

A Setback for Thai Democracy — II

A Dramatic Letter

A single communication or a speech can hardly change a political party from within, but it can serve as a catalytic agent and set a process in motion. This may well be the case with the letter that has been sent to the extended meeting of the Executive Committee of the Awami League (AL) by one of its leaders, Dr. Kamal Hossain.

In the letter, now reported by a section of the press, the much-respected member of the AL presidium has brought up a number of major issues facing the organisation, in the context of what many people regard as the debacle of the party at the February parliamentary election. The issues are inter-linked. However, if they are separated for the purpose of this discussion, Dr. Hossain's main grievance centres on what he has referred to as the "lack of chain of command and democracy" inside the organisation with the result that "there has been no evaluation of the leaders and workers of the organisation," especially in the context of a much-needed post-mortem of the AL's performance at the polls. Then, the presidium member has said clearly, without mincing words, that "inner conflict" in the party — the first direct reference to lack of cohesion inside AL made by a leader — had shattered hopes of sure victories in many constituencies. He has also attributed the "debacle" of the party at the polls to "over-confidence, indifference to work and boastfulness" among leaders and workers of the organisation.

Yet another point, probably the most important one, brought up by Dr Hossain refers to the present practice of combining the party leadership and the leadership of the parliamentary group, undoubtedly in the person of Sheikh Hasina. The presidium member suggests that the two positions should be separated and held by different persons, in line with the practice followed by the Awami League in past or in such parliamentary democracies as Britain and Sweden.

All the points raised in the dramatic communication boil down to one basic proposition, and it is simply this: The Awami League must establish a "truly representative organisational leadership". Then, as he puts it, "we want democracy, but we do not practise it."

There is little doubt that Awami League today stands at crossroads and that if it does not choose its direction carefully, it "may well meet the fate of the Muslim League in the near future" as Dr Hossain has grimly predicted. On the other hand, the choice of the right direction could well lead to a long overdue rejuvenation of the organisation, from the leadership down to the rank and file, but this would involve careful planning, hard work at all levels and development of motivation. In this context, nothing, absolutely nothing, seems more important than the need for "inner democracy" within the organisation and accountability of the leadership. It is possible, indeed most desirable, for the organisation to set up a mechanism, backed by constitutional provisions, to ensure the AL's strict adherence to both. However, in the final analysis, it is the commitment of the leadership that can serve as the decisive factor in the much-needed change. If the leadership tends to be authoritarian and relies too much on personality cult, it can always refuse to subject itself to a periodic scrutiny of its policies and even to elections at the decision-making level.

All this applies not only to Awami League but also to other political parties in the country, including the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). They must all realise that when they are unable or reluctant to practise democratic norms within their own organisational structures, they also fail to convince the public at large that their democratic pretensions are based on firm commitments and that they will practise what they preach when (and if) they have the chance of governing the country.

Ramadan Today

Today Bangladesh enters into a very special month. As one with the rest of the Islamic world — it has been waiting for the arrival of Ramadan. It is very difficult to identify and define what that eager wait is for and the sense of anticipation it is shot with. To say that millions upon millions all over the world look forward to this as a chance for inner cleaning would be a little too presumptuous. The point is, a great and good point it is, that there is very truly a wait for it and that is not wholly for the foodfest it always occasions. This lunar month of the Arabic calendar somehow fills up the whole social and even physical milieu with a manifest air of, yes, piety. And that multitude of people who are less than devout is also very touched and taken by this. This is what makes Ramadan so special. This is what we like Ramadan so much for. This draws in all — pious, less pious, impious as also those that do not belong to the fold. Taking off from a religious genesis, the inner thing about Ramadan becomes, very gracefully, social and thereby universal.

Ramadan has for ages rejuvenated the ummah with evernew evocation of the power that comes of fortitude which, together with sacrifice, forms the cardinal point of the Ramadan fastings. How we need both sacrifice and fortitude at this point of national as well as global criticality.

Contenance, not only in our outward conduct but deep down our souls, — the main injunction of Ramadan, is a great source of both the power of fortitude and the urge to undergo sacrifice. Contenance is a wholly inward-looking virtue and it is not complete without its social extension that involves all things external to oneself, namely, tolerance.

Our pious wishes on this score takes a bad jolt with the unflinching price spiral that features the arrival of Ramadan every year. The profiteer does not cringe from his fleecing act with any thought of the spirit of Ramadan being defiled. He can do so only because a large section of our people make of Ramadan the time for the best and the richest eats. And the most. This is so contrary to the values issuing from Ramadan that it must sadden the hearts of those that take Ramadan seriously.

It appears that democracy is really safe now in Thailand. So safe that nobody will be able to go near it. It is in the secure custody of the armed forces. And to make sure that it stays that way the military is determined to frame a constitution so that the free and open hands of the Thai people should not be able to touch it — at least, not in any way that the military disapproves.

On 16 March the military leaders announced the composition of the new national assembly, entrusted with the task of framing another constitution. There will be 148 members from the armed forces out of a total house membership of 292. The assembly also includes 39 businessmen and bankers and five journalists. Who will constitute the rest 100 members is not clear yet. They will not obviously be from among those of whose pro-military sympathies there will be any doubt. And this 'representative body' will be in charge of settling Thailand on a new course for democracy. The course is likely to be new indeed.

The army chief has declared his first goal to be to break the power of the trade unions in the state enterprises. Along with students the trade unions are considered to be pockets of possible resistance to the army rule. It is now quite clear that the Thai military will no longer be happy with being thought of as final arbiter of Thai politics. They would also like to be seen to be so. In other words what was true behind the scene must now be enacted on political centre stage.

All this comes from a general whose public posture has consistently been to uphold democracy and who repeatedly said coup was a thing of the past. The military was able to deflect a part of the criticism directed towards it by appointing a civilian caretaker government and a cabinet acceptable to the business community. However, their move to pack the assembly with serving officials of the armed forces will definitely reduce the credibility of their claim that they will soon restore democracy.

The ousted Prime Minister, Gen. Chatichai, must surely be regretting now his carefree and casual treatment of the treat from the military.

As I had mentioned earlier

(see Part-I published on 12 March) the present demise of Thai democracy can be traced to the distrust that developed between the civilian government led by the Prime Minister and the armed forces led by the Supreme Commander Gen. Sunthorn and the army chief Gen. Suchinda.

It was all due to the gradual rise of the power of the civilian authority, the increasingly vocal debate in the parliament about the financial dealings of the armed forces and the occasional outspoken and public criticism of the leaders of the armed forces by senior politicians. This includes, in some instances, members of Chatichai's government, that led to a feeling of insecurity on the part of the army that the civilian authority was becoming too-independent and that Prime Minister, though a former army general, was no longer dependable or could be counted on to do their bidding.

General Chatichai was aware of this feeling on the part of the armed forces and his attempt to gain their confidence back achieved a breakthrough

Chatichai and that the Prime Minister's final rapprochement with army has been brought about.

However, Chatichai's honeymoon with the armed forces was not to last long. Countering a criticism by Chavalit, a cabinet minister cast aspersions on the integrity of Chavalit and called his wife "a walking jewelry box," forcing the former army chief to resign. From then on the relationship between Chatichai

may have been right but he definitely chose the wrong horse to bet on in trying to reach it.

The last straw on the proverbial camel's back was the appointment of Gen. Arthit as the deputy minister in charge of defense. Arthit, a former army chief and supreme commander, however, was unpopular with the present army high command. This was Chatichai's most serious miscalculation and a move

the supreme commander. "My stars in general's insignia are being robbed off my shoulders," Gen Suchinda was reported to have said.

Whatever may have been the immediate reasons, both Gen. Sunthorn, the Supreme Commander, and Gen. Suchinda, the army chief, have had public profiles far larger than their army roles required and justified.

Gen. Sunthorn was well known for his outspoken positions on political issues. He constantly courted the press, and the media loved him for his controversial and provocative statements. Thin, and always attired in closely fitting clothes, the Supreme Commander of the armed forces never really hid his larger than army ambition. He played his cards extremely well during Prime Minister Prem Tinsulananda's time, when as commander of the elite force, the Special Warfare Centre, he extruded strong and unwavering support to the PM, against the wishes of the then army chief Gen. Arthit.

Gen. Suchinda, the powerful army chief, in contrast, kept a low public profile. He was repeatedly quoted as saying that "coup d'etat was something of the past." He was able to create the image that he was firmly behind democratic institutions, and if he were to join politics, he would seek it by way of election and not the back-door of an army putsch. His rise through the various army echelons was rapid. The good looking general never seemed to be in self doubt and always knew exactly what he was doing. Thus when he repeatedly talked about supporting democracy, politicians and other public figures felt that finally the army leadership was developing the proper mental attitude which made democ-

cracy safe.

Well we all now know better. Not only has the army once again taken over the political centre stage, they seem to be bent on leaving a long-term, if not lasting, impact of their presence.

With the formation of an interim government, headed by acting Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun, a diplomat of 25 years who has held ambassadorial posts in the United States and the UN. The widely respected Prime Minister has put together a cabinet of civilians and former army personalities with the National Peace Keeping Command (NPC) over all control. According to the interim constitution approved by the King, the NPC reigns supreme. Elections are promised in six months, but provision exists to push it back up 120 days into 1992 if a suitable constitution is not drafted by then.

So far there has been no public display of any anti-coup sentiment. As is usually the case, a group of students tried to register some protest but were quickly put behind bars. There has not been any public outcry yet. The reason for it is the usual Thai reticence about public show of conflict. They would rather do things in a consensus manner than fight one another in public. Given such a mental frame the army usually has an upper hand because once they have made their move the public usually adopts an attitude of wait and see.

Big issue that confront the people and the country now is what sort of constitutional reforms the army will bring. There was already a strong presence of the armed forces under the previous constitution. What more can they add to make the army's position more secure? Too blatant a tilt towards the army will make the new constitution look silly and perhaps will bring a lot of criticism to Thailand from all quarters.

The rule of the NPC will pass and a civilian representative government will come in its place sooner or later. But the blow that has been dealt to the confidence of the Thais, that they had made genuine progress towards representative government, will take quite a while to recover. We only hope that democracy returns in Thailand faster than many people now expect.

The Third View by Mahfuz Anam

and the armed forces nose-dived. It was from then on that the armed forces started a whispering campaign that Chatichai was out to destroy the army.

The most serious bone of contention was however the re-entry and the subsequent promotion to the rank of major general of the two-time attempted coup-maker and a suspected anti-monarchist (in the army's eyes at least) the young turk, maverick Colonel Manoon (see part-I for details). Political analysts say that

that triggered the take-over. Gen. Chatichai could not be naive enough to think that Arthit's appointment, just because he is a former chief, would please the army. Therefore Arthit's appointment could only mean that the Prime Minister deliberately wanted to rub the army on the wrong side. Arthit's induction did not yield Chatichai any additional supporter within the power circles, but new enemies.

The old rumour that Chatichai wanted to destroy the army found a new and more credible audience. The relationship between the government and the army became one of extreme suspicion and both used public fora to try push their own points of view. The drama reached its climax on February 23 (Arthit was appointed on February 13) when Chatichai was taking the newly appointed deputy defence minister to Chiang Mai for oath-taking in the King's presence. It was widely rumoured and later denied by Chatichai — some suspect that the rumour was deliberately spread to justify the army's move — that the Prime Minister also carried with him letters of dismissal of the army chief and



GEN. SUNTHORN KONG-SOMPONG
Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces



GEN. SUCHINDA KRAP-RAYON
Army Commander-in-Chief

In 1989 when he was able to persuade the just retired Gen. Chavalit, the predecessor of Gen. Suchinda, the current army chief and reportedly the real power behind this coup, to join his cabinet as Deputy Prime Minister in charge of the defence ministry. At that time every one thought that Gen. Chavalit was being groomed to succeed Gen.

the Prime Minister was putting too much at risk by protecting and promoting Manoon. He totally misread the deep distrust and resentment of the army's leadership towards Manoon's rehabilitation. On the other hand it is viewed by some that Chatichai took Manoon's case to establish the civil authority's supremacy over the armed forces. His goal

Following is a chronology of Thailand's history of 17 coups in the last 50 years, of which 10 were successful:

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|----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. July 24, 1932 | 9. September 16, 1957 |
| 2. June 20, 1933 | 10. October 20, 1958 |
| 3. October 11, 1933 | 11. November 17, 1971 |
| 4. May 8, 1947 | 12. October 6, 1976 |
| 5. October 1, 1948 | 13. March 26, 1977 |
| 6. February 26, 1949 | 14. October 8, 1977 |
| 7. June 29, 1951 | 15. April 1, 1981 |
| 8. November 29, 1951 | 16. September 9, 1985 |
| | 17. February 23, 1991 |

While western Europe worries about economic refugees from the East, concern is growing in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland, about an inflow from their less well adjusted neighbours—Romania and the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union will soon relax travel restrictions and some five million Soviet citizens are said to want to leave, even though they may not be entitled to take foreign currency with them.

As Czechoslovak Foreign Minister Jiri Dienstbier said: "There is no point in thinking of catastrophic scenarios and waves of migrants, but we just cannot absorb hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants seeking illegal work. Czechoslovakia cannot be a trampoline on which everybody jumps to the West."

Dienstbier concedes that eastern European countries may have to absorb substantial numbers of their kith-and-kin from across the frontiers:

"We can speculate that Catholics of western Ukraine or Lithuania may want to go to Poland. About 120,000 Czechoslovak-origin Ukrainians have signed a petition to come back to Czechoslovakia."

There is deep concern about Soviet troops still in the region who are scheduled to return home. Some 350,000 are in Germany. The 70,000 in Czechoslovakia are to leave by mid-1991. How many will defect?

So far only 75 Soviet citi-

East Europeans Worried by Influx of Soviets

Eve Koudri Kuhn writes from Vienna

While much has been made of the cost to Germany of helping rebuild Eastern and absorbing economic refugees, little has been said about a similar problem in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland. These three countries — already busy restructuring their societies after the collapse of the Soviet empire—are now bracing for a flow of immigrants from the Soviet Union and Romania.

zens have sought asylum in Czechoslovakia, none of them soldiers. But, says Dienstbier: "there is no housing, no employment, no nothing" for the returning soldiers in the USSR, and "when the Russians get passports, if there is no hope at home, they will try to find some place where there is hope."

Dr. Judith Toth, of the Hungarian Interior Ministry, is also worried that Soviet troops due to leave Warsaw Pact countries soon may choose to defect and seek asylum. Only 350 Soviet citizens did so last year and there are fewer than 2,000 in Hungary today, 2,800 as refugees.

Ninety per cent of the 90,000 seeking asylum or work who came to Hungary last year were from Romania, two-thirds of Hungarian origin.

Hungary issued more than 30,000 job permits.

The remaining 10 per cent of those seeking asylum or work were Albanians, Bulgarians, Turks and people from Soviet Republics. "There were also a few hundred from Somalia and Angola," says Dr Toth.

As for the predicted invasion from the USSR: "The Hungarian government has prepared some measures, but we do not think we can stop them if there is a mass exit. If civil war happens, for instance, it cannot be stopped."

Hungary has no visa requirements for other East European countries. They have "a better regime," says Dr. Toth, referring to the document called the invitation letter.

Holders of invitation letters can travel among Poland,

Czechoslovakia and Hungary. "It is a very strict regime. But letters can also be bought," says Toth.

Roughly 300,000 Soviet citizens of Hungarian origin live in the border zone of the USSR. Toth believes they will be the first to flee. She also fears they will arrive with passports, so they will not be illegal visitors but will refuse to return to the Soviet Union.

While the Hungarian border with Romania is not patrolled, Hungarian authorities do search homes for Romanian visitors who have overstayed 30-day visa-free visits.

A new law, soon to come into effect, requires all foreigners, especially those from surrounding countries, to have working visas before taking jobs.

Despite its worries, the

Hungarian government is averse to imposing visa requirements on visitors from Romania and the Soviet Union. Toth says: "We will only think of issuing visas in an emergency situation."

She says Hungarians are afraid to lose the contact with ethnic Hungarians in the two countries. "Earlier we had the very tragic experience of people being alienated from very close members of their families near the border zone."

Dr. Aleksander Krzymynski, Poland's Under-Secretary of State, says his country sees itself as a transit country. He adds: "As newcomers to the organisation of Europe, we are trying to find our place in a new spirit of cooperation."

"Soviet citizens come here to start small businesses or visit friends. We have three

million Poles in the territories we lost. Many have not accepted Soviet citizenship and are still Catholics. Every day we have 20,000 people crossing the border each way to exchange goods and then return."

Poland expects six to 10 million migrants from the Soviet Union. "We have to organise our frontier services and adapt our cities, restaurants, the whole infrastructure."

"Customs officers are not prepared for such a mass movement. In an emergency situation the border would be closed."

Allan Jury, US Counsellor for Refugee and Migration Affairs, admits that "no country recognises unlimited right to enter, simply because of hardship in the country of origin." The solution is in introducing humanitarian assistance, so that people do not starve in their own country.

Foreign Minister Dienstbier advocates firm international agreements "totally in compliance with human rights" to absorb any exodus in an orderly way. He adds: "We think there should be an international body to coordinate solving the problem of immigration. There may be even some all-European body, maybe within the framework of the Helsinki process of financing a solution." — 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.

Hazardous housing

Sir, It is heartening that so many apartment complexes are coming up to "cope up with the growing housing problem" of the expanding metropolis. But in the perspective of the capability of the majority the "exorbitantly priced" flats are no resolve as such. Perhaps the householders find the gap to their benefit and expand their existing holdings both horizontally and vertically. But the old premises have just measured or little elbow room

to the occupied sideways and not as much sustaining foundation as to allow a multistorey rise. These expansion plans to accumulate rental payoffs leave little or virtually no breathing space between the buildings which in most cases rise beyond their withstanding capability. Just imagine, in case of a tremor, you run out for safety, in the trap of a narrow lane studded with apparently high, trembling building on either side! However, the majority city dwellers who just can-

not buy a flat, have no option left but to accommodate their families in such renovated householders' lodges at high or exorbitant rentals.

Things take such unwanted shape in absence of any virtual check. Obviously the metropolis will grow further, and accommodate more and more people. But how? There must be some efficient plans foreseeing the future. Regrettably, in the present state of affairs, it appears there is little of such things and practically no enforcement of rules. The city development authorities sometimes take painstaking measures, such as expansion of roads in congested old part of the city, for which they of course deserve uninhibited thanks. But with it comes a question, why things were

allowed otherwise earlier? In the light of such experiences, the authorities concerned are urged to take active and effective steps now, to ease the present and ensure the future for the city dwellers.

Manik Chowdhury
Wari, Dhaka.

Rip Van Winkle

Sir, A news item said that a man woke up after staying in coma for eight years. This sounds like the story of a modern day Rip Van Winkle, only that the circumstances in this case are sad. The person concerned, Mr. Holbrook, had been hit on his head by his relatives, resulting in his long loss of consciousness. He had been asleep quite oblivious of what was hap-

pening to his surroundings, from the age of 18 and woke up when he was 26. It was a great joy for his mother, who must have lost all hope of seeing her son as a normal human being ever again.

Science sometimes works wonders for us. I wish science more success to human benefit.

Shohag Ahmed
Kabagan.

Rains: breath of freshness

Sir, After a long spell, the season's first rains the other day brought a breath of freshness along with it. Though it did bring misery in its own way, by causing damage and casualty yet it did bring with it the beauty of the season.

I am sure there are few Bangalis who do not like

rains. It is something which is enjoyed and relished by everyone. As a matter of fact, rain is something that our land, nature and people need.

While it rains, and we do not have anything to do, we can spend hours watching the rains, sitting beside the window.

However, it has a negative side too. For travellers, or people going to work, rains can be a real problem, in the sense that it is difficult to get or reach a public transport while it is raining. It is then that we tend to forget the beauty of the rains.

Nevertheless, it matters little as to how much a trouble it is. It is something very dear to all of us, isn't it!

Rezwana Tahir
Arambagh.