

Tuesday, September 19, 2023

NEWAGE

Opinion

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Our ministers' adulation of foreign leaders

[Md Mahmudul Hasan](#) | Published: 00:00, Sep 19, 2023



SINCE 2000 I have lived in four foreign countries: the UK, Germany, Malaysia and the USA. I have also travelled to other countries for presenting my research at various academic conferences. I lived in the UK for nearly seven years and have been living in Malaysia since June 2010. During my time in these countries, many of Bangladesh's ministers visited them. I have hardly seen their visits reported in any of the national media outlets of these countries. Visits by our political elites to most other countries perhaps receive a similar level of (in)attention.

The contrast involving visits of foreign leaders to Bangladesh (even if for an hour or two) is stark. Even if a junior minister from powerful countries comes to Bangladesh, the state reception as well as the media frenzy they receive is astonishingly intense.

Does it mean that we as a nation are more hospitable and welcoming than others? The answer is perhaps yes. But is it the only reason why we are at a feverish pace to welcome foreign leaders or cover their visits in the media? Sadly, our hysterical reception of foreign leaders does not necessarily point to our excessive love for them but may simply indicate a manifestation of our self-doubt and our sense of inadequacy.

I know that discussing these issues is complex, and these are unlikely to be topics of choice of our political elites. Our idolisation of foreign leaders and the relative inattention with which our ministers are typically greeted in foreign lands have been bothering me for many years. I had kept them locked deep inside me for a long time, but this essay is an expression of my pent-up anguish and frustration. While many of us keep trying in our small way to safeguard and promote the honour and prestige of our country, I have noticed with horror that our ministers drag all of us into the pit of ignominy and lack of self-confidence and self-respect.

I know talking about these issues may not take us anywhere, but my mind is torn by resentment for the tendency of our rulers to fawn on leaders of other countries. Perhaps, they act slavishly towards leaders of powerful nations mainly out of desperation to gain legitimacy and an inflated image in the eyes of people. But the questions are: Why do those in power in Bangladesh need recognition from foreign leaders — either in the form of visits or gestures like photo opportunities? Isn't it the people of Bangladesh from whom our rulers should seek legitimacy and recognition? My blunt answer to these questions is that, when ruling elites are disconnected from the people or are not democratically elected, they look for other sources of approval at our expense.

This has other implications.

Since our leaders are not in need of our appreciation or even our votes to remain in power, they seek acceptability from external stakeholders. For the same reason, they look after the interest of their foreign benefactors and treat the

citizens like colonial subjects only to impoverish them. They treat our country like their private property from which they derive dividends and amass fortunes only to siphon them off to foreign destinations.

Foreign dependency of our rulers harms us all and sundry, irrespective of our political hue and affiliation. It robs us of our dignity and compromises our identity as citizens of the world.

As a Bangladeshi, I feel ashamed to have seen how a photo opportunity of one of our political leaders with the president of another country has been fetishized into a political propaganda. It has been appropriated to tell us that we have reached new heights of achievement in global politics. The public display of such makeshift honour is nothing but a botched attempt to deceive us. This is not the right way for our leaders to gain importance and influence in the domestic or international arena. Once there is social justice, democracy and rule of law in our country, we will be prosperous and will not need to beg recognition from foreign powers.

Let me be more direct and unreserved in my remarks.

Which other countries in the world will regard a photo opportunity of their leaders with the US president as a mark of distinction? Did the US president consider it a privilege that he shared a photo with our prime minister? What is more worrying is that, considering the media coverage of the photo opportunity in question, such publicity stunt seems to have proven effective in fooling a section of the population. If people really believe that our prime minister's photo opportunity with a certain foreign leader has lent our country more weight among the nations in the world, there is a genuine cause for concern. It will show a very low level of their maturity and a very high degree of their gullibility, none of which augurs well for our country. Unfortunately, such naivety and ignorance of the people are used by political leaders to deceive and exploit them.

Soon after the photo-flash excitation, France's president visited our country. Again, that was also depicted as an increase in our country's influence on the global stage. I am not an expert in international relations. Nor do I know the granular details of diplomatic exchanges between Bangladesh and France. But I

can't comprehend how the French president's business trip to Dhaka to sell products of his country can be a victory for us. The truth of the matter is that, France's president would have gone to any place on earth — with the exception of a grave — if he had known that he would be able to sell 10 Airbus aircrafts at such a highly exorbitant and profitable price.

France's president was smart in the sense that, in a short trip of a few hours, he struck an extremely lucrative business deal for his country. Now compare that with innumerable foreign trips that our ministers have been making over the years. Have they been able to bring any comparable benefits to our country through all those trips that cost our country huge sums of money?

Our ministers are smart at deceiving us. But they are slavish to, and outsmarted and outmanoeuvred by, foreign leaders. If they respected us as citizens and helped protect our rights, both they and we would have a dignified existence in this world. Until they realise this truth, we may keep suffering inside our country and losing our prestige and resources to foreign powers.

Dr Md Mahmudul Hasan is professor of English and postcolonial literature at International Islamic University Malaysia. He edits Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature.