

89TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF SM ALI, FOUNDING EDITOR OF THE DAILY STAR

Desperately missing his guidance in this era of press bashing

MAHFUZ ANAM

It was my grand privilege to have succeeded our founding editor SM Ali in November 1993. Journalism has undergone dramatic transformation in these last 24 years, regrettably not all for the better. The most significant of these changes has been in the way we do journalism. The emergence of social media and the era of instant information have all changed the profession of journalism in ways that our founding editor could have hardly imagined. Just imagine, there were no computers (except for 10 in the production section), no internet, no online, nothing of the digital platforms and no smartphones. However, it is not the changes in journalism but the memories and guidance of our founding editor that are the subject of today's piece. Ali Bhai, as we would lovingly call him regardless of age, always had an elegant presence. He overwhelmed others with his personality but never intimidated them. There was always an easy-going charm about him that made others feel comfortable. There was that sharp humour that many people would miss and misunderstand—stories of which he would recount to us on occasions. It was our daily routine to meet in the morning around 10:30 and choose the editorial topics for the day's paper.

As our discussion would begin he would often take out the editorial that he had already written at home and hand it over to me for getting it ready for printing. I never knew nor did I ever ask why he always used a yellow tinged paper for his writing. The typing would mostly be clean except for a few handwritten corrections and additions which were also very neat. In the pre-computer days, editors would seldom type their own copies. They would dictate. But SM Ali was a rare exception. I clearly remember marvelling at the discipline of this man who would write as frequently as possible and always do it himself. As he would shut himself in the editor's room, which would be often, one could hear the relentless banging of the typewriter while passing by his room. Even if his door was closed the staff members were always welcome to seek his guidance any time. The shut door was only to indicate he did not want any visitors at that time. As his deputy it was my privilege to spend time with him whenever he was free or in a talkative mood. One of his severest pieces of advice was "never associate yourself with any organisation howsoever noble." "Even if it is doing very worthwhile work and with the highest level of integrity?" I asked. His reply cleared my mind. "If you are associated with a charity you will never be able to



SM Ali in his early years.

PHOTO: COURTESY

evaluate it with journalistic objectivity as you would be too close to it. More importantly, if you want to praise its work your readers will suspect bias. On the contrary, as an outsider you can be of better service to them with appreciative writings without any fear of bias." There was another priceless advice

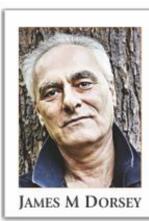
that I have tried to follow fully at the risk of appearing aloof or even haughty. He said, "You must divide all your time between the newspaper and your family. If you still have some time left, give it to the newspaper. Even after that if you still have some more time left, give it to the family. But never waste it anywhere else."

Attending diplomatic dinners, seminars and talking to interesting people, he would encourage as they were either sources of news or of ideas. He had admonished me from going to social clubs like the Dhaka Club and the Press Club. "You don't have time for that, at least you shouldn't have, except to meet specific people with prior appointments." The advice I have failed to adhere to much to my regret and I am sure to his disappointment as he looks down on us from his Eternal Abode is this. He insisted that I write every week, and even gave my column its name: the "Third View". I tried to write as regularly as possible but would sometimes falter as I had to run around collecting advertisements for the young and struggling paper. As the finances became critical in later months there would be weeks that I would miss my column. He reprimanded me saying, "As the executive editor you must keep a sharp focus on the revenue but it should never be at the expense of your writing. Your readers will never remember you for how much advertisement you brought to the paper but for what you wrote and what you stood for." I wonder what Ali Bhai's advice to me would be today as we are going through a period of almost zero tolerance for dissent. How would he guide me in covering a political situation where opposition is practically decimated—much of it due to its own ineptness but also due to severe oppression—and identified more as the "enemy" rather than a competitor for power? How are we to run the paper where any dissenting view is looked upon with suspicion and no opportunity is lost in vilifying anyone remotely critical of the present

powers that be? Every day as we brief our reporters, edit their copies, write our editorials, sift through the articles of our columnists and do our page layout, we try to double guess how this or that item would further increase the scrutiny and pressure we are subjected to. How much more of the restraint we need to practise in a constant nagging, thought impeding our independent journalism. How would he have handled the era of self-censorship and blame game? Did he ever face the phenomenon of "fake news" whose origin may not be in the Trump era but much closer to home and whose prevalence may not be as infrequent as many of us would like to believe? How would Ali Bhai guide us in protecting the reputation of individuals who are mercilessly denigrated without evidence or reason and where innuendos suffice as proof and where what is implied becomes stronger than the loudest response of the victim? This paper was born with the fall of autocracy. While Ali Bhai wrote our first editorial—"An Independent Voice"—spelling out the policy of the new paper, I wrote the first post—"Dreams Reborn"—enshrining both the dream of this newspaper and that of the energised nation that consisted of democracy, social justice, institution-building and unfettered press. As we remember our founding editor on the occasion of his birthday, we sorely miss his guidance in these times of global attack on the media and the national constrictions under cyber and digital laws and an overall atmosphere of fear and intimidation in which the media has to operate today. Mahfuz Anam is editor and publisher of The Daily Star.

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Gulf crisis creates opportunity for Asian nations



JAMES M DORSEY

There's a silver lining for Asian countries in the six-month old crisis in the Gulf that pits a UAE-Saudi-led alliance against Qatar. That is as long as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates shy away from attempting to harness their financial muscle to shore up lagging international support for their diplomatic and economic boycott of the idiosyncratic Gulf state. Asian nations, including India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines, whose nationals populate the Gulf's labour force, have already reaped initial benefits with Qatar, eager to put its best foot forward, significantly reforming its controversial *kafala* or labour sponsorship regime. Qatar recently became the first Gulf state to introduce a minimum wage, albeit criticised by human rights groups for being at USD 200 below earning levels in many of the labour-supplying states. It has also sought to improve workers' rights and committed to improving their living conditions. Qatar was under pressure to reform the *kafala* system long before the Gulf crisis erupted, but the dispute with its Gulf neighbours

strengthened its interest in being seen to be doing the right thing. Its moves are over time likely to persuade other Gulf states to follow suit. The boycott as a result of its refusal to accept UAE-Saudi demands that would curtail its independence has forced Qatar to restructure trade relationships, diversify sources for goods and services, creative alternative port alliances, and recalibrate the strategy of its national carrier, Qatar Airways. The UAE, Saudi Arabia, and their allies insist that Qatar unconditionally break its ties to various political groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, adhere to Saudi and UAE foreign policy, reduce relations with Iran, shutter the Al Jazeera television network, and accept monitoring of its compliance. Qatar has rejected any infringement of its sovereignty and called for a negotiated solution. The two countries have so far shown no willingness to compromise on their insistence on unconditional Qatari acceptance, but have also shied away from escalating the dispute, by among others pressuring third parties to choose sides. The dispute has further divided the Arab world with some countries like Egypt and Bahrain siding with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, others like Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Algeria sitting on the side lines and calling for a negotiated solution, and finally nations like Oman and Algeria who have stepped in to help Qatar offset the impact of the boycott. The fracturing of the Arab world was on display at a meeting in Cairo in mid-November of Arab foreign

ministers. Saudi Arabia was able to wrest a statement condemning Iran and its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, but failed to achieve a consensus as Lebanon teetered on the balance because of Saudi pressure. Without breaking the stalemate and the initiation of negotiations that at best would achieve a face saving formula that falls short of a fundamental resolution, the dispute is likely to settle in as a fact of life and further undermine the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that groups the six Gulf states. Saudi Arabia and its allies have said they were not contemplating military intervention even if they have sought to foster tribal opposition to Qatari emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani led by lesser known members of the ruling family. The UAE's articulate ambassador to Russia, Omar Ghobash, suggested in June that "there are certain economic sanctions that we can take which are being considered right now. One possibility would be to impose conditions on our own trading partners and say you want to work with us then you have got to make a commercial choice." Six months later, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have yet to act on their threat, creating business opportunities as Qatar settles in for the long haul and structurally ensures that it will no longer depend primarily on its Gulf neighbours. Food is one key area, making food security a Qatari priority. Turkey and Iran were quick to step in to fill the gap created by the Saudi ban on export to Qatar of dairy and other products. With the import of some

4,000 cows, Qatar has sought to achieve a degree of self-sufficiency with domestic production within a matter of months accounting for approximately 30 percent of consumption. Nonetheless, with a minimal food processing industry, Qatar will seek to diversify its sources, creating opportunity for Asian producers. With the loss of some 20 Gulf destinations as a result of the boycott, state-owned Qatar Airways, the region's second largest airline, may be the Qatari entity most affected by the crisis. Against the backdrop of a likely annual loss, Qatar Airways is looking to expand its route network elsewhere and weighing stakes in other airlines. Asia is an obvious target. Qatar is scheduled to initiate flights to Canberra in Australia, Chiang Mai and Utapao in Thailand, and Chittagong in Bangladesh next year. The airline has rejected proposals that it bid for Air India, but plans to move ahead with plans for the launch of a domestic Indian airline. Elsewhere, Qatar Airways acquired a 9.61 percent

stake in troubled Hong Kong-based Cathay Pacific for USD 662 million. Similarly, Qatar has had to compensate for its loss of port facilities, primarily in the UAE by diverting to Salalah in Oman and Singapore. While that solved the Gulf state's immediate bottlenecks, it is probable that Qatar will take an interest in other Asian ports in competition with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Given Saudi interest in China-backed ventures such as Pakistan's Gwadar and the Maldives, Qatar could well look at Indian alternatives, including the Indian-supported Iranian port of Chabahar, a mere 75 kilometres further up the coast from Gwadar. Singapore port has stepped in with Qatar availing itself of shipping and logistical services. Vietnam and India see opportunities in the sale of food and construction materials. Perhaps most fundamentally, Asian countries like India, in a bid to ensure the security of their energy supplies, are looking at diversifying their sources and increasing the non-

Middle Eastern portion from producers like the United States. Indian Oil minister Dharmendra Pradhan adopted a tough stand in recent talks with OPEC Secretary General Sanusi Mohammad Barkindo, advising him that India was looking at alternative sourcing. India recently cut crude oil imports from Iran because of stalled negotiations over the development of an offshore gas deposit in the Gulf, forcing Iran to look for alternative buyers in Europe. The Gulf, irrespective of if and how the crisis may be resolved, is unlikely to return to the status quo ante. As a result, the crisis is certain to influence political, economic and commercial relationships for decades to come. That creates opportunity that Asian nations potentially can capitalise on. Dr James M Dorsey is a senior fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture, and co-host of the New Books in Middle Eastern Studies podcast. He is the author of the book *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer* among several others.

QUOTABLE Quote

AMELIA EARHART
American aviation pioneer and author, and the first female aviator to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean.

The most difficult thing is the decision to act, the rest is merely tenacity.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Rubber-neck	29 Planet	6 Ship storage
5 Uneven haired	30 Crusading king	7 Multiple choice choice
9 Once more	32 Golfer Lee	8 Player in a mask
11 Casual shirts	34 Hotel feature	10 Annul
13 Photo finish	35 Jarsberg feature	12 Staff symbol
14 Koran topic	36 - Island	17 Hosp. parts
15 Series-ending abbr.	38 Cussed	19 Gaelic
16 Canal boat	39 Peace symbols	22 Robe feature
18 Tries again	40 Graceful bird	24 Athlete's dream
20 Fragrant tree	41 Unites	25 Light cirdlers
21 Categorizes		26 Quiver contents
22 Dance move	DOWN	27 Storage place
23 Try out	1 Arcade patron	28 Bartered
24 Fan's cry	2 Some marbles	30 Out of bed
25 Chess win	3 Warning from the roof	31 Raiment
27 Plague	4 Young fox	33 Designer Wang
	5 Stretches over	37 In what way

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

B	R	A	D	A	L	D	E	R
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