

An Afghan Solution

The civil war that started in Afghanistan following the left-wing revolution in Kabul in April, 1978 was supposed to have come to an end with the assumption of power by an interim government formed by a coalition of Mujahideen guerrilla groups. The exit of Dr Najibullah and fall from power of his Watan Party, has not, unfortunately, heralded an era of peace and harmony. The current showdown between forces loyal to the interim government headed by Sibgatullah Mojaddedi and guerrillas belonging to the fundamentalist Hezb-e-Islami led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, has come as yet another reminder that the world of Afghan politics is not as simple and straight-forward as it once made out to be during the time of the active Soviet military involvement between December, 1979 and February 15, 1989.

What we seem to have at present is a continuation of the civil war, with greater complications because of the multiplicity of factors involved. On the one hand, we have a vision of a "modern and progressive" Afghanistan as presented by the new defence minister Ahmad Shah Masood who appears to be backed by Mojaddedi and other "moderate" Mujahideen leaders. On the other, there is the Hezb-e-Islami of Hekmatyar, backed for a long time by the Pakistani military, wishing to see the establishment of a fundamentalist state in Afghanistan. In addition, ethnic rivalries among the Pakhtoons, Tajiks and Uzbeks are also rearing their heads, with struggle for local domination among a multitude of feudal lords with their little private armies adding fuel to the fire.

It is precisely this kind of scenario which the United Nations tried to avert by putting forward its plan last month, which allowed for a dignified exit of Najibullah and holding of country-wide general elections. That plan, along with whatever unity of purpose there was among the Mujahideen groups, now lies in tatters. The multi-dimensional animosities seem to run too deep, the availability of heavy arms and ammunition too easy and the propensity to resort to violence too great to leave any room for meaningful dialogue.

However, if the history of Afghanistan is one of never-ending wars and blood-letting, then it is also one of unlikely alliances and unexpected compromises. It is this Afghan capacity to wheel and deal, that now seems to hold out the only hope. It is doubtful if there can be any accommodation between Masood and Hekmatyar, but the latter has already shown himself to a power-hungry bigot who cannot be trusted to keep to any agreement that might be worked out.

Masood and Mojaddedi must now look for peace through compromises across the country with all the other groups, which can still play a constructive role in Afghan politics. With battles still raging, it may well be too early to raise the question of elections, but here the UN can and ought to offer its services as an honest broker. It will be a tough job, but it is one the UN must be ready to perform because it is the only body remotely capable of gaining the confidence of all concerned by virtue of its neutral position, and its past history of opposition to the Soviet adventure.

High Beauty

The title 'Miss Universe' is a little too presumptuous irrespective of whoever is crowned as such. We do not know of all universe to claim that this particular female member of the human species is the most beautiful of the living things in all of the 1,000,000,000,000 universes each of which contain 100,000,000,000 stars overaging the size of our homestar — the sun. And besides creatures other than human have their own standards of beauty.

And man's idea of the beauty of the human person is one of the most subjective and relative of all of man's faculty of judgment and appreciation. The final say on the matter may be as flimsy as — beauty is what beauty does, one knows when one confronts such without needing to be told about age-old definitions and criteria. It is good that it perhaps is indeed so, making it possible for a billion females to be accosted by a some billion males each of them knowing in his heart that it is beauty he has before him.

But the beauty contests — a genre represented by the current Bangkok carnival — base their activity on the contrary view that human, female to be precise, beauty is judgeably objective — that it can be measured and compared — ranged on graduated scale of perfection. The whole thing is so suspect that the organisers of all such events prefer rather to call the affair a pageant. Some organisers, conscious of the silliness of the underlying premises of the competition, have tried to include personality and intellectual attainments etc as considerations carrying points.

The idea of beauty, as very aptly demonstrated by the ever-changing world of fashion, specially in the field of apparels, keeps on changing. There is news that height is the latest fad to be considered as an essential ingredient of beauty. At least three of the contestants in Bangkok are six feet plus and a lot others are six footers. With high heels adding at least another three inches — the whole of that select crowd, if packed to Bangladesh, could become the tallest group of any sections of males — police and army included.

This is a fad that, as all past fads, will pass. Two things come inexorably to mind in this connection. It is quite possible that the common notion that both boys and girls in Bangladesh have gained in average height of up to two-three inches is right. A survey would possibly confirm this to bring Bangladesh's human height developed at par with what happened in the post war fifties and sixties in Europe.

For girls to be extra-tall — five feet seven plus — can be problematic and even tragic in Bangladesh where the average male height may not exceed five feet five. But, on the other hand, couples with the male spouse shorter than his partner have quite often been known to be happy and content — male chauvinism taking a back seat and height perhaps adding to the charm of femininity — a Bangkok.

Baker Hopes Poll Will Boost His Peace Process

By Benjamin Cohen

The US is hoping that when Israel goes to the polls in June it will end up with the new Labour Party leader, Yitzhak Rabin, as prime minister. Although Rabin is quite hardline, he is seen to be more likely to help the peace process which US Secretary of State James Baker has worked so hard to promote. Gemini News Service reports on a crucial general election.

ISRAELIS go to the polls on June 23 for what may be the most important general election in the 44-year history of the Jewish state.

The United States will be watching particularly carefully, to see whether the Israeli public endorse the Middle East peace process.

The election takes place against an uncertain, and potentially explosive, background. Upheavals inside the two main parties — Labour and Likud — reflect the new situation in which Israel finds itself. Israeli leaders, no longer able to count on unconditional American support and financial backing, are having to find a way to keep both the electorate and Washington happy.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir fended off leadership challenges from the hawkish Housing Minister Ariel Sharon and the more pragmatic Foreign Minister David Levi.

Despite this successful balancing act inside his Likud Party, the Americans are deeply troubled by his commitment to further settlement in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.

US Secretary of State James Baker told a Congressional sub-committee meeting at the end of February that \$10 billion of housing loan guarantees to continue.

Rubbing salt into the wound at a UN Security Council meeting, the US also condemned Israeli incursions into Lebanon. The Israelis had attacked Hezbollah positions in southern Lebanon following the killing of three soldiers at the Dotan Base in northern Israel.

By dragging out the spectre of Arab terrorism, Israel had hoped to shore up US support.

But what the US wants is a moderate Israeli government that will agree territorial concessions with the Palestinians. Washington hopes the June elections will be won by the Labour Party, which has never really recovered from its defeat by the Likud, under Menachem Begin, in 1977.

Labour's new leader is Yitzhak Rabin. He defeated

Shimon Peres in a February ballot with 40.5 per cent of the votes. Rabin, a former army chief of staff, was Labour leader from 1974-77. He has a tough reputation.

As Defence Minister in 1988 he developed the policy of "might, power and beatings" against the Palestinian intifada in the occupied territories.

Nonetheless, labour is officially committed to territorial compromise and does not rule out talks with the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), although the party has traditionally preferred King Hussein of Jordan as an interlocutor.

At the fifth party convention in November 1991 Shimon Peres underlined labour support for a freeze on settlement and concessions on territory, although he also made it clear that a return to the pre-1967 borders was out of the question.

Proposals put to the con-

vention by Labour's dovish wing were roundly defeated, partly because of Rabin's influence. Yet Rabin also told the delegates: "Can there be a greater difference than the one separating us from the Likud?"

"We want a democratic Jewish state with equal rights for all, and not to force our will on 1.7 million Palestinians. Much as I am attached to all of Eretz Israel (Greater Israel), for the sake of peace we must give up inches, and even several kilometres."

Rabin's chances of winning the election are good. Hanoch Smith, Israel's leading pollster, says: "Labour is now headed by a candidate who has broad popular support." Smith estimates that, with Rabin as leader, Labour's vote will be boosted by 12 per cent, gaining votes from the right as well.

Likud believes American pressure will push the elec-

torate further to the right. Immediately after Baker made his announcement, Shamir thundered to American Jewish leaders that he would "never go along with the principle that Jews have no right to live in this or that part of Eretz Israel." He added: "I do not believe that any government of Israel formed after June 23 would agree to such a demand."

Rabin, though, is adamant that settlement will be halted, regardless of whether or not the US approves the loans.

The rift over settlement appears to be growing. A heated Knesset debate in February resulted in the right-wing MR Eliakim Ha'ezri accusing Labour's Michael Bar Zohar of "Nazism."

Zohar had denounced the government for "appropriating two beloved words, which were part of the fabric of our Zionist life and heritage: 'settlement' and 'peace'."

"Deputy Foreign Minister Benjamin Netanyahu even accused the US of wanting Israel to return to the borders of Auschwitz."

The indications are that emotive debate will not win voter sympathy. The last year has seen Israel's economic crisis rise sharply, expanding social divisions. In January, when the National Insurance Institute published its data on poverty for 1990, it added that the situation had grown worse in 1991.

A total of 537,000 people — 14.3 per cent of Israeli families, including 279,000 children — live below the poverty line. The unemployment rate has risen to 10.4 per cent. Recent weeks have seen angry demonstrations in Jerusalem by unemployed workers.

Most of Israel's poor Jewish population is of Arab origin. The Sephardi Jews have, despite their reputation for supporting right-wing parties, always found it difficult to make ends meet.

New immigrants, of both Ethiopian and Russian origin, are also experiencing extreme hardship. The left, and especially the radical Sephardi Black Panther Party, has regularly contrasted the frenzied government spending on settlements with the lack of poverty relief.

The likelihood is that both parties will campaign aggressively on social issues. Labour Knesset Member Ora Namir's statement that "unemployment is the number one issue in Israeli society" shows that social issues may overtake security in the run-up to June.

Both parties are also worried by the increasing politicisation of the new immigrants. Soon after figures were re-

leased in January showing that 43,000 immigrants were out of work, a group of Soviet Jews launched the National Movement for Democracy and Aliyah (Hebrew for "immigration").

Known by its initials DA — Russian for yes — the movement describes itself as liberal and focuses on economic problems. The movement was encouraged by a January poll which showed that 32 per cent of recent immigrants would vote for a Russian party.

This means that the party could win between eight and ten Knesset seats — enough to hold the balance of power in Israel's complicated electoral system. DA could support either Labour or Likud, and overtures to it and the 20 other immigrant associations are already being made.

By the time of the election Israelis may well have realised that economic well-being and support from the US is more important than territorial expansionism.

But as the settler population — currently 250,000, including East Jerusalem — increases, extremism will also grow. A fresh term of Likud government could lead to another war with the Arab states. This would certainly upset US strategy, but any sign of instability within the Arab world would renew Washington's support for Israel.

If Rabin can present a coherent social programme together with sound peace proposals, the Americans will be much happier. Yet a Labour victory will not automatically bring peace.

The Palestinians are unlikely to compromise on the statehood issue and it is equally unlikely that the settlers will abandon their homes. Even if Israel's political scene does change in June, its effect on the wider region will certainly take more time.

BENJAMIN COHEN, a journalist based at the Institute for War and Peace Reporting in London, writes frequently on Middle East issues.

Controlling the Knesset



Labour leader Yitzhak Rabin

How they fared in 1988

Rightwing coalition 47 seats (Likud 40, Tehya 3, Taomet 2, Moledet 2)

Leftwing coalition 48 seats (Labour 38, Ratz 5, MAPAM 3, Shini 2)

Religious parties 18 Communist parties 6

Likud formed government with support of religious parties



Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir

South Asia : Balance of Nuclear Terror

INDIA and Pakistan have both brought their nuclear weapons programme out of the closet in recent months, and some disarmament experts think nuclear deterrence may actually bring added security to this volatile region.

After being ambiguous about it for years, Pakistan has publicly admitted it has a nuclear weapons capability. And in an unprecedented move, Indian officials said this month the country had a nuclear defence plan as well.

Said a leading Pakistani military analyst: "India and Pakistan have both taken their nuclear weapon programmes out of the basement and put it on the shelf, and the establishment on both sides of the border have accepted its role as a military deterrent."

The developments come as some military and strategic thinktanks in the West have challenged traditional notions of non-proliferation as a vital element in maintaining global

peace. Even the United States has accepted the fact the India and Pakistan are new nuclear states. One administration official in Washington reportedly said in March: "[We] hope the nuclear standoff in the subcontinent convinces both to manage their relationship more constructively."

India conducted an underground nuclear test in 1974 and has since said its nuclear programme was for peaceful purposes. Pakistan has been ambiguous about its nuclear plans. The two countries have fought three wars since they became independent in 1947.

But with the Cold War over and India's rapid rapprochement with the United States, it seems it is now confession time in South Asia.

Pakistani prime Minister Nawaz Sharif told French President Francois Mitterrand in January: "No doubt we have the capability of building nuclear weapons) but we are not

India and Pakistan go public with their nuclear weapons plans, but will this bring security to the volatile region? Mushahid Hussain of IPS reports from Islamabad.

going it because we are concentrating on development."

In February, foreign Secretary Shahryar Khan was even more forthright. He told the Washington Post Pakistan had nuclear capability, but "last year permanently froze production of high-enriched uranium and of weapons cores."

Recently Defence Minister Chis Ali Shah even hinted at nuclear deterrence in South Asia: "Pakistan has acquired nuclear capability for maintaining a balance of power in the region."

Pakistan has admitted its nuclear capability partly to appease domestic public opinion.

The government has been criticised by its Islamic hardline coalition partners of the Jamat-i-Islami Party who feel

Pakistan is buckling under US pressure to give up going nuclear.

Analysts say Islamabad's other concern may be that the emergence of Kazakhstan as an independent Muslim state could steal the nuclear thunder away from Pakistan. Kazakhstan is believed to be the only other country with possession of the dreaded Islamic Bomb.

Another reason pushing Islamabad to go public may be China's stinging of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty this year, which has increased pressure on India to follow suit. India's argument against signing was premised on China's strategic nuclear capability.

Explained one Pakistani

diplomat: "Pakistan is keen to ensure that it is treated at par with India in terms of the level of development of its nuclear programme when and if the issue reaches the conference table in South Asia."

By repeatedly stating that Pakistan has acquired nuclear capability, Pakistan is also sending a message to the United States underlining a threshold and ruling out a rollback.

Pakistani analysts say Islamabad's higher nuclear profile has induced New Delhi to shed its earlier stance that its nuclear programme is only meant for peaceful purposes.

In February, the Indian External Affairs Ministry said atomic weapons were part of India's "nuclear preparedness." And in an unprecedented move, India has begun talks with the United States about military cooperation and nuclear non-proliferation.

During recent discussions between US State Department officials and a senior Indian

diplomatic delegation, New Delhi maintained its refusal to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. But further Indo-US dialogue on the issue is expected.

Wrote one Pakistani commentator here: "India's vegetarian bomb has suddenly become carnivorous."

Pakistan's nuclear confession was a tactical move that has now put it in the category of countries like India and Israel which have been branded New Nuclear States (NNS). Some analysts here think this will make policymakers in Islamabad less apologetic about the country's nuclear weapon programme.

The nuclear issue has always been a sensitive one here. The United States slashed military and economic aid to Pakistan in 1990 after Islamabad failed to get a certification from the US Congress that it was not making a bomb. It marked the beginning of worsening relations between Washington and Islamabad.

To the Editor...

Public libraries

Sir, The human mind cannot give its best, unless it is constantly nurtured by education; and what can be a better way of learning than books, and books.

The true University of these days is a collection of books — Thomas Carlyle.

The Prime Minister while inaugurating a book week of the Jatiya Grantha Kendra at the Osmani Memorial Hall on the 15th of April stated that a sum of Taka six crore was earmarked for the development of the public libraries in the Fourth Five-Year Plan.

If the above mentioned figure is taken to be as correct (it needs rechecking), this appears to be an unbelievably low figure. For, after all, if the whole of Taka six crore is spent, simply for the purchase of books, how many books can we really buy with this meagre amount. We feel that even an allotment of Tk 100 crore for this purpose would not have been enough. We would request the appropriate authorities to kindly examine the above mentioned issue thoroughly and give a rejoinder in the matter.

Shahabuddin Mahtab
Dharamandi R/A, Dhaka.

Priceless diplomas!

Sir, Your charming description (My World 24.4.92) of the anecdote how Syed Mujtaba Ali's 'Biswabharati' diploma, signed by Rabindranath Tagore, got due recognition from the far-away-long-ago Kabul, has inspired me to refer to another interesting episode which happened at Comilla, decades ago, possibly early

30s. My Bengali teacher at Comilla Victoria College, Agha (if I am to quote the then Afghan minister as referred to in the anecdote!) Prof Sudhir Sen, got his appointment as a lecturer to the Bengali department in Comilla Victoria College on the strength of his 'Biswabharati' diploma plus a one-sentence testimonial from Tagore himself which ran thus: "Sudhir Bangla janey" (Sudhir knows Bengali).

Now, turning to Kabul again, I would like to mention here that since I have not visited Kabul, my knowledge of Afghanistan is limited to only three sources, namely, Syed Mujtaba Ali's "Deshey Bideshey", the feature film "Kabuliwala", and my cousin Kazi Mohammad Solaiman, a UN diplomat, who was posted in Kabul for some years. Be that as it may, my emotional attachment to that turbulent country mainly centred around 'Rahmat' to Tagore and 'Abdur Rahman' of Syed Mujtaba Ali. The story of strife-torn Afghanistan is shocking to any sensible person. I sincerely wish the Indonesian type "massacre" as you aptly, and perhaps, with enormous sympathy, put it elsewhere in the same column, does not happen in Afghanistan, once they have succeeded in their heroic struggle and regained independence. Incidentally, I am constrained to observe that the Afghan trait of "mutual distrust" could as well be the trait of Bengalis!

No I am not concluding my letter here without wishing a little good luck so that some day some one should hand over a copy of "Kabi Pranam" to you. In case it remained untraced, I would suggest you to get hold of a copy of "Shashwata

Tripura" (Eternal Tipplers, which was the old name of Comilla), published from Calcutta by some illustrious sons of Comilla. This anthology may give you some pleasure to find out that some persons of Comilla also attained fame to carve a position of eminence in the history of the sub-continent.

Abdul Kader
Purana Pallan, Dhaka.

NATO

Sir, Is the world safe now or still in danger after the collapse of Red Empire ending the great Cold War? The answer will have to be known to the world's citizens soon, should they have any reason to worry about their safety as much as for the planet they dwell on.

Anyhow, the (last) hope of ensuring their habitat safe and sound will depend much on the ongoing process of diminishing the difference between rival powers on earth. By far, increasing East-West cooperations have relaxed most of the tension among the world's ideological axes contributing to the NATO aids for Superpower Russia.

Now that NATO has virtually no adversary after making peace progress appreciably by the big powers to date, the purpose of such a grouping now is confusing, if not for the suspected extraterrestrial hyperpower, and even a possible extraordinary power source in the Third World or inside an ally may suffice at the most.

Better or worse, the peace-seeking changes enforced lately through various means including SALT and START have probably led to the boom-

ing western arms sales that must have a fallout on the global power balance jeopardizing peace.

M Rahman
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Airconditioning

Sir, Airconditioning increases the cold, as pointed out in a news-item "Facts about the common cold" Published in the Times magazine of April 24, 1992. Airconditioning increases susceptibility to cold because of the chill factor. However, real culprit may be the low relative humidity of refrigerated air.

In a Canadian study, schools with high humidity reported 40 per cent fewer cold-related absences than schools with low relative humidity did. Researchers say that good ventilation and vigilant personal hygiene are the most important factors in preventing people from catching and spreading colds. In airconditioning, generally, the relative humidity is lower than normal ventilated room or outside air. On the other hand, good ventilation cannot be provided in airconditioning areas as same air is recirculated again and again.

Our well-to-do people are enjoying the airconditioner without knowing the bad side of it as pointed out above. Airconditioners are fed by Freon gas which is destroying the ozone layer of atmosphere. Our MPs and well-to-do people should set an example by avoiding airconditioners to save health, foreign exchange and environment.

M Alaiddin
West Nakal Para, Dhaka

OPINION

"Murder? Suicide? or Both?"

While waiting for my doctor at a clinic in Bangkok I was reading a foreign magazine, where a headline attracted my attention, "Murder? Suicide? or Both?" I was smelt a local gossip and started reading the write-up. No, it is not a love story or a thriller. It is about our life. It is about pollution of environment and an appeal to save plants on earth. It said, "Whenever you kill a plant — you are helping to kill yourself and every form of life on earth. Plants give us the air we breathe; their green leaves filter and purify even the most polluted city environment."

The writer discussed many other things about pollution and then appealed to all the citizens of the world to conserve plants and trees at any cost. Because every time we are saving a plant, we are saving a human life too. Obviously, then, my mind drifted, towards the situation in my own country. There is so much pollution in the air of our cities. Population is booming, urban civic utilities are losing rationale and life is becoming difficult day by day. Slum areas are expanding as people from rural areas are continuously coming to cities in search of jobs. Every year we are experiencing a new climate. The behavioural pattern of weather is not as balanced as it was, it is rather unpredictable now. Either it is raining too much or no rain at all. Flood, cyclone have become synonymous with Bangladesh. It is the effect of removing plants and felling trees all over

the country? Although some quarters are holding seminars, giving speeches where ministers are being guest speakers, advising people to conserve plants, trees and forests, but to no effect as such. And at the same time while constructing or even repairing a city road we notice contractors are using logs as fuel for heating the asphalt and the authorities have nothing to say about it. Brick fields are burning whatever trees around to add to the denudation. They are not concerned from where the logs are coming.

After reading the article, whenever I see heaps of logs by the side of a road, I feel the concern. I feel the cautionary words — "Murder? Suicide? or Both?" "Why can't we use gas or other fuel for all such purposes? Can't we find any alternative to logs for fuel in the countryside? How long we would be helping to kill lives by killing plants and trees. What about finding a way to stop killing ourselves?"

Can't we plant more trees (not in unmeaning words and observations of "days" and "weeks", but in reality) in a planned, routine way to replenish the loss, even to the extent of not changing our old habit of burning logs altogether you have to raise the rate of replenishment over that of the loss. It's not hard, only a sincere will is required. A will to check suicide!

Munira Khan
Dhaka