

Let There be Outrage

The madness continues, without, it seems, the slightest bit of concern in government circles. Four days after a young, bright student was gunned down on the Dhaka University campus, the life of another 20-year old student was blown away by the assassins' bullet last Tuesday. The killing this time took place on the Rajshahi University campus, in a three-cornered clash among the police, the Islami Chhatra Shibir and the Gonatantrik Chhatra Oikya (GCO). The suspicion that the bullets that killed Yasser Arafat Pitu and injured many, including several girl students, might have been fired by the police, only serves to highlight the dangerous situation that is currently prevailing in the education sector of this country.

Not only dangerous, but the mood among a section of the "student" community appears to be sliding into the abyss of Dark Age barbarism. According to reports in the press quoting eyewitnesses, armed cadres of Shibir attacked three halls of residence and severed the veins in the arms and legs of anything between 20 and 90 GCO supporters. The police apparently made no attempt to prevent Shibir from unleashing its reign of terror in the halls, bringing its role as the upholder of law and order into serious question.

Ironically, the killing and terror in Rajshahi took place the same day that Prime Minister Khaleda Zia told the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) that all universities in Bangladesh, except one in Dhaka, were peaceful and normal. Such a statement, when tension in Rajshahi was mounting and Chittagong University continued to remain under virtual occupation of the Shibir militia, either meant that the head of government was unaware of the true state of affairs, or that she was being misinformed, or that the government had embarked on a policy of playing the whole thing down. Whichever explanation one can give for the Prime Minister's statement, it does not bode well for the immediate or short-term future.

Given such a circumstance, there is now a great need for an effective display of moral outrage on the part of the academic community in particular and society in general. It is now patently clear that mere words would not stop this inexorable slide towards full-scale anarchy on the campuses. There have been enough statements, meetings, even grand conferences. But the terrorists remain in the field, and not one of the major political parties known to harbour armed cadres has made any move towards renouncing violence as a political tool, let alone expel any arms-users.

Major political parties still seem obsessed with the idea that universities and colleges have to be "controlled" physically in order to maintain or gain political clout. These parties seem to have forgotten that in a democratic polity, it's people's confidence, and not muscle-power, which ultimately counts. What's more, by their very actions, all major political parties are engaged in a dangerous game, a game from which democracy has nothing to gain, but everything to lose.

It is now up to the student and teaching community themselves to break out of their lethargy and make their voices heard. It naturally falls on the teachers to lead the general students, the vast majority of the academic community, into a protest movement. A united stand by the teachers of all the universities cannot fail to carry the support of the students, most of whom want nothing more than to be able to finish their courses on time. The teachers have tried silent processions and token work stoppages, but those gestures have produced a blank. They need to take more drastic actions, be more assertive and vocal, even if it means going on mass hunger strike or closing down all universities until some sense is knocked into the government in particular, and the political parties in general. It is a question of leadership, and the teachers need to show that quality now.

Polls in Thailand

Thailand goes to the polls on Sunday to elect a new parliament and, hopefully, to give a civilian-led democracy one more chance. Such chances have come before and largely wasted, mainly because of the refusal of the military to stay away from the corridor of power. Thus, some 60 years after absolute monarchy made way for parliamentary democracy, with successive kings, especially the present one, playing their role with dignity, political stability has remained an elusive goal for this nation of 55 million people. Repeated army-led coups have interrupted the country's march towards a durable civilian administration based on popular participation.

What difference will be made in the scenario by the Sunday's election remains to be seen. A civilian administration will certainly take office with perhaps a marginal majority in the lower house. But it will have to work in harmony with the nominated army-controlled Senate. How long the two houses can maintain this uneasy relationship is doubtful. Much depends on how much support the new government can generate from a cross section of the Thai people, which, in turn, depends on how honest and efficient the new government is. On this score, the past experience of the people has been largely negative. Then, there is the military waiting to take full advantage of the disenchantment of the masses with the administration and stage a coup.

There is still hope for a change in the established pattern. The coup staged in February last year was more severely criticised, within the country and outside, than previous take-overs by the military. With pro-democracy waves sweeping through country after country, and the international opinion becoming increasingly more alert on the question, the Thai army should not take things for granted, before and after the election on Sunday.

Why So Much about the Gulf War Proved Wrong

by Daya Kishan Thussu

On the first anniversary of the Gulf war commentators and historians are looking back on an episode that is becoming increasingly controversial. One aspect is the role the Western media played in swinging public opinion in favour of military action against Iraq. Despite their claims to be independent of government, much of the media appeared to give partisan coverage of the Gulf crisis. Gemini News Service looks back at the role of the media in the conflict.

According to a programme made by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and shown on British TV in February, 10 million dollars — equivalent to a US presidential election expense — was spent on the propaganda war, using all the promotional techniques, such as providing videos to various news organisations.

The media generally underplayed the considerable opposition to military action within the US, reflected in the close vote in the Congress.

According to a New York-based media monitoring group, Fairness and Accuracy in

Reporting (FAIR), in the run-up to the war, the three major America TV networks, ABC, NBC and CBS, devoted less than one per cent of their airtime to organised opposition to the Gulf policy.

Few journalists asked any critical questions about why the democratic West should go to war to safeguard undemocratic sheikhdoms.

Hardly any reference was made to other policy goals, such as to keep control on supply of cheap oil; to justify the continuation of the arms trade in the post-Cold War age, and the long-standing US desire for a permanent military

presence in the Gulf.

Already since the end of the war the West has sold arms worth \$30 billion in the Middle East region. The media once again made little of last September's Kuwait-US defence deal which ensures that US forces can stay in Kuwait.

During the war itself, double standards persisted in reporting the military action. The Western missiles caused "collateral damage," whereas the Scuds caused "civilian casualties". George Bush was "at peace with himself, resolute, statesmanlike, assured" while Saddam Hussein was "demented, defiant, an evil tyrant, a crackpot dictator."

One key "fact" repeated throughout the crisis period and the war itself was that Iraq had the world's fourth biggest army.

As the World Defence Almanac shows, before the Gulf war Iraq was in seventh place after the Soviet Union, China, the US, India, Iran, and Turkey.

This exaggeration of Iraqi military capability could be seen to justify the continuous bombing of a retreating, largely conscript army.

Alfonso Rojo, of Spanish newspaper El Mundo who also filed for London's Guardian newspaper from Baghdad, was close to the truth when he said after the war: "Journalists have to figure at the top of the list of those who lost out by the Gulf war. We allowed ourselves to be manipulated and we confused the public. There did not exist an Iraqi army of a million men and Saddam Hussein's power was deliberately exaggerated."

Last April the annual assembly of the International Press Institute in Kyoto, representing more than 2000 newspapers and broadcasting organisations, unanimously passed a resolution condemning the media management techniques used during the war, which had "prevented a balanced picture of events, including the full extent of human suffering."

These wrong images of the war were not only for "allied" consumption, but shown across the world. Unlike Radio Baghdad or the Iraqi News Agency INA, which lack credibility even within Iraq, the US-dominated Western media have global reach and influence. Most international news is disseminated through

Western news sources.

The American Cable News Network (CNN) reaches nearly 100 countries in countries where CNN is not available. Visnews and Worldwide Television News (WTN), the world's two biggest television news companies and both owned by Western organisations, provide TV news.

The powerful Voice of America and the BBC World Service, with their domination of radio frequencies, can be tuned into anywhere in the world.

The four biggest international news agencies — Associated Press (AP), United Press International (UPI), Agence France Press (AFP) and Reuters — are western, the first two American.

They wield great influence in setting the agenda of world events, reflecting Western strategic interests — as do such US publications as Time and Newsweek, both with global readerships.

Articles and editorials from Western newspapers are syndicated to newspapers in many developing countries.

There remains, as was so often argued during the debate in the early Eighties on a New World Information and Communications Order, a virtual western monopoly on news and information available to shape public opinion internationally.

One year on, the Western media seem to have lost interest in Iraq. While the regime of Saddam Hussein unabashedly triumphs in its "victory" over the West, thousands of ordinary, powerless Iraqis continue to suffer the excesses of dictatorship.

As the al Sabah family celebrates the first anniversary of Kuwait's liberation, the human rights of millions of Iraqi children are being violated by the UN (read US)-dictated sanctions without any legal reason. Why has Iraq ceased to be newsworthy?

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The Moynihan Affair

Another Nail in the House of Lords Coffin?

Alan Chalkley writes from Hong Kong

IN the 900-year history of Britain's parliaments, many members of both houses have led colourful lives, to describe them kindly. Scandal and crime are not lacking over the centuries.

So the recent arrival of the infant Lord Daniel Moynihan of Leeds in Britain, said to be for the purpose of training him in the arts of being a British gentleman and the craft of being a member of the upper house of parliament, rang many a bell in history.

The young Daniel Moynihan's arrival comes at an awkward time — just when the British electorate is questioning the propriety of a tax-free monarchy and the antics of the younger royal family. Why not question the selection process for the House of Lords as well?

Young Daniel is the son of Lord Moynihan and his fifth wife, a former Manila hotel receptionist (his former two wives were Filipinas). Lord Moynihan disowned a son by his fourth wife and, as British tabloids would have it, went to England last year to establish by genetic fingerprinting that Daniel is indeed his son. The Lord's family has accepted the future Lord of Leeds' credentials and a Rolls Royce whisked him away upon his arrival to a life in the British aristocracy. This, amidst howls from the press and observers that it is about time to question the seemingly ridiculous process in which to choose a member of the all-important House of Lords.

His father, Lord Antony, was self-described as the "black sheep" of the family, claiming to have sought to revive his family fortunes by dubious means such as fraud and drug-running. He crowned his life by taking up the profession of whorehouse keeper in the Philippines.

At the end of this career he lived relatively humbly in a small bungalow on Manila's outskirts, so it appears that he failed to revive those fortunes significantly. And it was only within the last three years that he married two wives in swift succession (both from the somewhat shabby society in which he mixed), produced two sons, but then disowned the first.

There have been many disputed claims to peerages over the centuries, and even today there are doubtful origins to many a plush title. Even the succession of the Royal Family itself has been frequently disputed — a right, royal over the next sovereign in 1689 led to the creation of Britain's first political parties, and thus to the universal suffrage system which Westminster now boasts.

Perhaps the strangest events in Lords history have recently taken place in Hong Kong (one of the very few places left on earth which accept British royal honours).

Two peerages have been granted: one to a Jewish merchant, whose family was originally from Baghdad; the other is to a Chinese lady who has for years been a director of a British trading "hong." Both have done much for the colony where both have prospered — the Jewish peer, for instance, despite his community's dietary prohibitions, founded a piggery research centre in Hong Kong's New Territories!

As is still the custom, peers much choose a "territory" as part of their name. Not long ago, the awardee had to own the actual place, but not any more. Lord Kadoorie is "of Kowloon," and Baroness Dunn is "of Hongkong Island in Hongkong" and of Knightsbridge in the Royal

Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

There has been many a case of non-British, non-"white" knightages in the past, but few of peerages, the most outstanding case being that of Lord Constantine, a West Indian cricketer-diplomat. Several successions have been taken up by mixed-race heirs, because some peers, like Moynihan, have had cosmopolitan tastes in wives.

Asian peerages have been rare, partly because, for instance, to offer an Indian "Maharajah" a British lordship would not be regarded as a promotion at all. Then, with the disinheriting of all the Indian princes in the 1950s and the rejection of royal honours by all of South Asia, the question became moot.

Southeast Asia is in similar case: old aristocracies existed before British conquest, and in the great are of sultanates the holders of gorgeous titles were accepted into British society with full honours, as were the Rajahs, Maharajahs, Nawabs, etc, and their vast entourages.

So if the Moynihan incident does lead to the final abolition of the centuries-old House of Lords, the event will not stand alone. In many countries, aristocracies are under attack, even when they are merely symbolic — relics of old feudal systems, richly-dressed "models," parading like film extras at festival times. What is there to lose? ask the anti-Lords people.

And if the Lords go, why not

SIDEBAR

Little Daniel isn't the first scandal-tinged Lords claimant by far. But the grubby tale has reinforced a vocal group in Britain that has wanted to abolish the House of Lords altogether. Critics of the upper house go some way back — to the 1700s, when the philosophy that national leaders should be chosen by the people first gained strength in France and the American colonies.

So let us trace how the lordly institution arose, and how it appears to be falling into decay.

It began when William Normandy (himself a bastard) conquered England in 1066. His followers expected some large rewards for their success. William then parcelled out most of England among them, and gave them the responsibility to develop their lands (so as to pay taxes), and to send armed men to the aid of the King if he should need them.

These were the first Lords of the land. Most of them were not from aristocratic stock at all in Normandy — even kitchen scullions, if they fought bravely, became Lords of counties and manors galore. Indeed, some titled families still point with some pride to the lowly, the dubious and even the practical origins of their line, as the centuries brought them fame and fortune.

For many centuries, lordships were based on land. Even famous warriors like Mariborough and Nelson were given big acreages along with their titles. So it was natural that the Lord's heir, usually the eldest child, should also inherit the title. Thus logically, until very recent days, lordships (and baronetcies) were hereditary, because the successor was also the landowner.

But what of the House of Commons? This was a later creation. The King needed the support of a growing group of town-dwellers, called "burg-

esses." Then there were some minor knights and rich peasantry landowners in certain parts of the country — these, too, should be brought into the tax net. In return, the King would call them together for advice, from what then became the "commonality".

There were times when a House actually outlived the King. In 1215 a group of powerful barons made the King sign a kind of "freedom pact," the Magna Carta, but freedom mostly for the barons, of course. Then in the 1660s, two groups of people joined hands to defeat the King — the smaller landowners and the new body of rich town merchants (the financial and industrial revolutions were just beginning). They not only beat the King on the field of battle; they executed him in public!

But the royal family were soon restored to power. Why? For the same reasons that many support royalty today: a sovereign is (at least in appearance) an independent source of power and rewards; it is a symbol of national pride; it is not subject to political choice, but to the arbitrary event of the birth of an heir to the throne. Countries which have adopted routine political elections of their heads of state don't seem to have fared any better at bringing nations together, and the elections are divisive.

It was a British Government in 1911 which began the process of reducing the power of the upper house. It did it by taxation. It introduced an "estate duty," payable on the death of any family head. Small estates were exempted, of course, but the tax rate was steeply raised, until the very large estates of a big landowner was in effect destroyed. The tax was payable only in cash, so large areas of Lord-owned land came under auction.

The tax was a great success. Within three generations whole areas and villages had to be sold off. Who bought them? The new industrialist wealthy, along with thousands of small peasant who became the new breed of farmers and small-holders. Whole city areas were sold off, too, to the rising bourgeoisie.

Then, beginning in the 1930s, there was a strange new twist to the Lords story. Peerages began to be given without land, and to classes of people who had never been ennobled before — sportsmen, actors, trade union leaders, administrators of charities, even a journalist or litterateur or two, plus some warriors.

The grant of a peerage now became just a "top award," and had no significance in the power structure: nothing was expected in return for the

grant, not even attending the House. So it became logical that peerages should no longer be hereditary.

Thus we arrive at the current situation: Is there any value at all to the gorgeously-furnished and berobed House of Lords and its members, other than a top award for some real or imagined benefit to society?

The institution's critics charge that it is a colossal waste of money, since few members attend, their deliberations have very little effect on legislation, if any at all, and they are a tattered remnant of feudal times, representing nothing and nobody but themselves.

Both Lord Kadoorie (who is ailing) and Lady Dunn, for example, have business affairs to attend to in Hong Kong, and so their attendances in the House of Westminster are not expected to be frequent. They would, however, be expected to fly there for any debates on the territory.

But both Houses seem to find the subject of Hong Kong a bore (the last Commons debate was attended by only a handful of members).

The Lordships' supporters retort: most of the active Lords are experienced judges, ex-cabinet ministers, leaders of social and political institutions and street-wise observers of the modes and morals of today. They are now largely non-hereditary. A peerage is a means of giving people a say in the legislative process without subjecting them to the roughening and even corrupting effects of the election hustings.

Lords debates are far superior to those in the Commons, they add, because peers are absolved from toying party lines and churning out the je-june and even hypocritical phrases which spatter the proceedings of the lower house.

And thus, in the words of the broadcast reports, "the debate continues." If the socialist party should win the next election in Britain, then the anti-Lords arguments will get a fresh airing. But will they gain a majority vote, if a division is called?

Political realities may intervene to save the Lords from abolition. After all, socialist members of the Commons, and their supporters, are also in the running for peerages as the two annual "Honours Lists" approach. It is cabinets which advise the sovereign on those honours.

The socialists have been out of power for so long that a large number of them will, in their heart of hearts, be saying: "Don't abolish it yet — not when I might get a peerage myself at long last..."

— Dephewus Asia

To the Editor...

Roads in northern region

Sir, As reported in the newspaper, 100m US dollar loan has been extended to Bangladesh by ADB authorities for road management and road construction. We are pleased that the loan has been extended for this important sector. For Bangladesh is still far behind in communication development. More and more funds are required for the purpose of road construction in the northern region of the country.

There are still primitive and worse types of roads in the northern part of the country yielding more of troubles than facilities for the helpless users. It is more due to the phenom-

enal seasonal flooding that the roads are damaged seriously. Such existing roads need to be rehabilitated with adequate fund. Many roads need bridges/culverts to be constructed and repaired at once for the sake of vital communication between districts and upazilas.

We hope this 100m US dollar ADB loan will be utilized properly with preference towards the need of the northern part of the country.

M A Motin Majumder
Surveyor of Bangladesh, Dhaka

Arms or books

Sir, I am appalled at the violence that prevails on the Dhaka University campus and the other campuses in the country.

A university is a seat of education, not a place for flexing muscles and toting pistols. It is really shocking that this situation prevails. It prevents students from concentrating on studies when a course of three years may stretch on to five years.

This violence has become a routine over the decades and is being taken for granted. This is publicised and promoted. It appears, instead of being stamped out.

The continued violence makes the students and their parents feel insecure. Surely the government should take strong steps to rectify the state of affairs.

GDL
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