

Our way, their way

They have bandas in India too, but they don't trash the city to make their point



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The state government of Delhi recently hiked public bus fares in an astonishing manner. The Delhi Metro rail, a major medium of public transportation in the Indian capital, quickly followed suit. Prices of consumer goods are also going up, and the general sentiment is resentment against the establishment for its inability to curb rising prices.

The opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) called a Delhi *banda* on Friday. Guess what happened on the *banda* day. Dozens of cars smashed, pro-*banda* activists pelting stones at shop owners who refused to close their businesses, breaking railings on the streets? Nothing like that happened. Coming from Nepal where such things are an inseparable part of any *banda* and *bandas* themselves a part of life, I was mildly surprised to see such a peaceful *banda* and way of protest in Delhi. The BJP, not an ideal political party in itself, but that's a separate issue, only requested business owners and people to mark the *banda*, there was no force used. And, stunningly for me, the party said beforehand that there would be inconvenience for the general public during the *banda*.

"Transport and essential services will be allowed to run during the *banda* so that people do not face any inconvenience," a leader of the BJP was quoted as saying. Do you, residents of Kathmandu or any other city in Nepal for that matter, believe it? Something is amazingly good about India. The parties here, many parties, though not all, fear the people and respect the rule of law. They are concerned about their reputation and believe that tormenting the public isn't a great way of winning their hearts and votes. Morality still prevails in the majority of Indian politics despite innumerable shortcomings.

Now, as I was appreciating the BJP-way of protest, I came across a tweet from Kathmandu on Thursday. It said:

Witnessed the drama of the Maoist Morons around Singhadurbar (KTM)... walked to work (obviously!). INFURIATING

Infuriating indeed. It's a grave matter of concern that Nepali political parties are increasingly turning into gangs of rascals with their leaders happily engaged in extortion and intimidation. Whatever happened to the ideology and principles upon which party activities are supposedly based? With their egos higher than Sagarmatha and no vision for the country, our leaders are functioning like those Hindi film *goondas* who kill people on behalf of anyone who gives them *supari* (money). Do you really think Prachanda and his collaborators are fighting for civilian supremacy now?

The word people has been so much abused in Nepal that sometimes it feels that the very meaning of

the word has been changed. Those who inflict pain and inconvenience on the people and society, ironically, in the name of uplifting them scream "people" all the time. The image of a rabies affected dog comes to my mind when I hear the word "people" from the political leaders. They are never interested in solving the problems of, for example, inflation and a monopolistic market. Can't the Maoists, who are so much concerned about civilian supremacy, help the government to fight the power crisis or inflation?

Thuggery is not limited to the opposition. One shameless minister publicly slapped a national servant last week. Instead of throwing her in jail, the police continued escorting her. Rather than being ashamed of her act, the culprit went on declaring that she would respond by closing Birgunj bazaar if government employees protested her action. The height of anarchy that prevails in Nepal.

Four members of the Maharashtra assembly in India last week manhandled one of their colleagues; and they

every issue. We have seen how they looked like when they are ruling. Prachanda was by no stretch of the imagination different than say Girija Prasad Koirala in delivering failed governance, overlooking corruption and promoting nepotism. Forget the "we are different than the rest" Maoist rhetoric. During the Congress regime in the 1990s, the UML did what the Maoists are doing today: calling *bandas*, obstructing house proceedings and disrupting general life.

Though I am for a Maoist-led government because they are the largest party in the CA, I don't think it's the end of the world if they remained in the opposition. They can still work towards the formulation of the constitution and completing the peace process. Who can stop them from doing so? The problem is they are not interested. Because of this anarchy in our society today, foreigners make fun of us and, at every opportune moment, preach to us.

"When India became independent, the situation was far worse than what Nepal is facing today," said K.V.



were, at least, instantly suspended giving people the impression that there's still rule of law in the state. I can't forget what a Nepali student of chartered accountancy who came to study here in Delhi told me in an interview this summer. "The new thing that I found here is that people obey rules," he said casually. "And they fear the police and bus conductors!" He had just come from Kathmandu.

What's wrong with us? Don't we have anything constructive to do than hit the streets and shout slogans all the time? We now have the democracy and freedom that we so passionately fought for. We voted so enthusiastically and gave the ex-rebels the largest position in parliament. We did away with the monarchy that we thought was the only obstruction to our progress. Still the general public is suffering. Why? I understand these are pessimistic questions that could have come from a politically aloof person. I am not against the political parties per se. I see no alternative to multiparty democracy. Personally, I feel the Maoists should be in government. In fact, they should be leading it because the people, not a majority of them though, voted the party to be the largest in the CA. But that doesn't mean they can have it all their way on

Rajan, former Indian ambassador to Nepal, at a programme organised in Delhi last week in which CPN-UML chief Jhalanath Khanal was the chief speaker. "India had been partitioned; there were communal riots with thousands of victims on both sides. There were many serious problems. It was not that there was a national government, but we had leaders of great stature both in government and outside who were willing to work with the spirit of a certain sacrifice and service. It was that spirit of sacrifice and service and mutual cooperation which enabled the country to write the constitution at a very critical state and consolidate democracy itself."

With that example, Rajan was clearly saying "you guys don't have such leaders in Nepal". It hurts to hear such things from an Indian, but the reality is he is correct in his assessment. Our leaders have let us down. They have put us in such a situation that we can't face a foreigner with dignity. As Rajan said, even if the constitution is written while the Maoists are in the opposition, the real credit will go to no other than the Maoists themselves because people will think that they allowed it to happen. But again, the fact is, they are not interested.

Reading Weber in Tehran

CHARLES KURZMAN

An unlikely suspect was fingered at the recent show trials of Iranian dissidents: Max Weber, whose ideas on rational authority were blamed for fomenting a "velvet revolution" against the Islamic Republic. "Theories of the human sciences contain ideological weapons that can be converted into strategies and tactics and mustered against the country's official ideology," Saeed Hajjarian, a leading strategist in the Iranian reform movement, explained in his forced confession.

A political scientist by training, Hajjarian "admitted" that Weber's notion of patrimonial government wasn't applicable to Iran. The theory, Hajjarian declared, is relevant only in countries where "people are treated as subjects and deprived of all citizenship rights," which is "completely incompatible with and unrelated to current conditions in Iran."

Hajjarian's coerced denunciation of Weber is ludicrous but unsurprising. Since the disputed presidential elections of June 12, the hard-line government in Tehran has started a broad campaign against social scientists. This crackdown is not altogether new. Over the past decade, one or two prominent social scientists have been arrested each year for supposedly plotting against the state. Those scholars were typically detained for several months and then released after making videotaped "confessions." This year, however, after the popular presidential campaign of Mir Hussein Moussavi, and protests over the official results, the number of social scientists in Iranian prisons has multiplied. At least a dozen sociologists, political scientists, and economists were put on trial.

The regime's hostility toward social scientists stretches back to the origins of the Islamic Republic. Soon after it came to power Iran's revolutionary government shut down universities and purged scholars who were deemed insufficiently Islamic. "Our university students are 'Westoxicated,'" Imam Ruhollah Khomeini warned in 1980. Too many professors were "brainwashing" their students "in the service of the West," he alleged. A cultural-revolution committee was formed to develop an Islamicised university curriculum.

But Iranian universities continued to teach Western subjects, and translations of Western works soon outpaced prerevolution rates. By the end of the 1980s many Western-educated Iranian scholars had returned to Iran. They were regarded with suspicion by the authorities, who prohibited them from engaging in any political activity but generally allowed them to pursue their scholarship. At the same time, enrollment at Iranian universities skyrocketed, doubling from 5 percent of the college-age population before the revolution to 10 percent by 1990. It is now over 30 percent, and the growth has been particularly strong in the social sciences. In 1976 there were about 27,000 social-science students in Iran; now there are more than half a million.

"Today," Hajjarian said in his coerced testimony, "state universi-

ties, free universities, distance-learning universities, and private universities in every city are busy training students for advanced degrees in these fields, without paying attention to incorrect content." In a speech to university administrators in late August, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, leader of the Islamic Republic, described the popularity of the social sciences as a "worrisome" trend. "Many of the human sciences are based on philosophies of materialism and disbelief toward the divine Islamic teachings," Khamenei said. (In Iran, "human sciences" encompasses both the humanities and the social sciences.) "Instruction in these human sciences in the universities will lead to reservations and doubts in religious principles and beliefs."

Khamenei portrayed professors as "commanders" on the front lines of "soft warfare"-the term that hard-liners in Iran use to describe Western efforts to sway and organise Iranian youth. Professors, he suggested, have a responsibility to teach their students to avoid Western influences, and limit their "specialised discussions" in the social sciences to "qualified persons within safe environments." To do otherwise, Khamenei said, risked "damaging the social environment."

Iranian social scientists are being harassed and imprisoned for their engagement with the public sphere

Such rhetoric has fueled calls for a purge of the universities, with special scrutiny on the social sciences. "The human sciences should not be taught in the Western style in the country's universities," Ayatollah Mohammad Emami-Kashani, a senior member of Iran's Assembly of Experts, declared in a nationally televised sermon in September.

Max Weber is not alone in being blamed for the unrest in Iran. Other social theorists, like Jürgen Habermas, John Keane, Talcott Parsons, Richard Rorty, and unspecified feminists and poststructuralists have also been accused of "threatening national security and shaking the pillars of economic development."

What links this group of scholars, it appears, is their belief that an independent civil society, beyond the reach of the state, is necessary for the development of democracy and human rights. This view is particularly pronounced in Habermas's concept of the public sphere: free spaces for the exchange of ideas among autonomous institutions and individuals. Where the public sphere is weak, society is vulnerable to domination by the state.

In 2002, Habermas toured Tehran at the invitation of some of his admirers in the reform movement. (In his opening statement, the show-trial prosecutor actually invoked Habermas's brief visit as evidence of a plot to secularise

Iran.) While generally approving of Habermas's ideas, many social scientists in Iran have criticised him for relying solely on Western historical experience as the basis for the development of the public sphere. Habermas received an earful during his travels from young Iranian intellectuals who offered an Islamic interpretation of the public sphere. Must a society rid itself of religiosity, as Habermas suggests, in order to develop a "rational" public discourse? Are Western notions of tolerance unique to Christianity? Can traditional Islamic institutions, such as study circles and charitable foundations, contribute to the formation of a robust public sphere?

Notwithstanding such disagreements, Habermas's theories are very popular among educated Iranians, many of whom object to the state's intrusion into their private lives. Habermas's lectures in Tehran drew overflowing audiences-possibly the largest crowds that he has ever addressed-and his ideas are at the heart of Iranian political discourse. Former President Mohammad Khatami and his allies made the promotion of civil society one of the centerpieces of the reform movement. His administration, which came to power in 1997, handed out newspaper permits to any publisher who wanted one, in the hope of creating a free press — a strategy that worked until the hard-line judiciary managed to arrest, ban, or exile most of the country's independent publishers and journalists. Khatami's administration allowed Internet cafes to proliferate, as well as private dial-up access to the Internet; today Iranians are among the world's most prolific bloggers.

Since Khatami's second term ended in 2005, the Iranian government has tried to reverse his reforms. But it has not been entirely successful. A survey in 2007 found that 43 percent of respondents were active in at least one civil-society organisation, a proportion far higher than in other countries in the region.

The expansion of civic life spooks the Iranian government, and this past summer's sweeping election protests deepened its anxiety. The authorities have constructed a paranoid conspiracy theory that links Iranian social scientists to international civil-society activists, whom the Iranian government accuses of trying to foment a "velvet revolution" in Iran similar to recent mass movements in Ukraine, Georgia, Lebanon, and elsewhere. Colleagues in Iran tell me to expect an uptick in applications for graduate study in the social sciences in the West this year, as researchers face increasing threats.

Iranian social scientists are being harassed and imprisoned both for their participation in the public sphere and for their study of the public sphere. The Iranian government's goal, it seems, is to undermine not only the institutions of civil society, but the very idea of it.

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letters to the editor

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Belated response

Ram Saran Mahat's complaints against the role of United Nations Mission in Nepal's (UNMIN's) role in Nepal's peace process are belated and shameful ("Questioning the UN's impartiality", Nov. 10, Page 6). The Maoists have violated the letter and spirit of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) from the time it was signed in 2006. The general populace has suffered under their excesses and complained against UNMIN's apparent pro-Maoist bias since day one. But shamefully, it is only now, when the position of the 22-party coalition in government is challenged, that our leaders - such as Mahat - have chosen to speak up. Are our leaders here to represent the wishes of the people or to defend their privileged governmental berths only? If the first, why have they been silent for so long?

Secondly, Mahat rants as if it is the UN's job to transform the Maoists into a tolerant and pluralistic party abiding by internationally accepted norms of democracy. Was it the UN that promised to "mainstream" the Maoists? Did the UN write up and sign the CPA? It is the parties' responsibility to transform the Maoists into a peaceful, law-abiding party sans totalitarian ambitions. They themselves promised to do this when overthrowing the king's regime. Asking for support from the international community to help "mainstream" the Maoists is one thing. Let the parties define clearly what this support entails, and seek it respectfully. But lambasting the UN for the Maoists' non-transformation is childish and irresponsible, especially for someone of Mahat's stature.

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Unruly minister

The news of State Minister for Agriculture and Cooperatives Karima Begam slapping Parsa CDO Durga Prasad Adhikari made me think of how quickly our politicians forget the promises made to the people and start seeing themselves as big and important soon as they get into the government ("State minister slaps Parsa CDO," Nov.11, Page 1). Physical assault, however severe the crime of state employee, should not be tolerated as it violates the basic human rights of the person at the receiving end. Most worrisome was the minister's attempt at justifying her violent conduct as her right. Karima Begam must be punished for her highhandedness if the government wants to imbue a sense of rule of law in its citizens. Last year, the Minister for Forest Matrika Yadav

had locked up the CDO of Lalitpur in the toilet for not obeying his diktats. What action was taken against Yadav?

There is a well known saying, "If you want to change the world, start by changing yourself." But in Nepal, the leaders are out to change everyone but themselves. As the leader of this government, Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal should apologise on Begam's behalf. So should Deputy Prime Minister Bijaya Kumar Gachhadar as the leader of MJF (Loktantric) to which she belongs.

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The incident of State Minister for Agriculture and Cooperatives Karima Begam

assaulting Parsa CDO Prasad Bhandari epitomises the prevailing state of impunity. Begam slapped Bhandari at the latter's office accusing him of showing her disrespect by sending an old vehicle to receive her at Simara airport.

The government representatives, instead of setting an example for the rest of the country, are themselves violating the rule of law. It is sad that a person in such high office has stooped so low. The government must settle this case in a responsible manner and the prime minister should take a appropriate action against Begam to send a clear message to all civil servants such an act will not be tolerated in new Nepal

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