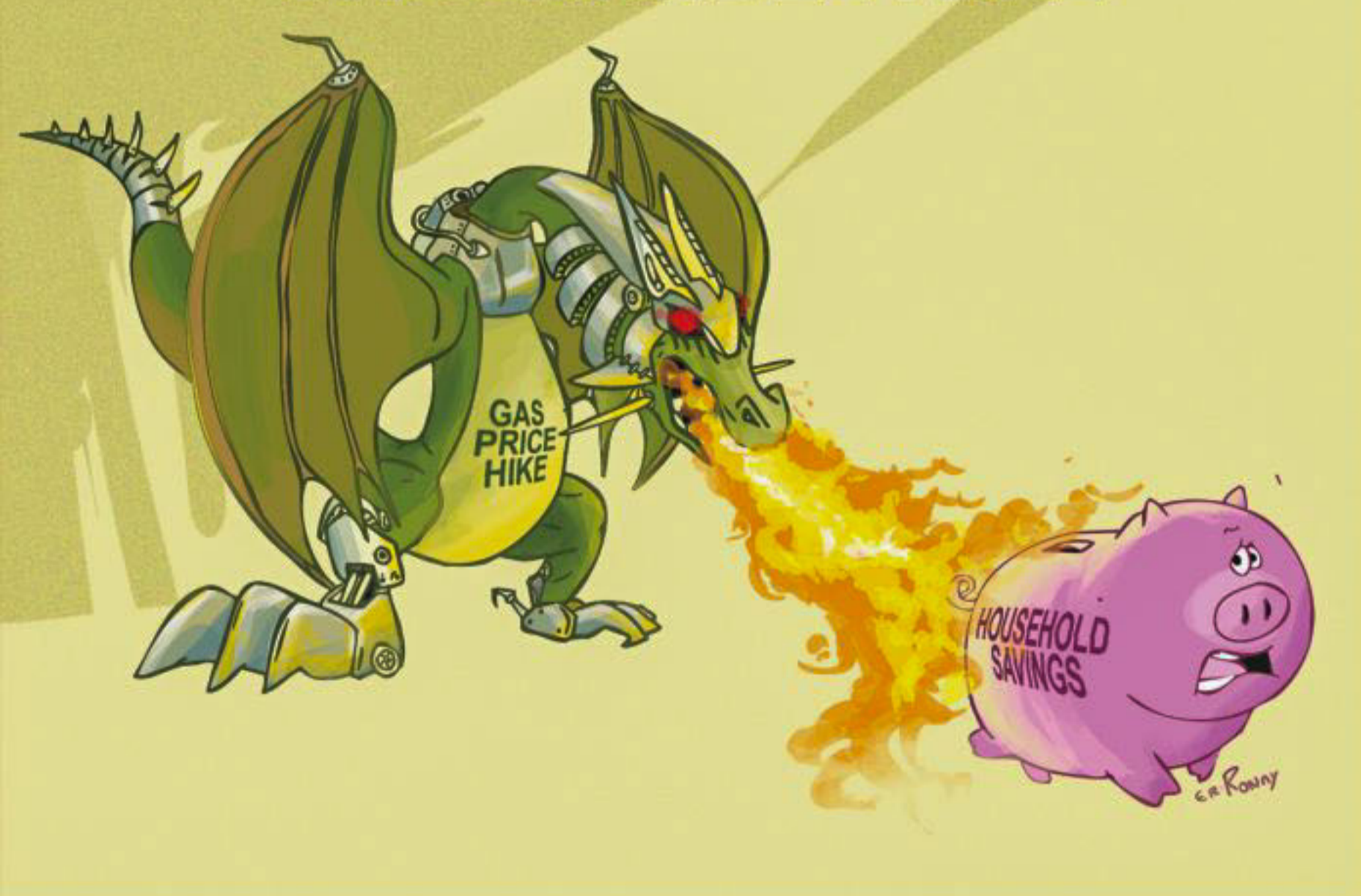
A long tenure in office of a head of government with little disturbance or uncertainty in their rule is an important ingredient for economic progress in a developing country. However, a natural tendency for all power is to be concentrated in the chief executive and that power eventually becomes absolute. With no checks and balances the absolute power leads to absolute destruction. This happened in the case of Suharto, Ayub Khan, and Hosni Mubarak. We had seen this in our country also in 1990.

Basic principles of democracy are equality under the law, personal freedoms, rule of law, and participatory government. The governments of the men cited before fell because they ignored these basic principles despite their attempts to make their rules look democratic and their avowed claims for economic progress. They tried to customise democracies in their own models to prolong their rule and the party they created. These did not prevail when their true nature to prolong their rule revealed itself through manipulation of the institutions that were supposed to uphold democracy.

The best and the worst lesson of History is that no one listens to history. Manipulating democracy or democratic institutions to prolong the hold on government may serve for some time, not for all of the time. We do not have to look far beyond in time to see the consequences of such attempts. Economic progress and economic development are definitely the ultimate goals of all government, but these should not be at the cost of losing democracy or democratic rights of people. We need progress but we also need our freedom to express, right to choose government, and right of protection under the law.

The writer is a political analyst and commentator.

UNBEARABLE HIKE



18th Saarc Summit: A partial success

HUMAYUN KABIR

ALTHOUGH initially there was some sense of frustration about lack of progress on three possible agreements, finally it looks like the Saarc leaders have been able to pen one agreement on the framework of energy cooperation. So I would brand it as a semi-success. Others -- the motor vehicle agreement and railway cooperation agreement -- may not have been signed but the optimism is still there as none of the countries have bluntly rejected it, but asked for more time. I would personally put them in the pending box. So with two agreements pending and one signed I would say

from a general point of view that the Summit was successful to some extent.

The atmosphere could have been much better if the gestures, postures and the style of exchange of greetings between some heads of states were friendlier. In a regional summit like that of the Saarc, or any other for that matter, the body language and gestures are important as they may hint at the nature of outcomes. But they sent out negative vibes. This is in stark contrast to the very nature of the Summit's goal, and especially when Saarc is mostly about regional cooperation, collaboration and integration. Some of the statements issued may have also

generated some negative vibes. These could have been more positive in outlook.

Some leaders should have avoided the unfriendly gestures. This has resulted in casting a negative shadow which could have been avoided. In terms of deliberations the leaders should have been more proactive and positive too.

Candidly speaking, Saarc may not have live up to the expectations of the region's people in general but the potentials are very much there. In terms of bilateral relations, India-Pakistan ties have always influenced the outcome of Saarc summits. This time, with new PMs of the two countries, the possibility for brushing away

the past was there. We shouldn't underestimate the fact that Pakistan and India are two significant countries within the Saarc system, so when the two elephants fight it's the grass that suffers. Having said that, the mistrust behind Indo-Pak relations is actually disliked by the Saarc citizens as a whole. This consciousness is growing by the day. They now desire to see more cooperation, better understanding and more productive relationships between all the Saarc countries so that Saarc can deliver on its promises.

Moreover, optimistic notes can still be exchanged between the heads of states of Saarc.

The writer is a former diplomat.

QUOTABLE Quote

You can never cross the ocean until you have the courage to lose sight of the shore.

Christopher Columbus

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS
 1 Uneven hairdo
 5 Deadly
 10 Go it alone
 11 Gourmet's sense
 12 Hammer or sickle
 13 Destroyed
 14 Thanks-giving dinner offering
 16 Thanks-giving dinner offering
 20 Arc unit
 23 Nabokov novel
 24 "Cats" poet
 25 Arsonists, in slang
 27 Print units
 28 Scarab, e.g.
 29 Thanks-giving dinner offering
 32 Thanks-giving dinner offering
 36 Con quest?
 39 Clip contents
 40 Wed in secret
 41 Grace finish
 42 Salamanders
 43 Physics amount

DOWN
 1 Swift jets
 2 Owl comment
 3 Baseball's Moises
 4 Course coach
 5 Animal life
 6 Put in a row
 7 Almond
 8 Had dinner
 9 Went ahead
 11 Tag info
 15 Yard units
 17 Component
 18 Fan's favorite
 19 Facility
 20 Profound
 21 Sailors' saint
 22 Basic idea
 25 Quick look
 26 Polite agreement
 28 Yawning, perhaps
 30 Take as one's own
 31 Yarns
 33 Jane Austen book
 34 Iowa city
 35 Massive amounts
 36 Signing need
 37 Hearty brew
 38 Squabble

Yesterday's answer

L	A	S	T	B	A	W	L	
U	N	C	A	P	R	U	P	E
C	I	R	C	A	I	R	I	N
A	M	I	T	A	B	L	E	T
S	U	B	L	E	T	S	C	O
S	E	I	N	E	M	E	N	
S	T	A	G	E				
A	R	T	L	I	A	R	S	
A	R	E	G	O	B	L	E	T
G	I	B	L	E	T	S	C	A
A	S	I	A	N	O	L	I	V
T	E	N	S	E	N	O	T	E
E	N	D	S		B	E	S	S

CRYPTOQUOTE 10-6
 HT GZ PABZPPSAW, QTA MLKZ HT MLKZ
 QTAY MZLYH JF QTAY GAPJFZPP, LFN QTAY
 GAPJFZPP JF QTAY MZLYH.
 -- HMTRLPLDLHPTF PY

Yesterday's CRYPTOQUOTE:
 A CRIMINAL IS A PERSON WITH PREDATORY INSTINCTS WHO HAS NOT SUFFICIENT CAPITAL TO FORM A CORPORATION.
 - HOWARD SCOTT

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

HENRY by Don Trachte

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