

INTERVIEW

Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri

November 2013

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Struggling Female Parliamentarians

BANGLADESH

War Crime Trials




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Keeping Democracy Alive

Elections are never a peaceful affair anywhere in the world and more so in the South Asian context. Perhaps it is to keep the record alive that the forthcoming annual general elections in Bangladesh are again heading for a bloody faceoff between the two main contenders- the ruling Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) – the major opposition entity.

It is to be expected, however, that in these circumstances, democracy will not be sacrificed at the altar of disagreement though the two top-billed parties in South Asia's third biggest democracy are again hurtling towards a showdown that could derail the country's general elections due in January 2014. Bangladesh already has a history of ferocious political violence and military interventions. In the current showdown, the ruling Awami League has refused to step down under a constitutional requirement. As per the constitution, general elections must be held within 90 days after the expiry of the Parliament. Since the ninth parliament expired on October 25, 2013, Article 123 of the Constitution of Bangladesh requires general elections to be held between October 26, 2013 and January 24, 2014. In these circumstances, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has threatened that unless the government relinquishes power, its supporters would whip up nationwide strikes and summarily boycott the elections. Polls were also aborted in Bangladesh in 2007 following clashes between rival parties and a military-backed government took over for two years. This time it is feared that even if the polls do take place, the opposition, led by the BNP, may not accept the results, leading to more strikes and, as was the case in 1996, a second election may take place.

It must go to the credit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina that she has sought to defuse the crisis and has even offered setting up of an all-parties government to ensure a peaceful election. It is thought that the BNP may not go along with this solution. The scepter of election bloodshed is a very real one in volatile Bangladesh. Though Bangladesh is a major resource for readymade garments for many international brands, factory owners have frozen their order books for the time being, causing great loss to the national exchequer. For the business and investment sector, this is one cost of the elections that must be borne.

Awami League President Sheikh Hasina became the Prime Minister of Bangladesh for the second time in December 2008. The caretaker system was started in the mid-1990s to ensure fair polls in a country where power had long changed hands between the two dynastic and mutually distrustful parties. The two parties differ little in terms of policy, analysts say, with voters simply booting out the incumbent with every poll in the hope that change will bring improvement.

Another flashpoint between the rivals is a tribunal set up in 2010 to try those accused of human rights abuses during Bangladesh's war of independence in 1971. The tribunal has so far convicted eight leaders of the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami, the main Islamic party, sentencing six to death. It is hoped that over and above the rivalry between the two main parties, the traditions of democracy will be upheld in Bangladesh, a country which long ago bade goodbye to army boots. While disagreement and dispute are proof of a living democracy, it is expected that the on-going rivalry between the AL and BNP will not be allowed to affect the holding of general elections in Bangladesh in 2014 and once again the best traditions of democracy will reign supreme in this South Asian nation.



Syed Jawaid Iqbal

Expert advice from WB

Your October cover story, "A reliable partnership", discussed in great detail the areas in which the World Bank has lent its support to South



Asian countries. No doubt the WB has done much in terms of aid and in providing expert advice to enable the regional countries to deal with a number of problems. There is one area, however, where I feel the WB's assistance can be of great help: disaster management.

The South Asian region has been worst hit by climatic changes which have resulted in natural disasters such as heavy rains, frequent flash floods, earthquakes and hurricanes to name a few. Almost all South Asian countries have been hit by all or some of these calamities during the last decade. Pakistan, for example, has been experiencing flash floods for three consecutive years. Hundreds of people have died and thousands displaced due to these floods. The situation is the same in India where this year alone more than 1,000 people died in flash floods. According to an official statement of the government of India, 6,000 people are missing after the floods. Bangladesh is

probably the worst hit country where frequent floods and torrential rains have become common.

While the WB has provided humanitarian aid in times of such crises, maybe it is time the organization took a different approach. It is true that financial assistance is essential, for no country can deal with disasters of such magnitude on its own, but the WB should provide South Asian countries with expert advice to enable them to face future disasters. It can help in the process of policymaking and in ensuring that practical steps are taken by governments to reduce the frequency and intensity of natural disasters.

Samira Ikram
Islamabad, Pakistan

The sympathy vote

In the article "War Crimes on the Island", it was stated that the government of Sri Lanka has undertaken quite a lot of development projects in the war-stricken northeastern areas of Sri Lanka. A similar claim was made by Sri Lanka's Human Rights Envoy to the UN, Mahinda Samarasinghe. Prior to the visit of Navi Pillay, the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights, to Sri Lanka, Samarasinghe had said that the Sri Lankan government wanted to show Pillay what it had done to improve the rights situation in the country. Reconstruction work may have taken place in the war-affected areas. But the result of the provincial council election in northern Sri Lanka proves that it was not sufficient enough to heal the wounds of the Tamils who were subjected to a most inhumane treatment by the Sri Lankan armed forces.

About 100,000 people were killed in the civil war between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority that spanned over three decades and ended in 2009. There are allegations that 40,000 civilians were killed in the last months of military action against Tamil Tigers.



Now the people of these areas have expressed quite explicitly where their sympathies and support lies. The Tamil National Alliance won 30 out of the 38 provincial council's seats. The good thing, however, is, the TNA believes in fighting for the rights of Tamils within the ambit of the constitution and while remaining within the Sri Lankan federation. The Sri Lankan government should acknowledge its mandate wholeheartedly and use this opportunity to address the grievances of the people of northeast Sri Lanka.

Rajjab Ali
Dhaka, Bangladesh

Greater role for Pakistan

I agree with the writer of the article "An Uncertain Future" when he says that most of the development work in Afghanistan has remained concentrat-



ed in some areas and regions. While the West spearheads the reconstruction process in Afghanistan, among South Asian countries it is India whose contribution to the development of Afghanistan can't be ignored. India has provided Afghanistan with aid and assistance in many areas, especially in construction and energy sectors. India has also signed a strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan under which it will provide military training to the Afghan Army. It has also made important headway towards securing mining contracts. While the New Delhi-Kabul ties are becoming stronger by the day, Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan have remained taut if not strained. It was disappointing to see that both countries failed to gain much from the visit of Afghan President Hamid Karzai to Pakistan in August 2013.

Considering that Pakistan is sandwiched between Afghanistan and India, it needs to improve its relations with both. The government of Pakistan should seek a greater role in the development of this war-ravaged country. It should help the Afghans rebuild their country. About time Afghanistan and Pakistan took their ties to the next level for the betterment and welfare of their people.

Samiullah Yusufzai
Kabul, Afghanistan

Not enough

My heart goes out to the victims of earthquake in the Awaran district of Balochistan. According to media reports, it took the authorities four days to send relief goods to the affected areas. One of the reasons was poor transportation facilities. As if that was not enough, there were reports that trucks carrying relief goods were made to wait for days at the deputy commissioner's office in Awaran because the government authorities couldn't decide as to who would supervise the relief efforts. Many people



lost their lives because they didn't get medical help in time.

Balochistan, unfortunately, is the least developed province of Pakistan. And now this earthquake has deprived hundreds of people of whatever they had. It is time the entire nation, especially the Pakistani expatriates, as well as international donor and aid agencies came forward to help the disaster-affected people of Balochistan.

Sarim Sheikh
Maryland, US

A commendable decision

The article "Whither Wildlife?" explores a subject which is very relevant in today's world and yet is hardly given the attention it deserves. The indifference towards this issue is not limited to governments only. People, too, do not bother much about wildlife. In both Asia and Africa, elephants, tigers and rhinoceros are being killed in large numbers for their tusks, hides, horns and other body parts. In the South Asian context, the population of the Bengal Tiger has decreased to such an extent that the IUCN has classified it as an endangered species. According to some estimates, only 2500 tigers remain in South Asia. Of the eight tiger sub-species, three have already become extinct. Another endangered animal is the snow leopard

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which is found in the Himalayan region. There are reports that its population has fallen to less than 450. It is the responsibility of governments and wildlife protection ministries and departments to take steps to save these wild animals from extinction.

I would like to give the example of the US government here which took a commendable decision in this regard. The Obama administration recently announced that it would destroy all the stocks of seized ivory as an effort to discourage the illegal poaching of wild elephants. In Africa, as many as 35,000 elephants were killed for their tusks last year. When the US government can take such a step, despite the fact that elephants are not found there, why can't the governments of South Asian countries, which are home to endangered animals such as the Bengal Tiger and Asian elephants, do the same? One would expect some urgent measures at least from the governments of India and Bangladesh whose national animal, incidentally, is the Bengal Tiger.

Mahesh Agarwal
New Delhi, India



UPCOMING B2B EVENTS ...



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“Terrorists are running out of Karachi and they would not find any place to hide. If we continue to work like this, then a day will come when anti-state elements will be completely wiped out.”

Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan
Pakistan's Interior Minister



“I am committed to socialism. And I support Narendra Modi because he is also a socialist and encourages Gandhian values – protection of human values and rights, brotherhood, justice at social, economic and political field.”

VR Krishna Iyer
Former Judge of the Supreme Court of India



“I've been to countries in the Commonwealth where people under 29 make up nearly 70 percent of the population. Therefore, in which ever way you can appeal to young people you should do it.”

Kamalesh Sharma
Commonwealth Secretary General



“What we have achieved under proportional representation is extraordinary. We hope the government as well as the people will respect the verdict. The government can no longer ignore the verdict at the NPC.”

M. A. Sumanthiran
Sri Lankan Politician



“The best way to prepare for the post-2015 era is to demonstrate that when the international community commits to a global partnership for development, it means it, and directs its resources to where they are most needed.”

Ban Ki-moon
UN Secretary General



“The taking of human life is contemptible. It makes no difference whether that life is Christian, Jewish or Muslim. For us it is the same.”

Hassan Rouhani
Iranian President



“We should be able to achieve a resolution that respects the rights of the Iranian people, while giving the world confidence that the Iranian (nuclear) program is peaceful. But to succeed, conciliatory words will have to be matched by actions.”

Barack Obama
US President



“A majority of the Taliban accept that the way out is a dialogue leading to peace. They realize that if they succeed on the battlefield it will be no success. After all the bloodletting, we would have to work with people we are fighting.”

Agha Jan Motasim
Afghan Taliban Leader



“I envy that the film (The Lunchbox) was not completely mine, envy that it had the most beautiful writing and a simple story told in a way that I could never write. So I decided to substitute envy with acknowledgement. If you can't beat them, join them.”

Karan Johar
Indian Filmmaker



“Law will take its own course. Those who lost their family members – it is their demand that these criminals should be punished.”

Sheikh Hasina
Prime Minister of Bangladesh



“Our islands are not rocks in the ocean, they are dynamic, natural systems and climatic changes are making life difficult or even unbearable for species like humans. If we were birds we would simply fly to Sri Lanka, but we build houses and settle.”

Mohamed Aslam
Former Maldivian Minister for Environment



“The country is undergoing a difficult political transitional period. In such a situation consensus between major parties is a must.”

Pushpa Kamal Dahal
Nepalese Politician

PAKISTAN

Constructive cooperation



A leading Turkish business group, Nurool, has expressed its readiness to invest in the Gadani Power Park in Balochistan, and to assist Pakistan in building the Karachi-Lahore Motorway

as well as the Bhasha and Bonji dams. This was announced after a meeting between a delegation of the group, led by its Vice Chairman, Orguz Carmikli and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The Nurool Group is considered a big name in the construction of motorways, dams and hydroelectric power plants and has constructed the Gebze-Izmir Motorway in Turkey. The most notable feature of this project is the 3.3-kilometre-long Izmat Bay suspension bridge – the third largest in the world. Given the group's contributions to the construction sector, Prime Minister

Sharif hoped that it would benefit from the huge business and investment opportunities offered by Pakistan's priority sectors for investment such as hydel and coal power plants, the Karachi-Lahore Motorway and infrastructure development. He also said that the Pakistan Power Park at Gaddani offers a golden opportunity to invest in coal-based power plants.

The Vice Chairman of the Nurool Group, Orguz Carmikli expressed his satisfaction over Pakistan's legal framework for foreign investment and stated that the federal government would provide sovereign guarantees for the construction of dams and energy projects. The company is likely to construct motorways on a build-operate-transfer basis. ■

AFGHANISTAN

Mining matters

An agreement on oil and gas extraction from the Afghan-Tajik basin in northeastern Afghanistan has been signed between the government of Afghanistan and three companies - the Turkish Petroleum International Company (TPIC), Drago Oil (UAE) and the Ghazanfar Group of Afghanistan. The companies are expected to invest \$12 billion in the energy-starved country. A total of 20 firms submitted extraction bids for two fields while eight of them had experience in the field. The signing ceremony took place in Mazar-i-Sharif.

The oil and gas basin, located between Takhar and Jawzjan

provinces, had been discovered in 1957. But the domestic situation in Afghanistan did not allow exploitation of the deposits. According to Jalil Ahmad, an official of the Ministry of Mining of Afghanistan, extraction from the two fields would begin in three to five years, with the firms expected to invest \$12 billion over a period of 12 years.

The fields are estimated to contain 514 million barrels of oil



and 91 billion cubic meters of natural gas. The oil and gas hauled up from the fields is to be used to meet domestic consumption before being exported, the official said. The project will initially create 1,000 jobs – a number that is expected to increase to 12,000 with time. ■

Selling power



2012 agreement between the two countries to export 250 megawatt of power. Initially, in the test-run, ahead of the actual transmission system that began on October 5, 2013, 50 MW of power was supplied to Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) and Indian NTPC Vidyut Vyapar Nigam Ltd (NVTN), a subsidiary of India's National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC), inked a deal on February 28, 2012 to import 250 MW of electricity, following up on a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed during Bangladeshi Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina's 2010 visit to New Delhi.

According to Bangladeshi officials, the BPDB will import 250 MW of

electricity from Indian government's unallocated quota, while another 250 MW is set to be supplied by an Indian private firm called PTC India Limited. The line connecting Bangladesh to India is expected to help establish a SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) electricity grid, with discussion for an undersea power link with Sri Lanka also underway.

Bangladesh's overall electricity generation is now hovering around 6,000 MW, but a demand of over 7,500 MW has caused a severe power shortage in the country. With an estimated projection of electricity consumption at 24,000 MW by 2021, Bangladesh also plans to import power from its neighboring countries Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar. **S**

India has started transmission of electricity to Bangladesh under the

BANGLADESH

Wages of protest

Thousands of garment workers in Bangladesh launched a protest movement to demand higher wages. The protests that spanned over weeks forced authorities to close more than 100 factories located in two industrial districts near Dhaka. A number of factories were also set ablaze by angry protesters. The districts of Gazipur and Narayanganj house hundreds of factories that supply garment products to numerous global brands, including Wal-Mart and H&M. The workers demanded 8,114 takas (\$100) instead of the current monthly minimum wage of 3,000 takas (\$38) – lowest in the world. Factory owners held that it was

difficult for them to significantly raise the minimum wage because of the unwillingness of global brands to pay higher prices amid stiff competition and economic crisis in the West.

Bangladesh is the world's second-largest garment manufacturer after China. It earns \$20 billion a year from garment exports, mainly to the United States and Europe. The sector employs about four million workers, mostly women. The harsh and often unsafe working conditions in Bangladesh's garment industry drew global attention after the April 2013 collapse of an eight-storey factory building in which more than 1,100 people were killed. The



sector has also experienced numerous fires, including one in November 2012 that killed 112 workers. **S**

SRI LANKA

Attractive entrepot

Sri Lanka's Board of Investment hosted an Israeli business delegation led by Anat Bernstein-Reich, Vice President of the Israel-Asia Chamber of Commerce and Chairperson of the Israel-Sri Lanka Chamber of Commerce. The delegation expressed interest in harnessing Sri Lanka's free trade agreements (FTAs) to carry out trade with other countries in the Asian region. Sri Lanka already has

two free trade agreements with India and Pakistan while it is expected that the country would soon enter into a new free trade agreement with China. According to a statement issued by the Sri Lankan Board of Investment, Israeli companies were studying the possibility of using the recently introduced entrepot trade facility. An entrepot is a trading post from where merchandise can be imported and exported without paying import duties, often at a profit. Such a facility would allow Israel to stock up its goods at the Hambantota Port, for re-export to other markets.

A number of Israeli companies currently operate in Sri Lanka. One

of them is the Diamond Cutters Ltd., which has been operating for more than a decade on the island. The company is engaged in cutting and polishing diamonds. The gems are then re-exported to Israel. Some of the diamonds are used by the high-end wristwatch industry. It currently employs 900 workers and has contributed to making Sri Lanka a centre for the diamond industry.

Another company exports tuna fish from Sri Lanka to Israel and Europe. It also promotes tourism to Sri Lanka from Israel and Russia. One area in which the Israeli delegation expressed interest in was breeding of livestock, particularly poultry farming. **S**



NEPAL

Development by collaboration

Nepal's five development partners – Norway, Switzerland, UNICEF, UNFPA and UN Women – have signed a joint MoU for development cooperation with Nepal for a period of five years. The agreement was signed by Nepal's Secretary of Finance, Shanta Raj Subedi and Alf Arne Ramslien, Ambassador of Norway to Nepal. The total estimated cost of the program is US\$ 1,362 million (Rs 136.2 billion). Of the total cost, the Nepalese government will contribute US\$ 1,126 million (Rs 112.6 billion) and the development partners US\$ 236 million (Rs 23.6 billion).

Under this arrangement, Nepal will be provided with financial assistance for the successful implementation of the second phase of the Local

Governance and Community Development Program (LGCDP-II). The first phase of the LGCDP was completed in July 2013. It reached almost one million people, 50 percent of them women, through 40,000 ward citizen forums. The program is said to have upgraded over 8,700 kilometers of roads, renovated 2,150 schools and upgraded 1,031 health facilities and benefitted 1.9 million households by providing community infrastructure on demand.

The LGCDP-II will be executed by the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development and implemented through local bodies. It covers all 75 districts, 58 municipalities and 3,915 VDCs. It is expected to benefit two million households by providing



them community infrastructure. The program will strengthen local governance and ensure that 90 percent of VDC secretaries are in a position to deliver services effectively. **S**

Medal for good service

Maldivian President Mohamed Waheed Hassan conferred the 'Nishaan Muleege Sharafge Izzaiy', one of the highest ranking honors on Chief of the Naval Staff of Pakistan, Admiral Mohamed Asif Sandila, in recognition of the Pakistani Navy's valuable assistance in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami. Admiral Mohamed Asif Sandila was the mission commander of the two Pakistan Naval Ships, P.N.S Tariq and P.N.S Nasr, which were on a goodwill visit to the Maldives when the tsunami hit the country. The Pakistan Navy ships took prompt action by responding to a critical situation and provided support and assistance to the

disaster-affected people. The Pakistan Navy provided vital humanitarian assistance in conducting search and rescue operations, evacuating citizens and tourists from afflicted islands, conducting the initial damage assessment, and providing critical food and relief supplies to the devastated islands in the aftermath of the tsunami that hit the Maldives on December 26, 2004.

Speaking at the function, President Waheed noted that the PN proved to be a source of exemplary service and dedication which was symbolic of the longstanding fraternal relation between the Maldives and Pakistan. In his



address, Admiral Asif Sandila thanked the government and the people of the Maldives for conferring on him the prestigious award and said he considered the award a great honor and pride for himself, the Pakistani Navy and his country.

Nishaan Muleege Sharafge Izzaiy (Order of Distinguished Rule of Muleege) was created in honor of Al-Sultan Mohamed Shamsuddeen and is one of the high-ranking honors conferred by the state. **S**

Fruits of democracy

Bhutan joined the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and became its 163rd member. The country's membership was announced at the opening of the 129th IPU Assembly held in Geneva. The IPU was established in 1889. The union is the focal point for worldwide parliamentary dialogue and works for peace and cooperation among peoples. Bhutan's application to join the IPU was endorsed by Bhutan's first parliament as the country joins the IPU for the first time.

First established in 2008, and renewed through elections in July 2013, Bhutan's National Assembly,



the Tshogdu, has 47 directly elected members of which three are women. Speaker Jigme Zangpo, who led the six-member Bhutanese delegation, said it was a great honor for the parliament and the people of Bhutan

to have acceded to this important international body of parliaments. "We look forward to being part of the global democratic forum and we are confident that our membership will go a long way in building strong and sustained democratic culture and values in our polity," said Jigme Zangpo in his address to the IPU Assembly.

Bhutan has transitioned from an absolute monarchy to a multi-party democracy. The country's journey towards democracy has been unique in the sense that it was actively encouraged by the Bhutanese monarchs. They also lent their full support in bringing about legislative reforms and in drafting the country's constitution. **S**

How Common is the Commonwealth?

The Commonwealth needs to ensure that regional trade agreements do not bring in too much protectionism and inward-looking trade policies. Barriers to non-participating members must be lowered to encourage more liberalization.

By Sijal Fawad

The Commonwealth's efforts to get actively involved in the promotion of regionalism in South Asia are being widely appreciated. The organization is trying to address various emerging and existing policy issues in the region with the support of South Asian think tanks, civil society groups and the academia and by maintaining productive relationships with regional policy experts. Potent as it is, a regional approach to national policy analysis is lauded by many experts. However, questions abound about its efficacy in the face of the even more potent multilateralism.

In today's world, regionalism has resurfaced with a greater force. One will be hard-pressed to find a country that is not a part of at least one regional agreement. It's the developing and emerging countries which particularly weigh the worth of regional agreements in gold, as these are perceived to be critically helpful in steering their economic growth and development in the right direction.

Just as the world is embracing regionalism with open arms, so is the multilateral trading system. This system is complex, but is continuously growing, making the management of regional integration more challenging. The tussle between localism and globalism and the question of which

one is better for a country has left many policymakers and analysts groping for solutions.

The problem can be linked to the perception and function of trade as a whole. Trade between countries is not a mechanical, robotic process with clearly defined procedures and instructional manuals to be followed. Even though the economics of trade have been a subject of intense research in the past, the trading system is a reflection of devices of not just economics but also politics. And, as anyone would know, the room for ambiguity increases and the thin line between white and black blurs, whenever the latter is involved.

Aligning a country's trade standing to either regionalism or multilateralism is not a strategy that should be on the agenda of wise policymakers, especially in the context of developing countries where the need for economic development is crucial. In such instances, coherence between multilateral trade agreements and regional agreements needs to be developed.

Taking into consideration the scholarly literature available and the general opinion of experts and policymakers, the overall consensus seems to be against burgeoning regional trade arrangements. It is based on the hypothesis that

crisscrossing such agreements will lead to greater incoherence, confusion and unpredictability in trade relations. Being involved in various regional and multilateral trade agreements does put a strain on the negotiating prowess of countries, especially if these agreements are undertaken despite a dearth of institutional and human resources.

Notwithstanding this, some important contributions to economic growth and political stability can be attributed to regional trade agreements. Take the case of South Asia. Many economic challenges faced by the region cannot be resolved individually by countries. However, through the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), even smaller countries can vie for markets that otherwise would have been difficult to tap.

As far as welfare gains from RTAs (regional trade agreements) are concerned, the increasing level of trade between member countries may be of advantage to local producers in certain countries which otherwise may not have received the significance they deserved. Competition resulting from targeting similar markets in a culturally-strewn region, and benefits of economies of scale for local producers, now manufacturing for a relatively larger market, are also there. Intra-regional exports have seen quite

a boost for many RTAs, seen most vividly in the case of the European Union.

“The formation of an enlarged regional market space through regional trade liberalization is not perceived as an end in itself but as a stepping-stone towards the future attainment of a single economic, social and cultural grouping, spanning several countries,” said a 2005 United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) report on regionalism in developing countries.

Besides, the political-economic advantages of regional trade agreements are also worth a thought. For instance, developing countries can move closer and quicker to freer trade than they could in a trade agreement at the multilateral level. At the same time, lessons learnt and the experience gained from regional agreements can be applied to multilateral arrangements later. In addition, the requirement that most RTAs have to be compatible with the rules of the World Trade Organization suggests that there is some hint of efforts towards integrating and positively collaborating on multilateral and regional agreements, further strengthening the worth of the latter.

However, is making policies and drafting them for a successful regional arrangement enough? Clearly not. For any regional trade agreement to be successful, implementation and delivery of all negotiated agreements needs to be ensured. It is essential for prioritization to be enforced by bureaucracies and that there is a greater coordination between governmental institutions and non-governmental organizations such as think-tanks. There is also a need for structured processes for implementing regional programs and appraising their progress in collaboration with non-governmental organizations.

At the same time, attempts need to be made to ensure that regional trade agreements do not encourage too much protectionism and inward-

looking trade policies. Barriers to non-participating members need to be lowered for greater liberalization and a more outward-oriented approach and for greater alignment with multilateral agreements. This also implies that weaker trading partners should be given special attention to ensure that the agreement does not put smaller or economically challenged countries at a disadvantage.

Further, strong governance principles and rational resolution of political and divisive issues, especially in a regional bloc like South Asia which is mired in deep-rooted political problems, also make a significant difference when it comes to turning regional agreements into a boon or bane.

What is unique about the South Asian region in particular is the vast variation in the economies of the region. At one end, there are emerging countries such as India which has been the apple of the capitalist world's eye for the past several years. At the other end is war-torn Afghanistan where the concept of economic prosperity is a far-fetched notion. Where this offers considerable opportunities for countries in the regional bloc to unite, it also makes room for a lot of challenges in managing regional agreements, especially when it comes to motivating the relevant ministries of

the respective departments.

As discussed, regional trade agreements have their merits and demerits. The focus needs to be more on developing a deeper coherence between multilateral and regional agreements rather than debating which of the two should be generally preferred, especially when it comes to the inward-oriented, protectionist nature of the latter versus the global focus of the former.

Countries will continue to sign up trade agreements with regional partners and multilateral trade agreements will continue to pose a challenge to many of these proliferating RTAs. However, striking that perfect balance with a regional and global focus, with the ultimate motive of socio-political and economic development, is what countries should strive for. ■

The writer is a student of economics and finance at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London.



Pakistan's Commonwealth membership remained suspended for five years after General Musharraf took over. Incidentally, you were the foreign minister at that time. Do you think the decision was correct? How did it affect the country?

Yes, Pakistan was suspended not once but twice. The first lasted from October 1999 and ended in May 2004, largely due to my efforts. I say this because not everybody paid enough attention to the Commonwealth in the Pakistani decision-making hierarchy. I did because I thought the Commonwealth could play an important role. It is a bridge between 54 nations in the English-speaking world and its influence stretches across the Atlantic. I anyway believe that Pakistan should not be isolated.

I worked very hard with the then General Secretary of the Commonwealth, Don McKinnon, to get Pakistan back into the organization. After the 2002 elections, I had to convince him that we follow democratic practices and at the same time also convinced President Musharraf that he should give up his uniform.

The Commonwealth Ministerial Actions Group ensured that the Harare declaration, the benchmark of determining democratic credentials of various members, was followed. I tried my best to assure the members that Pakistan fulfilled those requirements although President Musharraf was still wearing a military uniform and that was a deviation. However, our argument that Pakistan had an independent media, an independent judiciary with a vibrant civil society, worked and the suspension was removed. But we were again suspended after President Musharraf enforced the State of Emergency in November 2007.

How much has Pakistan benefitted from its association with the Commonwealth?

First we have to decide what we mean by benefit. From my perspective,

“Pakistan, if it acts responsibly, will play an important role, not just in the Commonwealth but also on the world stage.”

Arsla Jawaid talks to Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, in this exclusive interview.

Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri is a politician and diplomat who served as Pakistan's Foreign Minister from 2002-2007.

He is currently a senior foreign affairs advisor to the Chairman of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI).

isolation is something that a country like Pakistan cannot afford, given its difficult and strategic location. With the situation in Afghanistan, we are at the center of a storm. We need to be understood by the international community.

The Commonwealth has some very important countries as its members. The first advantage is that you do not vacate any conceivable place where

you can speak for Pakistan and the aspirations of its people.

The Commonwealth also provides a bridge with countries that believe in democracy, human rights, peace and development. These are essential values from the point of view of Pakistan or any civilized country.

On a more mundane level, technically-focused programs also



benefit Pakistan. Since 1959, almost 30,000 individuals have benefitted from Commonwealth scholarships of which Pakistan has been a major beneficiary.

A large number of programs also focus on building small business sectors, supporting youth participation, promoting the growth of business councils, organizing the

Commonwealth Games, etc. They also organize observers for elections in various member states. In technical assistance, the Commonwealth provides experts to draft laws and commission studies.

Then I think the Commonwealth also plays an important role in promoting development and peace with a proactive approach.

Can the Commonwealth help Pakistan in its terrorism and extremism problems?

We have to help ourselves. We don't seem to be doing a good job of that. Once the international community is convinced that Pakistan is following focused policies, the support will come from many parts of the world but to expect the Commonwealth to help

us is not a very realistic proposition. It can help by providing experts to draft laws as it has done in some countries.

Pakistan has some very serious problems that have more to do with our policy on Afghanistan and the drawdown of American troops. I think yes, it can play an indirect role but not a major one.

What role can the Commonwealth play in conflict resolution, especially in South Asia?

To be very specific, Kashmir is the main issue for Pakistan and India and India has been singularly stubborn on this issue by refusing all sorts of mediation. The Commonwealth basically works on consensus of consultation. This is true for any international grouping. Immediately after independence in 1947, the Commonwealth did make efforts. However, the United Nations has failed miserably and to expect the Commonwealth to do something is unrealistic and unfair.

While the Commonwealth condemns human rights violations in Sri Lanka's civil war between the army and the Tamil Tigers, it is also holding the next Commonwealth Heads Of Governments Meeting in Colombo.. How do you see this?

An organization of this nature is not a court but an association of countries. Countries have bilateral relations and do not operate on idealistic principles. They operate on principles with a pragmatic and practical approach. I suppose the Commonwealth has a benchmark for violations of human rights. The Sri Lankan government has not yet been convicted of violations of human rights though both the government and the Tamil Tigers have been accused. There have been visits by representatives of the UNHRC. I think the government is also providing access to those who object to its record and are investigating this matter.

This is a political decision and if there was a legal judgment against the government, then I think it would create problems for the Commonwealth Secretariat to host a conference there but that hasn't happened so far.

What is the future of the Commonwealth in the presence of such blocs as the European Union, ASEAN, SAARC and the African Union?

SAARC, ASEAN, and the EU are regional trading blocs. Contiguity is an important factor in the promotion of trade. Although there have been attempts to create a Commonwealth Union or a free trade area, it is unrealistic to expect the group to have a common foreign policy.

What role can the Commonwealth play to support emerging economies?

Essentially it can play the role of providing technical assistance. I don't suspect they have the sort of funds that the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank or the Islamic Development Bank have. When you talk of playing a role to support emerging economies, it cannot be a direct role. Indirectly, however, it can fund certain studies or books to provide guidance.

You recently said in an international moot that the "planet had to face two world wars because of the failure of the then global powers to accommodate the rise of Germany and Japan". Do you think such suppression of emerging powers by existing world powers still persists?

Of course it very much does exist. America's pivot to its Asia policy is an example of this. America is all of a sudden interested in the Pacific region. There are key efforts aimed at containing China in its own backyard though I don't think this is a wise thing.

China has one great advantage. It's a major banker to the United States. I think the total amount of money owed

by them is about \$1.4 trillion and the US cannot afford to ignore China. But the US is looking rather suspiciously at the rise of China. I can only hope that the US leaders understand that you have to accommodate the rise of countries that are emerging on the international arena. If you don't do that, conflict is inevitable. However, I don't see a comparable type of hatred, animosity or antagonism that existed in the first quarter of the 20th century. I think one reason is that most world leaders today realize the horrific nature of weapons. It would really mean mutually assured destruction. A balance of terror does provide a degree of security. I do hope that states will play their role and learn from what history has taught them.

How do you see Pakistan in context of the Commonwealth?

Pakistan is bound to play an important role simply because of its sheer size. We also have old Commonwealth connections - for instance, our system of education, the language that unites us and the values we believe in such as the rule of law and human rights. Pakistan is one of the three nuclear-armed Commonwealth countries and probably the second largest defense force after India.

Pakistan, if it acts responsibly, will play an important role not just in the Commonwealth but also on the world stage. When I was Foreign Minister, we had a relatively more stable country, a more stable economy and were very respected in the comity of nations at that time. Unfortunately, we made a mess of ourselves in the last 5 years. If you're unstable at home you cannot have a successful foreign policy. Pakistan is well placed to play an important role but we have to put our own house in order first. **S**

The interviewer is a Contributing Editor with SouthAsia Magazine. She contributes articles on foreign policy and development issues to various national and international publications.

Ideals into Action



The Commonwealth can take credit for some work it has done so far but it needs to rejuvenate itself by putting more emphasis on economic and trade links.

By Jamil Nasir

It is a harsh fact that people pay scant regard to what you did yesterday. They are interested in what you are doing today, and – just as importantly – what you plan to do tomorrow. No international organization has an inherent right to exist: it must constantly prove itself useful to its members and their changing concerns,” wrote former Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, Sir Donald McKinnon, in an article published in the Commonwealth Year

Book in 2008.

The Commonwealth is unique in the sense that most of its members fought against the colonialism of Great Britain. Strangely though, after gaining independence, most only chose to maintain their bonds with their colonizer in the form of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth has managed to survive over the last sixty years, though in a very loose bond, despite the fact that revulsion against colonialism was perhaps the

most prominent feature of twentieth-century international politics.

Its proponents say that the survival of the Commonwealth is a testament to the fact that it is here to stay and the question of its relevance is itself irrelevant. If it did not perform well, why would countries seek its membership? It is also claimed that the Commonwealth is the only global organization where the giants and small countries can speak as equals. Its supporters further argue that the

Commonwealth is a success story of British foreign policy as Britain has kept together nations belonging to every region and religion – an achievement no other organization can boast of except the UN.

But the key questions are: what does the modern Commonwealth signify? What does it stand for? The mere existence of the organization for the last six decades is not sufficient to prove its relevance and success. Is it not a mere club where the players of the member countries meet at the Commonwealth Games or the heads of governments meet for meaningless

itself relevant to the aspirations of the member countries.

The Commonwealth, as it stands today, is just like a club of nations which are together due to an accident of history, i.e. the colonization by the British Empire. Theoretically, it stands for lofty ideals like upholding democracy, the rule of law and protection of human rights. But how much influence did it actually exert to protect human rights and to establish the rule of law? It is not easy to quantify the role of the Commonwealth in translating these ideals into action.

Furthermore, they may be

regardless of race or creed and the inalienable right to free democratic processes. It is an ambitious agenda and the Commonwealth may take credit for some work that it did to end racial discrimination and to protect democratic processes, but what about economic development?

There is hardly any concrete initiative to promote trade and investment or, for that matter, to provide aid to the poor members of the club. Traditionally, the Commonwealth has put more emphasis on the political aspect, while completely ignoring the economic aspects.

This is a fast changing world where economy and trade are the real driving forces of cooperation. Almost every country of the world is a member of one trade group or another. Bilateral, regional, and multilateral cooperation in the domains of trade is the norm of the day. The Commonwealth has two big advantages which it can capitalize on to foster economic and trade ties among its member countries.

First, the economic links established between Britain and its colonies (members of the Commonwealth) during the colonial period. These could be strengthened through trade preferences. Second, the English language, which could play a vital role in deepening economic and trade ties as a means to business communication. Empirical evidence suggests that the commonality of language is an important factor in boosting trade ties.

The relevance of the Commonwealth will keep declining if it does not balance its political and economic aspects and fails to offer something productive to the people. Focus on enhancing trade among the Commonwealth countries should become its top priority. Commonwealth membership should offer some tangible benefits to the member countries and this is possible

The Commonwealth needs to rejuvenate itself by putting more emphasis on broadening economic and trade links. Instead of pledging commitment to lofty ideals, it should work to remove trade barriers and facilitate the movement of people across countries.

chit-chat? The fact of the matter is that the Commonwealth comes across as an inactive organization when compared to its contemporary counterparts.

The Royal Commonwealth Society conducted a poll in 2009. The results indicated that 30 percent of the British in the age bracket of 18-34 years could not identify any member of the Commonwealth. About 79 percent people of the same age group could not name any activities that the Commonwealth undertook. This poll confirms at least two things about the organization. One, the Commonwealth suffers from a visibility problem. Two, its slide into irrelevance would be much faster in the coming years if it did not metamorphose its role to make

interpreted differently by each member country. Certainly, protection of human rights and the rule of law are ideals worth pursuing. But expectations of the Commonwealth members in this regard differ according to their own perspectives. For example, the organization is criticized by some members for not going hard on Malawi and Uganda for outlawing same – sex marriages. Acceptance of homosexuality and gay marriages has a lot to do with cultural and religious norms of a nation.

The Harare Declaration of 1991 sets the Commonwealth's core set of principles and values, which include world peace, economic development, the rule of law, the narrowing of the wealth gap, an end to racial discrimination, liberty

through expanding economic and trade ties. Trade can turn out to be an important dimension of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth Business Council (CBC), created in 1997 to promote trade, investment and business among the Commonwealth members, needs to be invigorated. It is estimated that the 'Commonwealth factor' can make investment and trade 10-15 percent cheaper with other Commonwealth countries.

Trade facilitation can be an important area to work on for augmenting intra-Commonwealth trade. In this regard, facilitation at the borders (making customs clearance procedures simpler) and removal of non-tariff barriers should become the focus of the Commonwealth

Business Council. Movement of people also needs to be facilitated by removing undue visa restrictions. The Commonwealth must seize the opportunities of globalization and this is possible only by working on tangible goals.

The Commonwealth needs to rejuvenate itself by putting more emphasis on broadening economic and trade links. The relevance of the Commonwealth in the fast-changing world will depend on the role it can play to improve the lives of the people of its member states. Issuance of communiqués at the end of summits without giving any timelines for translation of wishes into reality will not work. Instead of pledging commitment to lofty ideals,

the Commonwealth needs to focus on specifics such as removal of trade barriers and facilitating the movement of people across countries.

The process of reinvention requires the demonstration of political will. Unless Commonwealth member countries address the imperatives of globalization, economic cooperation and human resource development, the organization will remain on the periphery of the global system. The Commonwealth countries have a challenge at hand. Only time will tell if they have the dynamism, creativity and innovation to walk the talk. **S**

The writer is a Chevening Fellow on Economic Governance and a World Bank scholar.

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The Commonwealth — an overview

- The Commonwealth is one of the world's oldest political organizations.
- The term 'Commonwealth' was first used by British Liberal politician Lord Rosebery in Adelaide, Australia, in 1884. During a famous speech, he referred to the British Empire as 'a Commonwealth of Nations'.
- It is an association of 54 independent countries.
- Its roots go back to the British Empire when some countries were ruled, directly or indirectly, by Britain. In the course of time, some of these countries became self-governing but chose to retain Britain's monarch as their head of state. They formed the British

Commonwealth of Nations.

- The Commonwealth, in its current form, came into being in 1949. In that year, the Indian Constituent Assembly adopted the country's constitution and India became a republic. However, it still wished to remain a member of the association. To accommodate the country, Commonwealth leaders agreed that membership did not have to be based on allegiance to the British Crown. As a result, the London Declaration of 1949 came into force that declared that Commonwealth members were "free and equal members of the Commonwealth of Nations, freely co-operating in the pursuit of peace, liberty

and progress." Since then, independent countries from Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and the Pacific have joined The Commonwealth.

- The last two countries to join The Commonwealth – Rwanda and Mozambique – have no historical ties to the British Empire.
- Fifty-four countries are members of The Commonwealth and they are amongst the world's largest, smallest, richest and poorest countries.
- Thirty-two of the members are classified as small states – countries with a population size of 1.5 million people or less – many of them island nations.

- The Commonwealth is home to 2.2 billion citizens and over 60 percent of these are under the age of 30.
- The largest member of the Commonwealth is Canada, at nearly 10 million square kilometers.
- The most populous Commonwealth country is India, with nearly 1.1 billion people.
- The smallest member is Nauru, with only 13,000 inhabitants.
- The Commonwealth also includes the world's driest and most sparsely populated country: Namibia.
- Since 1977, Commonwealth Day has been celebrated throughout the Commonwealth on the second Monday in March.
- All members subscribe to The Commonwealth's values and principles outlined in The Commonwealth Charter.

functions.

- There is no maximum fixed term for the head of The Commonwealth. The choice of successive heads is made collectively by Commonwealth leaders.
- There are 'Realms', Commonwealth countries which have The Queen as Sovereign, and 'Monarchies', which have their own monarch as head of State.

Commonwealth organizations

There is a vast network of Commonwealth societies, institutions, associations, organizations and charities that work towards improving people's lives. Some of them are:

The Commonwealth Secretariat

It implements the decisions and plans of Commonwealth leaders. It also

encourages the development and sharing of open learning and distanced education knowledge, resources and technologies.

Commonwealth Foundation

It works towards the development of civil society and strives for more effective, responsive and accountable governance with civil society participation, which contributes to improved development outcomes.

Royal Commonwealth Ex-Services League

RCEL provides financial assistance to Commonwealth veterans in need who served the Crown and who are resident outside the UK. In 2003 it became the Royal Commonwealth Ex-Services League by order of Queen Elizabeth II.



- The policies are shaped by member countries, all of whom have an equal say on decisions affecting them.
- Leaders of member countries meet every two years to discuss issues affecting the Commonwealth and the wider world at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM).
- All members have an equal say – regardless of their size or economic stature. This ensures even the smallest member countries have a voice in shaping The Commonwealth.
- Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II is head of the Commonwealth. Her role includes a number of symbolic

organizes meetings among members where global and Commonwealth issues are discussed. The Secretariat also works towards promoting member countries' interests at international forums. It offers advice and provides experts who share their skills and experience with governments and institutions.

The Commonwealth Secretariat partners with other international and Commonwealth organizations to deliver its work.

Commonwealth of Learning

An intergovernmental organization, the Commonwealth of Learning

Institute of Commonwealth Studies

The Institute of Commonwealth Studies is the only postgraduate academic institution in the UK devoted to the study of the history and politics of the Commonwealth and of Commonwealth countries.

Commonwealth Forestry Association

The mission of the CFA is to promote conservation of forests and forest lands. Its vision is to promote the wellbeing of the world's forests and those who benefit from them. The membership of the CFA is open to nationals of all countries, not just Commonwealth countries. [S](#)

The PPP and its Future

Before re-inventing the party, Asif Ali Zardari must re-invent himself.

By S.G. Jilane

Asif Zardari's exit from the President's House had all the trappings of "Paradise Lost." For five years he had been living there secure as if in a cocoon. Now he is out under the open sky. His first trip, after leaving office, was to Lahore where he was greeted by party faithful with chants of "Welcome, Welcome," and Aitzaz Ahsan stammering two verses from the Quran. Since then he has not been heard of. Nor, even, Bilawal.

Apparently they are busy picking up the pieces while the party, co-chaired by the father and son, lies flat on its face, traumatized by its rout in the last election, after ruling the country's political roost for more than four decades. There was a time when the party enjoyed mass support in all the four provinces with the status of a truly federal party. Benazir Bhutto was appropriately called '*wifaq ki zanjeer*' the chain that lassoed the federating units. Today, it has been reduced to the level of a purely regional party, confined to rural Sindh; the few seats it still retains in the Punjab do not alter the picture.

The situation raises the question that whether the last PPP stint in power was its swan song? Or can the Phoenix rise again? Does the party have what it takes to resume the status of a national party? Party loyalists optimistically recall the PPP's performance in 1997.

That was even a worse debacle than now as it won only 16 National Assembly seats. In contrast, the party won 33 NA seats in 2013. They also insist that the PPP's 'national' image remains intact and will enable it to bounce back.

But times have changed. The Bhutto father and daughter were charismatic leaders. Z.A. Bhutto was a powerhouse of energy. Berkeley had formed his *weltanschauung* and groomed him into a leader of men. In addition, he collected a galaxy of dedicated people around him – people with proven talent and hands that were squeaky clean, such as J.A. Rahim, Yusuf Buch, Hafeez Pirzada, Dr. Mubashir Hasan, Sheikh Rashid, et al.

Benazir was to ZAB what Indira Gandhi was to Nehru. At a young age she had met people like Henry Kissinger and Indira Gandhi in her father's company. Oratory and theatrics she inherited from her father. Harvard and Oxford added further sheen. And to supplement it all was her own physical charm. Just as ZAB could mesmerize a mammoth crowd, so could BB hold a multitude in thrall. That was the "weapon" that helped the party's rebound after the 1997 rout.

Circumstances also favored the PPP. Both in 1970 and 1988 its thumping victories were due as much to popular distaste for prolonged

military rule as to the attraction of the party's egalitarian programs.

The decline began with Mr. Zardari's debut in government. Tancu Ciller and Margaret Thatcher did not allow their spouses to interfere in governance, nor did they give them any office. The same applies to Angela Merkel of Germany and Dilma Rousseff of Brazil today. In contrast, BB appointed Mr. Zardari as a cabinet minister, while also distancing herself from her father's loyal supporters.

Corruption burgeoned to such proportions that the New York Times published a special report titled "House of Graft." Mr. Zardari received the label of "Mr. 10 percent" which became an instant international hit and still emblazons his image like a tattoo.

Since he took charge of the party, the decline became steeper as tested stalwarts were replaced by cronies and personal loyalty substituted party loyalty. In sharp contrast to ZAB, Zardari's cabinet boasted such people as Yusuf Raza Gilani and Raja Pervez Ashraf whose only excellence was sycophancy.

Survival being foremost for Zardari, he focused all his energies on securing his flanks by keeping all political parties in good humor, instead of sparing some moments for a viable public agenda. In the May elections,



therefore, instead of articulating any new program, the party fell back on old clichés like projecting the PPP as a party of ‘martyrs’ – a gimmick that failed.

This is the PPP’s moment of truth. The Tehrik-e-Insaf has emerged as a third political force to compete for the trophy of a “federal” party. At the same time, after remaining in power for a full term, the PPP can no longer draw upon mass sympathy as it did in the past. It is not a victim of oppression anymore. Nor can it play the anti-military rule card, because the country seems well set on the course of democracy.

The PPP’s electoral position has eroded remarkably since it first emerged on the political scene in 1970. From 39 percent in 1970 and 1988, the party’s vote share plunged to 15 percent in 2013, lower even than that of the PTI, which polled 18 percent of the vote nationally.

At its birth, the PPP had swept the people off their feet by being a voice for the underprivileged. That magic has been exorcised by Mr. Zardari. ZAB interacted with the rank and file; Mr. Zardari sidelined them and introduced a courtier culture that contradicted the party’s populist ethos. As one writer summed it up, “Once a party of change, the PPP was unable to define what it stood for any more. Efforts to project the party’s ‘liberal’ outlook on social issues were not matched by policy actions to substantiate such claims.”

Hereditary or dynastic politics is also a major factor in the PPP’s plummeting fortunes. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari’s appeal, based only on legacy came unstuck during the elections, only because, he could not “connect” with the audience. After two generations, only a surname is not enough to claim succession to the Bhutto legacy. One

must ‘earn’ a position of authority in the party through actual contribution, which Bilawal has yet to make.

People expect the party to offer answers to their current problems, beyond “*roti, kapra, makan.*” But under Mr. Zardari it has failed to offer any solutions.

Yet, the party can be resurrected, though it will need a virtual overhaul of policy and practice. As a first step, Zardari must reinvent himself. His foremost task must be to shed the labels of “Mr. 10 percent” and “*Yaron ka yar*” (cronyism). If he can do that, besides giving the slogan “corruption *hatao*” like Indira Gandhi’s “*gharibi hatao*”, and manages to collect a bunch of talented people like ZAB did, the party may rise again. ■

The writer is a senior political analyst and former editor of SouthAsia Magazine.



An Agenda of Violence

Despite an offer of peace talks, the TTP continues its strategy of terrorism. The time has come for the Pakistan government and military to change tactics.

By Javed Ansari

It is quite annoying for the average person to note that the Pakistan government seems to be cooling its heels – or is confused – over the talk offer made by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) some time back. The All Parties Conference (APC) that was subsequently convened in Islamabad to flesh out the matter and chalk out a strategy also appears to be an eyewash.

On the face of it, the impression is that it has been all talk and no action on the part of Mr. Nawaz Sharif and his government. Perhaps it was this silence that prompted the TTP leader, Hakimullah Mehsud, to invite a BBC reporter for a rare interview. While bomb attacks and killings continued across Pakistan, the TTP chief had no qualms in saying that the Pakistan government was not quite serious

about going ahead with the talks. Hakimullah Mehsud said things to the effect that he did not have much confidence in the intentions of the Pakistan government since he had not seen any serious move from the other end and that messages had only come to him through the media. This, he seemed to say, was not enough and not acceptable for him and his group.

It was quite strange though that

while Mehsud was making overtures of peace, his own TTP had launched terror attacks in different provinces of Pakistan and had again killed a number of innocent people. What did this in effect point to – an intention on the part of the Pakistani Taliban to conduct serious negotiations with the government or to carry on with the terror regardless and to continue to push their agenda of violence?

It may be recalled that the government's peace initiative vis-a-vis the Taliban had already seen a major setback when a high-ranking Army officer – the GOC of Malakand, Maj. Gen. Sanaullah Niazi – and two other officers were killed in an IED blast. In the days that followed, it was no other but the TTP that claimed responsibility for the attack.

If Mr. Hakimullah Mehsud was so unhappy with the attitude of the Pakistan government and let out his venom in the BBC interview, he and his associates could have done a service to peace by holding on to a policy of restraint and created an enabling environment that would have paved the way for peace talks rather than killing senior Pakistan army officers. As a matter of fact, the TTP subsequently resorted to even more intensified terrorist attacks and created so much havoc across the country that if they hoped people from among the Pakistani masses to back them, they had certainly lost quite a bit of support.

The Pakistani Taliban is a coalition of militant groups known formally as the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan. It was created in 2007 under the direct influence of al Qaeda. The TTP has declared war on Pakistan – its own country – and has targeted government institutions, politicians, security personnel and civilians. The group is separate from the Afghan Taliban.

Some analysts are of the view that since the TTP has grown in size and proportions and today comprises more militant groups than what it had originally contended for, those

among the grouping who want talks with the Pakistan government have been outnumbered by those who are for continued violence and bloodshed against the state and its people. There may have been efforts on part of the TTP, though, to distance itself from the 'new' groups but it seems like a long shot.

Despite the military leadership's participation in the APC and its saying 'Okay, go ahead with peace talks', there are also some in the security establishment who say that the resolution passed by the APC was a sort of surrender and that accepting the TTP demands would look like Pakistan had conceded defeat to a terrorist group which had let loose a reign of terror and had killed more than 40,000 military personnel and civilians.

In fact, the TTP has made such outlandish demands that these could prove a hindrance to the talks rather than facilitating them.

To begin with, they want to talk through a tribal jirga and are willing to provide it full security. Further, they want that Pakistan should be ruled through a Shariah-based system and the existing constitution of the country should be discarded altogether since, in their opinion, it has no place in the way they look at things. The TTP want to make Pakistan an Islamic state that would conform to their narrow interpretation of Islam. They have also demanded an end to drone attacks, an end to Pakistan's cooperation with the U.S. for its war in Afghanistan and compensation to locals for deaths or property damage from past U.S. drone strikes. Even if these demands are fulfilled, the Taliban say they would continue fighting for an Islamic state in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

So complex is the issue and so unending the TTP's demands that public opinion is certainly divided over what sort of talks should take place with the militants – or whether any talks should take place at all. On the one hand is the willingness, expressed by

none else but the prominent Pakistani political leader, Imran Khan that the TTP should be allowed to open an office in Pakistan. The politician has been severely criticized for backing the TTP in this manner and some have even said that this tantamounts to according recognition to the TTP and giving it the status of a separate state. The long list of demands that the Taliban leadership has forwarded to the Pakistan government is said to be a big roadblock as well.

Perhaps the time has come for Mr. Nawaz Sharif and his government to show some gumption and devise a counter-terrorism strategy. Instead of listening to the TTP's demands with the kind of patience they have displayed so far, the Prime Minister and the military commanders must draw up a different strategy and strike at the Taliban with the force the country is capable of. They need to realize that this is the one and only language that these terrorists and militants understand. Instead of going into fruitless exercises like APCs and peace talks, the government and the military needs to devise a joint strategy that would make targeted action possible and would strike at the very heart of the TTP terror machine.

To quote Pakistan's army chief General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, terrorists would not be allowed "to take advantage of the military's support to the political process."

The General says: "While it is understandable to give peace a chance through a political process... no one should have any misgivings that we would let terrorists coerce us into accepting their terms."

"The Army has the ability and the will to take the fight to the terrorists."

Since General Kayani won't be in charge of the army for very long now, let's hope his successor would feel the same way and would be willing to take the fight to the TTP's doorstep. ■

The writer is Editor of this magazine and a regular contributor on political subjects.

India has a land mass spreading over 3,166,414 km², with 35 states. It has a population of more than 1.21 billion according to the 2011 census. It is also the world's largest democracy. The Lower House of Parliament – the Lok Sabha – represents some 543 constituencies and has 552 members. Scores of political parties, both major and minor, contest elections and the number of candidates run into the thousands. Voters present a picturesque panorama with their linguistic, ethnic and religious

or a mega carnival, given the pageantry associated with the election campaign.

Entry into the Lok Sabha is the biggest prize in Indian politics. Each constituency has an average of one million voters whom candidates must persuade in order to win the prize. The rigor of the exercise a candidate has to go through has been chronicled in a book by Mavendra

The Grand Circus

With its pageantry, Indian elections next year may still look like a grand circus despite the use of new technology.

By S.G. Jilanee

diversity. And the mammoth, multi-purpose poll is held in phases that last about a month.

Next year (2014), India will hold its 16th general elections since independence. Candidates have already begun their groundwork. But, the entire country will be electrified once the election schedule is announced. Actions of candidates will lend it the look of 'The Greatest Show on Earth' aka the Barnum and Bailey Circus of the Unites States,

Singh who campaigned and lost in the 2009 election.

The first step is to win the nomination of one's party; then "to canvass for weeks and months in cities, towns, villages and hamlets; working out voter expectations and deploy scarce funds, track the campaigns of rivals, make calculations from hard data but also follow one's hunches, give dozens of speeches a day in an essentially oral and visual political culture, and finally, to sift truth from



TIONS

lie, fact and rumor.”

Each step presents a daunting challenge and tests the capability of a candidate to the utmost. For example, Singh termed his own experience of campaigning for two months “both

As mobile phones and the use of internet become more widespread, it provides a new campaign platform to the contesting parties. Some political parties have started sending “catchy messages to voters through mobile phones.” Many candidates have launched their own websites to attract voters.

The Bharatiya Janata Party, for example, has set up a team to generate campaign slogans to be transmitted via mobile phones and emails. By using SMS and email, the candidates can directly target urban voters who may otherwise be apathetic. Mobile phone numbers and email addresses of voters are, therefore, being compiled by political parties.

The advantages of the new technology are immense. For instance, during door-to-door campaign a candidate often cannot meet every voter in a household, because some may be away at work or elsewhere. So, he notes down their mobile numbers and sends them text messages to seek their votes. It is very much like a personal meeting and one-to-one talk. Besides, mobiles phones and text messages also make it easier for candidates to coordinate with their workers during election meetings.

Moreover, SMS-based campaigns are comparatively cheaper than the traditional media. Therefore, in the coming elections, it is SMS that will rule as an effective propaganda vehicle. What better method to reach out to hundreds of thousands of voters simultaneously than a cell phone.

Bharatiya Janata Party's shadow prime minister, Narendra Modi, is among the few political leaders to embrace the new technology in a big way. From Facebook, Twitter and now 3D, he spares no opportunity to be heard.

In the 2012 election of Gujarat's state assembly, Modi became the first Indian politician to use the 3D

technology for political campaigning in India. On one occasion he addressed people in 52 different places in Gujarat. The novelty of the 3D method was such that even many housewives switched over from tele-serials to his speech.

In yet another first for an Indian politician, Modi recently hung out on Google+ and answered questions of his followers during a two-hour video broadcast, which was watched by 82,000 people live on Youtube from 116 countries. In a week from the hangout, the video got nearly 555,000 views.”

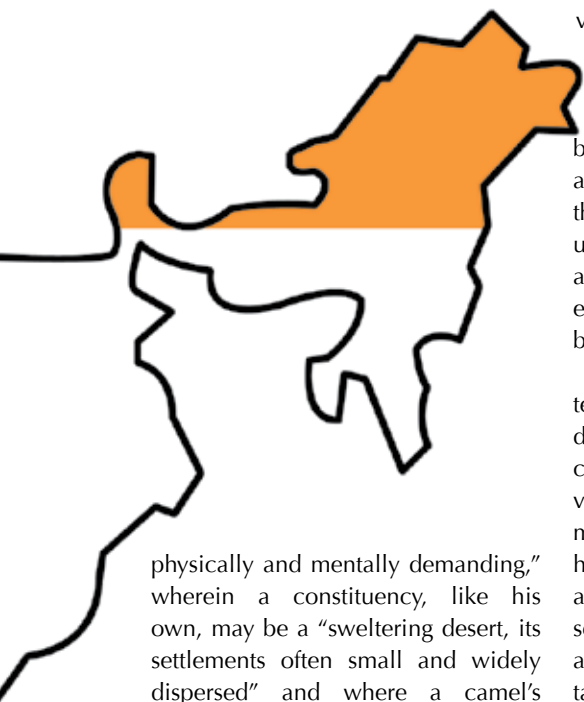
According to an Indian blog, “Modi had more than 3 lakh people in his G+ circle. He crossed one million followers on Twitter and displayed his speech and other important events on his website live. Modi also had over one million fans on his Facebook page where he posted videos, pictures and excerpts from his speeches.

That was then, when the contest was for the office of chief minister of Gujarat. At stake now is the country's highest political office – prime ministership. To prepare for this ‘Greatest Show on Earth’, Narendra Modi has further perfected his propaganda tools.

However, while new technology is largely abuse-free, the role of the media is often diabolical. One research has found that “many big media houses now routinely work out deals with political parties whereby lightly rewritten PR copy praising the candidate's achievements is published, often on the front pages, as news.”

One of the primary tasks for the Election Commission in next year's election will, therefore, be to find a way of putting an end to this practice. **S**

The writer is a senior political analyst and former editor of SouthAsia. Magazine.



physically and mentally demanding,” wherein a constituency, like his own, may be a “sweltering desert, its settlements often small and widely dispersed” and where a camel's back is the only available means of transport.

Posters, banners and music; flags, festoons and graffiti and candidates traveling on especially crafted coaches that resemble ancient chariots (*rath*) have been the usual stock in trade at election time. They still have their use and will be in full play in the next election. But their impact is on the wane.

Enters new technology. This is the age of mobile phones, internet, Twitter, Facebook, email and SMS (Short Message Service). These gadgets are widely and effectively replacing many old practices. In the coming elections, political parties and candidates are relying increasingly on new technology and the social media to reach out to voters.

Afghanistan will witness the withdrawal of NATO and ISAF forces in 2014. While there are major concerns vis-à-vis the security and stability of the country following the departure of international forces, how will this move affect the Afghan women is an issue of equal significance.

Women make up 48.8 percent of the total population of Afghanistan. From 1996 to 2001 – the period when the Taliban ruled the country – women were denied education, employment and freedom of movement. There was

No wonder then that Afghanistan had a Gender Inequality Index value of 0.712 in 2012, giving it a rank of 147 in 148 countries. In a 2009 survey conducted by The Asia Foundation, the leading problems identified for Afghan women (in order of priority) were education, lack of job opportunities and lack of women's rights and domestic violence.

Against this backdrop, the prospect of female representation in the Afghan parliament seems promising. For the first time in the country's history, 27.6 percent of the total seats were reserved

advocates women's rights in Pakistan, showed that female parliamentarians the world over ardently support legislation that prioritizes women's concern and are also in the lead in making efforts to combat gender-based violence.

Women politicians and leaders in Afghanistan have been actively fighting for equal opportunities for women in education and participation in the labor force and also champion other causes such as women's protection and security.

Women activists have been

Struggling Female Parliamentarians

Why is female representation in the parliament such a pressing issue in Afghanistan?

By Hadia Majid

no concept of women's representation or participation in politics. But the condition of Afghan women has considerably improved after the collapse of the Taliban regime. Now, nearly three million girls attend school and maternal and infant mortality rates have also declined.

Yet, even today, significant gender gaps exist in almost all social and development areas. For instance, in 2012 the percentage of population with at least secondary level of education was 5.8 for women and 34 for men while the employment rate was 15.7 percent for women and 80.3 percent for men. In 2012, the maternal mortality ratio in Afghanistan was 460 per 100,000 live births while the average corresponding figure for South Asia was 203.

for women in the upper and lower houses of the parliament in 2012. However, further legislation resulted in the removal of the electoral quota law. This decision received harsh criticism and was later recalled as a result of efforts by female legislators.

The final version of the bill reduced the provincial quota to 20 percent. Even this was met by strong protests by women's rights groups and the media. Yet, despite the reduced quota, Afghanistan's ratio of women representation in parliament stays above the South Asian average of 18.5 percent.

Why is female representation in parliament such a pressing issue in the Afghan context?

A 2012 survey conducted by the Aurat Foundation, an NGO that

campaigning for women's rights since the collapse of the Taliban regime. International groups such as Amnesty International have provided extensive guidelines about how to engage in effective activism to promote women's rights.

In 2012, the 112th Congress of the United States introduced the Afghan Women and Girls Security Promotion Act which required the "Department of Defense to develop a strategy to promote the security of Afghan women and girls during the security transition process". Sadly, the bill was never enacted.

As involvement of the Taliban in Afghan politics grows, attacks on girl's schools as well as targeting of female leaders and politicians has increased. Today, a member of the Afghan

parliament, someone who was a vocal advocate of women's rights, is looking for international asylum due to concerns for her safety.

Female mobility constraints also persist, especially in the southern and eastern provinces of the country, where highly traditional practices are still followed. Women in these areas are confined to their homes with little access to education or employment and hardly any say in household decisions.

Efforts to pass the Afghan Women's Bill of Rights in 2003 and a reduction in female subordination in the social and economic areas have been met with considerable resistance. Even

male-dominated society. With conditions quite similar to the ones during the Taliban regime, there are fears that the hard-fought gains of the last decade may be lost.

Going forward, the electoral performance of women in the upcoming 2014 and 2015 elections will be crucial in determining their position in Afghanistan's socio-economic and political landscape.

In August 2013, The Asia Foundation along with the Independent Election Commission (IEC) of Afghanistan, women members of the parliament, and the deputy minister of women's affairs, launched a project called "Increasing Women's

and potential female candidates to encourage women to run in the upcoming elections.

A second significant aspect of the project was its focus on dialogue with traditional and religious scholars and other community members to impress upon them the importance of female participation in the political and larger public arena. This engagement of religious leaders is especially relevant as it is mainly the conservative elements in Afghan society that are mainly responsible for the suppression of women.

A rise in opportunities for women and a closing of gender-based gaps is possible only if the Afghan society



President Karzai's 2009 Elimination of Violence Against Women Law, that would make domestic and public violence against women punishable, has seen no action in parliament.

In this situation, and with the deadline for the withdrawal of the international forces looming, women are becoming increasingly concerned about a further deterioration in their status in Afghanistan's conservative,

Political Participation and Dialogue Opportunities in Afghanistan", with the support of the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID).

The primary aim of this project was to ensure women's participation in the 2014 and 2015 electoral processes, both as candidates and voters. It also promised training to women members of parliament, provincial councilors

becomes more open to women's role in the public space. In the end, it is not just the number of women involved in the electoral process with access to public spaces that matters, but what these women are able to achieve with such access. ■

She is an Assistant Professor of Economics at the Lahore University of Management Sciences.

War Crime Trials

Pro-'independence' forces in Bangladesh waited for four decades to try those they perceived as collaborators against establishment of the state, despite persistent opposition from inside and outside the country.

By Munir Ishrat Rahmani

Pakistan was carved out of British India in August 1947 as a result of Indian Muslims' demand for a homeland. East Bengal had played a very significant role in that movement for independence and formed the eastern wing of the newborn state but it could be anticipated even at that time that the two wings – East and West Pakistan – had Islam as the only common factor between them. Thousands of miles separated the two wings and, with the passage of time, a feeling of unfamiliarity by way of culture, language, etc. grew among the majority of the more sensitive and liberal East Pakistanis, for whom religion was apparently not so important. After the 1965 Indo-Pak War, this feeling was further enhanced and gave rise to Bengali nationalism that threatened the very existence of Pakistan as a unified state.

The religious-minded Muslim population, however, continued to believe in the ideology of Pakistan and remained staunch supporters of a 'united Pakistan' to defy any effort towards break up of 'their' Pakistan. This divide continued to be visible in all spheres and became deep-rooted with the passage of time. The political crisis of post-1970 elections and reluctance of the federal government in Islamabad to hand over power to the

majority political party i.e. the Awami League, led to an open rebellion that the military rulers chose to quell with force.

The rebellion further widened the gulf between elements seeking political power and the ones opposing this rebellion by siding with the forces trying to eliminate the rebels. As happens in all such situations, some excesses were committed by both sides in order to gain supremacy. Leaders and members of the religious parties cooperated with the forces against the rebels who were considered 'freedom fighters' by the Awami League and its supporters. Those upholding the ideology of Pakistan, as envisaged at the birth of the country in 1947, were singled out by the Awami League as 'traitors' fighting against the cause of 'Bangladesh'.

The year 1971 gave way to a very crucial phase in the history of Pakistan when a battle for its survival was fought in East Pakistan between the forces loyal to the ideology of Pakistan and those led by the Awami League, vying for 'independence' to break away from the fold of a 'united Pakistan'. Both sides believed in their respective thinking and wanted to fight tooth and nail to achieve their objectives. When India took advantage of the unrest in the eastern province

and launched an attack on the East Pakistan border, a full-fledged war ensued, resulting in surrender by the depleted Pakistan armed forces and creation of Bangladesh in December 1971. Uniformed personnel were taken as Prisoners of War to India and the civilians who had fought the rebels alongside the Pakistan Army, escaped arrest by fleeing to neighbouring countries or went into hiding.

As was expected, the mood of celebration after winning the struggle for breakup of Pakistan turned into that of vengeance when things settled down after the emergence of Bangladesh. The initial period of the 1970s experienced coups and uprisings that claimed the lives of prominent political and military figures, including the founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The government of the Awami League always claimed to be a progressive party believing in secularism.

Several religious parties including the Jamaat-e-Islami were banned and their leaders or activists went underground to avoid the wrath of the Awami League, as they were blamed for 'collaborating' with the Pakistan Army during the military operation. When the Awami League lost power, the periods of military rule by Gen Ziaur Rahman and Gen Hussain Muhammad

Ershad saw Bangladesh moving closer to being an Islamic republic with Islam as a "state religion". The Bangladeshi society's leanings towards Islam were encouraged during their regime but the period of the Awami League's rule brought the country closer again towards secularism whenever it came to power.

Action against the 'collaborators' could not be taken for almost four decades but Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, responding to the popular demand of her supporters, made prosecution of the 1971 war crimes a key goal of her government. Sheikh Hasina's election campaign of 2010 promised the Awami League supporters trial of those individuals who were alleged to have collaborated with the Pakistan Army and contributed in killing thousands or were involved in mass rapes of Bengali women. Her party won the elections handsomely and the promise of War Crimes Trials was fulfilled.

The so-called collaborators were brought before the court after forty years of emergence of Bangladesh. Their actions were treated as war crimes and, in 2010, an 'international crimes tribunal' was set up to try these 'criminals'. It was obvious that these actions were politically motivated and the tribunal was going to function like a 'kangaroo court'. Prominent Islamists and top leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami of the period of 1971 'Liberation War' were jailed and targeted for War Crime Trials. Almost all accused persons were in their late sixties to nineties. The alleged crimes were said to have been committed four decades ago!

There was considerable skepticism from within the country against the war crime tribunals and courts. Concerns were also raised by international groups of human rights like Human Rights Watch but it was snubbed by Bangladesh government. The foreign media also expressed concern about the kind of 'justice' that could be expected from such courts that

appeared politically motivated. The Bangladesh government, however, was adamant and rubbished such criticism. London's reputed weekly *The Economist*, which is known for its credibility, was given a notice by the government for 'interference' in the trial process when it commented on these tribunals, casting doubts on their fairness.

Sheikh Hasina's government has become so sensitive to the issue of these trials that recently it even chose to tell off the Turkish government 'not to meddle' in the affairs of Bangladesh and stop interfering. The President of Turkey had appealed to the Bangladeshi President for clemency in trying the 'war crimes' cases of elderly religious leaders like Maulana Ghulam Azam who is in his nineties now and respected internationally as a Muslim scholar. The Turkish President's action was termed as 'interference' in the judicial process of the war crimes cases by many people and a section of the press in Bangladesh.

It is generally deemed that the war crime trials are politically motivated but the Awami League government is going ahead ruthlessly to satisfy its vote bank and ensure success in next year's elections. The mood of a slice of the general public, mainly Awami League supporters, is like that of the audience in an amphitheatre of medieval times – they are not prepared to accept a sentence less than 'death'. Any other sentence has been criticized and protested against.

In fact, the government had to bend before the 'demands' of protestors and went to the extent of amending a provision in law to allow the state the right to appeal for enhancing a sentence awarded by the courts. A number of senior and elderly leaders of Islamist parties, such as Jamaat-e-Islami, have been sentenced to death: prominent among them are Maulana Ghulam Azam, Motiur Rahman Nizami, Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid, Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury,

Muhammad Kamaruzzaman, Abdul Kader Mullah, etc.

The verdict of the tribunals had created tension in the country as the opposition and followers of Islamist leaders launched a wave of protests against the sentences and called a general strike across the country. Business and educational institutions were closed due to an effective strike. There were clashes between the Jamaat activists and police, resulting in detention of a number of Jamaat workers. TV footage showed violent, bamboo-wielding protestors on the streets of various cities, attacking buses and cars on the roads.

The largest opposition party of the country, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), stayed away initially as it could not openly oppose the trials of war crimes but later threw its support behind the Islamists when the wave of protest against the sentences grew strong. It blamed the government for exploiting the situation to weaken the position of the opposition through establishing tribunals for trying war crime cases. The allegation was denied by the government but it was obvious that the timing of the action was planned to win votes in elections scheduled for January 2014.

It hurt the BNP which was caught on the wrong foot. The present assessment is that due to the likely reaction and pressure of international opinion and human rights organizations, the death sentences may be commuted following mercy appeals from the condemned leaders at a later stage. As of now, the government of the Awami League may stick to its stand with regard to war crime trials but, ultimately it will have to heed the advice of its friends and come down from its high horse. This can, however, happen only after the elections of 2014. ■

The writer is a retired Colonel of the Pakistan Army and writes on current affairs and social issues from a key military policy perspective.



Fruits of an Electoral Victory

The remarkable election victory of the Tamil National Alliance and the formation of its first provincial government in the northern Tamil heartland has triggered a fresh confrontation with the government.

By Huzaima Bukhari & Dr. Ikramul Haq

The landslide victory of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a coalition comprising moderate Tamils, former Tamil Tiger militants and their opponents, in the election of the semi-autonomous Northern Provincial Council confirms that the

hearts and minds of the people cannot be won by sheer use of force. To ensure peace in troubled societies where ethnic and communal elements are at war, it is essential to give justice to all and protect the rights of minorities. However, on a reciprocal basis, the

minorities should also refrain from violence and raise their voice against injustice, through democratic means.

The remarkable electoral win of the TNA – it won 30 out of the 38 seats – and the formation of their first provincial government in Sri Lanka's

northern Tamil heartland, has rekindled hopes for self-rule, a cause for which they had been fighting – initially democratically and then militarily – for the last six decades.

Although the Northern Provincial Council was set up in 1987, elections for the body were not held till September 2013 due to the prolonged civil war. The elections were monitored by a number of observers from South Asian nations as well as the Commonwealth. Though the Election Commission officials received many complaints of irregularities, no major incidents took place during the nine-hour voting period.

On July 29, 1987, India and Sri Lanka signed an accord in an attempt to end the civil war in Sri Lanka. One of the requirements was the devolution of power to the provinces. Accordingly, the Sri Lankan parliament passed the 13th Amendment to the 1978 Constitution and the Provincial Councils Act No. 42 of 1987 in November 1987.

In February 1988, nine provincial councils were created and elections for the north-central, northwestern, Sabaragamuwa and Uva provinces were held in April 1988 while elections in the central, southern and western provinces were held in June 1988. The ruling United National Party (UNP) won the control of all seven provincial councils.

In the September 2013 elections, the performance of the TNA, especially in the most populous district of Jaffna, was astounding – it secured more than 84 percent of the popular vote, exceeding even its own projections of 66 percent votes. The United People's Freedom Alliance of President Mahinda Rajapakse won only seven seats while one seat went to a Muslim party.

Many believe that the TNA's victory is a confirmation of the Tamils' long-held demand for self-rule. The people of the war-affected region have spoken despite reports that the army was

allegedly trying to discourage TNA voters. The turnover of 68 percent may prove helpful in "ethnic reconciliation" in a country where over 100,000 were killed in the long civil war that came to an end in 2009 through military action against the Tamil Tigers.

After its electoral victory, the TNA named a Muslim and a female member of the party to fill two bonus seats. Suresh Premachandran, a senior party leader, announced that a Muslim from Jaffna and a woman from the former LTTE heartland of Mullaithivu would be appointed to the two bonus seats claimed by the party under the proportional representation system.

The TNA's decision to appoint a Muslim representative is significant as the LTTE, of which the TNA was branded a proxy, had chased the Jaffna Muslims as a part of their ethnic cleansing campaign. The party's selection of a woman from Mullaithivu will increase the number of women in the provincial council to two.

The elections held by the Sinhalese-dominated government, under tremendous international pressure to share political power with the Tamils, four years after defeating separatist Tamil rebels, have triggered a fresh tug of war between the government and the TNA. The 73-year-old retired Supreme Court Justice, C V Wigneswaran, who was sworn in as the first elected Tamil chief minister of the Northern Province, said that he wanted to work with Colombo on pushing his party's manifesto, which calls for self-government for the Tamils.

Wigneswaran says his priorities are the payment of war reparations, securing an army pull-out from the former combat zone and retrieving the land which the military continues to occupy four years after defeating the Tamil Tigers. President Rajapakse, in the meantime, has accused the TNA of raising expectations of a separate state – a demand that is opposed by the Sinhalese majority.

The September election results are certainly a setback to President Rajapakse, who has won almost every major election since he led the campaign that crushed the Tamil Tigers in 2009. What he termed a "spectacular military success" led to international demands for a thorough probe of allegations of war crimes said to have been perpetrated by the military in the final months of fighting.

Indian journalist Shivam Vij is of the opinion that President Rajapakse is posing as a good guy till November, when a Commonwealth Heads of Government summit is to be held in Sri Lanka. After this he might revert to his old ways and cause disruptions in the functioning of the TNA government. According to Shivam, one fear is that the governor of the Tamil Northern Province will not let the Tamil National Alliance government operate as some Sinhalese politicians say that allowing a local police would create a parallel military.

If this assessment is correct, it is bad news for Sri Lanka. It shows that the mindset of the conflicting parties has not changed. The most disturbing aspect is that the ruling party still perceives the Tamil population as 'terrorists'. If this attitude continues, and the TNA also does not let go of its demand for self-rule, Sri Lanka may be pushed towards chaos and conflict yet again.

It would be a disaster for democracy and the reconciliation process. Therefore, it is high time the Sinhalese-dominated government extended its full support to the TNA and convinced it that the future of the country and the betterment of both communities lies in peaceful coexistence and not armed confrontation. ■

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Nepal's Constituent Assembly has 601 seats. In South Asia, India is the only country that is closer to Nepal when it comes to the size of legislative bodies. Its Lok Sabha has 552 seats. But then, India has a population of over 1.237 billion while that of Nepal is only 24.74 million.

The huge size of Nepal's Constituent

Assembly can be ignored if its purpose is taken into account: to draft the country's constitution – an enormous undertaking indeed that remains unfinished after more than six years.

Before the advent of democracy, Nepal followed the Panchayat system for almost 30 years. This system was formulated by Nepalese King Mahendra

in 1960, under which people could elect their representatives, but the real power remained in the hands of the monarch.

Moreover, the Panchayat system, mockingly called "partyless guided democracy", pursued a policy that promoted one religion, one language and a prescribed set of values. In a

Quest for a Constitution

The failure of the Constituent Assembly to draft a constitution has raised questions about the viability of democracy as a system of governance for Nepal.

By Javeria Shakil

multicultural society like Nepal's, the failure of such a system was certain. And fail it did – albeit after remaining in place for almost three decades – from 1962 to 1990.

The Panchayat system was replaced by the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal in 1990 and remained in place for 17 years. In 1996, the Maoist insurgents announced an armed struggle against the monarchy. More than 13,000 persons were killed in the decade-long civil war but, in the end, the Maoists got what they had been fighting for – a democratic republic.

While most people thought that



it was the end of an era marked by suppression and subjugation, in reality the new status of the country heralded the beginning of some tumultuous years in which Nepal has, to date, tackled a major challenge – drafting a new constitution

A Constituent Assembly was created for this purpose. Its 601 members represented all segments of Nepalese society and were given two years to work on a broad-based legal framework for the country.

Representation of all groups was necessary considering the status the country held for centuries – of being the only Hindu kingdom in the world. While the one-religion, one-language rule worked in the days of the monarchy, its failure was certain under a multi-party democratic system. However, Nepal's flirtation with democracy has been unsuccessful so far.

The deadline of two years for drafting the constitution lapsed in 2010 without any success and the CA was given a one-year extension to fulfill the task. In 2011, the term of the Constituent Assembly and the validity of the interim constitution expired for a second time while the task still remained unfinished.

The CA was given a further three months to complete its job. The period passed and yet another three-month extension was given to the legislative body. Currently, Nepal is set to elect a new Constituent Assembly in November 2013 after the Nepalese Supreme Court declares all past extensions null and void.

One of the main reasons why the country has been unsuccessful in drafting a constitution is an acute lack of consensus plus the intra-party wrangling. The large size of the Constituent Assembly has not helped matters. In fact, it has further complicated an already difficult job.

A large number of marginalized

groups were a part of the legislative body. These included women, who constituted almost a third of the 601 members while the Dalits, who did not exist in any political space earlier, were given fifty seats. Problems started to emerge when it was felt that the leadership of the major political parties did not take all the representatives into confidence over crucial matters.

A representative of the transgender community, Sunil Pant said, "While I feel I've made progress as a representative for the transgender community, the general view seems to be that an individual representing a particular group is incapable of contributing to other issues. So I wasn't invited to the crucial discussions on federalism, state restructuring, governance and climate change... other than 14 to 15 major party leaders, the rest of the CA members are considered as minorities in terms of participation."

In the opinion of Dr. Suryabhadur Singh, an Indian constitutional expert, who has done extensive research on Nepal's constitutional dilemma, "Rigidity, abstract laws, limited constitutional resources, little judicial development and influence of the ruling monarch, are some major hurdles in the way of framing an appropriate constitution."

In addition to the irresponsible behavior of the major political parties and their refusal to take all stakeholders on board on important issues, irrational demands of some groups have brought the entire process to a grinding halt. One unfair demand came from the Unified Communist Party of Nepal-Maoists. It wanted to form a government under its leadership before moving ahead with the drafting of the new constitution. Internal bickering in parties and horse trading were some other factors that affected the functioning of the CA.

Discussions took place and sometimes went on for weeks but most

of them dwelled on irrelevant subjects. The political parties hardly bothered to hide their greed for power. In their desperation, they even forgot the task assigned to them. With their eyes set on just one objective – to get into power by hook or by crook – Nepalese politicians are losing sight of bigger and more dangerous challenges that lie ahead.

One such danger is that the failure of the Constituent Assembly to draft a constitution – despite the availability of constitutional experts and in the presence of a watchful judiciary and experiences of other democratic countries – has raised questions about the viability of democracy as a system of governance for Nepal.

It is crucial for Nepal to come out of this mess. The fast changing dynamics of the region also necessitate this. Studies conducted by renowned global think tanks suggest that China will be the new superpower by 2025. India has long been vying for the position of a regional power.

Landlocked Nepal shares long borders with both countries – 1,753 kilometers with India and 1,439 with China. While India's influence over Nepal has always been pronounced, China has also started to flex its muscles in a bid to exercise greater control over its little neighbor. It has reportedly invited Nepalese political leaders "for consultations", beginning with former prime minister and powerful Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal, popularly known as Prachanda.

These developments call for a show of maturity by Nepalese politicians and people. They have come a long way and surely they wouldn't want to waste this opportunity to put Nepal on the right track. ■

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Bhutan finds itself at the centre of a controversy involving a border dispute between two of its powerful neighbors: China and India. The dispute started when reports came that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of the Communist Party of China entered into Bhutan's northeastern region and set up three military camps there. This upset India which looks upon China as a rival state but treats Bhutan as a satellite.

Bhutan has an interesting history. The country preferred to remain in seclusion, isolating itself from international organizations and limiting its bilateral relations.

In 1910, Bhutan became a protectorate of British India after signing a treaty, seeking British guidance in the realms of defense and foreign affairs. In 1947, after Partition, India inherited the protectorate and Bhutan was among the first countries to recognize India's independence. China's annexation of Tibet in 1950 and its border disputes with both India and Bhutan drew the latter two countries even closer. Bhutan shares a 605 kilometers border with India, which is also its largest trading partner, accounting for 98 percent of its exports and 90 percent of imports.

On the other hand, Bhutan and China share a contiguous but un-demarcated, and not officially recognized, 470 kilometers border. Following the 1959 Tibetan Rebellion, about 6,000 Tibetans fled to Bhutan and were granted asylum, much to the chagrin of China.

In the early 1960s, fearing adventurism by China, which had laid claims on some of Bhutanese territory, the country imposed a cross-border trade embargo, closing its borders with China and establishing extensive military ties with India.

After India's defeat at the hands

Unhappy Neighbors



Bhutan has to do some diplomatic tightrope walking since it is sandwiched between China and India.

By S. M. Hali

of China in the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict, Bhutan sought the pursuit of a policy of neutrality. However, till the 1970s, India continued to represent Bhutan's concerns while addressing the Sino-Indian border conflicts in talks with China.

Following the confirmation of its membership in the United Nations, Bhutan began to profess a more independent foreign policy, voting in favor of the People's Republic of China (PRC) filling the seat which had been illegally occupied by Taiwan (Republic of China) and openly supporting the "One China" policy.

In a symbolic overture in 1974, Bhutan invited the Chinese ambassador to India to attend the proceedings of the coronation ceremony of Jigme Singye Wangchuk as Bhutan's monarch. More contacts followed in New York in 1983; the then Chinese Foreign Minister, Wu Xueqian, and Bhutanese Foreign Minister, Dawa Tsering, entered into parleys on the establishment of bilateral relations. Since 1984, China and Bhutan began annual, direct talks over the border dispute.

In 1998, China and Bhutan signed a bilateral agreement based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence for maintaining peace on the border. The budding relationship was strained with the PRC's construction of roads within Bhutanese-claimed lands in violation of the 1998 agreement. In 2002, negotiations resulted in an interim agreement after China presented evidence regarding ownership of disputed tracts of land.

The growing bonhomie between Bhutan and the PRC has been strained by a Times of India report published on June 26, 2013 about the establishment of three PLA military camps in Bhutan's northeastern region. Quoting intelligence sources, the TOI reported

that the PLA entered through the Sektang region in the east and Pang La in the north, and carried out a series of patrols along their shared border.

The veracity of this report requires confirmation. There is a possibility that India may have fabricated the report or stretched the truth in an attempt to wean Bhutan away from Chinese overtures towards Bhutan. India had wrongly accused China of similar incursions in Arunachal Pradesh.

Whatever the case, it necessitates diplomatic tightrope walking for Bhutan: whether to contend with China's alleged military advancements and maintain its national sovereignty or to accept its maneuver as a reality and weaken its economic and political ties with India.

Caught between the rivalries of two regional giants, either option will juxtapose Bhutan against one of its neighbors and possibly further strain the Indo-Chinese relations.

India has been wary of the growing Chinese influence in Bhutan and is worried about the possibility of a Bhutan-China settlement of the boundary issue, which may involve the border stretching from Dhoklam in the west to the grazing grounds in the north.

Indian concerns stem from Chinese interest in the grazing grounds, closest to the strategic Chumbi valley tri-junction, which is in close proximity to the vulnerable "chicken's neck" near Siliguri Corridor that links India's northeastern states to India. This can be severed by the PRC if tension prevails.

India has been keenly watching the growing ties between China and Bhutan. The 2012 meeting between former Bhutanese Prime Minister, Jigme Thinley and former Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao in Rio de Janeiro, and later Bhutan's purchase of a fleet

of 20 buses from a Chinese motor vehicle company raised eyebrows in New Delhi.

Thinley's comments soon after taking over as PM that he only saw growing opportunities in China and no threat, caused much anxiety among the mandarins at India's Foreign Office. India retaliated by cutting subsidized gasoline and kerosene to Bhutan in early July 2013.

In a TOI report, Indian Oil Corporation admitted its stoppage of shipment to Bhutan after New Delhi's announcement of its inability to reimburse the subsidies of its supplied fuels. Almost immediately, former PM Thinley pleaded with India to reconsider its decision on behalf of Bhutan's poor and India regressed on August 1, 2013.

Since then, fresh elections have taken place in Bhutan. According to some media reports, India interfered in the elections, ensuring that Thinley was replaced by pro-India Tshering Tobgay.

Reportedly, India's ambassador to Bhutan Pavan K. Varma was forced to resign due to his failure to prevent Bhutan from developing relations with China. The new ambassador V.P. Haran has allegedly played a big role in the PDP's electoral victory in Bhutan. It has also been suggested that the Indian withdrawal of subsidies before the elections was ample evidence that India's pursuit of power politics is not likely to cease.

Under such circumstances, Bhutan will have to learn to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds to manage its difficult relationship with both of its powerful neighbors. ■

The writer is a practicing journalist. He writes for the print media, produces documentaries and hosts a TV talk show.

Although Malala Yusufzai did not win the Nobel Peace Prize, the mere fact that a 16 year old was seriously considered for the honor is significant. Such global attention for a teenager would be cause for national celebration in almost any country of the world. Not in bitterly divided, conspiracy theory-prone Pakistan.

Islamists and hyper-nationalist Taliban apologists claim that honoring 16-year-old Malala Yusufzai is part of a Western design to impose Western values on Islamic Pakistan. The criticism from Malala's Pakistani detractors highlighted the national malaise that young Malala has committed herself to fight.

As an eleven year old five years ago, Malala stood up for her right to an education in the beautiful but remote Swat Valley in Northwest Pakistan, where the Taliban sought to impose their obscurantist version of Islam by force of arms. In doing so, she showed more courage and foresight than many of Pakistan's politicians, generals and public intellectuals who have gradually ceded space to extremist Islamists, projecting them as a nationalist reaction to U.S. dominance or Indian influence rather than a menace that would set the country back several centuries.

The Taliban, and their Islamist supporters, oppose education for girls, and their concept of education for boys, too, is far from enlightened.

Pakistan's leaders have been in a deep state of denial about their national priorities for a long time. Religious extremism and terrorism are often not seen as a serious threat for a nation that has, since its inception in 1947, focused on acquiring military parity with its much larger neighbor, India. Instead of seeing the Taliban as brutes fighting modernity, Pakistan's strategic planners considered them as allies against Indian influence in

Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union.

Terrorist groups with ideological affinity to the Taliban were assisted by the government in hopes of resolving its long-standing dispute with India over Kashmir.

Although Pakistan has lost thousands of its own citizens and soldiers to terrorist attacks since 9/11, strategic delusions continue to prevail. Even some Western educated Pakistanis seem to condone violence against minorities and terrorism in the name of Islam, describing it only as a

reaction to Western colonialism and American global influence.

In such an environment, Malala's choice of modern education and her willingness to face the threats of violence from the notoriously unforgiving Taliban was definitely an act of great courage.

Malala, a young village girl with little outside exposure, wished to connect to the rest of the world. She says she was inspired by Benazir Bhutto, who became the Muslim world's first woman prime minister and was killed in 2007 by terrorists

Malala's Fight for a Modern Pakistan

As Pakistan's political leaders embrace a victim mentality, Malala Yusufzai leads a movement to do the right thing, whatever the consequences.

By Husain Haqqani



for challenging their ideas. In doing so, Malala went against the Pakistani national discourse, which is dominated by sympathy for militant Islamic extremism.

Since 1977, when dictator General Zia ul Haq started Pakistan's Islamization, an entire generation of Pakistanis has grown up with textbooks that conflate Pakistani nationalism with Islamist exclusivism.

Anti-Western sentiment and a sense of collective victimhood have been nurtured as a substitute for serious debate on social or economic

policy. The country's resources have been devoted to maintaining a large military and expanding its nuclear arsenal, with inadequate investment in education, healthcare and other social needs.

The result is Pakistan featuring on virtually every list of states facing the potential of failure. Half of Pakistan's 193 million people remain illiterate, population growth remains high and economic growth has risen only in periods of increased flow of aid from the United States.


Malala's embrace of pluralism

contrasts sharply with the stance of several influential Pakistanis. For example, Oxford-educated cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan whose party was the second highest vote-getter in the country's May 2013 legislative elections, has often praised the Taliban, including their imposition of Sharia.

Although he expressed regret over Malala not getting the Nobel, members of Khan's party recently spearheaded a campaign on Twitter to describe Malala's recent activism in support of girls' education and liberal values as an American-funded drama.

Nothing illustrates the crisis in Pakistan, and possibly a large part of the Muslim world, better than a recent book published by the head of Pakistan's largest institution of higher learning, the Punjab University.

Dr. Mujahid Kamran, with a Ph.D in Physics, claimed that 9/11 was an inside job and Al-Qaeda was a CIA asset. He also said recently that "The U.S. and British governments are controlled by a high cabal of banking families, who seek to manipulate each of us by putting microchips in our brains and who sponsor terrorist attacks in Pakistan."

Malala has demonstrated wisdom beyond her age in shunning the obscurantism and conspiracy theory obsession of the society in which she was born. In her, Pakistan's embattled modernizers and liberals have found a new hero. 

The writer, Husain Haqqani served as Pakistan's ambassador to the United States from 2008 to 2011. He is a senior fellow at Hudson Institute and Professor of International Relations at Boston University. His book 'Magnificent Delusions: Pakistan, the United States and an epic history of misunderstanding' is scheduled for publication by Public Affairs next month.

The Coming Storm

Chemical weapons stocks in Syria could have unpredictable consequences for the population in the country and neighboring states, as well as for U.S. allies and forces in the region.

By Naveed Ahmad



Raadia, a 55-year-old widow, believes she is pregnant with nine babies. The woman from the south of Damascus does not look insane. Her siblings are sure that the grandmother of three is a practicing Muslim and an active house manager.

"My sister became hallucinated after she witnessed the violence of pro-Assad mercenaries called al-Shabiha about six months ago," says Raabia in a somber voice. The family has since migrated to a settlement inside the Turkish territory of Gaziantep.

Refugee camps in Turkey, northern Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan, house over 2.1 million registered Syrian citizens. Of the 6,000 Syrians who cross into the neighboring nations daily on an average, the majority is said to be suffering from mental illnesses of various kinds because of prolonged exposure to violence. Women and children make three quarters of the refugees or the internally displaced population of this Middle Eastern nation.

Refugee children, who make up half of those living in camps according to the UNHCR, continue their studies in Turkey's makeshift schools that are in relatively good condition. The challenges for their counterparts in Lebanon and Jordan are daunting. Home to over 120,000 refugees, the Zaatari camp in Jordan leaves much to be desired in terms of shelter, sanitation, food supplies and other services like health and education. Only the Soviet-era Afghan camps in Pakistan can be compared to Zaatari's geographical stretch and ever-growing humanitarian needs.

"The impact of refugee influx is visible everywhere from state infrastructure to streets and parks," says Mehmet Suleman, a Turkish aid worker who recently returned home after a year-long experience in Jordan. "There are visible signs of social unease," he says.

Inspired by the ouster of Tunisian dictator Ben Ali the people of Syria opened a new chapter of uprisings in March 2011 against the Ba'athist regime. All past efforts towards a regime change in the 1960s and 1970s – especially an attempt by the people of Hama – were brutally suppressed by the then Syrian ruler, Hafez al-Assad. The Soviet Union fully backed the mass killings of over 25,000 peaceful protestors while the United States and its allies were too busy in Afghanistan.

As demonstrations spread like wildfire in most parts of the country, Bashar Al-Assad's army resorted to the use of heavy force. By August 2011, senior military officers as well as dozens of foot soldiers had defected, pledging to protect the peaceful demonstrators from the violence

looming larger than ever, the Syrians started to leave for safer areas such as Damascus and Aleppo if they could not afford to make it to Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon.

The period of July-August 2012 is known as the worst for the Assad regime as his brother, brother-in-law and top officials of the defense ministry were assassinated in a precision time-bomb attack. Contrary to the much-trumpeted weapons supply to the rebels, the Free Syrian Army failed to make decisive inroads for the want of anti-aircraft guns and anti-tank munitions. Assad, on the other hand, continued to receive an uninterrupted supply of weapons as well as financial aid from Iran and a free supply of fuel from the Maliki-controlled Iraq.

Conservative estimates suggest

With the pace of hostilities increasing and the international diplomatic pressure failing to produce early results, the UN estimates that the number of Syrian refugees may double by December 2013 while the number of the IDPs may touch the 6.8 million mark.

of the regime's police, intelligence agencies and al-Shabiha.

The Tahrir Square in Egypt constantly stole the media limelight from developments taking place in Syria. Being the most populous Arab country, Egypt could not be ignored by the media and they did not pay much attention to the smaller population of Syria. Defections from the Assad army soared as did the attacks of the forces on demonstrators. By early 2012, the Free Syrian Army had grown in strength and capability to confront the Soviet-trained and equipped Syrian army. With uncertainty

that 115,000 Syrians have lost their lives since the uprising began. With the pace of hostilities increasing and the international diplomatic pressure failing to produce early results, the UN estimates that the number of refugees is set to double (four million) by December 2013 and the IDPs may touch the 6.8 million mark. The UN's largest-ever appeal seeking \$5 billion could win pledges for only \$1.1 billion. In a recent background meeting with this writer at the UN headquarters, a senior official said, "With diplomacy in disarray and three-way fighting raging, the plight

of a common displaced Syrian does not have many takers.”

Though Assad’s military and the Iran-sponsored Hezbollah have been on the receiving end despite the repeated use of chemical weapons, the in-fighting between the hardline Islamist brigade (often oversimplistically branded as Al Qaeda affiliates) and the more west-aligned groups has seriously undermined many strategic gains. The grip of anti-Assad fighters has loosened on territories bordering Turkey, which have been battling the alleged influx of Assad-backed terrorists and smugglers. A number of car bombing incidents have also taken place there in which many Turkish soldiers and civilians were killed.

Although his office remains largely ceremonial, the UN Secretary General’s Special Envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, seems hopeful about the outcome of the Geneva II talks, slated to be held in mid-November. Russia and China have advocated the inclusion of Iran as a key stakeholder in the conflict due to its all-out backing of Syria’s Alwaite minority regime. The Syrian opposition threatens to boycott its first-ever direct talks with the Assad regime if Iran is invited to the Swiss-hosted mediation bid.

Meanwhile, the cumbersome process of purging the Ba’athist regime’s chemical weapon factories and caches opens another Pandora’s Box for the international community. For all practical purposes, Syria’s denouncement of chemical weapons has brought it the much-needed relevance and diplomatic space.

With the exception of Erdogan’s Turkey, the most important goal of the international community remains the destruction of chemical weapons which pose a potent threat to Israel. The Obama administration has not gone beyond hollow threats to Damascus so far. The UK has already back-tracked its opposition to Bashar al-Assad as did France.

US Republican Senator John McCain seems to have got it right: “I can’t tell you how demoralized the Free Syrian Army units are and that’s why some of them are turning to Al Qaeda.”

Like the post-Geneva Accord situation in Afghanistan, the powers that be have failed to visualize a repeat of similar mistakes in Syria. There may be more complicated issues in and around Syria if the concern voiced by the former US presidential candidate is not heeded. **S**

Naveed Ahmad is an investigative journalist and academic. He specializes in conflict and disaster reporting.

Pakistan’s Diplomatic Amnesia

Islamabad has long suffered from a long and short-term memory loss. The problem intensified over the last three decades. Pakistan’s foreign policy revolves around four geographical nerve centers – the United States, India, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.

This state of amnesia deepens when it comes to the Middle East and North Africa. Libya’s Gaddafi may be history for much of his country and the world but Lahore still has a stadium in his name. Countries around the world may have expelled Syrian diplomats but not Pakistan. Former President of Pakistan, Asif Ali Zardari was receiving Bashar al-Assad’s deputy foreign minister as recently as May 2013.

Though the Assads always opposed Pakistan’s stance on Kashmir or East Pakistan, Islamabad sent its best air force pilots to fight on the side of Syria and Lebanon against the 1973 Israeli aggression. A PAF pilot flying a Soviet MiG humbled the Israelis by shooting down their aircraft over Damascus. But all of that is history.

The PML-N government continues to harp on the same old mantra of an end to violence by all sides and a peaceful transition of power. Like his others in the Arab world, Bashar’s time seems to be up as well. Pakistan should look at the future instead of caring for a regime that never sided with it in some of its most testing issues.

According to the UN and other independent estimates, over 75 percent of Syria’s territory is destroyed and is in need of reconstruction. The country will need both manpower and material assistance. Islamabad will lose all opportunities to strike a deal for the supply of labor and construction material such as steel and cement, if the country’s love for the man in Damascus continues to (over)flow.

Turkey, Pakistan’s all-weather friend and ally, is not only bearing the brunt of Syrian refugees but has also paid heavily by taking a pro-people stance and losing a lucrative land trade route to Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Islamabad, however, considers maintaining full diplomatic relations and providing political backing a legitimate option. The Assads have never befriended Pakistan except for a brief period when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was in power. That was mainly because of Bhutto’s left-leaning political views. Is supporting Syria’s dictator worth annoying a stable, prosperous and time-tested friend like Turkey? The foreign ministry must ponder over such fundamental questions.

Pakistan is a signatory to the Chemical Weapons Convention and abhors the use of weapons of mass destruction against innocent people. The Assad regime has allegedly used Sarin gas on more than one occasion – not against any foreign aggressor but his own people. Nonetheless, Pakistan chooses to bury its head in the sand.

What about Pakistan’s support for democracy? If the Assad regime is acceptable despite the killing of over 115,000 citizens, then why are Egypt’s military dictators being shunned?

Democracy and human rights should be the core principles of Pakistan’s foreign policy. Sir Zafarullah Khan had based Pakistan’s foreign policy on these principles. Pakistan had then backed the decolonization process in the Middle East and Africa by giving its passports to freedom fighters. The Arab awakening is the 21st century wave of decolonization of the minds from the indifferent and arrogant elite. Pakistan can’t stop the process by siding with tyrants.

–NA

Giving Peace a Chance

Is peace a realistic alternative in politically frenetic South Asia? It must be. That is why Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (Piler) Executive Director Karamat Ali has been honoured with the Didi Nirmala Deshpande South Asian Peace and Justice Award in Patiala, India.

The award is supposed to be conferred on individuals of the region who play a significant role in promoting peace. If Karamat Ali played such a role and was given an award for his initiatives, where is the peace then?

The Indians and Pakistanis bicker and fight on the line of control, there is no peace within Pakistan, what with the terrorists and the militants doing everything in the country that is anti-peace, while the Afghans have their own agenda and peace does not appear to be an alternative for them either.

Look around at other parts of South Asia. Bangladesh plans to go into elections in January next year. Are the two major parties there, even the minor ones, looking for peaceful means to contest the elections? Sri Lanka has recently emerged from a long-drawn 25 year civil war and the country would like to settle for peaceful ways now but the remnants of the LTTE would have none of it.

The other smaller South Asian countries like Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives, are also not models of peace either.

It therefore came as quite an eye-opener when Karamat Ali, received the Peace Award. The prize was given at the regional seminar on 'Exit of NATO Forces from Afghanistan and its Impact on India and Pakistan'.

It was also the 84th birth anniversary of Didi Nirmala. The ceremony was

organized by the Folklore Research Academy of Amritsar and Akhil Bharat Rachnatmak Samaj. It attracted scholars, journalists, writers and peace activists from Pakistan, India and Afghanistan who paid rich tributes to Didi Nirmala and also shared thought-provoking opinions on the issue of NATO presence in Afghanistan and its impact on India and Pakistan.

Those who spoke on the occasion included Ahmed Fashim Hakim, a peace activist from Afghanistan, Prof. Kamal Mitra Chinoy from Jawahar Lal Nehru University, senior journalist and teacher Qamar Agha from New Delhi, Dr Sarfaraz Ahmed of Area Studies Centre, Peshawar, Dr Riaz Shaikh of Shaheed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Institute of Science and Technology (Szabist) Karachi, Mohammed Tahseen of South Asia Partnership (SAP) Pakistan and others.

They talked about the role of NATO forces and US allies all over the world and the threats that their actions pose to peace and prosperity in South Asia.

"The fact remains that only the people of Afghanistan have the right to decide the future of their war-torn country. Pakistan and India should pay heed to their own issues and strive for permanent resolution of their mutual issues, in line with public sentiment," said Szabist's Dr Shaikh.

Other scholars urged both Pakistan and India to start slashing their annual military budgets by, at least, 10 percent, citing peoples' dislike for a nuclear race as a solid reason for a 'no-war pact' among the South Asian nations. They stated that the public wants peace, hence, both Pakistan and India should announce abolition of war initiatives and take steps for demilitarization.




Karamat Ali

Karamat Ali spoke of the pride at being honoured with the award. In his acceptance speech, he said, "Didi Nirmala was like an elder sister to me. I am proud of this achievement and the fact that the committee and my friends chose me.

"South Asian countries must take austere measures such as formulating an anti-war pact, deducting expenditure on weapons procurement and work towards making South Asia a nuclear-free zone. Moreover, they must give fundamental rights to people who have migrated from one Saarc nation to another and relax visa requirements for South Asians," said Ali.

Farhat Fatima of PILER read out a paper written by BM Kutty as a tribute to Didi Nirmala and her pivotal role for peace promotion in the South Asian region.

The participants vowed to continue Didi's mission with a commitment and dedication. The participants agreed on the need to strengthen networks within South Asia and bring the people closer.

At least, they gave peace a chance! 



Future Unknown

The condition of Afghan women can improve if laws are enacted and strictly implemented across the country.

By Meena Ahmed

Reports coming out of Afghanistan about the situation of women's rights there present a dismal picture. A report by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission terms findings and observations with regard to crime against women "alarming". Some 90 percent of the cases of violence against women fall under the category of domestic violence. In addition to this, insecurity, poverty, illiteracy, the absence of the rule of law and a patriarchal culture are some other challenges that women of Afghanistan face on a day-to-day basis.

The situation of women's rights in the country has improved to some extent after the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001. During the Taliban's rule, girls were not allowed to attend school while it was compulsory for all adult women to cover themselves from head to toe. Women were not allowed to leave home without a male guardian. To his credit, Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, took a number of steps that gave considerable freedom to women, making it relatively easy for them to study and work.

However, the process of empowering Afghan women suffered a setback when President Karzai endorsed a 'code of conduct for women' in March 2012. Despite his claim that it was written in consultation with representative groups of Afghan women, the code – which was presented by the Ulema Council of Afghanistan – faced harsh criticism and was termed "a giant step backward for the rights of Afghan women."

Fatana Ishaq Gailani, founder of the Afghanistan Women's Council, accused the government of "using women's rights as part of a political game".

Crimes against women are on the rise because of steps like this and the Afghan government's efforts to appease religious hardliners for political gains. A few months ago, the Taliban

kidnapped a female Afghan MP, Fariba Ahmadi Kakar, when she was traveling with her three daughters in the central province of Ghazni. Although Kakar has now been released, there are reports that she was freed in exchange for five Taliban militants and six of their family members.

In August this year, the most senior policewoman of the southern province of Helmand was shot dead on her way to work. Recently, an Afghan Senator, Rooh Gul and her husband survived an attack in Ghazni. The killing of an Indian author and activist, Sushmita Banerjee, is the most prominent and recent case of crimes against women in Afghanistan.

Given the imminent withdrawal of the allied forces from the country, there are fears that the women's rights situation may take a turn for the worse. Such fears prompted U.S. Senator, Kay Bailey Hutchison, from Texas and Senator Bob Casey from Pennsylvania, to present the Afghan Women and Girls Security Promotion Act in the US Senate. The bill was signed by the US President in January 2013 and is now a law. Commenting on his initiative, Senator Casey said, "We not only want to make sure that we're training the Afghan Army and the Afghan Police, but we're also insisting that they have the kind of gender sensitivity and training that is necessary, and also that we're taking substantial steps to do the recruiting, so that there are more Afghan women who are police officers and soldiers."

Expressing her apprehensions on how the withdrawal of U.S. troops may impact the freedom of the Afghan women, a rights activist, Suraya Pakzad, said: "When the troops leave, some areas are going to be handed over to the Afghan local police. They can't ensure the security of those areas. So, unfortunately, violence against women will increase."

Even twelve years after the fall of the Taliban regime, Afghan women

are still insecure. As NATO troops prepare to leave the country by the end of 2014, there are real concerns regarding the limited freedom won by Afghan women over the last decade.

Atif Taib, the Editor of Wakht News Agency in Kabul, believes that the government and the international community have not been able to overcome the challenges that hinder the evolution of women's rights in Afghanistan. According to Taib, efforts to address violence against women have been successful to some extent. Yet, forced and early marriages and cases of domestic violence, murder, rape and selling of women have increased.

However, all is not lost. There is some hope. For instance, there is the success of a weekly radio show 'Afghan Woman's Hour' that highlights the role of women in Afghan society and motivates women to actively participate in the process of transformation of their country. A research study by BBC Media Action noted that 55 percent of women who participated in their survey had listened to that show. Another notable finding was that 39 percent of its listeners were men. Of people who listened to the program, 91 percent agreed that it helped them solve their problems, while 83 percent agreed that the program motivated them to attempt to change their lives.

Yet, in Taib's words, "Women in Afghanistan have very short-term successes and long-term failures". In his opinion, the condition of Afghan women can improve only if laws are enacted and strictly implemented at the center, in the provinces, towns and villages across the country. The failure to do so will mean that the problems of Afghan women remain unresolved in the foreseeable future. ■

The writer has worked with The News and UNDP. She is currently the Group Communications Manager at FNCK Ventures.

Emergence of Islamic Banking

Islamic banking is growing in Sri Lanka and catering to a wider clientele than just the Muslim community.

By Asna Ali



Although Sri Lanka only has a small Muslim minority – less than ten percent of the total population – it is one of the few non-Muslim countries to pass legislation facilitating the Islamic banking sector.

This should be considered a wise decision as both banks and customers have shown a keen interest in the sector ever since the establishment of Islamic banking windows and initiation of Islamic financial products in commercial banks after an amendment to the Banking Act No.30 1988 in 2005.

Even though the Islamic banking sector is in its infancy in Sri Lanka, it has grown rapidly over the last few years. There are, at present, several players in the field. The Amana Bank became the first Islamic bank in Sri Lanka in 2011 and currently offers a variety of products.

There is also a fully functional Takaful bank set up by the Amana group which offers Shariah-compliant insurance. In addition, there are other commercial banks, including the Bank of Ceylon and the Muslim Commercial Bank, which have set up Islamic banking windows.

Proponents of Islamic banking point to these developments and the speed with which Islamic financial products are being adopted by both Muslim and non-Muslim customers, as signs of healthy growth in the sector and a cause to be optimistic about its future.

It has been suggested that Islamic banking has gained popularity due to widespread mistrust in the commercial banking sector after the 2008 global financial crisis. It is not surprising that people have started looking for alternatives after witnessing the colossal failures of banks to protect the interests of their clients and the lack of transparency in the banking industry.

For many, these alternatives are Islamic financial products since the concept of profit and loss sharing

seems fairer and more transparent as compared to traditional bank loans which may come with hidden charges.

However, the Islamic banking sector in Sri Lanka, as elsewhere, faces a unique set of challenges. Given that it is a relatively new field, there is a lack of experts which causes problems when it comes to devising rules for new products.

Differences can arise in the interpretation of Islamic fundamentals of finance due to the various schools of thought. It can become difficult to convince potential customers of the validity of a product's compliance with

introduction of financial instruments requires availability of funds. In addition, there are conceptual difficulties in the introduction of such investment instruments which must be resolved. This could take considerable time to materialize. Nevertheless, as many parties have shown considerable interest in the sector, it is expected that such issues will be eventually resolved.

There is another challenge facing Islamic banks in Sri Lanka that has little to do with banking itself. An increasingly nationalist streak has emerged in the country that has resulted in hostility towards minority

as make it difficult for them to expand operations in a financial market where they are already facing stiff competition.

If, however, this particular set of events does not occur or banks are able to tackle the problem successfully, Sri Lanka could be well on its way to becoming a successful player in the Islamic banking sector.

Currently, its position in terms of market size, international presence and a financial environment that accommodates Islamic banking is weaker as compared to other countries in the region.

But the development of a crucial set of legislation, greater consensus amongst banks about the terms and conditions of their Islamic financial products and the establishment of differentiating or unique features that clearly separate and highlight Islamic banking in comparison to traditional banking, could very well result in a more robust and profitable Islamic banking sector.

Ever since its birth, Sri Lanka's Islamic banking sector has seen considerable growth and has surprisingly attracted a diverse customer base. This makes it unique since Islamic banking is typically associated with Muslim customers since its roots are entrenched in the Shariah. Sri Lankan banks must be lauded for successfully presenting the advantages of Islamic financial products to customers regardless of religion.

However, as religious tensions in the country continue to grow, they may have to redouble their efforts to market products in terms of fairness and transparency.

Sri Lanka's Islamic banks do have the potential to develop an international presence but they need support from the financial environment and legislature in order to succeed. **S**

The writer is a business graduate. She has interest in political and social issues.

The development of a crucial set of legislation and greater consensus amongst banks about the terms and conditions of their Islamic financial products could result in a more robust and profitable Islamic banking sector in Sri Lanka.

Shariah in these circumstances.

Islamic banking in Sri Lanka is also limited due to the investor's inability to put money into interest-based financial products. In this regard, conventional commercial banks have an inherent advantage as the financial system the world over is interest-based. For Islamic banking to gain ground, changes have to be brought in at the policy-making level.

Sri Lankan banks, which are eagerly pursuing Islamic banking, are pushing the country's central bank to take steps to introduce viable financial instruments. This is a particularly important issue since banks need to invest their excess liquidity.

Treasury bills are usually favored for this purpose and, therefore, the idea of introducing Sukuk instruments as an alternative is being pursued.

However, challenges remain as the

groups, including Muslims.

Many feel that after the end of the civil war with the Tamils, Muslims have become the next target for hardliners. Over the past couple of years, there have been several unprovoked attacks in which mosques were vandalized and people injured. Calls for a ban on halal meat, among other demands, are becoming increasingly common. This is an alarming situation for the country's Muslim minority as conditions seem to be deteriorating over time.

Under the present circumstances, it is not far-fetched to assume that Islamic banking may also be targeted. If this is the case, then Sri Lankan banks that are already operating or thinking of starting operations in the Islamic sector will be in a quandary.

Opposition from conservative religious leaders could drive away their non-Muslim client base as well

A “lived-happily-ever-after” ending is a far cry from how the real life tales of many young Bangladeshi girls go. Barely out of their adolescence, 66 percent of the girls in this country are married off while about a third of them get married even before they reach the age of 15 as per the State of World’s Children Report from the UNICEF.

However, Bangladesh is not the only underdeveloped country that suffers from this malady. According to UNICEF’s statistics, every day about 39000 child marriages take place all over the world, especially in rural Sub-Saharan Africa and in South Asian countries, adding to the increasing rate of population growth in these regions.

Other countries include Niger with a child marriage rate of 75 percent; Chad and Central African Republic, where it is 68 percent; Guinea, 63 percent; Mozambique, 56 percent; Mali, 55 percent; Burkina Faso and South Sudan, 52 percent; and Malawi, 50 percent.

Child marriages are seen as a violation of basic human rights according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, which grants people the right to a ‘free and full’ consent to marriage, implying that this benchmark becomes null when a person is not of the age to make informed decisions.

This universally accepted standard clearly states that any incident of child marriage – which is marriage before the legal age of 18 years, and applies equally to both girls and boys – is a definitive violation of basic human rights. However, this phenomenon is more common among young girls as compared to boys. This results in increasing cases of sexual abuse and misuse of girls as child brides.

In countries where child marriages are common, the core contributing elements behind this practice are the belief systems and the social makeup of that particular area which manifests

in consequential factors, such as poverty, low levels of education and the probability of getting a good price for the bride.

In the context of the South Asian region, one can consider Bangladesh’s example to evaluate the severity, consequences and possible ways of redemption of this widely practised criminal activity that is occurring more frequently despite strict regulations..

In Bangladesh, it is not hard to

and the private sector, to date, parents in Bangladesh prefer to marry their young daughters off without giving any consideration to its consequences.

An unusual aspect of this situation is that this practice is common among both the rich and the poor. With the motive of expanding their own businesses, many among the rich do not hesitate to marry their young daughters off to fellow businessmen.

The practice is widespread in

Help for Child Brides

The consequences of child marriages in Bangladesh go far beyond the breach of human rights as the practice leads to physical and mental abuse and irreversible health problems.

By Zufah Ansari

spot a girl barely out of her teens, cradling a baby in her arms with two others trailing behind. For such girls, it’s not the question of being happy. It’s about accepting the reality and suffering through it.

Although Bangladesh’s laws prescribe the minimum legal age for marriage to be 18, such laws are hardly given any consideration in the presence of certain social, economic and cultural priorities. Despite persistent efforts by the government

rural Bangladesh, which proves that the trend is mainly prevalent in areas that are relatively backward in terms of education and socio-economic growth. These are the areas where parents are unable to provide for the basic needs and education of their girls. Keeping in view the aforementioned factors, it is not hard to spot the incentives parents see in marrying their adolescent daughters off.

Besides poverty, social conformity

is another reason that forces families to take such actions. While some girls fall prey to the patriarchal complexion of society, which views women as weak and in need of male guardianship to survive, others are married at a young age to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancies, marriages of choice or for the sake of preserving virginity until marriage, a key cultural trait driven by religious belief as the underlying cause.

of the setbacks, the government of Bangladesh, with the help of local and international NGOs, is working vigorously on strategies to discourage the practice of child marriages.

Some of their strategies include the introduction of the female secondary school assistance program that offers scholarships to girls to study instead of going for an early marriage while another rewards parents. This is in the form of monetary compensation

children and human rights as well as educating youngsters about the world of possibilities that waits ahead if they do not succumb to forced nuptials.

Moreover, the media, a core disseminator of information, can play a vital role in reshaping beliefs and educating the masses. Mass media campaigns can be conducted to address the issue and quell the trend of early marriages, depicting the severity of the problem.




As a result, the consequences of child marriages go far beyond the breach of human rights. More often than not, this practice leads to physical and mental abuse, irreversible health problems that occur due to unsafe sex or premature pregnancies that put in danger the health of both the mother and the infant.

The solution to eradicate this menace has to be a combination of awareness of the problem and action-driven initiatives. Regardless

for the loss of their daughter's input in agricultural and domestic labor in return for signing a legal document stating that they will not marry their daughter off before the age of 20.

Similarly, NGOs such as Plan International have put in place systems to register children at birth so that they can be protected under the legal age legislation. Plan and other likeminded organizations such as the MDGIF are also moderating youth-led groups for raising awareness about basic

Apart from centralized efforts, members of civil society, especially the educated lot, can help in countering myopic individual beliefs and ignorance about marriage through exchange of information. Empowering and making children independent could be one of the ways to make a significant contribution to the cause. 

The writer is an undergraduate marketing student with a strong interest in culture and society.



The Fashion



Heritage

Fashion has become an integral part of every young Indian's life as apparel and textile designing transform into a fast growing industry.

By Madiha Bilal Kapadia

India has a rich heritage when it comes to weaving and knitting. Like the nation's age-old culture, the origin of textiles also dates back to the era of the Indus Valley civilization or even earlier.

The ancient remains of the Harappa and Mohenjodaro civilizations give us a glimpse into how the people of this region dressed. Hindu epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata are full of references of the rich Indian traditions of intricate craftsmanship.

Although the tradition of designing clothes is centuries old, in the past it largely remained localised. Not anymore. The present-day India is witnessing a new phenomenon: a fast emerging fashion industry which is broadening its horizon.

There were only a few designers prior to the 80s. But the fledgling industry saw rapid growth in the late 80s and 90s. This was mainly brought about by the country's increasing exposure to international fashion trends and the economic boom after the liberalization of the Indian economy.

Increased global exposure led to changes in the dressing style of the Indians, which eventually resulted in a fusion of Indian and western dresses. The traditional *kurta* shrank and became *kurti* while *sari* blouses with spaghetti straps became all the rage. These are some examples of how western culture influenced Indian sartorial sensibilities.

Today, the work of Indian designers is highly appreciated all over the world. Now western brands come to participate in Indian fashion weeks and invite Indian designers to participate in international fashion events as they see a lot of potential in this emerging market.

The journey of Indian designers to this stage has been a long and difficult one. Ritu Kumar, one of the pioneers in fashion designing who is known for her ethnic wear, began her career with four block printers and two tables in a small village near Kolkata. She was the first to introduce the boutique culture

in the country with the launch of her brand Ritu in 1966. Her work revived the traditional hand block printing techniques of Bengal and has now made it an essential part of the fashion industry's ethnic style.

In 1973, she came out with a collection in which she used 'zardozi' embroidery. This had its origins in the royal costumes dating back to the Mughal era. This led to the revival of yet another forgotten art. In no time, embroidery became a prominent feature of wedding attire and also one of the biggest fashion exports.

After her initial success, there was no looking back for Ritu Kumar. She gradually won a formidable name in the country's fashion sector. She is also credited with making Indian textiles a global phenomenon as her clientele included celebrities like Jemima Khan and the late Princess Diana. She has also designed clothes for Indian film industry people such as Sushmita Sen and Aishwarya Rai.

Indian cinema has played a major role in the rise of the fashion industry. Costume designers like Bhanu Athaiya started experimenting with film fashion in the 1960s. Athaiya started working on period costumes and went on to introduce varied trends which were soon followed by the fashion-conscious public.

Other notable Indian fashion designers include Manish Malhotra, whose costume for Michael Jackson for an awards ceremony so pleased the celebrity that he requested the designer to design for his show in Munich and for his children as well; Manish Arora, who was enlisted by the renowned makeup retailer MAC to collaborate on a beauty range; Rohit Bal, who was titled "India's master of fabric and fantasy" by Time magazine in 1996; Rina Dhaka, whose work has been featured in international fashion magazines such as Vogue and Elle and Ritu Beri, the first-ever Indian designer to have presented a show in Paris.

Indian cinema has always been


more than just a source of entertainment. It has been a major disseminator of fashion trends. The Indian film industry was and is a source of inspiration when it comes to fashion.

With nearly every Indian movie comes a style trend that is followed by the masses. Indian film icons like Madhuri Dixit, Aishwarya Rai and Kareena Kapoor, etc., have been at the forefront of fashion in the film industry. From Madhubala's anarkali suits in Mughal-e-Azam to Kareena Kapoor's t-shirts and patialas in Jab We Met, each style trend that was born in Indian movies, became an instant hit among the masses.

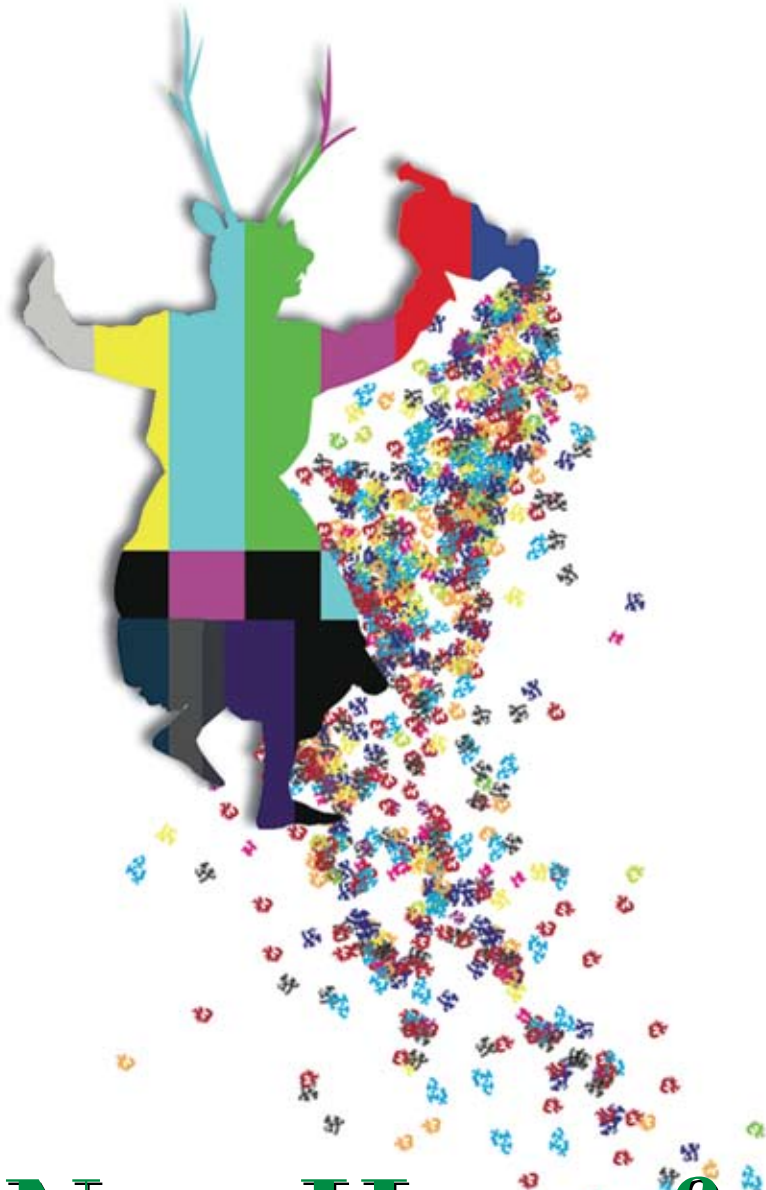
In the global scenario, the fashion industry has seen rapid growth and there has been a considerable Indian presence on international forums. Indian designers have successfully taken the fashion industry to the global stage.

Professionals associated with the industry have contributed immensely to the spread of fashion, both among Indian consumers and selected segments of western markets. They have also benefited greatly from Indian fashion industry's global impact. Now, India also has many happening fashion events in major cities across the country, with the fashion and entertainment capital Mumbai taking a lead in this respect.

The fashion industry in India, though still in its youth, has the potential to make its mark on the world stage. The country has a rich and varied textile heritage where each region has its own native dress and traditional costumes.

Today, fashion is an integral part of every young Indian's life which is why apparel and textile designing has become a fast growing industry. India can now boast of dozens of leading fashion designers, who can match any European fashion designer in terms of concepts, styles and designs. 

The writer holds an MBA in Marketing and freelances for various publications.



New Hope for Filmmakers

Bhutanese filmmakers have found a new platform to display their works in the form of Beskop Tshechu, a festival of short films.

By Asra Khurshid

Bhutan, a small country with a rich culture, is sandwiched between other South Asian countries that have strong and all-pervading cultures of their own. The majority of the country's population is Buddhist but Hinduism is also quite prevalent. An interesting fact about Bhutan is that it is the only country in the world where people's well-being is measured by a Gross National Happiness index.

The country is also known for its rich art and cultural background, which is quite similar to that of Tibet's and is mostly inspired by Buddhist art forms. After remaining secluded for a long time, Bhutan is gradually opening up to the world and the people of Bhutan are exploring new avenues to broaden their horizon and present their culture in new forms, one of them being short films and documentaries.

Bhutan's entertainment industry, especially the cinema industry, is not a developed one. In fact, in comparison with the film industries of neighboring countries such as India, the industry in Bhutan seems to be in its early stages of development.

The first film made in Bhutan was Gasa Lamai Singye, which was released in 1989. Since then only 89 films have been made. Out of these, a few went on to gain international recognition and even won some international awards.

The plot of most of Bhutanese films revolves around traditional folklore, legends, culture and history. However, some of the recent movies seem to be more inspired by both Hollywood and Bollywood themes, especially the Hindi films and their songs that seem to have a strong influence on young Bhutanese filmmakers.

In recent years, a number of Bhutanese filmmakers have taken their movies to film festivals around the world. Thanks to their exposure to the concept, film festivals are

gradually becoming a prominent feature on Bhutan's cultural horizon. The presence of foreign media at these festivals indicates that they have gained international recognition in a short time.

While there are different types of film festivals, Beskop Tshechu is the first and the only documentary, animation and short film festival in Bhutan which is dedicated to promoting and encouraging creative filmmaking.

A non-profit event, it is organized by a group of filmmakers, artists and volunteers. Screenings and events are free and open to the public. Beskop Tshechu was launched in 2011 to celebrate the historic royal wedding of Bhutan's 'Dragon King', the American-British educated and immensely popular monarch, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, who married his longtime girlfriend in October 2011. The festival was meant to pay homage to the king for his committed and continued support and interest in the arts and films.

Since then the festival has featured a number of short films and documentaries made by Bhutanese and foreign filmmakers.

The three-day festival also showcases non-competitive films from around the world to provide Bhutanese viewers with a range of artistic endeavour. There is also an out-of-competition "Bhutan Special" category, in which old Bhutanese films are screened.

This festival provides an excellent opportunity to individual filmmakers as well as small-scale production houses to display their work to the world and explore their potential.

Films in competition are viewed by a jury, which consists of both local and foreign members, and the event concludes with an awards ceremony and the winning filmmakers are given cash awards.

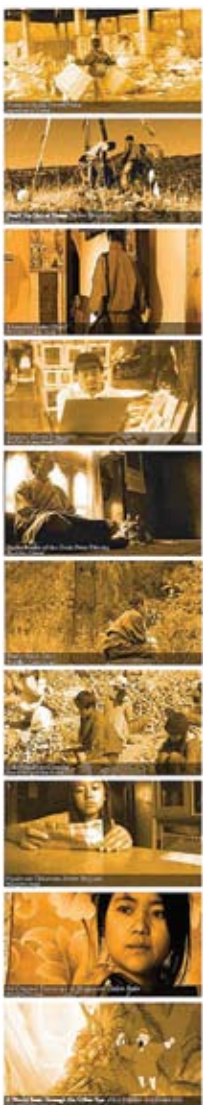
Over the years, other features have also been added and now a number of filmmaking and arts-related programs, such as workshops by foreign professionals and music and drama activities, are also a part of the film festival.

Previously in Bhutan, there was no regularized support for creative filmmaking. There were no grants or recognition for such films. Film

with an opportunity to display their work and gain recognition. Beskop Tshechu is a fully voluntary effort by filmmakers and artists to enhance the scope of cinema in the country.

This year, the festival featured three animated movies, four documentaries, four fictional and five special projects in the competitive category from Bhutan. As the festival also caters to international filmmakers, a number of foreign filmmakers submitted their work. A major international participant was India which submitted six films while Japan, Iran and Hong Kong also submitted their films in the categories of short and animated films.

It can be said that Bhutan now has an emerging film industry, led by passionate and talented professionals, that enjoys the patronage and support of government officials, investors and



The vision behind the festival is mainly to provide filmmakers with an opportunity to share their artistic endeavors. Such festivals play a major role in encouraging and promoting non-commercial filmmakers as they provide amateurs with an opportunity to gain recognition.

festivals were unheard of and there was no outlet to share one's work. This was the reason why some filmmakers felt the need for a platform to promote out-of-the-box, creative films that would help cultivate a new future for Bhutanese filmmakers. Their determination to have such a forum led to the Beskop Tshechu.

The vision behind holding the festival was mainly to provide filmmakers with an opportunity to share their artistic endeavors. Such festivals play a major role in encouraging and promoting non-commercial filmmakers as they provide amateurs

professionals.

Its growth in such a short time indicates a bright future. The organizers are hopeful that more international participants will take part in future film festivals held in the country.

In addition to giving the much needed boost to Bhutan's film and entertainment industry, such festivals are also expected to bring in considerable revenue for the country's economy. **S**

The writer is a student at the Lahore School of Economics. She regularly writes on social issues.



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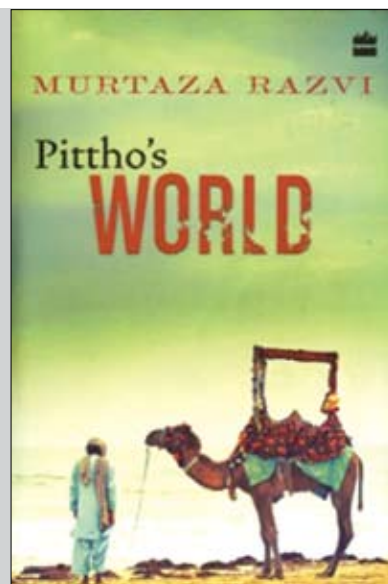
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An Incredible Tale

Book Title: Pittho's World
Author: Murtaza Razvi
Publisher: HarperCollins
 (April 2013)
Pages: 220, Paperback
Price: Rs.695
ISBN-13: 978-8172239343

Reviewed By S.G. Jilanee



Murtaza Razvi's posthumous publication, "Pittho's World" is a clever blend of fact and fiction. You may suspect the veracity, but you cannot tell them apart. Even Rani, whom Sheikhu tells the stories as a friend, sits up and asks, 'Tell me, Sheikhu, are these all true stories, as you say?' 'Honest to goodness,' he answers.

Yet, doubt lingers. The reader bites his nails and wonders whether all that Sheikhu tells could really have happened. Outlandish as they may appear, but, except for the jinn and Khwaja Khizr episodes, most of the stuff is not altogether implausible.

Sheikhu's extended family comprises an assortment of uncles, aunts and cousins besides Dada, Dadi, Nani, Abbu and Ammi. Some are liberal, some orthodox and some outright cracked. A mild clash of the ancient with modern occurs when Ammi starts making dolls with encouragement from Apa and Dadi but has them burnt because, according to her, it was a sin.

The crazy ones are also suitably named; Pagal Kutta uncle and Cattie Auntie. Pagal Kutta is obsessed with preventing food wastage. Once he invites Sheikhu for lunch and inquires

how many *chapattis* his guest would have.

"Then, from a little bag sitting on a trolley in front of him, he drew out some flour, measured it on the scales and laid it in a dish sitting next to the flour bag on the trolley" and yelled to the servant to make *chapattis* with it.

Catty Auntie rears cats. They are named after historical figures including Nehru, Indira Gandhi and so forth. One, named Musharraf, has its tail cut off. Her second spouse makes 'chicken soup' with kitten meat and enjoys the meat of a squirrel roasted whole "with the fur still on, over charcoal."

One cousin is dubbed "Dr. D – the D standing for 'death' because he was a quack." An uncle, "heated up a coin and then placed it on my bum to leave a stamp that said, 'One rupee' and 'Government of Pakistan' in reverse," Sheikhu tells.

A colleague at work is called ABAJ, because his real name, Abdul Bahauddin Alauddin Jalaluddin is too lengthy to pronounce.

A distant aunt, Pittho, of the book's title, starts from her home at daybreak for their house which is only a few miles away but arrives at midnight, because, Brum-brum Chawk, the mischievous jinn made her walk

around in circles. It was when Khwaja Khizr appeared to guide her way and the waters of the Ravi parted at the touch of her stick that she was able to arrive at her destination. On another occasion Jafar Jinn carries Lala in his arms and flies to the Koh Qaaf, (Caucasus) to rescue his child.

And then there is the successful rockstar cousin, Deedee. His mother, Bia, refuses to see him when he tries to visit her during her terminal illness of cancer. "When Bia's end finally came, Deedee dashed back from Bombay to attend the funeral. But by the time he managed to reach Lahore, his stepfather had already buried his wife, depriving Deedee of her last 'face-seeing' as it is called in Urdu. This only went to confirm the allegations Deedee had made about his stepfather, and everyone's sympathies lay with the rockstar. Thus jolted, he went on to release a new album named after BIA, the title song – *Bia-o-Bia, tu ne kya kiya* – which went on to become a universal hit."

If all that is not enough to make you hold your sides with laughter, there is Agha Razik's story. "Of all of Dada's friends, it was Agha Razik who wore the very thick glasses whom I remember for his eccentricities. He

used to publish an almanac which used to tell you what special Islamic or Hindu or Sikh day fell on what day of the Gregorian calendar. He also made predictions of things to come, and whenever a major event occurred, he would remind his colleagues at the Dera how far back in time he had predicted it. Neil Armstrong's landing on the moon was one such event. 'I see Neel-i-Bazuzore on his way to capturing a heavenly body very close to our planet,' he had predicted."

For the elderly reader, the wedding rituals and particularly the "vulgar" songs sung on the occasion would revive nostalgic memories of the happier times.

Among this crazy lot Sheikh's paternal aunt, Apa, stands out as an incredibly strong woman, who brooks no nonsense. "Apa had acquired a reputation for being quite lethal with her tongue. That was perhaps her only weapon against her outmoded parents.

If they had been allowed to cajole her into acquiescence, she never would have been the free woman she became... She contested the election to the provincial legislature while living in the house of parents who wouldn't dream of sending their women out to vote."


There are unnatural deaths galore. Pittho poisons Lala. ABAJ is strangulated. Akhyanji's brother is 'butchered.' She burns a servant alive. Dada hits Agha "on the head with the iron rod he kept by his side to stir the fire in the hookah pot" that kills him.

But amidst all this fantasy, there are also glimpses of history: the MQM-Pakhtun turf war, Ziaul Huq's reforms, the MRD, the 1971 War and Bangladesh, all compressed in a few pages.

Karachi receives plaudits "Here was a place you could be who you naturally were, evolve into who you wanted to be... Rather than a melting pot, this was a salad bowl

in which every ingredient retained its individuality and formed one big, diverse whole."

And finally, the unique explanation for the name of the Delhi locality of Billimaran that should make Mirza Ruswa turn in his grave and laugh. The signboard on Catty Auntie's rehabilitation centre for women, reads; "In loving memory of the late Ruswa Delavi, the great poet of the Delhi School: This home for displaced women is named after the historical neighbourhood of Old Delhi. Ballimaran was the name of the original settlers of the neighbourhood in Delhi because they were known to kill stray cats ..."

True or not, but the stories establish the pre-eminent journalist, Murtaza Razvi as also a fiction writer par excellence. 

The writer is a senior political analyst and former editor of SouthAsia Magazine.



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So Much for the Rule of Law

By Anees Jillani

The Indian media loves to ridicule Pakistan and the state of its democracy. It is proud of its traditions that uphold the rule of law in India. It is a different matter that there is a lot that it has reason to be ashamed of including the night of February 23, 1991 when 125 personnel of 4 Rajputana Rifles belonging to the Army cordoned off Kunan Poshpora village in Trehgam Tehsil of border district Kupwara, some 100 km north of Srinagar, and ordered all the men to come out in the open. The troops entered the houses, and gang-raped the women ranging from the ages of ten to 80 years. The number of women is not important as even one is too many but the people of Kashmir claim that more than 200 women were raped. The government estimate hovers at around 55.

The courts in Pakistan are criticized for their inability to convict the accused in the Mumbai attacks. In the case of Kunan Poshpora, what to talk of any convictions, not a single accused has ever been arrested. The people are just experiencing one investigation after another.

In June 2013, the Chief Judicial Magistrate Kupwara, while dismissing closure report of Jammu and Kashmir police in the case, asked police to “further investigate to unravel the identity of those who happen to be perpetrators.” The court had said that the investigation would be conducted by an officer not below the rank of SSP and within a time bound period of three months. Even this time period has expired and nobody has heard of the report.

The Indian Foreign Minister who incidentally is a Muslim during his recent visit to Kashmir condemned the gang-rape of the village women when asked about it by a reporter. However, he advised the Kashmiris to forgive and forget and move forward. Now this is one advice that the Government of Pakistan should keep handy all the time and share with the Indians each time they accuse Pakistan of not prosecuting the terrorists for the offenses committed in India.

There were of course protests in Kashmir after this. There were of course governmental investigations but they rejected the allegations as “baseless.” Apart from the fact that international human rights organizations like Amnesty, Human Rights Watch and the US State Department expressed serious doubts about the integrity of these investigations and the manner in which they were conducted, stating that the Indian government launched a “campaign to acquit the army of charges of human rights violations”, which woman and then a Kashmiri Muslim one would levy such a false charge.

We in South Asia live in a male chauvinist society where the victim rather than the rapist are usually punished and ostracized. Social stigma generated out of this incident has resulted in women of this village facing difficulties in getting married even today. The villagers are so isolated that only two students have gone to university since the massive rape; most choose to drop out after eighth class than bear the taunts and barbs directed at them when they go to the other villages to continue their studies. The only government school in the affected village teaches up to standard eight.

It is a sad reflection on the community but many of the other villagers have banned all social contact with the victims' families. Parents say it is difficult to marry off their children. At least one family has confessed to marrying off their 16-year-old daughter to a 50-year-old divorcee and father of three because “none of the young men in the village came forward” and “a search for prospective grooms outside the village was never an option after the incident.”

So much for the rule of law and justice, India... 

Anees Jillani is an advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan and a member of the Washington, DC Bar. He has been writing for various publications for more than 20 years and has authored several books.



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