

Continuing Nepal tragedy

Power must rest with the people ultimately

HERE cannot be a greater and stronger voice than the voice of the people. It is the will of the people that must in the end prevail and indeed that is what happens ultimately. We hope that the Nepalese king was motivated by these thoughts before climbing down from his position to offer a way out of the present bloody impasse in Nepal that has led to sufferings and many deaths. But even his pronouncements to hand over the 'executive power' of the kingdom of Nepal to the people have been rejected out of hand by the opposition alliance.

There are perhaps important lessons that leaders can draw from the recent developments in Nepal. An institution like that of the monarchy can hardly be expected to survive if it is out of sync with the political realities and becomes a stumbling block in the democratic functioning of the country. That was what the monarchy turned out to be, ossified in outlook, and atrophied in dynamism while stifling the press and other institutions of the state. The arrogance of power displayed by the monarch has been most harmful for his country that had pitted the monarchy against the people, a wholly unwarranted development, and which may well turn out to be his nemesis.

We have our total support for the aspirations of the Nepalese people and our heart goes out to those that have lost their dear and near ones, trying to fulfil their desire of seeing democracy established in Nepal. However, the positions of the king and the seven-party alliance are at a tangent, which ought to be reconciled in the interest of the nation. Democracy must be provided with an opportunity for a smooth transition. The window of opportunity must not be missed in staving off further bloodshed and turmoil in the Himalayan kingdom. And it is for the king to set the ball rolling by taking the next step as a follow up of his recent announcement, in the light of the ground realities, instead of waiting for the opposition to name a prime minister, an offer that the public see as a ploy to procrastinate power hand-over to people.

Power must devolve to its appropriate owners, the people. And it is for the people of Nepal to decide the future of monarchy in their country.

The strange disappearance

Explanation inadequate and belated

EVER since Ehsanul Islam Sadequee, a US citizen of Bangladeshi origin, was picked up from the capital by plainclothesmen and whisked away to USA reportedly by FBI a few questions have been haunting the minds of the people.

Surprisingly, the news did not originate from Dhaka, although it happened in Bangladesh capital; but people learnt of the incident through the US television network CNN and BBC. The only other information we had on the entire episode is through a press conference held by Ehsan's father.

After keeping an eerie silence for quite a few days into the incident, a rather casual explanation has emanated from the State Minister for Home in the form of an answer to a journalist's question. This sounds as too little too late by way of an authentic clarification.

This has been dubbed as part of a routine affair whereby every year some five or six persons are sent back to USA. The movement and behaviour of the person concerned purportedly raising 'suspicion' he was detained and sent away.

It is indeed shocking that while the US sources have been forthcoming with information, quite a few days after the incident, none of the relevant Bangladeshi agencies from either Home Ministry or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed nor denied anything the incident, far less explain fully how could such a thing happen with the kind of promptitude that was expected.

Little wonder, a legal expert in New York expressed surprise as to how Sadequee could be whisked away since USA has no extradition treaty with Bangladesh. There is the question of rules and individual rights of anyone, even of a foreigner, let alone Ehsan being of Bangladeshi origin. Didn't the government have any responsibility towards him, apart from interstate and international legalistic implications.

Let's make it abundantly clear, however, that we are all for global co-operation for fighting terrorism, but then it should not involve springing such surprises which appeared to impinge on the sovereignty of Bangladesh.

A fuller statement of the government on the issue would be in the fitness of things.

A people's victory

Kansat tragedy should wake up the government from slumber. It must remain vigilant about the possible effect of Kansat crisis elsewhere in the country. However it must try hard to keep the commitments it has made to the Palli Bidyut Unnayan Parishad to save itself from further humiliation. One thing is clear. The people of Bangladesh have not forgotten that people's force is the ultimate force and its victory is inevitable.

ABMS ZAHUR

FOR the last three months the government miserably failed in satiating the dissatisfaction and containing the anger of the people of Kansat and its adjacent areas. People's representatives (local MP and Rajshahi City Corporation Mayor) could not convince them (mainly illiterate, poor and innocent small farmers). Because the people of Kansat do not have any other avenues to earn their livelihood except cultivation. Lack of water

and fertiliser is considered as their very critical problems. Stiff attitude of the government has resulted in loss of life of 17 (unofficially 20) villagers. Tackling of such a sensitive issue has been done in a manner comparable under a rule of worst dictator. It appears that this government has forgotten about BNP regime's past mistake of killing 18 peasants desperately demanding fertiliser. Repetition of similar mistake indicate government's indifference to people's sufferings.

Kansat event has exposed

Three cheers for Kansat

PERSPECTIVES

People's power is now poised to determine the future course of the country's politics under a new breed of leaders who are now in the making in the obscure hamlets where problems brew up and new dynamics of our politics grow. In that sense, Kansat is both a turning point and pioneer of sorts.

M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE occasions for such hurrahs are indeed few and far between in this country. But Kansat was truly something worthy of note in our politics — against the backdrop of a despondency syndrome that persisted for long, ever if the episode had been totally apolitical.

The oppressed people of a somnolent Kansat, subjected to a syndicated skullduggery of the REB (Rural Electrification Board) could, through a heroic struggle, put an end to their exploitation and uphold their rights.

The posse led by party cadres and employed by the establishment to quell the peasants' uprising had to be finally on the retreat, signaling victory for the people's power.

The whole drama was reminiscent of 1971, both in term of excesses and cruelly meted out to the hapless villagers and the resistance they offered with an unbelievable spontaneity and tenacity. Indeed, a new history was created at Kansat, but at the cost of the lives of at least twenty villagers who fell victim to police atrocity.

Why did the establishment behave in the manner it did in Kansat? This is how the powerful behave whenever their moral authority atrophies. Then they face their challengers only with the crude physical power endowed by the state, but to no avail. Because the state-endowed power lacking moral content rings absolutely hollow.

In Kansat, the government's calculations went hay-wire and even with adequate reinforcements the revolting villagers could not be browbeaten. Finally, they held their moral high ground.

In the meantime, many more Kansats have brewed up across the

country demanding affordable prices of the essentials as well as the supply of water, power, and fertiliser. The establishment's apparent response is to brand them trouble-makers bent upon sabotaging the country's developmental surge.

The authorities seem to have gone berserk and been seized with a paranoia of spotting development and its saboteurs everywhere. The fact of the matter is that the claimants of such a "developmental surge" cannot meet the farmers' basic needs and ensure its citizenry a society free of hardships.

The country's elite, which subsides in it the politicians, burgeoning business entrepreneurs, and even the members of civil society, a well established segment of the society, have apparently joined hand with the establishment in one way or other with their fingers already stuck in an ever-shrinking national pie.

As a result, the people's power is now poised to determine the future course of the country's politics under a new breed of leaders who are now in the making in the obscure hamlets where problems brew up and new dynamics of our politics grow. In that sense, Kansat is both a turning point and pioneer of sorts.

It is high time that our crass politicians changed and adapted to a new outlook now shaping the world with a pro-people stance. The World Social Forum first held on the Brazilian city of Porto Allegro in 2001 and quickly followed up elsewhere as a counter to World Economic Forum (where the world's business and political elites assemble to plan further pillage of the world) is a pointer.

The world has moved far beyond the antiquities pursued by the

politicians in our country. Henceforth, the world may not be able to sustain its neo-liberal stranglehold fostering the elite's corporate pillage in individual countries. The trend is bound to impact domestic politics in the vast swathe of Latin America and Asia.

We have indeed, traversed a significant distance since the world — albeit the Western world — proclaimed only fifteen years or so ago the "end of history" and the "triumph of capitalist democracy." Even our Khaleda-Hasina will not be able to sustain the old familiar mould of politics.

When the conflicts become inevitable in the society and polity and the battle-lines are drawn, it is immoral to sit on the fence and not to take sides. While taking sides, one has, however, to go the whole hog in embracing the challenges it entails.

Golam Rabbani of Kansat did that which entitles him to be a role-model of sorts. The time has come to cast aside an inconsequential pattern of leadership confined only to speech making and issuing statements.

Instead, it is the time for mobilization — mobilization of the country's poor — the marginalized peasants, slum dwellers, pavement squatters and destitutes swarming around our flashy cars. From now onward they ought to be the staple of politics in this country.

A small but powerful syndicate, capable of manipulating the country's politics, always calls the shots. To effect a qualitative change in the pattern, we must be able to break their strangle hold. Kansat could do that. Long live Kansat and its intrepid heroes!

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

Do Socialists have a future?

Mr Fernandes's is the latest case of a Socialist turning a traitor to his cause. Alas, he's not the only one. Recently, Mr H.D. Deve Gowda supported his son in forming a defectors' government with the BJP in Karnataka. Nitish Kumar, Ram Bilas Paswan and Sharad Yadav have also been Hindutva collaborators. Today, the Socialist movement, which emerged as an independent current in 1934, is in danger of dissolution. Most veteran Socialists are in regional groupings like the Samajwadi Party, or in one-person outfits. The movement lost its organisational identity long ago. It could soon lose the ideological affiliation many of its leaders shared.

PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

FROM a thundering beginning in Bombay to a whimpering end in Bihar after three stints in power in New Delhi. That sums up the career of George Fernandes, one of India's most colourful politicians.

Mr Fernandes looked distinctly off-colour after losing the election to the president's post in the Janata Dal (United). He received only 25 votes against his one-time protegee Sharad Yadav's 413.

Mr Fernandes is a bitter, lonely old man without a future. He's too deeply compromised with the Bharatiya Janata Party to be respected by his colleagues. Yet, he's not in the sangh's core, despite having rescued it countless times. He gave a clean chit to the Bajrang Dal for the burning alive of Graham Staines, and rationalised the Gujarat pogrom. He may at best get a decorative

parivar position.

Mr Fernandes began as a dynamic leader of Bombay's dockworkers, and later of taxi-men and bus-drivers. Control over the city's arteries made him the Uncrowned King of the Bandh. He vanquished the powerful Congress boss, S.K. Patil in South Bombay in 1967.

He led the 1974 railway strike, one of the biggest struggles in India's history, which frontally challenged Indira Gandhi. The railway strike gave the opposition a national character. But it exposed serious flaws in Mr Fernandes's leadership: he vanished when thousands of arrested railwaymen needed help.

The railway strike marked the peak of "George the Giant-Killer's" career. When the Janata Party came to power following the Emergency, Industries Minister Fernandes was in search of gimmicks — like throwing out Coca-Cola and IBM while imposing German multinational Siemens

upon the public-sector BHEL. He also advocated nuclear cooperation with Libya.

Mr Fernandes's trajectory since has been erratic and calculated to shock, but always guided by blind opposition to the Congress and the Communists.

In 1974, he condemned India's first nuclear test: so long as Indians lack "enough food, clothing and shelter," even thinking of nuclear weapons is "obscene." But he became hawkish as the number of Indians without enough food swelled. By 1998, he was a votary of nuclear weapons.

Mr Fernandes became Hindutva's greatest apologist outside the BJP and moved close to the RSS. Tehelka and the coffin-import scam showed him deeply compromised.

Mr Fernandes is the latest case of a Socialist turning a traitor to his cause. Alas, he's not the only one. Recently, Mr H.D. Deve Gowda supported his son in forming a defec-

What will this election solve?

Even if we did have an election, and the Awami League won a landslide (they should, by the way), the changes will be cosmetic and minor. This election is not going to solve very much and we should not be raising our hopes. Disappointment will set in by the time Pahela Boishak arrives in 2008. If you prefer to stick to election timetables, and cannot contemplate the breakdown of democracy, I would say we are looking at the wrong election. Prepare for the one after next.

FARID BAKHT

THE big issue for the next nine months is: who is going to win the elections.

Really? Who cares? Powerful institutions certainly do care. You and I do. But what about the non-newspaper reading public? The vast majority of this country, including farmers (male and female), fishermen, most transport and industrial workers, and the rural youth.

Will the starvation of "monga" disappear if the BNP-Jamaat alliance is removed?

Will literacy, primary health care, and corruption all dramatically improve?

Will women find real emancipation?

Will water launches stop sinking?

Will traffic jams, pollution, and noise become tolerable?

Will land-grabbing stop and master plans for cities be followed?

Will six million slum dwellers in Dhaka live in a decent environment and obtain clean drinking water, proper sanitation, gas and regular electricity?

Will mastans (hoodlums) go on a ten-year world tour, leaving our shopkeepers alone?

Will farmers be able to make a decent living and receive fair prices for their grain?

In turn, will food prices in the cities and small towns come down to within the limits of most people's budgets?

Will personal security improve so that women can walk in the streets in the evening without looking over their shoulders?

Will garment factory owners pay their workers on time, including overtime and sick leave?

Will we combat river erosion and build alternatives for the half a million affected people, year in year out?

Will our modest natural gas and coal reserves be utilised to produce electricity for all and fuel new industries?

Will we create one million new proper jobs every year?

Will we revamp our public universities into safe, flourishing centres of learning, rather than allow them to decline as we have for the last two decades?

Will we treat our Non-Resident Bangladeshis as partners in development?

Will we construct solid relationships with China and India and figure out where our place is in the world, finally?

Whichever alliance comes into power will not turn any of the above into a positive answer. Perhaps we should reflect on that. All that noise. All those rallies. All that newsprint devoted to the "showdowns," "gheraos," "hartsals," "long marches," accusations, counter-accusations, speeches, invectives, and street violence. To what end? Nothing that does any good for the people.

Democratic parties have been, are presently, and will be completely unsuccessful in catapulting us into the path of real development. We have a generational problem.

So what are some of us doing then? Looking for short cuts, clutching at straws. Seeking easy answers to complex problems. Very few commentators (and self-styled leaders) analyse power and explain just how they are going to make a difference.

So the latest wheeze is to find "clean candidates" and somehow get to "clean politics." This is all meant to be accomplished within six months! One has to admire a section of the middle class when they believe a little trickery here and there will solve the enormous challenge of rescuing 140 out of the 150 million people. Perhaps we should nominate these magi-

cians to lead the UN. No major political figure or organisation is offering any credible road map that will make a difference to the lives of ordinary people.

Let us say, the ugly, speeding, honking, spitting drivers of the BNP or Awami League were replaced by clean, polite drivers of the X NGO party, would it matter an iota if they continued to travel in the same direction? They would still drive us on the wrong road, to the wrong destination. Smiling all the way to Valhalla, not Nirvana.

Beyond electioneering, no doubt there are other conspiracies being hatched. If the Young Turks on the government see defeat in the offing, they might do their damndest to scupper the election and push the cantonment to become involved. Rather no lady, than the other lady.

Or maybe some enterprising embassy staffers will encourage a formation I implied in my article: Which way to Mauritania? (DS March 3, 2006). A score of civil-society gray-haired-soft-spoken-NGO/cuddly political yes-men front, backed by steel bayonets.

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If you prefer to stick to election timetables, and cannot contemplate the breakdown of democracy, I would say we are looking at the wrong election. Prepare for the one after next.

Farid Bakht, an NRB, has written a book: "Arrival or Departure: Bangladesh in Dangerous Times."

tors' government with the BJP in Karnataka. Nitish Kumar, Ram Bilas Paswan and Sharad Yadav have also been Hindutva collaborators.

Today, the Socialist movement, which emerged as an independent current in 1934, is in danger of dissolution. Most veteran Socialists are in regional groupings like the Samajwadi Party, or in one-person outfits. The movement lost its organisational identity long ago. It could soon lose the ideological affiliation many of its leaders shared.

The Indian Socialists' history is, regrettably, a story of splits. Thus, in the first 17 years after Independence, they underwent four splits, driven as much by personality considerations as by ideology. Socialist politics has been largely reactive.

The worst disintegration of the movement came in 1978 when the Janata Party split over its Jana Sangh component's "dual membership" issue. The split was initiated by Socialist Madhu Limaye. But the Socialists themselves got divided. They briefly regrouped under the Janata Dal, but that too underwent fission.

The Socialists' history of disorientation is doubly tragic. They once formed an important current representing the poor. In the Hindi heartland, they provided a counterweight to social conservatism and right-wing politics and became the sole progressive alternative for millions of idealistic youth.

Secondly, the Socialist movement threw up brilliant leaders, from Narendra Dev and Ram Manohar Lohiya to Ashok Mehta, Jaya Prakash Narayan, H.V. Kamath, Madhu Limaye, S.M. Joshi and N.G. Goray.

Some (e.g. Lohiya) were original thinkers who developed a sophisticated understanding of Indian society based not just on class, but also caste. The Indian concept of affirmative action owes much to Lohiya.

Lohiya went politically astray after his 1967 strategy of forming anti-Congress governments indiscriminately. But his contribution to the understanding of the importance of Dalit and OBC empowerment, secularism, women's equality, and radical social reform is undeniable.

The Socialist movement was marred by three great flaws: obsessive anti-Congressism; Cold War-style anti-Communism, which prevented joint actions with the rest of the Left; and personality-led politics. For instance, Mr Fernandes's erstwhile Samyukta Socialist Party had few compunctions in joining hands with right-wing groups against the Communists.

A pernicious role was played in this regard by JP, who bestowed respectability upon the RSS through the Bihar agitation. Without him, the Jana Sangh couldn't have found a place in the Janata, nor acquired the influence in the post-Emergency government that it did. The Sanghis consciously infiltrated the government apparatus and the media — a

key to their urban middle-class influence in later years.

The Socialist movement is today at a crossroads. Either its remnants regroup as a Left-wing secular current with a progressive agenda. Or it will sink without a trace.

Fortunately, four years ago, leaders like Kishan Pattanaik, Madhu Dandavate, Surendra Mohan and Mrinal Gore floated the "Socialist Front," to regroup Socialists outside the National Democratic Alliance and the Congress.

The Front started a dialogue with people's movements like Narmada Bachao Andolan, Samajwadi Jan Morcha, and other grass-roots groups working on human rights, and Adivasi and Dalit empowerment. They also opened a productive conversation with the Communists and proposed a merger of the Hind Mazdoor Sabha with the CPI-led AITUC.

The merger didn't materialise. But there is greater coordination between the Front and the rest of the Left — as evidenced by the recent remarkable solidarity campaign around the Narmada issue.

One can only wish the Front well. There is room in India for progressive groups and movements that take up grassroots issues with tenacity. If it succeeds, it can put behind itself the Fernandes legacy and make a positive contribution to politics.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

powers of the bureaucracy who otherwise are prone to use it at the slightest provocation or need. In fact many of the police firings are simply unnecessary.

Due to lack of public accountability sometimes even a sound government policy also fails due to overzealousness of bureaucracy. In India one of the main reasons of the fall of Indira Gandhi was, reportedly, overzealousness of the public servants for making the family planning programmes successful. In the then East Pakistan it was the police firing in 1952 (an act of administrative indiscretion) which resulted ultimately in the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. Provision for judicial review can arrest such situation. Legal scholars are of the opinion that primary value of judicial review is its deterrent effect on the overzealous administrative

officials. However, in these days of high politicisation, concept of judicial review appears to be irrelevant.

Withdrawal of police forces from Kansat cannot absolve the government of police excesses committed during the last three months. At the same time it is yet to be seen as to how far the ministerial government committee becomes successful in solving the crisis. Also to be seen is how the government reacts in regard to the removal of the local BNP law maker.

We are not yet aware of the full facts of the crisis. We may know in detail about it after the 11-member Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA) probe committee report is out. On the other hand the government should form an inquiry committee headed by a High Court judge. This committee must pinpoint

the public servants responsible for turning the local movement into a national crisis. Appropriate punitive actions should be taken against them to bring back confidence of the people. Let us see as to how much the government is sincere about developing the sense of accountability among the public servants even though politicisation has already blunted their senses.

We are happy that people's struggle has ultimately succeeded. Peace has returned to Kansat. Normal activities of Sonamasjid Land Port supposedly has resumed. It is, however, not yet clear as to why the government almost surrendered to the Palli Bidyut Unnayan Sangram Parishad suddenly. Is it because it was turning into a political issue? We cannot say all the demands of the villagers

were reasonable. We do not know as to what may be the repercussion of this negotiation in other Palli Bidyut Unnayan Parishads when it would be known to them that (a) meter charges have been cancelled, (b) monthly connection charge has been reduced from Tk. 105 to Tk 78, (c) no fine charged for taking connection from a house or institution to the venue of a religious programme or an institution and (d) no fines charged for the bills due since August 8, 2005; besides monetary compensation from Tk 3000 to Tk 200000 will be given to the affected villagers.

These decisions may lead to system loss, loss of income of Palli Bidyut Sangstha. Thus the government has to accept financial loss (recurring and non-recurring) because of inefficient handling of certain demands of

villagers. Police excess is certainly deplorable, police officers must try to understand that the excess committed by police force will ultimately help the opposition not the administration.

Kansat tragedy should wake up the government from slumber. It must remain vigilant about the possible effect of Kansat crisis elsewhere in the country. However it must try hard to keep the commitments it has made to the Palli Bidyut Unnayan Parishad to save itself from further humiliation. One thing is clear. The people of Bangladesh have not forgotten that people's force is the ultimate force and its victory is inevitable.

ABMS Zahur is a retired Joint Secretary.