

O HERALDO

The Voice of Goa - since 1900

Unsafe buildings must go

Unsafe buildings in key urban areas across both Goa's districts have become a cause for concern. Just last month, following the early onset of the southwest monsoon, the slab of the old Bank of Baroda building in Margao partially collapsed. Instead of moving to swiftly keep the building out of bounds or initiate the demolition process, the local MLA called for a structural stability test by the Goa College of Engineering. This led to valid questions about whether yet another assessment would be needed at all, considering the clearly dilapidated condition the building was in, and the fact that it continued to house commercial establishments despite being declared structurally unsafe years ago. Some observers pointed out that one other building in the state's commercial capital that was declared unsafe by the Goa College of Engineering back in 2018, remains even now, despite orders from the South Goa District Disaster Management Authority that it be pulled down.

Another setback the authorities face is the doggedness of business owners to continue conducting trade from within extremely weak structures, thereby not only risking their own lives but also the safety of customers and other individuals in the vicinity should such a building collapse. Interestingly, in the case of Margao, the authorities themselves appeared to be uncertain about whether the Margao Municipal Council, the South Goa Disaster Management Authority, or the demolition squad was responsible for sealing or razing buildings that pose a public hazard. This should be enough cause for alarm because if buildings that are already labelled 'dangerous' are still allowed to accommodate commercial establishments, what guarantee is there that such structures, despite being declared unsafe in expert-backed structural assessments, will be sealed or demolished before it is too late?

Just last week, the south district collector, Egna Cleetus, who is also the chairperson of the South Goa District Disaster Management Authority, told reporters that the orders passed to demolish two unsafe buildings in Margao - Indra Apartments and Cabeça building - would be executed within 10 days. She said the PWD was in the process of issuing the work order for the demolition of both structures. Ironically, outgoing district collector, Asvin Chandru had in November 2023, ordered that the Cabeça building be razed, but precious little was done then. One wonders if the authorities concerned will keep up to their timelines at least this time around.

In the state capital, the Corporation of the City of Panaji swung into action only after a June 4 court order directed that a building located opposite Keni petrol pump be demolished within two weeks. The CCP consequently brought the structural safety of 16 buildings in within its jurisdiction under scrutiny. Already, the National Theatre has been sealed and the matter is under review by the urban development secretary. Clube Nacional, Sushila Building, the Lokmanya Multipurpose Cooperative Society, and the Confraria building are also under a similar scrutiny along with six other privately-owned structures that are in poor condition.

In the meanwhile, the CCP last week decided to demolish the El Dorado building located in the municipal market, which was declared unsafe for several years, though business owners - like their counterparts in Margao - objected to moving out of it. The matter remains sub-judice and an order by the urban development secretary is simultaneously pending. The mayor acknowledged that the building has been in bad shape for years and that its collapse could affect not only its occupants but also shopkeepers near the market lane adjoining the structure. He, however, said that although the occupants had sought alternative premises, the CCP was unable to meet their request.

The monsoon is currently in a lull but should it pick up pace, all eyes will be on these and several other dilapidated buildings across the state. The government would do well to act swiftly and decisively in such cases or enforce rules that are stricter, in the interest of public safety. Else, disaster upon disaster will await it and hapless citizens should the fury of the monsoon be well and truly unleashed.

One problem, of course, is that Iran's own people have indeed been trying to effect regime change via democratic means in recent years, only to be brutally suppressed again and again

BY INVITATION

Vivek Meneses

ELEGY FOR IRAN

If the grotesque calculus of the war-mongers continues to play out as we have been seeing the past few days, America will now launch an unprecedented joint assault with Israel on Iran, in yet another iteration of the same old Iraq playbook: bogus claims of "weapons of mass destruction", false predictions of popular support, then uninhibited war crimes tearing apart state and society. Just like that time, all pretences about "rules-based order" have been jettisoned in the exercise of primeval "might makes right." As the sage Goa-based Admiral Arun Prakash (he was both Chief of Naval Staff and Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee) tweeted a few hours ago: "Should we worry? Nuclear facilities of a sovereign state are being unlawfully attacked with impunity; endangering its people and the world, thru hazards of radiological/nuclear fallout. Regime change - the sole prerogative of a country's own people - is being openly discussed!"

One problem, of course, is that Iran's own people have indeed been trying to effect regime change via democratic means in recent years, only to be brutally suppressed again and again. In her 2023 Nobel Peace Prize address written "from behind the high, cold walls of a prison", the inspirational human rights activist Narges Mohammadi made it clear "the reality is that the regime of the Islamic Republic is at its lowest level of legitimacy and popular support, situated in a position of unstable equilibrium, and the emergence of any element as a catalyst for change will mark the final form of opposition policies and the transition from religious tyranny."

Make no mistake, Mohammadi has no illusions about the current scenario either. Earlier this week, she told Corriere Della Serra that "I spent ten years of my life in prison without seeing my children just for defending human rights and peace. Now my people and I find ourselves at the crossroads of two wars. A total war between Israel and the Islamic Republic and the Islamic Republic's internal war against the people of Iran. I stick to the facts: in Iran, a misogynistic religious regime governs with Ali Khamenei at the top, who has brought us to hell while promising paradise. At the same time, Netanyahu is also leading us to hell while promising freedom and democracy. I am certain that war never brings anything democratic, nor human rights nor freedom. I condemn this war in the strongest possible terms."

But even if Iran's sternest internal critics are united against the prospect of Israel and the US attacking the regime they also seek to topple, their voices of reason do not matter to the powerful pro-war lobbies that have seized control in the governments going rogue. Here is how the fine analyst - and former Portuguese minister - Bruno Maçães summarized how we got here in The New Statesman: "As far back as last September, Netanyahu was saying that Iran would be 'liberated sooner than people think'. The same month Jared Kushner remarked: 'Moments like this come once in a generation, if they even come at all. The Middle East is too often a solid where little changes. Today, it is a liquid and the ability to reshape is unlimited. Do not squander this moment.' Trump hadn't yet won the election, though. Netanyahu was forced to wait, but after Israel weakened Hezbollah in Lebanon, he became fixated



Exclusive Artwork: Basté (Enough) by Amruta Patil

But even if Iran's sternest internal critics are united against the prospect of Israel and the US attacking the regime they also seek to topple, their voices of reason do not matter to the powerful pro-war lobbies that have seized control in the governments going rogue

on how auspicious a final confrontation with Iran looked. His priority then became how to drag America into a war it refused to join from the start. American bunker busters are needed to wipe out Iran's nuclear programme, and perhaps US troops will be required, too, if the Khamenei regime is to be ousted. Trump is somewhat more difficult to manage than his bumbling predecessor - he has after all built much of political appeal on a critique of foreign intervention - but how long will even Trump be able to resist the call for a final battle between good and evil? Not long, I think."

You know the world is in deep trouble when anyone looks to Trump to save the day, and of course he will not do so. That means chaos is now about to be unleashed our veritable doorstep, as Goa and Persia - indeed India and Iran - have been inextricably interlinked for thousands of years. It is a familial relationship of great significance, writ deep in our language and identity: Konkani is full of Farsi words - "barik", "noxib", "bejar" - and the percentage is even higher in Marathi. Prior to the colonial depredations - and to a large extent during and afterwards too - there has been an incessant back and forth between our two locations. There were thousands of Goans living and working in Persia after oil was discovered at the end of the 19th century through to

the middle of the 20th century, and many Iranians have come to study, work or visit the state in the 21st century too. Earlier this year itself, on the auspicious occasion of Nowruz, the first-ever charter flights from Iran landed in Goa to an enthusiastic welcome.

All that seems distant, almost impossible now just a few weeks later, and it is perfectly realistic to feel scared and sad about what is coming next. "I have an intangible sense of being 'amongst my people' with Iranians (as with North Africans from Morocco and Algeria). No further way to explain it, says Amruta Patil, the brilliant Goa-raised-and-based artist and the country's first woman graphic novelist, whose protest painting Basté (it means "Enough") accompanies this column. She told me her artwork is about "the mangling of popular discourse about Iran and Islam. I have done a course in Farsi and have a longstanding love affair with the land. Twice over I have enrolled at Dekhoda Language Institute in Tehran only to have one pandemic and one political catastrophe intervene. The footage of the exodus of cars, of ruined buildings - it all feels very close to home. My heart has been in a state of perma-ache."

(Vivek Meneses is a writer and co-founder of the Goa Arts and Literature Festival)

The lessons Goans never learn

The utter chaos that has been unfolding in Goa should be opening up a new Pandora's Box. And it's a sheer disgrace that has befallen on Goans. The collapse of governance has shaken the conscience of every Niz Goykar. The government may be denying this very fact to save its own skin. Neither the media nor opposition is strong enough nor do they have guts to highlight peoples' woes. For how long are we going to be the silent spectators to all the wrongs that have been happening to our Goa? How many more Goans do we want to leave Goa in search of better prospects? Today the closed Goan houses are being looted and ransacked in daylight robberies. There is deep concern about the presence of hundreds of migrants who have unleashed terror in the villages of Goa. Why should we not believe that some of them have escaped from their states after committing heinous crimes and are hiding in Goa in the

SAVIO PINTO

guise of labourers? Why should we entertain such hordes of migrants who neither are accounted nor issued any identity cards by the Goa government? Shouldn't the government have the accountability of such influx into Goa? Or is it that the true spirit of governance is missing?

Once upon a time, Goa was governed and managed by mere four or six cabinet ministers; but now that we have forty, the governance / administration has nosedived to its worst level. A visit to any of the government departments will blind you with the surplus staff that have no work to do at all. And still no file moves ahead until you make innumerable visits to the department. Can you believe that just to obtain a simple senior citizen identity card, it takes more than a month's time? Isn't this a monumental blunder of administrative practices?

The recent arrogance of the health

UPFRONT
Once upon a time, Goa was governed and managed by mere four or six cabinet ministers; but now that we have forty, the governance / administration has nosedived to its worst level

minister was just a tip of an iceberg. In reality, every minister and his coterie is nothing less. The collapse of administration is visible to your naked eyes and one need not have to know rocket science.

Just have a glance at two -three cities of Goa. Though we should be ashamed to call them cities, now that they have lost all the glamour and charm of the past. What actually good governance should have taken care of is that of our major cities, like Panjim-Vasco-Mapuca and Ponda. Instead of harping on Smart Cities, these are being turned into ghost towns where transport and commerce indiscipline and

chaos is the order of the day. The pathetic conditions of the bus stands are crying for attention in Margao and Panjim and have turned into an eyesore to any visitor.

Wasn't it a must by now to have a flyover from Old Market to Navelim? Wasn't it a must to restore the past glory of the Margao Municipal Council building? Instead it looks that they have been deliberately allowing decaying to its present state. No doubt, it's obvious that a deliberate attempt by the government to allow these historically associated buildings to collapse on their own thereby erasing the Portuguese era buildings

in Goa.

Every municipality in Goa today has turned into milking cows to the city godfathers. Instead of taking care of the city for its health and cleanliness, they are busy collecting haftas from the market vendors. The illegal roadside vendors have been occupying most of the space and people are forced to negotiate their way.

The transport in Goa has become a hell to any traveler. The irregular and undisciplined buses have only made the matters worse to the public and forced to add more which forced the public to own private vehicles which now have turned into a nightmare.

The tall talk from the government regarding governance is only for public consumption. He knows that Goans have no choice because it has shut the mouths of most of the greedy politicians who are always shown a dangling sword over their head. What we see today in the State Assembly is also nothing short of a circus. The public at large is just taken for a ride. And of course Goans

have fallen prey to such gimmicks for far too long.

Only time will tell whether we will ever have any better choice or a better future. At the moment it seems that Goans have not learnt any lessons from the past. So, it's time for Goans to gear up and keep at bay the traitors at large who will come begging for votes. Goans should do some soul searching and deep introspection as to how to save our Goa, knowing well that most of it has already been sold to the land sharks who will only add more misery to Goans in times to come.

So, let us hope that someday sooner, some sons of the soil will rise up to this challenge and help to embark on a new beginning and restore Goa to its former glory. The governance that will listen to the people. After all, Goans should never allow a dictator or a king to rule in future.

(The author is a Konkani novelist and an ardent lover of nature photography)