

Turn for the better in Nepal

The will of the people must be respected

THE decision taken by King Gyanendra in the face of weeks of pro-democracy demonstrations to reinstate parliament is most definitely a step in the right direction. Similarly, the decision of the seven-party opposition alliance to call off its demonstrations and nationwide strike in response and to choose former Prime Minister GP Koirala to head the new government, is also a very positive development.

The king has finally bowed down to the articulate popular will and in doing so has chosen a wise course of action. It is good that he has accepted that remaining in power as an autocratic ruler in the face of people's pressure was no longer tenable.

The opposition parties, too, deserve commendation as they have shown themselves willing to moderate their demands in the grater national interest.

Most importantly, the people of Nepal have shown great maturity and restraint, for which they deserve praise. The demonstrations could easily have descended into total chaos and the people could easily have dug in their heels for a more complete solution. But they did neither and have very wisely accepted the king's compromise.

Much remains unclear and unsettled. The Maoists have not accepted the deal and have vowed to continue blockading the capital and all other cities, saying that free elections to a new constituent assembly is their minimum demand.

The continuing role of the king is also uncertain and needs to be resolved. The Maoists may yet be brought into the elective fold. The reconvened parliament could be the first step towards a constituent assembly to draw up a new constitution.

We certainly hope that the Maoists will be brought into the political process. Compromise has already achieved much, and we hope that the maturity and statesmanship shown by all parties thus far will continue with respect to incorporating the Maoists into the democratic mainstream.

What is clear is that whatever road Nepal takes it must now be in line with the wishes of its people. The people have shown that their will can no longer be over-riden. The aspirations of the public must be reflected in the political dispensation agreed to and the social fabric of the nation must remain intact.

Ear-drum ripping noises

An issue squirted around hilariously

SOUND pollution, which has long been identified as a major environmental hazard in the city, is assuming a more and more intractable character in the absence of any effective steps to regulate what has become a free-for-all civic nuisance. A survey recently conducted by two non-government organisations shows that the existing level of sound pollution in the city at 71 decibel on an average, even in so-called quiet areas, is much above the permissible limit.

A WHO study has revealed that noise pollution could cause no fewer than 30 diseases, some of which would be life-threatening. Harmful effects of high decibel cacophony on the human mind and body are well known. The sources of such pollution are not far to seek. Yet, successive governments have failed to do anything to contain them. This government had decided to frame a set of rules to control sound pollution in 2004, but nothing concrete has been heard about it since.

Yes, the policy-makers are convinced that pollution has to be contained in the interest of public health, but the realisation is not reflected through any administrative action. They do not have any plan of action as such. Otherwise, the indiscriminate use of loudspeakers and hydraulic horns would have been prevented by now. Obviously, unplanned growth of the city is one reason why certain areas are more susceptible to the scourge than others. This obviously is a problem that will have to be handled on a long-term basis. But the law enforcers should be able to eliminate the irritants like blaring of horns and indiscriminate use of loudspeakers in residential areas without ado. The traffic police are under instructions not to allow hooting of hydraulic horns, but we don't yet see any practical application of the taboo.

Sound pollution is causing great damage to public health and as such will have to be treated as an environmental problem, energy sapper and a health hazard. The inordinate delay in adopting a guideline to combat this menace cannot be countenanced any longer. The government must adopt an action plan to muffle the noises around us or find civic life debilitated.

Is Nepal on the road to a republic?

As for the monarchy, although it has not met all the demands of the seven-party alliance, its decision to reinstate the parliament has doused the fire of unrest, for the time being at least. The political parties, but not so much the people, are divided over the future role of the monarchy. While it is for the people of Nepal to decide whether or not they would want to retain kingship, and if so in what form, it is for the king to prove the relevance of the monarchy to Nepal's politic future.

**BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM
KHAN NDC, PSC (RETD)**

It is perhaps not the end, but by the signs and symptoms it appears that the monarchy may well be on its way out from the political firmament of Nepal, this time for good. At least it looks as though the Shah dynasty, not for the first time, will have to cede power, this time to where it belongs, to the people, and, perhaps for the last time the monarchy will have any part in Nepal's political denouement and its journey on the road to democracy that is rooted in the precept of government by, of, and for the people.

But wait! Are we speaking too prematurely? Are we making too simplistic an interpretation of the situation in Nepal? Would handing over power by the King resolve a problem, which has fomented over many many years and come to such

a pass now.

Nepal's experiment with democracy has always been abortive. In fact, in its several hundred years of history, since 1769 when a territorial shape to what is now Nepal was finally given by King Prithvi Narayan Shah, Nepal has been ruled by absolute monarchy, before 1990, except for a short-lived stint of democracy under BP Koirala. And when King Gyanendra so rudely ended the post-Panchayat democratic decade in what has been termed as a royal coup, it severed the last link of democratic polity with Nepal's experiment with democracy. The current spate of popular movement is the latest attempt in Nepal's quest to see the will of the people established finally in Nepal.

But Nepal's twelve year stint with democratic form of government has not been without blemish or tribulations,

with no less than eleven prime ministers forming government in as many years since 1990. There have been deliberate attempts, by the detractors of democracy, including the monarchy, who found its failures an excuse to assume full executive power, hoping to underline the argument that Nepal was not yet ready for democracy, and the Maoists, who exploited the democratic interregnum to strengthen their party organisation, to propagate the efficacy of a Marxist government in Nepal.

In fact, the king and the Maoists have complemented each other. According to RS Mahat, a former finance minister of Nepal, "By crippling the democratic process the Maoist insurgency has given an alibi for the king's direct rule. On the other hand, the king's actions have given validity to the Maoist theory

that the ultimate power in the present political order lies with the king." Although the king has willed further and reinstated the parliament, it would be a tad premature to suggest that the end of the confrontation is near.

It is important to remember that there are three players in Nepal's politics, the monarchy, who has had a patchy role since Nepal's inception as a nation state, but has wielded real political authority from 1959 till the end of the Panchayat system in 1990; the political parties, whose poor track record in running the state during the decade of democratic dispensation and the shortcomings thereof were one of the motive forces behind the emergence of the third force, the Maoists, in 1996. Since October 4, 2004, the political deadlock that resulted from Birendra's takeover of power gave rise to a triangular struggle for power. What the king's action has been able to achieve is to bring the anti-monarchy elements, notwithstanding their divergent political philosophies, on the same platform, pitted against him.

The king's first offer to the political parties to name a prime minister was rejected out of hand by the people as being a ploy to procrastinate

on delivering on the demands of the people, and to drive a wedge in the political movement; and it was the popular mood that acted as a disincentive for the seven-party alliance to fall for it. But his latest move, to reinstate the parliament, has been able to split the movement, wittingly or unwittingly, in that while the seven-party alliance and the people on the whole have welcomed and accepted the offer, the Maoists have summarily rejected it. And that is what gives rise to uncertainty about the future of democracy and peace in Nepal.

It is therefore imperative that all the parties act sensibly, keeping the future of democracy and the peace and stability of the country in mind.

As for the seven-party alliance, it is as important for it to take the Maoists on board in any future political discourse and arrangements, with the 12 point Agreement of November 2005 between them as the backdrop, as it is to see the best way to the election of a constituent assembly that will draw up a new constitution. Without this, the success of the last several weeks of struggle risks being nullified.

As for the Maoists, they were with the alliance in the recent movement, which, according to commentators,

provided the verve to the popular protest. They will be closely watched to see whether or not they forego violence as a means to power and reconcile to the idea of a multiparty system of government. That would require the Maoists to dispense with their underlying political philosophy. A tall ask for them indeed. What is important, too, is how the seven-party alliance coalesces with the Maoists, given the pressure that they were under at the start of the recent movement particularly from the US, to abjure any link with the rebels.

As for the monarchy, although it has not met all the demands of the seven-party alliance, its decision to reinstate the parliament has doused the fire of unrest, for the time being at least. The political parties, but not so much the people, are divided over the future role of the monarchy. While it is for the people of Nepal to decide whether or not they would want to retain kingship, and if so in what form, it is for the king to prove the relevance of the monarchy to Nepal's politic future.

The author is Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star

How patriotic are we?

The corrupt practices of many of our lawmakers have reached such horrific proportions that, to my mind, many of them should be declared as enemies of the state. Of late the NBR has recently unearthed a racket whereby a number of our lawmakers are importing expensive duty-free luxury cars, a privilege granted to them exclusively to facilitate import of cars for their personal use, and sold them to their rich business friends. Such is the level of patriotism among the cream of our citizens on whom people have reposed all their trust.

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

I do not know of any other country of the region where so much talk (sheer rhetoric) goes on about patriotism, perhaps with the exception of Pakistan. Yet, do I dare say that the number of unpatriotic people in this country is on the increase at a regular pace.

How many of our politicians are patriots? How many of our so called intellectuals are patriots? How many of our traders are patriots? How many of our industrialists are patriots? How many of our bureaucrats are patriots?

I may be wrong but to me it looks as though a large number of these people are not patriots. How can they be, when most of these respected people are vigorously pursuing their own selfish goals and

that too often at the cost of national interests?

The teachers are concentrating their efforts more in advancing the interests of one or the other political parties than imparting education to their pupils. Businessmen are working toward fattening their purses, no matter what. The intellectuals are busy in using their intellect in advancing the cause of their political gurus more than steering the country to the right and honest path. The industrialists are industriously working towards building their own empire, often at the cost of lives of the labourers and workers.

With due respect to our political leaders and their stooges, it is my impression that they should do some serious soul-searching and ask themselves as to how much

their actions are patriotic. Over the years, they have shamelessly engaged themselves in advancing family interests and at best their party interests. Had it not been so we would have been much better off today.

I do not know of any political party or leadership that has kept its promises to the people's welfare and well-being. It has been a story of continuous lies and deception. None of the parties have fulfilled or kept even 50 percent of their pledges. So selfish and ruthless are our lawmakers that many of them have and are still indulging in using the religious terrorists to destroy the independence of this country just to be in the seat of power. How patriotic is that?

There are yet those who wish to establish their hegemony and be in

the seat of power by paralyzing the entire country through picketing and violent political agitation, street violence, so on and so forth. These people are nothing but exploiters, they are exploiting you and me. They have turned this country into a playground for their dirty game of politics. They are no patriots.

The other day one of our team members participating in the Commonwealth games at Sydney was charged with indecent behaviour with a young woman while another "disappeared." Well, that is not patriotic, or is it?

Look at the history of Bengal of the not too distant past, the rule of the last Nawab of Bengal, Nawab Sirajudowla. His Chief of Army betrayed him. People with some degree of honesty would agree with me that such legacy of betrayal was also seen during the last days of our war of liberation when the Razakars who were mostly Bengalis carried out the Pak occupation forces' master plan of brutal killing of our intellectuals. Once again "we" played into the hands of our enemies. Our legacy of patriotism is rather poor.

We have yet another brand of unpatriotic people who have been bleeding this country for decades,

these people whom I call "lobbyists." They usually move about in flashy cars, are seen often around teashops at the lobbies of the cities' five star hotels. These are the fortune hunters also known as the "money chasers."

Many of them have minted millions in collaboration with some unscrupulous government bureaucrats and their "middlemen" through winning tenders for large projects involving millions in grafts, jacking up the price of projects, and causing loss of millions to our national exchequer. These are ruthless people who have little or no regard or concern for this poor country. They are vicious and have a tight network that is not easy to break through.

There is no denying of the fact that many Bangladeshi expatriates living abroad are actively engaged in tarnishing our country's image in the name of partisan politics. They are being encouraged and backed by some of their high-profile political gurus back home.

Except for the fact that we have a magnificent parliament building, perhaps the finest example of architecture anywhere in the world, there is nothing that is democratic about this country. We have now

adorned the seat of the most corrupt country of the world for the past several years. We are a bunch of shameless people without the least concern and love for the country. People who are known and perceived as most corrupt are often seen as the ones talking most about fighting corruption.

The corrupt practices of many of our lawmakers have reached such horrific proportions that, to my mind, many of them should be declared as enemies of the state. Of late the NBR has recently unearthed a racket whereby a number of our lawmakers are importing expensive duty-free luxury cars, a privilege granted to them exclusively to facilitate import of cars for their personal use, and sold them to their rich business friends. Such is the level of patriotism among the cream of our citizens on whom people have reposed all their trust.

With such an acute downward swing of our moral and ethical values, encompassing nearly all cross sections of the population, how can anyone be a patriot in the truest sense of the term?

OPINION

Why must we pay taxes?

M SHAUKAT ALI

THE Hon'ble Finance Minister seems to have been rampaging for realising taxes of various names and natures from the 'public'. He has made all out efforts to net even the small fries and squeeze them dry. Even those whose annual income is less than 150 thousand taka have been netted without least considering the present market price which is bouncing up unbridled. It seems he has taken a vow to show the international aid and lending agencies a hand by exercising to the utmost his

'capability' and competence as finance minister. He is now going for stringent laws to deal with the tax-evaders/defaulters. His intentions are apparently honest no doubt. But there remain a few questions which he should answer as a leader of the people.

a. It is quite open that most politicians, at least those holding public office, having been constitutionally and morally pledge bound to preserve and protect public interest, turn into 'millionaires' from 'commoners' soon after assuming public office. Even their henchmen make fortune overnight out of nothing.

Now, will the FM honestly say how do they do so and how much tax do they pay?

b. The Hon'ble Finance Minister supposedly knows the names of officers and employees, even such petty ones as 'inspectors' and 'meter-readers', of various ministries, who own fabulous assets both fixed and liquid in this capital. How could they acquire such wealth under the very nose of the administration and how much tax did they pay to the public exchequer?

c. It is known to all that crores of taka are wasted by way of loss and mismanagement or simply pilfered

every year in various departments. Those responsible for such colossal loss and pilferage have seldom been brought to justice or the money recovered. Why? Whose money was that?

d. Billions in foreign exchange is pumped into our economy every year by way of loan, grant, aid etc, 75% of which -- as a previous survey revealed -- is regularly plundered midway allegedly by those in power or position. But the burden of the loan is left to be borne by the unfortunate 'public'. The government is never known to have taken any step either to penalise those thugs or to

recover the money thus plundered. Why and for what interest?

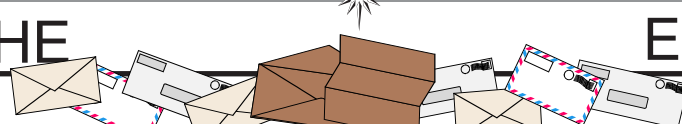
e. We, the common citizens, pay taxes of various kinds to get the services we lawfully deserve and expect from various government agencies and departments. But everywhere we have either to pay bribes or suffer harassments to get things done. Even our life and property are not safe nowadays, not to mention our basic civic and human rights. We are not safe even in our jobs or vocations. Will the hon'ble minister say who pays for the luxury the ministers, the MPs and the bureaucrats enjoy? Does

the Finance Minister want to say that we are liable to pay the penalty of having been born in this country?

f. A question to the so-called donors also. Why are you so much interested to give 'aid' to this country when you know this country is infested with those politicians and bureaucrats who have placed it at the top of the list of the most corrupt nations? Aren't you running the risk of being accomplices?

It is hoped that we, the common people, will be favoured with satisfactory answers.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Learning English

There is no denying that the overwhelming number of students of our country are weak in English. Most of them fail to write and speak English correctly and freely, because they are ignorant of the different rules of grammar. It has been observed that they cannot even properly use the auxiliary verbs am, is, are, 'have, 'has' according to number, tense and person. So in order to enable them to write English correctly and freely they should be taught the rules of grammar.

The teachers have to play the pivotal role in this respect. I hope the education authorities will look into the matter.

**Quazi Md. Mahboobul Haque
Comilla**

School or business centre?

Recently, I had the experience of getting my child admitted to one of

the prestigious schools of the city. Well, I thought that this school would be different from others when all of my well-wishers were telling me that this school is really good. After a lot of hassle like interviewing of child and also parents and other things (it seemed the most important thing for the school is the income of the parents!), my child qualified to be admitted to the school. Initially, the school authorities sent us a letter stating that I needed to deposit Tk 50,000 of which Tk 20,000 was development fees and the rest Tk 30,000 as admission fees. The monthly charge which previously was Tk 2,000 was increased by 100 percent. And, remember, all these fees are for a child in the play group and again the child who is going to spend only 1-2 hours per day on five days a week. And again the classes will start in August next year but you have to deposit the total fees by the first week of December this year. A noble way to earn some extra bank

interest? Being anguished by such a demand from the school, I thought I should talk to the school authorities first.

My first question was why I have to pay development charge? The answer given by the lady was that she was not empowered to answer my query and since others have already paid I need to pay. Immediately the following supplementary questions came to my mind:

-Am I a shareholder or owner of this school? Why should I be made to pay something for which the school authorities will be the sole beneficiary?

-Why can't the school authorities or owners of the school invest for the development of the school? Over the years they have made a fortune - why can't they use that?

-What is the rationale behind increasing the monthly school fees from Tk 2,000 to Tk 4,000 in just one year?

I think it is high time that either the government or local authorities came up with guidelines or covenants to restrict these so-called educational institutions' money making spree. The following facts should be considered whilst designing guidelines:

1. Background of teachers. If you want to start practicing as a doctor, architect, lawyer, accountant etc, first of all you need a professional degree and then a licence to start practicing. Do the teachers have the requisite qualification or degree to impart education to children, do they have the ability to sharpen their skills on an incremental basis, how much time and money the school authorities spend on their training etc.? Currently, the only qualification that many of them have is that they are the wives of some reach people. And they have English medium background.

2. The fees to be charged should be determined by the facilities that

they are providing. Almost all so-called renowned schools of Dhaka charge donation in the name of raising development funds. And we all know how this development fund is utilised subsequently.

Is there anyone to help us?

**An anguished parent
Motijheel, Dhaka**

Car theft

Stealing cars and hijacking by using car are a very common phenomenon in the city these days. We watch on TV channels and go through such reports in the daily newspapers. Unfortunately, a section of the law enforcers are also alleged to be involved in these unlawful activities. I do have some specific recommendations to counter this crime.

1. The registration number should be written on the body/glass of the car, both in front and at the back. No number plate should be allowed in this regard.

2. No sticker should be allowed

to write the registration number.

3. When a car is painted or kept in a garage, the local police should be informed of all such activities.

I would request the authorities concerned to consider my suggestions with a view to stopping car theft which has increased alarmingly.

**Jubair
On e-mail**

Why not in Bangladesh?

Akbar Khan has released his movie 'Tajmahal' in Pakistan. About 40 years after, an Indian movie is being shown in Pakistan. The movie 'Mughal-e-Azam' will be released in Pakistan next June.

But why not in Bangladesh? Indian movies were banned in Pakistan after the 1965 war. Now the Indian directors should release movies not only in Pakistan but also in Bangladesh. We would like to let

them know that there is a huge audience of Bollywood movies in Bangladesh.

At the moment we can watch such movies only on television channels which are no match for the big screen.

**Prasenjit Sarker
Dhaka**

Ban pornographic websites

A few days back, I was watching a Hindi movie entitled 'Kalyug', a movie by the well known Bhatt production based on pornographic websites on Internet.

I intend to share my personal views regarding those websites. I have worked

in an office where I have found some of my colleagues surf through pornographic websites of Internet in their leisure time. I have asked them what they look for. Their answer was that these sites are

available online on Internet and they watch these just for fun and as a pastime. Indeed, these days many young people are using Internet just to have access to obscene and unhealthy entertainment.

These films inspire them to deviate from their usual social life. These websites should be banned if we want to prevent a total degeneration of our youths.

**Rubab Abdullah
Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka**

Ashrafui

The boy has finally been dropped. But I'm sure he will soon stage a brilliant comeback. He is too good a player to remain sidelined for a long time.

Yes, Mr. Whatmore, your task is to instill the self-confidence in Ashrafui which would help him begin his career anew.

**Mansur Raja
Dhaka**