

Which Congress Culture One Talks about?

Time to Unite

We are shocked, shattered and sad. We are shocked at the assassination attempt on the life of Rashed Khan Menon, an eminent politician and parliamentarian of the country; our confidence stands shattered at the ability of the law enforcing agencies to ensure security of our lives; and we are deeply saddened by the fact that our democratic way of life appears to be threatened by a gang of murderers under the patronisation of extreme and fanatic political forces.

While we thank the Almighty for sparing Mr Menon's life uptill now, we condemn in the strongest of terms those who are responsible for the attempt on the life of this patriot who, over the last thirty years, has unfailingly served the cause of freedom, democracy and economic emancipation of the people.

The assassination attempt on Mr Menon's life calls into question the claim of the government that the law and order situation is being gradually brought under control. It has been reportedly claimed by political forces that Mr Menon was made the target of an extremist group, who even gave a memorandum to the Home Minister a few weeks back, and followed it up by public statements that if Mr Menon and others — there was supposedly a list of 40 — were not punished, then they would do it themselves. Mr Menon reportedly informed the authorities about the life threatening calls that he and his family were receiving. Yet we know of no action taken by the home ministry to provide any security for him. The assassination attempt on Mr Menon has raised once again very serious doubts about the efficacy of the home ministry to bring the terrorists to book. This journal repeatedly appealed to the government, and especially to the Home Minister to wake up to the deteriorating law and order situation and take preventive measures while there was still time. It all fell on deaf ears and Mr Menon had to get shot to prove the point. Given the serious questions now agitating the public mind we call for a high level judicial inquiry into the matter. We also call for a major shake-up in the ministry including at the highest level which would give more credibility to the enquiry.

The attempt on Mr Menon's life should not be considered as an isolated case of political violence by any fringe political group. It is an attempt to destabilise not only the government but the democratic system that we have instituted. Let nobody look upon this tragic event from a partisan point of view. The threat is to the system and therefore the system must be protected by all those who believe in it, namely the political parties. We therefore appeal to all of them especially to the BNP and the AL to forget their differences and join hands in fighting the terrorists who, through armed cadres and brute force, are eroding the effectiveness of the democratic process. We earnestly suggest talks, both private and public, and at different levels, between the leadership of the two leading parties. We warn them that this is not the time for mutual recrimination and mudslinging.

We pray for Mr Menon's recovery and hope that the tragedy that has befallen him and the courage with which he is fighting for his life, will inspire our two leading political parties to set aside their political and personal differences, and work together for democracy.

Hell-bent Hekmatyar

The fire in Afghanistan seems to have taken on a new, evermore fearsome form in recent days. While the whole world, particularly the United Nations, is urging Afghan guerrilla groups to come to some sort of power-sharing arrangement so that refugee rehabilitation and reconstruction work can get going, one powerful leader seems hell-bent on establishing his hegemony over Kabul at any cost. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of the right-wing fundamentalist Hezb-i-Islami, has served notice, in the most bloody and brutal terms possible, that he will have no truck with the present arrangement in the Afghan capital. That arrangement had left all the major Mujahideen groups, including the Hezb, with a say in the running of the government, but that is evidently not enough for Hekmatyar.

The dictatorial engineer, who has spent most of the last decade and a half in Pakistan scheming and plotting the overthrow of one government after another without actually ever being in a position to capture outright power himself, has now clearly marked himself out as an enemy of the state and people. His murderous rocket and artillery attacks have killed hundreds and wounded thousands in Kabul in the past couple of weeks, and he shows no sign of relenting. Hekmatyar derives his strength mainly from the close rapport he has enjoyed with the Pakistani military and from the fact that the bulk of American military equipment sent to fight the Soviet forces until 1989 has gone to the Hezb.

Ostensibly, Hekmatyar merely wants the disbanding of all military units, particularly the Uzbek militia led by General Dostam, which served the former communist regime of Dr Najibullah. But, given the scale and intensity of his attacks, it is doubtful if he is after anything short of state power itself. Probably sensing the danger, the Kabul government has quite rightly thrown Hekmatyar's Hezb out of the ruling council. Considering that Afghanistan is a country which survives on wheeling and dealings, such a move by the Golam Rabbani regime could only have been taken as a desperate, last-ditch one. What has now become obvious is that Hekmatyar's faction is a thoroughly untrustworthy component of the Afghan scenario. Most reasonable people across the world would like nothing better than to see an amiable resolution of the present conflict and start of the long road to recovery. But it is now open to question whether peace and democracy, even of the Afghan variety, form any part of the grand design of Hekmatyar and his friends in Pakistan.

POLITICS know no altruistic move. Human Resources Minister Arjun Singh's letter was not either. His plea to activate Congressmen to fight the Bharatiya Janata Party's plank of Hindu chauvinism is unexceptionable. But it is apparent that he was trying to rattle Prime Minister Narasimha Rao at a time when he was in the midst of receiving kudos for having averted a bloody confrontation at Ayodhya.

Whether Arjun Singh fired the salvo too early or whether he failed to get the response he anticipated is not the point. When he wrote the letter, purposely to the prime minister's political secretary, Arjun Singh must have measured political stakes. He was not challenging the prime minister. He was only preparing the climate for picking up the gauntlet some time after the end of the three-month grace period for a solution to the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute.

Arjun Singh has been feeling aggrieved for some months. He was forced to resign from the Congress Working Committee even when he polled the maximum number of votes. Narasimha Rao had the satisfaction of nominating him. Again, as the senior-most minister in the central cabinet, Arjun Singh expected to be associated with the prime minister's talks with the sadhus and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad representatives on the stoppage of construction at the disputed site.

Narasimha Rao kept him out. Till today he has not been told what transpired at the meeting. (Defence Minister

Perhaps the party and the government need to be separated, not for the appearance sake but for healthy interaction. At present there is a tendency to gloss over the worst of failures because the party cannot dare hold mirror to the government.

Shahad Pawar is equally sore. Had he been present at the talks, Arjun Singh says, he would have put the VHP on the mat and asked it specifically whether it would obey the court's verdict.

The uncertain factor that Arjun Singh has been in the reckoning of Narasimha Rao from the beginning — Arjun Singh had proposed the name of Sonia Gandhi to succeed Rajiv Gandhi as the party president — may have been responsible for the split and the re-split in the Janata Dal. The prime minister wants to increase his following at any cost and his eyes have been fixed for long on the Janata Dal, which has never been a cohesive party. All those who have booted the JD have stated categorically that they want to strengthen the hands of the prime minister. It is not difficult to add two and two.

That the prime minister bleated the split may be difficult to prove. But the needle of suspicion gets directed towards him when his affluent friends are found in the alleged business of buying MPs. A whopping sum of Rs 50 lakh to each for defection has been mentioned. One MP, who claims to be in and out of the PM's house all the time, has flaunted a figure of Rs 20 lakh at a press conference.

V P Singh, the Janata Dal leader, is justified in accusing industrialists and businessmen of subverting the democratic structure through the use of money. But it speaks volumes about the candidates he se-

lected. Some MPs, who have defected, are known for changing their loyalties overnight. Why were they given tickets?

This does not, however, absolve the Congress from its moral responsibility. Some of its leaders have worked hard to effect the split. The party badly wants a majority in the Lok Sabha where it is still 17 short. Speaker Shivraj Patil should accept the suggestion

time affair and it cannot be spread over a year.

The calculations of the Congress in engineering defection in the Janata Dal may also be the belief that once it is out of the way, the Muslim and liberal vote will return to the Congress. Some signs of this strategy are visible in UP and Madhya Pradesh. The Muslims in the two states are beginning to turn to the Congress because they find that the Janata

she saw the nation differing with her, she imposed the emergency to suspend the fundamental rights, shackled the press and subvert the system as such. In 1978 she even changed the name of the party — from the Indian National Congress to Congress (Indira). And in 1980, she combined the position of prime minister with that of the Congress president.

As long as the Nehru dynasty lasted, the Congress culture was total obedience to it. Any one who dared to oppose the dynasty was called 'anti-progress' and 'anti-national'. Within the party a dissenter was bludgeoned to submission or turned out.

The dynasty has gone but the syndrome of one-person party has not. It is obvious that the Congress has a political culture that adapts well to a single-man-party rule. The Congress has not overcome the old habit of pouncing on any one who even seemingly differs with the prime minister. This is seen from the way Congressmen of any consequence have assailed Arjun Singh and avowed allegiance to Narasimha Rao.

In fact, the prime minister should be worried because if he were to lose power tomorrow, his condemnation would be even louder. The Congress mind has stopped thinking democratically and even when the party has held election of sorts, practically in every state, it is the bossism that prevails. The Congress leaders used

to write letters to one another freely on all matters. The collected works of Gandhi, Nehru, Patel and Azad testify how acrimonious debates were conducted through correspondence. Never was there any doubt about the loyalty and integrity of those who wrote or replied. In recent years, Kamalapati Tripathi tinged his pen with poison while writing to Mrs Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi on the sorry state of affairs in the party. He was left alone but his intentions were never doubted.

Perhaps the party and the government need to be separated, not for the appearance sake but for healthy interaction. At present there is a tendency to gloss over the worst of failures because the party cannot dare hold mirror to the government. The decision by the Congress to have one person for one office could not be implemented because the prime minister has not forsaken the office of party's presidentship. Some other Congress leaders have copied him to violate the decision at other levels.

The Congress culture can be revived provided members shed fear and bosses their sense of superiority. The suspicion that prevails in the party is a symptom of insecurity which inflicts them. They do not open their mouth because they are afraid of being singled out. The Congress used to serve as an umbrella under which different points of view were aired and debated. That is the atmosphere or the culture worth harking back. If it ever happens, not only the Congress but the country will be on the way to recovery.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

by George Fernandes and set up a House committee to investigate the allegation that the JD members were paid large sums to defect. In the absence of such a probe, the Congress will continue to be in the dock.

The Speaker has already raised doubts about his impartiality by not deciding straightaway that the recent defection of 12 MPs was not a split. The minimum number for a split and for avoiding the application of the anti-defection act, whereby a member is disqualified, is one third of the party's strength. When 12 members crossed over, the Janata Dal was 51 strong. The AIT group cannot be counted among the ones who have defected recently because it was turned out nearly one year ago. The split is a one-

Dal may not make the government. Whatever its considerations, the Congress has not been playing fair.

Against this background, Communication Minister Rajesh Pilot's denunciation of Arjun Singh for having cast aspersions on the 'Congress culture' by questioning the bona fides of Congressmen sounds trite. Which culture is he talking about? Once upon a time there was something called the Congress culture. That was, in fact, India's ethos. But it ended with the death of Lal Bahadur Shastri. Mrs Gandhi gave it a deep burial.

One spectacle of the Congress culture was seen in 1969 when Mrs Gandhi split the party to silence that old guard, who had dared to differ with her. Six years later when

Moscow Plotter Advises Stock Exchange from Jail

Mikhail Pasternak writes from Moscow

One year ago (August 19, 1991) a motley assortment of Communist leaders overthrew Mikhail Gorbachev and trapped him in his holiday villa. They ruled for only a few hours and soon they were rounded up. One, Boris Pugo, committed suicide. What happened to the rest? Gemini News Service reports that from jail some have been writing books and even conducting business. One is a stock exchange adviser.

One year on

other coup leaders. When he was interviewed on TV recently he said he and his colleagues had not intended to stage a coup, but wanted to push Gorbachev to take stronger action against those republican leaders and political movements trying to split the country.

Anatoly Lukianov, former chairman of the Soviet parliament and "shadow" vice-president of the USSR, was arrested after most of the coup leaders. In prison he has been the most politically active of the plotters. He has written two books of poems and some

of these have been published by nationalist and neo-communist newspapers.

Neo-communists organised two poetry evenings of the "heroic prisoner of truth, Anatoly Lukianov" in top Moscow theatres. The books were published by a new "patriotic" publishing house called Palea.

Its director applied to the Mayor of Moscow for permission to hold a Lukianov poetry evening in Red Square. In an interview Lukianov said he was ashamed of nothing except that he had been too soft in stopping the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Former defence minister General Dmitry Yazov is also writing poetry, but nothing has yet been published.

His right hand man, who was probably the real leader of the coup inside the Soviet army was General Valentin Varennikov, former chief-commander of the ground forces. In jail he has become the symbol of the neo-communist movements. He wrote an anti-Gorbachev book, which was to be published in Japan on an exclusive basis with the help of Pravda journalists.

But two months before this "exclusive sensation," as the Japanese called it, was due to appear some parts of the book were published in two Russian nationalist newspapers.

Varennikov has also initiated a "common peoples" investigation into how Gorbachev brought "the greatest state in the world to collapse and allowed the great USSR to split up."

Valentin Kruchkov, former chief of the Soviet KGB and one of the coup's most interesting figures, was the right hand man of the Russian Communist Party first secretary and, say non-official sources, passed on to him confidential information not even available to Gorbachev.

Kruchkov was one of the main organisers of the communist counter-attack in the Baltics in January 1991 which Gorbachev and Yeltsin halted. Maybe after that he decided it was time to turn out Gorbachev. Yet Gorbachev appointed him KGB chief and probably their relations were much closer than Gorbachev tried to show after the coup.

Not long ago Pravda published a letter from Kruchkov to Yeltsin, which read: "I am sure that an objective inquiry will show that we are not to blame for what happened."

Valentin Pavlov, former prime minister of the USSR, started talks while in jail with the biggest Russian goods and raw materials stock exchange. Its board of directors appointed him its adviser.

As prime minister he had initiated the monetary squeeze in the winter of 1991, using not liberalisation but price increases. A few months later mounting public pressure forced him to give up.

If the coup had succeeded, his first step would probably have been to freeze non-government businesses and order price increases to halt inflation. After Pavlov was arrested he always said publicly that there was no coup and he had been obeying Gorbachev's orders.

Pavlov criticised sharply the programme of market reforms worked out by the Yeltsin government. Parts of his letters from jail were read out to the public at a big communist meeting. Pavlov was allowed to leave prison for a few hours when his mother died.

Vasily Starodubtsev, former director of one of the biggest collective farms in Russia, has been released. While he was still in jail he was elected chief of the so-called Agrarian Party — the movement established by the directors of communist collective farms to unify efforts against Yeltsin's moves towards private farming.

An independent commission found that stocks of imported foreign goods, received from state reserves of state prices for the common people of Starodubtsev's collective farm, were being sold on the stock exchange and in commercial shops.

Nevertheless, Starodubtsev was freed, went back to his collective farm and started work again as if nothing had happened.

Aleksander Tizakov and Oleg Baklanov, both leaders of the USSR military-industrial complex and both closely connected with the army, mainly with the ground forces, were not very active politically.

They were among the main architects of Gorbachev's programme of conversion of military industry. The plans failed because many military factories were forced to produce equipment for collective farms and for the food industry without proper studies being made of demand and buying capacity.

During the coup investigation, two important witnesses, former top executives of the Communist Party Central Committee budget department, killed themselves in mysterious circumstances. Investigators had begun to uncover details about how the Soviet Communist Party had been helping communist parties abroad to run their businesses and avoid paying taxes.

A special department had been producing false diplomatic and financial documents of countries all over the world. What will happen to the jailed coup leaders is still in doubt. Recently Russian Vice-President Alexander Rutskoy said he would not like their trial to start yet. He talked about the possibility of an amnesty.

General Prosecutor Stepankov's reaction was that an amnesty might provoke a new coup.

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To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

To erase sins

Sir, Saudi Arabia has informed Bangladesh of "overstaying of some Bangladeshis in the kingdom after performing the Hajj or Umrah", which obviously means troubles for the pilgrims who violated Saudi immigration laws.

Hajj being one of the five compulsory Islamic rituals has binding only on those who can afford. The holy occasion is an annual opportunity to visit where Islam was born, to be near the "House of God", and to pray for sin forgiveness. One of the common beliefs is Hajj clears the pilgrim off his/her sins and Umrah (performed at other times) also helps earn blessings of the Almighty.

Hajj/Al-Hajj — title taken by who performed Hajj — seems to have become a status symbol in LDC Bangladesh where a Hajj is widely respected and, in many instances, enjoys privileges regardless of a despicable background. Also, many unscrupulous people have allegedly been exploiting the religion to personal advantage and even for profitable business.

Like a number of other religions, Islam preaches Heaven and Hell for ultimate fate after death following Final Judgement on his/her deeds specified as *Sawab* and *Gunah* as per *Halal* and *Haram*.

Islam as the state religion, sums of mosques, mazars and Islamic institutions, and yearly

Security of life

Sir, We the residents of Mohammadpur area are virtually trapped in the grip of a few anti-social groups, who are involved in heinous crimes like toll collection, hijacking, terrorism, teasing of girls etc. In broad day light, they come in a group to houses and offices in the area and demand large sums of money introducing themselves as 'heroes' of some recent murder cases. Often they inform about their arrival and demand over telephone in advance and threaten not to

take any precautionary measures which would put the life of the whole family in danger. The parents of young girls are in more difficult situation. They not only tease the girls but also threaten the parents that if you refuse the proposal of marriage then your child's life would be in danger. There is no security of our life whether at home, office, school or in the street or market.

We are afraid of reporting to police mainly because we are not fully aware about their particulars and as they probably come from neighbouring areas and the scope of punishment is very weak, they may come back in short time with a more aggressive attitude. In many incidences, the role of law enforcing agency is also questionable, they are reluctant to entertain complaints and even many crimes reportedly take place in presence of the personnel.

We have so many problems in our daily life and are already struggling hard with those. But the security of life and property is the question of ex-

istence. We are very much concerned and talking so much but the situation rather than improving is deteriorating. Lack of sincerity in responsible corners is allowing the situation to deteriorate. We are prepared to take every step and co-operate with the respective agencies for the greater interest of the nation, if our security is guaranteed.

We are confident that our law enforcing agencies are capable enough to eliminate such anti-social elements. But to strengthen them we may also suggest that the government can use the services of our largely skilled armed forces along with the existing forces in driving out the anti-social elements from society, thus restoring peace and security of the citizens.

A citizen

Sitting arrangements at ZIA

Sir, Zia International Airport is the only international airport in Bangladesh. Everyday, hundreds of passengers go abroad and arrive in

Bangladesh through this airport. Relations of passengers who go to the airport either to receive or to see them off have to wait there for quite some time. But it is a matter of great regret that there is no sitting arrangement at ZIA for the relations of passengers. In the absence of sitting arrangements, relations of passengers are seen to be standing here and there of the airport while waiting. Earlier, relations of passengers could enter and stay in the premises in front of the lounge after having purchased a 2-taka ticket. But, it is sorrowful that for the last few years, they have remained deprived of this opportunity.

Zia International Airport being an international one, sitting arrangements for waiting relations of passengers ought to be there.

We urge the relevant authority to look into the matter and take urgent steps for sitting arrangements at ZIA and thereby fulfill a long-felt need of the relations of passengers.

Md Delwar Hossain North Shahjahanpur, Dhaka