

A Hope for Thailand

The unexpected announcement by King Bhumibol Adulyadej recalling a former respected prime minister, Anand Panyarachun, to form a caretaker government in Thailand offers a new hope for the country which is yet to recover from the aftermath of the blood bath of earlier this month. The move does not help in healing the wound caused by the massacre of pro-democracy protesters by the army led by Gen Suchinda Kraprayoon as such. However, it may — indeed, should — start a process that puts the country on the road to democracy that no longer operates under the shadow of an army rule.

A former ambassador to the United States, a well-respected administrator and a businessman, Anand had served as an interim prime minister, again appointed by the King, after a military coup had ousted an elected government in 1991. His short-lived government was seen by most Thais as the cleanest and, in some ways, the most efficient one in the country in recent decades. However, being a non-partisan technocrat, with no political base of his own, he stayed out of the last election and went into retirement.

The plan announced by Anand has been welcomed by a cross section of people in Thailand. The parliament will be dissolved anytime and then within 90 days, a fresh election will be held under an amended constitution. One of the most crucial changes made in the constitution makes it mandatory for the prime minister to be an elected member of the lower house — which Suchinda and many of his predecessors were not — and thus be answerable to the legislature in real sense of the term. Other changes made in the constitution reduce the powers of the nominated upper house, the Senate, which, in the past, had been used by the military to impose its will on the lower house.

The changes, not to mention the appointment of Anand, augur well for Thailand. However, much remains to be done for the country to recover its losses — social, political and economic — caused by recent events. As the new Prime Minister has put it, one of the immediate tasks of the caretaker government is to regain the confidence of foreign entrepreneurs in the continued stability in Thailand. While one wishes every success to the administration on this score, many multinational companies may well reserve their judgement until a new general election is held and a new government takes office. Again, no one should be surprised if pressure is brought upon Anand to enter politics and run in the election. However, whether the party this well-regarded technocrat may join, if he at all takes the plunge into active politics, will capture enough seats in the lower house to make Anand the new prime minister is a different matter. Another way-out may be to choose Anand, after he has been elected to the lower house, as a consensus candidate for the post of the prime minister.

With someone like Anand Panyarachun running the next government for a few years, political parties will have time to reorganise themselves as genuine popular organisations, with well-defined programmes, making the fullest use of the newly-emerging yearnings for democracy among the people. Thus, they will be well-equipped to face any further assault on the country's democratic institutions by the army, the danger of which can never be ruled out. The appointment of Anand certainly offers a new hope to Thailand. However, in the ultimate analysis, the real challenge facing the country must be faced by the political parties.

Having the Warrant of Precedence as Audience

The Director-General of the Shilpakala Academy has been removed unceremoniously for no more serious an offence as distribution of the invitations to the Academy's events appearing as unsatisfactory to some minor minister. This is patently petty-minded and at once too serious an act of undermining the sanctity and effectiveness of operation of statutory bodies to go unchallenged.

The meanness of the situation stems from the rotten fact that what was fashioned as and indeed could be the guardian-angel of the arts of the land, has, on the contrary, been taken by the establishment as a set-up of entertainment catering exclusively to whoever constitutes the government — mainly ministers, their henchmen and bureaucrats. The long and almost unrelenting grip of barracks autocracy over the governance of the land did much to make such degeneration come true.

The Shilpakala Academy is a statutory body enjoying autonomy which should mean a degree of independence in the subject it specially deals with. And Shilpakala is specially special in that it deals with the arts — a far cry from the mechanics and automations of bureaucracy and still farther from the alleys of power wherefrom men and women, off and on descend on the stages and podiums and wings of the Academy. As such it is best that it be headed by one who has been in the thick of the artistic denouement of our culture. And this could pay desired dividends if only such a person, along with his team, were left to their own devices to make a mark in the recovery of the dwindling arts situation of the country.

Things started looking up with the advent of democratic governance. The performance of the Shilpakala Academy in the last one year or so displayed, for the first time, a sense or direction derived from an understanding of art and culture and an appreciation of the problems now besetting them. And now out of the blue comes this bolt of reducing the Academy to nothing more than a dump. The insistence that the invitees' list of the Academy include, first, the ministers and their deputies and vices and people enjoying equivalent status and bureaucrats down to the joint secretary level is, to say it most euphemistically, foolish. And that is what the DG of Academy was asked to abide by, on pain of removal. He has been removed. We now wait to see the warrant of precedence manning the Academy auditorium on show days, failing which the persons responsible for this inconceivably mean situation should, in all fairness, resign.

The bad show at Shilpakala has surely undermined the institution of statutory bodies. More important, it does compromised the present government's claim to an understanding of the nation's cultural needs and to democracy at large. The Prime Minister would, we think, do well to treat this odious episode as worth her while to look into.

The Double Standard: 'Bhadralok' Image

A longtime Indian resident of Bangkok once told me that in his next life, if there is any, he would like to be born either as a Thai male of a rich well-to-do family or an upper class (at least upper-middle) Indian woman. Although he is a man in this life, his future gender preference is geared to the particular place and situation of birth. To me the choices seemed to be rather odd with no apparent similarity between the two. However, as he explained to me, the end result from either of the options is the same.

The two alternative choices would lead to the same easy life style of no work but fun and frolics all the time. The young Thai adult of a rich family with his sports car, girl friends and evening parties is really the envy of the hard working Chinese or expatriates living in Bangkok. On the other hand, the lifestyles of the rich housewives of the subcontinent are well known to us with no work and all fund making them pretty dull sometimes. This is because housewives are done by half a dozen servants and the children are reared by the ayahs. As a result, the days are spent either at the beauty parlours or for shopping; and the evenings are for parties. Indeed a fairly busy schedule particularly during the year-end season of Anglo-saxon vintage when there could be more than one party to attend during the same evening.

In Thailand, women constitute the vital work-force. Their

participation rate in the labour force is one of the highest in the world. From huge business empires and construction works to small noodle shops are often managed very ably by Thai women. Men, therefore, often take it easy. They can afford to do so because women are efficient, bright and hard-working. At the same time, they do enjoy male company and guidance, as appropriate.

Not that this pattern is universal in Thailand but the hang-over from the past patriarchal society still persists and it has been good for Thailand since women take better care of money when family welfare is involved. Men often tend to waste money in drinking and gambling. But such waste from women at the cost of family is indeed very rare anywhere in the world. To women, the children and the family come first.

Under the circumstances, each successive Thai generation particularly now and in the future, would bring forth the cadres of young entrepreneurs and professionals, behind whom are the mothers as the prime motivators dedicating their lives to home as well as outside business ventures.

Our own bhadralok perceptions leave women behind in the dark reaches of the inner house, the *Andarmahal*, during daylight hours, only allowing them to come out after dusk for family celebrations. Bausk care takes more and housework less time as and when

fortunes could be acquired and the families (lucky few) move up the social ladder.

Housewives: Spheres of Activity

There are at least 10,000 if not more housewives in the city of Dhaka who have studied beyond high school if not college graduates already. With very little training, virtually all of them could become suitable school teachers. As a result, all the city schools and some-times colleges can run on a double shift basis. Overnight,

Quality of health services can be substantially improved with participation of idle housewives in medicare activities. If not curative care, preventive health care and, above all, family planning services could be very usefully rendered by the enlightened housewives. Take of example, 100 housewives together launch an organised programme to ensure the use of oral contraceptive pills by 10,000 married women. If can be done at no extra cost to the government as well as foreign aid. Many such things should be done but there is no will to

the area of hand embroidery. There are scopes of many more items like that.

But if the women are out of the house like then who will look after the house, particularly the daily meals when husbands return from work at the end of the day. Here, a novel system has emerged in Thailand. There are private enterprises who in small vans or motor cycles deliver home-cooked food on time everyday, like the newspapers in the morning, and collect the bills at the end of the month. I was told by my Thai neighbours that food cost under such system is almost at par with that for home cooked meals and the taste is equally good, sometimes even better.

Relief from Drudgery

During evening rush hours, the Bangkok pavements are full of women selling cooked curries and other delicacies kept in large pots. Housewives returning from work buy them packed in clean polyethylene bags. Only the rice is boiled at home in rice cookers which takes only ten minutes. Thus the age old tradition of family dinners is also fully retained and the women are relieved of the routine drudgery.

Once our educated women are drawn into the mainstream of economic growth, very dramatic developments could be foreseen. Not only the family incomes will be augmented but the quality of life should vastly improve. Children will be better taken care of instead of the feared neglect commonly apprehended by us. Above all, it

is social progress of unprecedented dimension.

Any bhadralok, no doubt I am one of them, would immediately agree to what have been stated so far. Among his friends women emancipation and equal rights are hot subjects. But we the incredible bhadraloks have double standards. In public the bhadralok image of a progressive individual must be maintained but back home, in relation to wife, the very personnel standards are different. In spite of the publicly held image of being broadminded, it is difficult for us to imagine that during the mid-morning tea break, the wives are having a good time with the male teachers as friends and colleagues. Women apart from being wives are persons as well and they could have male friends as well. Yes, fine with me, if it is not my wife — this seems to be the common bhadralok sentiment which of course is hardly revealed at any time. Somehow, in spite of all the education, travel abroad and exposure to western media, we are still living in the Victorian age of the past. Our double standards are deep-seated in our complex sentiments, never for once bothering that we are proving to be useless to the modern times of unprecedented gender developments.

Basically, the 19th century *bhau* image of bhadraloks still persist in an irresistible manner: while we keep the women tied within the household, we daydream of the idle Thai male with no work and all play making him the fun boy.

What should in fact raise our eyebrows are comments passed by ordinary mortals in bazaars these days which are becoming louder each passing day. These comments, are easily audible when the people find the prices of essentials rising. These comments are already mentioned earlier, are the mixed expression of anger and frustration which amounts to almost the rejection of, and indifference to, all the rhetoric on the successful operation of the democratically elected government, conspiracy bogys, fresh movement against the neo-autocrats etc, powerfully exercised in the public meetings irrespective of parties, politics or ideologies.

Down-to-Earth Facts

The proposed survey should indicate through down-to-earth facts supported by necessary data, the relevance of public meetings to our changed perspective with a focus on the categories of people forming the audience of these meetings. Already in the last general elections, it has been noted with considerable amount of confusion and frustration that too many stipulations of the participating parties, even to the surprise and shock of the veterans in politics, went wrong on account of mainly the "over-understanding" of the people's mind, exposing for the first time a gap between the leaders and their followers.

As the times have changed, bringing about a total change in the value-pattern which is identifiable for its characteristics of decadence, we should perhaps, without indulging in formula-rhetoric, try to correctly understand those changes and identify their causes, and accordingly modify our approach to respond effectively to the felt-needs before a couple of decades more are lost together with historical valuables such as Paltan Maidan, for an instance.

A survey, it should be noted keeping in view the points discussed in this write-up, is not necessarily a white-collar business. Its urgency in the present case for those who understand, is substantially high to differentiate between a public meeting and smokescreen with special reference to, among others, its venue and other dynamics already mentioned.

Public Meeting — Venue, Traffic and Smokescreen Syndrome

by Gholam Mohammad

remarked as the lungs of Dhaka city, now mainly Suhrawardy Uddyan and partly Shishu Park and Police Control Room, is no better than Shapla Chattar and/or Panthapath from practical view point which may be casually discussed in the subsequent analysis.

Main Streets

The main streets within Dhaka city, therefore, provide venues for public meetings and for that matter, selection of places by BNP, AL, Left Wing parties and Jamaat-e-Islami, is admirable except for massive traffic problems, paradoxically to the detriment of the people themselves, during the meeting hours and a couple of additional hours upon conclusion of the meetings. For this, absence of alternative traffic routes or meeting places is to blame rather than apportioning the blame to the parties blocking the traffic. However, as long as the problem persists, their party-in-power (not necessarily BNP, always) should take the blame gracefully upon itself in the event of its failure to resolve this problem. Others should also wake up to their responsibilities in accordance with the size of the responsibilities devolving upon each.

It may perhaps be useful in our changed political scenario to assess at the present stage, when we are talking a great deal of parliamentary democracy, the attitude of the audience towards the public meetings, and to obtain their views on the rhetorics powerfully exercised in course of these meetings — the urgency for this consisting into the fact that immediately upon the conclusion of a public meeting, a quick claim is made by its organisers that the people have given their overwhelming mandate in favour of what was spoken and for which, the people are also thanked. This looks as oversimplification of things planned earlier in closed doors with a provision to implement the already decided sets of

programmes after ceremoniously reading them out, amidst familiar rhetorics, in a public meeting.

A series of surveys on different aspects of public meetings might land us, maybe, on new islands of knowledge. A questionnaire developed for the purpose, may ask the audience, inter alia, on random basis, to begin with, some questions about their presence in the meeting viz. i) whether it was by mere chance or accident that the respondents found themselves in the meeting or, driven by their inner urge without any mundane considerations, they attended the meeting; ii) whether long-standing friendship with the organisers of the meeting without necessarily sharing each other's political views or, financial or any other tangible benefits, attracted them to the meeting; iii) whether they went there to listen, with or without commitment, to what the people were speaking on the mike; iv) whether it was just whiling away their spare time; v) whether they really agree to the existence of conspiracies around the corner to which both the opposition and the ruling party refer and vi) whether they went to the meeting to witness the live show of their leaders arriving in a motorcade, taking the seat on the dais, standing up with a smile or a tense face and speaking out accordingly.

The respondents should be categorised age, sex, education and profession-wise with a question, whether at any time in the past, they were convicted in a criminal case or any such cases are pending against them at the present moment. Another question to be addressed should be whether the respondents agree to the points raised, or, in their opinion, there are other dimensions too, or the points are altogether absurd.

Popularity of Leaders

The survey should also focus on the popularity of the leaders by inserting a few pertinent questions, in the

PUBLIC meetings are an important factor within the academic definition — democratic institutions deserve quite urgent attention for re-assessment/re-evaluation in our situation where a fierce gun battle, aided by rocket launchers, with the police force is still regarded as a law and order case. Needless to define a public meeting in its scope, purpose, significance etc which are too well known to be repeated here, we should be concerned with primarily the venue of public meetings and see next how are these meetings influencing the democratic process within our society.

During the mass upsurge against autocracy in recent times, public meetings, as a vital part of the democratic movement, used to be held almost daily all over the country from which, among others, a very interesting tradition with regard to the venue of public meetings within Dhaka city, developed. A discussion on this may be interesting and informative.

Open space within the city is fast yielding to roads and buildings (also busses). An emphasis on sophisticated shopping complexes and markets during the preceding regime(s), was pronounced all over. Bustees, an apparent obstruction in the city's beautification programme, were removed by application of force (ignoring the reasons for the growth of bustees as well as the fact that cheap urban labour in the shape of our domestic servants, posters in the markets, rickshaw pullers, push cast drivers and other categories of day labourers are available to us from these bustees).

Paltan Maidan

A valuable natural tradition, to our bad luck, has disappeared in this process which explains some kind of derangement/derailment in our thinking and doing things. Paltan Maidan where glorious events of far-reaching national importance took place, was converted into a shopping complex with an extension of the Stadium. The site should, in fact, have been preserved with a monument to remind us and our children of the nation's uncompromising struggle for emancipation. Unfortunately for us, we have ourselves witnessed its total de-construction without

suffering a prick on our conscience which, I am sure, did exist within ourselves.

Paltan Maidan sliced into square feet, was leased out to the business community for whom the western front of the adjacent park, across the road on the south facing the Gulistan Cinema Hall was available, perhaps, as a better option for that purpose. This is one of the hundreds of instances to illustrate how, denuded of the sense of history, affairs of great historical significance have been handled by our leaders which as a nation, we, too, have shamelessly compromised with.

The political parties leading the mass upsurge of compulsion, therefore, opted out on the streets around to hold their regular meetings quite frequently blocking the already gone mad road traffic system of the city. Eventually, by consensus possibly, these political parties mutually allotted among themselves certain near-by places for holding their respective meetings viz. Gulistan Square to BNP, Bangabandhu Avenue to AL, Zero Point to Left Wing parties and North Gate of Baitul Mukarram to Jamaat-e-Islami. This speaks well of inter-parties understanding, discipline and a spirit of co-existence despite their differences on ideology and political programming. Being in itself a vital requirement for the development of healthy democratic norms and traditions, this should not imply that the immediate resultant problems arising out of these public meetings on the streets are being ignored. It may be mentioned here that Shapla Chattar within Mujibee C/A and Pantha-path close to Sonargaon Hotel, were two places tried as prospective places for public meeting. But these failed to respond to the political needs to emerge out as formidable as the four meeting places mentioned earlier. They were, therefore, abandoned.

Manik Mia Avenue looks too selective for ordinary political activities over there. Race Course, indeed correctly

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.

Saving scheme and interest rate

Sir, Newspapers published (June 03), the Finance Minister's announcement about government decision to lower bank rate, interest rate on lending and deposits. The decision goes to the length of lowering the rate of interest allowed on three years saving scheme from 19% to 15%! This has come as a bolt from the blue to the retired officials who have invested their pension gratuity money in the three year saving scheme. The

Finance Minister's announcement will certainly take away their night's sleep.

We hear that the government is always facing local currency shortage to finance development projects both in the public and private sectors. This is due to scarcity of internal savings. In the face of this, we do not understand how lowering of incentive will encourage internal savings?

At a time when cost of essential commodities are living, the drastic cutting down of the only source of income of the old and retired investors

will surely shorten their lives. The decision has come as a cruel joke to the retired and small investors. The matter has legal consideration also.

That a person invests his savings under certain express conditions in force at the time is a bilateral agreement with legal implications. Any change in the conditionality of the agreement is not tenable at least for three years.

We hope the people's government will reconsider its decision so far it hits the retired officials who have invested their life's savings in Sanchay Patra.

A retired investor

Powerless manpower

Sir, Bangladeshis are deported from Malaysia and elsewhere is not only upsetting

news but also a humiliating setback to the state's international relations.

The accusation of illegal entry is costly for the countries concerned as can be irreparable damage to many expatriates.

As a normal practice, the travel documents are required to be authenticated by the government of traveler's nationality and destination prior to departure.

The Malaysian case in point surfaces "organized syndicate" smuggling in thousands of Bangladeshis for jobs with "forged permits" that sooner or later land them in dire straits turning their sweet dreams into nightmares.

Other consequences of such improper manpower trafficking may include increased waste of state revenues and national reputation at stake.

Only effective government procedure will retard such underworld trades saving time, money, energy, and prestige of this nation.

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Quadrilateral meeting on water sharing

Sir, The Ganges river does not belong to India alone. It is an international river. It originates from the plateau of Tibet and passes through Nepal, India and Bangladesh and falls into the Bay of Bengal. Since 1975 we have left no stone unturned to solve the Ganges water sharing with India bilaterally but we have failed miserably. The acute water crisis in the north-west of our country

has become the matter of life and death for millions of our people. Now we understand that after Farakka Barrage in West Bengal, India is contemplating to construct another Barrage in Assam also to divert the water of Brahmaputra river.

It is, therefore, imperative that a quadrilateral meeting of China-Nepal-India-Bangladesh may be convened under the auspices of the UNO at an early date. The United Kingdom may also be invited to attend the quadrilateral meeting as an observer for necessary help and assistance. We sincerely desire to maintain a friendly and cordial relation with India, of course with solution of Ganges water dispute and some other outstanding problems with New Delhi. A friend in need is a friend indeed.

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