

Ethiopia's Future

The flight of Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam from Addis Ababa and the subsequent fall of the remnants of his discredited and dispirited regime brought one blood-stained chapter of Ethiopian history to a close. The militarymen who ended one of the world's longest-surviving — and less distinguished — monarchies through a coup d'etat on September 12, 1974, proved incapable of healing the country's ethnic divisions. Politically, it adopted a revolutionary stance, without breaking the domination of the minority Shoan tribe (indeed, Mengistu sought to perpetuate his rule by exploiting the very tribal chasms which his professed Marxist ideology was supposed to erase); the famines of 1986 and 1988 exposed the regime to be as inept as the previous one of Emperor Haile Selassie I; and more than US\$12 billion worth of Soviet aid was wasted on futile war efforts.

At the end of it all, economic indicators, not surprisingly, make a harrowing reading: gross national product for a country of 48 million people amounts to only US\$4.74 billion, giving a per capita income of US\$120 per annum; average growth has hovered around two per cent for years.

Ethiopia's sufferings over the past decade and a half is now likely to make it a focus of international sympathy. The country's triumphant guerrilla alliance — the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front or EPRDF, is in a good position to put that good-will to constructive use.

The EPRDF has worked in close collaboration with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front or EPLF, which has fought since 1962 for Eritrean people's right to self-determination; the former is also committed to ending the Shoan domination of the country, which should go a long way towards bridging the ethnic divides.

The new leaders of Ethiopia will now need substantial foreign aid to set the country's economy on the road to recovery. But there lies a catch. Western nations and Japan are most unlikely to extend any help unless EPRDF can prove it really intends to carry out its earlier pledge to initiate a process of democratisation by, first sharing power with other groups opposed to the previous regime, and then holding free and fair elections. Secondly, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front or TPLF — which is the largest and most influential component of EPRDF, may have to dilute its strident commitment to Marxist philosophy, as a way of attracting western capital, as well as to utilise the economic potential of the existing urban educated elite and entrepreneurial class.

Introduction of political pluralism and a free market economy are also likely to attract expatriates, many of who are highly educated, back to the country. The crucial question of food, which may make or break the new dispensation, will have to be approached with the utmost care, putting emphasis on giving incentives to farmers to grow and sell more of their produce.

But the most important determinant of peace and democracy in Ethiopia will remain the question of Eritrea. The left-wing EPLF, despite having physical control of the Red Sea province, has displayed exemplary maturity by refraining from declaring independence.

It will be a great tragedy if the EPRDF and its allies repeat old mistakes by denying the Eritreans the right to determine their own future. At the same time, the Eritreans will no doubt be conscious of the fact that Ethiopia's only outlet to the sea runs through the Eritrean ports of Massawa and Assab. A landlocked Ethiopia may well resemble a lion in a cage, while an independent Eritrea can easily slip into semi-colonial dependence on the rich and powerful Arab peninsula across the Red Sea. For security and prosperity of both, an amiable, political solution has to be found, through recognition of each other's interests and aspirations. The flight of Mengistu has provided the best opportunity for dialogue in 30 years. The world at large, particularly the United Nations should help them along the path to peace.

Razing the Hills to Ground

No one in his senses would suggest that the April 29 swoop on Chittagong had even remotely been a retribution of sorts. It could very well be thought that this was punishment for the residents of the city or their top people who displayed over decades a scant regard for the dictates of nature and environment — the most revolting instance of which has for long been the levelling of the best features of that port city, namely, its hills with their myriad of trees and birds and what not. But no one, not even those that had always opposed this suicidal yet popular practice of selling the soil that comes of a hill's demolition and promoting it as a gem of real estate, has thought of that. For the disaster was truly apocalyptic in size and world moving in tragedy and there was no wisdom in just blaming it on this or that. Plunder of nature and degeneration of environment have gone on in this country without respite and over the years that became one of the worst painful features specially of Chittagong. And this has of course very loosely been related to the spurt in the frequency of natural visitations although never specifically to the recent or the 1970 tidal bore.

As a single isolated act of vandalism on nature and environment nothing perhaps can compare to bulldozing a hill down to a playfield. Measures were taken to stop it in the Chittagong metropolitan area but holes were also duly found to circumvent those. There is no doubt, however, that some inhibiting influence has been at work lately there.

A news item appearing on Thursday however dashes every hope of an early stoppage of this evil job. A report in a vernacular newspaper says that 'felling' of hills illegally is going on with impunity in the Sitakund area. Hills are specially being victimised in the Barabkunda and Faudarhat areas. Hundreds of trucks are ceaselessly working to move the earth that is coming out with the razing of these hills.

This should stop. This must stop. How we don't know. But we are certain that if the right quarters in Dhaka decide firmly enough that this wouldn't anymore be allowed to happen, this can stop tomorrow. We want such a decision and without delay. We know all right thinking people feel the same.

Every such seemingly small thing is but a big test of governance, let there be no confusion about that anywhere.

WHY did Ziaur Rahman only make a partial change? Why didn't he go all the way and change both the one-party and the presidential systems? In the present debate, many are citing the fact of his half-way change as an indication of his preference for the presidential system. Perhaps they are right, but only perhaps. For I am not aware of any public statement by the late President where he actually says which form of government he supports.

When events catapulted him to the helm of affairs in November '75, he did not have any political base, leave alone any political party. So it would not have been possible for him to introduce a parliamentary form. One can argue that he could have restored the continuity of constitutional government, broken by the assassination of Bangabandhu and the toppling of his government. But such a move by Zia would have meant the restoration of the universally rejected one-party system. By the time President Zia had built the BNP and gave it a popular base, he was killed. It is an open question what form of government he would have ultimately settled for once he had reorganised the BNP (he was planning to do at that time) and given the party the national grassroots base that he was in the process of doing.

The Ershad experience was one of a perverse presidential form in which all legislative and executive power was concentrated in one hand, inevitably leading towards an autocratic system of government. Such a presidential form has been rejected by the people.

In deciding the most suitable form of government for us it is important that we keep a few lessons of our history very clearly in mind. First, whatever others may say about our illiteracy and the low level of development, there is a remarkable attachment to democracy and freedom among our people. Freedom for us is not just a privilege of the few, but a passion of the many. Let not any leader doubt it. Second, throughout the Pakistani period whenever we

PARLIAMENT'S FIRST SESSION — II

The Debate that Never Was

Concluding part

In erstwhile East Pakistan articulated our preference as to the form of government, it was always in favour of the parliamentary. It was so in the famous 21-point programme of the United Front in '54, in the aborted 1956 constitution of Pakistan, in the 6-point programme (which was a party programme at the outset but became a programme of the people of East Pakistan, struggling for autonomy); and finally in the 11-point programme of students, workers and peasants, that galvanised the national struggle in 1969 and was a precursor of our liberation war.

Coupled with the above experiences of the 60s and 70s, there is also the experience of the 80s, especially in our own region that must also be taken note of. Sri Lanka, which was a parliamentary democracy all along has now turned to the presidential. Pakistan, after the parliamentary form introduced by Bhutto following the birth of Bangladesh, has turned to the military tailored quasi-presidential form set up by General Ziaul Huq. This system provides for an active Prime Minister, but the real power rests with the President, as we had recently seen in the way he dismissed the elected government of Benazir Bhutto. India was a bastion of stable parliamentary democracy. But recent history showed that its stability was not so much due to the parliamentary form but more because of the hold of Congress over the electoral process. Now that this hold has weakened, the whole system is coming under question. Will Indian system be as stable as before with a fragmented body politic?

It is with this mixed bag of experiences that we face the question of choosing our own form of government. The choices are three: a) maintain status quo — a choice that runs the risk of being dubbed as autocratic and has already been rejected by the people; b) opt

for a parliamentary system as suggested by the opposition; and c) go for a mixer of both that provides for a strong presidency and "sovereign" parliament with checks and balances for both. For this system we have France and the US as models.

Our Prime Minister has often said that all systems have good and bad points. It depends on the people. She is right to a point. Yes, like everything else in the world governments are only as good as

the people who run it. Yet the reverse impact, of systems on the people is not something that any political leadership should underestimate. As Thomas Jefferson said: "Government is a creature of the Constitution." If it provides for open, accountable and representative government than it has less likelihood of oppressing the

Constitution of a country is not an act of its government, but of the people constituting a government." (Thomas Paine). In contrast we have been going about as if governments make the constitution.

At this stage it is perhaps pertinent to ask the question, why our '72 constitution suffered from so many amend-

ments and why have our people been relatively so indifferent about them? Well the obvious answer is that they were done in a way not to involve the people. However there perhaps is an additional factor. Could it have been that there

were flaws in the way we went about making our first Constitution. For one thing it was not a Constituent Assembly that framed it. The members who gave shape to it were all elected to lead us in a totally different context. This difference did not appear to have been very important at that time. But in retrospect perhaps we were a bit too casual (as we are being now). Maybe in the euphoria of victory we forgot many things, and took many other things for granted.

For example, if instead of four, we had put only one basic principle — democracy — in our original Constitution, then we would have spared the subsequent amendments. Did we really need to put in socialism? In a democracy we can envisage that in one election a socialist programme may win and in another the very opposite. So why put it in a document which is supposed to be permanent? It is obvious now that the framulators of the 1972 Constitution had misread the public mind about the place of Islam in the Constitution, again necessitating amendments later.

The lesson to learn from it all is that if the Constitution is to pass the test of time, then it must reflect the genuine aspirations of the people and not that of the party in power of the day. It was the thinking of the ruling party in the early 70s that made for most of the intellectual input into the 72 Constitution. This is not to downplay the importance of the 1972 Constitution. On the contrary in terms of its democratic character it is a magnificent document. But along with democracy it brought in other things which, perhaps, were neither necessary nor reflective of the popular aspiration.

In deciding the form of government we must remember that neither the presidential nor the parliamentary sys-

tems have ever been given any chance to work here. The presidential systems we have had — in Ayub Khan and Ershad — were devised not to serve the people, but to control them. So, they cannot be taken as models for judging the presidential system.

The experience of instability of the parliamentary system during the Muslim League rule in Pakistan was mainly due to the fact that no elections were held and genuine representatives of the people were never allowed to assume powers. In fact Ayub's coup was precisely to forestall the election that Suhrawardy had scheduled for 1958. Sheikh Mujib's constitutional coup was only possible because he had no effective opposition and because he controlled two-thirds majority in the parliament.

With the budget session of the parliament to start from June 11, it is obvious that the issue of the form of government will have to be tackled in the very near future. The ruling party has not yet informed the people about its thoughts on the issue. There have been speculations about it in the press. What is being keenly watched is whether it is going to be the rivalry between the two leading parties which will be the determinant factor in deciding the issue or will the people at large be taken into confidence and be allowed to contribute to the process.

History is full of examples that we repeat it — mostly its mistakes. But we are not condemned to. We can always start anew and show the world — and more so ourselves — that we are not going to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Whichever way we go we must go unitedly. As we have a national consensus on democracy and the role of the parliament, so also there must be a national consensus on the form of government. It should not be a partisan decision. The only criterion of judging this issue is not what the party we belong to stands for; but what the NATION NEEDS.

and 1988 alone.

Commenting in 'The Australian' newspaper, columnist Richard Farmer said, "our allies in the Gulf are our enemies down on the farm."

Wheat prices have fallen from A\$185 (US\$143) a tonne in 1988-1989 to A\$115 (US\$89) for the recent crop. Wheat farmers carry the burden of A\$11 billion (US\$8.5 billion) rural sector debt to financial institutions.

In March, the federal government rejected a call from the wheat industry for a guaranteed price scheme of A\$150 (US\$116) a tonne for the coming season.

The grains industry is being driven into the ground at the hands of the powerful treasuries of the United States and the European Community and the government has refused to defend it against this subsidy war," said Andrew Igts, the president of the Grains Council of Australia.

The council, the wheat industry's representative body, has predicted that the decision will cut planting by a third next season, thus cutting Australia's export revenues by A\$750 million (US\$581 million). — IPS

Australia

Farmers and Sheep Fight for Survival

Kalinga Seneviratne writes from Sydney



Chittagong port. This scheme guarantees a minimum reserve or floor price for wool sold at auctions.

The troubles besetting Australia's wool and wheat trade have driven grain farmers to bankruptcy and forced the slaughter of 11 million sheep.

price for wool sold at auctions. In Australia, under RPS, the AWC buys wool which falls to attract the floor price and stores in until the market improves, when it is re-offered. The floor price which went up to 1,200 cents a kg during the peak was reduced to 700 cents in 1990. By mid-1990, the AWC was holding 3,065 million bales in its stockpile and buying over 50 percent of the bales offered for sale.

Thus, at the end of 1990, the AWC proposed reducing Australia's sheep flock from 175 to 125 million, through a drastic sheep slaughter scheme.

The stock reduction scheme — suspended on March 1 due to lack of funds — has already resulted in the slaughter of 11 million sheep. The AWC pays farmers six Australian dollars (US\$4.65)

for young and two Australian dollars (US\$1.55) for old sheep which are registered for slaughter.

In February, the federal government decided to suspend the 17-year-old RPS until Jun 30 in a desperate bid to spur buyer demand and maintain Australia's three billion Australian dollars (US\$2.3 billion) a year wool exports.

The price of wool has dropped to around 450 cents a kg since the auctions resumed on Feb 25, according to an AWC spokesperson.

Meanwhile, the wheat farmers, the other pillar of the Australian economy, are questioning the value of Australia's alliance with the United States.

The most conservative segment of the Australian electorate, the farmers are

now suggesting that US bases in Australia should be used as a bargaining chip to stop US-subsidised wheat being dumped into Australia's traditional and lucrative Middle East markets.

In 1989-1990, 53 percent of Australia's 10.6 million tonnes of wheat exports went to the Middle East. The trade is worth over one million Australian dollars (US\$775,000) to the Australian economy.

Egypt accounted for 17 percent of the market, Iran 16 percent and Iraq 13 percent. When Australia joined the trade embargo against Iraq, a large market was thus lost.

The United States is reportedly trying to sell its subsidised wheat to six countries which bought half of Australia's wheat exports last year, including the Soviet Union and Egypt.

One Australian study has estimated the US subsidies have cost Australian wheat farmers as much as A\$336 million (US\$260 million) in 1987

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.

English as second language

Sir, I want to put the following few lines in support of introduction of English as second language and for repeal of Act II of 1987. We want to become bilingual for obvious reasons.

After independence there was a cry for introduction of Bangla in all walks of life, as a result high-ups of the society started to send their wards to foreign countries for their education in English medium. But they compelled the rural people to educate their wards in Bangla medium. The situation further worsened when Ershad did everything for his cheap popularity and ultimately drove the last nail in the coffin by enacting Act II of 1987 (Introduction of Bangla Act). On the other hand, among others, Sk. Hasina too seemed to have followed Ershad in demanding education in Bengali medium only. But her wards are studying in Noinital, India, while Ershad's son is a student of American International School (for foreigners). What a hypocrisy!

Taking advantage of this situation teaching of English language has become a good

business in Bangladesh. Everyday we see advertisements in the daily newspapers alluring the prospective students to take admission in this or that institution/tutorial home for studying English and thus to achieve 'good sort of superiority' over others.

The recent report submitted by the Public Service Commission (PSC) before the parliament is an eye opener for the Education Ministry and others. PSC report says that the under-privileged job seekers obtained 75 percent of the jobs in 1982 — students coming from rural backgrounds got 69 percent of the jobs — which has come down to 37 percent in 1988-89. In the case the students with urban backgrounds, the percentage was 31 in 1982 which has increased upto 63 percent in 1988-89.

The reason is well known to us. In urban areas English was not discarded but is rather shunned in the rural areas.

We need a Sir Syed Ahmed to restart. English is lingua franca, the sooner we realize this the better it will be for us.

M. Saleem Ullah, Advocate, 77, Motifheel C/A., Dhaka.

Chittagong port

Sir, I suppose whoever viewed and listened to the BTV interview of the Shipping Minister May 23 night on operation of Chittagong port after the unprecedented devastation, have the feeling of an efficient ministry, who have really done a yeoman's job.

But at the same time people around the spot have been shocked to find the honourable Minister, once being a senior bureaucrat, has lapsed to mention the name of Chittagong Port Authority, who have done an unbelievable job to put the port in action. Facts remain all along there and everybody expects proper appreciation, which not only encourages good performance but also stimulates it.

Gholam Muquitt, Dhaka.

An appeal to PM

Sir, It was a remarkable step that the government made orders to provide two months' salary in advance to those class-III and class-IV category government employees who belong to the cyclone hit areas. But, no such decision has yet been taken regarding class-I and class-II category officers belonging to the ravaged regions. Whereas most of them hail from the middle class families they are too shy to stand in queue for relief or even to express their grievances. Resultantly, they are facing tremendous hardships even starvation and many major problems. They too, have

become destitutes.

Hence, it is our ardent appeal to the honourable Prime Minister and to the concerned authorities to kindly grant similar salary advance or at least an easy conditional loan of equivalent amount for this section of suffering humanity.

Subochan Chowdhury, Sonali Bank, Dhaka.

Campus violence

Sir, Although sad, nowadays it has become a daily feature to hear about a campus violence. This is true of any university in the country.

There was a time when Dhaka University was known as "the Oxford of the east." The standard of education was quite high, and the students enrolled were more involved in their studies. However, by saying this I do not want to undermine politics, rather I want to point out that being student members of any political party should help them understand politics. In other words, it should be a training time for them to take up future leadership.

Unfortunately, in recent times what we observe is that being a member of the students' wing of any political party means clashing with each other with deadly weapons and resulting in fatality.

Hence, it is our earnest request to the relevant authorities, to political leaders and to the university administration and students alike — please stop this violence. Where there's will, there's way! Tawfiq Rahim, Malibagh, Dhaka.

OPINION

Power Prospects

Petroleum happens to be the most powerful matter on earth lately. The Almighty has blessed the Middle East deserts (a small portion of the planet) with the lion share of the earth's total oil reserve, and nobody could imagine only half a century ago that this natural object would be one the most sought after things (as an essential commodity to the civilized man) at this age of ailing ecosystem.

Essential to the advanced societies now-a-days is this viscous substance, popularly known as oil, which is virtually responsible for the development of ultra-modern amenities available today. Rapid western industrialization and transportation system contributing to scientific lifestyle would not be possible had this natural resource not been utilized technically.

Redundant to mention the power of oil, in this late twentieth century when the face of the earth is being reshaped fast with the advanced technological, economic, social, and political order — locally, nationally, regionally, and globally, oil has directly been linked to the most important means of present cost for living economic power.

Power Struggle: Obviously, the oil, rather Petro-Gold, has assumed the pivotal position in many recent international power struggles; the Kuwait problem justifies such an observation that evidently covers the military and/or diplomatic manoeuvres of all the super powers as well as other concerned nations worldwide.

Without any controversy, the impact of Kuwait issue has

substantially engulfed rest of the world as a consequence of hampered oil production and supply against demands generating the ripple effects on the economies of all other countries. Alongwith the rich countries, the poor ones are worse affected because of their financial limitations to afford expensive substitutes, which in turn multiply the miseries of LDCs suffering from the 'vicious circle'.

Bangladesh Efforts: Accepting the realities, "necessity is the mother of invention" should be the right move for LDC Bangladesh. Although a practicable alternative to oil has yet to be invented or developed in this country, some efforts to that end had already been made in the past with encouraging results, while the developed countries have progressed to a great extent over the past few decades in the energy field. The experiments on Liquid Gas, Solar Power, Hydro Power, Wind Power, Synthetic Oil, Electronic Cells, and Atomic or artificial Power source have been highly successful mostly in the developed countries with steadily increasing consumptions in variable proportions. Bangladesh has achieved appreciable successes in hydro-electricity, concentrated gas, and solar power for selected uses to date. If her essential energy demands can be supplied with economically produced domestic substitutes, Bangladesh will then be able to make her way toward a self-reliant nation sooner.

M. Rahman, Mymensingh.