

Dealing with the Press

The government of Pakistan has been prudent enough to drop the sedition charges it had brought against three journalists...

The charges related to the publication of an Urdu poem printed by the Islamabad edition of the News on September 7 criticising the government over a couple of current financial scandals...

The matter should have ended there. However, whatever might have been the motive of Prime Minister Sharif, a sense of vendetta against the News or a desire to set an example for the country's growingly independent press...

Understandably enough, the case triggered widespread criticisms from virtually all opposition parties, from the Pakistan People's Party to the Jamaat-e-Islam...

Since the protection of press freedom has universal implications, not to mention of its special relevance to newly-emerging democracies like Bangladesh and Pakistan, we should indeed treat the withdrawal of the case against the three journalists with relief...

The search for material for my book, Report on Afghanistan, had taken me to Kabul. As soon as I came out of the airport, a short stocky man came up to me and whispered in my ears...

Our Elder Citizens

The International Day of the Elderly was observed in Bangladesh yesterday, as elsewhere in the world. The question of the elderly has so far been looked upon more in terms of taking care of them, building elderly homes...

However, today we would like to focus our attention on a different type of problem of our elderly people. That of retiring them, even when they have years of active service to render to the society...

In many countries, qualified elderly people are being given jobs as advisors and consultants — at a fee lower than normal. This serves the dual purpose of looking after the elderly and also economising on cost...

Time has come for us to look into such possibilities. There are thousands of highly qualified retired professionals, government officials and business leaders who can be inspired to get involved in nation building projects...

The ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to hold its party council session. After the successful completion — the real extent of its success will become obvious in the near future — of the Awami League (AL) council session...

BNP's Council Session

Time for Some New Thinking

12th Amendment, dealing the parliamentary system, into the party constitution. According to the BNP secretary general issues such as market economy, eradication of illiteracy, compulsory education upto class 8 for women...

Something else he mentioned that I found quite interesting. He said BNP was looking at the prospect of forging greater links with like minded political parties abroad, who believe in democracy, market economy, multi-party system etc.

I realised that I had touched a sensitive nerve when I said that there was widespread feeling that organisational work of the party has been neglected because of the preoccupation with running the government. Mr. Talukdar brushed aside the criticism and said government's activities always attract more attention than the party's...

proper office created the type of impressions that I was pointing out. Wasn't the anti-terrorist drive losing steam? After the arrest of one JCD leader there appears to be no follow up. Are we to understand that all the problems had only one root? These questions did not, as I had anticipated, receive straight forward answers...

and BDR by themselves cannot solve the problem of terrorism', he repeated. Having got as much as I could from the secretary general, I talked to a few other senior BNP members of the party about the coming council session. Their perception was in sharp variance with that of Mr. Talukdar. In their talks with this writer a common concern of BNP's growing distance with the people was expressed...

electorally. Being party secretary general does not give that chance. This however is the most charitable explanation. There are several uncharitable ones which I prefer not to mention. Frankly, the job is also a thankless one. Done well, the credit goes somewhere else and, some how, all failures seem to find their way to the door step of the secretary general.

All said and done, the most critical role in the coming council will be that of its chairperson, Prime Minister Khaleeda Zia. It is what is going on in her mind that will ultimately hold sway. She enjoys unquestioned power. The BNP constitution gives far more power to the party chief than does the AL's. However, in practice both Khaleeda and Hasina run their respective parties in the same style — with absolute authority. But the party constitution is not her only source of power. She has successfully led her party through nine years of relentless assault of the Ershad regime and has delivered an electoral victory. It is these factors also that made her stature supreme and unquestioned. But all her prestige and charisma, Begum Zia herself faces some formidable challenges. Her leadership qualities will come under a new test. This will be her first council session as the party chief after the establishment of democracy. What will her role be, now that the party needs a different kind of leadership. How much power and authority will she share with others? There is immense rivalry among her lieutenants and sharp groupings at crucial levels of the party.

One is not sure whether to call it her failure, or whether it was her deliberate policy, but the fact is that there is no generally acceptable number two in her party. From the outside one does not get the impression of a well co-ordinated cabinet working. But of a group of people who are going on their own different directions. If there is a caucus which works very closely with her, the people in her party are not aware of it. Being the head of the government of a

The Third View by Mahfuz Anam

ago, but the leader of the opposition did not respond. Is there any move now to open dialogue with the opposition parties? None, at the official level, he said. But unofficial level contacts were always going on.

The message was clear. No new collective move was in the offing about curbing terrorism in the DU campus and other educational institutions. So I came back to my original question, about the BNP's drive against JCD, and asked, if BNP's own house was cleaned, will it not give the requisite moral authority and public support to follow suit on the activities of other parties? With a superior moral position, BNP will not need the support of any other party to eliminate terrorism from society. Your question suggests that JCD is the only student organisation that indulges in violence? Mr. Talukdar said, I protested saying that what I meant was that if BNP takes the 'bull by the horn' and eliminates armed criminals from its own party, then it will acquire the moral authority to hit out at any one involved in terrorism. He said police can never stop terrorism unless political parties cooperate. 'What if they don't cooperate?' I tell you, police

and adequate supervision have led to the rise of factions in many district level bodies. In some instances such factionalism is known to have entered the cabinet itself, letting loose unhealthy, and in some cases unsavoury, competition among cabinet colleagues.

All these and many other problems are going to converge on to the party council session coming December. Added to this is the question, which I naturally could not put to Mr. Talukdar, is whether or not, the party will go for a new secretary general. According to a report in this paper, the all powerful party chairperson, Begum Khaleeda Zia prefers a full time party general secretary who will not run any ministry, but to give him the right status, will enjoy a cabinet rank. This greatly narrows down the possibilities as there is hardly anyone who would rather give up his ministry for the party. The reasons for this are many. Being a minister gives one the chance to do things for his own constituency. And in a system of quid pro quo, make other ministers do things for his constituency with promise of returning the favour. This is the way to maintain one's popularity among those who have

problem ridden and resource starved country like ours, Begum Zia has very little time to attend to the nitty-gritty of running her party. But in the absence of any clearcut sharing of authority, everything ends up at her door step. Begum Zia poses the question as to how long can she run her party in this manner. More fundamentally, should she?

Though, we in the this paper have called for it several times, there is no likelihood of it being coming true. I am referring to the idea of separation of the posts of party chief, leader of the House and the Prime Ministership. If the three-step separation is not feasible, which works in the UK, then at least a two step one, that is the separation of the office of the Prime Minister and that of the party chief should be looked into. This is an integral part of the parliamentary system. We had proposed similarly that the AL chief should decide to opt for one of the two positions she now holds. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman opted to be the Prime Minister, making Mr Kamruzzaman the party chief in the AL council session in 1974. There are of course other illustrious examples from earlier times.

The recently concluded AL council session did not give us anything to write home about in terms of division of power and responsibility in the party leadership. There is absolutely no reason to expect anything different from the BNP. So while we continue to talk about accountable government and collective leadership in the parliamentary form of government, the parties that make up the parliament continue to be run in a most centralised and authoritarian manner.

However, for the moment we have to be happy with what we have got. Though undemocratic methods and practices dominate the functioning of all our political parties, at least the timely holding of their council sessions will help, in however a limited way, to make the leadership somewhat aware of what is going at the grass roots level. If not anything else, the council session should provide the leadership and the supporters of BNP, to do some introspection, and bring in some new thinking into the party, to enable them to face the existing challenges of development and better governance.

A Star Special

A Revolutionary in a Three-piece Suit: Meeting Murtaza Bhutto

by Kuldip Nayar

Now that Mir Murtaza Bhutto, elder son of the executed Prime Minister of Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, has come out openly to talk about his outfit, Al Zulfikar, I recall the time when I met him in Kabul some twelve years ago. I have retained the notes since.

It was late last September. The search for material for my book, Report on Afghanistan, had taken me to Kabul. As soon as I came out of the airport, a short stocky man came up to me and whispered in my ears, 'Murtaza, Bhutto's son, wants to meet you. We shall eat together.' I had not decided where to stay but he said he would find out since only two or three hotels were allowed to put up foreigners.

Until then I did not know that Bhutto's son was in Kabul. My impression was that he was in London. Bhutto, his father, whom I had met many a time in Pakistan and elsewhere, had once or twice mentioned about his son studying at Oxford. But Bhutto would often talk about his daughter, Benazir, not anyone else.

Though very busy during the day my thoughts went again and again to the evening appointment. Why did Murtaza want to meet me? How did he come to know of my arrival? In a place where the Russians were watching every stone, not to speak of men, I felt somewhat uneasy.

The same squatly person picked me up from my hotel and drove me to a large, modern mansion. This was not Murtaza's residence; he had a bungalow elsewhere. Two men and a lady were sitting in sofa chairs. They were introduced to me as Murtaza, Shahji and Mrs Shahji. A child was glued to TV. He was Shahji's son.

Murtaza turned out to be younger than I expected. He looked hardly 20 but he said he was 26. He was handsome but his expensive clothes gave him a foppish look. He wore a well-cut three-piece western suit, a neatly-knotted silk necktie, a shirt with gold links showing outside of the coat-sleeves, and patent leather shoes. As he stood up, he just looked a tall boy. Even though he had a thin moustache and talked like a mature person, his sparse constitution told on his deportment.

Shahji was broad, in his late thirties; his gold fillings showed every time he laughed. He had escaped from Pakistan or, more appropriately, from Gen Zia Ul Haq, Pakistan Chief Martial Law administrator, to seek refuge in Afghanistan. His wife wore silk salwar and kameez, with a gold-embroidered dupatta.

'My father used to mention your name.' This was how Murtaza started the conversation. What he had said was perhaps true because when I was covering Bhutto's trial in Islamabad, he had sent me a couple of messages from jail through his lawyer, Bakhtayar.

I was keen to find out what Murtaza was doing in Kabul. I am raising a resistance force to intervene in Pakistan,' he said. 'PLA', and then he spelled it out as the Pakistan Liberation Army (now Al Zulfikar organisation). He went on, 'Really speaking, we are an armed wing of the People's Party of Pakistan. Many People come from Pakistan for training and return to their positions after the completion of the course. We are constantly in touch with them.'

He gave me the details of various raids they had carried out in Pakistan. There were

also several instances of sabotage and bomb blasts. What he described gave me an impression of the Al Zulfikar being a terrorist organisation. I told Murtaza that most people did not know that the PLA was active in Pakistan. I expressed my doubt as to whether a few hit and run exercises could dislodge an entrenched military junta.

'There are many young military officers with us, both from the army and the air force. We are in close touch with them,' he said. 'Once we are able to pile up pressure from without they will rise from within.' Murtaza was confirming what I had heard during my visits to Pakistan that there were young officers who had sworn to avenge Bhutto's execution. But the group was said to be small.

I did not want to disillusion him. He seemed to imagine himself at the head of a liberation army entering Islamabad in the midst of defending slogans 'Murtaza Zindabad', 'Bhutto Zindabad'.

Breaking the silence, Murtaza said that there was no other way out. The people in Pakistan were so afraid and so demoralised that they could not rise in revolt on their own. 'We have to help them.' He often shook with anger, he did not say it but it was clear that the uppermost thing in his mind was to revenge the execution of his father.

'A conquest from outside.' I went on raising doubts and he went on saying it was possible. And then he mentioned some of the countries he had toured to seek support. Libya was his main prop. Subsequently, I discovered that Libya was financing even his stay in Kabul.

the social strata where they exist.

It appears that the teeming millions of the hapless poverty-stricken people are destined to be in that endless gloom. However, prospects, although bleak, have been around to fight this vice. A social milieu to streamline the forces to effectively combat poverty is required. Hands with expertise to mend the social fabric eliminating poverty are to be sprouted through appropriate policy changes. Poverty, the debilitating vice, should not be looked upon with fatalistic resignation.

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Poverty

Str. Seemingly, none of the vices stands so striking as poverty does. From among a panoply of other ills and evils, poverty could be identified as the lone biting the vast multitude of the people.

In this capital city, where a small segment of the people have been watching the Western life-style by the grace of dish-antenna and becoming discontent to their already high living-standard, thousands of malnourished children in different slums, ghettos and road-side make-shift habitats have been yearning for a loaf of bread, many of the times in vain. This contradiction of the society has added new dimensions to the poverty phenomenon which has been

more resulted from the factors beyond their manipulations than the ones they hold strings.

There is a vicious circle of poverty. Think of a female child born in a rickshaw-puller's family, who is brought up malnourished and reaching puberty sent to a well-to-do household to become a servant — a stigma which does never get stripped of. Again, a construction worker's male-child has very meagre chance to go to school rather than following his father's suit.

The reverse trend of the children of poor people getting educated and those of richer people going astray is very infrequently seen. In this entire gamut of process, the roots of poverty go deeper into

of Shahji, whom he described as the Finance Minister of the organisation. 'Did this mean that they had set up an emigre government in Kabul?' I asked. Murtaza said, 'Not exactly but we have a shadow cabinet.' Shahji added that they had in Murtaza their Prime Minister.

During my 10-day stay in Kabul I did not meet any other member of Murtaza's cabinet. Nor did I get a statement of their foreign policy and a blueprint of their economic programme. They promised to send them to me. The foreign policy, as delineated to me, was based on a closer contact with socialist countries; the economic policy was socialistic in content.

In no time, the ashtray was full of cigarette butts, Murtaza

chain-smoked and seemed to prefer British Duna. Something from the TV programme frightened the child. He ran to his mother and insisted that they go home. Tears welled in her eyes. She said: 'We cannot go there. Your father will be arrested.'

I did not know why the mother suddenly became sentimental. Was it because of the long struggle ahead or because of her own conviction that they could not make it?

In any case, the curfew time in Kabul was approaching. We hurried through the dinner. Murtaza left in his Mercedes, Shahji in a Toyota. My stocky host took out his Jalopy from the garage and drove me back through the deserted streets of Kabul.

OPINION

Radical Solution for the Debt Problem

For many poor countries, the debt trap has become impossible to escape or to bear with. To 'export their way out of the debt crisis' is not a realistic option. Restructuring of debt is no longer a solution. Negotiations concerning bilateral loans that take place in Paris often end up in postponing payment of interest, which means with each round of negotiations, the debt burden actually grows. Suggestions often made on various occasions and indeed repeated here by some distinguished speakers to the effect that debtor countries mobilize more vigorously their internal resources and organize their management of development activities more efficiently, are well-taken. But that should also call for a clean slate without bringing forward a debt balance.

Among the seventeen most heavily indebted countries, Bangladesh has accumulated a net outstanding debt of US\$ 11,560 million as in June 1991. Economic growth and development of Bangladesh are largely dependent on external assistances. Lack of investable resources in Bangladesh, manifest in her saving-investment and import-export gaps, necessitates this dependence. While external assistance has made positive contribution to economic development, it has also led to the growing indebtedness of the country in real terms. Gradual fall of the proportion of grants in the total aid package is one of the major factors for the growing debt burden. It has declined from 66.9% in 1972-73 to 47.6% during 3rd Five Year Plan period (1985-90), thereafter

eral ODA debt outstanding against all LDCs.

— Substantial reduction of debt burden of other developing countries by implementing the Trinidad options i.e to write off two-thirds of loans.

— The above measures should apply to both concessional and non-concessional loans including debt in respect of official and officially guaranteed export credits.

— Maximum use of concessional options in case of future loans advanced by the creditor countries, both within and outside Paris Club, thereby reducing the proportion of loan and increasing the proportion of grant in ODA. For all those donors who can perhaps afford, it would be worthwhile to emulate the Scandinavian countries who disburse almost whole ODA in the form of outright grants.

— Debt relief amounts should be in addition to normal development aid flow.

— Concessional relief should also be made applicable to multilateral credit agencies and international banking system.

— As interim measures, full and immediate implementation alongwith improvement of the scope and coverage of existing debt relief options and mechanisms such as the Toronto options, should be effected.

— To reduce commercial debt buy-back and conversion schemes like debt-for-nature swaps should continue to be implemented.

— Greater access of LDC products to the markets of the developed countries and fair price there of be ensured.

With a view to alleviating the hardships faced by most of the low income countries, which constitute serious hindrance to planned development, the provision of development assistance needs to be complemented by an additional package of measures focussing on debt reduction ultimately aimed at virtual debt elimination. In this regard the following measures seem to be worthy of consideration:

— Total write-off of all bilat-