

VIEWS FROM THE SOVIET UNION

Moscow Putsch: An Afterword

by Vladimir Simonov

A successful coup in the Soviet Union would have strangled the Gorbachev reforms and newborn democracy, and revived the East-West confrontation. Now that it has failed, we expect graphic improvement in the political situation. As the country and the world sigh with relief after the three grim days, they have reasons to hope that 'perestroika' will regain momentum after its small pace of the last months.

personified in Yeltsin, who worked with selfless courage to rescue Gorbachev — the man whose resignation he strongly demanded a mere six months ago. Many Soviet and Western analysts think the two Presidents will now make it up between themselves.

The putsch investigation is still ahead. We expect it to show that the abortive attempt was encouraged by fear before the loss of the centralized authoritarian power, which the union treaty promised.

Now that the putsch flopped, the treaty may gain new partisans. It is human to keep together in trouble. For three days, the Soviet nation was united by the painful realization of danger. Republican leaders — whether favouring the treaty or opposing it — refused to recognise the eight plotters as lawful government. Now, they are more likely to side with the treaty than before the fatal day of August 19.

The coup failure was brought closer by international

opposition. Hot lines connected Yeltsin with leaders of all major western countries. Soviet resistance was encouraged by the world, as its indignant voice came across the frontiers. The junta has no chance of international recognition. It became clear after

the West promptly took back its promises of loans and other economic aid.

Still, the three terrible days make us doubt whether the Seven took a sound stance when they met Gorbachev in London. Aid put off till after successful reforms spelt dan-

ger for the West as for the Soviet Union. The plotters used the rampant economic crisis as cover for their sinister plans. We can hardly deal with this crisis unless other countries help us.

British Prime Minister John Major, the Seven's current leader, thinks it was wrong to refuse Gorbachev the requested 7.3 billion pound loan.

and demands the decision revised. The formula 7+1 needs something weightier than advice and consultations to carry on the reforms and stabilize the Soviet economy.

"Thank you, Russia. Thank you, Moscow." The French presidential envoy said to the jubilant rally in front of the Russian parliamentary premises.

The three days in August brought the world closer than it had been before.

— IAN

Women in Bangladesh

Women in Bangladesh enjoy, or rather endure, the lowest status among all other countries in the developing world. That was the conclusion of a study conducted by the Population Crisis Committee (PCC), using information supplied by various international organisations on women's position in five crucial sectors — health, marriage and children, education, employment and social equality.

But that is not all. According to the 1991 Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme, the rate of literacy among Bangladeshi women is less than half that of their male counterparts; for every 100 men engaged in wage earning, there are just seven women.

These statistics, far from lying, tell only half the story. Status of women in present-day Bangladesh is such, that to call it lowly would be to make it respectable. Women bear the brunt of not only the task of holding families together and making sure their husbands and children have something to eat (even if it means going hungry themselves), but they also suffer every kind of exploitation, injustice and repression society can devise. The problem is a deep-rooted one deriving its durability from long social traditions, compounded by misguided religious bigotry.

The choice before us now is a stark one: either we launch a vigorous campaign to eradicate existing social prejudices against women, or get ready to face the prospect of retarded development and social degeneration. No society can conceivably hope to advance economically or ethically by treating half its population as second class citizens, and by actively discouraging them from engaging in productive, income-generating activities. This is a denial of a woman's right to be counted as an individual, rather than as a footnote to a man's life.

Two developments in recent years have proved beyond doubt that women can contribute, as much as men, to the betterment of the country's economy. The Grameen Bank initiative in advancing credit to rural women has generated a great deal of self-help and small business activities without any liability to the tax-payers. Similarly, women have played the pivotal role in making the garments exporting industry into a thrust sector.

We need to thoroughly investigate the current status of women in our society in order to identify the problems. At the same time, a study has to be launched into the role women can play, without social or religious hindrance, at all levels of society, and not just at home. Leading on from that, an integrated and comprehensive long-term plan needs to be formulated to bring women's position up to the level of men in the crucial sectors mentioned in the PCC study.

There is a grave lack of public knowledge about legal rights relating to women's position within the family. Uneducated and rural women, in particular, suffer from an ignorance of their rights, or they are simply afraid to take recourse to the law when faced with either exploitation or repression. The government as well as the media have a moral duty to make women more socially aware, without which their cause will remain a lost one. Most important, however, the 34 women members of parliament ought to play a more active role than they have so far. We hope the 30 "unelected" women MPs will justify their presence by taking up women's issues and set in motion legislations to enhance women's position in the eyes of the law.

Stewing in an Infernal Juice

Bangladesh produces about 75 films every year. Very few nations do so. But the figure instead of signifying achievement became the butt of a spell of lamentation by one of our ministers. Most of these films fail to give the audience their money's value and their general standard is degrading, said Mr Nurul Huda, the State Minister in charge of Information. His observation was made at the opening of the current Chinese Film Festival in the city.

This is an improvement over past ministerial performance of raining platitudes about everything anytime anywhere. Mr Huda, of course, kept to tradition by volunteering his ideas on what films should do and what they should be like: they must 'depict' the problems of the 'toiling masses' and they must be 'healthy', 'reflecting the happiness as well as the miseries of the people of all walks of life' and be 'entertaining'.

That's a tall order and a little impractically optimistic too — hardly hiding a hope that the 'filmpara' would perhaps reform and earn some relevance to the needs and the realities of the society. Well, that hasn't happened so far and there's no reason why should that happen now. Film is a business involving investment and a hard-drive desire to get the money put in back with some profit. But it is so far a very bad business in so far it has in-built pitfalls all the way with a very great possibility of losing money in a big way. No stone is left unturned, as the figure of speech goes, for ensuring a less-risky venture in films. Certain things have to be sacrificed and certain others done in order to get a good paying market. The Dhaka filmwallahs have long discovered what jettison and what to embrace in their slippery business. You throw out art and taste and culture and social relevance in order to make way for the success formula. You embrace it and you start copying from earlier pillars of success specially of the Bombay variety — churning out pills of erotica.

The government's sincerity in its opposition to the drugs is beyond reproach. Cinema in Bangladesh is selling addiction and nothing besides — addiction that is taking a toll of the nation's idea of reality and of itself. And government is indeed supporting this industry as best as it can. There is little bit of playing double standard involved here which cannot be obviated by ministrations of some good words once in a while.

The Censor Board plays at best a complicitous role in this nightmarish drama. And government is averse to interfering in the goings on in films beyond the rusting censoring scissors. How then to get out of this hole? By way of a true cultural resurgence, could be the best answer. But without any knowledge of how to bring that about this hardly is any answer at all. It is perhaps for the time being unavoidable that we would be stewing in this infernal juice until an overall and radical change takes over — in governance and education, politics and culture.

Reaction is not crushed once and forever, but its influence is waning. Russia's MPs demand to break or reorganise institutions which supported the putschists, in particular, to cut to a reasonable minimum the bloated military and KGB bureaucracy.

The pressure on Gorbachev from the right will ease off, to all appearances, to give him more chance for cooperation with democracy. The doom looming over 'perestroika' gave rise to an embryonic left centrist bloc, whose birth had long seemed too good to be true. The newfound unity is



Boris Yeltsin

"Eternal Memory to You Guys," Reads the Sign

by Vladimir Alexeev

Political Observer, Novosti Information Agency

"ETERNAL memory to you guys," read the hastily painted sign on Sadovaya Avenue where in the early hours of August 21, 1991, unarmed Russian patriots gave their lives to thwart an attempt by a column of armoured personnel carriers to break through to the building of the Russian Republic's parliament.

Mounds of flowers rimmed by burning candles marked the spots where they fell, and late into the night people were still streaming in thousands to pay homage to the valiant defenders of freedom and democracy.

On that tragic night, the fate of the nation was decided as much on the rain-drenched asphalt of this avenue, as in the Russian parliament nearby, where the leaders of the republic headed by president Boris Yeltsin, were organizing resistance to the usurpers.

The eight coup leaders must be held responsible for the deaths of their heroic young patriots, as much as for state treason by attempting to

suppress democracy in the land.

In their narrow-minded arrogance, instilled by years of faithful servitude to preceding totalitarian rulers, they wittingly considered that people were still pawns who could easily be manipulated to advance their ominous designs.

It would be naive to suppose that the coup attempt, though horrendously badly planned, was a spontaneous act. For a number of years there were indications that the many economic hardships endured by the nation were artificially induced and it should now be determined what part these traitors played in engineering these difficulties to fan popular discontent with the reforms being promoted by President Mikhail Gorbachev.

After all, involved in the coup attempt was the former prime minister directly re-

sponsible for the nation's economy, the head of the country's military-industrial complex, or the most efficient industrial structure in the land, the head of the collective farming union, responsible for the organization and the management of agricultural production, as well as a secretary of the communist party's central committee, the minister of defence and the chairman of the state security committee — all possessing leverage to influence the nation's political, as well as economic development.

Their proclaimed desire to end chaos and bring order to the land backfired from the very beginning. Industrial production has been further seriously disrupted and it might take months, if not years, to rectify matters. The same can be said for agriculture, because during these vital harvest-time

days efforts to save this year's harvest were crippled. Moreover, their actions have seriously damaged the popular standing of the army, the law enforcement agencies, as well as the prestige of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

It will be long and difficult task to rectify the immense damage inflicted by the reactionary coup attempt on the Soviet economy. But there is no doubt that the Soviet people inspired by the leaders of the resistance spearheaded by Russia's president Boris Yeltsin, will do their utmost to rectify matters as swiftly as possible.

And in this they will be inspired by the immortal memory of the valiant young patriots who sacrificed their lives on the rain-drenched Moscow's Sadovaya Avenue fighting to insure freedom and democracy for all the people of the Soviet Union — for the peoples of the world.

Refugees Tip the Man Most Likely to Win

Elias Nyakutemba writes from Mufulira

About six political parties in Angola are set to contest the country's first pluralist polls, due in September 1992. But the main battle is between the two giants, UNITA and the MPLA. A Gemini News Service correspondent talked to Angolan war refugees in Zambia to assess their views and find out which candidate they believe will become Angola's next president.

THE Mchaba refugee camp on Zambia's north-western border with Angola is now reeling under the weight of 26,000 refugees, up from 16,000 only a few weeks earlier.

In villages scattered throughout the region, an estimated total of 103,500 Angolan refugees go about their daily chores, putting up shelters and settling into their new lives in Zambia without moving into the overcrowded camp.

Many of the refugees are still visibly frightened by their war experiences, despite the cease-fire and plans for multi-party elections, and remain unconvinced about lasting peace in Angola. Between now and September next year, six or more parties will jostle for power but the main fight will centre on two men — Jose Eduardo dos Santos, leader of the governing People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), and Jonas Savimbi, leader of the rival National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA).

It is the war between these two that has created these refugees. The closing battles before the cease-fire between MPLA and UNITA were for control of Luanda Province, which borders Zambia. Now the refugees watch and assess with interest how the two leaders shape up in a totally different, hopefully peaceful, arena.

Refugees opinion seems to be that although Dos Santos has the machinery of government on his side, the election could be pulled from under his feet by the Joint Military

Commission, and the results determined by ethnic factors and current realities.

The MPLA has to not only defend a 16-year-old record of corruption and shocking living standards, but an elitist image among the poor, who make up the majority. They include many Mesticos (mixed race) and Mulattos (Angolans assimilated into Portuguese culture) who dominate sections of the government.

Dos Santos plans to broaden acceptance from his Kimbundu ethnic base in Luanda, Kwanza and Malange provinces to include central, south and east Angola and to undo the deep-seated mistrust piled up over years of bitter fighting.

The central region is inhabited by Jonas Savimbi's Ovimbundu tribe, which is Angola's largest single ethnic group, making up 45 per cent of the nine million population.

Savimbi has been in control of the south for years. Over the last century or so, ties between the Ovimbundu (commonly known as Mbundus) and a loose Luvale-Lunda alliance, have transformed relationships into a single power bloc. Dos Santos's task is to split that alliance and attempt to sway votes to his cause, a formidable task.

Dos Santos cannot boast of having delivered the goods in the east, which is his power

base, and the southern regions remain the most impoverished in the country.

The MPLA had earlier insisted at the recent Lisbon peace talks that it needed at least three years to prepare

Angola for plural elections. Whether it can fulfil its promise — and thus bolster its own position — in little more than a year remains to be seen.

The MPLA itself is split between the privileged

Kimbundu classes and the party's poorer supporters. The failed coup attempt in May 1977 against then MPLA leader, the late President Agostinho Neto, was interpreted largely as an expression of entrenched resentment against the Mesticos by the under-privileged led by Jaao Bernardo Vieira.

But Savimbi's ranking is not exactly that of a saint either. He has been known to be highly intolerant to inter-party democracy. Past UNITA Congresses have been run autocratically, with Savimbi himself setting the agenda and then hand-picking his own hacks to occupy executive positions.

He is said to have silenced all opposition within UNITA, in some cases by detaining them or even by eliminating them altogether. In contrast, Dos Santos can genuinely point to openly competing rivalries within the MPLA and lay claim to being a champion of inter-party democracy. Yet these differences of opinion within the party, observers believe, could

also undo the MPLA.

There has been talk of the "hawks" and "ideologues" splitting from the MPLA and forming a new bloc away from the image of elitism. They could also take with them an estimated 100,000 soldiers from the MPLA due to be laid off under the current UN-supervised amalgamation of the MPLA and UNITA Armies into a single national force.

Additionally, during the war, the MPLA divided the country into just six military zones. Administration was confined to government centres and very few political structures at grass-roots level were established. It will be hard to put these in place at a time when contenders from all parties are jostling for support. By contrast, Savimbi's political structures are said to be much more dominant and alive, especially in the south.

Savimbi is a dominant character and his charisma is a major election asset. As one of the refugees in Zambia put it: "People want change, even if the devil has to provide it and I think Savimbi is the devil people want."

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Angola's refugees: Picking a winner

Map of Angola and surrounding regions (Zaire, Zambia, Namibia, Botswana) with portraits of Dos Santos and Savimbi. Includes a legend for refugee settlements, rivers, and roads.

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.

Govt shares in multinationals

Sir, No country can be industrialised and developed by the efforts of government and few entrepreneurs alone unless the small investors come forward in large numbers to invest in the industrialisation of the nation. So at present all sorts of positive measures are taken by the governments across the world to promote the capital market and activate the stock exchange.

Non availability of profitable shares on the floor of Dhaka Stock Exchange is primarily responsible for its present show. Small savers are now very much willing to buy and hold shares of reputable and profitable companies — be that national or multinational. The over subscriptions of a few public issues of both national and multinational companies bear testimony to the fact.

Besides, the remarkable increase in the number of 'investor's account' holders with ICB all over the country itself bears testimony to it. To keep small investor's interest alive particularly in a developing country like ours, Prof Sidney M Robinson in his Report on share market in Bangladesh emphasized on the role of shares of multinationals in the development of the stock market in Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh multinational shares worth about Taka 10-12 crores are reported to be presently held by ICB and the Ministry of Industries. Besides, more multinational shares may comfortably be made available to the public by the government through the mechanism viz, dilution of percentage of foreign holding, conversion of private limited company to public limited one, permission to allow foreign investments like banking and beyond a

limit only by selling a percentage of shares through stock exchange etc.

In the light of the privatisation policy the government itself decided to off-load the government shares held in few multinational companies through stock exchange. The government earlier took the decision in the meeting of the Disinvestment Board held on 2.10.1990 after adequate publicity so that small investors could know about such sale and buy it. To this effect it is reported that all attempts were taken to split the share certificates of such multinationals into massive number of share certificates for offering public sale. Even, for example, government renounced its whole right issue of multinational Oxygen (Bangladesh) Limited in favour of public issues and sold such shares to the public through the stock exchange. Bata Shoe's and Singer's shares were also made available to public in past because of the directive of the government to convert Bata and Singer into public limited companies.

But to our great surprise, notwithstanding the decision to sell government's shares in few multinationals, the government itself is now reported

to be bowing down not to offer such multinational shares to the public. Keeping the government itself away from materialising the decision has aroused questions. Is it due to the pressure of the vested quarters?

Abdul Awal, Dhaka.

Visitors at ZIA

Sir, Many among us often visit the Zia International Airport to receive or to bid farewell to some near and dear ones. In the arrival lounge, there is a visitors' waiting lobby, admittance fee to which is Tk. 20/- per person. But in case of the departure lounge, there is no such waiting lobby and therefore the visitors are facing much problem. Those who leave the country wish to remain with their relatives till the last minute of their departure. Hence, visitors should be allowed to enter the departure lounge as well, if necessary, on payment of admittance fee.

I draw the attention of the Civil Aviation Authority to this matter. A. Zahidul Haque, Assistant Professor, Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka-1207.

OPINION

Take it easy

Plain Living and High Thinking

Chuckles

Here are some unpractical suggestions for plain living and high thinking, as practical suggestions won't be followed. Besides, it is easier and fun to have some freedom; and to be slow and steady in changing over to an austerity programme for self-defacement.

* Switch off engine of the vehicle when facing red light. * Skip dinner and make the speech longer. It means that you are observing plain living, while it is not binding on others. It is the first practical stage of democracy, in small doses, a small step at a time, the host being the last to be served (with democratic principles, not dinner).

* For family planning, take a glass of water — instead. * Go to office in a rickshaw. The wife is quite able to maintain the car. * If smoker, smoke a low brand at home, and 'foreign' in office or outside. This is the first phase.

* Do not have the air-conditioner repaired (in the office). Wait, and develop patience. A little sacrifice helps. Serve the country with the sweat of your brow, as our chashit-bhais do; but you are doing it indoors, with the fan set at minimum. * Don't mind if your peon goes on french leave. Walk out with the file — you might get a

free cup of tea (served by your colleague). If the host is a subordinate, you are practising democracy.

* If the phone is out of order, practise silence/meditation for some spiritual development. Both are in short supply. The beard can wait till the razor blades disappear in the black market; or till your friend returns from abroad with a fresh supply.

* Respect your wife's logic when she tells you some day: "Did you know I saved you Taka 1800 today? I liked a 'saree'. I wanted to buy it, but at the last moment decided not to." Resist temptation; learn it from your wife.

* When thirsty, take green coconut water. It is natural, good for health, air-tight, germ-proof, unadulterated, and potable. The money goes to the village.

* Take paan (betel leaf). It is good for the digestion (proved for 2000 years), and contains 9000 units of vitamin A (per standard unit), and is far better than pills, which are not so assimilative (by the body) compared to natural food.

After reading the opinion on austerity (Star, Aug 17), I could not help myself but write this.