

Contours of New Islamic Bloc Begin to Emerge

by Hazhir Teimourian

"RELIGION is spreading like cancer," warned an anti-religious expert in Soviet Tadzhikistan in February 1987. "It is spreading all over our land. It is contaminating more and more people."

"Yesterday believers used to gather for an inoffensive prayer. Today they meet for collective mass rituals. What will they do tomorrow?" (V. Rabiev, Komunist Tadzhikistan).

The growth of Islamic fervour was such that even Communist Party members often felt it prudent to appear at religious gatherings, and new mosques sprang up everywhere.

So terrifying for the Soviet establishment was the realisation that Islam might provide the common standard around which 50 million of their subjects might gather in the Caucasus and Central Asia, that in July 1989, President Mikhail Gorbachev devoted the whole of a televised message to the nation to warn against the danger.

He gave notice that the state would use all the power at its disposal to suppress violent attempts at breaking away from the Union. At one time, it seemed that an Islamic-led popular revolt in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, was so widespread that the rule of the Soviet army over the republic might fall without new reinforcements.

The pace of change in eastern Europe and Central Asia has, of course, been dazzling over the past five years since the Tadzhik Communist ideologue issued his warning, with the Soviet Union itself disappearing from the map of the world.

But Muslim militants determined to replace their countries' Marxist regimes with Islamic fundamentalists have not had a notable success.

Will the next five years see a turning of the tide for them? Abdolrashid Abdullah, of the Tadzhik Academy of Sciences,

With the break-up of the Soviet Union, 50 million Muslims in the Caucasus and Central Asia suddenly find themselves in six new independent republics about to become full members of the United Nations. Will they begin to emulate the Islamic government of their southern neighbour Iran, as some fear or will they be pulled by the example of Turkey, which formally discouraged the mixing of religion and politics? Gemini News Service investigates.

Islamic clerics taking over, but there was also widespread fear of the future in general among all the peoples.

He said: "The pace of change has recently been so rapid that we do not know what is waiting for us round the corner. There could be war between the various nationalities, or spontaneous revolts."

"But one thing I do not fear, and that is a falling under the sway of any of our southern neighbours. The Iranians are Shia Muslims, while we are Sunnis, and the Afghans are at war among themselves. Turkey does not share a border with any of us."

This is not to say that Iran and Turkey are not hopeful of dominating the Caucasus and Central Asia in the years to come. The Turks, increasingly convinced that the European Community (EC) does not intend to allow them membership, say that they intend to be the economic link between Europe and Asia.

They are sending as much economic aid as possible over land into Azerbaijan, one of the five former Soviet republics speaking a Turkic language. The odd one out, Tadzhikistan, speaks Persian.

The Iranians, too, try to reap benefit for linguistic and cultural ties, sending in large numbers of merchants to buy factories, hotels and other economic establishments. These could provide a foothold for future peddling of influence during political crises.

Altogether, then, the future looks ominously unclear and suited to exploitation by all relevant parties, depending on the shrewdness of their tactic.

The chief mufti (Islamic cleric) of Dushanbe, the capital of Tadzhikistan recently confided in Moin: "I am glad we did not win the presidential election in November. We were not ready. Let the Communists try to rule the land and fail first."

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Racism in East Europe

As if the newly-emerging democracies in eastern Europe have not enough problems they can barely deal with, racism has raised its ugly head in a few of them, especially Hungary.

According to a London report, between 60 and 80 Arab, African and Asian students have been viciously assaulted in recent weeks in Budapest by young Hungarian gangs which are known as skinheads, the type that had created terror among South Asians, especially Pakistanis, in London in the sixties and seventies. These figures of racist attacks have been collected by the Martin Luther King organisation, a group set up in the Hungarian capital last year to combat rising racism in the country.

The activities of the skinheads in Britain mainly centred on the then prevailing colour prejudice among a section of British youths. What is happening in Hungary and some other East European countries is different and potentially more dangerous. It is now reported that with the arrest in Budapest of a neo-Nazi group last month, there are distinct fears of a wave of rightwing extremism making a dent in the country's national life. The size of the group still remains a matter of speculation. One official source puts it at hundreds. Other figures are more conservative.

It is the phenomenon, rather than the size of the rightwing movement, that deserves close attention. There were signs of rising racism in Hungary even in the late sixties. However, the communist authorities kept the situation under control and firmly dealt with extremist elements. Now, with the return of democracy to the country, the forces which were kept under check have reappeared, ready to pounce on all non-Europeans, including even Cuban guest workers, and, as feared, local Jews. Anti-semitic literature is now available in selected bookshops.

Political analysts are divided in their assessment and interpretation of the situation. It is said, quite rightly, that the present phenomenon is the delayed manifestation of the social frustration experienced during the communist regime. This being so, some argue, all this may be a passing phase. In other words, let democracy gain its momentum, and all will be well.

It may not be all that simple. With the growth of political institutions in East European countries, new social equations will certainly emerge, together with new values and standards. Yet, all these changes may not bring about the reconstruction of the society. In this reconstruction, large funds pumped in by the West can hardly help. Even the operation of the market economy, which is gradually taking shape, can only make marginal difference.

In coming to terms with their destiny, Hungary and its neighbours will go through their teething problems. One hopes that these problems will not slow down the process leading to genuine democratisation of the national scenario in each and every country of this volatile region. Unless this is understood by all concerned, especially the political parties, rightwing forces can play a dangerously disruptive role, even if they are unable to capture power.

Let the Book Fair Cares Pay

Ekushey has over the years evolved, from the sombre and touching thing it was for many years, into the greatest festival of the Bengalee people. That such an all-involving concourse for national jubilation should have as its origin and wellspring a heroic struggle for one's write to one's language renders a special quality to the proceedings of the day. And it is specially gratifying to see that the joys of the day has spilled across our borders to infect not just contiguous areas but also very many overseas climes.

It is in perfect keeping with the spirit and that special thing about Ekushey that a national exhibition of books has become an integral part of the day. This has proved a supreme crowd-drawer. Although there is no doubt that the huge crowd that visits the exhibition on all the days of its month-long duration do not necessarily swarm the place to buy books or even to do a bit of browsing — it nevertheless is an elevating thought that the occasion for all that is books.

This welcome development, however, has over the recent years taken on some sordid aspects. Taking advantage of a situation where some tens of thousand people are penned in an area awfully inadequate to take that multitude — the Ekushey Boli Mela has been reduced to a regular stomping ground for bullies of all kinds — mastans being the more familiar breed. From toll collection and other extortions and book snatching to gang attempts at molesting girl visitors have become a regular feature, robbing the fair much of its meaning and significance.

The sponsors, Bangla Academy, have taken some very imaginative steps to prevent the yearly scandal by mainly spreading thin the crowd through expanding the space of the fair ground. The stretch of road running from the TSC to the Doel Square has been included into the exhibition area. And they have also organised brigades to oversee the fair and stop any untoward development at its beginning.

We shall keep on hoping that these cares and pains will pay. Meanwhile we cannot but brood over the fact that all this fuss has so little to do with the thing at issue. Books. It is doubtful if at all this or any other book fair is helping the nation's 'book development'. And it is equally doubtful if the fair helps increase the per capita consumption of books by the Bangladeshis. Books are a kind of pleasant background music for the Ekushey Fair.

The Bangla Academy and the National Book Centre or related organisations should give their best thoughts to the ways and means for bringing about a radical change in the reading habits of the literate people of the land. Although they form a shamefully miserable part of the whole population — they number more than 20 million — more than the populations of many a leading nation taken together.

As the euphoria of multi-party democracy dies down, Nepal's face hard realities: the prices are rising and the government has failed to reform the bureaucracy in a way critical to Nepal's development priorities.

Nepali Congress field workers are already complaining that the government has failed to do anything spectacular to give the party an image of an alternative to the overthrown one-party regime.

Prakash Koirala — eldest son of the late Prime Minister BP Koirala and nephew of the present Prime Minister — will contest under the Nepali Congress (NC) the Sunsari constituency. He is being challenged by Dukhi Lal Chaudhari of the United Marxist-Leninist (UML) faction of the Communist Party of Nepal. In Kathmandu constituency, NC's Tirtha Ram Dangol is pitched against UML's Kirshana Gopal Shrestha.

The two by-elections are necessary as both Prime Minister Koirala and UML general secretary Madan Bhandari, who contested and won two constituencies each, vacated the other for which polls are now being held.

Analysts said the situation favours NC candidates. Mr

Prakash Koirala, 43-year-old student of political science, seems to have the better edge over his communist challenger who happens to be UML heavy-weight in the area.

Mr Koirala, it may be noted, represents a nationalist trend within the ruling party. He was denied ticket in the May 12 parliamentary elections in what was seen as an effort to block him emerging as a challenge to Prakash Man Singh, son of party boss Ganesh Man Singh.

Mr Koirala's choice for the Sunsari constituency was vehemently opposed by party boss Singh.

"Why it is only the Koiralas and nobody else?" asked Mr Singh, accusing Prime Minister Koirala of nepotism. "Why did this question never come when your son and wife were issued party tickets," shot back the Prime Minister who is the leader of the ruling party's Parliamentary Board.

Mr Singh's son Prakash Man Singh and wife, Mangala Devi Singh were given party tickets for the May 12 parliamentary elections. Both of them lost to UML candidates.

Most favourable for the ruling party is the sharp rifts in the rank and file of UML, a situation different from the May 12 polls when a unified communist alliance captured and impressive 69 seats in the 205-member House of Representatives.

Prabhu Narayan Chaudhari, a widely respected communist leader in the area, has already deserted the UML, accusing the current leadership of joining hands with "regressive forces represented by the royal palace."

Mr Chaudhari said the plans to revive his own Marxist

factious of the party that stresses on class struggle for the ultimate goal of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In addition to being in power, the ruling party has also the advantage that it does not head a coalition government, unlike in the last parliamentary elections.

By taking a nationalist posture, Mr Koirala has avoided the chances of hostile campaigning against him by his opponents. He said his nationalistic sentiments are in line with his father's policy of national reconciliation that stressed both democracy and nationalism.

Communists could still improve their position in Nepal's conservative Hindu society if the government headed by Prime Minister Koirala's Nepali Congress Party fails to deliver the goods.

The most spectacular performance was staged by UML general secretary Madan Bhandari, a dark horse who defeated Nepali Congress president and then prime minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai in the prestigious Kathmandu constituency.

The UML had many capable young workers while the Nepali Congress seemed out of touch and drifting," explains Sridhar Khatri, a political science teacher at Tribhuvan University.

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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.

Security check and women

Sir, In every country some security formalities are being maintained for the protection of the President, Prime Minister, ministers and other VIPs. And this is so in our country. People participating certain functions, meetings etc. where the President or Prime Minister is attending are required to follow some security instructions, such as, checking of personal essential belongings by the security personnel. Well, this is quite natural and we have nothing to say about these formalities. But it is felt that often women are being discriminated from men while observing such security formalities.

The other day I was talking to a senior lady official. She told me that while attending state meetings or similar other functions, women have to deposit their vanity-bags at the security counter. She raised a point. According to her, ladies usually carry their personal belongings such as, spectacles, note book, pen, cosmetic etc in their vanity-bags since they have no pockets as women wear sharees normally. On the other hand, a gentleman carries his cigarette packet, matches, etc. in his pocket but no security officer had ever searched the pocket of any gentleman for normal security purposes. Here comes the question of discrimination between man and woman. She further told me that on one occasion, she forgot to take

her spectacles out of her vanity-bag before depositing. As a result, she experienced a great difficulty in reading papers while attending a high level seminar.

May I draw the attention of the competent authority to the above issue?

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

Stop wastage

Sir, It is possible to turn waste into profitable use and thus control pollution. A poor country like Bangladesh cannot afford to waste anything. One billion people could die of starvation in the next 20 years because food production lags behind the population growth, according to scientists' forecast in the recent proceedings of the Royal Society, London. So we must try to save our people from hunger.

Banana stalks which are wasted in Bangladesh can be used as packing material like that in India. Like this we can

establish many waste recycling industries to generate income and feed our people and thus check the environmental degradation too. At the same time our people must be made conscious to stop all kinds of wastage. Most of our people are habituated to drain out the starch water from cooked rice which, if retained in the rice, can well provide us with calories, protein and vitamins. Most of us peel potatoes and other vegetables and then wash before cooking, thus diminishing to a certain extent their nutrition values which can be retained if those are boiled or washed first and then peeled.

As stated above, unnecessary draining of starch water from cooked rice and too much peeling of vegetables definitely create problem for WASA and Municipal Corporation. Change of habit can also reduce the pollution problem to a certain extent.

M. Alauddin
West Nakal Para, Dhaka.

OPINION

Why Not Privatised T&T?

Ref. Star report 'T&T won't be privatised', Jan 24. As an irate ex-subscriber for 30 years, and now as a new applicant for the last 18 months, it is time to ask the million-dollar question: 'Why not?'

Here are a few relevant but sensitive questions, which should be answered publicly, in public interest, by the authorities. The subscribers cannot wait for years for a new connection, and standard service, — without corruption.

(i) 'When you can't do it yourself,' get it done by others. The users will pay, not the authorities. It is merely selling of an essential service to the public, numbering a million to start with. Let there be competition. Other smaller developing countries have started privatising, then why not Bangladesh? Look at the success in Malaysia, for example, — in just five years. There one could telephone for a new telephone — a new connection is that fast; and nobody is losing. The 'security' aspects are certainly not greater in Bangladesh!

(ii) Concrete proposals may be invited and examined if others are willing to operate it to the satisfaction of the authorities, as the contractors (or consortium) won't lose but make some profit (that's business). There might be relevant causes in the contract to ensure that the profit is not too high. It is the 'business' of the administration to safeguard public interest, and not operate telephones (which it is totally incapable of handling, as we see from experience).

(iii) After the contractors have completed the project, operated and maintained the system, and recovered the investment within a stipulated period, the network may be handed over to the public sector, if so desired.

(iv) The administration cannot offer the lame excuse of funding restraints, as it would not be difficult for the contractor to arrange for the funds, including the vital foreign exchanged component.

(v) The administration can easily provide the co-ordination and local facilities; and in fact own 49 (or 51) per cent shares in the company, incorporating the existing agencies in the private or semi-autonomous sectors.

The subscribers are not interested in a long list of reasons of what are the present shortcomings. It is practically possible to have more telephones than the demand. By about 'luxury', we are not talking about 'luxury'.

Another technical point which should be examined is why not go for wireless telephone network in the very first phase of digitalisation? The advantages are obvious — the T&T engineers can explain. If not, the technical experts from amongst the subscribers can brief the authorities.

A Mawaz
Dhaka.

Parliamentary By-elections to Test Koirala Government

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Jan Sharma writes from Kathmandu

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"The UML was seen as the party of protest and of change while the Nepali Congress was

protecting stability and status quo," says prof John Solz who studied electoral trends in Nepal with finding from the Asia Foundation.

Still, the UML faces a dilemma of sorts: whether to chip to populist and radical slogans or work hard to seek a centrist posture to challenge its arch foe, the Nepali Congress party.

Mainstream communists say they accept constitutional monarchy so long as it did not poke its nose in the democratic process. But all major political groups did make monarchy the main target during the election campaign.

King Birendra indeed complained about the attacks despite his pledge to remain a constitutional monarch. "If people question the institution of Monarchy, let there be a referendum on it," he said. "I will abide by whatever verdict given by the people."

The UML says its main goal is to transform Nepal into socialism and communism based on the 'trail blazed by the great proletarian leaders like Mao Tse Tung, Ho Chi Minh and Kim Il Sung.' But there are sharp ideological divisions among the rank and

As the euphoria of multi-party democracy dies down, Nepalis face hard realities. And the communists could win the next parliamentary polls if the government does not deliver the goods

In 1990, Nepal's communist groups joined hands as the United Left Front, established to help the Nepali Congress launch the pro-democracy movement. When the one-party system was overthrown and King Birendra agreed to democratic elections, the United Left Front broke away.

Since then, two ultra-left groups — the Proletariat Labour Organisation and the Mashal (Torch) — merged to form the Communist Party of Nepal (Unity Centre faction). This group later joined hands with another ultra-left group, the United People's Front (UPF).

The UPF believes that power can be captured 'not through parliament but only through the use of force and violence.' Its leaders have been calling for people's movement along the Maoist line.

"Our basic difference with the UML is that they believe in constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy," says Lilamani Pokhrel, leader of the UPF's parliamentary board. "This we do not believe because they both are subservient to capitalism."

— DepthNews Asia