

Is the bastion against Europe's far-right hobbling?

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

POLITICAL ideologies ranging from populist and nationalist to far-right neo-fascist have been making inroads into the European political landscape. In fact, capitalising on a migration crisis,

of parliament wear headscarves as a goodwill gesture to Muslim women. Nevertheless, in a general environment of populism and insular nationalism—vaunted by Trump—people looked to elections in France and Germany to turn the table on the far-right march. Our expectations have only been partially met; Chancellor Angela Merkel has won a fourth term but with a critically reduced margin; and French president Emmanuel Macron has stopped Far-right Le Pen on her tracks.

As for Merkel, the conservative CDU/CSU group saw their tally of seats slashed from 309 to 246 leaving her to cobble up a coalition government with smaller parties.

Her primary task is to neutralise a newly empowered hard right—Alternative for Germany (AfD) Party. It entered the Reichstag for the first time with 93 deputies capturing 13 percent of the vote.

The Social Democrats (SPD) received 20.5 percent of the vote, a humiliating post-war record! It has ruled out cooperation with Merkel; as a junior partner in the "grand coalition" it had played a part in leading Germany for eight of Merkel's twelve years in power. All this makes the quest for a ruling alliance that much more complicated, let alone governing the country with an iron will.

Policy wise Merkel is likely to be less

generous to immigration and grant of asylum. She is reportedly mulling the possibility of restricting migration families attached to those already in Germany.

Coming to Macron, he is widely reported to be constantly changing his positions. As Francois Hollande's Minister of Economy, Industry and Digital Affairs he was not a member of the president's socialist party. In 2006, Macron declared to journalists, "Honesty forces me to tell you that I am not a socialist." He added on TV that he was on the left.

He promised to overcome what he called France's "sectarianism and sterile oppositions" and claims to be "neither left nor right". After three months of presidency he is starting to sound very much like "never left, more right".

Galles Candor, a historian and political analyst says, "Macron's fiscal and labour policies" seem to be going the way of employers. The journal Liberation, in an article titled "Macron is not left wing" added that the left has historically sided with the workers.

"His neither-nor logic has limits," points out an observer, as one could argue that the glass is half-full or half empty, meaning an unattended void. It could backfire.

On the topic of immigration, he was perceived to be a social liberal, "something that has changed since the election." On security and immigration, his policies are tougher than Hollande's.

With his approval rate plummeting, there is a sliver of a possibility that he may take an authoritarian path.

Shah Husain Imam is a commentator on current affairs and former Associate Editor, The Daily Star. E-mail: shahhusainimam@gmail.com



German Chancellor Angela Merkel with France's President Emmanuel Macron. PHOTO: AFP

economic inequality, increasing disillusionment with the European Union and a sense of lost national identity, right-wing parties have made electoral gains in a growing number of European countries.

A BBC News story titled "Guide to the nationalist parties challenging Europe" unveiled on May 23, 2016, the extent to which voter support has been garnered by far-right parties. Listed are countries with right-wing political parties having voter support of 10 percent above just a year and a quarter ago. You had Netherlands with 10 percent far-right presence followed by Sweden 13, France 14, Finland 18, Denmark 21, Hungary 21, Switzerland 29 and Austria 35.1. To add to this, in many countries, nationalists received higher scores in European Parliament elections and opinion polls.

An auspicious break with the trend, however, occurred in Austria centring around the presidential election of the country last year. The ruling far-right Freedom Party fielded Norbert Hofer as its candidate, while former Green Party leader Alexander Van der Bellen stood as an opposition candidate. Van Bellen won convincingly in a two-round election.

The Austrian president on his assumption of office had women members

Women's driving: Saudi Prince Mohammed's litmus test



JAMES M DORSEY

SAUDI Arabia's long-awaited lifting of a ban on women's driving, widely viewed as a symbol of Saudi misogyny, will likely serve as a litmus test for Crown Prince Mohammed bin

social media. Hundreds of thousands used an Arabic hashtag demanding the restoration of powers to the kingdom's religious police, whose ability to strictly enforce ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim moral codes was curbed last year.

A 24-year-old, speaking earlier this year to *The Guardian*, noted that ultra-conservatism maintains a hold on significant numbers of young people. "You know that the top 11 Twitter handles here are Salafi clerics, right? We are talking more than 20 million people who hang on their every word. They will not accept this sort of change. Never," the youth said.

Talal Salama, a Saudi singer, was attacked on social media this week for singing a text from the Qur'an during the national day celebrations. "The disaster is not just that he is sitting singing the Quran, the disaster is that it was a party approved by the government that is allowing him to sing," said lawyer Musleh al-Udayni on Twitter.

In advance of the lifting of the ban, Saudi authorities banned Saad al-Hijri, head of fatwas (religious legal opinions) in the Asir governorate, from preaching for declaring that women should not drive because their brains shrink to a quarter the size of a man's when they go shopping.

The suspension was the latest measure in a crackdown in which scores of Islamic scholars, including some of the kingdom's most popular ones, judges and intellectuals, were arrested. The arrested were likely to ensure that conservative opposition to the lifting of the ban would be muted.

The kingdom's decision to delay implementation of the decision until June next year gives the government time to neutralise opposition and serves as an indication of what it would take to ensure Saudi women's rights.

To implement the decision, Saudi Arabia

has to first eliminate bureaucratic, legal and social hurdles that prevent women from obtaining licenses, create facilities for women to learn how to drive, and train policemen to interact with female drivers in a country that enforces gender segregation and in which men largely interact only with female relatives.

The lifting of the ban is part of Prince Mohammed's Vision 2030 plan that seeks to diversify and streamline the economy and introduce limited social reform but avoid political liberalisation.

With women accounting for half of the Saudi population and more than half of its university graduates, Vision 2030 indicates the limits on granting women's rights by envisioning that women will account for only 30 percent of a reformed kingdom's workforce.

While the lifting of the ban in a decree by King Salman allows women to apply for a license without the permission of their male guardian, the principle of male guardianship that subject women to the will of their menfolk remains in place.

There is, moreover, for example, no indication that last week's use of a stadium as a test case, will lead to a lifting of restrictions on women's sporting rights, including free access to attend men's competitions and the ability to practice and compete in a majority of sports disciplines.

The public relations value of the lifting of the ban was evident in the fact that it temporarily drew attention away from news that reflected badly on the kingdom, including mounting international criticism of Saudi conduct of its war in Yemen, that has pushed the country to the edge of the abyss. Saudi Arabia has desperately been seeking to avert censorship by the United Nations and defeat calls for an independent investigation.

It also put on the news backburner, a 62-

page report by Human Rights Watch that, despite the banning of Mr Al-Hijri, documented that Saudi Arabia has permitted government-appointed religious scholars and clerics to refer to religious minorities in derogatory terms or demonise them in official documents and religious rulings that influence government decision-making. Anti-Shia, anti-Sufi and anti-Christian sentiment was evident in the Saudi education system and in the judiciary, the report published on Tuesday said.

The kingdom has spent an estimated USD 100 billion in the last four decades to propagate its austere vision of Islam in a bid to establish itself as the leader of the Muslim world and to counter the revolutionary appeal of Iran following the 1979 Islamic revolution that toppled a monarch and an icon of US influence in the Middle East.

In doing so, it has contributed to Muslim societies like Malaysia and Indonesia becoming more conservative and intolerant towards minorities. Saudi ultra-conservative influence was visible earlier this week when an owner of a self-service laundrette in the Malaysian state of Johor banned non-Muslims from using his services.

"Saudi Arabia has relentlessly promoted a reform narrative in recent years, yet it allows government-affiliated clerics and textbooks to openly demonise religious minorities such as Shia. This hate speech prolongs the systematic discrimination against the Shia minority and—at its worst—is employed by violent groups who attack them," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch.

Dr James M Dorsey is a senior fellow at Singapore's S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, co-director of the University of Wuerzburg's Institute of Fan Culture, and the author of the book *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, among others.

Who Deserves a Hat Trick?

HUMOROUSLY YOURS



NAVEED MAHUB

THE only good thing about the Donald Trump tragedy is that comedians are in business. In fact they (the comedians) have become lazy as Trump himself is delivering the jokes on a silver platter.

On the same token, the only good thing about the Rohingya crisis is that satirists like us can keep on writing about Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK). But I would rather be scraping the bottom for topics rather than giving ASSK a hat trick on my column and displacing hundreds of thousands. I've written about her the last two weeks and newspaper real estate isn't cheap, as cheap as the newspaper actually is to buy. So, ASSK, sorry, I need a breath of fresh air, though you are breathing down our necks right across the Naf. You do NOT deserve a hat trick on my column.

But I do like hat tricks. So, I was hoping that the Rural Development Secretary's car would get a traffic citation a third day in a row for exhibiting the right to drive on the right side of the road. Some brave hearts of Dhaka Metropolitan Police surely deserve a truck load of kudos. Though I wonder if it's a suicide mission as far as their careers are concerned, thus creating another exodus towards Khagrachari and Bandarban—of officers for simply doing their jobs.

But many in uniform have called the boon dock postings an opportunity of a lifetime, not to be traded for the world, not for even a transfer to Baridhara. The man and the woman in uniform, plenty of those at the moment at our South East, are thanking God for the opportunity to serve mankind. One such young officer of Bangladesh Police writes on his Facebook post, there is not a single service person in uniform, hardened by battle and battling crime, which has not shed a tear seeing, guiding and holding those on their exodus from across the Naf. Maybe those cops flagging down VVIP vehicles for traffic violations are not playing a game of Russian Roulette after all, but playing their



PHOTO: AFP/KHIN MAUNG WIN
A bronze statue of Aung San Suu Kyi displayed at an art exhibition organised by the National League for Democracy in Yangon.

cards just right so as to be shipped off to where the whole world, except Yangon, is focusing on.

Business is good for hotels in Cox's Bazaar and for airlines operating flights between that city and Dhaka. But once again, the hotels and the airlines, hands down, would prefer to host tourists rather than aid workers and officials, the former, an indication of happier times. Besides, how many would really enjoy the world's longest beach at this point, knowing that not too far, is a tragedy unfolding?

The world is watching especially for what the big boys are saying. Beijing has said it will play a "constructive role" in settling the Rohingya issue. Just make sure it's not a "construction roll" (of steel).

Well, there you go ASSK. You got your hat trick on *Humorously Yours*. Please, please, don't make me write another one...

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

QUOTABLE Quote

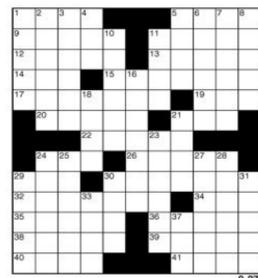


JEAN PIAGET
SWISS CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

Education, for most people, means trying to lead the child to resemble the typical adult of his society...but for me and no one else, education means making creators...You have to make inventors, innovators...not conformists.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Ready to pick
 - 5 Gofers' work
 - 9 Make amends
 - 11 Joust need
 - 12 Superman's real name
 - 13 Pond growth
 - 14 Yale rooster
 - 15 Make out
 - 17 Analyze in detail
 - 19 Confederate general
 - 20 Pursue
 - 21 Blue
 - 22 Get naked
 - 24 Urgent call
 - 26 Battery end
 - 29 Some amount of
- DOWN**
- 1 Dild yard work
 - 2 Tilted type
 - 3 Shine
 - 4 Hydrocarbon suffix
 - 5 Powder base
 - 6 Germany's Merkel
 - 7 Trembling
 - 8 New Hampshire
 - 10 Firstborn
 - 11 Ultimate
 - 16 Sleelike
 - 18 Pertness
 - 21 Location
 - 23 Foot part
 - 24 Skilled shooter
 - 25 Pearl producer
 - 27 Make less tense
 - 28 Passes, as a law
 - 29 Sun-dried brick
 - 30 Bears' lairs
 - 31 Attire
 - 33 Formal salutations
 - 37 Finish a "j"



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott

