

MEETING A WHITE MENNONITE

By Iftekhar Sayeed

WHY WE LIKE IT: *The well-known Bangladeshi writer and activist argues against the 'truism' that democracy is the best form of government for those under military rule. He explains how Christianity rationalized and justified the democratic model—and by extension, its own religious primacy—when in fact, as the records show, it condoned racism, violence and oppression. In Thailand, Bangladesh and other places, military rule was characterized by civic stability and overall peace. But this, of course, was exactly what rankled Western powers in their quest for exploitation. Choice examples of the author's word colour: '...Thailand has never been colonized, so they're not coconuts like us—brown outside, white inside—starving for the approval of white people.' And 'This was daylight racism...She was white, we were brown. It seemed natural—almost rational—that she would know what was best for us.'* (Spacing is author's own).

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The British after the Battle of Plassey 1757: still here

Mrs Norah Martin was my colleague at the Notre Dame College English course.

She was a Mennonite Christian, a fundamentalist. She was Canadian.

She was white.

This was in the early 1990s. Some of us teachers gathered together and, during break, over sugary tea, did what we usually do when we have nothing better to do: hold a corroboree on the nation's future.

After a brief discussion, a consensus was reached: military rule was the way forward (the military had just been ousted by western donors).

Gormless as we were, we took Mrs. Martin into our confidence.

“No!”

Her entire body stiffened. Her pointy nose signalled disapproval, pointing downward, as though averting our collective gaze.

“No! That's not the way.”

She was treating us like misbehaving students. We were children lost in the woods. We needed adult guidance, a firm hand to deal with our errant ways.

This was daylight racism.

It would have occurred to none of us to dictate to Mrs. Martin how *her* country should be governed. We felt incompetent.

She was white, we were brown. It seemed natural - almost rational - that she would know what was best for us.

None of us contradicted her, none of us stood his ground. We accepted the scolding in stupid silence.

Her effortless assumption of white superiority hardly offended. We look up to white people as our natural superiors.

We felt like negroes post-Reconstruction, Uncle Tomming to our erstwhile masters. We are [the Dr Azizes](#) of South Asia, [brown sahibs](#), coconuts, mental slaves.

It didn't occur to her that we were rational human beings assembled in the little office at Martin Hall, Notre Dame College.

She never bothered with evidence or arguments. There was no appeal to the facts or reason.



Notre Dame College: no haven for student thugs

(Many in Bangladesh want military rule, but the elite, under western inspiration and western financial coercion, conceal the facts. Modon Shahu, editor at the most widely circulated English daily, the Daily Star, told me: “We know people want martial law, but we can’t print that.”

The motto of the rag? [“YOUR RIGHT TO KNOW”](#)).

As a Mennonite, she was against evolution. She didn’t believe, despite the evidence. True, it’s “only” a theory, but it shows her disregard for data. Later, Fr. Banas, a Catholic priest, told me, sotto voce, that Mennonites have a literal interpretation of the Bible. Even he found it preposterous that one didn’t believe in evolution.

As a fundamentalist Christian, Mrs. Martin no doubt believed that democracy is God’s gift to mankind. It would never occur to her that it might be a gift from the other guy. After all, didn’t Christ perish for each and every one of us, and doesn’t democracy affirm our essential equality?

True, so does Islam, but Islam affirms hierarchy and subordination, thereby nullifying equality *in this world*. We are a vertical society; a Christian society is horizontal, like a democracy. (Never mind that hierarchies are universal: what matters is belief, not the facts on the ground.)

Joseph Schumpeter, mystified by the contemporary belief in democracy, despite all evidence to the contrary, concluded that this was an evidence-denying religious belief - in fact, Christianity redux.

He meant the democracy-as-Christianity thesis as discrediting democracy, for religious belief ignores - “transcends” - the evidence.

I am in total agreement: you may believe in the goodness of God despite the evidence, for that constitutes religious faith - goodness is “evidence-transcendent”. For all we know, it may ultimately turn out that God is good.

But the goodness of democracy must be based on the evidence only - along with its rationality. The voter has been elevated to the level of an infallible demigod, when [experiment after experiment by social psychologists](#) have shown him or her to be thoroughly irrational.

But there’s more. While for Schumpeter the [“democracy = Christianity”](#) thesis is evidence of irrationality, recent thinkers like Larry Siedentop and Nick Spencer affirm and glorify the equation.

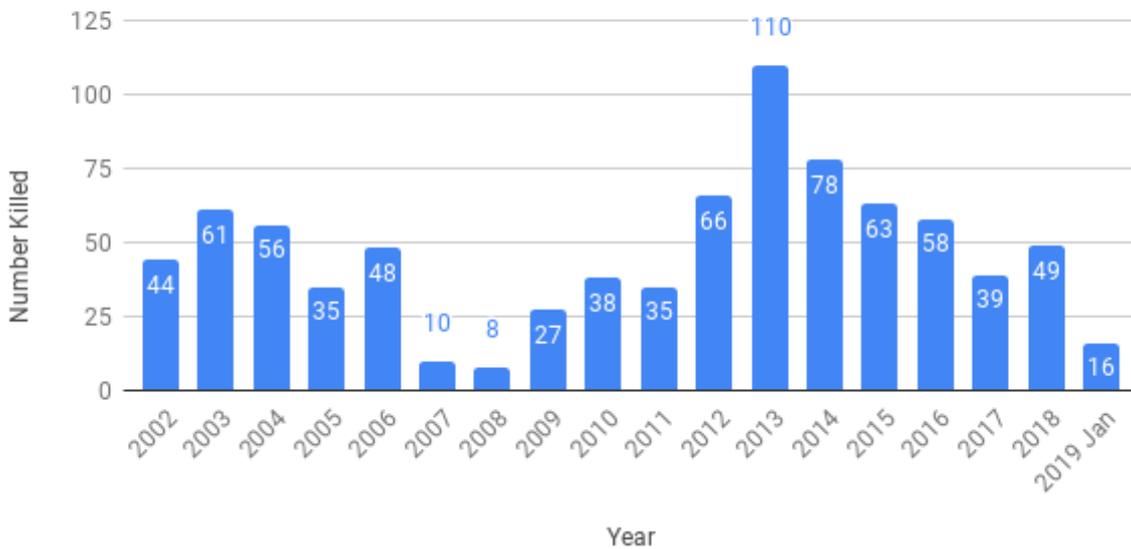
They really put democracy beyond all rational enquiry, like Mrs. Norah Martin, the fundamentalist Mennonite Christian.

If she had spent a few minutes conferring with Fr. Banas on the use and abuse of students by the political parties, she would have got an earful. (For the big picture on democracy in Bangladesh, click [here](#)).

Had she listened, she would have learned how the priests have kept student thuggery out of campus (Notre Dame College motto: *diligite lumen sapientiae*), how they nearly left the country 45 years ago rather than allow [student thugs](#) to run amok, to the eternal gratitude of parents who, when warned by the padres, would immediately take their child out of politics, the boy quivering in his shoes and dumbstruck before the relieved father and mother.

But then, being a fundamentalist, she might just have stuck to her credo.

Newspaper Headlines Announcing The Murder Of Student Politicians in Bangladesh (military rule: 2007 to 2008)



Student thugs kill each other over a division of the spoils: notice the plunge in numbers under military rule (2007-8)

In 2011, my wife and I went to Bangkok.

The city was flooded.

There were sandbags everywhere - even in the hospitals. It was feared that the hospitals would have to shut down, like other parts of Bangkok already had.

My doctor failed to keep his appointment because his house was under water. Another had moved out of her house and onto higher ground - an apartment.

It was widely believed that the government of Yingluck Shinawatra would collapse. It had dismally failed to forewarn citizens of the impending disaster. It was a massive case of government failure.

What saved Yingluck's skin was not her good looks, so to speak: there was a more sinister complexion to the matter.

Yingluck was the sister of the demagogue, Thaksin Shinawatra, a wildly popular personality.

Thais still fondly recall his trigger-happy ways: [he killed over 2,500 people](#) in less than three months in extrajudicial murders ([including in the Muslim South](#)), which made him very popular - on top of the generous pandering to the poor.

It took the military to defenestrate him and finally exile the divisive figure.

The army's investigation revealed that most of the murdered were innocent people - never mind if they were innocent; guilt and innocence are to be decided in a court of law, not by a lynch mob.

As is typical in Asia, his sister took over.

She engineered [a disastrous rice-subsidy scheme](#) - again to appeal to the poor, the majority - that nearly bankrupted the exchequer.

Again, the junta defenestrated her and "allowed" her to escape abroad.

The army created modern Thailand. It instituted a constitutional monarchy in 1932, since when [it staged 18 military coups](#), of which 12 were successful. Now, the junta is trying to -and succeeding in - caging the democratic beast.



Getting shirty in Bangkok: how democracy makes us civic enemies

In Bangladesh, parents, elders and teachers perpetuate the canard that military rule is not good for a country.

Where's the evidence?

In Bangladesh, under military rule from 1975 to 1990, we had peace and stability: no one was [burnt alive](#) or beaten to death in hartals; no woman was [raped for voting for the "wrong" party](#); no judges were leaned on to pronounce for the government; no politics meant no hatred, no US versus THEM polarization of society. We were not civic enemies, then.

Again, in 2007, in Bangladesh, it was the army that "prevented a bloodbath", [to quote the Economist](#).

Thailand, South Korea, Taiwan and Indonesia all developed and modernized under the military.

Today, the Thai military is performing its decades-old patriotic function. It can do so for two reasons.

First, Thailand receives no foreign aid, so western imperialists have no stranglehold - “full nelson” or, rather, “surfboard backbreaker”- on the country and its people.

Second, Thailand has never been colonized, so they’re not coconuts like us - brown outside, white inside - starving for the approval of white people.

And since we can’t be genetically white, we try to be politically white - by voting, just as the white man does.

Rudyard Kipling exhorted his white brethren to:

“Take up the White Man’s burden...”

Today, Kipling would have been barrel-chested with pride: regiments of brown sahibs – “half devil and half child” - carry the white man’s burden for him.



John Bull and Uncle Sam bear the White Man’s Burden by carrying the coloured of the world to civilisation

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

After our so-called democratic transition (1990), many have been burnt alive, beaten to death and raped for voting for or belonging to the opposition. Democracy has made us civic enemies, with the two political parties/dynasties

unleashing their student thugs on each other and on innocent bystanders. Under military rule (1975 - 1990), the state had a monopoly of violence, which it then lost. The Cold War over, western donors pushed General Ershad out and forced democracy on Bangladesh, as on many other countries.

My intention in writing the essay was to vent. The two groups of people who are in a position to look honestly at the facts and speak up - the hyper-educated, cringy elite here and westerners - are too blinded by the religion to utter a squeak of heresy. Democracy's goodness is evidence-transcendent.

This is not the first time that ideological blindness has led to misery. We've clearly not learned. Essays like these may winkle out readers who eschew the extra-rational and proportion belief to evidence.

BIO: *Iftekhar Sayeed teaches English. He was born and lives in Dhaka, Bangladesh. He has contributed to The Danforth Review, Axis of Logic, Enter Text, Postcolonial Text, Southern Cross Review, Opednews.com, Left Curve, Mobius, Erbacce, Down In The Dirt and other publications. He is also a freelance journalist. He and his wife love to travel.*