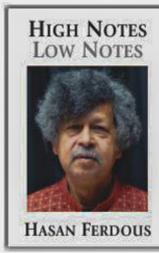


# Decency vs Banality



HASAN FERDOUS

**With about 40 percent approval, Trump begins his first term as the least popular president in recent history. Obama, on the other hand, exits with a whopping 54 percent approval rating. If Obama was the "quintessential gentleman," his successor is just the opposite – boorish, uncurious, thuggish and incoherent on most policy matters.**

**L**AST week we witnessed two extraordinary events. First, President Barack Obama bid farewell to his fellow countrymen. He shed a drop or two of heartfelt teardrops, as he recalled the unlikely path he took to ascend to the presidency. Most of the 20,000 or so people in Chicago's McCormick Convention Centre had moist eyes, too. Here is a good man, who had made basic human decency the hallmark of a presidency at a time when banality and luridness were the driving forces behind fame and political fortune.

And then there was Donald Trump at his first press conference since the US election. On the day following Obama's Chicago moment, he stood at his Trump Tower before a phalanx of cameras. By then much of the world had come to know in great detail the so-called "golden shower" he and some of his male friends took three years ago at a Moscow Hotel in the company of two hired prostitutes. All fake news, claimed the man who had invented fake news (by questioning Obama's US citizenship) and as proof said he was a "germophobe". Besides, he knew it very well that Russians kept their cameras rolling in every nook and cranny of their hotels to spy on foreign dignitaries staying there.

The world was dumbfounded, both by the revelation and the reaction of the American President-elect. His shouting match with a CNN correspondent – as the cameras kept rolling – was a priceless spectacle that told us how this man plans to govern the next four years, or eight, as he claimed. He was huffing and puffing, fake smoke spewing through his ears, all in an earnest desire to convince us what he was told by the nation's top intelligence officers "did not happen" and should not have been "leaked" to the press.

Whether Donald Trump knew the cameras were rolling with lights on or

not, and whether his "golden shower" actually happened or not, people at their dinner table all across the country are now having a jolly good time – yes, with their lights on – at the expense of the Great Don who they saw on national television fake-swaggering. "How could this happen, I am scared of germs?" There were peals of laughter in the room, the ripples of which quickly travelled places far and wide. This was all so familiar. Some three

happening only the day after Obama bid his heartfelt goodbye in Chicago, makes it amply clear what America and the rest of the world will have to endure the next four years. America's democracy is strong and deep, and its guardians are wise, we have come to believe. And yet, as Obama so eloquently described, it has never been in greater peril. The country is at a crossroads, and there are forces at work that threaten American democracy.

beginning of this century has been one of these moments," Obama cautioned. He did not mention Trump by name. He did not have to; we knew it all too well. With his verbal tirade against Mexicans, Muslims, African-Americans, women and even Jews, Trump has been shaking that wall of solidarity to its very core.

Let's be honest, the eight years that Obama presided over have not been all milk and honey. In the coming days

the personal level, Obama shined as a decent human being, earning grudging respect even from his ardent foes. His basic human decency was on full display in his farewell address, where he felt no embarrassment to wipe tears when speaking about his wife and children. (Trump, in contrast, said his daughter was "voluptuous" and he would have dated her had she not been his daughter.)

I have argued elsewhere that Obama fell far short of what he had set out to achieve. He called himself the change that we have been waiting for. Yet, "the change" has been followed by a person who has vowed to undo everything he stood for. Obamacare, the outgoing president's signature healthcare legislature, will be annulled on his first day of presidency, Trump has vowed. The historic nuclear deal with Iran and the political reopening with Cuba, two of Obama's most important diplomatic achievements, could be dismantled quickly through executive orders. The deal on climate change, a giant step towards saving our planet from environmental catastrophe, could be thrown into uncertainty if Trump keeps his promise to withdraw from the international treaty. Millions of undocumented immigrants could face deportation in the coming months, as Trump sets in motion a course-reversal.

Clearly, America has voted for a perfect anti-Obama, and much of the country is already feeling buyer's remorse. With about 40 percent approval, Trump begins his first term as the least popular president in recent history. Obama, on the other hand, exits with a whopping 54 percent approval rating. If Obama was the "quintessential gentleman," his successor is just the opposite – boorish, uncurious, thuggish and incoherent on most policy matters. The people within his own party called him a con man, one who would put his own interest ahead of his country's.

Judging by the "germophobe's" words and his performance since the election, the worst is only ahead of us. Weep, America, weep!



A demonstrator holds up a banner as President Barack Obama delivers a farewell speech to the nation. PHOTO: AFP

months ago, we were feted with a similar situation, the Great Don bragging about his sexual conquests in front of a live camera and microphone. Only later he claimed he did not know his "locker-room banter" was being recorded.

There are people who do not trust facts and abhor science. (There is even a word to describe such a phenomenon – altright). What has kept the country together thus far was its sense of solidarity. "There have been moments throughout our history that threatened to rupture that solidarity – the

and months, America and the rest of the world will debate the degree to which he was able to restore the national economy, end blood-letting in foreign wars and heal America's racial wounds. What, however, leaves little room for debate is that he changed how the world now views America. At

## REGIONAL SOLUTIONS KEY FOR ASIA-PACIFIC'S TRANSITION TO SUSTAINABLE ENERGY

# For a cleaner world

DR. SHAMSHAD AKHTAR

**T**HE Asia-Pacific region is at a turning point in its energy trajectory. The energy solutions that have fuelled growth in the region over the past few decades are no longer compatible with the sustainable development aspirations of our nations and people. In transitioning to a new era of sustainable energy, policymakers across the region face complex decisions. Supplies must be secure and affordable, and they must fill the energy access gap which leaves half a billion people across the region without access to electricity. At the same time, mitigating the local impacts of energy generation and use will be vital in resolving problems such as the air pollution choking our cities and the global consequences of greenhouse gas emissions causing climate change. Solutions exist, but only through regional cooperation and integration can Asia and the Pacific transition to sustainable energy in time to meet the ambitious 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Goals.

Countries have committed to moving towards a more diverse and low carbon energy mix through the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. However, fossil fuels stubbornly remain a major part

of the regional energy mix, making up three-quarters of electricity generation. Unless the region's countries work together to accelerate the incorporation of sustainable energy into their strategies, business-as-usual approaches will result in a continuation of fossil fuel use and associated impacts.

While some countries suffer from energy shortages which limit their economic and social development, others enjoy energy surpluses, such as hydropower and natural gas. Trading these resources through new cross-border power grids, drawing on renewable energy when possible, as well as gas pipeline infrastructure, can open up enormous opportunities for both economic growth and decarbonisation.

The energy technology renaissance, already underway in some countries, is playing a vital role in the transition. New technologies are reducing the cost of clean energy and renewable power. Smart grids and electric vehicles are rapidly gaining market share. Since 2010, the cost of solar power generation has declined by 58 percent ([http://www.irena.org/DocumentDownloads/Publications/IRENA\\_Power\\_to\\_Change\\_2016.pdf](http://www.irena.org/DocumentDownloads/Publications/IRENA_Power_to_Change_2016.pdf)), with the cost of wind power down by one-third. The International Renewable Energy

Agency projects cost reductions of 59 percent in solar power and 12 percent in wind power within 10 years, edging below fossil fuel electricity costs in most Asia-Pacific countries. Advances in long-distance power transmission technologies enable the linking of renewable energy resource-rich areas such as the Gobi Desert, Central Asia and far eastern Russia, with distant population centers. Asia-Pacific has emerged as an engine for clean energy, both as a manufacturing centre for renewable energy technologies and as the leading region for deployment, with USD 160 billion invested in renewables in 2015.

On the demand side, energy efficiency technologies have an important role to play in energy transition. Better energy efficiency is a key driver in decoupling energy use and GDP growth in many economies. With 15 percent of the world's electricity consumed by lighting (<https://www.energy.gov/articles/rise-and-shine-lighting-world-10-billion-led-bulbs>), efficient LED lighting technology, which consumes up to 85 percent less energy, will make substantial savings. Energy storage technologies for vehicles and power applications have also leapt ahead, offering flexibility in power usage and balancing variable electricity generation from renewables. Here

again, regional cooperation, technology transfer and south-south collaboration will play a vital role in the transition.

Despite these encouraging developments, the success of the energy transition will require sustained commitment at national and regional levels through better policies, incentives and allocation of investments. The inertia of the existing energy sector is considerable, with its long-lived assets and entrenched institutional arrangements. Regional cooperation, through sharing of policy experiences, building capacity and mobilising finance can play a significant role in assisting countries to implement their own energy sector reforms and capture the many co-benefits. The importance of regional energy cooperation is evident in the transboundary nature of many prominent energy challenges – improving regional energy security, managing air pollution and establishing cross-border energy infrastructure. ASEAN, South Asian and Central Asian countries, as well as China, Russia and Mongolia are already embracing cross-border energy connectivity. Initiatives such as the CASA 1000 and the ASEAN Power Grid will allow low carbon energy from gas, hydropower, solar or wind to be traded across borders. Long-term

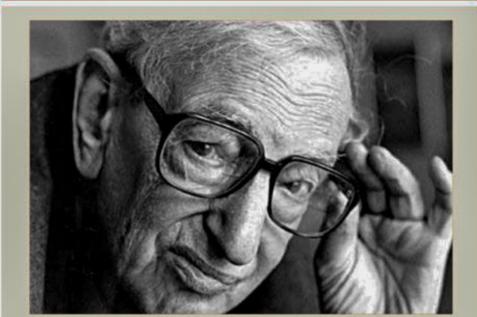
regional dialogue is required to further develop these complex and infrastructure-intensive initiatives.

Connecting countries, finding regional solutions and promoting regional standards and guidelines has been at the core of the work of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific for the past 70 years. We recognise the need for regional energy cooperation, and with the support of our member States established an intergovernmental Committee on Energy that will meet for the first time in Bangkok from January 17-19. Through the Committee, countries will help to map out key regional energy solutions for the region, such as accelerating uptake of renewables and energy efficiency, establishing cross-border energy connectivity, promoting regional approaches to energy security, and providing modern energy access throughout the region to ensure a sustainable energy future for all. Through regional cooperation and integration I am confident that the countries of Asia-Pacific region can transform their energy trajectories to better serve their people, the region and the planet.

*Unless the region's countries work together to accelerate the incorporation of sustainable energy into their strategies, business-as-usual approaches will result in a continuation of fossil fuel use and associated impacts.*

The writer is an Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) and the Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

### QUOTABLE Quote



**ERIC HOBSBAWM**  
British Marxist historian of the rise of industrial capitalism, socialism and nationalism.

*History is the raw material for nationalist or ethnic or fundamentalist ideologies, as poppies are the raw material for heroin addiction.*

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Slugger Sosa
  - 6 Tibetan monk
  - 10 Concur
  - 11 Sound-related
  - 12 Succotash beans
  - 13 Opened, as a fastener
  - 14 Arkin of "Argo"
  - 15 Light wind
  - 16 Use a spade
  - 17 So far
  - 18 Capitol Bldg. worker
  - 19 Kept in reserve
  - 22 Luke's teacher
  - 23 Map line
  - 26 Fortified
  - 29 Good serve
  - 32 – Paulo
  - 33 Scottish river
  - 34 Heston film
  - 36 Cincinnati team
  - 37 Worship site
  - 38 Egypt's Anwar
  - 39 Flour separator
  - 40 Biting
  - 41 Loser of a fabled race
- DOWN**
- 1 Leafy courses
  - 2 Numbness
  - 3 Visually challenged character
  - 4 Nasty
  - 5 Today's reply
  - 6 Solitary
  - 7 Southern range
  - 8 Corn
  - 9 Mayflower name
  - 11 John of "The Night Of"
  - 15 Nap site
  - 17 "Likely story!"
  - 20 Hwys.
  - 21 "The Raven" writer
  - 24 Made sense
  - 25 Obstetrician's calculation
  - 27 Crew item
  - 28 Annoy
  - 29 Make ashamed
  - 30 Singer Cruz
  - 31 Door sign
  - 35 Own
  - 36 Risque
  - 38 Plopped down

**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker

THE AMUSEMENT PARK IS TRYING TO MAKE THE RIDES SCARIER

GREAT! NOT WALKER

AND THIS ONE IS THE SCARIEST!

**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott

WHAT DID YOU DO TODAY, HANNIE?

THE USUAL.

STUBBED TWO TOES, TWISTED AN ANKLE, SCRAPED BOTH KNEES AND GOT A SUNBURN.

I MEANT WHAT KIND OF THINGS DID YOU DO?

WHEN YOU PLAY AS HARD AS I DO, IT'S EASIER TO KEEP TRACK OF THE INJURIES THAN THE EVENTS.

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

M	A	M	A	S	A	N	K	L	E	
A	M	I	S	H	C	A	R	E	S	
C	O	M	P	O	R	T	M	E	N	T
A	R	E	V	E	E	M	I	A		
W	E	S	T	E	N	D	L	E	T	
				O	L	D	F	I	N	E
S	E	M	I	S	H	I	N	T	S	
O	P	A	L	S	E	A	S	E		
L	I	D	S	E	A	S	I	D	E	
A	T	E	E	A	R	R	A	N		
C	O	M	P	A	R	T	M	E	N	T
E	M	A	I	L	H	E	N	C	E	
D	E	N	T	S	S	T	E	E	R	