Dhaka, Monday, February 25, 1991

Coup in Thailand, Once Again

Once again the military in Thailand has taken over power. The reason? According to the Army Chief, General Suchinda Kraprayoon, one of the leaders of the coup d'etat, "we could not allow large-scale corruption to drag on." Led by the Supreme Commander Gen. Sunthorn Kon-gsompong, the military junta ousting the government of Gen. Chatichai Chonhavan, has suspended the Constitution and has called for fresh polls within six months to elect a new government. Meanwhile a caretaker government was to be put into place to oversee the polls and to run the affairs of the State in the interim.

The Thai military became an important actor in the nation's political life since 1932 when through an uprising the absolute monarchy was replaced and the current system of a Constitutional King, along with a comparatively democratic Constitution and a system of elected government, introduced. Though its entry into politics was to introduce democratic reforms, the That military never allowed the development of a truly democratic system and through one coup after another has hampered the development of a genuinely popular government. In time they became the arbiter of which government should

stay in power and should not.

However during the 70's and 80's there appeared a silver lining in the Thai political sky. Almost for two decades there were no army coups and the few that were attempted failed to garner any support. That is not to say that the army did not have its hands in the government. Thais being a very practical people had a very practical solution to please everybody. The political parties would contest election and then the majority party or a coalition forming the majority would select a consensus candidate for the post of the Prime Minister, who would, not accidentally, be a retired general. Gen. Prem Tinsulananda, the Prime Minister preceding Gen. Chatichai, was perhaps the best example of the above arrangement of convenience. The genial bachelor general was popular with the people and the politicians and also enjoyed the confidence of the army.

Gen. Chatichai, the ousted Prime Minister was the first Thai head of the government ever to be directly elected by the people. With his coming to power the delicate balance of Thai political power began to tilt towards the civilian, making the army increasingly restive. It is not clear what caused the final split, but that there were serious problems became public last November when the rumors of an imminent coup gained currency in

Thailand and abroad.

The military takeover is definitely a set back for nascent Thai democracy. What makes this coup extremely significant is the suspension of the Constitution. This obviously means that not only a new government, but the Thai military may bring into play a whole new set of rules of the political game. There is no indication as to what sorts of Constitutional reforms the army has in mind. It should be mentioned here that just three months back an infamous law curbing press freedom was suspended by the Chatichai government. granting more effective freedom to the Thai press.

At this stage, as a people who are about to elect a democratic government, we can only wish the That people all the success in ensuring that free and democratic elections are held within the promised time-frame and to impress upon the leaders of the junta of the advice the King of Thailand gave them when they went to meet him following taking over power, "Do not disappoint the people".

Bangla in Computers

A standard code for Bangla and English language computers data exchange and a standard Bangla keyboard for computers, are now imminent. Such was the confident message from a recent seminar on Bangla language in computers.

Bangla has come a long way since Munir Optima, the first typewriter with Bangla keyboard, was introduced in the early 1970s. That single piece of equipment probably did more to make Bangla the office language of this country than anything else had done previously.

The significance of the new development cannot be over-estimated. Since the revolution in information technology and the advent of personal computers ideal for office work in the early '80s, English has threatened to overrun office-blocks around the world. The PCs have revolutionalised the fields of office-management, banking, education, even publishing, with a manifold increase in efficiency. Computerisation has become a most worth-while investment for a company with ambition.

However, this has accorded English a greater relevance in commercial offices than even Bangla. The social impact of such a situation could have been profound, conferring an unfair advantage on managerial and secretarial staff with greater

proficiency in English.

In that context, the advance of Bangla in the field of computer technology is a process of revolutionary significance for this society. With the standardisation of the Bangla keyboard, and code for data exchange with English-language computers, a lot of essential programmes will soon be redesigned to operate with Bangla fonts. At present, Bangla is widely used in wordprocessing. but not quite so in the crucial fields of accounting, data-management and education-related programmes.

That is all set to change within a short space of time. Benefits coming from it will not be limited to those considered unsuitable for computerrelated work at the office due to their poor knowledge of English. Teaching methods, especially at the primary and secondary levels, should undergo a major transformation provided correct initiatives are taken.

We have long accepted that computerisation is not only a desirable goal, but a necessary one. The successful introduction of Bangla into computers, an on-going and highly commendable process that begun in 1983, will enable us to pursue our national policy of making the use of the mother tongue at the work-place compulsory, without sacrificing efficiency.

Still the Old Rules for a New Game

by Sabir Mustafa

The massive public debate triggered by the fall of General Ershad has shifted its focus more and more on the past— "our deeds" and "their misdeeds" as the election deadline draws closure.

But there we have tt. The wheel of fortune has certainly turned since

I we've had three Golden

years, how come we are

still in such a bad shape?"

Thus runs a question heard

frequently around town these

days. Asked rather wryly, and

with a good deal of sarcastic

wonderment, the question

seems an appropriate retort to

the incessant bombardment of

verbose speech-making at

triggered by the fall of General

H. M. Ershad's government has

shifted its focus more and

more on the past - 'our

deeds" and "their misdeeds"

- as the February 27 election

claims its period in office be-

tween January. 1972 and Au-

gust, 1975 as the best time the

country has ever known; the

Bangladesh Nationalist Party

(BNP) maintains that the rule

of its founder, General Ziaur

Rahman between November.

1975 and May, 1981, is unri-

valled in prosperity and free-

dom; lately, a resuscitated

Jatiya Party (JP) has also cn-

tered the fray by claiming

greater deeds for its founder.

element in the political main-

stream, Jamaat-e-Islami (JI).

has maintained a strange si-

lence on its past

"achievements". The reason

behind this silence may not be

too difficult to discern. The

JI's only period of effective po-

litical power, from about April

to December, 1971, is not

something they would appar-

ently like to boast about (not

publicly at any rate). Odd

thing is, back in 1972 nobody

thought the JI would ever be

able to engage in politics in

this country again, let alone be

thought of as part of the

HE January visit to Sri

Vidya Charan Shulka, has

raised hopes of improved

relations between he the two

territorial integrity and

sovereignty of each country

were reaffirmed. Far-reaching

The understandings on the

countries.

Lanka by India's exte-

rnal affairs minister,

However, the fourth major

General Ershad.

The Awami League (AL)

deadline draws closer.

The massive public debate

campaign rallies.

Ages in the

past 20

Now, what about the issues? In all elections, debates during the campaign - whether through speeches, TV interviews or newspaper articles create the issues on which people vote. That is the theory, anyway. More often than not, real, hard issues become far too complicated for the voter's comfort. But there are also times when voters are stirred by a particular image projected by a leader, or the presentation of a vision, a vision that is abstract but glori ous enough to capture the people's imagination.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1970 offered just such an image and vision to the Bengali people: freedom from foreign domination, liberation from servitude. But such moments of epoch-making significance come rarely, and fleetingly, in a nation's history. And the man who would appear at such a moment to shape history, rather than be a mere politician seeking office, is rarer still.

The issues in 1991 are not as clear-cut as they were in 1970. Furthermore, there are several strands of political ideas in the field today, rather than the two "visions" that were essentially competing for power 21 years ago. Yet, for many people, the choice is fast narrowing down to two — the

to the negotiating table only if

centred on politics

They believe the Indian

Sri Lanka's Minister of State

central government move

would help to reduce the flow

of arms, ammunition and fuel

for Defence, Ranjan Wijeratne,

expressed satisfaction at the

Indian central government's

actions to prevent the LTTE

from using Indian soil for its

purposes. He said Sri Lanka

would not allow anybody to use

its soil for any activity harmful

who feel this was purely a

move made by the minority

Chandra Shekhar government

to please Rafiv Gandhi. It was

done for internal political rea-

sons and would have no bear-

ing on the Sri Lankan situa-

about the purpose of Mr.

Shukla's visit which came after

There was some speculation

tion, observers said.

However, there are others

and the exit of refugees.

they are militarily weakened.

AL and BNP - who have become the focus of most attention, and source of most excitement as well as worry. Both the parties have painted themselves into a corner by claiming overwhelming support in the country. Now the time has come to prove it, and the going is turning out to be very tough indeed.

So, what real choice is the

voter being offered? The

campaign so far has followed predictable and traditional lines: issues have been simplified and compressed into slogans, with rhetorical speeches forming the heavyweight battering ram. The battle of words between the AL and BNP, which seemed quite placid even in early January. has now assumed war-like proportions. Considerable amount of time, energy - not to mention money — are being expended to issue dark warnings. Harking back to the bad old days, one is accused of killing democracy and kowtowing to a "foreign power". while the other is being blasted for introducing the politics of killings, martial laws and black money. Each accuses the other of being a grave threat to the country's independence and sovereignty The war-drums are booming. filling the cynical observer with amusement, and the ordinary voter with apprehension for the future.

But perhaps we have not witnessed real electoral battles for too long, and consequently

taking the fire-brand rhetoric too literally. For their part, politicians, particularly of the major parties, are facing a nightmare. Victory is imperative, because this time there will be no place to hide. Instant accusations of rigging is unlikely to provide the vanquished with the fig leaf to cover his shame. If Justice Shahabuddin can carry out his plans as he intends to, then the February 27 showdown will provide a real test of strength. possibly for the first time since 1970. Undoubtedly, the 'wewere-robbed legion will not be lacking as frustrations get the better of common sense. In an electoral system like ours which does not give any prizes for second place, defeat is hard to digest.

The idea of a healthy debate is yet to take root in Bangladesh where the infant of democracy has been battered mercilessly for more years than is acceptable. Detailed discussion of issues tend to bore people and supporters away. prospect of a debate on the financial feasibility of the Jamuna Bridge project is hardly likely to set the Madrasha ground overflowing; on the other hand, statements thrown in the manner of hand grenades — and with pretty much the same impact - are seen as the real stuff of politics, whether one is talking of parliamentary elections, or revolutionary agitation. It is populist politics at its most

primitive. It may leave a bad taste in the puritan's mouth, but democratic politics in this country has had neither the time nor the opportunity to grow out of the chaos of its formative stage.

Amid the rhetorical flourishes and blood-curdling slogans, the electoral battlefield is being relaid along a "us vs. them" line. At first glance that may appear as the height of irresponsibility, given the absolute necessity for big party harmony in parliament if democracy is to succeed. But after closer scrutiny, another factor comes through: that is the intense pressure both the parties are under to first win. and win handsomely. It is possible to win a

selected number of seats by campaigning on strictly local issues, and concentrating on the good points of the candidate. But one needs a little extra in order to win across the board. One needs to ercate a tide. It is not enough to create a tide in one's favour by recalling golden ages, it seems to have become more important to create a tide against the other fellow by recalling (failing that, inventing) his (or hers) dark deeds. This is the dynamic working for the us vs. them scenario, the apparent intoler-

The absence of clear-cut battlelines as in 1970 is compelling the two major parties to create the illusion, in order to achieve a similar landslide. The last five general elections

in this country have produced two-thirds majority for one party or another, rigged or otherwise. Consequently major parties cannot conceive of anything other than a landslide as a "success". However, this being a first-past-the-post sys tem, it is eminently possible for a party with less than 50 per cent of the total vote to end up with a massive majority of seats in parliament. So the two parties are not really chasing a mirage, as many people tend to think.

The question exercising everyone's mind is not so much who might host the first lfter evening on the North Plaza, but whether there will be peace in parliament once the Battle of Hustings is over. Ominously, our much-abused parliament itself is facing an identity crisis. The November 19, 1990 joint declaration by the three alliances had stipulated that the acting president would hand over power to a "sovereign parliament". The AL and its friends in the 8 and 5 party combines maintain that clearly implied agreement to amend the constitution, since under the present format the president cannot hand over to parliament. However, the BNP has distanced itself from the declaration, and now says it wishes to retain the present system and leave the issue of amendment to the next par-

The future form of government has thus emerged as the single most important issue of the polls. What's more, this issue has managed to emerge from all the mudslinging quite unscathed, having been debated with absolutely no reference to foreign power, alcohol or who swallowed what portion of the Jamuna Bridge cake. The verdict now rests, as ever, with the electorate.

Indo-Lanka Talks Nix Cross-border Terrorism

Harold Pieris writes from Colombo

decisions were taken on ecoent stance. Recently, Mr. nomic matters, including a joint effort to explore for oil in Karunanidhi had even the Gulf of Mannar, off northpromised the Tigers free western Sri Lanka. treatment in Tamil Nadu hos-

For nearly a decade the discussions between the two The move by New Delhi is seen as an attempt to fulfill its countries have been primarily centred on political issues. It promises and pledges to prevent cross-border terrorism was heartening to note on this occasion the equal prominence and has been appreciated by Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan analysts given to economic affairs. believe the Tigers would come

At the conclusion of Mr. Shukla's visit, it was also announced in New Delhi that the Tamil Nadu government of Muthuvel Karunanidhi had been dismissed and presidential rule extended over the Tamil state. This is because the Karunanidhi government had failed to check the illegal activities of the militant Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which seeks self-rule in Sri Lanka.

The Tigers have been using Tamil Nadu as a base for their operations in Sri Lanka. They have training camps there and obtain a regular supply of arms, medical supplies and fuel from sources in that state.

This support given to the Tigers has strained the relations between the two countries. In recent times the special treatment given to the Tigers in Tamil Nadu has even been resented by the nationals of that state.

Time and again the central government of India has pledged to end this gunrunning between Madras and Jaffna. But the Tamil Nadu government has taken a differa powerful Chinese delegation led by their Prime Minister visited Sri Lanka and a number of countries in South and East Asia. The Chinese offer of aid and even military hardware would have caused concern in

New Delht. However, if was generally felt the visit would enable Sri Lanka to establish a series of political understanding with India and to discuss economic collaboration.

Equal Prominence was given to economics, after a decade of talks

Mr. Shukla had talks with

President Ranasinghe Pre-

madasa, his Sri Lankan coun-

terpart, Harold Herat, former

President Junius Jayawardene,

opposition leader Sirimavo

Bandaranaike, Tamil Plantation

Workers' leader, Minister

Savuminamoorthy Thondaman

and representatives of the

Tamil groups and political

parties operating in the north

had made earlier which cre-

ated a furore in Sri Lanka. Mr.

Shukla's statement was "that

no foreign power will be al-

of Sri Lanka. He now admitted

this was a matter entirely in

sic political understandings —

equality in relations, the need

to recognise each other's se-

The leaders reaffirmed ba-

the domain of Sri Lanka.

lowed to interfere in the affairs

He clarified a statement he

and east of Sri Lanka.

curity concerns, respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty and the need to find a political solution to the island's ethnic problem.

Mr. Shukla was apprised by Sri Lanka of the ongoing talks with Tamil and Muslim parties to evolve a solution.

India agreed not to permit her territory to be used as a base against Sri Lanka and promised never again to send

tervene in the separatist war.

these political understandings,

the position of the controver-

sial Indo-Lanka accord of July

1987 was not examined not

was the question of a new

erated India's belief that the

political framework created by

Sri Lanka following the Indo-

Sri Lanka agreement of 1987

provided a viable basis to settle

million rupees (US\$2.5 mil

lion) to the UN High Commis-

sion for Refugees to support

refugee centres in Mannar and

However, the talks were

notable for the emphasis given

to economic affairs which

could develop into an eco-

nomic and trade agreement.

other places in Sri Lanka.

India has also given 31.4

the ethnic problem.

Mr. Shukla, however, reit-

friendship treaty pursued.

Apart from reaffirming

early date." her troops to Sri Lanka to in-

Lanka Commenced in 1967. Since then a French company. American firms have tried but

Trincomalee, on the east coast A proposal to set up a free trade area in South Asia was also discussed. Studies in this connection would be harmonised into a

agreed to pursue this. Sri Lanka perceives and welcomes the changing attitudes on the Indian side. But this would, perhaps, have to be negotiated and discussed again as the Chandra Shekar government is a minority government enjoying the direct support of only about 10 percent

of the Indian parliament. These pledges and understandings would have to be renewed again, perhaps, after the general elections expected in India this year. Sri Lanka is aware this would have to be a continuing process. — Depth-

Three major decisions in this regard were taken. One was to establish an Indo-Sri Lanka joint commission, chaired by the respective foreign ministers on an alternating basis. Initially the commission would have two sub-committees: one devoted to trade, finance and investment and the other to social, cultural and educational matters. A preparatory meet ing in this connection would be held in New Delhi in March.

It was also agreed that the Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC) of India and the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation of Sri Lanka should jointly undertake oil exploration in the Gulf of Mannar. This project is expected to commence "at an

The exploration of oil in this area, off northwest Sri a Russian agency and two failed to strike oil. The ONGC is also expected to submit a feasibility report to renovate the British-built tank farm in

blueprint. Both countries

news Asia.

Out Unconditionally With formation of his own

WHAT

peace plan, Mikhail Gorbachev

bids to head off a ground war and become principal diplomatic arbiter of a Gulf peace. His move catches the United States in an uneasy place. Washington is eager to see its Soviet coalition partner help push Iraq to the right kind of unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait. But the combat has strengthened the war's own internal logic that wants Saddam Hussein, if not physically removed from power, at least politically and militarily miniaturized. Some people talk of what they conceive of as a need for Saddam to "save face" and for the coalition to help him do so for the sake of arranging a deal. But the purpose of the coalition now must surely be to cause him to lose face, not save it. So there is much discomfort at seeing Mr. Gorbachev shape a diplomatic process which, it is reported, assures the Iraqi leader that he can stay on. The United States, which apparently was not consulted on the Gorbachev plan, surely cannot be bound by this feature of it - or any other such

problem that arises. Under pressure at home, Mr. Gorbachev is asserting a strong Soviet interest in a crucial region only a few hundred miles from his border and acting to preempt any continuing large or dominant American role. The Soviets are trying to become the agent and champion of the United Nations in reconstructing the Gulf, and America is being portrayed, by implication, as just one of the heaviest applying the muscle, being reduced in some way to one of the combatants among whom the Soviets must, with great detachment, mediate.

That is not the only

compensations.

The Kremlin deserves a little time - a very little time that affords Saddam Hussein no chance to evade or to tangle people up -to arrange an unconditional, immediate Iraqi pullout without the heavy weaponry. That done, a smashing success could be claimed in terms of the American interest and the UN mandate.

Unconditional, of course, still means unconditional. It is not clear yet just how encumbered the Soviet plan is with codicils and footnotes. As for the polite but real competition for prestige and postwar Gulf influence that is now beginning to touch Soviet-U.S. relations, the element of cooperation exists as well. It is an element based on repelling Iraqi aggression. At the moment it requires and enables Soviet diplomacy to use the leverage derived from U.S. military power to force Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait quickly, completely, with out that heavy weaponry and

without political compensation or guarantees. —The Washington Post

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Coin box telephone

Sir. In the old part of the city two telephone coin boxes bearing nos. 239112 and 239258, installed at 17 Haricharan Roy Road, Faridabad, were functioning satisfactorily for the last 8/10 years under the supervision of International Pen Pals Club. Local people were extensively benefited by the telephones. However, in view of their very often out of order condition and without any satisfactory step thereof from the concerned authority, the club authority resorted to newspapers which in turn caused the T&T Department to threaten with its withdrawal. Subsequently they did it. As a result, presently the local people are faced with immense

difficulties.

That is not enough, different departments of the government are failing in providing them basic necessities of civic life. Government is discouraging increased use of telephone—that is what proved by such an act! However, increased use of telephone by the citizens bears testimony to a country's progress. The local people, view this illogical decision to withdraw it with extreme condemnation.

The telephone coin box system in existence in the country does possess endless faults. Over and above, at the above address our club's telephone (No. 250823) most of the time remains in a disorder condition. Because of its

importance, application has been made to the General Manager, Dhaka Telecom munication Zone for its group change from 25 to 24 or 23. Meanwhile, we raised the matter with the General Manager and new Divisional Engineer, regrettably until now without any satisfactory response.

Sir, therefore, it is my earnest request to the Post & Telecommunication Ministry that necessary in struction please be given for reinstallation of the withdrawn Coin Box Telephone and group change of Pen Pals Club Telephone from 25 to either 24 or 23. Mahbubuddin Chowdhury President, International Pen-Pals Club, Faridabad. Dhaka-1204.

Salvation armada

Sir, " The importance of someone is reflected by the strength of his enemy", said an Ethics teacher.

Who is stronger over Kuwait issue has yet to be determined, or does not matter much as long as showdown continues (even if really after the peace move) — diplomatic plus military. Someone must worry... What appears to be

possibly going to happen sooner or later may not happen at all. Even if it does, so? Queries, however, keep cropping up, what if ... Not unexpected though, someone will say then

"that's what I said", only if ... As it all stands now, it's no joke or not just an international exercise extraordinary or not even the Close Encounter of the Last Kind (who knows for sure?) ... it is, indeed, a spectacular armada! (However, we wish a real peace process

M. Rahman Zila School Road Mymensingh

takes over.)

Childcare homes

Sir, It has become a common feature of life of a middle class family to have both the husband and the wife go out to work. It is

nomic pressure. But then what do couples with very small children do? It is not a wise idea to

needed because of the eco-

leave children absolutely with servants. For one it is not safe, and besides, the child may not have the kind of proper up-bringing which any parent would

Most working mothers leave their babies with relatives willing to take such responsibility. But, my suggestion is that, since women will, have to work for a living, and children will also have to be looked after in a better way, it is important to have some childcare homes run by competent persons who besides doing a business as such, would also be interested in the welfare of the children.

However, the cost or fee for such facilities should have to be kept within the means of those wanting to benefit from it.

Riffat Ahmed, Dhanmondi, Dhaka.