

# Congress after Rajiv — Challenges and Prospects

by Zagul A Chowdhury

THE second phase of Indian elections begins today. How will Congress fare? Will it be brought back to power in a sympathy vote for Rajiv? What is going to happen to the Congress party, as a result of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination? These are some of the questions uppermost in the mind of India watchers. How the party faces the situation after the death of its president attracts world attention for many reasons. For, the future of the Indian politics and the challenges and prospects facing a traditionally dominant political organisation in India are inseparably linked with the functioning of world's largest democracy. Rajiv was a high-risk political figure, particularly after the failure of his peace overtures in Punjab and later in Sri Lanka. Yet the Congress was taken by surprise by Mr Gandhi's death at an obscure place in southern Tamil Nadu state last month. It is interesting to see how the one hundred and six year old political organisation that led India to freedom from the British rule copes with the situation. The crisis facing the party has been particularly compounded because of the timing of the death of Mr Rajiv Gandhi, coming as it did midway through an election which itself is seen crucial for the future of the country. In fact the death of Rajiv's mother Mrs Indira Gandhi, who was both prime minister and Congress president when she was assassinated in 1984, did not create a void comparable to that created by her son's killing.

The refusal by Rajiv's widow Italian-born Sonia Gandhi to steer the Congress at a critical phase following the killing of her husband disappointed some party leaders. After wavering for some time, they chose Mr P V Narasimha Rao as interim party president. Mr Rao, a senior party leader, was successful as a minister and is known for intellectual qualities but less for organisational capability. His appointment was a measure to prevent further controversy over the party leadership since Mr Rao is more acceptable because of his

crisis within the Congress itself and how the organisation deals with the leadership issue as the party goes the elections and the post-election developments. The move was welcomed by the Congressmen although not unanimously. Since then not once did Rajiv hold any election for the party hierarchy. It is possible to trace the leadership issue of Congress to the Nehru era when he himself did not take kindly the leadership challenges of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Mr P D Tandon or Acharya Kripalani. But despite critics' contentions that Nehru seldom encouraged the second line of leadership, it can at least be said that there was strong claimants for the post of prime minister-ship. One can reasonably argue

an old and vast political organisation! For all their qualities as party chiefs and government functionaries, today's sad spectacle in the Congress owes much to Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi's handling of the organisation. Many Congressmen do not feel happy with a situation when the organisation had to lean on the widow of Rajiv for leadership of a party known for nurturing growth of political leaders. Jawaharlal Nehru became Congress president for the first time in 1939 and Indira Gandhi in 1957 and both through a long political process. During their time the election to Congress presidency was a regular affair, be-

gressmen are stressing the need for "collective leadership" in the organisation even though an interim president has been chosen. This highlights the precarious condition of the party. There is no scope for a single leader to run the affairs of the organisation with full authority. Even the choice of Mr Narasimha Rao would have run into problems had he not been asked to occupy the top organisational position only temporarily. There are experienced and dynamic leaders in the party but they have not been allowed to come in the forefront at the national level and consequently, many of them are seen as the leaders of a particular "region" like the "Hindi belt" or "South" or even as "group" leaders.

Another factor that could be potentially dangerous in the leadership issue is the "coterie" that had emerged surrounding Rajiv in last few years. This group, mostly made up of persons having personal loyalty to Rajiv, is drawn from his Doon school friends or bureaucrats. This group is known to have wielded considerable influence during Rajiv's time and may find it difficult to push through its wishes now.

**With the selection of Narasimha Rao as party president, for the moment or at least for the foreseeable future the hold of the 'Nehru dynasty' on the helm of affairs of the most well-known political organisation has come to an end. But the question is how could an organisation like Congress come to a situation where it had to turn to the foreign-born wife of its slain leader for leadership?**

## Curing Our Health Woes

Addressing a conference of doctors in Dhaka on Sunday, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia raised several points which should provide a good basis for approaching the issue of health care in Bangladesh in a comprehensive manner. However the PM's complaints about doctors being reluctant to go to upazilas is not a new one, nor is her observation about the city's private health clinics being too expensive for the urban poor. But the mere fact that the PM herself has raised the points indicates, hopefully, that the government intends to act.

But what we are not so comfortable with is Prime Minister's assertion that a medical university would soon be established. Considering that we do not have the capacity to absorb all the graduates currently produced by the six existing medical colleges, and that the standard of the output vary widely from college to college, the case for a whole new institution, with rather debatable cost-effectiveness, does not seem a very strong one. It would be far wiser to use the available resources to make existing facilities more efficient.

The problem with doctors in upazilas is a most serious one, since the bulk of our population lives in rural areas. Poor management, lack of medicines and proper maintenance of equipment have robbed upazila health complexes and substations of much of their intended usefulness. Furthermore, chronic absenteeism among doctors posted at upazilas has itself become a disease in need of urgent cure. A great deal of efforts and resources now need to be expended in order to rejuvenate this grass-roots level of medical care. Ways have to be found, through consultations with medical associations, to provide the necessary incentives as well as inspiration for doctors to approach rural duties in a more positive frame of mind.

The surplus of doctors we have at present in effect means wastage of trained and educated human resources. We need to search for ways to utilise these resources created at an enormous cost to the taxpayer in the first place. One idea is to offer preferential credit facilities to doctors to set up private clinics in rural areas. Many doctors remain idle due to lack of employment or funds. Financial institutions should move to fill this credit gap, allow doctors to apply skills at home rather than in foreign countries and increase the level of medicare available to rural folk.

However, doctors in upazilas form only one aspect of rural health care, and the issue has to be approached in conjunction with other initiatives. One such initiative can be the setting up of a programme to train and recruit paramedics, who can play a significant role in rural areas, particularly in villages away from upazila centres at union level. Cadres of well-trained and motivated medics could play a vital role, not only at times of epidemics, but at all other times.

The essential approach should be to emphasise primary health care, with prevention being the main focus of the drive. The community itself, with help from para-medics and rural doctors, can then look after its own health needs, minimising the necessity for expensive hospital care and excessive dependence on medicines. For that, of course, we need to have a thorough campaign to disseminate health-related information right through to the grass-roots level. Community and personal hygiene, along with proper nutrition, for instance, can go a long way towards eliminating the threat of many diseases such as diarrhoea and cholera. The problems are well-known and the issues well-charted, what we need now is action. But it has to be a kind of action that involves every level of society, from the professionals at the top right down to the landless villager in the union.

## Farewell and Thanks

The members of the US Task Force are leaving Bangladesh today, after performing a highly commendable humanitarian task. Soldiers usually defend their own country and destroy whatever is targeted for them under the term 'enemy'. Seldom are they involved in humanitarian operations, and that too thousands of miles away in a far-flung third country. The US Task Force, by coming to the assistance of the cyclone-hit people of Bangladesh has set a new and eminently laudable challenge before soldiers everywhere to come to the aid of the suffering humanity. We express our sincere thanks to them and to the soldiers, technicians, and professionals of all other countries who, so generously, came to the assistance of Bangladesh at a very critical period in our life.

Given the enormity of the task and the challenging circumstances under which it had to be accomplished, the US Task Force did an efficient and timely job that aided our own relief efforts and greatly helped to reduce the suffering of our people. Their presence gave us the needed extra boost that made the relief operation more effective and fast.

It is not the huge tonnage of food and essential items they ferried or the number of sorties they flew that is so unique here; but the fact that thousands of war weary soldiers, eager to return home awaiting reunion with their families, should take the time and make the effort to help the needy, the injured and the destitute.

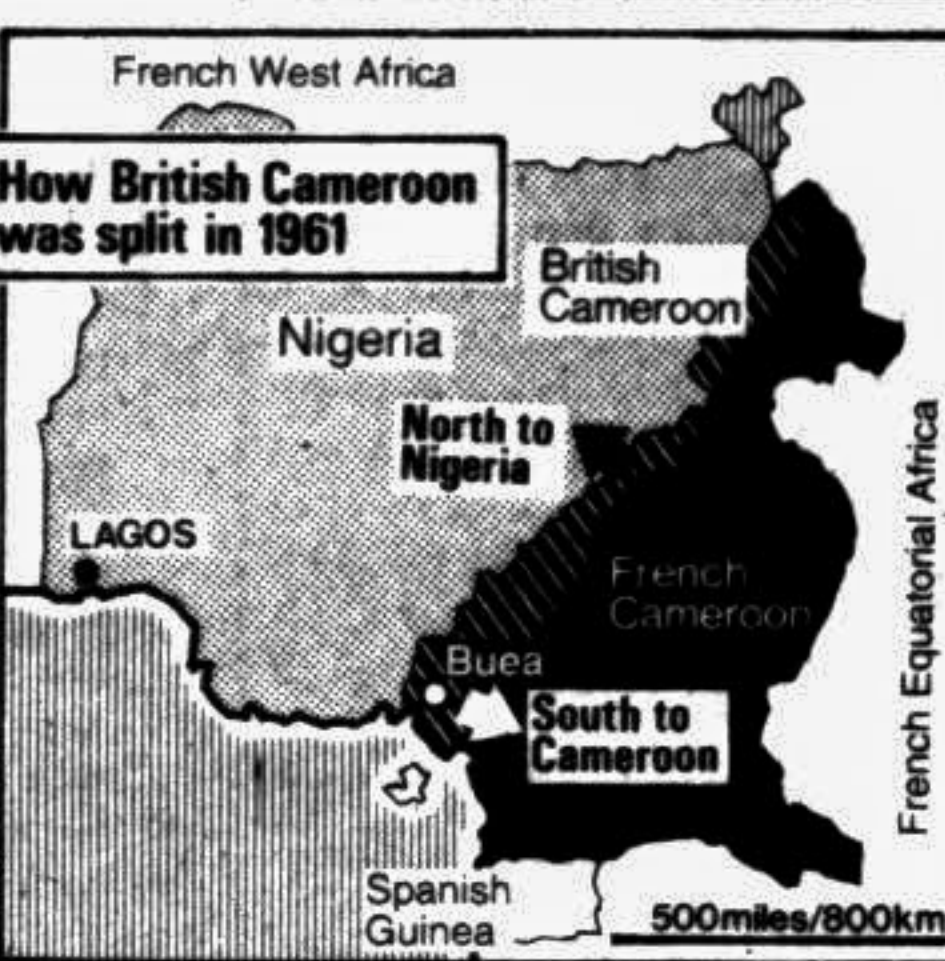
Their action and those of the other countries, set a new example, worthy of emulation by all, of humanitarian assistance in the otherwise complicated and wordy world of international cooption.

# Why Cameroon Wants to Join the Commonwealth

by Kaye Whiteman

After former French Cameroon became independent plebiscites were held in 1961 to decide the fate of the neighbouring British Cameroons. They led to the north joining Nigeria and the south going to Cameroon. In 1972 the federal republic of Cameroon became a unitary state under an increasingly authoritarian government. Now, as multipartyism takes root it is applying to join the Commonwealth.

## Cameroon



Nations mandate, then as a UN trust territory. The British colonial tie was a real one, and although after 1961 the British largely lost interest in Cameroon, the English-speaking Cameroonians kept the British connection alive, especially through educational ties. The English language was never dropped. In the idealism of Cameroonian reunification, the francophone elite was obliged to learn English. For years, the reunification seemed to be working. There were especially no regrets when the anglophone area escaped the Nigerian civil war in the Sixties.

In 1972 came a major blow. President Ahidjo staged a constitutional coup, and abolished the federation which had been the basis of reunification in 1961. To many "west of the Mungo" — the river which divides the old West Cameroon from the rest — federation had seemed a guarantee of their liberties.

The de facto single party created in 1966 also created unhappiness, as did the spread of Ahidjo's repressive security system. The "anglos", as the French-speakers came to call them, became disillusioned with their lot — a disillusion fuelled by the Seventies oil booms. Although most of Cameroon's oil is offshore from the anglophone areas, they felt they profited little from the vast revenues. The main battlefields, however, were legal and educational. Administratively, there was French-style centralisation with prefects, as well as the gendarmerie, but the integration of two contrasting legal systems has still not been perfectly achieved.

is split. A wide range of outspoken independent newspapers now exist. But both parties and press are still harassed by the hated political police, the CENER, and other arms of the security forces. Populations are beginning to separate. The bi-lingual university of Yaounde, has virtually disintegrated. In such troubled circumstances, the question is bound to be asked: Is this the right time for the Commonwealth to accept Cameroon, even if other criteria are met? The answer must be a categorical Yes. If there were an embattled French-speaking minority in an English-speaking country, would not the francophones do everything in their power to show solidarity? Now the Commonwealth is not, nor should be, a specifically linguistic grouping, even if English is its only working language. The actual and potential ties of Cameroon with the Commonwealth, however, cannot be ignored, especially because of the lifelines and international connections it can offer. Nigeria will be strongly pressing Cameroon's case. Cameroon stability involves Nigerian stability, and the internal balance in Cameroon is increasingly a Nigerian interest, although Nigeria has to tread carefully, as it can easily be presented as a bogeyman.

The only objection might be that the Cameroonian president does not speak good English, and Commonwealth summits allow no interpreters. That seems like a quibble faced with the geo-political imperatives, involving both African stability and democracy, which are now in play. GEMINI NEWS

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## To the Editor...

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.

### Railway

Sir, It is disquieting to note that Bangladesh Railway is incurring loss to the tune of Tk. 140 crore annually. A poor country like Bangladesh cannot afford the pain of such colossal loss in one service sector alone. Every year before presentation of budget we hear about the colossal loss of railway. But, why the situation has not been improved. It is an admitted fact that railway journey is still comfortable and safer. But why travelling passengers are avoiding it? Why traders are not sending their goods by railway? There are a lot of reasons which have declined the earning of the railway. The trains do not run in time. The compartments, in

most cases, do not have nominal facilities like light, fan, water etc. There is no enough security measures in trains. The genuine travellers do not get seat, whereas it is always occupied by the ticketless passengers. The Inter City trains have already developed habit of late running. Inter City train tickets, sometimes, are not easily available. During festival time these tickets are sold in blackmarket. In the case of goods — train, wagons are not easily available. Booked goods cannot reach the destination within time. There are also reports of pilferage, and also that of surplus staff. All measures be taken to provide basic facilities in the trains. The trains should run strictly on time. All ticket

### Domestic Savings

Sir, We have been listening to sermons on the virtues of domestic savings since Pakistani days. Normally domestic savings comprises savings and investments in banks, insurances, share purchase etc. I paid Tk 750 per annum for a Postal Life Insurance policy for 20 yrs and received Tk 24,800/- as final settlement. I could then buy six tons of gold with one year's premium but now with 20 yrs premium and profit I cannot buy six to-

las of gold. The Investment Corporation of Bangladesh's annual reports show that 50% of the companies could not pay any dividend on an average during the last four years. Many companies failed to give dividend for the past consecutive four years while government is crying for privatisation. Several deductions are made on bank deposits, bank accounts etc. Thus how the government expects domestic savings unless proper incentives are given? Let the authority look into the matter seriously and honestly. Sadik Ali Moghbazar, Dhaka.

### Where default is at a premium!

Sir, From time to time one comes across prominent advertisements put in by the WASA and the PDB at considerable public cost, offering special concessions to defaulters if they paid up their arrears dues within a particular period. The concessions represent a total exemption of all

accumulated surcharge and interest which are public money. Are not such exemptions tantamount to a premium on default as well as an open invitation to the defaulters to continue to default in the future too in order to enable them to obtain similar exemptions at the cost of non-defaulters? Surely, it would seem more logical if the defaulters were required to pay all arrears with surcharge and interest within a particular period, failing which the surcharge and interest would be enhanced at a higher rate. I suppose, everything in our country is upside down, such as an honest businessman having to pay five to six times more tax than a dishonest one who, by not paying tax regularly, accumulates plenty of black money and suddenly one day is permitted to make his black money white by paying only a fraction of what was otherwise due by him. A. Quayum Dhaka.

### US Task Force

Sir, Every coin has two sides and we can argue for ever the motives of the US Marines' arrival in Bangladesh for cyclone relief work. But talking to the affected people and seeing what has been accomplished, one cannot doubt the benefit and miracle the US Task Force has accomplished within such a short time as they carried out their relief operation. Let us be a grateful nation and thank the US Marines, President Bush and the people of the United States of America for coming forward in such a way with such a great help in such a short time. It was a humanitarian cause and they have done a humanitarian deed. It goes to prove that an army is not just for "fighting" a war. In peace time it can be used for a better cause for the humanity and mankind. It should be a lesson to all for constructive utilization of human power. A. Chowdhury Nakhlapara, Dhaka.