

Stemming the Rot

The real challenge is to stem the rot in the public sector, the Planning Minister said the other day at the Media Round Table organised by this journal. He had plenty of reasons to emphasize the point. According to the figures presented by him at the Round Table the public sector losses were Tk. 1572.88 crore, Tk. 2353.87 crore and Tk. 2383 crore respectively for the past three financial years. By all accounts the loss is staggering and no country, especially one as resource constrained as ours, can afford it. Therefore, something needs to be done about it and done fast. But what? The Planning Minister highlighted the problem but did neither discuss the reasons as to why it exists nor suggest what measures he plans to undertake to improve the situation. He referred to the nationalisation policy of the 70s for arresting the steady growth of the private sector that had begun in the sixties. But then, the move of the early 70s had been reversed about 15 years ago. During the subsequent period the performance of the public sector got from bad to worse. The power sector, which in reality should definitely be a winner in collecting revenue, is the biggest drag on the economy. The Railways that used to make profit, now costs the public more than Tk 150 crore annually to keep running. According to a former finance minister participating in the Round Table, during the last decade real wages of industrial workers rose by 33 per cent whereas their productivity went down by 18 per cent.

Inefficiency, mismanagement and the rise in workers' wages have all contributed to the enormous loss in the public sector that the country is now faced with. So what can we do to stem the rot, as the Planning Minister asked? First and foremost, we must accept it as a major national problem to be treated above and beyond party politics. The government may need to take harsh actions in the form of retrenchment and lay-offs which will provide good fodder for the opposition to play politics with. Here the national interest must act as the supreme guide. The government on the other hand must adopt policies with the opposition being taken into confidence and being fully informed about every development. It is only through such quid pro quo between the government and the opposition that this malaise of our economy can be treated. To start with, the government should publish a White Paper on the state of the public sector. This report should include all aspects of the running of the sector. It is not only the wage hike in the nationalised industries but gross mismanagement and inefficiency by those in charge of running the enterprises that has led to what has been termed as the 'rot'.

The two central questions that need to be addressed as far as the public sector is concerned are inefficiency and corruption. In fact they are two sides of the same coin, so to speak. One cannot exist without the other. Through the publication of a 'White Paper' government can start the ball rolling about improving public sector performance.

Democracy and Development

Lee Kuan Yew, the former Prime Minister and the 'miracle maker' of Singapore was always known for saying it as it really was. A staunch and faithful US ally — and the first to offer to host the American base if there was ever any question of relocation from the Philippines — did not shy away from saying in Hong Kong a few days back that Asian nations were becoming increasingly disillusioned with the American and the British systems of Government. The growing economic strength of East Asian nations and their social advancement made these countries — Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore — more attractive as models to follow than the Western models.

The subject came into the open, following the collapse of communist bloc and with the US pushing hard on countries like China, North Korea, Vietnam, Burma to democratise. According to a recent newspaper report, officials of many Asian countries are campaigning that they are being 'prodded to conform to what they contend are essentially Western values and interests.' It is reported that one significant and unintended reaction to the US pressure is to turn towards Japan — and not the West — as the best example to follow.

It is really surprising for that to be the case, especially now when it is becoming increasingly clear how corrupt, clannish and coterie centred Japanese politics is. However dazzling Japanese economic success can be said to be, the way the hugely popular Mr. Kaifu was replaced by Mr. Miyazawa as the country's Prime Minister, should not really excite the democracy loving people in our region.

Prominent among the current Asian leaders to promote the view "Japan — and not the US" is Mr. Mahathir bin Mohammad, the Prime Minister of Malaysia. But then Malaysian democracy, with the built-in formula for the so-called "Bhumiputra" is a very special case indeed, which the democracy aspiring Asian countries hardly need to emulate.

An American scholar, Robert A. Scalapino, of Berkeley University, has coined the term "authoritarian-pluralism" to describe the democracies of East Asian countries — those that hold regular election, but don't change Government. That is to say that a dominant party, or a coalition always remains in power, as is the case in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. The virtue of this system, say Lee of Singapore, — among its most successful exponent — is the political stability it provides, which is so very necessary for economic growth.

Well, we have had our share of stability with Ershad, but there is hardly any growth. No, our chosen path is democracy — full and complete. This will bring us development. We have seen the other paths. They all failed.

Three years after his death, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani is still a name to conjure with. That the Maulana was a unique figure in Bengal-Assam politics, can hardly be denied. His career is one long struggle for the poor and the down-trodden. The scene of his activities shifts from his native Tangail to Assam, and back again to the land of his birth. His association with different political parties at different stages of his life, his role in the break-up of the Awami Muslim League, his fathering the National Awami Party, and in the last days of his long life, his announcement of an organisation named Khodal Khilmatgar, are an indication of his restless mind, his impatience to be of service to the common man. For he never sought an office of state nor did he seek political power. Rather these who have successively occupied positions of power, from General Ayub to General Ershad, have each one of them wooed for his support and blessings. In this, they were not disappointed, though, it must be added, that the Maulana was the last man to be taken for granted.

Despite the basic consistency of his politics, the

Maulana still remains an enigma, in certain respects. It is difficult to reconcile his undoubted love for his people with the political understanding that he formed and maintained with Ayub Khan. It is well-known that the Maulana was a tower of strength when in 1954, the United Front was formed, that toppled the Muslim League in then East Pakistan. Ayub, if anything, represented the return of forces out to destroy democracy. Ayub had first denounced politics and politicians, and then had seized power. Under him, with a meticulous planning, all democratic institutions, were destroyed. Still, this man received the tacit support of the Maulana, who never thought it fit to raise his voice against him till Ayub committed the blunder of framing charges against Sheikh Mujib: the Agartala Conspiracy Case.

The enigmatic nature of Bhasani's politics became perceptible with the emergence of Sheikh Mujib as the undisputed leader of East Bengal's nationalist movement. Bhasani had long found a friend and ally in China. The triangular re-

Bhasani Remembered

lationship of Pakistan-India-China lent substance to this alliance. Perhaps so did the Moscow-Beijing rift, which increasingly put India and the Soviet Union on one side of the fence, and Pakistan and China on the other side. Bhasani's rift with Suhrawardi is usually seen and explained as related to this perception of foreign relations. Sheikh Mujib, as a political heir to

and the Maulana, who led the Farakka March, was the symbol of this opposition. This must have been a most uneasy time for the Sheikh, whose love and respect for the old man, despite serious strains, remained unshaken. We have it on good authority that though the Maulana was not absolutely free in his movements, his personal comfort and well-being was scrupulously looked after in

produce the maximum impact at a given moment. The Farakka March, which ended in smoke, was one such demonstration. It might even have had secret official support, though we cannot be sure about this. There is only one ground for this supposition: the continued regard and concern that the two leaders felt for each other till the end of their days.

In his peculiar blend of ideology, Bhasani was able to reconcile Islam with socialism. He was a religious leader without a trace of communalism, and he was an internationalist with his feet firmly planted in rural Bengal. Without much of a formal education, — all his education consisted of Islamic learning at a Madrasa — he saw education as a prerequisite for progress. What he hoped to achieve through his Islamic University at Santosh, we shall never know for certain for he never formulated his ideas, political and educational, in writing. The events of seventy-one exposed the deep division within the nation. Political-ideological polarisation, developing over the years, came to the surface. After the libera-

PASSING CLOUDS  
Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

Suhrawardi, and as a challenger to Pakistan's despotic rule of East Bengal, posed a problem for Bhasani, who must have realised the positive side of the Sheikh's politics without endorsing his role in international relations.

Increasingly, after the emergence of Bangladesh, the Maulana found himself aligned with forces, if not opposed to Bangladesh, at least opposed to Sheikh Mujib, with his presumed secret treaty with India. The anti-India stance was a convenient rallying point of diverse groups and interests,

accordance with the Sheikh's instructions.

Still, something of the mutual regard and warmth between the two leaders must have gone. One remembers the rather unkind remarks of Syed Nazrul Islam about the Maulana's healthy appetite when, after one of those protest marches, he and his companions were received by the minister and the hungry protesters were offered refreshments. Bhasani certainly had a fine sense of drama, and many of his protests and marches were calculated to

Imelda Returns: A Filipino Theatre of the Absurd

Abby Tan writes from Manila

The beleaguered Filipino government of Corazon Aquino has reluctantly allowed Imelda Marcos, widow of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos, to come home after almost six years in exile. Marcos must now face a raft of corruption charges. But, Filipinos are more fascinated by her colourful personality and flamboyant declarations than by evidence that she robbed the country blind.



MELDA MARCOS  
Flamboyant return

Imelda Marcos has come home. The theatre of the absurd unfolded the moment she stepped off a plane at Manila airport.

Absurd because preoccupies Filipinos is not the fact that the former first lady came back to face trial on charges that she robbed them blind while she and late president Ferdinand Marcos ruled the country for more than 20 years.

Absurd because Filipinos are assured that Marcos's homecoming will be a circus without parallel, a show about money and power.

The show will highlight her ability to exploit the media, providing a sharp contrast with an inept government that could not manage the news of her return.

Marcos thrives before lights and cameras. She postponed a return in September, when the nation was too engrossed by its senator's decision to reject a military-bases treaty with the United States to give her much attention.

Now, after nearly six years in exile in the US, she has returned in a flourish. With a plane-load of foreign journalists in tow, her return on November 4 was reminiscent of that of Benigno Aquino Jr., the husband of her nemesis, President Corazon Aquino, in 1983.

Aquino had mistakenly believed then that the journalists accompanying him would serve as protection against death threats. Soldiers of Ferdinand Marcos shot him dead at Manila airport.

Imelda Marcos has cultivated extravagant treatment —

Imeldific treatment, she calls it — from supporters. On her return, she requested, and got, rings of security men to protect her.

The strategy of the 62-year-old widow appears aimed at wearing down another widow, her main rival Corazon Aquino, who led a revolt to chase the Marcos family into exile in Hawaii in 1986.

Until this year, Aquino had insisted on keeping Imelda Marcos out of the country. Aquino had also blocked the return of the body of ex-president Marcos, which is stored in a refrigerated crate.

But Imelda Marcos's constant tears and theatrics before the world press appear to have exhausted Aquino. She declared that she would lift the ban on the body's return before she ended her term next May.

Now, reluctantly, her government has also allowed Marcos herself to return to face corruption charges. Marcos's pleas that she be allowed to pay homage to the dead by burying her husband on home soil successfully tugged at Filipino cultural heartstrings.

She has turned the tables and projected herself as a victim of injustice, thereby diverting attention from the serious crimes she is charged with. And many Philippine politicians seem to have been swept along by Marcos's theatrics. Half the country's 225 congressmen and senators backed a resolution calling on Aquino to allow Marcos and the body of her late husband back.

Few Filipinos express outright indignation at her return. Aquino's former spokesman, Teodoro Benigno, now a newspaper columnist, has berated legislators for their short memories of the excesses of the Marcos regime.

Indeed, most Filipinos may

have forgotten why she returned. What they are seeing is the spectacle of a glamorous, once-powerful woman being lionised, rather than condemned, by the media.

Solicitor General Frank Chavez, who will prosecute Marcos, is at a loss to explain why she is getting the star treatment. Only in the Philippines could such a spectacle occur, he says.

Marcos faces a total of 40 charges on tax evasion, illegal land seizure, theft of state money and the illegal export of \$1 million worth of Filipino currency. The Aquino government hopes to seize \$356 million which Marcos is said to have deposited in secret Swiss bank accounts. It also hopes those deposits will provide clues about the location of a further \$5 billion which it claims the Marcoses stashed away elsewhere.

Yet the government seems unprepared for Marcos's return. Doubts persist about the ability of a weak, corruption-prone justice system to withstand her onslaught. Moreover, Aquino's officials seem to have no media strategy.

Marcos's arrival has thrown at least one crisis facing the government into further disarray: General Lisandro Abadia,

chief of the armed forces, suspended of talks aimed at securing the surrender of army rebels until "after the Imelda issue shall have settled down."

Marcos has been provocative, gleefully threatening to occupy one of her family's ancestral houses near Malacanang, the presidential palace, "so that Cory Aquino can watch over me."

For her part, Aquino has declared that Marcos, like any citizen, is welcome to visit the famous collection of her own 1,200 pairs of shoes — now on display at the presidential palace as a reminder of her wanton waste.

In an interview in her four-storey New York townhouse before her return, Marcos said: "I'm glad Mrs Aquino found only shoes when she opened my closets. When I open her closets, I might find skeletons."

Chavez believes he has found enough skeletons in Marcos's closet to convict her on the Swiss accounts. The Swiss government has handed voluminous documents to Manila which detail layers of paperwork hiding the money.

"This," says Chavez, "is the smoking gun." Marcos, he adds, "can no longer claim she was the grieving, innocent

widow who didn't know what her husband was doing." Such a plea won Marcos an acquittal on racketeering charges in New York last year.

The evidence, however, will probably not be the aspect of Marcos's trial which most captures the attention of Filipinos. Many citizens already consider her guilty as charged. Marcos's weeping, fainting fits — and remarks like "Beauty is my destiny" — are more likely to put her on the front pages.

Some Filipino columnists believe the public's fascination with her vulgarity and her pursuit of affection have turned her into a pop icon.

She acknowledges her style is unconventional. "My politics," she says, "is on a different plane from everyone else. My politics is the politics of heroes and patriots."

Marcos sees parallels between her husband's life and that of Jesus Christ. "Christ was betrayed by Judas P. Escario. Marcos was betrayed by Juan Ponce Enrile. The initials are the same." Enrile is the senator who, as defence minister in 1986, conspired in the revolt that ousted Marcos.

Marcos's cattiness extends to unsolicited advice to Corazon Aquino: "I would ask her to do something about herself, to look at herself, because she's ugly."

A first-class "thriller in Manila" promises entertainment. What remains unclear is the long-term effect the return of Imelda Marcos will have on Filipino politics. — GEMINI NEWS

ABBY TAN is a Singaporean journalist who has been based in Manila since 1971.

An officially sanctioned reassessment of Vietnam's feudal and dynastic past has brought a sigh of relief to many in this ancient royal capital where just about everyone can claim relation to a king or a royal mandarin.

Ending nearly two decades of ostracism, politicians and scholars here are tackling a previously taboo subject, reviving the reputations of Vietnam's former emperors who they now say are not the "traitors and puppets" that the Communist Party said they were.

When Hue was liberated from the US-backed government of South Vietnam in 1975, people whose bloodlines could be traced to the Nguyen lords and emperors who ruled all or part of the country between 1588 and 1945, either fled or kept a very low profile.

Emperors who once plotted against their French rulers in the quiet grandeur of the Forbidden City here, were disgraced by communist officials. The official line insisted that the emperors had stood for abuses of the feudal system and had opened the door to French

Vietnam

Taking New Pride in Feudal Past

After decades of ostracism, Hanoi is reviving the reputation of the country's Nguyen emperors whom the Communist Party had once reviled as "traitors and puppets". Philip Smucker of IPS reports from Hue, Vietnam.

one of Vietnam's first advocates of "doi moi", Vietnam's version of "glasnost".

"He was pro-women's rights, even though he did have 142 children," said Ung who is working on a book on the emperor whose rule preceded French efforts to overthrow the dynasty. "And he wasn't as bloodthirsty as some people might think."

In the late 1880's, the French began shipping emperors off into exile for anti-colonial activities. Bao Hien, now a gardener at a tourist hotel in

Hue, says his grandfather, Emperor Thanh Thai, was exiled to Reunion Island for plotting to overthrow the French.

But the Nguyen emperors' affinity for women, fine food and elaborate tombs contributed to the economic hardships of the Vietnamese peasantry in the 19th century.

Emperors built immense tombs for themselves on the outskirts of the city using forced labour. Emperor Tu Duc pronounced his tomb "modest", but a local poet wrote that its walls were built with the bones of the people

and its moats were filled with their blood."

At the history department of the University of Hue, a strict Marxist interpretation of the past is no longer in vogue.

"After 1975, we mainly assessed the Nguyen dynasty in terms of politics," says Dinh Lem, director of the Hue University history department. "But with the new principles of 'doi moi', we are looking again at the history of our development."

The sanction for the reassessment has come from the very top of the political leadership.

"Some say the emperors paved the way for French colonialism," said Vice-foreign Minister Nguyen Vi Nien. "I am not of that opinion."

As president of Vietnam's Unesco Commission, Dy Nien is spearheading a drive to rebuild the crumbling capital

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.

Coastal security surveillance

Sir, With the increase of piracy in the coastal waters of Bangladesh, it is time to consider the feasibility of using helicopters for daily patrolling, to support the sea patrol crafts.

The daily operational cost might be cheaper if small, light, patrolling helicopters (which can land on water also) are employed for spotting pirating sea vessels; as, from a height, the scanning and visual

radius are much greater than that of several patrolling sea craft combing an area. The pilot can quickly direct the patrol sea vessels to the target areas, and also keep track of the escaping pirate boats (with radar at night). The air wing acts as extended eyes and ears for quick maneuvering and interception.

Such small helicopters (marketed in ready-made standardized versions) could be imported in CKD form and assembled locally, to provide local training and experience.

These aircraft could also provide invaluable relief service during emergencies such as floods and tidal surges.

A coastal helicopter fleet looks like a 'must', under the circumstances we are facing today (piracy and floods).

A. M. Dhaka.

Malnutrition and vegetables

Sir, Malnutrition is one of our major problems. Bangladesh is a poor country and majority of its people cannot afford to take rich foods regularly to meet up their daily nutritional requirements. A large number of children suffer from malnutrition.

Vegetables are cheap sources of vitamins minerals and also protein. Our climate is very much favourable for grow-

ing all sorts of vegetables. Hence, it is strongly felt that the government should attach top-priority on encouraging farmers and general public to grow and eat more vegetables. A national vegetable growing programme should also be chalked out providing farmers and others with necessary inputs, credits and technical knowledge for profitable cultivation of vegetables.

M. Zahidul Haque  
Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka-1207.

SAARC

Sir, SAARC was formed to improve the fate of the billions people of South Asian Region. Poverty-ridden struggling people of this region had expected some positive contribution from this seven-nation forum. But the recent behaviour of

one big member country which has been manifested by the sudden postponement of the scheduled Colombo summit — greatly disappointed the peace-loving masses of SAARC member countries.

While, internationally, the fields of co-operation are rapidly expanding, the era of cold war has ended, the world leaders are striving best to end all enmities and bitter relations between nations, the changed world political atmosphere has created opportunity for the Middle-East arch foes to sit across negotiating table, then the ties of regional co-operation in South Asian region is subjected to threat of severing!

Such uneasy development will generate disbelief and suspicion among the SAARC member nations and hamper their steady march toward so-

cio-economic progress. Keeping distrust and doubt in mind show of cooperation externally and ceremonial yearly gettogether will not bring any meaningful fruits for those who actually need other's cooperation to get rise of their impoverished condition. That is why the survival of a workable SAARC is essential to fulfill the hopes and aspirations of the concerned people.

We hope, the dynamic leadership of this region will take pain to save this regional forum from potential collapse, at this crucial moment, with their wisdom and statesmanship. The responsibilities however, lies more on the shoulder of the big member country whose sincerity can make SAARC a more stronger and effective forum.

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