

# Elected autocrats and the decline of democracy

## Celebrating 25 years A message of gratitude

FOR most people a 25th anniversary celebration is an excuse for a grand party. For us, the men and women of *The Daily Star*, it is an opportunity to express our profound gratitude to our readers, patrons and supporters who have been with us through thick and thin for the last 25 years. This is also when we reflect upon our past with an eye to the future.

Our grateful thanks to Mr. Md Abdul Hamid, the Hon'ble President of the People's Republic of Bangladesh who was kind enough to grace the inaugural programme of our silver jubilee celebrations. We are humbled by the opportunity to be able to honour 24 distinguished personalities and the Liberation War Museum for their selfless and tireless contribution to nation-building. *The Daily Star* family is also grateful to the foreign dignitaries who took the trouble to be here with us on this joyous occasion and inspire us to do better.

Our message today is simple: that we have never faltered in our resolution to give a voice to the dreams, hopes and aspirations of the common people of this country. Our pledge today is firm: that we will continue to work with the faith, devotion and energy necessary to build a knowledge-based society where the strong are just and the weak secure.

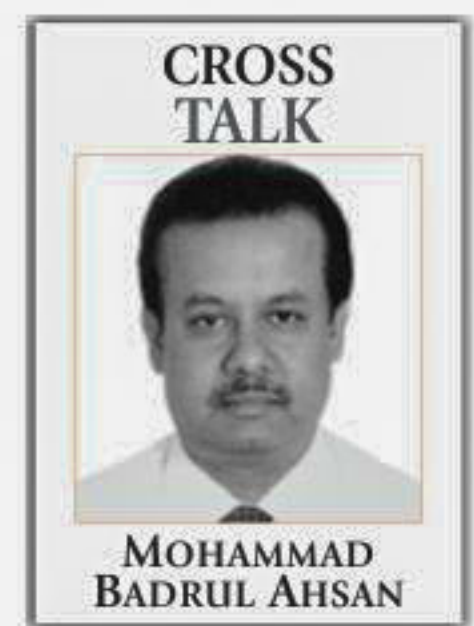
United, there is little this nation cannot do. Split asunder, there is little we can do. We ask all to carry us in our journey as a force of unity, peace and harmony.

## Alarming rise in child killings

### Not merely a law enforcement issue

AS per a news report in a leading Bangla daily, some 1,085 children have been murdered in the country over the last four years. Experts and social scientists agree that criminals are being employed to abduct and if necessary kill these children to settle personal animosities and disputes over property ownership, as children are the easiest targets. With the steady degradation of social and moral values, we find children falling victim to the most serious of crimes, i.e. murder. We witness with horror the murdering of children in cold blood even when these children are taken for ransom and the ransom is paid, as in the case of 11-year-old boy Abdullah found murdered in Keraniganj recently.

Legal experts point out that although 'Child Act 2013' was promulgated, neither have the ordinances been set nor is there any application of the law. The police merely react to situations as they emerge. This is not only a law enforcement issue; rather it requires a far more comprehensive approach that will bring together political parties, society at large and the police to tackle a malady that is both criminal and social in nature. The media need to be involved to disseminate information that it is morally reprehensible to target children; religious figures like the Imams should be giving sermons to the faithful on the issue and there is a role for civil society organisations to spread the message to both rural and urban audiences. Only together can we fight this scourge that is now threatening our children.



CROSS TALK  
 MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IF the dawn of democracy arrived in Athens 2,500 years ago, how has its day progressed in as many years? This cradle of democracy was built on slave labour, where women wore the veil and the majority of the ordinary Athenians were enslaved to the rich. Although there were smooth-talking politicians, who used spins even in those days, the city was able to develop sophisticated voting systems and anybody who didn't vote was called stupid.

If not for a few exceptions, the contrast with our times looks grim. Some of the most advanced democracies of the world are seething with controversy on whether they should ban women from wearing the veil. That most people are enslaved to the rich is more than adequately reflected in the most recent finding: 62 people are as wealthy as half the world's population. The plight of the workers in sweatshops, the women and children trafficked to brothels, and the refugees washed up on foreign shores conjure the nightmare that was once the fate of the slaves.

US-based organisation, Freedom House, in its report last year claimed that about two-thirds of the world's citizens lived under a dictatorship. It also said that 106 dictatorships or partial dictatorships persisted, accounting for 54 percent of the world's nations. The most striking contradiction these countries have with ancient Athens is that citizens who wish to cast their votes are made to look like a bunch of idiots.

Because elections meant to be the conduit of democracy are being used to confiscate it. When millions of Egyptians voted in a referendum on their Constitution in January 2014, 98.1 percent yes votes basically re-established military rule in the country. The whole world knows what happened before the referendum. Security forces rounded up and tortured hundreds of activists who had called for a no vote. Not even 40

percent of Egyptians bothered to show up at the polling booths.

Thus the rise of elected autocrats is now a standard practice in many Third World countries. It proves wrong the vaunted optimism expressed by analysts in the early 1990s that a democratic dawn was about to break across the globe. Instead, mischievous rulers have learned to beat democracy at its own game. They are using the political legitimacy of a popular vote to abuse power, enrich allies, and annihilate the opposition as well as the legitimacy itself.

Even worse, these rulers are treating return to power like the refill policy of

bureaucracy of independent-minded civil servants. In some cases, they try to win the support of their rural populations, promoting economic growth and improved standard of living. Democracy in this master-minded manipulation invariably tends to perpetuate political strife, graft, and muddled economic planning.

What it does is rollback democracy, which first creates stagnancy and then degeneration. Many of the rulers plan to rule for a lifetime and some of them partially succeed until they are either assassinated or toppled. If eternal vigilance is the price of liberty, people are covered into submission and paralysis

finances go into a freefall after 10 to 15 years of totalitarianism. The tell-tale signs are increasing inflation and diminishing growth.

Countries with a small population and high revenue are exceptions to this rule. Oil-rich Gulf states are best examples. Singapore thrived under one-party rule, small geographic and population sizes incrementally outpaced by GDP growth. Nigeria, to the contrary, started with a wave of petrodollars much of which was squandered by military juntas and their cronies.

It's one thing not to have democratic



those stores, which offer unlimited free refills for their drinks. Once in power, the rulers devise ways to perpetuate it. And they do so by staging rigged elections as if one legitimate investment in power entitles them to have many illegitimate returns on it.

Once these rulers win elections, they uphold electoral democracy in their speeches but utilise its power in their actions to consolidate power and amass vast wealth. They start destroying democratic institutions and emptying the

by a complex set of manoeuvres comparable to card sleight that leaves bettors in a state of perplexity. Democracy is reduced to a bluff when the packet is intact but the gift is missing.

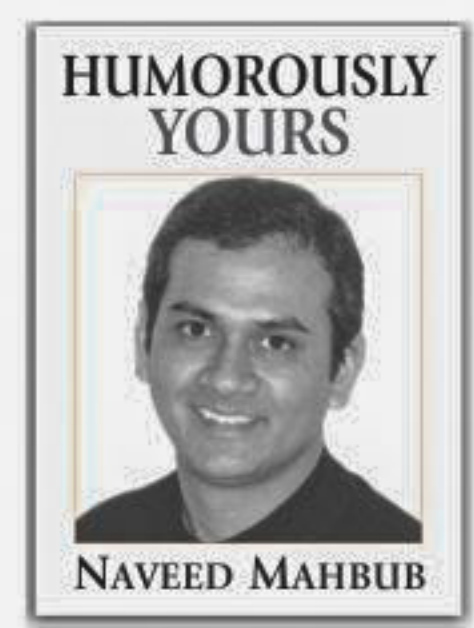
This type of deceptive democracy is like fruits laced with formalin. It slows down the rot but is downright toxic. And it hollows out a country like termites eating wood. Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe is now on the verge of collapse. Venezuela is teetering on the brink. Researchers say that a country's

rule in a country. It's another thing when fake democracy is imposed on people. The former whets people's appetite for democracy, while the latter ruins it like junk food hurts metabolism.

Frogs blink when they eat because their eyes help them swallow food. Democracy is caught in the false pretence of defenders who are devouring it.

The writer is the Editor of weekly *First News* and a columnist for *The Daily Star*.  
 Email: badrul151@yahoo.com

# Video Killed the Video Star



HUMOROUSLY YOURS  
 NAVEED MAHBUB

SUPER Bowl 2007. Eid in the US as the whole nation is glued to the TV sets to witness the biggest sporting event of the year – the final game of American football. It's a guy thing. But roles are reversed in my household. The wife sits in front of the TV with popcorn and Coke. I give her company, but only to watch the ads.

This is far from an unusual scenario as the best of the best ads air during the games. So much so, that there are as much, if not more, post-game reviews of the ads than of the game itself.

It IS the Super Bowl, the grand finale of American football (with nothing to do much with the foot), that has reached the height of its brand equity. TV therefore controls the duration of the ads to sync with the time-outs of the game. Perhaps the game itself was designed to accommodate for ads, the latter paying top dollars for every second of airtime.

In Bangladesh, we watch TV ads, brought to you by *Tritio Matra*. Ok, only the diehard fans of the latter patiently sit through the ads, a process known as torture.

But if it ain't broke, don't fix it. Like the stock market, life is everlasting bliss. Well, till all hell breaks loose. And when (I didn't say if) that happens in traditional media, it will be too late. The dime a dozen TV channels will wither away as the remaining advertising takas make their way to digital media, where the sponsor's cost is lower, the return on investment is higher, the content are fiercely cutting edge while being available on demand, i.e., to be watched at the leisure of the viewers. The wake-up alarm clock has been ringing, but most have chosen to press the snooze button.

*Video killed the Radio Star*, and now, online video is

killing the TV video star.

So, is all the sponsor dough going digital? No. There's plenty left for TV, that is the TV that viewers watch. Hence, these prime TV advertising takas are making their way across the border – if the ad needs to be seen, they need to be shown through what ARE being seen. Icing on the cake for the sponsors – ad times are potentially cheaper across the border as those channels can run two streams of ads concu-

*Invest in quality writers and then, a simple facade will do while giving rich content. And please, don't underestimate the intellect of the viewers. They'll get it – no need to explain the punch line and as a backup, play an annoying sound bite to remind us to laugh.*

rently, thus practically offering half the price to Bangladeshi ads while Indian ads are played to the Indian viewers. Whether we like it or not, that IS the power of Indian channels as they HAVE created the content to lure in droves of viewers from both sides of the fence. Why else does my four year old convince her 10 year old sibling to cut her (the 4 year old's) hair just because *Potol Kumar* has cut her hair short?

Block the Indian channels? Bangladesh will still figure out a way to watch – technology.

Is there a silver bullet? Yes and it's always been there – create quality programmes. That doesn't mean more revolving lights and fancier LED backgrounds. Less is more – invest in quality writers and then, a simple facade will do while giving rich content. And please, don't underestimate the intellect of the viewers. They'll get it – no need to explain the punch line and as a backup, play an annoying sound bite to remind us to laugh.

The quality programme raises viewership, well somewhat. Remember we are still advertisement heavy. So, now raise the price of ads – somewhat. Now reduce the number of ads, somewhat, by keeping your total ad revenues the same. Hold on, don't start getting greedy. With somewhat reduced ads, the viewership increases again, somewhat. Raise the price again, somewhat, and reduce the ad times again, somewhat.

Repeat the loop. *Boiling frog syndrome* (my favorite line). Over time, the trickle effect is a drastic net increase in viewership along with ad prices and a drastic net decrease in ad times and a drastic net increase in demand from sponsors to bag the drastically scarce ad times. The clever channels will figure out a sizeable net increase in ad revenues.

So what happens to digital? Oh, they will get drastically savvy in the meantime, continuing to pose a major challenge to the traditional channels.

Again, a silver bullet for the TV channels. Sleep with the enemy. Once aired, give your content to the digital brethren and announce it to the world.

And you radio guys? Don't chuckle. All applies to you too.

Let's see what's in store for us – the dinosaur or the phoenix...

The writer is an engineer at Ford & Qualcomm USA and CEO of IBM & Nokia Siemens Networks Bangladesh turned comedian (by choice), the host of ABC Radio's *Good Morning Bangladesh* and the founder of *Naveed's Comedy Club*. E-mail: naveed@naveedmahbub.com

## COMMENTS

**"WHO declares global health emergency"**  
 (February 2, 2016)

Halcyon Jewel

Has Bangladesh taken any step against Zika virus?

**"No possibility of cutting fuel prices"**  
 (February 3, 2016)

Aslam Hossain

It is clear that some people are making huge profits from this.

Ahmed Galib

Why would they? How would they buy the latest cars and send their children abroad for expensive education? And who pays for all that? WE!

Manjurul Islam

But there is every possibility of a further increase in electricity bill. No doubt, we have a government which is so concerned about public welfare!

Afrin Zaman

This is not right. International trend should be followed in Bangladesh.

Shamsi

Fuel price reduction is the demand of all.

Sajid Khan Majlish

No wonder why we hold the 13<sup>th</sup> place in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI).

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### A common platform for protecting the biodiversity

South and Southeast Asia represents a biogeographically contiguous region rich in numerous species of flora and fauna. The rich biodiversity of the region is reflected in the fact that the four mega biodiverse countries of the world are located here: India, China, Malaysia and Indonesia. The other nations in the region with considerable biodiversity are Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. However, poor wildlife management and severe anthropogenic pressure in the region have been seriously impacting this spectacular regional biodiversity. Several species found in this region are not found anywhere else in the world, but many of them are seriously endangered and are on the verge of extinction. The

factors promoting this loss of biodiversity are: uncontrolled forest fires, poaching, wildlife trafficking and trade, dependence on forest resources for sustainability of poor indigenous communities, illegal encroachments into forests, poor surveillance and management, lack of awareness etc.

For effective management of the regional biodiversity, China, SAARC and ASEAN members need to come together on a common platform to prevent poaching, illegal wildlife trade and trafficking. All these nations have common borders that are used by traffickers. Surveillance is challenging as the region has dense forests and a difficult terrain. Regional coordination is of utmost importance in stopping poaching and trafficking of wildlife.

Saikat Kumar Basu  
 Lethbridge, AB, Canada

### Women are only workers!

Women comprise 85 percent of the total number of garment workers working in the garment sector of our country. But it is very unfortunate that most of the garment owners are still not interested in offering higher positions to women. And most of their job advertisements reflect this mindset: "Only males are allowed to apply." Do garment owners really believe that women are not qualified for better positions?  
 Anonymous  
 On e-mail