

What Happened to Our Trade Unions?

Something rotten has entered our trade union movement. The ethics, the righteousness and the egalitarian spirit that once became synonymous with the rights of the workers have now been replaced by greed, narrow sectarian interest and murderous tendencies that not only has discredited the trade union movement as such but has given a strong justification to those who want to do away with the system itself.

The unrepresentative nature of the autocratic regime lent itself to attempts to co-opt the labour movement through back-door deals, kick-back, pay-off and granting of privileges regardless of costs. In return they had to support the regime and subvert opposition movement. The fact that we have a large state sector has allowed the regimes of the day to use it to corrupt our trade unions.

The importance of eradicating this malaise can hardly be overemphasized. The foremost responsibility for this task lies with the genuine trade union leaders. They must save their movement from the "mafia" type gangsters who have penetrated the workers movement and are exploiting them for their personal benefit.

It must be remembered that putting the trade-union-house in order will not only free our workers from the stranglehold of the "mafia" elements, but also open up the possibility for the type of economic and social reforms that the government wants to bring about.

Bastille Day

The underlying message of July 14, the National Day of France, better known as the Bastille Day, is best summed up in three words, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

Yet, the long 10-year history of the French Revolution, heralded by the storming of the Bastille, the symbol of Royal power, has more lessons to offer for mankind of all generations than just the stirring message of July 14, 1789.

Most developing countries, including Bangladesh, have much to learn from these lessons. The end of authoritarianism, even freeing prisoners held in custody without any trial, provide a new beginning to a nation, but they do not necessarily offer instant answers to a country's problems.

For France, all this is history. The country has moved forward along its own charted course of stability and prosperity, as a caring one that shows its concern for suffering humanity whether it is in Bosnia, Somalia or Bangladesh.

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When Syed Ali Kabir told the assembly that an upper house, a second chamber of our Sangsad would strengthen the parliamentary system of the country, it did not detonate like a bombshell exactly. The occasion was the seminar held under the auspices of the Democratic Forum, and the date June 19. The themes for the afternoon was democracy, rule of law and the budget.

Our Sangsad is a House peopled exclusively by politicians. For Syed Ali Kabir, this is not enough. He wants an upper house which will not be quite as powerful as the US Senate, or even as the Indian Rajya Sabha, without, at the same time, being a paper tiger

The Sangsad, the Budget, et cetera

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either. It will be a House manned by non-political persons, drawn from different professional backgrounds, persons known for their supposed wisdom resulting from experience, and some of them for their achievements in arts, science, industry, social work et cetera.

Syed Ali Kabir, since he did not spell out fully his concept of an upper house, only hinting that it will supply the missing element in the present unicameral Sangsad, may hopefully come out one of these days with a fuller statement. I am sure there are people who are interested. I am equally sure that the immediate result will be zero; uneasiness in some quarters, giggles of laughter in the corridors of power, cynicism in the academia for the naivety of the proposal, an alert interest among the elderly, the retired, the senior citizens, who constitute the bulk of the morning walkers-cum-morning gossipers of our famous city.

considering that both occasion and moment was appropriate, I may disagree with him there. It struck me as premature. The Sangsad was in session. And it cannot be said that the Sangsad has struck roots yet, as the centre-piece of our political system. The Sangsadians (A coinage, if you like, in line with Parliamentarians) are yet to learn the rules of the game, a good many

of them. A second chamber is never a threat to the supremacy of the lower house, but it is certainly a curtailment of the same. This very fact may assume exaggerated importance in the minds of the politicians, especially those who are merely politicians.

PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

of the Speaker and of the nation. On the budget itself, we have been following the comments and the criticisms within the House and outside. It seems to me that the Finance Minister has shown himself an adept in tight-rope-walking. He has allayed the fears of those of us who have expected harsh measures to raise the much needed revenue. He has reduced taxes, and tariffs on items much fancied in middle-class houses, thus silencing that section of the community that produces the most noise. At the same time, he remains vulnerable to the criticisms that there is hardly any positive pointer to a more self-relying future, any philosophy behind the figures. The budget, according to one critic, looks like a grocer's ac-

counts book. Perhaps it does, I am no judge of such matters. The Chambers of Commerce people don't sound too unhappy, generally speaking. The Sangsad criticism suffers from the limitations of party politics. Speeches made by MPs generally follow party lines. There seems to be an absolute predictability about who is going to say what. The only exception was Suranjit Sengupta, an opposition member who found some good things to say about the Minister, local allegiance — something which a true son of Sylhet will carry to his death — triumphing over ephemeral relations.

Jokes apart, I think Mr Suranjit Sengupta, generally considered one of our sound and capable parliamentarians, set a good example by praising where praise was due. Here was a lesson for all, irrespective of the location of the benches one occupied. The Sangsad would have been a far more lively place, the debates would have been far more relevant, and free from the limitations of party affiliation carried to extreme limits, if members were free to speak as they really thought. On paper, they may be free, for all that I know; in practice they don't appear to be so. The party whip may still carry his whip but it need not be too long. It need not be a stranglehold. I am glad that one opposition member, Mohammad

Nasim, has come out with a forceful attack on the Private Universities Bill. I am glad because I did not expect any member, or any of the opposition groups, to come up with a clear comprehension of the bill, and its far-reaching implications. There I was mistaken. The idea has been hanging fire for quite some time. Apart from some casual writings in our dailies, mostly by columnists, the issue did not receive the kind of public attention it deserved. But it is a matter of the greatest public concern. If private universities are allowed to be set up, it may, in course of time, change, for better or for worse, the entire landscape of higher education. All the implications should be carefully weighed before the bill is given a clear passage. Here is a bill which has all the reason to be circulated for eliciting public opinion.

Judging from what has transpired already, the UGC has set some conditions for the establishment of a private university. The conditions are silly. It is if a university is supervising the affiliation of a college: so much land, so much funds in the bank accounts, so many subjects. The UGC has miserably failed to grasp the issue, and to put it in its proper context. The guardianship role it has arrogated to itself is both dangerous and uncalled for. Dangerous because, knowingly or unknowingly, it keeps open the door between the UGC and the private university for negotiations of a financial nature. The conditions, apparently daunting in the beginning, are alluring for the sponsors in the long run. Do we wish public funds to be channelled to private universities?

ANTI-GOVERNMENT

protests in Thailand and its Tiananmen-like suppression is the latest indication that a growing Asian urban middle class wants rising living standards to go hand-in-hand with political freedom.

In South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong and now in Thailand better off citizens have made it clear they want a greater say in decisions that affect their lives.

And across Southeast Asia, analysts say government that had sacrificed personal freedom to achieve economic discipline and high growth may have to face the same dilemma in the years to come.

In Taiwan and South Korea, dictatorships fell in the past five years after relentless public pressure. Taiwan ended martial law and South Korea introduced political reforms. In Hong Kong, the people showed their concern about Communist Chinese takeover in 1997 by voting overwhelmingly for democracy in last year's local elections.

But the Thai military does not seem to have taken the cue. It did not even learn the lessons from the country's own past.

Three days and nights in May in Bangkok brought scenes of carnage and brutality not seen in Asia since Tiananmen Square in 1989. Petrol bombs exploded, armoured personnel carriers crushed motorcycles, soldiers used automatic rifles on young men hurling rocks. This could be Beijing in 1989, Seoul in 1987 or Rangoon in 1988.

At the heart of the Thai protest was a group of opposition politicians, teachers and radical students who wanted the military to stop meddling in politics. Their sit-ins were joined by hundreds of middle class Thais, some with neckties and cellular phones.

Asia: The Middle Class Also Rises

When Suchinda backed-tracked on a promise for constitutional reform, the protests turned violent. Rallies have continued outside parliament in Bangkok, where legislators are debating a bill to have the prime minister elected by the people.

But the people are angry, and will stop at nothing short of a stop to the military's influence on politics. Analysts in the region fear similar upheavals may lie in store for Asia's other authoritarian states — Indonesia, Malaysia and even Singapore — unless their rulers loosen up politically.

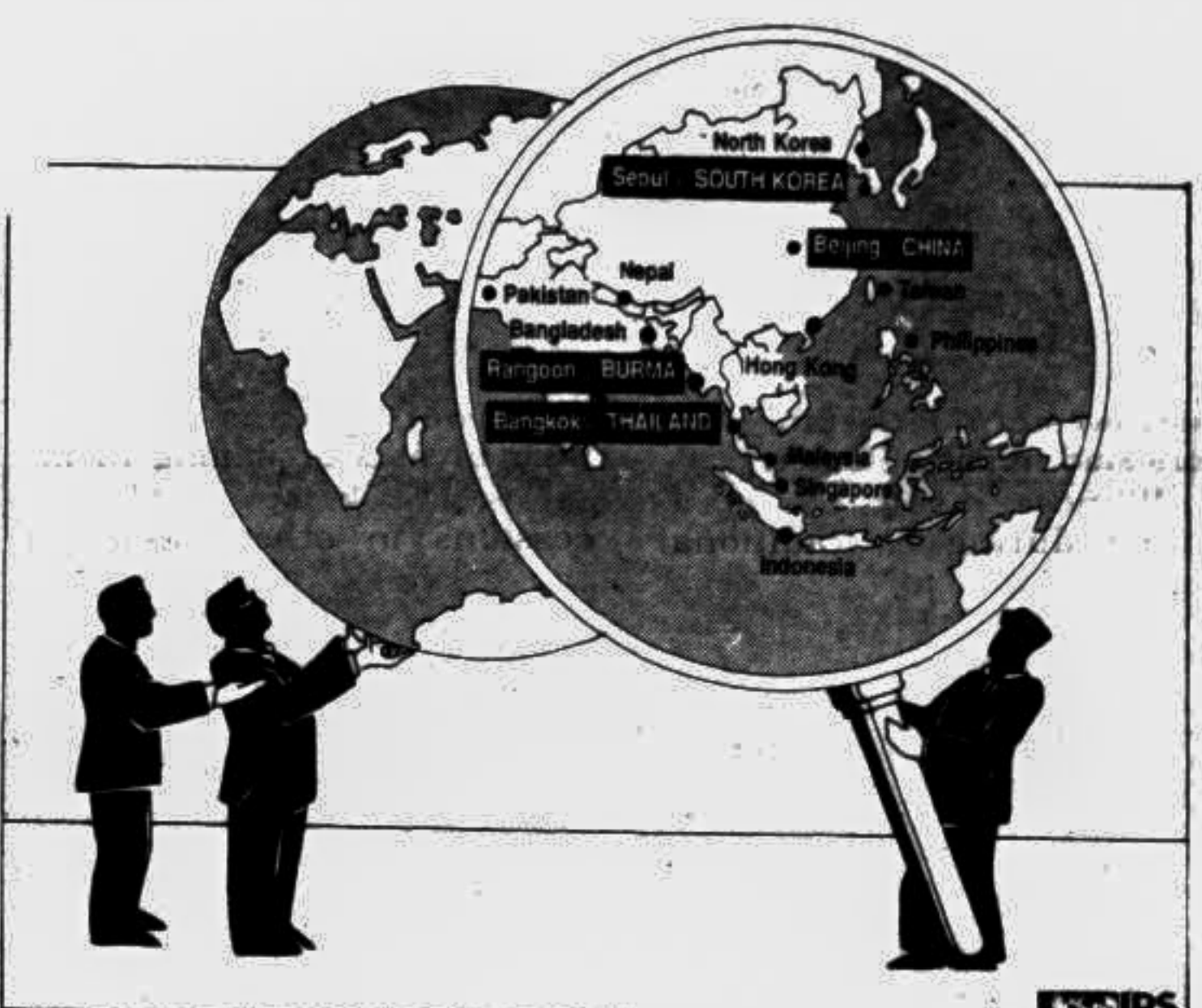
The tiny multi-ethnic city, state of Singapore has taken the middle path and successfully employed economic anaesthesia to numb political instincts. But even there, people are voting with their feet and emigrating to Australia and Canada in droves.

Elsewhere, pressure is also building up in the hermetically-sealed republics of North Korea and Burma, where the lid on dissent has been kept down most forcibly. Monks, students and the middle class protested in Rangoon in 1988 and were massacred by the hundreds.

In China, the post-Tiananmen rulers have gone capitalist with a vengeance with regards the economy, but politically the regime is as cautious and hardline as ever. Beijing experimenting with economic freedom without sacrificing political orthodoxy. The prevailing theory among China-watchers is that this will fail.

In poorer Asian countries like Bangladesh, Nepal and

An affluent and increasingly dissatisfied middle class is asserting itself in the politics of many of Asia's newly-rich nations. Kunda Dixit of IPS reports from Manila.



Pakistan, multi-party democracy has dawned after decades of totalitarian rule. But the failure of elected rulers to improve peoples' lives has disillusioned the masses and brought threats of democratic reversal.

In some of them, elected rulers seem tempted to elicit military backing "to do a Fujimori" to get a better grip on things. Peru's president Alberto Fujimori suspended the constitution and assumed control, saying the opposition was not allowing him to implement his economic plans. Six years after overthrowing

a dictator, the Philippines has just gone through an elections that should ensure a peaceful transition of power to a new elected president — the first time in 22 years.

But even here, the business and political elite is entrenched as never before, and the military is waiting in the wings. As with charismatic opposition leader Chamlong Srimuang's campaign in Thailand, the powerful showing of dark-hors Miriam Defensor-Santiago in the Philippine presidential elections is seen as a vote of protest against the traditional

politics of patronage by an impatient middle class. Neither Chamlong nor Santiago want radical political reforms but both of them ar-

OPINION

Safety and Security of Gulshan, Banani and Baridhara

Jamal Uddin Ahmad

The ghastly incident that took place recently at the Chinese Embassy has put the country to shame. The people of Bangladesh regardless of their political opinion are one in their condemnation of the senseless and dastardly act of hooliganism and indiscriminate destruction committed by a section of people to the Embassy premises. We feel deeply perturbed and embarrassed and offer our sincere apologies to the Government and friendly people of China.

The fact that an ugly situation such as this could happen in this area was not altogether unforeseen. The methodical way in which this once so-called posh and diplomatic enclave of Dhaka was allowed to degenerate into slums and peopled by unauthorised squatters under the very nose of Dhaka Municipal Corporation, RAJUK and Law and Order Enforcement Agencies, it was no surprise that an attack similar to the one committed on the Chinese Embassy had not taken place earlier. The surprise, if there was one, was that it took such a long time to happen.

The whole locality is now full of garment industries with thousands of workers, shops and bazars of all kinds, road-

side vendors, squatters, unhealthy and unhygienic roadside eating places, beggars, hijackers and muggers. Safety and security of the residents of the locality are at serious stake. Hijackings, robberies, killings are not uncommon features in this area. In early mornings, hundreds of people are seen using the roadsides for their "call of nature". Employees of hundreds of shops and squatters are at full liberty to use the locality for all their dirty pursuits.

Now that the unfortunate incident of the Chinese Embassy has opened the eyes of the Government to revamp the overall safety and security of the area, the first thing that needs to be done is to clean out the place by removing all garment industries, squatters, unauthorised shops and constructions. Rickshaw, baby taxi and tempo stands must be brought under strict control. Pavement shops and bazars should be banned. More security force should be deployed to bring about an atmosphere of safety and security in the area. Time is running out. Action and not promises is what is urgently needed.

The writer is a former Deputy Prime Minister.

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.

Why Opposition?

Sir, I have been regularly tuning into Voice of America & British Broadcasting Corp (VOA & BBC) for quite some time and I also subscribe to the Western Magazines and Newspapers frequently. The political aspects dealt by these media have been agitating my sub-conscious ever since. The political party not in power is never referred to either in the USA or Britain as the Opposition, in the case of Britain they are referred to as, The Labour Party, Tories, Communist Party and in the USA as The Democratic Party. We can safely assume that, the word Opposition is strictly confined to this subcontinent. As a result, this violence prone political warzones that are clearly discernible throughout the entire subcontinent whereas either in the USA &/or the UK a relatively dignified, constructive and above all else a humane, cultured and congenial political atmosphere is very much in practice. I have looked-up the meaning in the Oxford Dictionary and found the meaning

to be anything but pleasant i.e. obstacle, antagonism, resistance, being hostile etc., in the lay men's language 'enemy'. In Bangla the meaning is also the same. Hence, in the Bangladesh context one's enemy must be dealt with utmost vengeance if not physical elimination irrespective of whether political colouring exists or otherwise (Leave it to the politicians. They are sure to do the needful). Here I would like to make one thing explicit, I have no particular political party in mind as this muscle power has long been nationalised by all political parties and is pursued with sacred zeal at every given opportunity. A glance at the daily newspaper will amply prove this unfortunate situation now prevailing in increasing intensity with each exploding sun-set. Perhaps this may be my senile ramblings due to various factors yet I appeal to all right thinking men and women especially the esteemed Professors Zahidul Huq & O H Kabir Esquire, of Dhaka to give a patient thought to this matter and also their valued com-

ments. We have imitated the West in almost all fields, why not in this matter? By refraining to cling to this word 'Opposition' I don't mean to say that Eldorado of genteel politics is round the bend. What we may be able to achieve is at least, arresting the nose-dive in the entire socio-economic and political set-up in which case this may lead to a snow-ball effect in: positive politics, thinking, respect to both youth and the aged and what not.....

Salahuddin Jamal Firozshah, Chittagong.

Attack on journalists

Sir, The attack on the journalists by the police or hooligans is equally condemnable. As for that matter attack on anyone or any institution is extremely uncivilized and is an indication of the extent of degeneration a society may have. Unfortunately we find ourselves completely immersed in such a situation. In a society where most people are illiterate and poor, the conscious section are mostly against 'establishment'. Criticism is the essence of democracy. This is the primary function of the thinkers and philosophers of a nation. It is pleasant to find that the intellectuals of Bangladesh come out with protests whenever there is any injustice done or

unwise step taken by the 'establishment'. Unkind criticism towards their dissenting voices do not deter them.

We find that various forces are out today to silence the journalists and newspapers.

The reason is not very difficult to guess. During the last autocratic regime the newspapers in support of democratic movements once remained closed for over a week. The despot and the lackeys benefited most as their pet media continued to blare their glory and their canards without any protest from any quarter.

In this desperate situation in a despaired mood, maybe, the journalists are considering steps to express their feeling. They should remember that the elements which harm them will achieve their end if an extreme step is adopted.

MA Haq Green Road, Dhaka

Less than a 'snail's pace'

Sir, My father passed away in August 1985 and soon after I applied for a succession certificate, something required by the law for share certificate claims and the like. I finally received my succession certificate the other

day, after nearly seven years, following the non bribable procedure, being a good citizen of the land and all that.

In effect, the law of the land has finally seen fit to recognise me as my father's son, despite the fact that I have been recognised as my father's son by various bodies such as banks, insurance companies, airlines, various Chambers and Forums of trade and commerce, even the Government of Bangladesh.

This brings to mind another event that occurred to a friend. He applied for a telephone to the relevant department through the same process as I did and received his phone nine years later.

Does this mean that I should apply now for my nine-year old son to get a phone so that he gets a telephone once he is old enough to have one in his own house?

If only the Almighty had seen fit to inform me of my death prior to the event I could apply for my son's succession certificate well in advance and in the process save the tax payer some money.

Still, I'm happy. It's good to be present in class than to be seen to be present in class.

Noorur Rasheed Choudhury Sylhet

Movement to plant or cut a tree?

Sir, National tree plantation movement is in full swing in the country. Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia has given clarion call to give the afforestation programme the shape of a social movement. It is well accepted by all Bangladeshis. It is good for all. Our prime minister urges political bodies to supplement government efforts. I wish every one will come forward to make this noble programme a success.

But some action by certain sector has disappointed me — (1) It is found that all trees at the Gulshan-Banani sector are being felled to the ground. It took two hundred years to develop these valuable trees. (2) It is published in certain newspapers that a public tender has been invited by a Govt Department to fell raintrees in the Jessore-Banapole Road. These trees were planted by a Maharaja in honour of and kind remembrance to his mother Maharani. Definitely it was a noble work for the welfare of the public and environment.

Will the authority advise us in which direction we should proceed? Cut down or plant a tree for the future generation?

Meah M Habibullah "Tree Lovers", Dhaka