

# Cuba: Looking back to move forward

## SHIFTING IMAGES



MILIA ALI

**F**OLLOWING Cuban revolutionary leader Fidel Castro's death on November 25, numerous columns and articles have been written about his achievements and failures. It is, therefore, logical for readers to be weary of another article on "Fidel" (as the Cubans affectionately call him). Let me clarify that this column is about my impressions and observations of the Cuban people based on a recent visit to the country. But, any piece on Cuba would be incomplete without paying tribute to Castro -- the man who shaped the country's destiny for nearly six decades. His death, however, invoked extreme and intense reactions -- from deep sorrow and veneration to jubilation. The sharp dichotomy is understandable given that Castro ousted the corrupt Batista regime with its connections to the American mafia and other vested interests. In its place, he established a communist state aimed at equalising Cuban economic life and putting an end to social divisions. As in most revolutionary situations, changes came at a high cost: the leftist regime cracked down on opponents, seized private businesses and homes and monopolised the media.

The post-revolution political and economic system of Cuba might have its limitations, but it is essentially designed to ensure that people do not starve and are



People gather outside the Cuban embassy in Santiago the day after Cuba's historic revolutionary leader Fidel Castro died aged 90.

PHOTO: AFP

housed and transported at minimal cost. In addition, Cubans have access to free education and world-class medical care -- not just for home use, but exported to many African and Latin American countries. The Western media continues to highlight Cuba's human rights abuses. But what it often fails to mention is that despite economic hardships resulting from US sanctions and post-Soviet austerity, Cuba has managed to prevail in terms of social indicators. Life expectancy and child mortality rates in Cuba still compare favourably with those in the vastly richer US.

Fidel ceded power to his brother Raul in

2006 but remained a towering presence in the background. With his exit, it is expected that significant reforms and changes will be introduced. While experts speculate on the speed and direction of future changes in Cuba, I would like to share some impressions about the Cuban people and society based on my personal experiences and observations.

What struck me most was that class divisions are more or less non-existent. One notices an absence of extreme opulence or extreme poverty in favour of a generalised level of well-being which could be described as "enough to get by"! Overall, people seem to share a camaraderie that transcends the

barriers of income, colour, gender and social strata. Most Cubans I interacted with displayed a sense of professionalism -- whether it was the artist selling her paintings or the driver/guide who took us around the island. They conducted themselves with dignity even when receiving a tip or negotiating prices.

I observed that despite years of economic deprivation, Cubans seem to be filled with joie de vivre. They also have a natural proclivity toward music and art. Groups of happy people sing and dance in the parks and street corners and the markets are filled with local art, which has its unique stamp and style. My favourite memory is that of an elderly couple (probably in their sixties) dancing away to the rhythm of a street band with joyful abandon. For me, their swinging motions and graceful movements symbolised the Cuban spirit: bent but not broken!

Surprisingly, I did not see Fidel's portraits or statues in public places: unlike in Middle Eastern dictatorships or even South Asian democracies. And now we have learned that Castro left instructions that streets or public buildings should not be named after him!

It would be remiss of me not to mention the indelible mark that a visit to Ernest Hemingway's home (turned into a museum) in Finca La Vigia left on me. The local people fondly remember him as "papa" who loved to sail and hunt and shared his life with ordinary folks. Reportedly, Hemingway left the island reluctantly under immense official pressures from the US government. Thus, in preserving Hemingway's memories and

possessions, Cubans seem to be making a bold statement: that their affection and admiration for the author transcend ideological and political differences.

Some of you may be wondering if, in the course of my trip, someone gave me a special drink of "Mojito" that has induced uncritical support of the Cuban regime! The truth is, it's not the regime, but the human qualities of the people that have earned my deep respect and admiration. Qualities that I do not always detect in wealthy, ambitious people on this side of the ideological divide. I can't think of better words to define them than dignity and nobility resulting from a tremendous sense of pride in their Cuban identity.

Not surprisingly, I also got a sense that Cuba is ready for change. Its citizens, especially the younger generation, want greater freedom of expression and better living standards. But as the country moves toward economic liberalisation, the question is what compromises will it make in terms of its political system. Fidel Castro and Che Guevara played leading roles in re-building the Cuban society. But the collective will and sacrifices of the people have greatly contributed toward making Cuba an egalitarian society. And I doubt they are willing to reinstate economic and social inequities in their lives.

In his farewell speech to the Communist Party, Fidel Castro said: "Our turn comes to us all, but the ideas of Cuban communism will endure." Will it indeed? We must wait and see.

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

## Dhaka in Defiance

NADIA KABIR BARB

**T**HE queues in front of the immigration desks were long, practically filling the hall, and people waited impatiently to get through to the equally overcrowded baggage reclaim area. At any other time, this scene would have elicited a frown or had me groaning in dismay but on this occasion the buzz of activity and the sheer number of people provided a huge sense of relief. It was business as usual at Shahjalal International Airport. The journey from the airport was slow and laborious with the traffic jams worse than I can remember. The streets were just as busy, overflowing with people going about their day-to-day business. The next two weeks in Dhaka reminded me that we are a nation that does not scare easily. Bangladesh is no stranger to natural disasters, economic upheavals and political turmoil. There must be an inherent streak of stubbornness in us that manifests as resilience in some cases and defiance in others. Fear can be psychologically paralysing and create a sense of powerlessness but the hustle and bustle was proof that Dhaka was not going to back down or be held hostage to the twisted ideologies of extremist militants.

From its inception, secularism has been one of the four fundamental principles on which Bangladesh was founded and on which it has prided itself. Despite being a country with a roughly 90 percent Muslim population, the concept of secularism was written into our constitution in 1972. In recent years, however, there has been a marked rise in Islamic fundamentalism and extremist views. We have seen the brutal murders of bloggers, activists and people from religious and ethnic minorities by machete wielding zealots. Earlier this year in July, the escalation of these atrocities culminated in the massacre of twenty-one hostages at the Holy Artisan Bakery situated in an affluent and residential area of Dhaka. Amongst the victims were two Bangladeshis and eighteen foreigners. Two members of staff also lost their lives and two policemen were killed during the rescue mission.

The barbarity and brazenness of the

attack shook not only the residents of Dhaka but the rest of the country to the core. The fact that the assault was a well-coordinated and pre-meditated act carried out by a group of young men, some hailing from well-to-do families, claiming to be affiliated to ISIS, generated a sense of fear and apprehension. This kind of incident could happen anytime, anywhere and to anyone. It was also a wake-up call for the government to acknowledge and tackle the threat of rising extremism.

Immediately afterwards there were reports of people avoiding public places for fear of another attack and restaurants and shops feeling the financial brunt with their clientele

exaggerated view based on sensationalist press coverage. It was with this image in mind that I boarded the flight back home expecting to find a city living in fear.

Instead nothing could have been further from the truth. The city seemed defiantly vibrant. Life was in full swing. I had also arrived at a time where events such as the Folk Festival, which I had sadly just missed, the Dhaka Literary Festival (DLF) and The Bengal Classical Music Festival were being held. We have always had a rich culture of literature, poetry, music and art so it was encouraging to know that these aspects of our heritage were being nurtured and furthered by making the

around housing book stalls and food stalls, marquees set up for various sessions and of course the steady flow of people that helped make the festival a resounding success. According to the organisers, there were over 20,000 attendees. It was particularly encouraging to see the large number of young people at the event.

Despite a few speakers pulling out over fears of personal safety, there were a staggering 180 speakers in total of whom 60 hailed from 18 different countries. This year the international line-up included the 2016 Man Booker International winner Deborah Smith, Pulitzer Prize winner Vijay Seshadri and winner of the 2014 European Union

and liberal society". What better way than to place ourselves firmly in the global literary circuit, showing the world that we refuse to be intimidated. Due credit must go to the organisers and Directors of the DLF for enforcing added security measures, ensuring the safety of both the speakers and the public.

Over the last few years The Bengal Classical Music Festival has earned the accolade of being the world's largest classical music festival bringing to Dhaka musical maestros from around the sub-continent. According to the Bengal Foundation, the organisers of the festival, its ethos is "to uphold the cultural heritage of Bangladesh and to introduce a new dimension to the contemporary cultural dynamics of our nation" and "aspire to enrich popular taste, lifestyle and mind-sets through diverse forms of creative expression".

Fortunately for more than the 100,000 people who thronged to the army stadium over the course of the five days, the festival went ahead notwithstanding the concerns this year of hosting an event of such proportions after the Holy Bakery attack. Bag checks, metal detectors and strict protocol allowed for the smooth running of the programme. People of all ages, social and economic backgrounds had the opportunity to enjoy the collective genius of the artists performing at the show. It was just a question of sitting back and being enthralled by the beauty of the evening listening to the likes of Pandit Hari Prasad Chaurasia on the flute, Pandit Shiv Kumar Sharma on the santoor, Ustad Rashid Khan, Dr. L. Subramaniam on the violin and Vidushi Girija Devi on vocals.

Both the Bengal Classical Music Festival and the Dhaka Literary Festival have changed the cultural and literary scene in Bangladesh. Not only do they put us on an international footing they also engage the minds of hundreds of thousands of people, especially the youth in our country.

I like to think that Dhaka has spoken and is sending out a clear message that it refuses to back down and will not be cowed by fear, paranoia or intimidation.

The writer is fiction writer and contributor to The Daily Star, based in UK.

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Thousands through the Bengal Classical Music Festival 2016.

SOURCE: BENGALCLASSICALMUSICFEST.COM

dwindling, especially those normally frequented by foreigners. There were even messages on social media stating that the lack of cars on the streets confirmed the sense of unease felt by the residents.

For those of us living abroad, our vision of these events and the aftermath were based on newspaper articles, news coverage and information passed on by family and friends. As so often happens, when we are geographically removed from a situation, the mind can overplay and we form a distorted,

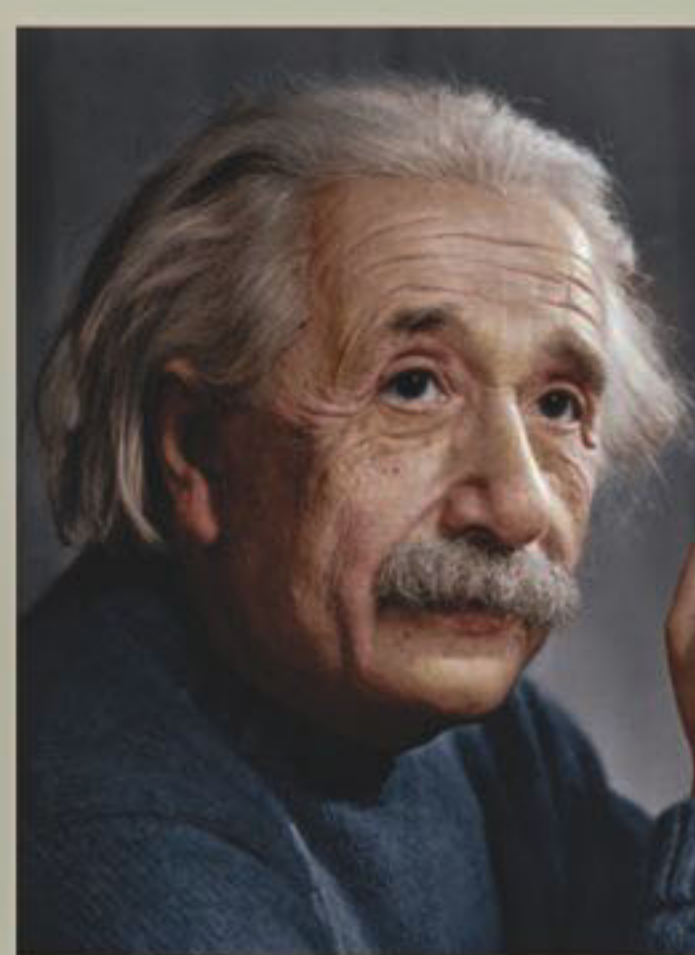
events free for the general public.

The three days of the Dhaka Literary Festival 2016 were a cultural extravaganza with animated discussions by panellists from around the world, poetry recitations, folk performances, children's programmes, book launches and film screenings taking place throughout the day. Held in the grounds of the beautiful Bangla Academy the atmosphere was lively and festive. I found myself swept up by the buzzing atmosphere around me. There were brightly coloured tents dotted

Prize for Literature Evie Wyld to name a few. The list goes on and reads like a 'who's who' of the literary world. The highlight, however, was Nobel Laureate VS Naipaul who, at the age of 84, made the journey from London to inaugurate the festival. His interview which was both charming and candid took place to a packed audience and overflowing auditorium.

As the Minister of Cultural Affairs Asaduzzaman Noor aptly stated in the inaugural ceremony, "we need free thinkers to create a secular, progressive

## QUOTABLE Quote



ALBERT EINSTEIN  
GERMAN-BORN THEORETICAL PHYSICIST.

Any fool can know.  
The point is to understand.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

### ACROSS

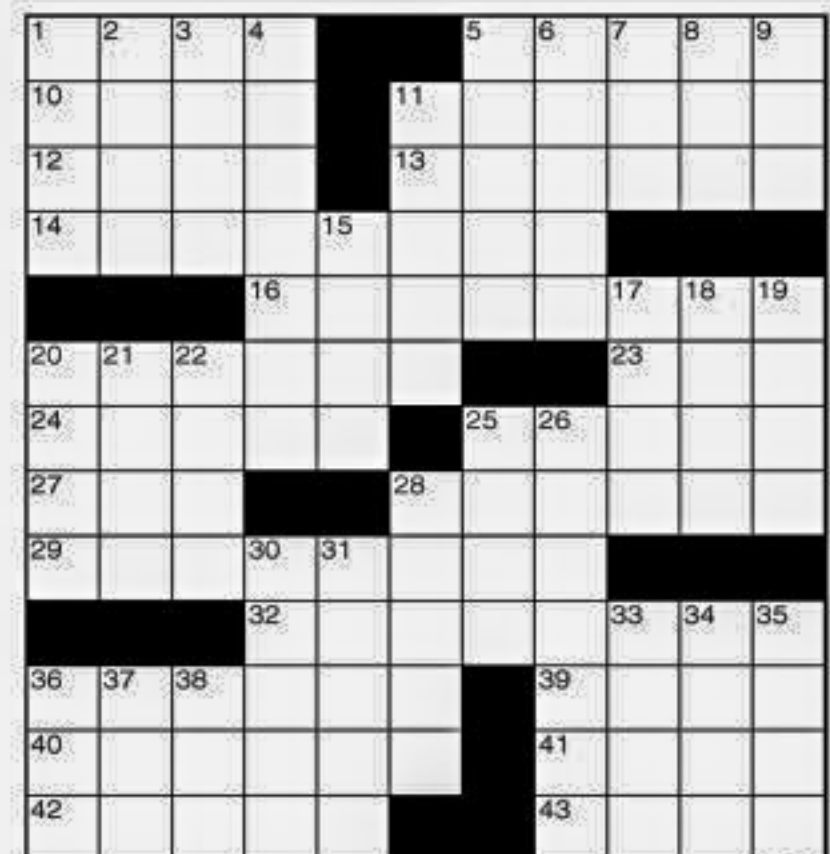
- Endure
- Lukewarm
- Open space
- "Forget it!"
- Conks out
- Did book work
- Thanks-giving dinner choice
- 1981 Kathleen Turner film
- Light lunches
- Japanese prime minister
- Burning
- Oscar winner Sophia
- Hot blood
- Drinks to
- Sofa for two
- Bill ignorer
- Tawny cat
- Assess
- Blood line
- Atlas section
- Army VIPs
- Brooklyn team

### DOWN

- "Shane" star
- Opera piece

### 3 Oracle

- Place for some icons
- Right now
- Singer Piaf
- Deep hole
- Road hazard
- Principal's deg.
- Requires
- Style
- Rabbit features
- Aid illegally
- Addition column
- Enter the regatta
- Bushy do
- Schreiber of "Ray Donovan"
- Washer unit
- Muffin makeup
- Mournful
- Borders
- Scorches
- Move carefully
- Fighting
- Afternoon socials
- Fare carrier
- Bruin Bobby
- Hagen of acting



### YESTERDAY'S ANSWER



## BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



## BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott

