

Politics of the Future

In observing the first anniversary of the fall of the Ershadian autocratic regime we celebrate as much the event as we do the process. The event was the fall of a nine-year-old corrupt and illegal government. Driven by uncontrolled ambition Ershad used the army to come to power, and once there, he used the power of the State to plunder the treasury and syphon off foreign assistance through cronies and political allies.

However, the real significance of the day lies in the fact that the corrupt government of Ershad was not toppled through another army coup, or through a palace conspiracy or through any other means that replaces one power hungry coterie by another. The unpopular and bankrupt government was driven out of power through a superb display of what has become known as 'people's power'. Unarmed, slogan chanting, poor and deprived people of our country, in a magnificent display of unity and solidarity, took away the ground from under the feet of the arrogant General who thought that we were too ignorant and divided to do him any harm.

So we celebrate the process, and in doing so we ask what was it that made the magic work one year ago? The resounding answer would be — UNITY. Unity of the people, of the students, of the professional groups, of all the patriotic forces and of course of all the political parties. The message from the success of the anti-autocracy movement is as clear as it can be — that in unity lies our strength, and the absence of it paves the way for the back-door entrants to power.

This is a truism. It is something that we have known all through history, and especially through our own political experience of the last four decades. Yet it is a message that we tend to forget. It does not take too much of imagination to think what we could have achieved if the same spirit of the unity would have continued. Sporadically it did — as in the case of the passage of the all important 12th Amendment Bill. But in such other vital areas as reconstruction of the economy, and more specifically, on the question of containing campus violence, we have witnessed a shameful absence of that spirit.

This journal would like to state in the clearest of terms that the most important resolution of this day should be to do everything possible to strengthen the democratic process and the role of the parliament in it. This means that the sanctity of the parliament and the norms of an accountable government must be most scrupulously followed by the party in power. The opposition on its part must accept the fact that a new government has been elected through a free and fair election for a period of five years. This government must be allowed that time to lead the nation.

If the government tries to avoid the parliamentary process and do things through ordinances, as it did in the case of abolishing the Upazila system, and if the opposition tries to create obstacle in the process of peaceful and orderly governance as it did by not condemning the uprooting of railway lines and such other anti-national behaviour in the name of struggling for workers rights — then democracy will not be strengthened.

Running the country under a parliamentary democratic system is not a game of the government trying to outsmart the opposition or of the opposition trying to put the government in a tight spot. For a developing country like ours, is it the art of trying to strengthen freedom and democracy and improving the lot of the poor. This we can do only by moving away from the politics of the past, and launching ourselves into the politics of the future.

It's No Remedy

The decision taken by the Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company to revert to the flat billing instead of meter system is indeed puzzling. Although the consumers, have been left with the choice open either to pay their gas bills at the fixed rates or according to the meter reading, the move decidedly pronounces a death sentence on the meter system. The fault however is not with the system itself but with the imported meters that have shown unbelievable readings on them in most cases. So the authority has gone for the easiest of solutions without even trying to find out the cause of the malaise. The prescription it has come up with has its similarity with the legendary oblique conclusion that it is better to chop off the head when remedy for headache is not easily available.

In this case, the decision will put things back to square one. For the move is a positive encouragement to wastage of national wealth contemptuously called, 'government property.' It is common knowledge that most consumers keep their gas burner burning 24 hours a day only to save match sticks. The introduction of meters was aimed to deter the trend. Under the flat billing system no such deterrent is there and the less conscious citizens will feel no remorse to leave the ovens burning all through.

Now the question is if a sound system — one that is practised the world over — should be sacrificed for the fault of a machine that can be corrected through repair or even changed. Logic dictates that one must pay according to one's consumption of gas. And no two families consume equally this natural substance. Policy somersaults pay when they are most warranted by phenomenal changes in situation. The one in question here involves in it not only unreasonableness but also inconsistencies that thrive on weakness to implement a good policy. Maybe, the present failure will have its snow balling impacts in 10-20 years when the number of consumers will double or treble. If the wastage continues then at the present rate, the estimated 12-14 trillion cubic feet of gas reserve will reduce substantially and in another 50 years the country may really head for a crisis of fuel.

That ominous prospect points to the unavoidable need for meters for economic use of natural gas. Reintroduction of meters in, say, 10 years will again be resented by the consumers and should the authority capitulate to pressure then as well? Better stick to meters and evolve ways to make it free of mechanical faults as much as humanly possible. The question of giving relief to consumers is important no doubt — and such considerations are appreciated — but there is no scope for confusing undue favour with the future of the nation. The measure to realise charges at the fixed rate may be only a temporary one until that time when the old meters have been either corrected or replaced by new and good ones.

Progress in Thai Economy Obscures Rising Social Costs

ALMOST every Newly-Industrialised Country (NIC) in Asia presents two strong images: One seen from inside and the other from outside. They are not necessarily in sharp contrast to each other. However, there are pronounced variations between the two which are often obscured by colourful tourist brochures, impressive but often carefully selected statistics and strong endorsements by foreign entrepreneurs.

In the case of Thailand which stands at the doorstep of NIC, the two images have been subjects of varied interpretations. To start with a simple fact, with all its traffic congestions, pollution and fast-disappearing open spaces, Bangkok is often called the most unlivable capital city in Asia. No matter what yardsticks are used — a high-level of reckless consumerism, rampant sex trade and the growing threat of AIDS — the quality of life in this sprawling metropolis is regarded as all-time low by Thai experts, including officials whose capacity to call a spade a spade should serve as a model for their counterparts in other developing countries, including Bangladesh.

To critics, both foreigners and locals, it is time to look at life in Bangkok as it really is, without myths and illusions, without treating it as a kind of 'moveable feast'.

Now, let's look at the other side. Thailand has been the world's fastest-growing economy during the past three years, an achievement which is attributed, among other things, to an influx of foreign investment and a boom in the property and construction sectors, fuelled, in turn, by stock price increases. With this impressive growth in the economy, the country has seen the expansion of the manufacturing industry, paving the way for the export boom now estimated at 800 billion baht in 1992, eventually estimated to reach 1321.8 billion baht in 1996. (The annual average during the sixth plan period — 1987 to 1991 period — was 467 billion baht.)

One sees this thrust in virtually — but not all — sectors of the economy. True, as a direct result of the Gulf War, the authorities have scaled down the tourism growth rate to only two per cent over that of 1990, a modest increase by Southeast Asia standard, with the number of arrivals estimated at 5.39 million. During the year under review, there will also be a sharp decline — here official figures are still a little vague — in the export of Thai manpower to the Gulf region and Saudi Arabia. Yet another problem area for the Thai economy, described by experts as a continuing source of conflict between Tokyo and Bangkok, is the chronic Thai-Japanese trade deficit which has further worsened by the rapid increase of imports of capital goods and raw materials in support of accelerated Japanese investments in Thailand. Not surprisingly during 1990, Thai imports from Japan reached 259.2 billion baht as against 101.5 billion baht of exports. (In 1989, Thai imports from Japan amounted to 200.9 billion baht as against 88 billion baht exports.)

More such figures can be quoted from official and non-official documents. They underscore the established pattern of growth in any NIC, some variations notwithstanding, such as a determined export drive, influx of foreign investment especially from Japan, a boost for privatisation almost in every field, development of

Rising Social Costs

This is the concluding article of the two-part series, based on the writer's recent visit to Bangkok.

managerial know-how and the promotion of new, especially communication, technology. Whether or not Thailand provides a model for a country like Bangladesh, specific prescriptions, just mentioned, deserve as much attention as the so-called conditionalities offered to developing countries by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In fact, there is little doubt that what these aid agencies want Bangladesh to do are largely based on what these institutions see as reasons for success in Thailand and other countries in Southeast and East Asia.

There is hardly any room for disagreement on the validity of several, if not all, of specific

distribution of its benefits between the metropolis of Bangkok and rural areas, between the north and north-east and the central plains, between the deep south and the areas bordering Burma.

The answer to the question is in the negative, although there may be divergent opinions as to the nature of imbalance in the development. According to one international expert, the disparity of income between the people in urban centres and rural population is widening year after year and that some 20 per cent of the population in Thailand live below the poverty line. The independent English-language daily, the Nation puts the figure at 25 per cent, if not

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AT HOME AND ABROAD

S. M. ALI

prescriptions mentioned earlier, ranging from a determined export drive to the development of managerial know-how. However, even Thai experts have started talking of the need for caution, for a close look at several problem areas of the current Thai economic scene. As one Thai journalist put it to this writer, 'problems produced by affluence are not necessarily easier to deal with than those created by lack of development.'

In Thailand, the biggest question facing experts is whether the development throughout the nation is a balanced one, with an equitable

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Two cartoons, reproduced here with permission of the Bangkok Post, show that all is not well with the socio-economic life in Thailand. If the introduction of the VAT system has come under fire, there is growing concern over the spread of AIDS which, according to one expert, may claim nearly half a million lives in Thailand by the turn of the century.

OPERATION Deep Freeze. The United States Antarctic research programme, has its headquarters in the New Zealand city of Christchurch.

Ironically, a diplomatic deep freeze has chilled relations between New Zealand and the United States since New Zealand banned nuclear ships six years ago.

No New Zealand leader has been received at the White House since the ban was imposed. And New Zealand was pointedly omitted from President Bush's coming tour of Asia and the South Pacific, including Australia.

The Americans have refused to budge from their policy of neither confirming nor denying there are nuclear weapons on individual naval vessels.

New Zealand has been barred from taking part in defence exercises with the United States and, in the words of some US officials, is being 'punished' for its nuclear stand.

Although still a member of the ANZUS defence alliance linking Australia, New Zealand and the US, New Zealand has not been invited to the annual

Diplomatic Deep Freeze Between NZ, US may be About to End

Derek Round writes from Wellington

ANZUS talks since 1984. The Americans and Australians, embarrassed by their neighbour's stand, have settled for bilateral meetings while the nuclear standoff continues.

The nuclear ban was imposed by the former Labour government in 1985 but has been continued by the conservative National Party which took office in October 1990.

Foreign Minister Don McKinnon, who had part of his schooling in Washington, DC where his father was New Zealand defence attache, has made it clear he is uncomfortable about the nuclear ban and the severely strained relations with the United States.

But US President George Bush's recent decision to remove nuclear weapons from US surface vessels has raised the possibility that American ships might once again enter New Zealand ports.

The President's announcement came soon after he had a personal meeting — coincidentally — with New Zealand Prime Minister Jim Bolger at the United Nations in New York.

The debate on the safety of nuclear-powered ships seems certain to continue. But there are signs that New Zealand might at last be about to come in from the diplomatic cold

Mr Bolger now suggests the US nuclear defence cuts could make the six-year ban on nuclear-armed or powered ships entering New Zealand waters all but irrelevant.

The position dramatically changed with the initiative taken by President Bush — which says that in all foreseeable circumstances there will be no nuclear weapons carried

on surface vessels and only on particular and small category of submarines," Mr Bolger said.

Only a small number of easily identifiable vessels could now be expected to be nuclear-armed. The New Zealand

government is studying whether it could accept nuclear-powered ships.

Britain, which also has a "neither confirm nor deny" policy, has followed the United States in not sending naval vessels to New Zealand. But Prime Minister Bolger said after recent talks in London with British Premier John Major that they agreed there

were no difficulties now standing in the way of British warship visits to New Zealand.

"They (the British) don't have nuclear-powered surface vessels," Mr Bolger said. "So there are no nuclear-power problems with the British, there are no nuclear weapons on board and as far as I am concerned, there are no reasons now why a British naval vessel, if it's in the New Zealand region, should not call at a New Zealand port."

The New Zealand government is setting up a committee, including scientific experts, to look at sections of its anti-nuclear laws that ban nuclear-propelled ships to see if these restrictions are still necessary. The principal task was to study the safety of such ships, Mr Bolger said.

Anti-nuclear campaigners here continue to warn of the possible dangers if nuclear-

powered ships are allowed into New Zealand ports.

Greenpeace spokesperson Jacqui Barrington said changing the law to allow visits from nuclear-powered ships would show the government was more interested in getting on the said of the United States than in the health of New Zealanders.

Wellington, the capital, has a contingency plan for a nuclear incident or accident in a nuclear-powered ship. But civil defence officials admit it is out of date.

Workers and residents in inner-city Wellington would be taken by bus to a football stadium for a cold shower, change of clothes and a potassium iodate tablet if a nuclear-powered ship developed a leak and contaminated the port.

Jacqui Barrington of Greenpeace says measures in the contingency plan would be "hopelessly inadequate".

The debate on the safety of nuclear-powered ships seems certain to continue. But there are signs that New Zealand might at last be about to come in from the diplomatic cold.

— Depthnews Asia.

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.

Insurance, disinvestment and industry

Sir, There are a number of matters which require the attention of the government, and this can be best done through the media.

First of all, no claim (except from those who were fortunate to be able to insure with foreign companies) has been paid to those industries which suffered from the cyclone/tidal bore of 29th/30th April in Chittagong. This performance speaks very poorly of the private insurance Cos and also Sadharan Bima with whom reinsurance is compulsory. Delays restrict operations of these industries as the bank overdraft limit is not increased. By the extent of the damage, there is not enough capital for operation. Besides this, the industry has to bear the bank interest until the claim money is received and credited to the bank O.D. account.

The insurance Cos have made no study nor has Sadharan Bima of all the cheapest rates available to the

insurer in the Tea industry. Loss due to hail damage is insurable but loss due to landslide, or any other damage is not insurable. We may try to find out what is the position regarding such insurance in India.

For the last 3/4 months there has been a lot of talk and publicity at home and abroad about Govt. decision to disinvest all the industries under their management. Jute, Textiles, Tannery companies will probably be on the disinvestment list. No mention has been made of the Sugar Mills, Dockyards, Fertiliser Cos., Engineering Cos like BMT (Joydevpur), Chittagong Steel Mills, Aromat, National Tea Co. and the Panga Tea Co. Perhaps these will be put up for sale in the second phase as may also be the equity held by Govt. in multinational companies like Glaxo etc.

In the past when national assets such as the Tea Gardens and Tanneries were sold on deferred instalment payments over eight years, there were some defaults and after the payment of the first instalment some purchasers stripped the industry and sold the movable

assets and felled the shade trees and supplied the market with timber for fuel. All this to the detriment of the industry.

From such unfortunate past experience it may be advised that Govt. should dispose of their assets against full payment. Further, it is high time that the Labour Ministry made a study and find out the cause of the low efficiency of the industrial workers in Bangladesh when the efficiency of same workers working in a foreign country is at least four times higher!

Sadr Ispahant M.M. Isphahani Ltd.

Visa for Pakistan

Sir, Within the framework of SAARC, it was understood that the life of common men and women will be easier since there might be less formalities in seeing their near and dear ones across the seven SAARC countries. It is easy to receive visa for India but unfortunately it is most difficult to secure a visa for Pakistan by the poor who just cannot afford wage — either of money or of time. It is known that over one million Muslim Bangalis live in Pakistan yet visa is refused. According to an estimate about 95% cases every day are rejected. That being so, the purpose of SAARC is being defeated.

Will the Ambassador be kind enough to direct his officials to be kind while issuing visa and thereby consolidate

the existing bond of friendship between the peoples of Bangladesh and Pakistan. There is light for the rich and influential people, let there be light for the common poor people too. It is also to see SAARC as a meaningful organisation in South Asian region.

Giulam Maula Green Road, Dhaka.

Uttara Gano Bhavan

Sir, The Palace at Natore in North Bengal was turned into a temporary Secretariat of the head of the Govt. during Pakistan days. After independence the Palace is named as Uttara Gano Bhavan. The then Governor of erstwhile East Pakistan, the then President of Pakistan and after independence of Bangladesh Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Shaheed Ziaur Rahman, even Ershad held meetings here with relevant Cabinet ministers, relevant secretaries and members of Parliament of the region. A meeting of Bangladesh Parliament was also held here. Such meetings were held at Uttara Gano Bhavan to demarcate the problems, solutions and to supervise the Govt. activities at first-hand for development of neglected North Bengal.

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia meets the cross section of people at Sugandha in Dhaka. People of North Bengal, in particular, and that of Western region, in general,

cannot easily go to Dhaka to meet her. Fiftytwo per cent of total land and 48% of total population of Bangladesh constitute the western region comprising Rajshahi and Khulna Divisions. The river Jamuna divides the country into two zones and is a great natural obstacle to communication. Natore is centrally located and connected by rail and road without an interruption of ferries with all parts of North Bengal.

In the context of it, it is urged upon the Govt. to arrange the meeting of Prime Minister with cross section of people also at Uttara Gano Bhavan. Besides, steps need to be taken to hold the Cabinet meetings and the meeting of MPs of the region to know the problems at first-hand and to supervise the development works. Significantly poor representation of Rajshahi Division, compared to other Divisions, in the present Cabinet and in the Secretariat calls for using Uttara Gano Bhavan by the Government.

Md. Anwarul Afzal Rantnagar, Naogaon.

Law and order

Sir, Although the law enforcing agencies including the police are trying their best to keep the law and order situation under strict discipline, still the prevailing situation is not so good. The security of the citizens' lives and property is rather remains in danger.

Criminals, as often found, are doing their jobs at the very nose of the law. In my opinion, the main cause for the present situation is the delay in the dispensation of punishments to the criminals and wrongdoers. For instance, the punishment awarded to the convict in the sensational Rijma murder case has yet to be executed. Again, in most of the cases it would be evident that the punishment is not equivalent to the crime done. For example, recently a security guard in a bank has shot his manager dead with his official gun. I don't know what the learned court will decide but in such case, (as per the Islamic law) life in exchange of life may be dispensed.

One more fact is that, our public learn only about a crime committed by a criminal vide mass media, especially the newspapers, but they are not served with further follow-up news pertaining to the punishment awarded and executed by the concerned authorities. Perhaps, dispensation of exemplary punishments to certain types of criminals who are frequently threatening the social order, and execution of these punishments publicly, could create a positive impact upon those who commit crimes without any fear of the consequences.

M. Zahidul Haque Assistant Professor, Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka.