

A whiff of Singapore



TIMES
FORUM

John Burton

One of the accusations made by the political left during last year's presidential election was that the entry of Park Geun-hye into the Blue House would mark a return to the days of the Yushin Constitution in the mid-1970s when her father imposed authoritarian rule over the country. That claim was dismissed by most as overheated political rhetoric given South Korea's reputation now for being a vibrant democracy.

But I was quite surprised during a recent trip to the U.S. when discussing Korea with people who closely follow the country how often the case of leftist lawmaker Lee Seok-ki was cited as a possible indication that the bad old days of red-baiting and fear-mongering may be reviving even as President Park pursues a more moderate policy toward North Korea than her predecessor, Lee Myung-bak. Other troubling signs included the recent appointment of the legal official who drafted the Yushin Constitution as President Park's new chief of staff as well as allegations that the National Intelligence Service intervened in support of the ruling Saenuri Party using "black propaganda" in last year's presidential polls.

This appears to be part of a trend that began during the previous administration of the deterioration in the protection of freedom of expression, a subject that has received less attention than it should in both the international and local

media. This development has not been ignored, however, by the United Nations and respected international human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders and the Open Net Initiative, all of whom have noted the decline.

The fear is that South Korea could be following in the footsteps of Singapore, an ostensibly democratic country that has raised the suppression of freedom of speech to a fine art. The South Korean government has a range of tools at its disposal similar to those used in Singapore to suppress free speech and cripple the opposition, including a draconian national security law, strict defamation laws, restrictive campaign laws, Internet censorship and state ownership in broadcasting.

For example, Singapore government officials, including the ruling family of Lee Kuan Yew, have long used the threat of costly defamation lawsuits to curb criticism by both opposition politicians and local and international journalists. The number of indictments for defamation in

South Korea, which were once rare, has sharply increased since 2007. The most noteworthy case was the government's defamation suit in 2009 against the MBC television program "PD Notebook" for its report on U.S. beef imports that triggered weeks of protest against the Lee administration that previous year. Although the PD Notebook journalists were acquitted of defaming the Ministry of Agriculture, the lengthy and costly legal case has had a chilling effect on investigative journalism.

Indictments and detentions under the notorious National Security Law also rose under the Lee Myung-bak administration, according to Amnesty International, and look set to continue under the Park administration if the case of Lee Seok-ki is any indication. The NSL was a favorite tool of President Park's father to harass the opposition, including the jailing of future president Kim Dae-jung. But in recent years, it has been used less dramatically, but routinely, to suppress dissent by leftist groups on the grounds that they are allegedly supporting North Korea. At times, though, the use of the NSL had reached absurd lengths such as the prosecution of the young satirist Park Jeong-guen last year for the Internet posting of altered images of North Korean propaganda that were meant to be a spoof.

The NSL also played a role in increasing Internet censorship under

the Lee administration, with the government blocking access to websites that were deemed pro-North Korean. The government has imposed pervasive Internet filtering systems to block any pro-North Korean or pornographic material and the OpenNet Initiative ranks South Korea as being in the same league as China in terms of its web controls despite having one of the world's most advanced Internet infrastructures. Freedom of expression on the Internet has also been jeopardized by laws passed in 2008 that increased penalties for defamation, "false rumors" and malicious postings, similar to practices being implemented in Singapore.

It is the increased Internet censorship that helped persuade U.S.-based Freedom House to downgrade South Korea press freedom and freedom on the net rankings to "partly free" from "free" in 2011, while Reporters Without Borders has listed South Korea as a country "under surveillance" in its "Enemies of the Internet" survey.

South Korea at 50th is still a long way from the record low ranking of 149th for press freedom that Reporters Without Borders gave Singapore this year, but if current trends continue, it could find itself in the same neighborhood some day.

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What is Shinzo Abe's ultimate objective?

By Yoon Suk-joon

I am curious about just where Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's foreign policy is heading. My research areas are mainly concerned with maritime and military strategy, rather than foreign policy per se, but I am willing to guess that his ultimate objective is to proclaim the message that "Japan is back!"

As China embarks on a renewed path of "peaceful development," and South Korea implements "trustpolitik," it seems a rather awkward moment for Abe to be trying to reverse decades of strategic stagnation with an approach in which peace and trust are entirely lacking. In an interview with the Defense News, Yoichi Koda, retired vice-admiral of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force, blamed the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan for squandering many opportunities to enhance Japan's contribution to the Japan-U.S. strategic alliance, and urged the LDP to reverse this policy.

And the U.S. has offered a fresh opening through its pivot to the Asia-Pacific, announced in January 2012. Abe and the LDP would love Japan to be seen as an adept and reliable partner for the U.S., and the lynchpin of all future strategic structures, but in practice the U.S. has been disappointed by Japan since Abe came to power, as Ralph Cossa's article "Enough is enough" makes clear. Moreover, the U.S. is investing far more in diplomatic effort to reestablish its great power partnership with China. In comparison, U.S. relations with Japan have withered.

In fact, the situation seems to be going from bad to worse for Japan. Arguably, the U.S. is shifting its major focus to the Middle East, leaving the Asia-Pacific in China's hands. And senior U.S. personnel with knowledge of East Asia — Hillary Clinton, Thomas Donilon and Kurt Campbell — have all gone. Whoever takes over managing U.S. policy in the region will rely heavily upon what was agreed at the historic June summit in California between Presidents Obama and Xi Jinping.

The U.S. pivot to Asia is struggling, and China is growing steadily more convincing as a great military power, so that the Pentagon will be obliged to seek the cooperation of the Chinese military. And then there is South Korea, now generally acknowledged as a legitimate middle power, with President Park Geun-hye warmly received in both Washington and Beijing. Finally, the newly nominated U.S. ambassador to Japan is the daughter of the late President Kennedy, perhaps also an advocate of "peace and trust?"

Under these circumstances, what choices has Abe's cabinet made? So far, they seem determined to upset all their neighbors

and allies. The so-called "Abenomics" appears designed not only to rejuvenate the Japanese economy, after decades of stagnation, but also to boost defense spending to restore the strength, and influence, of the Japanese military. Abe's government has recently adopted an unyielding hard-line stance in maritime disputes, especially against China, which has been equally assertive. The LDP is also committed to amending Japan's pacifist constitution, and in using the excuse of defending against North Korean missiles they want to allow the Japanese Self-Defense Force to conduct collective defense operations against external threats.

The U.S., in particular, finds Abe's shock therapy rather unwelcome. With the U.S. military rebalancing to Asia, and suffering serious constraints to its defense budget, the U.S. is seeking strategic cooperative partnerships with its allies, partners, and like-minded countries in the region; and Abe is rocking the boat. Military-to-military contacts between the U.S. and China have been growing warmer, and the Chinese defense minister, Chang Wanquan, has asked his U.S. counterpart, Chuck Hagel, to do more to responsibly manage regional instabilities. General Chang also encouraged the U.S. to move toward rapprochement with North Korea. The Japanese, meanwhile, have been left out in the cold.

Prime Minister Abe has devoted considerable time and energy to consolidating Japan's strategic partnership with weak and vulnerable Southeast Asian nations, in particular the Philippines and Vietnam, which share a common cause with Japan in resisting Chinese hegemony in the South China Sea. Japanese efforts have been extended to Australia and India, with Abe hoping to gain some leverage over China strategically by getting involved in economic or political affairs. During the 1970s, after Sino-Japanese rapprochement, and even in the early 2000s, the Chinese were dependent on a huge flow of Japanese foreign direct investment, but they will surely strive to avoid any repetition.

South Korea has also moved on: its options are no longer limited to trilateral security cooperation with the U.S. and Japan. A new strategic triangle is possible between the U.S., China and South Korea, prompted by the need to deal with the military threats of the North Korean regime. The Japanese contribution to this problem, Abe's investment in a "strong national defense" (kuni no mammon), including Theater Ballistic Missile Defense, is hardly appreciated by his neighbors.

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9/11 attacks still linger in unexpected ways

By Dale McFeatters

This year, there are roughly 31.5 million more Americans than there were on this same date in 2001. Children born that year are entering junior high school, their "memory" of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the vivid video of the two hijacked airliners plowing into the twin towers of the World Trade Center.

The site is now occupied by One World Trade Center at a symbolic 1,776 feet tall, New York's tallest skyscraper. Three other towers, although not quite so grand, are planned for the site, which is now largely landscaped and adorned with ornamental pools on the footprints of the original buildings. A museum and memorial are nearing completion. The WTC website, onewtc.com, promises unsurpassed access to public transportation and "world-class shopping."

Sadly, less well-remembered are the hijacked airliner that slammed into the Pentagon in Arlington, Va., and a fourth, believed to have been headed toward the U.S. Capitol, that passengers forced to crash into a Pennsylvania field near Shanksville. No one aboard any of the airliners survived. The hijackers thought their names would live forever; it's doubtful that any Americans stopped at random on the street could name even one of them.

But the aftereffects of that day are with us still; in some ways, they are more influential now than in the immediate aftermath.

Take the revelation this year of the breathtaking extent of the U.S. government's electronic spying on its own citizens. At one time, the loss of privacy and the breach of the implied constitutional right to be secure in one's communications would have been public outrages. Instead, insofar as the public's attitude can be characterized, it was, "We didn't know it for a fact, but we suspected all along that something like this was going on." And then back to business as usual.

President George W. Bush used the 9/11 attacks and misleading intelligence about weapons of mass destruction — long since destroyed — to leverage us into a war with Iraq that dragged on for eight inconclusive years.

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Nature, not more development, needs support

By Bill Maxwell

The 88-year-old St. Petersburg Country Club, like many others nationwide, is in financial trouble.

To keep it operating, club officials say they need to find a lot of money — fast.

To do so, they have agreed to sell about 10 acres of club land to Arizona-based housing developer Taylor Morrison, who wants to build 115 gated townhomes.

But the deal might not happen. And it should not happen.

The 10 acres in question, near the 13th hole of the golf course, is adjacent to the 245-acre Boyd Hill Nature Preserve, one of the few remaining pieces of Old Florida in our region and one of the city's crown jewels.

The natural charms of Boyd Hill attract more than 50,000 visitors a year — including thousands of schoolchildren — eager to experience some authentic relief from urban life in Florida's most densely populated county.

Fortunately, residents of Lakewood Estates; staff, volunteers and board members of Boyd Hill; and a coalition of activists are fighting the

townhomes project. I am on their side.

Ample evidence shows that building on the 10 acres would damage the preserve. The land is an aquifer recharge area and serves as a vital buffer zone between the preserve, the golf course and the homes along Fairway Avenue S. Among the species believed to be potentially impacted is the gopher tortoise, listed as threatened by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission.

I spoke with Lakewood Estates residents Ric and Maggie Langford and Celeste Nesbitt, who said they are not enemies of the country club and do not want it to fold. In fact, they see it as an asset to the community. They simply oppose the construction alongside the preserve.

I was impressed that as they expressed their opposition, the Langfords and Nesbitt did not speak of politics or lawsuits. They want the city — which has the authority to stop the project — the country club and the developer to appreciate the intrinsic public value of the preserve's wildness and the residents' love of the neighborhood's beauty.

"I can walk out my back door and have an alligator in the pool," said Nesbitt, who has lived in the same house since childhood and who created the Save Boyd Hill Facebook page. "Just two weeks ago, we had a turtle nesting in our front yard. It followed you everywhere to make sure you don't go near the nest. ..."

"I watched a bald eagle for 30 years nest right outside my front door, watched their babies take flight and watched them do their mating dance. There are not that many human beings who live in a populated area who can say they see these things."

Ric Langford, who has lived on Fairway Avenue for 10 years, said he and his wife have had similar experiences.

"We can sit in our front yard and see foxes, eagles and coyotes," he said. "We have bald eagles fly over our house to their nest almost on a daily basis. If we lose that long buffer zone to townhomes, there are going to be issues with wildlife. We're talking about 10 acres of homes and 200 cars along the fence line of the preserve. The animals living in that area now will have to go away or become roadkill."

Jim House, a field biologist who's

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on the board of directors of the Friends of Boyd Hill, took me on a walk through the area in the preserve that would be impacted by the new housing.

"Wherever they build, we are going to have to cut another 30 feet in as a buffer zone," House said. "However their proposal is worded, we're going to have a net loss of preserve property. This is a very nice native hammock. This is what Florida looks like — well, what it used to look like. We'll lose this if they build."

In July, the city threw out Morri-

son's application and gave the developer until Sept. 30 to submit a new plan. No matter what design Morrison returns with, townhomes should not be allowed near Boyd Hill Nature Preserve.

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Let's campaign against language pollution

An increasing number of newspapers and television shows are using confusing economic terms, some of which analysts struggle to understand let alone the average Korean citizen.

For example, the Federal Reserve Board (FRB) is in the spotlight for its "quantitative easing" or QE. Does anyone really know what that means? It means the FRB printed money beyond the unprecedented level, or more professionally, expanded the money supply. In an easier explanation, it refers to the U.S. central bank's distribution of money from a helicopter to stimulate the economy.

In 2008, the FRB adopted the QE policy in an attempt to save the American economy, which faced the biggest downturn since the Great Depression in 1929. Now the FRB hints at collecting money it pumped into the economy.

Another puzzling expression is the "democratization of the economy." This expression doesn't translate into English. Most Americans have no idea what it means. President Park Geun-hye and opposition leader Kim Han-gil interpret the phrase differently as well. Ordinary Koreans might believe that it means curbing chaebol's unbridled expansion for mom and pop shops.

In fact, this terminology is misleading because in capitalism, no one is equal and only the strong survive. Although democracy allows each citizen to have a vote, this rule doesn't apply to capitalism. The government



TIMES Column

Lee Chang-sup

should replace the phrase "democratization of the economy" with "fair play" in the economy.

President Park also uses the phrase "creative economy," which raises more questions than answers. Does Korea need two economies?: a creative economy and an uncreative economy. Is the uncreative economy bad while the creative economy is good? Is manufacturing uncreative while non-manufacturing is creative? Despite President Park's repeated explanation, even policymakers are struggling to define the phrase. The expression has a negative connotation for job seekers, the unemployed and struggling companies because they are referred to as "uncreative."

Creative economy is easier to understand than democratization of the economy. John Howkins, the author of "Creative Economy: How People Make Money from Ideas" said, "New ideas, not money or machinery, are the sources of success today, and the greatest source of personal satisfaction."

Howkins goes on to say, "The creative economy is revitalizing manufacturing, services, retail and entertainment industries. It is changing

where people want to live, work and learn. It looks at where people think, invent and produce."

Senior citizens are also bothered by President Park's "universal welfare" because she plans to reduce the benefits due to tight budget. One of her campaign goals was to open what she called "the people's happiness era" by providing 200,000 won (about \$190) in monthly pension to every senior over the age of 65. She promised to provide the pension to seniors regardless of income and wealth. She also said her government would provide full coverage of medical expense for life threatening diseases including cancer, heart failure and blood vessel disease.

Her comments about universal welfare attracted voters even before she outlined a clear way to fund the program. President Park should consider replacing universal welfare with additional support for the needy because she plans to cut the benefits.

All of this economic jargon can be broken down into clear language. Using abstract phrases is language pollution. Politicians use fuzzy phrases to raise expectations, among ordinary people.

Author George Orwell said language should be "an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought." His book, "Politics and the English Language" goes on to say, "Abstract words are meaningless, and people have used

this as a pretext for advocating a kind of political quietism." He says language is polluted because thoughts are polluted.

Orwell offers six rules to use clear language:

— Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.

— Never use a long word where a short one will do.

— If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

— Never use the passive where you can use the active.

— Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

— Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Using clear language is an effective way to prevent language pollution, which often leads to confusion. The economy is now in a difficult phase. When politicians, leaders and economists use plain language, people will easily understand them. This would enhance the public's knowledge on key economic issues, which would increase its growth rate. Let's not waste time deciphering words when the focus should be on specific ways to fix the economy. Why does language promote misunderstanding?

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Assad survives

By Gwynne Dyer

It was already looking likely that President Bashar al-Assad's regime would survive — it has had the upper hand militarily in the Syrian civil war for at least six months now — but the events of the past two weeks have made it virtually certain.

Syria has already complied with the two initial demands of the Russian-American deal concluded over Assad's head last week. It has signed the Chemical Weapons Convention, and it has given a list of all Syria's poison gas facilities and storage depots to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. That means that the United States cannot attack it for at least a year.

President Barack Obama's ability to order such an attack was already in doubt because of opposition in Congress. Now he could not bomb without endangering U.N. inspectors, who will be all over the regime-controlled parts of Syria by November to take control of the estimated thousand tons of chemical weapons. Syria has a year to destroy them all, and until and unless it fails to meet that deadline, bombing is out of the question.

Even if there are delays, the United States will be uniquely ill-placed to use them as the pretext for an attack, as it is far behind schedule itself. In 1997 the U.S. agreed to destroy the 31,000 tons of sarin, VX, mustard gas and other lethal gases that it owned within 10 years.

That's 30 times as much as Syria has, but 10 years should have been enough.

The civil war will probably continue during the coming year, and possibly for a good deal longer. Assad's troops have been winning back territory in the center of the country, but they have yet to make much progress in the north, the south or the east. They lack the numbers to finish the job now, but the tide is running in their direction.

Close to 1,000 separate rebel units are now operating in Syria, but there is no unified rebel army. The armed groups can be roughly divided into jihadists (many of them foreign) who want to create an Islamic caliphate in Syria, and more moderate groups who originally took up arms hoping to create a democratic Syria freed from the Baath Party's tyranny.

Most of the less radical groups want an Islamic republic too, but they are repelled by the extremism of the jihadists. They hoped that

the West would destroy Assad's forces and put them in power instead (while keeping the jihadists out), and they are now very angry at the United States for letting them down. But they are also deeply disappointed, for the realists among them can see no other way to win this fight.

Many of these fighters would now be open to a regime offer of a ceasefire, an amnesty, and a gradual transition to a less corrupt and repressive political system, and the Baathist regime is likely to make such an offer soon (whether it means it or not). It would not neutralize the jihadists and restore peace to the country, but it might seduce enough of the other rebels to shift the military balance sharply in Assad's favor.

Much cruel fighting would remain to defeat the jihadists, but at least the country would emerge intact. Or the war may just go on and on, ending eventually in partition. But at least we have

been spared the spectacle of the United States and its sidekicks attacking yet another Muslim country, only to realize in the end (as in the case of the imaginary "weapons of mass destruction" in Iraq) that its excuse for doing so was false.

The pretext this time was going to be Assad's use of poison gas against his own people. But the timing was weird. (U.N. inspectors had just arrived in Damascus when nerve gas was fired at the rebel-held eastern suburbs). The target was pointless. (Why civilians, not rebel fighters?) And why would Assad use a weapon that might trigger Western bombing when he was already winning the war without it?

Now the Russians are saying (off the record, so far) that the serial numbers of the rockets that delivered the nerve gas reveal that they did not belong to the Syrian army. They were made in Russia in 1967 and sold to Yemen, Egypt and Libya's Colonel Gadhafi — who filled some of them with nerve gas. He had about 1,000 tons of the stuff.

A lot of Gadhafi's arsenal went missing after he was overthrown two years ago, sold off by the victorious rebel militias. Some of the nerve gas-filled rockets could easily have ended up in Syria, in rebel hands, and the temptation to use them in order to trigger Western military intervention would have been hard to resist. If that is really the case, then President Obama should be even more grateful to Moscow for saving his bacon.

Gwynne Dyer is an independent journalist whose articles are published in 45 countries.

Iran says it's open to dealing with West

By Dale McFeatters

There is an old saying: "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." Then quit. No sense making a fool of yourself.

This maxim should govern our dealings with Iran (and even more so North Korea, although Pyongyang deserves only one "try"). We tend to invest new dictators with the best of intentions for the flimsiest of reasons.

Early portrayals of Kim Jong-un, North Korea's leader since December 2011, suggested he might be more amenable to U.S. diplomacy because he was an intense basketball fan. Instead, he has turned out to be every bit as nasty a piece of work as his father and grandfather.

Reaching further back, Yuri Andropov's 1982 ascension to the Soviet leadership was hailed as a positive development for the West because of his supposed fondness for scotch and mysteries. His role in the bloody suppressions of the 1956 Hungarian revolt and 1968 Prague Spring turned out to be more accurate indications of his character.

With the June election of Hassan Rouhani as president of Iran, the scrutiny is underway again for evidence of his good character and desire for better relations with the West and the United States in particular. President Barack Obama welcomed the Iranian to office by offering to engage in direct talks over that nation's nuclear program.

But every Iranian politician has in the back of his mind the fate of Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, a former foreign minister and top aide to Ayatollah Khomeini. He favored better relations with the West and a more secular government, reducing the role of the clerics — and was executed for such heretical beliefs in 1982.

The Western press has described Rouhani as a "moderate cleric," meaning he is not as crazy as his predecessor or particularly homicidal. However, Rouhani dodged an easy chance at an informal face-to-face meeting with Obama when both were in New York for a United Nations meeting, suggesting that strings are being pulled back in Tehran.

The author is an editorial writer for Scripps Howard News Service (www.shns.com).



Pope Francis' messages inspire but conflict

By Bonnie Erbe

Is Pope Francis sitting astride an invisible seesaw? Why else would he on one day speak out as one of the great religious reformers of all time, and on the next shrivel to the level of his most recent predecessors, who kept the Roman Catholic Church cloaked in the darkness and atomism of the Middle Ages?

In an interview published last Thursday in various Jesuit journals, Francis warned the church away from its "obsession" with divisive social issues such as gay rights and abortion. He even took a dagger-fronted plunge into the heart of the church's conservative core and referred to those issues as the church's "small-minded rules." Instead, he laid out a vision of a more compassionate, supportive future for the Vatican and its hierarchical servants of God, importuning them to act like a "field hospital after battle," healing the wounds of the faithful and going out to find those who have been hurt or excluded or who have fallen away.

Those words reverberated around the globe, drawing almost universal sighs of relief and approval. Media reports of parishioners leaving Sunday services quoted them as agreeing this was a signal from a true leader, a pope who was ready to move beyond the mindset of

the Inquisition and to inspire a more welcoming, inclusive institution.

But a mere one day after the release of that interview, and with much less fanfare, Francis spoke to a group including many Catholic obstetricians, lecturing them on the evils of abortion. He accused the world of having adopted a "throw-away culture" that does not value life. "Every child that isn't born, but is unjustly condemned to be aborted, has the face of Jesus Christ, has the face of the Lord," he said.

Watching this pope evolve during his few months in office has been as thrilling as a roller coaster. Francis is casting off the materialistic pomp of his predecessors, showing his followers that worldly possessions mean little. He abjures the palatial papal apartment in favor of a simpler communal residence. He replaced the golden crucifix of Pope Benedict to one made of less expensive metal. Confounding his guard, he regularly exits the "pope mobile" and bounds into the street to embrace and pray for sick and disabled people and to wash the feet of the poor. This pope has made clear that love and people are important, things are not.

So why, then, did Francis feel the need to break the spirit of reform and lecture an audience of Catholic obstetricians (who would not have been granted a papal audience if they needed such a lecture) on the evils of abortion?

One possibility is that he was trying to placate the nearly omnipotent right wing of the church. With Benedict and John Paul II having stacked the ranks of cardinals, archbishops, bishops and priests for many years, Francis faces a formidable wall of resistance as he tries to move the church forward, stop its seepage of adherents and adapt it to modern culture. He is in every sense a crusader as he tries to reinvent a church when words and deeds instantaneously go global and viral.

But the other possibility is that he really didn't mean what he said in the interview, at least insofar as it pertained to women's rights and abortion. This pope has made clear he wants to enhance the role of women in the church. He has called for the creation of "deep theology of women," although what he meant by that is unclear.

What is clear is that this pope, no matter how much of a reformer, is not going to allow women to become priests — or, for that matter, to be treated as men's equals in the church.

None of Francis' decrees have reached the level of doctrinal change. But it would be a bit more encouraging to hear him address how he intends to make change for women, who are after all, the backbone of the church.

Bonnie Erbe writes this column for Scripps Howard News Service.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

A misguided view of Singapore

I refer to John Burton's column "A Whiff of Singapore" published in The Korea Times on Sept. 12. In the column, he mentioned Singapore a number of times, in ways which we disagree with.

First, Burton labelled Singapore an "ostensibly democratic country." Different forms of democracy are practiced in the world shaped by each nation's history and social background. Since independence, Singapore has held regular, free and fair general elections with high voter participation rates. Governance in Singapore is based on the rule of law and its effectiveness is demonstrated by our ability to consistently deliver a high quality of life to the people. Singapore has also been rated one of the least corrupt nations in the world by Transparency International.

Second, Burton may have some misconceptions about the application of Singapore's libel laws. Our principle is that if one makes a personal attack against another person's reputation, he should be prepared to defend his allegations in a court of law. If these allegations fail to stand in a libel suit, he will be required to pay damages and legal costs. We have no issue with robust debate and criti-

cisms of government policies. But we believe that such debate should not cross the line into personal attacks and allegations that are not founded on facts.

Singapore's laws are meant to address threats to internal security and public order, and to preserve ethnic and religious harmony. As a multi-racial and multi-religious society that has experienced racial and religious riots in the past, Singapore cannot afford to take for granted the social harmony and stability we enjoy today.

Third, Singapore's approach toward the media is that it should be a responsible medium for reporting the news and that facts should be clearly distinguished from opinion. The media in Singapore can raise questions and expose wrongdoing but it should report fully and fairly. The strength of Singapore's media lies in being credible, balanced and objective in their reporting. This is attested to by the Edelman Trust Barometer, which showed in 2012 that 65 percent of the informed public in Singapore trusted the media, above the global average of 50 percent.

Tan Xuan Rong
First secretary, Embassy of
the Republic of Singapore

Singapore Sling



TIMES FORUM

John Burton

I always thought that a fascinating and enlightening public debate would have been one between Kim Dae-jung, the former Korean president, and Lee Kuan Yew, the architect of modern Singapore, on the merits of democracy in Asia.

Kim led the movement to overthrow Korea's military dictatorship and was a firm believer in the principles of liberal democracy and their application in Asia. Lee, on the other hand, favored a style of pseudo-democracy based on what he described as "Asian values," which in fact are largely autocratic neo-Confucian ones, for his ethnic Chinese-dominated city-state.

Lee began pitching the idea of Asian values in the late 1970s to justify his authoritarian government as Singapore's growing prosperity and rising middle class led to increasing political opposition to Singapore's one-party government under the People's Action Party (PAP), which then held all the seats in parliament. But Kim had little truck with the idea of Asian values when he saw liberal democracy flourishing in his own country, which after all had been strongly influenced by neo-Confucianism since at least the 14th century.

I thought of all this as I read in The Korea Times of Sept. 27 the response of the Singapore Embassy to my column, "A Whiff of Singapore," of Sept. 12. Like the Singapore government, I too am a believer in "robust debate" and thus cannot allow to pass without commenting its assertion that my column represented "a misguided view of Singapore."

"Misguided" as judged by whom? Such a characterization implies that I

do not know what I'm talking about. As Tan Xuan Rong, the political first secretary at the Singapore Embassy in Seoul, discovered when he viewed my LinkedIn account before penning the letter, I was the Financial Times correspondent in Singapore for eight years and can claim some knowledge of the country, although its government may disagree with my interpretation.

The letter states that Singapore has "no issue with robust debate and criticisms of government policies," although its officials religiously and consistently counter any criticisms when they appear in the media. They call this their "right to reply." Nothing in the letter was new. The points of defense have been aired many times before, but the claims are rarely rebutted. So here is my reply.

"Burton labeled Singapore an 'ostensibly democratic country.' Different forms of democracy are practiced in the world shaped by each nation's history and social background. Since independence, Singapore has held regular, free and fair general elections with high voter participation."

Singapore takes a "have its cake and eat it too" approach in defending its political system. It says its form of democracy is based on Asian values,

while suggesting its election procedures reflect those of a liberal democracy. In reality, the political system lacks a system of checks and balances. Power is concentrated in the executive branch while parliament rubber stamps legislation and plays no significant independent role.

The electoral system is heavily tilted against the opposition with very restrictive campaign laws, gerrymandering and the dominance of multi-candidate parliamentary districts (supposedly created to promote ethnic diversity in parliament) that favor the government. Opposition figures receive little coverage (unless it's negative) in the state-controlled media, except during the short election period, which normally lasts nine days. Of course, Singapore has "high voter participation" because voting is compulsory.

The results of this system are clear. Although 25-30 percent have regularly voted against the government since the 1980s, only 5 percent of the seats held by full-voting members of parliament have normally gone to the opposition. In the last election in 2011, a record 40 percent voted against the government but only 7 percent of the full-voting seats fell to the opposition.

"Governance in Singapore is based on the rule of law and its effectiveness is demonstrated by our ability to consistently deliver a high quality of life to its people."

The PAP has justified its rule by saying that its effective governance is reflected in the city-state's prosperity. It is true that Singapore is one of Asia's richest economies, but Singa-

pore already had the second-highest GNP per capita in East Asia in 1959 (after Japan) when the PAP assumed power from the country's British colonial rulers. Income inequality is close to the same level as in 1959, although it narrowed in the 1970s and 1980s before widening again. Singapore's Gini coefficient score (which measures inequality) was a dismal 0.481 in 2008, according to the World Bank (Korea's score was better at 0.313).

In response, Singapore will then trot out international rankings that place it near the top in terms of international competitiveness, absence of government corruption and human capital development among other measures.

But this is what I find troubling about such arguments. Efficiency is used to justify the curtailment of civil liberties such as press freedom (which I will discuss in my next column in response to the embassy letter). Similar arguments were made by fascists or communists in the 1930s to criticize the messiness of democracies when capitalism was in crisis. Indeed, the PAP party symbol was borrowed from the pre-war British Union of Fascists (a fact once confirmed to me by Lee himself).

So we should keep all this in mind when Singapore's pioneering model of authoritarian state capitalism is being studied and copied by China, the Gulf states, Russia and even Rwanda. Is it a harbinger of our future?

John Burton, a former Korea correspondent for the Financial Times, is now a Seoul-based independent journalist and media consultant. He can be reached at john.burton@insightcomms.com.

US government is not broke

By Gwynne Dyer

A salient feature of American "exceptionalism" is the belief that the United States can never be ordinary. If it is not the best, then it must be the worst. If it is not destined to dominate the world forever, then it is doomed to decline and decay.

This kind of thinking explains why much of the commentary in the United States about the recent "shutdown" of the U.S. government, and also about the impending default on the national debt (due on Oct. 17), has started at hysterical and quickly geared up to apocalyptic. We Americans have lost the mandate of Heaven, and it will soon be raining frogs and blood.

So everybody takes your tranquilizer of choice (mine's a double scotch), and let's consider what is actually going on here. The United States is the world's oldest democratic country, with an 18th-century constitution that is bound to be an awkward fit for 21st-century politics. But that hasn't stopped the United States from becoming the world's biggest economy and its greatest power. Has something now gone fundamentally wrong?

The problem lies in Congress, specifically in the House of Representatives, where the Republican majority is refusing to pass the budget, and threatening not to raise the official debt ceiling either, unless President Barack Obama postpones the implementation of his bill extending medical care to all Americans.

The Affordable Care Act was passed by both houses of Congress and signed into law by Obama almost four years ago. Last year it passed scrutiny by the Supreme Court, and was subsequently welcomed by a majority of the voters in the presidential election, so Obama is understandably refusing to yield to blackmail. But the House Republicans seem mysteriously unworried by the fact that the public blames them for the impending train wreck. Why?

Because 80 percent of the Republicans in the House of Representatives don't have to worry about what the general public thinks. They represent Congressional districts that have been so shamelessly gerrymandered by state legislatures that it is almost impossible for anybody who is a Republican to lose an election there. National public opinion is no threat to them, whereas the views of their extremist Tea Party colleagues are a potentially lethal danger.

You can't gerrymander the Senate; every senator's "district" is the entire state he or she represents. State legislatures controlled by the Democrats also gerrymander congressional districts to create safe

seats for their own party, but there is no organized extremist group in the Democratic Party that will try to destroy elected members of their own party who do not toe the ideological line. Whereas in the Republican Party, there is.

Republicans seeking re-election to the House of Representatives may not have to worry about their Democratic opponents, but they certainly have to fear the Tea Party. If it decides to mount a challenge to an incumbent in the Republican primary elections, the far-right challenger will be lavishly funded by the Tea Party's wealthy supporters, and that may mark the end of the incumbent's political career.

So the Republicans in the House of Representatives, even those generally open to compromise, are keeping their heads down for fear of angering the Tea Party. That means it is possible (though not probable) that the Oct. 17 deadline will be missed, and the U.S. government will be forced to default on its debt. How bad would that be?

Very bad, according to a U.S. Treasury spokesperson. "Credit markets could freeze, the value of the dollar could plummet, U.S. interest rates could skyrocket, the negative spillovers could reverberate around the world." And it might rain frogs and blood.

Or maybe not. There would certainly be turmoil in the markets: many people would lose money, and some would gain. But it would not be a repeat of the crash of 2009, when it was suddenly understood that huge amounts of the mortgage debt held by banks could never be repaid. The U.S. government can still pay its debts; it just has to get Congress's permission first. And the markets, while prone to panic, are not completely stupid.

Nor is the U.S. Constitution fundamentally broken. It always requires a fair degree of compromise between the various branches of the government in order to work smoothly, and at most times in history that cooperation has been forthcoming. The current paralysis is due mainly to the gerrymandering of Congressional districts that makes members of the House of Representatives less afraid of public opinion than of the views of their own party's hard-liners.

It wouldn't hurt to put some controls on election spending as well, so that rich ideologues had less influence over the political process. But that is merely desirable; ending the gerrymandering is absolutely essential. It will take time, but this is a problem that can be fixed. And in the meantime, the U.S. government is not really going broke.

Gwynne Dyer is an independent journalist whose articles are published in 45 countries.

Public pension woes loom for municipalities

By Dan Walters

Bob Deis, the city manager of insolvent Stockton, Calif., is proud of fashioning a bankruptcy plan that avoids cuts in city workers' pensions.

Insurers of the city's bonds had demanded that pensions be on the table but appear to have backed off and accepted a multipart deal that includes stretching out some payments and taking over a building that would have become Stockton's City Hall.

Were pensions to be reduced, Deis says, "There'll be a mass exodus of those employees, and we won't be able to fill those positions."

Assuming the deal wins bankruptcy court approval, and voters approve a sales-tax hike later this year, Stockton evidently will not be the arena for a showdown on whether public pension obligations can be reduced in bankruptcy.

That issue, however, is still alive in San Bernardino's bankruptcy, and it's a pivotal point in Detroit's bankruptcy.

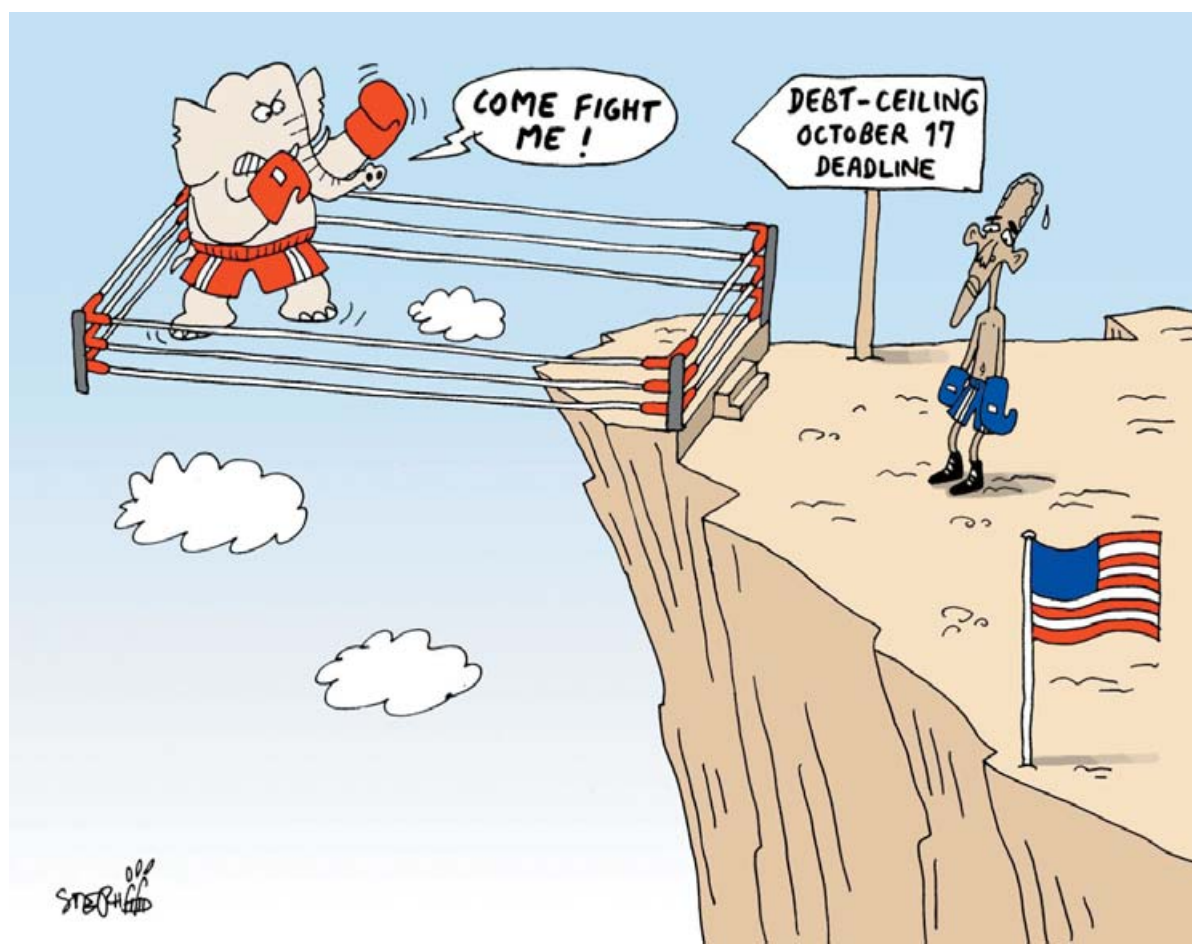
Regardless of what happens in bankruptcy court, California's local governments, especially cities, are facing years, or even decades, of fiscal distress from rapidly rising pension costs.

Sharp increases in local pension benefits over the last 14 years, coupled with lackluster earnings by CalPERS and other pension trust funds, and a tide of baby-boomer retirements are pushing costs upward.

CalPERS is adopting a more conservative investment strategy after two decades of counting on speculative ventures, and has already told its member agencies to expect steady increases in their mandatory contributions to whittle down its immense unfunded liabilities.

The situation is illustrated by what's happening in Vallejo, which, like Stockton, left pensions untouched when it went through bankruptcy a few years back.

Dan Walters is an editorial writer for Sacramento Bee.



In college admissions, testing the essay approach

By Bill Maxwell

Freshman admission to elite colleges and universities has been based on meritocracy, individual ability and achievement of the so-called "best and brightest."

The primary measuring tool has been the standardized test, and the SAT and ACT are the most used. Of course, a lucrative industry charges would-be applicants a lot of money to coach them on subject matter that appears on these tests.

Many educators argue that America is SAT- and ACT-obsessed. For decades, increasing numbers of admissions officers, professors and others have argued that these tests are not infallible predictors of how well students will perform academically over time. In fact, the National Association for College Admission Counseling has requested that U.S. colleges and universities re-examine their reliance on the SAT and ACT and expand the use of other admissions tools.

Now, Bard College, in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., is the latest presti-

gious college to join the trend of expanding how it admits first-year students. Beginning this fall, the college will offer the option of four 2,500-word research essays for admission. The college, whose tuition is \$45,730, will provide the prompts and sources for the essays.

Students who earn a B-plus or better will be admitted regardless of high school grades. The SAT and ACT will remain an option, and the school will keep the Common Application that is used by 415 colleges and universities in the United States.

The inclusion of the essay as another route to admission is fitting for Bard, a unique place. While many other institutions bow to the demands of the business community, Bard continues to engage its students in the life of the mind. For that reason, some of the world's foremost scholars and artists consider it an honor to work there because of its devotion to academic freedom and intellectual experimentation.

So why use the research paper as an entrance tool?

In a prepared statement, Leon Botstein, Bard's president of 38 years, explains: "The tradition of high stakes examination, using multiple choice questions, has made the entire apparatus of high school and college entrance examinations bankrupt. Teachers, scientists, and scholars must once again take charge of the way we test. What the Bard Entrance Examination asks is that students study the source materials and write comprehensively in order to show the quality of their reasoning."

He further explained in the New York Times that the move to the admission-by-essay approach is a "kind of declaring war on the whole rigmarole of college admissions and the failure to foreground the curriculum and learning." The current system, he said, is "loaded with a lot of nonsense that has nothing to do with learning." He said he wants to see the college entrance process return to the "basics" and "common sense."

On its website, the college touts itself as being "a place to think." This is not just a fancy slogan. It is a

concept that defines the essence of the college, and a standardized test alone cannot measure how a young person will respond to the intangibles of the school's intellectual engagement.

Botstein argues that while college prepares young people for careers, it also should teach ways to "connect learning and life in a manner that influences everyday life, including earning a living." The research essay, therefore, is an effective way to introduce applicants to Bard's culture and to let them gauge their commitment to the challenges ahead.

What about cheating? How will the

college know the essays are the students' own? To use the essay option, Botstein said, students must sign a pledge that the work is theirs and provide a character reference from their school. He told the New York Times that he wants to take the "high road," trusting that students are being honest.

Skeptics and supporters alike will be watching Bard's experiment. No matter how it turns out over time, evidence long has shown that standardized tests are shutting out many otherwise qualified applicants. Why not try the research essay?

Reach Bill Maxwell at bmaxwell@tampabay.com.

We welcome your opinions for the Thoughts of the Times and comments on editorials, columns and other topics in The Korea Times. The articles should not exceed 700 words and letters to the editor 350 words. They should bear the names of writers, addresses, phone numbers and short biographical information. Send them to opinion@koreatimes.co.kr. — ED.

Another Singapore Sling

Several weeks ago, the Singapore Embassy in Seoul wrote a letter to The Korea Times, which was published on Sept. 27, to rebut statements that I had made in an earlier column of Sept. 12 about the status of press freedom in the city-state and the use of libel suits by its leaders to curb criticism by the opposition. I thought the arguments made in the letter were disingenuous and I have decided to reply to the comments.

"Burton may have some misconceptions about the application of Singapore's libel laws. Our principle is that if one makes a personal attack against another person's reputation, he should be prepared to defend his allegations in a court of law. If these allegations fail to stand in a libel suit, he will be required to pay damages and legal costs. We have no issue with robust debate and criticisms of government policies. But we believe that such debate should not cross the line into personal attacks and allegations that are not founded on facts," the embassy letter stated.

The Singapore government has been accused by the U.S. State Department and human rights groups, such as Amnesty International, of using libel laws as tool of intimidation since the legal process is expensive. The court interpretation of libel in Singapore is very strict because judges tend to disregard the standard defense against defamation that criticisms made are justified as



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being in the public interest. Outspoken opposition politicians have repeatedly fallen foul of libel laws and have been made bankrupt, which then precludes them from standing for office.

The same applies to the foreign media. Senior government officials have filed around 40 libel suits by one estimate against the foreign media over the last few decades and have won every single case in the Singapore courts or else the media has agreed to settle out of court.

This has a dampening effect on foreign media reporting on Singapore as I witnessed at first hand when I was the Singapore correspondent at the Financial Times. In 2007, the FT published a story by another reporter on the newspaper pointing out that the head of Temasek Holdings, the giant state holding company that controls most of Singapore's biggest businesses, is the wife of the prime minister who is the son of Lee Kuan Yew, modern Singapore's founding father. The FT received a letter threatening a libel

suit from lawyers acting on behalf of all three claiming we were suggesting nepotism was involved, although the statement was factually accurate.

The FT was left with the choice of paying an immediate out-of-court settlement and publishing a public apology or else facing an expensive legal battle that editor was certain the newspaper would lose given the previous track record of defeats for the foreign media in the Singapore courts. He chose the cheaper option and quickly paid up to the amount of \$75,000. This did not escape the notice of the U.S. Embassy in Singapore, which commented in a diplomatic cable to Washington headlined "Foreign media caves to Lee Family Inc. defamation club, again."

"The Lee family is hyper-sensitive to any implication of nepotism and sticking to the facts offers no protection. The FT article actually never used the word nepotism, but made a series of factual observations," the cable stated as disclosed by Wikileaks. "Given the long winning streak (the Lee family) have had in the Singapore courts on defamation cases, the FT probably decided it was easier to pay up now rather than later." Precisely.

In contrast, senior Singapore government officials have rarely resorted to filing a libel suit in a foreign jurisdiction, even in libel-friendly U.K., and none has ever won a libel suit

heard overseas as far as I am aware.

An exception was a libel lawsuit filed by Lee Kuan Yew in the Canadian courts in 1999 against former Singapore President Devan Nair, who was living in political exile in Toronto. Nair had a public falling out with Lee years earlier and the latter had accused the former in a parliamentary debate of public drunkenness (which would seem to violate the government's principle to "not cross the line into personal attacks"). Lee dropped the suit after the Ontario Superior Court of Justice refused to throw out a counterclaim by Nair alleging that Lee was abusing the litigation process.

The embassy letter commenting on my column also stated that "Singapore's approach toward the media is that it should be a responsible medium for reporting the news and that facts should be clearly distinguished from opinion. The media in Singapore can raise questions and expose wrongdoing but it should report fully and fairly."

I expect that the Singapore government and its diplomatic representatives should adhere to the same standards as well in presenting the facts "fully and fairly," which is why I have felt the need to reply.

John Burton, a former Korea correspondent for the Financial Times, is now a Seoul-based independent journalist and media consultant. He can be reached at john.burton@insightco.com.

Arab Awakening's aftermath

By Erik Berglof and Shanta Devarajan

LONDON — The turmoil following the Arab Awakening has all but decimated the affected countries' economies. Political assassinations and polarization in Tunisia, civil unrest and a military takeover in Egypt, terrorist attacks in Yemen, sectarian strife and an institutional vacuum in Libya, and civil war in Syria have contributed to a sharp fall in investment, tourism, exports, and GDP growth, aggravating macroeconomic imbalances. For example, Egypt's fiscal deficit now stands at 14 percent of GDP, with public debt approaching 100 percent of GDP. Most of the Arab Awakening countries lack buffers to withstand further economic shocks.

Worse, beyond the removal of individual autocratic leaders, few of the problems that fueled the uprisings have been addressed. Indeed, unemployment is higher today than in 2010. Untargeted fuel subsidies and the public-sector wage bill have increased, crowding out much-needed public investment and relief to poor families, while impeding the development of a dynamic and competitive private sector and limiting new firms' access to finance. Meanwhile, public-service delivery has deteriorated.

Moreover, the political situation remains unsettled, with transitional or interim governments, unfinished constitutions, and uncertain timetables for future elections. In short, the Arab world's transition countries are much more vulnerable today than they were at the height of the protests in 2011.

Against this background, an external shock could bring these fragile economies to a sudden stop, leading to devastating poverty and hardship. And imbalance-correcting policies — such as sharp tax increases, spending cuts, or currency devaluation — could backfire, fueling political unrest, delaying elections further, and exacerbating the very imbalances that they were meant to rectify.

Even if governments managed to restore macroeconomic balance gradually, the structural problems of high unemployment, poor investment climates, and inadequate provision of public services would likely remain unaddressed. Growth would be insufficient to create jobs for the millions of young people entering the labor market. The Arab Awakening could become little more than a blip in the affected countries' socioeconomic development.

Until now, the international community's response has been piecemeal at best. In 2011, the G8 Deauville Partnership — which brought the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) to the region — pledged that the international financial institutions (IFIs) would provide \$38 billion to the transition countries over three years.

But that promise was based more on existing IFI pipelines than on transition countries' emerging needs. Furthermore, poor macroeconomic fundamentals, slow progress on reform, and political

turmoil have constrained the use of these resources. And, from the transition countries' perspective, bilateral support from the G8 and the European Union has been disappointing.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries — especially Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait — have contributed roughly \$28 billion to the transition countries. While these resources have helped to finance budget shortfalls, stabilize reserves, and calm nervous markets, they have not been sufficiently leveraged to improve the policy framework, strengthen implementation of public investment projects, or, more generally, put the transition countries on an inclusive and sustainable growth path.

To give the Arab Awakening countries the needed space to transform their economies alongside their political systems, while avoiding destabilization or collapse, the international community must scale up financial, policy, and institutional assistance. This should include:

- New financial assistance linked to long-term reforms, amounting to \$30-40 billion annually for about three years;

- Technical support to ensure that these funds are channeled toward productive public investment in short-term public-works programs that create jobs and longer-term infrastructure projects that ease supply bottlenecks;

- Broad frameworks for trade, regulatory reform, and investment provided by, for example, deep and comprehensive free-trade agreements with the EU;

- Policy and institutional support to restore trust between governments and their citizens, including by eliminating red tape and nepotism in business transactions, enabling poor people to hold public-service providers accountable, and enhancing social protection for the most vulnerable citizens.

This combination of assistance plays to the strengths of bilateral and multilateral partners like the GCC, the EU, and the U.S., as well as IFIs like the World Bank, the IMF, the EBRD, the African Development Bank, the Islamic Development Bank, and Arab development funds. These players complement each other in terms of systemic knowledge, implementation capacity, and available financial resources.

The gathering of finance ministers in Washington, D.C., for the World Bank-IMF Annual Meetings is an ideal opportunity to begin building consensus around this much-needed effort. Without urgent action, there is a good chance that those who took to the streets — indeed, risked their lives — in the struggle for dignity and opportunity will have done so in vain.

Erik Berglof is chief economist at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Shanta Devarajan is the World Bank's chief economist for the Middle East and North Africa. For more stories, visit Project Syndicate (www.project-syndicate.org).

Shutdown is expensive lesson in how not to govern

By Dale McFeatters

We thought Congress had learned the foolishness of forcing a government shutdown in 1995-96. Apparently not.

Now the country has taken a \$24 billion hit to its economic growth to teach that same lesson to congressional radicals, mostly House Republicans, who were too young or too obtuse to learn it the last time around.

The ratings agency Standard & Poor's estimated the shutdown knocked 0.6 percent off gross domestic product growth through lost economic output; the S&P reduced its estimate of annualized economic growth in the fourth quarter by a full percentage point, from 3 percent to 2. Moody's Analytics was slightly more optimistic. It estimated the hit to GDP would be only \$23 billion.

Either way, the final cost is likely to be even higher as scattered reports of the economic damage begin to come in.

In the area at the shutdown's epicenter, the District of Columbia and Maryland lost a combined \$21 million a week in sales taxes. That number will worsen when Virginia tallies up its damage. The U.S. Travel Association estimated that \$2.4 billion in travel spending was lost.

The National Park Service estimated it was losing \$450,000 a day, although that was mitigated in a few cases where states stepped in to fund parks on which local businesses heavily depend.

The National Retail Federation is expecting only marginal sales gains of 3.9 percent, to \$602 billion, during the November and December holidays — a critical period for many small businesses.

We'll have a better fix on the damage when a dozen or so government economic reports resume publication. Those include reports on employment, retail sales and inflation.

There are two more opportunities on the near horizon for another shutdown: in December, when the resolution ending the shutdown must be renewed, and in January, when the government's borrowing limit must be raised.

Let's hope Congress has learned a lesson. Heaven knows, we've paid enough for it.

The author is an editorial writer for Scripps Howard News Service (www.shns.com).



When parents get involved, students succeed

By Bill Maxwell

RIVIERA BEACH, Fla. — A universal truth in education is that regardless of their race or ethnicity or income, students whose parents are involved in their learning tend to perform better academically, graduate on time and move on to college or professional schools at higher rates than those whose parents are not involved.

Emma Banks, principal of Inlet Grove Community High School, has embraced this truth and is making parental involvement part of standard operations.

Inlet Grove is a charter school in a low-income neighborhood. It has 700 students. Minority enrollment is 94 percent, and 66 percent of the total enrollment is economically disadvantaged. Banks said that roughly 115 of Inlet Grove's students are Level 1 readers on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). The highest level is 5.

So many Level 1 readers are unacceptable, Banks said. And she is doing something about it: Parents of the students with low scores are required to attend Saturday reading classes at the school, and they must bring their children with

them.

Banks said she and her staff want parents to learn strategies and skills that will enable them to assist their children at home. Inlet Grove teachers, staff members and volunteers will be available. Parents will be required to read assigned books and other material to learn how to analyze evidence and other conventions of reading so they can help their children.

"I don't want you to take this as a negative," she told the Palm Beach Post. "Take it as a positive thing that someone cares enough about your child to come on a Saturday to help you learn strategies to help your child pass the reading test."

Banks said for parents with transportation problems, volunteers will provide rides. No child care? The principal will find babysitters, and she will babysit if necessary.

I attended the first meeting of the parents' classes on Oct. 12. Forty parents and their children showed up. Banks said she is certain the number will increase as the program matures. I asked what besides the low FCAT scores motivated her to establish the parent program.

"I was tired of going to meetings and hearing people saying our minority students don't have the basic skills necessary for them to be

successful in school," she said. "When I hear that one of the hardest things is to get parents involved in their children's lives, I know I have to act. If you're coming from a low-economic family, children will not get exposed to the finer things in life while they are in school unless someone else provides it for them.

"All parents, regardless of how uneducated they are, want the very best for their children. Some don't know how to get those resources for their children. I want to show that Inlet Grove is a family. When one hurts, we all hurt. When we see that children aren't reading at grade level, I had to take action with not only the child but the entire family. Some parents have said to me, 'Dr. Banks, I can't read, but I want my child to learn to read.' This statement hurts. I knew I had to do more. I don't have money to pay some of the volunteers. Their commitment in coming out to help means so much to Inlet Grove."

What happens when parents refuse to participate in the Saturday classes? Banks said she asks the parents to come to her office to explain. If a weekend job is the problem, for example, she will find a way for them to attend a weekday session.

And for parents who persistently

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refuse to participate? "I remind parents that one of the agreements for your child to enter Inlet Grove is that you would participate in your child's learning," Banks said. "If you don't, your child will return to his or her home school at the end of the semester."

Banks has the support of Palm Beach County schools superintendent Wayne Gent. Like Banks, he under-

stands the singular importance of parental involvement.

Reach Tampa Bay Times columnist Bill Maxwell at bmaxwell@tampabay.com.

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Seoul vs. Singapore

General Motors recently decided to move its international headquarters from Shanghai, where it had been operating for the last nine years. So where to go?

The relocation was part of a corporate restructuring in which GM's China operations will be spun off as an independent unit while the international headquarters will continue to look after "key parts" of GM's business in Korea, Southeast Asia, Australia and New Zealand, India, the Middle East and Africa as well as Chevrolet and Cadillac in Europe.

Seoul would have seemed an obvious choice for the new base, which would be in charge of international sales and marketing, finance, government relations, human resources, information technology and legal functions.

Korea has become a major production hub for GM, accounting for a fifth of the automaker's global production after it took over bankrupt Daewoo Motors in 2002. GM already employs 245 administrative staff in Seoul.

But GM chose to ignore Korea and instead decided to place the new headquarters in a country not known as a major auto hub and where German luxury cars are favored by a status-conscious public despite the fact that car prices there are among the highest in the world due to punishing license fees. That place is Singapore.

The number of jobs involved with the international headquarters is not large, around 120. But where the headquarters is located has high



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prestige value.

So why did GM decide to pick Singapore? GM said one key reason was the city-state's close geographical proximity to emerging key markets in India, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Another factor may have been the fact that Singapore served as GM's Asia-Pacific regional headquarters between 1993 and 2004, before it was moved to Shanghai.

But GM also might have preferred Singapore to Seoul because it is reportedly considering gradually reducing its presence in Korea and shifting the production of new models elsewhere because of rising labor costs, militant unions and a stronger Korean currency.

Such a move would come despite the fact that GM's acquisition of Daewoo's small car technology, which the U.S. automaker lacked, helped revive GM's fortunes after its 2009 bankruptcy by enabling it to produce vehicles popular in fast-growing emerging markets.

In the competition among Asian cities to attract the regional headquarters of multinational firms such as GM, Singapore has boasted of its "business-friendly" environment.

This includes a tamed workforce since unions in Singapore are grouped under a government-controlled labor federation, similar to the corporatist model employed in Mussolini's fascist Italy of the 1930s, and strikes are as rare as a snowstorm on the tropical island.

Singapore has been aggressive in courting multinational companies to base their Asia headquarters in the city-state by touting such advantages as a high standard of living, advanced infrastructure, a clean environment, minimal crime, competitive tax rates, a skilled English-speaking workforce and a clear regulatory framework.

But Seoul also has many of these advantages from clean air and low crime rates to one of the world's most efficient public transport systems.

GM may not have been aware of the growing disenchantment among expatriates living in Singapore. The government's policy in recent years to boost the population above 5 million on the compact island has led to a sharp jump in rents and housing prices, making the city-state nearly unaffordable for even relatively well-paid foreign residents.

The soaring property prices also reflect Singapore's efforts to become what could be described as the world's largest gated community as it seeks to attract the super-rich from around the world, such as Russian tycoons and Indonesian timber merchants, with promises of bank secrecy and security. It brings to mind

Somerset Maugham's description of Monte Carlo as "a sunny place for shady people."

Foreign schools in Singapore are increasingly difficult to get into as the growing ranks of foreign bankers swell demand for places for their children. The subway and buses have become crowded and the roads are increasingly subject to traffic jams, a constant source of complaint. And Singapore's cultural attractions remain patchy, with no museum that can match, for example, the newly opened Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in central Seoul.

The influx of foreigners into the country has led to a backlash among the local population, with increasing displays of resentment. Many expat friends, who once enjoyed Singapore, are now making plans to leave.

Seoul has a good story to tell in attracting international professionals, but unfortunately it is telling it rather badly. It should mount a well-executed publicity and marketing campaign, something that Singapore has done well. Singapore spends millions of dollars a year on promotion activities and its inward investment agency, the Economic Development Board, is seen as the one of most important government agencies and attracts the cream of the bureaucracy. Seoul and the central government should take note and do the same.

John Burton, a former Korea correspondent for the Financial Times, is now a Seoul-based independent journalist and media consultant. He can be reached at john.burton@insightcomms.com.

Chinese demographics

By Gwynne Dyer

The big news of the week is that China's one-child policy is being relaxed. After 34 years when most Chinese families were officially limited to only one child, most couples will now be allowed to have two children. The reality, however, is that it will make very little difference.

It will make little difference because only about one-third of Chinese couples were still living under those restrictions anyway. The one-child limit never applied to ethnic minorities, and in the past 15 years it has rarely applied to people living in rural areas either: couples whose first child was a girl are almost always allowed to have a second child (in the hope that it will be a boy).

Controls were stricter in the cities, but if both prospective parents were only children themselves they were exempt from the limit. And people with enough money can just ignore the rules: the penalty for having a second child is just a stiff fine up front and the extra cost of raising a child who is not entitled to free education. (The fines are reported to have raised \$2.12 billion for the state coffers last year alone.)

The net result of all this is that the China's current fertility rate (the average number of children a woman will bear in a lifetime) is not 1.0, as it would be if there were a really strict one-child policy. According to United Nations statistics, it is 1.55, about the same as Canada. Which suggests that most Chinese who really wanted a second child got one.

The new rules that have just been announced by the Third Plenum of the Communist Party say that urban people can now have a legal second child if just one of the would-be parents was an only child. This is not going to unleash a wave of extra babies; it will raise the fertility rate, at most, to 1.6. ("Replacement" level is 2.1.) Indeed, it's questionable whether the one-child policy really held down China's birth rate at all.

There are demographers who argue that the one-child policy hasn't really made much difference. China was already urbanizing fast when the policy was imposed in 1979, and the more urban a country is, the lower the birth rate. From about 1970 there was also a very aggressive birth control policy.

The fertility rate in China had already dropped from 5.8 children per woman in 1970 to only 2.7 in 1978, the year before the one-child rule was introduced. It has since fallen to 1.55, but that might well have happened anyway. For comparison, Brazil's fertility rate has dropped from 6.0 50 years ago to

1.7 now WITHOUT a one-child policy.

China's National Population and Family Planning Commission claims that the one-child policy has spared the country an extra 400 million mouths to feed, but it would say that, wouldn't it? The real number of births avoided by that policy is probably no more than 100 million in three decades. And if we accept these numbers, then three major conclusions follow.

The first is that the one-child policy is not the major culprit in China's disastrous gender imbalance, with at least 120 boys born for every 100 girls. The social effects of this are very dangerous: by the end of this decade there will be 24 million "leftover" men who will never find a wife.

Any sane government would be terrified by the prospect of a huge army of unattached and dissatisfied young men hanging around the streets after work with nothing much to do. A regime with as little legitimacy as the Communists will be even more frightened by it. Unfortunately for them, ending the one-child policy will have little effect on this pattern.

Only state intervention as arbitrary and intrusive as the one-child policy could reverse the gender imbalance, and it is doubtful that the Communist regime is still confident enough to risk that degree of unpopularity.

The second conclusion we can draw from these statistics is that China's population is going to drop whether the regime wants it or not. It will peak at or below 1.4 billion, possibly as soon as 2017, and then begin a long decline that will see it fall to 1.2 billion by 2050.

There's nothing wrong with that in principle, but it exacerbates what is already the greatest threat to economic growth in China: the population's rapidly rising average age. The big, old generations will be around for a long time, but the younger generations are getting smaller very fast. Indeed, the number of people in the 20-24 age group in China will halve in the next 10 years.

This means the dependency rate is going to skyrocket. In 1975, there were 7.7 people in the workforce for every person over 60; by 2050, the ratio will be only 1.6 employed persons for every retiree.

No country has ever had to bear such a burden before, but ending the one-child policy won't get the birth rate back up. The only way China could increase its workforce to lessen the burden is to open up the country to mass immigration. And what are the odds on that?

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Economist Yellen would be first woman to run Fed

By Dale McFeatters

The head of the Federal Reserve Board is one of the most powerful and, outside of financial circles, least known officials in the U.S. government.

The Fed, an independent agency that jealously guards that independence, has \$3.8 trillion in assets, sets interest rates and, since the recession, has an open license to intervene in the economy.

The Fed has two mandates that can easily come in conflict — maintain a stable currency, which basically means keeping inflation under control, and try to combat unemployment.

The Fed chair's semi-annual appearances before Congress — one day each for the Senate and House — are major economic events with the central banker's testimony closely monitored worldwide.

It's a safe bet that few Americans have heard of Janet Yellen and even fewer could recognize her, but after a two-hour confirmation hearing before the Senate Banking Committee, Yellen, President Obama's pick to lead the Fed, seems assured of Senate approval, despite a handful of dissenters.

She would succeed Ben Bernanke, who will step down Jan. 31 after eight years on the job. Yellen, 67, indicated that she would continue Bernanke's policies which are heavily weighted toward stimulus — super-low interest rates and the monthly purchase of \$85 billion in bonds.

Yellen indicated to the committee that she is on board with Bernanke's plan to keep interest rates near zero until the jobless rate, now 7.3 percent, falls to 6.5 percent. The bond-buying program seems likely to remain in place at its current rate until at least March. Whether to continue it and how long will be one of Yellen's first major decisions as chair.

Her testimony before the committee cheered stock markets here and abroad, especially in Asia, where major indexes rose sharply, in some case to record highs.

The author is an editorial writer for Scripps Howard News Service (www.shns.com).



Guns and drugs, a new normal in Texas

By John M. Crisp

It has the ring of parody, as if an entrepreneur opened, say, a combined hardware store and childcare center. But, no, last week I did indeed visit Nichols Westwood Pharmacy, which shares space with Nichols Guns.

On one side of the store you take care of your health; on the other you tend to your personal safety and hunting needs. And through a convenient side door is a new 18-lane shooting range. A wall-sized sign greets visitors: "Guns and Drugs." Welcome to Texas!

Of course, Texas has no monopoly on the casual integration of firearms into ordinary public life, a "normalization" that makes a pharmacy/gun shop seem not all that strange. Guns have an increasingly prominent profile everywhere in our culture, from movies, TV, and videogames to the 300 million firearms that reside in the drawers of bedside tables and in hall closets and gun safes in homes all across the nation.

But my home state embraces the romance of firearms as tightly as anyone. In fact, firearms will play a significant role in the race for governor. Thus, my state's attorney general, Gregg Abbott, made a campaign stop last week in my hometown at Nichols Pharmacy/Guns.

Abbott used a rack of rifles and shotguns as backdrop as he confirmed his support for the Second Amendment and for laws that would permit guns in college classrooms and for the "open carry" of firearms.

His opponent, State Sen. Wendy Davis, isn't given much of a chance, partly because she's seen as soft on guns; she voted, for example, to permit guns in students' cars on campuses, but not in college classrooms.

How did firearms become such a litmus test of political credibility? Even Gabby Giffords, former Arizona congresswoman and gunshot victim, feels obliged to profess her long-time gun ownership and strong support of the Second Amendment.

Some of the answer probably resides in a firearm's capacity to con-

vey both pleasure and power. A well-crafted firearm is a thing of beauty, and the sense of power found in the heft of a pistol grip is attractive in ways that far exceed a gun's practical function. So gun owners tend to support politicians who favor gun rights.

But most gun-control advocates are not determined to abolish the Second Amendment. And even though getting from a "well regulated militia" to our current gun-saturated nation is quite a stretch, it's hard to gainsay the right of citizens to hunt and to protect themselves.

Some of this reverse political correctness stems from the mythology and psychology connected to firearms. Candidate Abbott wants Texans — and all Americans — to have the right to carry a gun for protection. Fair enough. But "open carry" inevitably alters the way citizens interact. A gun carried openly says clearly, "Don't Mess with Me." And if you do, deadly force is not very far down on my list of options.

Thus, last week in New York, when Renisha McBride, seeking help

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after a car accident, knocked on Theodore Wafer's door in the middle of the night, Wafer reached for the weapon at hand and fired a 12-gauge shotgun through a locked screen door. The 19-year-old McBride died at the scene.

It's hard to fault Wafer for keeping a weapon for self-protection. But we're becoming an increasingly anxious and frightened society, and gun manufacturers, the National Rifle Association, and many politicians benefit if we stay that way. Our national gun saturation has the ironic effect of contributing to the fear; at some point in his panic Wafer must have assumed that McBride had a gun, too. She didn't.

When the Second Amendment was

written, firearms were tools, not fetishes. Some of the perverse psychology attached to guns — the pleasure and fear — insinuates itself into our society in unhealthy ways. Sure, let's keep them for hunting and self-protection. But maybe they've become a little too "normal" when we stop by the drugstore to pick up more ammo.

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