

Biman's unbridled corruption

No wonder it is taking a nosedive

INCREDIBLE stories of the flag carrier's corruption and poor management are aplenty. Such stories no longer surprise us although it causes us distress. It makes us wonder whether all those that are responsible to see that Biman is kept flying have become so despondent as to be unable even to take corrective measures of any description to stem the fall. Either that, or they are deliberately making sure that it collapses totally.

Biman's mismanagement is proverbial and its financial indiscipline a classic example of how not to run an airline. It has come to represent a shell that is nothing but a cipher and almost everyone that is anyone of import in Biman has drank from its cup of mana down to the dregs with very few takers of what is left of it.

A recent report of the blatant corruption tells us why the national carrier is taking a nosedive. The inflated cost of purchases, from food items to spare parts where more than thirty times the actual cost has been realised in certain instances, to buying of aircraft, the level of corruption that has been resorted to is unbelievable but unfortunately true. It indicates the close and deep nexus of managers at all levels without whose acquiescence such practices in a corporation like the Biman would not be possible.

If corruption fetters the airline from taking off, the practice of commercial factor being subordinated to political and personal considerations in running its operation is another reason why it has been suffering losses in revenue continuously. One is at a loss to accept that there is not an iota of accountability and a total absence of corporate culture that should be present in such an organisation. One has not heard of any managerial staff of Biman being taken to task or subjected to disciplinary action in spite of the many instances of corruption and gross financial irregularities in the airline. Thus one is forced to surmise that the allegations that government high-ups are involved in Biman corruption perhaps are true.

Biman has been riddled with problems. With a grossly top-heavy administration, a highly distorted aircraft to manpower ratio and lacking in sound leadership that is further weighed down by bureaucratic meddling from the top, with multifarious trade union bodies, whatever may be the strategic planning of the government regarding its future, for the time being appropriate measures must be put in place before Biman plunges irretrievably down the precipice.

Export of manpower to Malaysia

Why this hiccup?

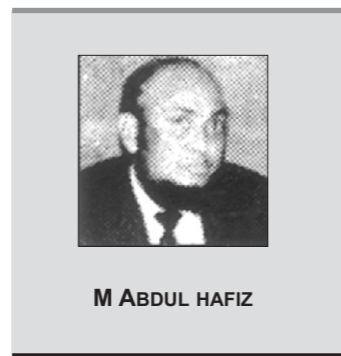
DESPITE having tremendous potential for exploiting the manpower market in Malaysia, Bangladesh could make little progress in making the most of the opportunities because of bungling at our end. In a preposterous development of events, the Malaysian government is said to have placed a 'temporary' ban on import of nearly 22,000 workers, which was being processed by Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA). It may be recalled that only two months back Malaysia lifted a ban on import of manpower from Bangladesh and placed the fresh order. The recent decision came in the wake of Bangladesh failing to meet certain technicalities such as sending details of nearly 22,000 workers through bio-metric system and overcharging the selected candidates. The deadline for exporting the workers is to expire on October 20.

At home, the Ministry for Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment is also accusing the members of Baira for their inept handling of the entire deal and making a big mess of it. In their defence, however, BAIRA puts up the argument that it was the Malaysian government that delayed in issuing 'calling visas' while Bangladesh High Commission in Malaysia lost valuable time in attesting the demand letters.

The bottomline is, we might lose a huge order for our workforce from Malaysia since the deadline of 20 October is approaching fast. Only one thing can explain this -- there was lack of coordination among all the parties concerned, which led to the unfortunate situation. The lifting of the ban after ten long years and placing of fresh order for our workforce was a golden opportunity for Bangladesh. All the agencies involved here should have given their maximum effort in fulfilling the export order meeting all the requirements. But various factors came to play a sinister game that resulted in the impasse at the moment. We urge the government to look into the matter and resolve it without ado.

We can only hope that the relevant authorities will approach their Malaysian counterparts with request to withdraw the temporary ban and let us resume manpower export to the fraternal country in full swing.

It's still time for keeping fingers crossed



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE people of this country must have rued the day they voted to power an unholy alliance only on its syrupy electoral pledge that it would give them a society free of terror and corruption -- the twin scourge that befell the country during the preceding AL dispensation.

Five years later, we continue to reap the whirlwind because the alliance failed to deliver while the embryo of terror has grown into a monster and the corruption is an epidemic now. In addition, an unprecedented price hike of the essentials -- perhaps the worst in our history, constantly gnaws at the country's poor.

During the last five years of the alliance's rule, the nation was literally taken for a ride in the name of fighting terror and corruption. But its inability, if not unwillingness, to eradicate these evils, is exposed now more than ever before. These are the staples of its politics although it still pretends to promote a terror and corruption-free society -- and, of course, its pet "unnayan" agenda for public consumption.

BNP and Jamaat, the main components of the alliance, want the best of both worlds by ravaging whatever little is left of this country, and have been able to catalyse a hedonistic nouveau riche from

PERSPECTIVES

There is no quick fix of a solution to the problem; neither can there be a miracle untying the Gordian knot. What is, after all, the issue at hand? It is to have a free and fair general election. If we can address this single issue without any lateral deviation, a solution may be within reach. We have to do whatever is required to have such an election. It is not a question of both sides making some concessions and striking a deal through hard bargain. Everything considered, the time has not yet come for a hurrah on the part of onlookers. It's still the time for keeping our fingers crossed.



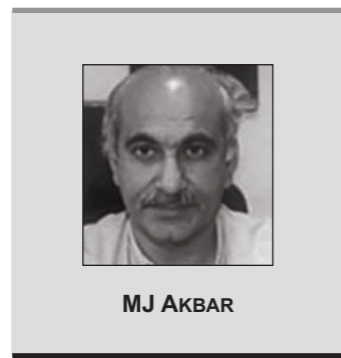
among their ranks. The alliance does not give a damn about the rest of the population who are needed at best for the number games during the election.

The alliance cannot pretend not

to understand the public mood and the people's alienation. In the meantime, it itself has, however developed, a vested interest in clinging on to power. The BNP chairperson makes no bones

about it and almost demands to be elected to power if only for the continuity of the "developmental surge" initiated by her party. But the alliance's enthusiasm conceals the true picture -- that of having no

Soft sell, hard luck



MJ AKBAR

AMIR Khan is surely the finest actor in contemporary popular cinema. His oeuvre, spread across nearly two decades, stretches from chick lit romance (hugely successful), to rebel-with-a-cause (superhit), to hero-by-accident (hum-haw). His latest rebellion, Rang de Basanti, has so enchanted the establishment that it is the official Indian nominee for next year's Oscars.

The only Indian film that came close to winning an Oscar in the foreign films category was Mother India, released in 1958. It lost to Federico Fellini's Nights of the Cabiria by a solitary vote. One filmmaker who believes that he could have easily won the Oscar, had he but put in the effort, is Dev Anand, for Guide.

But instead of going to Los Angeles to campaign for his film, Dev Anand, heady with the unexpected commercial success of an absolutely brilliant film, started work on his next movie, Jewel Thief. Great entertainment, that gentleman thief, straight out of the Cary Grant mould, but no Oscar. Since India is now the big buzz around the world, there is a good chance that 2007 might be the country's lucky year.

But surely the easiest way to get

BYLINE

Aamir Khan, the classy actor, wants us to suspend disbelief (the first requirement of theatre or cinema) when he assures that despite all the controversies around Coke, he has tried and tested it and confirmed that it is full of joy. Thank you, Dr Khan. But do put that sermon tone away and say the same thing in song-and-dance. We might as well be entertained while being sold a pup. And you might get an Oscar.

Aamir Khan an Oscar for best acting would have been to enter the latest advertisement he has done for Coca Cola. There has been no finer bit of acting. Aamir Khan looks deadly serious in a deadly blue plastic cap and a deadly white shirt talking to a scientist in a deadly white laboratory apron holding what even might be, in your subconscious, a test tube. The great weakness of the ad, unfortunately, is the dialogue, which is more dead than deadly.

But Aamir Khan, as he has done so often while working for lesser mortals in Hindi cinema, triumphs over the script in his attempt to sell the distortion that Coca Cola is a wonderfully healthy drink, that it has no impurities (as alleged by some dirty politicians and filthy NGOs), and so on and so forth.

The ad is flush with symbols of purity: that plastic cap! It must be there to ensure that not a single strand of the actor's well-oiled hair gets into any Coke bottle. That chemist's frock! Coke is clearly produced in sanitised laboratories that use their extra capacity to produce cancer-destroying drugs. That grim face! It is Aamir Khan taking personal responsibility for the good health of anyone gorging on Diet or Fat Coke.

Honestly, I don't get it. Who is Coke trying to fool by using Aamir

Khan to spread a silly sanitised image? There is of course history: Coca Cola has been trying to dupe the consumer ever since it was created. It was first marketed as a medicine, and after a century it has been forced back to a laboratory environment to survive in India. The managers of the company are smart. So far they have paid Aamir Khan vast sums of money to look like, among other things, a Japanese tourist with a swollen face and a penchant for samosas, Coke and a curious sense of humour. It must have worked or they would have stopped the cheque.

But they also know that Aamir Khan has been crafting a "serious" sideline in his image, by turning up suddenly to promote the Narmada dam agitation. He left as suddenly, of course, when irresponsible journalists started asking uncomfortable questions, but that is another story.

Between Narmada and Rang de Basanti an alternative image has been created, quite consciously. Coke has paid, therefore, for a double role: Aamir Khan the Japanese tourist when Coke wants the kids to laugh, and Aamir Khan the social activist when it wants the kids to quote his wisdom in their homework.

Does such marketing work? It

has not stopped the agitation against both Coke and Pepsi in Uttar Pradesh for depleting groundwater levels by unchecked exploitation around the Mehndiganj Coca Cola plant in Varanasi. Dr Sandeep Pandey, who has won the Magsaysay award, believes that nearly 90 per cent of the wells and over 40 per cent of hand pumps within a radius of three kilometres of the plant have been affected. He adds that the plants contaminate water by producing cadmium, chromium, and lead. These are serious issues.

The epicentre of the anger against the cola giants has been in the south, but it is now becoming a nationwide movement. This anger is not going to be assuaged by dressing up an actor. The cola companies have to engage in a debate with activists who know what they are talking about, and people who believe their health and interests are being damaged by companies more concerned with profit than the consumer. These concerns are not unique to India, although India does have problems that may be unique.

The best option for the cola companies could be to banish the pretence and stick to the Japanese tourist and samosa. Consumers are generally an intelligent lot, and

wind in its sail.

Over the years it therefore blueprinted a strategy of getting over the electoral hurdles with the least pain. To perpetuate the alliance's corporate skulduggery, the strategy was in place right after the election in 2001. Since which time, in a systematic way the opposition was -- through vengeance, repression and political eliminations shrouded with unresolved mysteries -- cut down to size while its wings were adequately clipped. The alliance went whole hog to politicise the administration and national institutions to bring them in its thrall. Thousands of party cadres were inducted into law enforcing agencies, primarily to combat the opposition activities.

What has however been the most obvious part of the alliance's election engineering strategy has been its arbitrary appointment of a biased Election Commission which through all of its activities and pronouncements so far only produced controversies.

Resorting to extraordinary means to have a head of the caretaker government of its choice is another blatant breach of trust on the part of the alliance. The rot continues to deepen and it is feared that the last vestiges of democracy will be wiped out by the time the election, if any, is held.

No self-respecting nation can allow this blatantly immoral power game to continue. Hence, the protests, electoral reform proposals, and numerous other political activisms. The establishment, in the beginning, tried to dismiss them all as the opposition's attempts to create chaos in the country that was claimed to be in the throes of a "developmental surge," initiated by the alliance government which conjures up an

image of their indispensability if that surge has to continue. In an inevitable riposte, the spontaneous movements grew up across the country to thwart the alliance's game plan. A deadly clash looked imminent.

It was at this juncture -- thanks to the good offices of our business community and civil society -- both sides agreed late last month to have a dialogue on electoral reform proposals amid unnecessary brouhaha and bloated optimism. So far so good. But the million-dollar question remains still unanswered: "What if..."

There is no quick fix of a solution to the problem; neither can there be a miracle untying the Gordian knot. What is, after all, the issue at hand? It is to have a free and fair general election. If we can address this single issue without any lateral deviation, a solution may be within reach.

We have to do whatever is required to have such an election. It is not a question of both sides making some concessions and striking a deal through hard bargain. It is more a question of attaining the goal -- a free and fair election -- without resorting to sophistry and play of words. If it involves giving it everything either side can give, what is the harm?

Everything considered, the time has not yet come for a hurrah on the part of onlookers. It's still the time for keeping our fingers crossed.

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they know that there is generally a price to be paid for fun. (The most intelligent consumers of colas, however, might be the Andhra farmers who soaked a small area of their farms with the stuff. Ants, attracted by sugar, made an antline to the spot, and could be killed in heaps.)

Coke and Pepsi sell because they are the modern mass-produced sherbets, with oversized doses of sugar, gas, and at least some kind of narcotic, if that is the right word in these heavily legalistic age. In fact, the most money is made these days by industries that do not waste their mind-space worrying about your health.

The cash flows in the alcohol industry are pretty racy, thank you, and no one has yet shown an advertisement of beer being produced in a medical factory. Cigarettes have to place a pretty grim warning on every packet. What could be more terrifying than a notice that what you are about to consume could kill you? But have you seen any cigarette company that has died of hunger?

Coke and Pepsi don't even have to suggest that too much of either could make you obscenely fat. They can also spend a fortune on advertising that has absolutely nothing to do with the product, and get away with it. Pepsi, for instance, has chosen to answer its problems in India by shoving cricket-patriotism down your throat till you are blue in the face. It doesn't talk about Pepsi at all: how brilliant! On the other hand, you can't truly support the Indian cricket team in the Champions' Trophy if you don't have a Pepsi in your satchel. But this is friendly manipulation.

If there had been consumer

brands in Moses's time instead of merely locusts and honey, the cola companies would have lobbied hard, and possibly effectively, to prevent the Ten Commandments from becoming law. Coke is good for wandering in the desert.

There is better news for the big cola boys: the competition might be even more harmful. The most successful new soft drink has been an energiser from Austria, Red Bull. An eight-ounce can contains 80mg of caffeine and about five teaspoons of sugar. Try that for size. Your size.

The most famous "medical" endorsement for any product is surely the ageless pseudo-dentist telling you that Colgate is good for your teeth. But that is a believable claim, if only because no one has been able to prove that Colgate is bad for your teeth. The anonymity of that dentist is oddly reassuring; toothpaste is not a glamour product.

Aamir Khan, the classy actor, wants us to suspend disbelief (the first requirement of theatre or cinema) when he assures that despite all the controversies around Coke, he has tried and tested it and confirmed that it is full of joy. Thank you, Dr Khan. But do put that sermon tone away and say the same thing in song-and-dance. We might as well be entertained while being sold a pup. And you might get an Oscar.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

OPINION

'Election, corruption and coup in Thailand'

NURUL HUDA

I have read with interest the article, "Election, Corruption and Coup in Thailand" by Harun-ur-Rashid (September 27 DS).

I am writing this piece to endorse the views expressed and also to add some of my own.

The political development of Thailand is of special interests to those who want to see democracy gain solid ground in different countries. The future of democracy of the country, which has witnessed 18th coups so far during its 74 years of on-off democracy, has again been put to uncertainty.

Harun-ur-Rashid has given some explanations, which can be seen as some of the probable reasons behind the coup by General Sonthi. The coup leader was chosen by deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra for the coveted

position of the country's armed forces.

The coup, which was bloodless and apparently readily accepted by the people (except Thaksin loyalists), has sent a clear message for leaders of other Asian countries. The coup in Thailand has once again taught the lesson that the loyalty of generals or for that matter of civil bureaucracy, should not be taken for granted.

The loyalty of the bureaucracy (both civil and military) can change any moment as has happened in the Kingdom of Thailand. It is the same General Sonthi who had said that "there would be no coup, and the military would be patient."

Generals chosen for coveted positions, have often been seen turning their guns to their mentors in different countries including Pakistan and the Philippines. The deposed prime minister earned the

wrath of the revered king Bhumibol Adulyadej as has been demonstrated through unusually quick royal blessings to the coup leaders.

This time the king did not act the way he did in 1991. He intervened in 1991 against the then army chief Suchinda's coup, and eventually the general had to pave the way for Anand Panyarachun to become prime minister.

The king was not happy with Thaksin as he had openly posed a challenge to what the royal palace has long been seeing as royal prerogatives to decide -- the successor to the king, who is celebrating the 60th anniversary of his accession.

Some countries including the United States of America have condemned the coup. The USA has not only expressed concern but also imposed sanctions on Thailand, meaning suspension of its financial

assistance to the tune of millions of dollars for the armed forces. In a reaction (September 28) to the coup US Foreign Ministry spokesman has expressed the hope that the Thai military leadership would take steps for holding of elections for restoration of civilian rule at the earliest.

Thaksin also earned the anger of the people for reasons which include the sale of his business empire for US \$ 1.9 billion to the Singaporean government in January this year. The circumstances of the sale are being investigated by the military rulers as he is reported to have evaded payment of taxes. Some of the assets of the deposed billionaire Prime Minister may be frozen pending investigation as has been indicated by the military leadership.

The deposed prime minister who left the country for a meeting in

Finland on September 9 reportedly carried 58 large suitcases and trunks with him. Another aircraft was also dispatched from Bangkok carrying 56 suitcases for him days before the coup. Those suitcases might have been used for carrying money and other valuables for him as is being speculated in Bangkok.

Thaksin Shinawatra, however, stands apart from other deposed leaders in Asia who have amassed fortune, like Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines and Ms Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, as he was a successful business executive.

Former army chief General Surayud Chulanont, with whom the deposed prime minister had strained relations, has been appointed as the new prime minister of Thailand. The coup leaders have made it clear that the military would retain a share of power. The new prime minister will only lead the

country for one year, until elections promised for October, 2007.

But under the constitution "the junta will be able to sack him and to play a powerful role in reshaping Thai politics." The military leadership has made it clear that they would decide the future course of politics of the country.

Thailand witnessed for months political battles between Thaksin and his opponents, which had been characterised by large street protests, random bomb blasts and posturing over who had the endorsement of the king. This was becoming divided since April 2 polls, which had been boycotted by the opposition and later annulled by the courts. Thaksin Shinawatra who is now in London with his daughter, is blamed by many people of his country for dividing the nation. He was acting as a caretaker prime minister and was scheduled to

address the UNGA when he was ousted.

People of Thailand would also hold the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) partially responsible for its failure to act the way it should have as regards conducting the polls.

The king had to intervene so that the country's constitutional and administrative courts could assert their authority. As a result of the king's intervention the courts acted with authority and gave their verdicts annulling the election of April this year.

The influence of the generals of the country was in decline in late 1980s and the military coup of 1991 failed as those behind it could not obtain royal blessings. In 1995, a constitutional drafting assembly representing all segments of society of Thailand set about the task of reaching agreement on the need for a

new constitution with guarantee of democracy and human rights. Meanwhile, the armed forces who were used to suppress Muslim separatist campaign in the southern provinces, bordering Malaysia, were unhappy with Thaksin for mishandling of the situation.

Democracy became the victim following failure of the country's politicians to work through understanding. It, however, remains to be seen how the military leadership keeps the promise by returning power to the civilians as has been pledged by the coup leaders.

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