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David Roodman's Microfinance Open Book Blog

The Persecution of an Imperfect Man

January 29, 2011

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Lydia Polgreen has just posted (if I can use that verb) a [story](#) for the *New York Times* on the political controversy around Muhammad Yunus. It is a subtle sketch of a situation that, while polarized, is hardly black and white. I was struck by how the quotes, though they come from various sides of the fight, generally rang true:

In an interview at his office here, Mr. Yunus seemed stunned and deeply stung.

“There is some kind of misinformation,” he said, his voice trailing off. “I shouldn’t say more.”

A pause.

“Every word I say will be held against me,” he said finally.

“I think he is a good man with a small heart,” Mr. Huq said of Mr. Yunus. “He cannot give credit to anyone but himself,” he added, with a wan smile at his pun.

(This is the first time I’ve heard this sentiment *in public*.)

Mahbubul Mokaddem Akash, an economist at the University of Dhaka who has been critical of Grameen Bank, said that while Mr. Yunus might be personally incorruptible, the bank needed strong governing practices and transparency if it was to thrive once its charismatic founder departed.

“The main focus should not be on personal corruption but on prudential management of the institution,” Mr. Akash said.

She [Prime Minister Hasina] is afraid that another military government will come and try to use Yunus as its face,” said a retired senior government official who worked closely with Ms. Hasina but who feared being punished if identified. “She wants to tarnish his image so that he becomes less of a threat.”

“This man has done so much for the country,” said Mahfuz Anam, editor of The Daily Star, a leading English-language newspaper. “He does not deserve to be treated this way because of dirty politics.”

One quote seems strange though:

“I am riding the tiger,” Mr. Yunus said. “I cannot just get off the tiger without drawing the attention of that tiger. So I have to very quietly do it.”

Does Mr. Yunus mean that the Grameen Bank is a tiger that will devour him if he dismounts it wrongly? Does he believe it will fall apart without him? What does that say about its condition? More likely, I think:

this is an expression of the psychological trap of **founder's syndrome**. He cannot separate his ego from the Bank. Another classic sign of that organizational ailment is that “long-serving internal candidates that might have replaced Mr. Yunus as the bank’s managing director after his retirement have departed acrimoniously.”

The irony is that Hasina may well do the Grameen Bank a favor by engineering a necessary succession in an orderly way even as she fails to eliminate a perceived political rival through defamation. So far she doesn’t seem to have much dirt on him. Unless she really tarnishes his reputation, even if he leaves the Bank, Yunus will still be Yunus: still the founder of the Grameen Bank and the father of microcredit; the author of books on social business; the most famous Bangaldeshi; a man who has probably done more for the poor than the politicians, and that at much less material benefit to himself.

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7 Comments on “The Persecution of an Imperfect Man”

1. *Michael* Says:

January 29th, 2011 at 10:08 pm

I didn’t read his tiger comment that way. If he agrees with Anam, he views himself as precariously taking advantage for his own purposes something dangerous. I would assume that he himself would say his purposes are making Grameen effective, perhaps making a name for himself, or simply alleviating poverty. The “something dangerous” I would not presume is Grameen, but rather public attention, interaction with Hasina, or the connection of his name with social business as a whole. Either interpretation is possible, but either way we just don’t know much about it as his intent was to obfuscate, not provide clarity. (And I don’t say this with snark.)

2. **Ramesh S. Arunachalam** Says:

January 29th, 2011 at 11:20 pm

Dear David

What is happening in Bangladesh to Prof Yunus is unfair and I think that needs to be severely condemned...For all that he has done, we need to let him live with Dignity...I have seen Grameen’s work from the late 80s and when you take the overall score, it is a huge

positive...Governance, transparency and other aspects are all issues with any organisation (and most MFIs) but a personal individual attack, of the kind that we are seeing in Bangladesh, needs (and I repeat again) the strongest condemnation...

Regards

Ramesh

3. **Tim Ogden** Says:

[January 30th, 2011 at 9:26 am](#)

Since he's also somewhat in the news now, I think its worth pointing to the differences between Mandela and Yunus, two men who have done tremendous things for their people.

The difference now between the perceptions of Mandela, who is universally revered, and Yunus, it seems to me have to do primarily with Founders Syndrome as David notes. Mandela's successors did not depart acrimoniously; Mandela himself has stayed largely aloof from the politics of South Africa since he stepped down—on time and with decorum.

The primary limit to Yunus' ability to live with dignity is his own behavior. If he had ceded daily control 10 years ago, as he should have, to well-trained and competent personnel, he would enjoy the same halo that Mandela does and would be well beyond the reach of Hasina.

4. **joena lopez** Says:

[January 30th, 2011 at 9:27 am](#)

I think the article is quite good. It sums up nicely some of the issues with the Grameen and Yunus. Akash sums up the problem with the Grameen—its governance; Huq sums up the problem with Yunus—his ego and small-mindedness. Anam sums up the dilemma with the elite and expatriate Bangladeshis: the apprehend that they may not be able continue to bask in the borrowed glory of Yunus .

In Bangladesh , both politics and the Grameen are deeply flawed institutions. In this conflict of the titans, if they come out reformed—even if it means goodbye to Hasina and Yunus from the helm— be it : that will be a great benefit for the country!

5. **Asif Dowla** Says:

[January 31st, 2011 at 12:01 am](#)

The title of the post "the persecution of an imperfect man" is quite ironic, don't you think? Aren't we all imperfect, of course, with the exception of Nelson Mandela (Even though the latest book on Mandela "Conversations with Myself" by Nelson Mandela shows that he was an imperfect man as well. That imperfect man, Yunus, created an eco-system—microfinance industry—from which we all are earning livelihood. An imperfect man, indeed.

Please forgive my caustic tone. I love both these man and consider them my personal heroes. I am just saddened by what is happening to one of them. I pray the other one remain healthy.

6. **David Roodman** Says:

[January 31st, 2011 at 8:09 am](#)

Yes, Asif, I intended that irony. On the one hand I think some of the criticisms of him are accurate. No one is perfect. But I also think "persecution" is the right word for what is happening to him now.

7. **Rantersparadise** Says:
February 3rd, 2011 at 9:48 am

Hmm, the last time I heard of Mandela he was galavanting with Naomi Campbell during the event he invented the Black Diamond president and he gave Naomi 'a dirty stone'.

So my opinion of the great Mandela is not all that great. Furthermore, please there is no such think as an imperfect man, in fact, that makes me laugh out loud.

What have we learned so far in society? We have enlightenment and now entering the knowledge age. For some, information is at our finger tips because of the Internet, never have we been so spoiled to reach out and look for various sources from information that is being spoon fed to us by the media.

To be shocked that man such as Yunus is far from perfect, whatever that means is very naive.

You need that ego to do what he or Mandela have seeked to do, especially in that way that is top down and not bottom up, so that they are the only face of said campaign or organisation.

The questions is can we look at greater, progressive and more sustainable ways to make positive change in the world without having to deal with some great huge ego of some man or woman?!

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