

Dhaka, Tuesday, July 16, 1991

The Acid Test

Everything seems set for elections to the Dhaka University Central Students Union (DUCSU). Everything, that is, except the real problem: will it be held in a peaceful atmosphere and fair manner? Judging by Vice-Chancellor Moniruzzaman Miah's conduct of last year's DUCSU polls, there is no reason to doubt that, from the administrative side, the elections are likely to be held in the fairest manner possible. However, the question of peace, on which the whole exercise hinges, is an unknown quantity. Unfortunately, there is a prevailing suspicion that the intentions of some student parties, or of individuals and sub-groups within them, may not be as conducive to peaceful politics as we would like to believe.

But here again, a look back at the most recent DUCSU polls should give us more cause for optimism than not. The 1990 polls went off peacefully, and to their immense credit, defeated parties accepted the results in good grace, setting an example of democratic behaviour. As a result, all student groups were able to unite later to achieve a common goal — overthrow of Lt Gen H M Ershad's government.

When students set the example in 1990, they did so against a backdrop of an all-pervading authoritarian system which denied popular participation in the governance of the country. Today, we have a representative government elected through the fairest polls ever held in this country's 20-year history, and all the current talk is of consensus politics and finding ways and means to strengthen the democratic process. Naturally then, we expect the student community, which has always played a prominent role in shaping the political destiny of the country, to respond to the political imperatives of the moment and conduct its affairs in such a way that will contribute to, rather than obstruct, the process. Students of Dhaka University acquitted themselves well during the transition from an authoritarian to a representative dispensation, but now comes the acid test. A peaceful election is essential not only because that is the DUCSU tradition, but as a sign that, having set the example in 1990, students are still capable of playing a constructive role in the development of the country's political culture.

We believe that every student group and its leaders have the best interest of their community in particular, and the nation in general, at heart. They differ in the ways in which their goals are to be attained, and in some instances the definition of the goals themselves. But that is not the problem. In any democratic dispensation, differences are not only normal they are indeed essential. We have a problem because of the way politics is seen to be conducted on the campus.

At the same time, the focus of campus politics seems to be a little distorted: while our education system as a whole is suffering from a deep-rooted malaise, it is most disheartening to see students expending energy on issues that should really be left to the National Assembly, which is now a truly representative house of the people. True, students should remain vigilant against any slide back towards authoritarianism, but that must not become an obsession at the expense of everything else. Finally, we have to say that it is the major political parties with student fronts, that must bear the ultimate responsibility for what happens on the campus. Political parties control their student wings pretty tightly, to the extent that most, if not all, DUCSU candidates are likely to be nominees of central leaders of political parties. While the leaders enjoy the amount of influence they have on student politics, they must also recognise that the buck stops at the party central office. An unequivocal renunciation of the use of force in politics by the major parties has now become essential. Not only renunciation, but a positive undertaking to expel anyone known to use arms from their respective parties is now required. That is the real test ahead for the political leadership of the country.

Felicitations for the New Queen

Our respectful obeisance to the new queen. Our exuberant felicitations to the tender one on the occasion of her ascending the throne. When beauty, tenderness and power find a natural habitat in one wee little girl we cannot help marvelling. Our new women's national chess champion comes from Chittagong and has two more years to take her school certificate exams. We congratulate you, Tanima Parveen. Keep the standard flying, and we won't be surprised if Bangladesh becomes first in Asia to have a woman grandmaster.

Tanima, — the name called from the immense treasure trove of Tagoreana and testifying to delicate physical beauty — breasted the tape in a photo-finish that involved a big dose of high drama. Both she and the runner-up Shabana Parveen Nipa were trailing Afroza Khanam Bablee before their respective last round. Bablee needed one win to steer clear of all challenges and list the summit. But she lost and caused two tie-ups. Tanima got better of Shabana Nipa and the unhappy Bablee had the consolation of pushing international woman master Rani Hamid to the fourth place — thanks to the Buscholtz tie-break system. Special congratulations to Tanima for remaining unbeaten to the end.

Only a few days back grandmaster Niaz Murshed had told Prime Minister Khaleida Zia that chess was one — perhaps the only — area in which Bangladesh stands a very good chance of hitting world class. Let us add to that excellent possibility a note of optimism that soon enough our Tanima's and Nipa's would be reaching the height of Chiburnadze's.

Our little grandmaster on that occasion emphasized the importance of proper and adequate support to the chess talents. We want to underline that as we once again celebrate the school-girl's winning the national crown.

THE head of Nepal's new government, Mr G.P. Koirala, has been described as "dry as dust" but businesslike. To surmount the problems now facing the country, he will need all the pragmatism and stamina that he can muster. He may also need some luck.

The first problem is internal stability, which he has publicly recognised as a priority. The administration's foremost aim, he has said, is "restore the people's sense of security in order that their faith and confidence in democracy remain intact."

He has also appealed for a one-year moratorium on all forms of agitation, keenly aware that the country's civil servants are restless and dissatisfied and that the main parliamentary opposition group has vowed to overthrow him at the first opportunity — unless he produces quick and effective remedies for the chief economic malaise, a rate of inflation running at over 30 per cent.

Mr. Koirala's Nepali Congress Party won 110 seats in the 205-member lower house of parliament in the May

12 elections, the country's first in 32 years. The United Marxist-Leninist (UML) faction of the Communists emerged as a strong opposition with 69 seats.

The new Prime Minister has also recognised that social instability and economic disorders go hand in hand. What the people need, he concedes, are measures of "immediate relief": he has pledged himself to a speedy reorganisation of the country's economic

The New Prime Minister of Nepal may have an unexciting personal image, but he has been prompt and explicit in setting out his government's priorities

structures. Relations with India are the third area of pressing concern. Mr Koirala, describing India as a "natural friend," has promised to start a dialogue — with an "open mind and heart" — with India's new leaders as soon as possible. The issues will range from trade and transit to exploitation of water resources and a proposed rail link.

The ground for these discussions was largely prepared by the outgoing (interim)

Prime Minister, Mr Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, who visited India in June 1990. He agreed then to a restoration of relations to how they had stood before April 1987 "pending the finalisation of a comprehensive arrangement covering all aspects of bilateral relations."

For Mr Koirala, much will depend on whether he can find an acceptable way of agreeing to Indian demands for a common security and defence arrangement. Such an accord would be vehemently opposed by the UML. And China, which supplied arms to Nepal during the trade confrontation with India and which has watched moves towards rapprochement with a studied silence, will be a far from indifferent bystander.

The relatively dull personality of Grijya Prasad Koirala has been particularly emphasised by observers familiar

with his predecessor, who was an engaging conversationalist. An analyst in the "Times of India" said: "After an hour with Mr. Bhattarai, one came away with the feeling that the time had been short. With Mr Koirala fifteen minutes can be heavy going."

Mr Bhattarai suffered a shock defeat in the May elections at the hands of a "dark horse" UML challenger, Mr

Madan Bhandari. As head of the interim government, he had fulfilled the two major responsibilities given him: drafting a new Constitution and holding the general elections.

Although complimented on those successes, he is often blamed for an otherwise weak performance by the administration he headed. He has agreed, reluctantly, to remain acting president of the Nepali Congress Party and has undertaken to revamp its organisa-

tion. Meanwhile, the new Prime Minister has been turning his attention to the national economy. Mr Koirala has said he will do his best to control rising prices, lower the interest rates on credit to poor farmers and subsidise the price of fertilisers.

He has recently sought to downplay his anti-Communist image, saying he was not a "staunch anti-anything" in foreign affairs, he stressed it

would be his policy to maintain friendly relations with all countries, "especially the two big neighbours," adding that he considered India "a brother" and China "a friend".

When a newsman asked him to comment on communist charges that the Nepali Congress would "sell" the country (to India), he dismissed the allegation as an "outright lie."

Mr Koirala, aged 66, is the youngest of four brothers born to Krishna Prasad Koirala in

Tedi Saharsha (India) where he was exiled by the autocratic Rana rulers in the 1920s. Two of his brothers — the charismatic B.P. Koirala and MP. Koirala — are former prime ministers from the "dawn of democracy" period dating from the 1950s.

Before graduating from university, he joined Mahatma Gandhi's "Quit India" movement against British rule. He then joined the revolution against the Rana regime in Nepal, orchestrating the first industrial revolt at a jute mill.

He spent seven years in jail after King Mahendra dismissed B.P. Koirala's government in 1960. Freed in 1967 after a 21-day hunger strike, he went into political exile in India in 1971 and returned in 1979 on the eve of the national referendum.

Mr Koirala lost his wife, Sushma, in a fire accident in 1972. He has not married again. He has been general secretary of the Nepali Congress Party since 1976.

—Depthnews Asia

In her book "Mosaic: A Chinese Legacy" the novelist Bette Bao Lord, talking about the Cultural Revolution, mentions being out walking with her aunt, who was a teacher during that period, and later.

A passing young man bowed to them, saying "Good afternoon, Teacher Bao". After he had gone, Miss Bao turned to her niece and said calmly, "that student beat me up and locked me in a cupboard during the Cultural Revolution."

The eldest son of Senior Leader Deng Xiaoping was thrown bodily out of a fourth-floor window during the Cultural Revolution. He survived the fall, although he broke both legs, some vertebrae, lost a kidney, has damaged lungs and various other problems. He is now a paraplegic, his body held together with steel pins and wires.

Today, no traces of his discomfort and constant pain are visible on his face. He has dedicated himself to bettering the life of handicapped people in China, and is the driving force behind the Chinese Association for the Handicapped.

One young man now in his thirties mentioned how the Cultural Revolution affected him: the schools were all closed; by the time the Cultural Revolution ended he had reached the age to enter university. With no education to speak of, he applied himself to passing the Entrance examinations. He studied sixteen hours a day for a year, and passed. Today he speaks fluent English and is an executive in a large corporation.

Another young man gave himself an education of sorts by spending six hours a day studying Mao's works at home because no other books were available to him during the period. Today he too is very well-read, well educated and speaks fluent English. He holds a high position in another organisation.

The Cultural Revolution made victims of thousands of people; not just the high officials who were denounced, jailed, tortured, beaten and killed, nor the intellectuals who were sent into the countryside to work with the peasants; but even the young Red Guards themselves; and all the other young people who, during the formative years of their lives were brainwashed into acts of destruction, deprived of education and otherwise made to suffer. Many of these people have been unable to put their lives together again; those then years are lost to them forever.

But almost any person in China when questioned about the price he had to pay at that time in terms of suffering, loss of career, or the loss of loved ones, shows no bitterness. They all say the same thing. That it was a mistake in judgement by the leaders at the time; that the young people are not to be blamed, they

Re-education of Bangladesh's Red Guards: Hope for Our Future Generations

by Portia

were misled, they did not know any better; that the tide was going in a certain direction, and one had to go with the tide or perish.

Today, few traces remain of the upheaval and chaos of the Cultural Revolution. Chinese history has at different times been turbulent, replete with instance of rebellion, war, exploitation, colonisation and ill-treatment at the hands of for-

We must move away from a culture of violence. We must put the past behind us; we must stop wanting revenge on those that we imagine have wronged us; it is counter-productive and time-wasting. We must stop thinking of the trials and tribulations that we have suffered, and look forward.

and chaos. In Bangladesh today we have reached a new stage in our development. We have a democratically elected government, and there is hope now for a brighter and better future.

And yet there is still talk of corruption on an immense scale, inefficiency, obstructionism in the bureaucratic process, and a general idea that we owe the country nothing, but the country owes us a living for all that has gone before.

We, in Bangladesh, must in our turn, move away from a culture of violence. We must put the past behind us; we must stop wanting revenge on those that we imagine have wronged us; it is counterproductive and time-wasting. We must stop thinking of the trials

and tribulations that we have suffered, and look forward. We must think of what we, each and every one of us, can do to better the conditions of our country, now that we have the opportunity.

We have a responsibility to our future generation. Dhaka University which was once counted as the best educational institution in former Pakistan, is now the scene of senseless gun battles which have no aim, seem to serve no

purpose other than to destroy the educational system. The peace and the stability of Bangladesh, which was a goal which finally seemed to be within our reach, now seems to be receding into a vague and menacing and not too promising, future.

It takes many years of sacrifice, love and hard work to bring our children to adulthood; yet all it takes is one bullet to put an end to a lifetime of hope and aspiration. The young men with guns are the equivalent, in a manner of speaking, of the misguided Red Guards.

These are our children on the campuses. We parents pay the price for the violence when the bodies of our sons are brought home dead. The

UN Development Programme calls for a reduction in military spending in the north with the savings being transferred to social investment, with at least a quarter going to overseas assistance.

Europe accounts for over 50 per cent of world military spending and it is thus an obvious place for cuts. Money saved from there and put into research and development of environmentally sound technologies and agriculture, plus a willingness to freely share these with developing countries, would do much more to promote peace than bigger and better weapons.

Last September, all of the G7 plus 64 other presidents and prime ministers, promised to take action to secure the survival, protection and development of children. Only France has so far ratified the convention on the rights of children. The US has still not signed it and the rest of the G7 has yet to ratify it.

— GEMINI NEWS

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less of GNP in developing countries.

The current World Bank president, Barber Conable, has defined military spending as excessive where it exceeds public spending on health and education.

Well informed sources say the IMF submitted a paper on military spending to the G7, suggesting the Fund makes cuts in military spending a condition of its adjustment programmes. The fund is also believed to want controls on the arms trade.

It is possible that an agreement to limit arms sales may emerge from the summit, but much more will be needed if ordinary people worldwide are to have increased human security. The 1991 Human Development Report from the

G7 will Have to Confront World's Inequities

Geoff Tansey writes from London

Problems of debt, military spending and chronic lack of development have put developing countries at the mercy of rich countries. If this severe imbalance is to be corrected the G7 nations meeting in London (July 15-17) will have to take issues like reduced military spending, development and environment much more seriously.

AS Mikhail Gorbachev prepares to join the G7 leaders (July 17), he will be hoping for more than crumbs from the rich world's table. He may get a few billion dollars plus much greater access to World Bank and International Monetary Fund expertise. But what of the rest of the world?

Some fear the return of a 19th century type of international order of major powers competing for power and spheres of influence. To avoid this, the G7 must take peace, environment and development issues seriously — they must at last give up some of their power over the world economy.

To enable poor countries to develop, the G7 must do something about the massive outflows of money from poor to rich countries for debt service.

The outflow from Africa to the industrialised countries in the form of service payments on debt has amounted to over four per cent of Africa's GNP for about eight years," says Richard Jolly, deputy director of UNICEF.

"It's outrageous, obscene, and the most serious obstacle

to African development and recovery."

Some action on debt does seem likely. Reports in London talk of a \$15 billion debt relief programme that will be agreed on by the G7 leaders for the very poorest countries.

The plan may be modelled on the so-called Trinidad terms that John Major, the British prime minister, outlined to the IMF last September. These called for doubling of official debt relief, extending repayments to 25 years with a five-year grace period in which low income countries pay back neither interest nor principal.

In 1988, G7 agreed to give low income countries the option of cancelling a third of their official debt, stretching repayment or reducing interest payments.

The new deal is expected to allow debt relief on 50 per cent of the loans, although Britain is reportedly pushing for 66 per cent. This means at least 19 countries with per capita incomes of less than \$700 would get relief from debt service charges on the \$30 billion they owe. In return, those countries would be required to negotiate their economic policies with the IMF.

Welcome as this may be in sub-Saharan Africa, it still goes nowhere near dealing with the \$1,300 billion of outstanding debt which developing countries have as a whole, nor with the portion of debt owed to banks.

The combined gross domestic product (GDP) of the G7 topped \$13,500 billion in 1990, almost 84 per cent of

the total GDP of the 24 member Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) club of rich countries. But the G7's average aid only amounts to 0.41 per cent of GNP, well short of the 0.7 per cent UN target, which in 1990 only France surpassed at 0.75 per cent.

Aid apart, however, human development will require fair as opposed to free trade and a much more even sharing of world power and resources.

In a post-cold war world, there is a chance to rethink security and cut levels of military spending. Former World Bank president Robert McNamara has called for drastic military spending cuts north and south. He supports linking aid to military expenditure levels of two per cent or

promotion along with educating the public about the system. Now neither the public nor the enforcing authority know what this VAT is all about. This is turning out to be the biggest joke around. Let us hope this does not become the biggest tragedy because of the ignorance of a very few, or of a majority otherwise.

A. Chowdhury Tejgaon, Dhaka

Share market

Sir, Almost all the dailies maintain some columns on Dhaka Stock Exchange share market. The government is continuously disinvesting abandoned units along with partial off loading of shares of

public sector industries. Besides, there is continuous advocacy for privatisation. But unfortunately, the performance of DSE share market in respect of dividend declaration is very poor. There are 134 companies listed in DSE but only 76 companies gave dividend among 128 companies as per ICB annual report in 1989-90. Similarly only 65 companies gave dividend among 114 companies in 1988-89. If an investor had invested in all the companies at par, excluding multinational companies, it could be absurd to get all the money invested through disposal today! Let the government look into the matter and do something.

Sadik Alee Maghbazar, Dhaka

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.

Floor crossing by MPs

Sir, I like to draw the kind attention of the Parliament Members to a clause of BNP proposed Constitutional Amendment Bill 91. As a measure against the floor-crossing Member (s), it has been proposed, in such case, the Membership of the Floor-crossing MP shall fall vacant and he/she shall not participate in MP elections in next

five years. To most of the patriots, the preceding part of the proposal is acceptable and the succeeding part is rejectable. Election is the main gateway to democratic system objected toward protecting national interest.

However, a stable democratic government is inevitable for national development. Whatever political party ascends the throne, shall fetch bad omens, if the government

is unstable. If floor-crossing opportunities are left unhindered, the government shall always have to face threats of immature fall due to probable personal or fractional malices. The Parliament must not be considered as a sports arena. The Parliament is already going to be sovereign in the proposed system. The MP's representing the crores of people are, hence, requested to think over the matter.

Taher Mohiuddin Mohammadpur, Dhaka

VAT

Sir, VAT or no VAT that is the question. The crisis over the new system of taxation will go on for a long time. It is a bitter pill to swallow and a sys-

tem too sophisticated for a country where corruption has become a part of life and bureaucracy runs the show. The proponents of this system, for application in our country, are very naive. They seem to be totally alienated from the mainstream of life in Bangladesh. The impression I get of them is, they know of this country from what they hear in cocktail parties, dinner at sophisticated restaurants and the select few they meet in their very sophisticated 'enclave'. VAT is an excellent system but by forcing it down the throat of Bangladesh, the proponents will only succeed in making it a failure.

The VAT should have been introduced slowly first in a few areas, that too with a lot of

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