

The Strongman returns



ADNAN R AMIN

THE MIDDLE PATH

It should be no surprise to us that the political 'strongman' has resurged. The very word evokes images of a bare-bodied Vladimir Putin on horseback: a veritable Hercules of politics! Granted that it is an image that the western media cultivates – there is little recourse but to admit that a president who can nonchalantly annex a province of a neighbour is a strongman. So is the leader who promises the abolishment of a weaker neighbour if he is elected. That was Benjamin Netanyahu, if you were wondering.

A political 'strongman' is essentially a political leader who – even if operating within democratic bounds – rules by force and with a sense of entitlement. They are most akin to tribal chiefs, commanding loyalty and arbitrating morality. Before the Industrial Revolution, it was not uncommon for nations' leaders to be warrior-conquerors and moral-judges at the same time. Therefore, military leaders had long been thought of as strongmen. But things have changed. I would venture the qualification that modern strongmen are distinct from warlords, dictators or monarchs, in that they operate under the veneer of democratic structures and institutions. They prevail during 'terms' not 'reigns'. They stage 'elections', not 'coronations'.

There is a tendency to limit the term to certain regions only (namely, Africa and Asia). But with the global right-wing resurgence, strongmen are floating to the forefront in every corner of this fractured, post-globalisation world. While many of the earlier strongmen did come to power through revolutionary means, the contemporary ones are often elected into office through elections. Strongmen leaders often evade the labels of 'dictator' or 'autocrat' because popular understanding of dictatorships concentrates on the manner of 'ascension', not the manner of 'rule'.

A recent *Financial Times* op-ed named seven statesmen who are shaping contemporary geopolitics: Vladimir Putin (Russia), Xi Jinping (China), Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (Egypt), Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Turkey), Shinzo Abe (Japan), Narendra Modi (India) and Benjamin Netanyahu (Israel) – all sharing similar characteristics and styles of governance. Not long ago, Thaksin (Thailand), Mahathir

(Malaysia), Rajapaksa (Sri Lanka) and Gbagbo (Ivory Coast) had all been dubbed strongmen. Latin American actually has a term for such leaders: *Caudillo*. Strongmen are also frequently women, some examples being Indira Gandhi (India), Thatcher (UK), Merkel (Germany) and Suu Kyi (Myanmar).

Political strongmen have been known to share certain attributes: humble beginnings, right-wing politics, messiah complex, official personality cults, promises of (ruthless) progress, dislike for critical media and penchant for moral legislation. A key attribute is a preference for a 'nationalist' view of their countries. In the post-Cold War era, national, communal or religious appeals are used to cultivate tribal loyalty in the

highest percentage of female parliamentarians in the world. However, Kagame is also allegedly engaged in cracking down on citizens and covertly supporting violent rebel groups. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán's government regards its protectionist policies as a form of 'patriotism'. For political strongmen, 'progress' is both the goal and justification.

Turning 'tribalism' into a 'cult' requires strongmen to nurture and promote an adversarial view of neighbouring nations. Their own nations have no friends, only interests. They may also adopt oppressive stands against minorities. Erodgan, for example, is known to persecute the Kurds, which helps unite and

in the wake of WW2. Putin's annexation of Crimea, Kagame's disregard for his own constitution and Modi's breaking with India's long tradition of secularism point towards willingness to defy expectations. Hungary's Orbán has adopted protectionist economic policies, exerted control over media and cracked down on donors and NGOs funding civil society organisations. An avid footballer, he has been using legislative influence to raise donations for a mega-stadium just across his residence. Because they operate like dictators but appear similar to democratic leaders, strongmen are seldom shunned from the corridors of international power and diplomacy.

Strongmen also exert control over media's framing and reporting, e.g. to help introduce

and shipping armaments to Egypt.

In wake of a new strongman era, what is odd is that it also means that mass tolerance, if not preference, for such characters has grown steadily. Undoubtedly, two protracted, multi-country wars, a lingering recession and the spectre of international terrorism have substantially moulded public sentiments and fears.

It seems like more and more people are now willing to trade loyalty for direct benefits to their group or community. Jason Stanley argued on the *NYT*, "[these] voters are simply more attracted to a system that favours their own particular religion, race, gender or birth position."

In the past half-century, gentle, receptive leaders with egalitarian agendas and liberal sensibilities have lacked either a robust development agenda or the will and/or power to push it through. Diplomacy and dialogue have made no dents on the growing menace of terrorism. Informed advocacy and journalism has not deterred unsanctioned surveillance or attacks on foreign soil. To a world that perceives the chasms to be widening, a leader who dictates and acts may be preferable to one who orates and consults. The preference for 'doers' over 'thinkers' is not incongruent with the dynamics and sentiments of modern industrialised nations.

In *The Republic* Plato predicts that a 'towering despot' will invariably rise in any democracy; feeding the fears of dominant groups, (s)he will declare himself the 'protector', thus (s)he will usurp power and limit freedoms. What we are witnessing may be a number of countries simultaneously reaching this critical stage. It is easy to view the resurgence of strongmen as socio-political immaturity or devolution; or as a temporary digression in the wake of worldwide conflict and recession. But a more realistic possibility is that the 'strongman' is an enduring archetype that will emerge and fade based on political needs. In Latin America, the era of *caudillos* is virtually over. The branded strongmen of the Middle-East have fallen (but they are not necessarily irreplaceable). Cambodia's estranged strongman Hun Sen has been facing a popular uprising and was recently found buying Facebook 'likes' to puff up his online image. Global governance is in flux. As one set of strongmen bows out, others will rise elsewhere. The resurgence of strongmen may point to market demand for democratised dictators; or it may herald a new political reality in the post-Cold War era.

The writer is a strategy and communications consultant.



masses. Narendra Modi's campaign evoked the glorious past of a Hindu India. Turkey's Erdogan is reviving the glory of the Ottoman Empire. Donald Trump is feeding the fear of Islamisation and 'making America great again'. These characters are products of their times and seek to capitalise on sentiments of anxiety and longing for reclamation of a civilisational past.

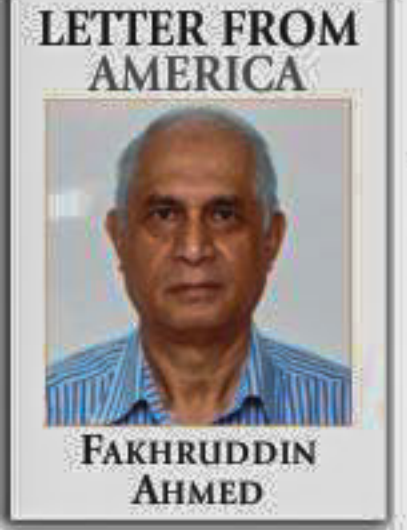
Strongmen drive a ruthless development agenda. Rwanda's Paul Kagame – who grew up in a refugee camp – has reduced child mortality by 70 percent, grown the economy at 8 percent, established a national health insurance programme and rallied for more women in political office. Today, Rwanda has

consolidate his primary constituency. Peace Prize winner Suu Kyi has been hauntingly silent on the disenfranchisement and persecution of the minority Rakhine people. Modi's administration – cruising on the promise of economic progress – has imposed Hindu scripture study in schools, condoned attacks on churches and banned beef to appease his core constituency. Of Modi, *India Today* editor writes, "The way to govern this complicated country is to engage in discussions and win arguments with those who disagree" rather than "squashing dissent" and orchestrating a cult of personality."

Strongmen have a tendency of breaking diplomatic norms, especially those established

nuances of 'fatherly benevolence' to stories about their authoritative rule. Thus, political strongmen are defining a new mode of government that is an isomorphic mimicry of democracy, but no different from a dictatorship. Consider this: Egypt's Sisi led a coup to depose the elected Morsi administration and assume power – in order to 'rescue the Egyptian people'. He suspended the Constitution and imprisoned leaders of the ousted government. But it was not long before he organised a (questionable) election and flung a garb of democratic legitimacy over his military regime. The international community has now wholeheartedly endorsed Sisi's regime, unhesitatingly doling out financial aid

Acting fuels Trump's success, just as it did Ronald Reagan's



FAKHURUDDIN AHMED

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Donald Trump has been an actor most of his adult life; first as a celebrity real estate developer, and then as the host of the reality television show *The Apprentice*. Trump has a commanding stage presence, and the gift of gab. In presidential debates, Trump's opponents find it impossible to pin him down; he wiggles out of every trap.

Politics is the wrong vocation for the honest. It requires Machiavellianism – cunning, deceit and duplicity. Politicians attempting honesty, such as former US President Jimmy Carter, are abject failures. A politician who is an actor by profession, such as the late US President Ronald Reagan, is a huge success. Donald Trump is treading that path quite successfully.

For the Trump clan, cunning began long before they dabbled in politics. The real Trump family name is very German, Drumpf. After WWI and WWII, it was not prudent to flaunt easily identifiable German names like Drumpf. As an act of social expediency, Donald Trump's ancestors anglicised the family name from "Drumpf" to "Trump." Up

until recently, Donald Trump had denied his German ancestry. A Twitter campaign parodies Trump's rallying cry "Let's make America Great Again" with "Let's make Donald Drumpf again!"

On the campaign trail, actors can improvise much better than politicians. They are masters of one-liners. They know that the average Joes are not policy wonks, and are averse to detailed policy expositions. They want simple solutions to complex problems – one line sweeping statements. That is why Trump's simplistic, insult-laced solutions to complex problems – illegal immigrants are rapists and drug dealing murderers who must be deported; Muslims are terrorists who must be banned from entering the US, women are bimbos who must play second fiddle to men; blacks are violent and therefore must be handled with violence – resonate so well with his base.

Ronald Reagan was the master of one-liners. He joked that if Hollywood, where he was rated as a B-grade actor, had treated him nicer, he would not have entered politics. But, to a considerable degree, Reagan's acting ability propelled him towards winning the governorship of California twice and the presidency of the US also twice.

Before a debate preceding the 1980 New Hampshire primary,

Regan noticed that there were only two chairs on the stage (for Reagan and George H. W. Bush), and none for other contenders like Senator Bob Dole. As Reagan was articulating his displeasure, the editor of *The Telegraph*, the organiser of the debate, asked the soundman to turn off Reagan's microphone. An irate Reagan thundered: "I am paying for the microphone, Mr. Green!" The crowd roared and went wild! Pundits believe that this seemingly insignificant event may have endeared Reagan to the general public as a fearless leader who did not suffer fools easily, and won him the White House.

I always thought it was a mistake for President Carter to debate Ronald Reagan, days before the 1980 election. Reminiscent of the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debate, in which Kennedy clobbered Nixon, the 1980 Carter-Reagan debate was lopsided. Carter's gentle southern drawl was no match for Reagan's suave enunciations perfected in Hollywood. Breaking a previous agreement not to shake hands, the 6'4 inches Reagan strode majestically towards Carter and towered over him as they shook hands before the debate. (Americans prefer tall presidents!) Reagan used put downs, such as, "There you go again!" repeatedly, and concluded his pitch by posing the rhetorical question:

"Are you better off now than you were four years ago?" Reagan won the debate and the election in a landslide.

After March 15, when Hillary Clinton won all five Democratic primaries, only an act of God can prevent her from winning the Democratic nomination. Thus far, Hillary has garnered 1,606 pledged and Super delegates. She needs 777 more to get to the magic 2,383. The

the establishment's darling, quit the race. Three candidates remain – Trump, Cruz and Kasich. The Republican establishment hates Trump. They love Cruz more than Trump. They hate Kasich, who has won only one state, and is unlikely to win more.

As of March 15, Trump's delegate tally is 673; 564 short of the target (1,237). Delegates to be contested are 1,061. Trump needs to win 53 percent of those. Cruz, who has won 411 delegates, needs to win the remaining at a 78 percent clip. With only 143 delegates, Kasich has no chance. Donald Trump will either win the Republican nomination outright, or go to the convention with the highest number of delegates.

Those who think that Donald Trump can be denied the nomination are living in a fool's paradise. Trump has warned of "riots" if he is denied the nomination. Sooner or later, the Republican establishment will coalesce around him and start singing his praise.

Whether Trump can win the presidency is unclear. Trump supporters may be angry, but the rest of America is not. Trump has offended so many groups – Latinos, blacks, women and Muslims – that they would crawl over broken glass

to vote against him! Minorities constitute one-third of the American electorate. Between 80-95 percent of them will vote against Trump. Hillary Clinton will need only about 40 percent of white votes to win the presidency – the same percentage that Obama won.

There is one scenario in which Trump may win the presidency- if there is another Muslim terrorist attack days before the election. There are unconfirmed rumours that the Reagan campaign was so worried about an "October Surprise" in 1980 (meaning that the Iranians would release the American diplomats they took hostage in Tehran in November 1979, in late October 1980, just before the presidential election, facilitating a Carter victory) that they reached out through back channels to Ayatollah Khomeini, who hated President Carter, and persuaded him not to release the hostages before the election.

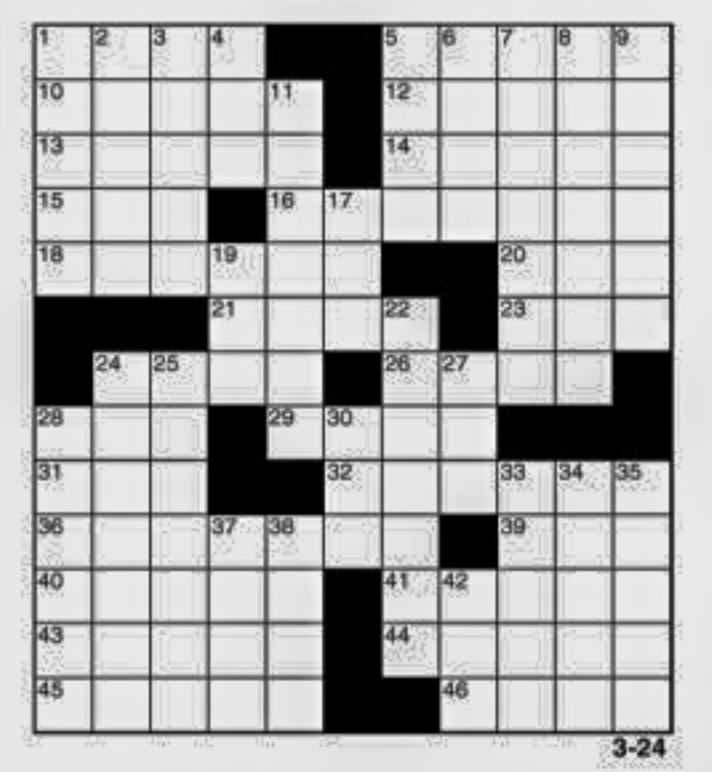
American hostages were released on January 20, 1981 - the day Ronald Reagan was inaugurated president. For America's sake one prays that there is no "October Surprise" perpetrated by Muslim terrorists this year. The worry is that Muslim terrorists for hire may be a dime a dozen.

The writer is a Rhodes Scholar.

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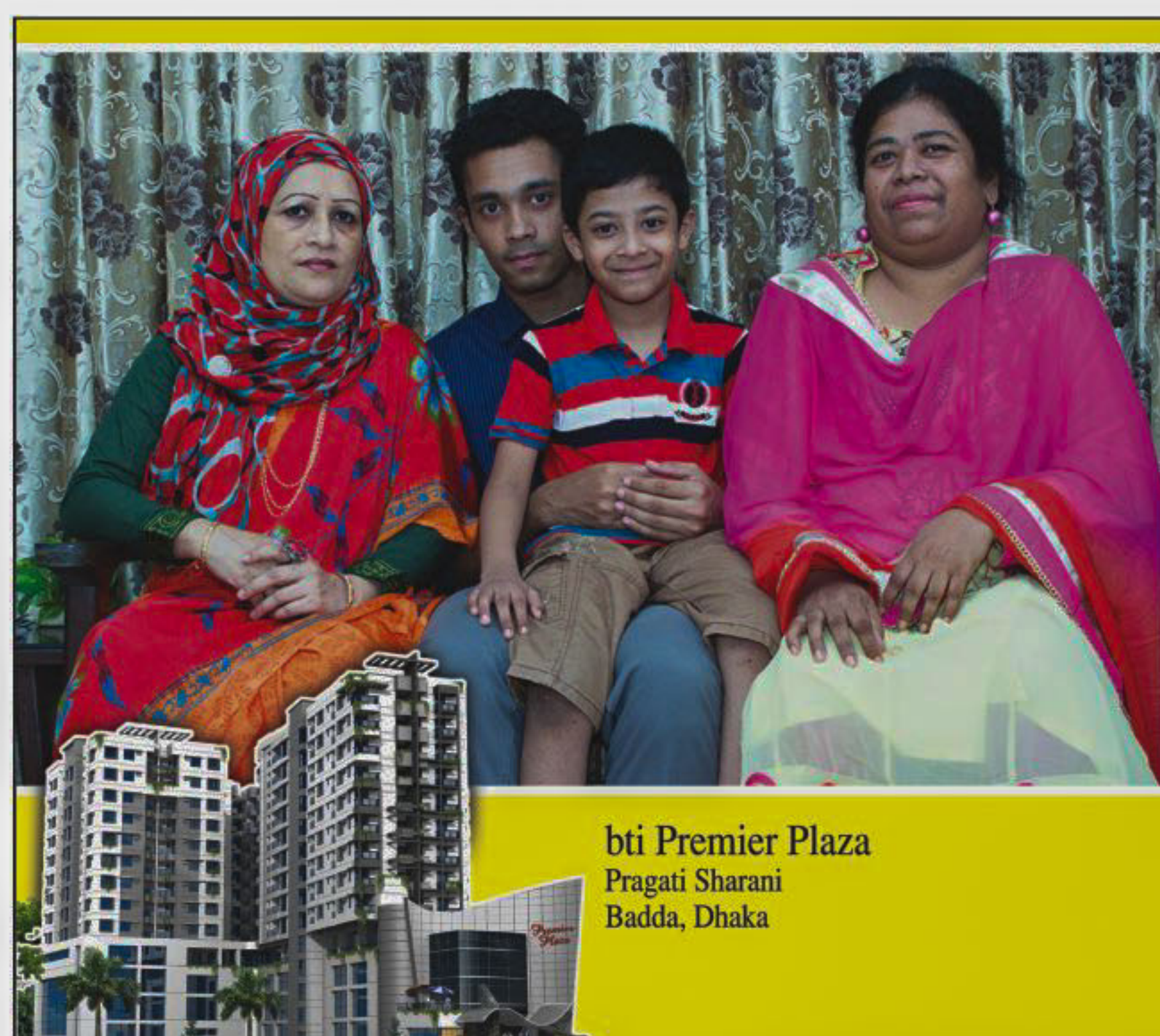
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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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