

Millions in backlog cases

Systemic changes needed

WE appreciate the comments made by Law Minister Anisul Huq recently that a high-powered committee will be set up to expedite the disposal of some 3.4 million cases stuck in the pipeline. We understand this committee will help investigators produce witnesses and complete investigations at shortened periods of time. It should be understood that this backlog has not come in a day but has built up over the years not just because of an acute shortage of judges in the Appellate Division but also the High Court. Although the government had introduced alternative dispute resolution system, it has not had the desired impact.

We must contend with the fact that beyond the shortage of judges, there are systemic problems related to the way in which our cases are prepared. With the backlog of cases growing by the day, those who seek justice must suffer for months, if not years to get a verdict. The law minister has ruled out separate courts to try drug-related cases but hinted at a new law. Now, with the war on drugs gathering momentum, we hope that the new law being mulled over will help shorten sentencing rather than prolong the situation. The most important reason of congestion of cases is the delay in resolving cases. Perhaps we should take lessons from other countries that have started introducing digitisation of the judicial system that could help in reducing the backlog i.e. introducing technology such as e-filing, efficient data entry and recovery, fewer data errors—procedures that would reduce our dependence on paperwork and help speed up the hearing of cases and maintain the integrity of court records.

Land ports money vending machines?

Corruption at Benapole must be stopped

REPORT by this newspaper on malpractices at the Benapole international passenger terminal shows how a customs system bedevilled by corruption and mismanagement is holding travellers hostage. According to an estimate, in April 2018 alone, some 1.32 lakh people went to India using the Benapole land port while about 92,434 entered Bangladesh through the Petrapole Customs station, which is on the Indian side of the border. Often the travellers have to bribe their way into the terminal. There are also allegations of lax monitoring. But money can move a lot of walls, and nowhere has this been truer than in Benapole. The sheer number of people crossing this checkpoint for travel and trade purposes is reason enough for a shift away from the laissez-faire attitude to public sufferings by the port authorities, who have been consistently resistant to calls for transparency and accountability.

Our report also mentions that travellers have to face harassment on the Indian side of the border as well. It's important to remember that border is a sensitive place. Its integrity should be preserved at all costs. When money talks, security and surveillance can become a secondary consideration. While we hope the Indian authorities would address the problems facing Bangladeshi travellers, we call upon the Bangladesh Land Port Authority (BLPA), which operates Benapole and all other border ports, to get its affairs in order by taking firm action against all excesses and malpractices by the immigration officers and rectify its service delivery mechanism.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The need for parental intervention

It had previously been reported that tech billionaires Bill Gates and Steve Jobs had limited the screen time—the use of social media and smartphones—for their children as they considered it harmful. Bill Gates didn't allow his children to use cell-phones before they were 14-years of age. Both of them considered the excessive use of smartphones and other electronic gadgets to be serious impediments to the natural growth of children.

Ironically, both had built up an empire selling these gadgets. Yet, they seemed to be in consensus that their use, especially by children, should be limited.

In addition to this, multiple studies have also found that excessive use of electronic gadgets and screen time damages the brain, eyes, etc. and might even cause serious psychological problems.

Many young people in our country use social media and electronic gadgets all the time. This is a problem that cannot be solved through legislation.

It is up to parents to address this. They must be tougher on their children when it comes to the use of social media and other electronic devices as it is for their own good.

Md Abu Wares, By e-mail

The New World Disorder: We must learn to live with it

IFTEKHAR AHMED CHOWDHURY

A fundamental law of physics, also applicable to the social sciences, is that everything in nature is in a state of flux. The sage Heraclitus had said we never step into the same river twice. The flow of the river of life today has remarkably gained a momentum that is torrential. It gushes ahead washing away old values, norms, and the societal architecture that human mind and endeavour had conceived and created over a long period of time. As it leads us into the digital post-modern era dominated by big data, cloud-computing, and artificial intelligence, it also impacts on the politics, economics and sociology of how we organise our lives.

It is without doubt that a major factor of change in our socio-political and economic life today, President Donald Trump, the leader of the world's most powerful nation, the United States. He is relentlessly adding kinetic energy speeding up the motion. But did not make a sudden appearance. *Ex Nihilo nihil fit*—nothing comes from nothing. Mr Trump, with his disturbingly erratic and seemingly irrational behaviour, is the product of decades of domestic and global developments. These are those that are both within America and in the world beyond. In the nineteenth-century America believed it had a "manifest destiny", ordained by God. It was not only to expand its territorial dominion westward, but also spread democracy and capitalism throughout North America.

Across the Atlantic, in Europe, the present was being shaped by the past. The Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 created nation-states. The French Revolution of 1789 sparked nationalism with its positive and negative ramifications. Germany, a somewhat late entrant to European civilisation, burst upon the unfolding history with its enormous contributions in literature, mathematics and philosophy. The "Protestant Reformation" of Martin Luther, supplanted orthodox Catholicism, igniting the spirit of enquiry. It also laid the foundation sciences and a new work ethic. Eventually a scattered Germanic nation became united under Bismarck. Meantime other European nations—Spain, Portugal, Holland and England—were dividing up the world between themselves. Freshly empowered, Germany now demanded its "plätzen der Sonne"—"a place in the sun", including its own colonies.

The result was two disastrous world wars. America, the "new world", was called out to aid the "old" Europe. Thereafter, to rebuild it on the ashes of the conflagrations. Through the Marshall Plan and the establishment of the Bretton Woods Institutions (World Bank, International Monetary Fund), the United Nations, and the World Trade Organization, it helped create "a new World Order". It helped set the norms and standards for trade, arms control, and international relations. The "Manifest Destiny" now moved eastward. The opposing Communist ideology of the Soviet Union was confronted and ultimately vanquished. The winner was capitalism, buttressed by free trade and liberal values. America was now the "city on the shining hill", the unparalleled "hyper-power".

Then several things happened. First, unsurprisingly, hubris set in. Its military misadventures, in Iraq and Afghanistan, led to immeasurable damage to the respect and reputation it had acquired. Second, its strategic nuclear-weapon superiority was now deterred not just by Russia, but also China. Third, it incurred huge deficits in trade with its partners, with many now seeing commerce as a "zero-sum game". Finally, other nations were rapidly emerging in capabilities and in particular China. Its new-found wealth and capacity, spurred on by President Xi Jinping's "ZhongGuomeng"

or China Dream, were being rapidly translated into power. The American sociologist, Andre Gunder Frank, remarked that what he feared more was not so much the rise of China, as America's response to it.

America was now exhausted. Middle America, the redneck white working classes, distressed by the widening gulf between them and the elite, thought they were paying a heavy price, economically and militarily, for their so-called "leadership of the free world". Enter Donald Trump. He was thrown up by this constituency, small, but consistent and powerful. He promised to tear up the rulebooks of traditional conduct, put "America First" and make it "Great" again. He pulled America out of past agreements, challenged the very institutions that America had created, and sought to renegotiate America's engagements with the rest of the world. America was not necessarily disengaging from the world. Rather, it was re-engaging with its perceived self-interest, on new terms. It now preferred to do it bilaterally, where it was strong, rather than multilaterally, where it felt weak and constrained by rules. To America there was no longer "friends" or

region, South Asia, these developments may presage a return to the classical form of "balance of power". Henry Kissinger has endeavoured to educate the contemporary times on it. It entails that no nation is supremely dominant. Each is left to calculate its imperatives of power, and accordingly, align itself with or oppose other nations. No one would be an *a priori* ally or antagonist forever.

For countries like Bangladesh, as for other smaller South Asian countries, it would mean the need for nimble diplomacy. Linkages would need to be constructed on the merits of specific issues. It is important to bear in mind, that even if America at the highest levels disengage, at operational levels, where its interests are not critical, its field functionaries like its diplomats may be landed with a greater role. This is why we see America sanction, on recommendations from its agents in the field, Myanmar generals for their alleged atrocious perpetration of inhumane violence upon the "Rohingyas" in the Rakhine State.

Nevertheless, South Asia, as well as other regions, must know that it can no longer routinely draw on



President Donald Trump poses for photos with the 2017 NCAA football national champions the Alabama Crimson Tide at the White House on April 10, 2018.

PHOTO: NICHOLAS KAMM/AFP

"foes". Only "others". Idealism had yielded to realism. Lord Palmerston of Britain had once, in a moment of pique vis-à-vis his continental peers, had reportedly remarked that God had made a mistake when He made foreigners. Mr Trump actually seemed to believe it.

So, is the old global order giving way to a New World Disorder? Perhaps. Some fear that there may be chaotic consequences that would be unmanageable. But chaos need not necessarily be bad. For instance, ancient Greeks perceived it positively. To them it was the dark void of space, the primeval state of existence, from which the four elements of nature—air, water, earth and fire, and eventually divine and human forms emerged. Today we see disruption as providing the necessary fillip to technological innovation. Trump's actions may be perceived as doing the same on the political matrix. Possibly in a dialectical fashion, the "disorder" that we "confront" would eventually synthesise into another order, a newer methodology for the interrelationship of peoples and nations.

For most countries, including those in our own

external state-actors to make up the power gaps with adversarial neighbours. It is a key point to bear in mind for our leaderships in this election period in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Maldives, Bangladesh and India. These countries would be well advised to renegotiate their intramural relationships. They must aim to ease tensions among themselves to be better able to confront the world with collective interests. They must be able to help themselves, as no one else will.

The global trends cited earlier will not alter substantively even after Trump leaves office. He is not the cause but the effect of the changes. The "New World Disorder" will eventually become a new normal, which will become yet another "New World Order". For now, however, the "disorder" has come to stay. The rest of the world has no option but to recognise, readapt and respond to the changing times.

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The people speak

AASIM SAJJAD AKHTAR

AMIDST all the acrimony about the extent to which what took place on Wednesday was actually democratic, it is worth dwelling at least briefly on the most important element of the electoral exercise—the "demos" or people themselves.

Imran and the PTI will say that the people have spoken, the rest of the mainstream contenders will say that the people's voice has been stifled. Neither position even scratches the surface of a burgeoning global debate about actually existing democracy. Those of us interested in social transformation need to think deeply about what our democracy looks like in a broader context.



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PHOTO: AFP

First, money and power are what matters: it is not only in Pakistan that democratic procedures and institutions are hostage to capitalists, military establishments and the corporate media. Ordinary people, no matter how much they are moved by inspiring campaigns run by those outside the mainstream, often end up choosing accommodation with the status quo because surviving the daily grind of state and market typically requires ingratiating yourself with those in power.

There are of course notable exceptions to this rule.

between the mainstream contenders because we need powerful mediators to help us negotiate the unjust and inequalitarian political system.

Second, the forces of reaction are making hay by depicting themselves as pro-people outsiders: Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election was the most obvious indicator that right-wing populists are garnering increasing space amongst "the people" to preach their exclusionary messages and give wind to xenophobic herd behaviour.

Similarities between the PTI and the Trump brigade

have been observed; Pakistani progressives would do well to take a leaf out of the book of their comrades in the US who have mobilised impressively in the wake of Trump's victory.

The more general fallout of right-wing sloganeering is that the cynicism amongst the wider voting public grows once it becomes clear that self-proclaimed messiahs are as beholden to money and power as those who they claim to have displaced.

In the lead-up to Wednesday's polls many ordinary voters with whom I came into contact were already clear that Imran and the PTI are anything but "outsiders". Accordingly, the promise of "change" seems to become even more remote. One hopes that sooner rather than later it is recognised that genuine options for change exist even if they are still in the teething phase.

Third, those who want change must make themselves seen and heard on the ground: there is little doubt that we have entered an era where informed individuals can have an impact on political processes in the comfort of their own homes via social media platforms. The PTI's victory owes itself in part to the support it generated on social media, especially amongst younger segments of the population.

Progressives were also quite visible on social media, and were lauded for running impressive electoral campaigns. But it is telling that most of these campaigns were unable to translate support on the cloud into votes on the ground. When the Faizabad dharna happened, I wrote about the problem with progressives in this country—that they simply do not put their lot in with political organisations, whereas conservatives align themselves openly with reactionary political "alternatives".

On Wednesday, Khadim Rizvi's TLP secured tens of thousands of votes in constituencies all over the country, and while this owes much to the patronage of the powers that be, progressives do themselves and their cause no favour by limiting their political expression only to social media. Coming out to vote is of course only one way of making oneself heard and those who did not do so on Wednesday must think hard about dedicating time and energy to building a progressive alternative to status quo on the ground in the weeks, months and years to come.

In sum, we have been reminded yet again about the realities of capitalist democracy. Those who want to build a genuinely democratic, egalitarian and ecologically sustainable social order will have to put in the hard yards to make "the people" believe an alternative is possible.

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