

Democracy and the Individual

By Danish Azar Zubay

The single most important factor that has played a vital role in the making of communities and history in general is the individual's role. Every citizen has an important part to play in the society, regardless of the field he/she belongs to. The psyche of every person can contribute either positively or negatively to the life and spirit of a community or a nation. The individual is a part of the whole, the link between the macrocosm and the microcosm, His prosperity and stable constitution is a guarantee of welfare and stability of a nation.

Unfortunately this aspect never gets the attention it deserves. On the contrary, the philosophies of governmental systems, the ideals, and sometimes utopian concepts are the limelight of discussion, especially democracy. Democracy has earned notoriety due to the shapes it has taken in the Third World yet a general consensus is still there about its fundamental principle - the participation of the people to form governments.

And if we agree that democracy is case of lesser evil of all governmental systems, can we ever dream of a true democracy? When the majority of our assembly seats are occupied by feudal lords, sardars, waderas and chaudries, who believe in the enslavement of people rather than their emancipation and freedom. Only the most resourceful and powerful people end up in the driving seat and grab the most crucial positions in the country. The common man has no representation, no voice, his grievances are never heard.

In such a situation, the masses, perhaps about 90% of the population, who are living on the edge of a precipice, with promises from politicians and the priests, and yet no improvement in the quality of life, become dissatisfied, disoriented and aggressive. Now there are bound to be messes in the system. There is bound to be injustice. There is bound to be dissent, rebellion and chaos.

To top it all there is an invisible but gigantic unhindered force, a mega-tornado sweeping the entire globe, causing more damage in the Third World. It is called urbanization. It has changed the character and the morality of our universal man. Some middle-class people have succeeded in getting a place in our legislative assemblies. This appears as a good sign, but I'm sure that it will not be till our great grand children's time that true representatives of the real people have a majority in these houses.

With our education standards and literacy rate a revolution is unthinkable. Thanks to the great explosion of the information technology that has hit us from the West, some awareness has been created. I strongly feel that it is not wise to pay lip service to democracy. Democracy and national harmony are only possible in a peaceful atmosphere.

Let us get to the real issues. Let's straighten out our priorities.

Many innocent citizens are murdered cold-blooded in broad daylight by the so-called subversive elements; shoot-on-sight curfew had become frequent. Brutal crime has become so common that even the newspapers fail to give it proper coverage. There has been so much talk of rule of law, when lawlessness has become the order of the day. Sindh has become a perpetual law and order situation. One sees scared civilians, flight of capital, the unemployment, the economic fiasco. The barricaded streets have left a permanent scar on our city and, of course, our history. One feels that we are living in a state of undeclared emergency.

It has been our national misfortune that we lost the leadership soon after the promised land was delivered. We all know what happened next. Self-centered politicians having no sympathy with the land or the people, military adventurers and fortune seekers had a ball at the cost of national integrity and quality of life of the masses. Officers lacking insight and a vision for the future were at the helm of affairs. Planning for future was absent, and the results of whatever planning was done are obvious.

A country at its birth which was a little over thirty million in population had its population doubled, trebled and almost quadrupled in four decades. The development could not even keep half a pace with the population growth. Seems ridiculous -- but it's a fact. In terms of simple logic, if you put thirty people in a room on the first day and then gradually keep on increasing their numbers and decreasing their basic amenities to sustain life, what will happen.

They may want to escape or break the confinement. The weaker may not even get a share. The problems of autonomy and not getting even shares, the centrifugal forces, the nationalists and the separatists are all a bi-products of our accumulated political blunders and planning problems in an anti-democratic atmosphere.

Coming back to the individual's role and moral re-armament, there are some definite views, which may be quite arbitrary in nature. Giving a to-the-point perspective one can start with an explanation that morality or moral values including ethical values, which society uses as a reference, usually emanate from the religious beliefs of the society. In other words the established religious maxims have the greatest bearing and influence over the prevalent morality of the society. The wider the bifurcations of the sects, the wider the differences in a religious order, and the broader the range of interpretations of established values and norms. Also the greater the possibilities of confusion and an absence of proper direction.

Our religious orthodoxy is of a similar classification. Complicated and puritanical in nature, it contains dozens of different sects which only help to compound the differences and tensions, hence a unified platform is not available. I think there is a great need to

accept and identify the gradual change of values in an urban context. We have to recognize the fact that a universal urbanite human is emerging who is at the crossroads of traditionalism and modern education and systems. He needs salvation which traditional religious orders and moral or ethical systems are not providing. The new urban scenario creates new problems which demand new solutions and directions.

There is a great need for an urban religious order, a renewable system which should change with changing values and the passage of time. It should be in harmony with the nature of its users. People should be taught to respect the right of way on the city roads and not to violate traffic signals. There is no sermon for traffic rules. Therefore when a God-fearing person sees that the road is clear and there is no vehicle in sight, he breaks the red signal without any fear, perhaps thinking that these are merely man-made rules. (I quote this from experience). He sincerely believes that if it is written in the book of destiny to die on the traffic signal, no one can stop him. He will be received in the hereafter for the real unending life.

There is no traditional answer to the toxic nuclear waste disposal' problem, and mullahs, the main dispensers of moral systems for a majority of our population, don't seem to be aware of such a problem. Therefore, what we need is education, an unbiased education, free of cost, for everyone. (Perhaps the infamous idiot box should be used for a mass education drive that this country needs so desperately). I feel that the biggest problem of the country, the population explosion, despite many efforts could not be contained because of our fundamental beliefs. Will our *moulvis*, who have almost the entire nation's mind in their grip, declare in their sermons that from now on a single child family is the divine law? They can help save a major disaster by doing so, but one wonders if they will. China the most populous country in the world, who got independence at the same time as ours, would have committed suicide if she did not contain the population problem. This is one country, it is said, that it has succeeded in a single child family program and is now among the superpowers of the world.

With the same logic if you take thirty people belonging to the highest and strongest moral order in the world, and stuff them in a single room on the, first day, keep on increasing their numbers and decreasing their food supply and other life sustaining requisites from the second day, imagine what will become of them. Ours is a similar situation.

Poor leadership, poor planning, no education, unhindered urbanisation and the result is quite obvious, a state of high emergency in forty years: a state of red alert! Besides education, moral re-armament and character building, what we need immediately as a curative medicine is that the intellectuals of all walks of life, professionals and social scientists get together and carve out a 'universal urban order' for a universal urban human.

Secondly, as a rehabilitative medicine we need to direct major funds and professionals to make serious efforts to arrest the urbanisation phenomenon. If it took centuries for Europe to get rid of feudalism, it will take even longer on this side of the planet, considering the kind of politics that we practice, and the type of democracy we cherish. In order to come out of the red alert we must immediately propose legislations and programs that can control population by law, enhance developmental programs, and most important, have a free, unbiased education for all.

DAZ

March 1991