The failure of military government

The information and analysis on the ISI's role provided by Asghar Khan led me to ponder as to why we do not yet have such exposures on the Bangladesh intelligence services. After all, for years we have heard allegations about NSI and DGFI involvement in our politics. Yet no researcher or the media has attempted to collect and publish empirical evidence. This is a serious gap in our knowledge and understanding of politics. Involvement of intelligence services is a cancer in politics which needs to be clearly identified and eliminated. We need first hand accounts like Asghar Khan's book. We need more evidence-based research on the involvement of intelligence services in our politics.

ROUNAQ JAHAN

M. Asghar Khan's book, which carries a rather depressing title: "We've Learnt Nothing from History," is a fascinating account of the author's personal recollections of political events and conversations with key leaders in Pakistan over the last half a century. It is a refreshingly frank account often told with a lot of humour. I consider this book as a must read for all students of both Pakistan and Bangladesh politics. Though it primarily focuses on Pakistan politics, many trends described in the book are equally applicable to Bangladesh. Asghar Khan demonstrates how rulers in Pakistan have repeatedly failed to learn from history. I am sure after reading the book students of Bangladesh politics will be tempted to draw similar conclusions about our own rulers, both military as well as civilian.

The book narrates many personal experiences and conversations which will serve as a valuable primary source for scholars researching Pakistan politics. I believe we need many more such personal accounts by people who have been privileged to witness historical events or have had access to confidential information that throws light on dark episodes of our history and politics.

Of course, there is always a risk with personal accounts. These are written from the perspectives of individuals concerned. They can also be self-serving and can tell partial truth or even lies. Unfortunately in Bangladesh we have seen repeated such attempts to misrepresent history by people who claim to be witnesses to historical events. But despite such risks, personal accounts and memoirs are always a valuable primary source. A good researcher should be able to check facts and decide what can and what cannot be used as a source of information.

Though the title of the book is depressing, it is sadly apt. The author persuasively demonstrates how repeated interventions by the military in the country's politics thwarted development of democratic institutions and norms in Pakistan. Each time the military took power, the results were disastrous for the nation. Every military ruler assumed power in the name of "saving" Pakistan. Each promised to "establish" democracy. But each regime pushed the country further in the path of disintegration. Chances of democracy taking root became even more remote with each military intervention. Successive regimes military and civilian pursued the same failed policies and made the same old mistakes. Readers of the book will easily concur with the author that ruling elites, military as well as political, have not learnt anything from Pakistan's six decades of history since its birth in 1947.

Asghar Khan argues that the military is incapable of fostering democracy or even functioning as a government responsive to citizens needs, particularly those of the poor, because the military institution is by definition not accountable to people. He narrates an interesting incident when a junior officer behaved insolently with the deposed president Iskander Mirza. He writes:

"The conduct of this officer typified the dangers inherent in the involvement of the armed forces in politics. When power is wielded by the defence services, it is ultimately exercised by people who both by experience and by temperament are least suited for this role. Since they are not responsible to the people, their arrogance finds expression in ways that are more harmful than the one typified by the ill manners of the young officer at Mauripur airfield on that October morning." (p. 16)

Asghar Khan narrates many such incidences of the military's arrogance and misguided policies. He underscores the futility of the pursuit of military actions by military regimes when the situation on the ground demands a political solution. He cites Pakistani rulers brutal military actions in Bangladesh and Baluchistan as prime examples of such arrogance and folly.

Of course the military rulers have been aided and abetted by equally arrogant and power-hungry politicians such as Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Asghar Khan narrates a conversation with Yahya Khan who said that Bhutto had advised him (Yahya) that "East Pakistan is no problem. We will have to kill some 20,000 people there and all will be well." (p. 36)

Asghar Khan also reports on lack of resistance and even pro-active undemocratic advice offered to military rulers by influential people who are supposed to uphold democratic principles. For example, Chief Justice Munir told Ayub Khan that a Constitution could be approved by "public acclaim" in meetings organized in different cities of Pakistan by the military regime (pp. 12-13).

I found Asghar Khan's detailed description of the role of the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) in politics to be the most illuminating chapter. We generally hear rumours about ISI involvement without much empirical evidence to support such allegations. In this book Asghar Khan has devoted a whole chapter (pp. 195-201) describing how ISI's role has changed over the years from its origin in the late 1950s as an intelligence coordination agency to "a system of political interference" in the 1970s and 1980s. He cites examples of ISI support in the formation as well as break up of political parties and alliances; manipulation of election results; distribution of funds to politicians; aid to religions groups within Pakistan; and training of mujahideens that ultimately led to Taliban control of Afghanistan. The most interesting exposure of ISI's role was the suo moto case Asghar Khan brought in the Pakistan Supreme Court in 1996 detailing the illegal activities of the agency, particularly its disbursement of funds to various political leaders (pp. 199-200). The case had three or four hearings and has been in cold storage since 1999.

A pertinent question here is how can ISI continue to engage in such illegal activities when its involvement is open public knowledge? After all the newspapers have published the list of people who received ISI funds. Then why is there no punishment either for the ISI or for the people receiving funds? Asghar Khan provides a partial answer to these question? He observes:

"It is a measure of the lack of political sense of the Pakistani public that they continue to bring these people back to the assemblies whenever national elections are held. Old habits die hard and the political parties and their leadership, whatever their public stand, look towards the armed forces to help them come to power. It has become the norm in Pakistan for political parties when in opposition to establish contact with GHQ and the ISI and conspire to bring down the elected government. If this remains so, the ISI will undoubtedly continue to be used for political manipulation." (pp. 198-199).

The information and analysis on the ISI's role provided by Asghar Khan led me to ponder as to why we do not yet have such exposures on the Bangladesh intelligence services. After all, for years we have heard allegations about NSI and DGFI involvement in our politics. Yet no researcher or the media has attempted to collect and publish empirical evidence. This is a serious gap in our knowledge and understanding of politics. Involvement of intelligence services is a cancer in politics which needs to be clearly identified and eliminated. We need first hand accounts like Asghar Khan's book. We need more evidence-based research on the involvement of intelligence services in our politics.

Asghar Khan's life long commitment to and struggle for the achievement of democracy, human rights and social justice come through clearly as one reads the book. One principle he repeatedly emphasizes is that civil and military officials are under no obligation to follow illegal or immoral orders given by their superiors. He refers to the Nuremberg trials after the Second World War when Nazi war criminals were held accountable even though they tried to plead that they carried out orders of superiors. He cites example from his own life when he refused to follow the order of his superior military commander to destroy a caravan carrying women and children. Chapter 5 of the book, titled "The Guardians of the Law" contains copies of various letters he wrote at different periods to Inspector Generals (IG) of Police and Chief Secretaries, reprimanding them for various unconstitutional and illegal actions committed at the dictates of "immoral and repressive" regimes. In one letter written to IG Police in 1976 he states:

"[S]uch unlawful acts on the part of police officers can only push the country further towards anarchy and chaos. Those who are party to this are undoubtedly guilty of a crime against Pakistan and its people." (p. 89).

Again, this chapter of the book will remind readers in Bangladesh of similar unlawful acts committed by our police, civil administration and military under the order of their superiors. Asghar Khan's insistence on protection of human rights and his description of various incidences of violation of his constitutional rights underscore the importance of establishing rule of law as the primary function of a modern state.

Though Asghar Khan has resisted Bhutto's autocratic actions and personally suffered imprisonment and harassment as a consequence, he is fair in his assessment of Bhutto. For example, he credits Bhutto for some of his economic policies such as nationalization of industries and the Five Marla Scheme in agriculture. He writes that "the working classes were satisfied that the government was working for their uplift and betterment. They acquired a sense of importance and a feeling of security that they had not hitherto experienced" (p. 64). This kind of generosity in recognizing good acts of opponents is rare in our parts of the world.

Many of Asghar Khan's ideas and positions are visionary. He envisions a local government system (pp. 161-2) that will free Pakistan from what he calls the "shackles of an all powerful bureaucracy." He proposes elected governments at village, halqa, district and provincial levels, with control of their staff and operations. He is opposed to Pakistan's acquision of nuclear weapons because he considers this to be an unwise military strategy (pp. 243-44). He argues that it increases the chances of India launching a nuclear first strike. He is also opposed to increasing budget for the armed forces and weapons. Instead he recommends increased investment in human development and social services such as education, health, sanitation and clean water. He is in favour of a near independent status for Kashmir. Indeed, the book is full of many enlightened ideas and policies, which if implemented, would have augured well for Pakistan and South Asia.
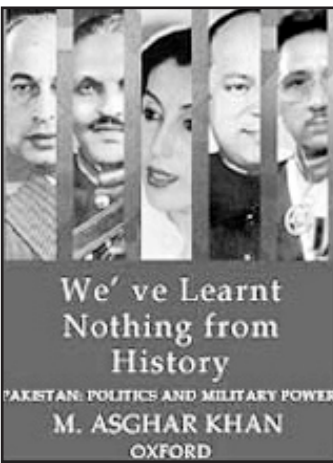
Asghar Khan is equally forthright in rejecting use of religion to advance political gains. He argues that the military regimes like that of Ziaul Huq cannot call themselves Islamic because under their policies the gaps between the rich and the poor have widened. Asghar Khan believes that Islam stands for social justice, and regimes that do not promote social justice cannot be called Islamic.

Of course, a good book generates many questions. This book is no exception. Many questions came to my mind as I read the book. Here I will focus on only three. First, Asghar Khan writes that the ruling class of West Pakistan considered East Pakistan to be an "encumbrance and conditioned itself to believe that Pakistan would do better without its eastern wing" (p. 9). But if that was the case, then why did the ruling class not agree to part amicably with us? What was the need to unleash the act of genocide?

Second, Asghar Khan does not fully explain what motivated him to enter politics via a route different from that of other military leaders in Pakistan. After all, he spent a life time in Pakistan military establishment. What led him, then, to oppose his former colleagues: Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan? Why did he decide to champion democracy, human rights, and social justice?

Third, why are leaders such as Asghar Khan, who practice principled politics, not able to mobilize enough popular support to win electoral majorities? Why do people vote for parties that are led by corrupt politicians? What are the constraints of the existing electoral processes that work against clean parties and leaders?

Asghar Khan clearly is not worried about not winning electoral majority or being a politician like the others. He is more interested in telling the truth as he sees it and following his principles and conscience. Surprisingly, however, the book does not have a moralistic, preaching style. Instead it is written simply with a lot of anecdotes some quite amusing, that make it very clear how Pakistani rulers repeatedly took unlawful and immoral actions that ruined successive regime and pushed the ordinary citizens into more and more hardship. The author deserves our congratulations for a highly readable and lucid account of Pakistani politics. Hopefully, after reading this book, our rulers will start learning some lessons from history.

Rounaq Jahan is Senior Research Scholar and Adjunct Professor, International Affairs, Columbia University, New York.

How to accelerate software export growth

To move up the ladder a number of developments are required to take place: (a) the presence of a major IT multinational having software development facilities, (b) software industry profiling and growth plan done by a globally accepted consulting firm such as McKinsey or Gartner, (c) aggressive overseas promotion of Bangladeshi software products and services, and (d) building world-class software applications. If we can achieve a major breakthrough in any of the above, the world is sure to notice us and help us climb up the pecking order.

HABIBULLAH N KARIM

LOOKING back at the year 2005 we find a number of significant developments in the software sector (the term "software" will henceforth be used here to broadly include software development, data processing, IT enabled services such as animation, graphics and content development as well as business process outsourcing services such as call/contact centers, document processing, etc).

First and foremost is the fact that according to Bangladesh Bank export remittance statistics, software exports in 2004-05 registered 75 percent growth compared to the previous year. In fact, in the last three years the year-to-year growth has been 51 percent, 71 percent, and 75 percent. This 70 percent plus growth rate in the last two years has continued in the first quarter of 2005-06 as well, paving the way for four successive years of high growth. However, as the baseline export at the beginning of the new century in 2001-02 was a paltry $2.3 million, we are only expected fetch about $20 million in 2005-06 despite this high growth.

Highlights of the past year
The back-to-back visit of a software business delegation from Denmark at two successive BASIS SoftExpo (an annual software exhibition organized nationally by the Bangladesh Association of Software & Information Services) is noteworthy. A number of software outsourcing deals have been reached between Danish and Bangladeshi software houses in the last two years.

The day-long visit last year by Microsoft founder Bill Gates caught the attention of the whole nation and I am sure of the world as well. Although Mr. Gates, presumably the richest man alive today, came primarily in connection with charitable projects in public health funded by the Gates Foundation, his short engagements with the business leaders
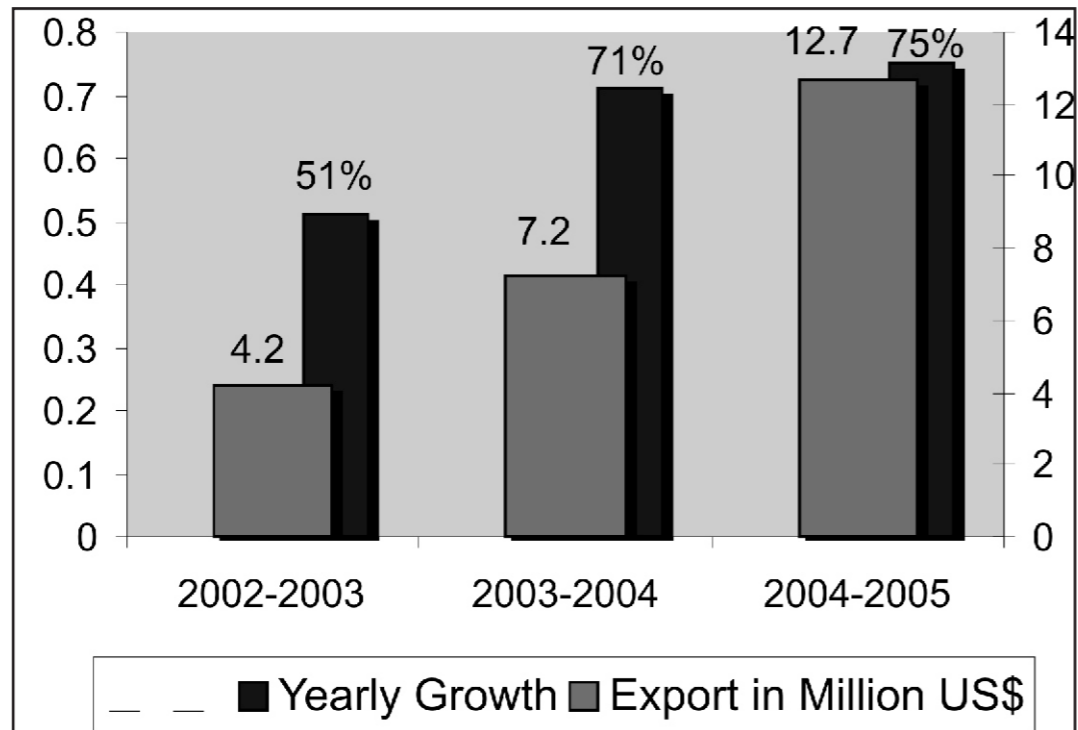
and the government high-ups resulted in a couple of Microsoft initiatives being penned for the expansion of training facilities for their software products.

Another milestone of the past year is the cabinet approval of the electronic transactions act draft which is popularly known as the cyber law. However, the approved draft has not been made public yet nor its fate afterwards. When pressed into law this will provide legal cover to all financial transactions done electronically without any paper documentation and physical signatures of the parties involved. One can only guess when this will get past the floor of the parliament and become law. The parliament, however, did pass the copyright amendment bill 2005 thereby removing the typographical inconsistencies from the landmark copyright act of 2000 which for the first time recognized the copyrights of intellectual properties recorded in electronic media such as software, e-book, e-music and e-video.

BIBC closure
On the down side, last year saw the closure of the Bangladesh ICT Business Centre (BIBC) -- the first-ever overseas marketing office for the software industry of the country set up in 2003 in the heart of Silicon Valley in California at a cost of nearly half million dollars funded by the World Bank under the export diversification project of the ministry of commerce (MoC). Much was expected from BIBC in terms of channeling software outsourcing work from US to Bangladesh. Some work did come from BIBC but not enough to keep it going according to the MoC.

While on the subject of outsourcing, let me summarise the kind of jobs being parceled out to Bangladeshi software companies. According to BASIS and the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) there are more than 50 companies that regularly export software to clients in more than 30 countries of the world in four continents. The bulk of these contracts are for programming (coding) services and graphics/animation works. However, Bangladesh is increasingly becoming a destination for software support services, multi-media content development and business process outsourcing.

Continued growth but no breakthrough
The current trend in near triple digit growth in software export appears set to continue throughout the year. The industry seems to be in sync with its natural potential as the growth is continuing without any command intervention from the government. Most developed economies of the world are recognizing the availability of large pool of IT professionals and the economic gain that can be realized by harnessing this resource. In addition to the Danish software business delegation this year we are expecting significant IT trade delegations from the UK and the US among others. A bigger Microsoft presence is also expected on account of the landmark visit by Bill Gates late last year. The continued high natural growth of the software export industry will happen behind the scenes through mostly organic growth of existing export capabilities and no high-visibility breakthroughs are foreseen at this point.

From Tier 3 to Tier 2
Despite our sustained high growth we are still not recognized as a major outsourcing destination due to our small share of global software exports. According to Intellect, the British IT Trade Association, Bangladesh is listed among Tier 3 countries for software outsourcing. The good thing is we are listed but our pride is pinched when we find that Pakistan and Sri Lanka are grouped under Tier 2. To move up the ladder a number of developments are required to take place: (a) the presence of a major IT multinational having software development facilities, (b) software industry profiling and growth plan done by a globally accepted consulting firm such as McKinsey or Gartner, (c) aggressive overseas promotion of Bangladeshi software products and services, and (d) building world-class software applications. If we can achieve a major breakthrough in any of the above, the world is sure to notice us and help us climb up the pecking order.

Domestic profile
The current software industry size is estimated to be approximately Tk 300 crore in 2005 as published by BASIS (software industry association) and Catalyst (a swiss NGO). Although the current membership strength of BASIS is a little over 200, this author estimates more than 500 software firms (including software development, IT-enabled services, BPO and IT services) in operation in the country sharing the relatively small pie of Tk 3 billion. This is why even within the country the software industry is not considered a major economic area. On top of it all the small number of professional software development firms feel threatened by the onslaught of much larger Indian software firms with huge marketing coffers built with burgeoning IT outsourcing business with the developed economies of the world.

Do's for the private sector
The industry is highly fragmented and ripe for a consolidation. The size of the domestic market as well as overseas outsourcing market cannot sustain such a relatively large pool of small to medium sized firms. There are too many firms doing the same kind of products or services. Judicious mergers among many of these firms can create a smaller number of stronger and highly focused firms that will be able to take on the outsourcing market with stride as well. A common weakness in the industry appears to be the lack of appropriate allocation for marketing activities resulting in less than desirable visibility of local software products and services. More investment in marketing and customer sensitization is a must if the local players wish to retain and enhance their share of the domestic market.

Another common malaise of the local industry is the lack of sufficient professional managers in most of the firms. Development of professional management in software firms has long been felt a necessity that still has not been adequately addressed. In a somewhat connected fashion most start-ups are falling prey to their own under-quoting and unrequited undercutting. Such undercutting leads to financial losses and often abandoned projects if the losses are unbearable. This practice is not beneficial to either the vendors or the clients and needs to be carefully redressed.

BOIPs and BOIEs
One recent phenomenon fueling the growth of exports has been the active participation of Bangladeshi Origin IT Professionals (BOIP) and IT Entrepreneurs (BOIE) living abroad in the marketing of software services from our country. This is really heartening given that most software companies here lack the financial and organizational strengths to carry out overseas marketing on their own. Such collaboration with BOIPs and BOIEs need to be pursued vigorously for further growth of the industry.

Immediate do's for the government
In the last seven years the government has been very supportive of the IT industry, at least in theory. ICT has been declared a thrust sector, an ICT Task Force has been constituted with the highest government functionary as its chair and funds have been allocated for (a) overseas IT fair participation (through EPB), (b) equity injection in IT firms (through Bangladesh Bank EEF Unit), (c) e-government initiatives (through the planning commission) and (d) laying fibre cable up to the landing point in Cox's Bazar for the SEA-ME-WE4 submarine trunk. However, the quantum of support and attention suffers from the much-despised "too little too late" syndrome. While the government claims brownie points for the hard-earned achievements of the industry, the lack of seriousness about the IT industry is clearly reflected by the fact that the ICT Task Force has not met once in the last two years and even the decisions reached more than two years ago remain largely unrealized.

With the parliamentary elections looming on the horizon in less than a year, the incumbent government is not anticipated to take on any new initiatives for the ICT sector which is still considered a fringe sector except for the telecoms part of it which is seeing big money of late. However, despite the equations of power politics that be, the least the government can do in the next several months is to sustain the fruits of the efforts made in the last four years to accelerate the growth of the ICT sector. That would require the government to at least hold one more meeting of the national ICT Task Force before fiscal 2005-06 comes to an end and ensure (a) continuity of funding in all four areas mentioned above, (b) formulating the usage and pricing policy for the submarine trunk cable before it becomes operational sometime middle of this year, and (c) reviewing the execution status of all decisions reached thus far.

Looking ahead
The current spate of software export growth should continue throughout this decade unless unforeseen political or natural calamities take the air out of this youthful and energetic industry before it has had a chance to bloom. At the present rate of natural growth, exports will exceed $180 million by 2010. We are certain to be on the radar screen of all software outsourcing clients at that level. Many however wonder whether we should shoot for a higher target achieved through command growth regime. In the past we have seen very high targets being set without being followed up with the necessary resource mobilization resulting in disappointment and frustration. Given the constraints of resources and long term policy paradigms in the context of the country, this author favours natural growth and a policy regime supporting such growth.

The ICT industry has steadily grown over the last two decades in the face of doomsayers and cynics both inside and outside the country. Many even prophesied that we have missed the ICT train, the train of ICT-led bounty. Having ridden that train for two decades I can only continue my journey and hope the naysayers will join me too.

Habibullah N Karim is the managing director and founder of Technohaven Company Ltd., a software company operating in Bangladesh since 1986. He is the immediate past president of BASIS, the software industry association.

Chart: Yearly Growth and Export in Million US$

Period	Export in Million US$	Yearly Growth
2002-2003	4.2	51%
2003-2004	7.2	71%
2004-2005	12.7	75%

■ Yearly Growth ■ Export in Million US$