

After Putting Sultans in their Place, What will Mahathir Do Next?

An Appeal for Harmony

The communal forces of India, by destroying the Babri Masjid, have dealt a severe blow to peace and harmony in the South Asian region. Their actions have caused the death of thousands of innocent people, and the destruction of property of countless others, as well as greatly complicating the relations among the three major countries of the region. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), through its programme of holding a rally in Delhi, scheduled for today, is again trying to fan communal conflicts and disrupt peace and harmony. BJP is trying to use the forces of communalism to gain political power. It is clear that this political party, by instigating communal conflicts and fanning religious fanaticism, and by attacking and displacing minority population, is attempting to create a religious fundamentalist state in India. The implications of such a development is a matter of great concern to India's neighbouring countries. The situation created by this evil force, especially the political and social chaos it has unleashed by the resulting violence and counter violence, is posing to be a serious threat to democracy, political stability and to the prospect of economic development of the region.

In Bangladesh, communal forces, taking advantage of the situation in India, are trying to gain political advantage by instigating religious fanaticism. It needs to be mentioned that these communal forces, by attacking minorities in our own country, further jeopardise the security of Muslims in India, who are already facing situations of hardship and insecurity due to the activities of communal forces there.

In view of this situation we appeal to the government, to all political parties, to all socio-cultural organisations, to all NGOs, to all community leaders, and foremost to the general public to defend at any cost our democratic and humanitarian traditions and demonstrate once again our unwavering commitment to religious and communal harmony regardless of what may occur and what situation may develop due to the activities of communal forces in India.

(This editorial is also carried in several other newspapers.)

A Study in Obviousness

It was a misnomer with which they embarked on the programme. Almost in the fashion the Atomic Energy Commission was set up with a Bengali name which meant very plainly and elementarily, the molecular-anobik that is, energy commission. In the second case the misnomer stuck but didn't possibly do any harm except to project the commission to brass's couldn't-care-less attitude of disrespect to the Bengali language. But in the first case, that of the compulsory Primary Education Programme, much is amiss and most of the numerous shoals it is hitting can be tracked to origins in misconceptions epitomised by the choice of the adjective 'compulsory' in place of 'universal' the latter having no coercive connotation.

Whoever thought that the outcome of the 'compulsory' programme would be anything other than miserably tragic? No proof was needed by anyone except possibly those that conceived it. The 'compulsory primary' dreamchild must have been the result of what in astrology they call a *raj-jotak* or a rare royal conjunction—of political expediency finding in bureaucracy all too eager an 'expert-pool' to cash in on the Ershadian gimmick. No, the people that devised the CPE didn't either need any proof, this way or that. Monday's Daily Star, however, without caring much for the big game, reported in very plain terms the CPE situation in Bogra. Without hedging about for nothing, one would get the national CPE situation from the Bogra scenario—plus-minus a bit or two.

As one of the districts where CPE has been introduced, Bogra recorded a goodly primary involvement of 270 thousands. But soon enough half of it or more than a lakh dropped out. The enrolment was encouraging because that almost covered the entire population of six-year olds standing at three lakh.

The drop-outs didn't quite melt away. The report said the girls were helping their families perform the daily household chores, or even going out to work and earn. The boys were working in the crop fields with their elders or busy at other things that help the family with some cash. The moral is a study in obviousness — the poor cannot send their children to school.

Elimination or even alleviation of poverty will take decades to realise. Education is one prerequisite for materialising that. If children of the economically hard-pressed families cannot, for the very physical survival of their families, go to school and if these children constitute more than half of the juvenile population, what will happen to the nation's education?

Primary education for all is an ideal. But the need for the moment is something short of that, something more easily attainable. That golden thing is 'universal literacy'—the case of which has so very strongly argued by Rabindranath. Schools or no-schools, the job is to make the society a wholly literate one. If the government hasn't quite hit the idea because of its in-built limitations of pockets of vested interests, some NGOs have, it seems, got it right and are probing their way through.

A people aspiring for a democratic society, in spirit and in practice, cannot have a "compulsory" programme, specially when this denotes something wholly impractical and illusory and more so when a far more pressing task is awaiting materialisation: Plain literacy and for all.

KUALA LUMPUR — Having just won a decisive round against nine traditional Sultans in the country, in stripping them of their personal immunity from legal prosecution, Prime Minister Mahathir Muhammad has been scanning the horizon for further developments.

In doing so, the Malaysian leader obviously maintains his grip over the situation. However, there are loose ends to be tied if stability in the constitutional process is to be ensured within the country's traditional framework of national consensus.

In the first place, in accepting the agreement of the Conference of the Rulers held last week of the constitutional amendments introduced in the parliament last month, the Mahathir Government has conceded that some modifications would be made in the bill before it becomes law, an obvious face-saving compromise for the Sultans.

In political terms, it is a good move. After all, while educated Malaysians feel angry and even bitter about the way some of the Rulers have handled themselves, few would like them to be humiliated or the institution undermined. Here, one must also dismiss the rumour spread by some quarters that the ultimate aim of Mahathir is to pave the way for the abolition of the monarchy, to turn the federation into a republic and become the country's first president. In power since 1981, who underwent a heart bypass in 1988, the Prime Minister may well run for another term in office, if, as he recently said, his health permits and people want him to continue.

It is on the financial front that the gains and losses for the Sultans and the government must be counted carefully, against the backdrop of a massive and, indeed, hostile media coverage of the lavish life-style of the rulers of the state.

At a recent press conference in London, Malaysian Finance Minister Anwar Ibrahim, often tipped as a successor to Mahathir, disclosed that it cost the country as much as MS200 million, approximately US\$70 million, every year to pay for all the perks enjoyed by the rulers. Then, there is an incredible

number of luxury cars, racing boats and expensive household items which have been imported without any payment of duty. There are also expensive palaces — more than two or three for each Sultan — built by the state or federal governments, all lavishly furnished.

One unofficial estimate which understandably lacks corroboration suggests since 1963 when the federation came into being, the Sultans may well have spent as much as M\$One billion, in addition to their budgeted perks, in maintaining their life-style. For a country which has struggled hard during the past 30 years to lay the foundation of an af-

fluent economy, this is a staggering amount — and very largely a waste.

It is unlikely that the Sultans will be now asked to pay back to the state what is its due, such as import duty on cars and other luxury items. However, banks which were once obliged — or forced, as some would say — to advance massive loans to many Sultans, generally without any securities, would not take such a liberal approach in recovering their debts.

During his press briefing in London, Finance Minister Anwar suggested that if there is a slowdown in the Malaysian economy, the government would be obliged to review the perks, perhaps to reduce them, enjoyed by the rulers. As one observer puts it, restrictions may be imposed on the number of luxury cars that a Sultan can bring in without payment of import duty.

All this is hardly likely to be a straightforward streamlined exercise. It is full of hidden corners.

What adds a new complication to the situation is whether, having gone after the

Sultans, the Mahathir Government will now turn to politicians and businessmen who may also be guilty of corrupt practices, financial irregularities and of owning assets beyond their known sources of income.

To let this section of Malaysians, regardless of their race, religion or political connections, go scot free — vulnerable but relatively untouched — would expose the administration to the charge of pursuing double standards — one set of rules for the Sultans and another for politicians.

During the past decade, the country was rocked by several financial scandals, mostly in

the corporate sector, some allegedly involving senior government leaders and even cabinet ministers. Even now, as new high rise luxury apartment buildings, massive hotels and supermarkets change the skyline of what, only twenty years ago, was a sleepy capital, whispered conversations continue to be about lack of transparency in business deals, with more speculations than facts circulating as "inside stories" behind each new transaction.

Then, when one reads about some 45 golf courses being set up in the state of Selangor, where the federal capital is located, with owner-membership for each of them selling for anything between US\$10,000 and \$25,000, experts wonder if this kind of expansion of the country's economy will benefit the rural poor. Again, one also asks if the water shortage in and around the suburb of Kuala Lumpur is not caused by its excessive use in the golf courses.

The challenge now facing the Mahathir administration is to take a new look at the overall economic priorities and thus disarm its critics who privately argue that no matter how badly the rulers have behaved all these years,

the Prime Minister is out to grab more power at the cost of the constitutional monarchy.

At this moment, these critics may be few in number, scattered, with little or no impact on the national politics. However, they do include several local politicians with grassroots appeal and at least one national personality, the former Finance Minister, Tunku Razaleigh Hamzah, a member of the Kelantan royal family, who now heads a breakaway but ineffective faction of the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO).

Above all, there is the Parti Islam (PAS), the nearest equivalent to the Jamaat-e-Islam of Bangladesh, which runs the state government of Kelantan and maintains a power base in several other areas. In a number of state by-election contests, since 1990, PAS gave the UMNO a tough fight, with the ruling party winning them by narrow margins.

While PAS may well strongly disapprove of the Sultans, especially of their lavish life-style, they remain critical of what is often described as "unbridled capitalism", based on western materialism, which tends to ignore manpower development and expansion of educational and medical facilities. A case in point is, with its 18 million people, Malaysia produced 26,000 scientists and engineers in 1982 (the latest OECD figure) as against 36,000 in Singapore with a population of three million. Then, there is the continuing dependence of Malaysia on foreign workers in the industrial sector, construction industry and rubber plantations.

In a frank and probably accurate observation about the Prime Minister, Razaleigh Hamzah once said that Mahathir is at his best when the going gets tough. "He loves crisis (and) thrives on confrontation."

However, each crisis met by the Prime Minister, as has been the case in his confrontation with the monarchy, produces a new scenario, with new actors entering the stage. It is still early to say what it will be this time. One thing is certain: Whatever it is, Mahathir Muhammad is ready for it.

This is the concluding part of the two-part series on Malaysia.

AT HOME AND ABROAD

S. M. ALI

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Migrants Victims of Violence in Cambodia

A Special Correspondent writes from Phnom Penh

The Khmer Rouge are again threatening the United Nations peace effort in Cambodia. As hopes for a smooth transition to multiparty politics are dashed, the violence against Vietnamese migrants has been increasing. Young Cambodians, dissatisfied with the peace process, resent the Vietnamese migrants and the UN isn't sure how to tackle the escalating violence without alienating them.

IN Cambodia, a new wave of anti-Vietnamese sentiment has surfaced as thousands of Vietnamese escape poverty in their own land for relative prosperity of their neighbouring country.

"In this city it would not be worth my life admitting that I am Vietnamese to anyone. Instead I dress like a Khmer, I speak like a Khmer, I act like a Khmer," says Minh, a young Vietnamese man in his mid-twenties.

He left Ho Chi Minh City six months ago for a job as a construction worker on one of Phnom Penh's mushrooming building sites. "Friends of mine have been attacked. I have been beaten up several times. And I fear it is going to get worse. All the Cambodians have guns now and it's only a matter of time until they use them."

Already beset by many problems, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) has been slow to confront the dangers posed by the endemic antagonism towards Vietnamese in Cambodia. But recent developments are forcing UNTAC to finally admit publicly the extent of the problems and the implications it poses for the peace process.

According to Michael Williams, Deputy Director of UNTAC's Human Rights Component, if unchecked this conflict could also threaten wider regional security. "Who would have thought three or four years back that there would be a war in Yugoslavia purely on racial grounds. The same thing could happen in Cambodia."

In the past three months, 41 Vietnamese have been killed in Cambodia, "and those are only the ones we know about," says Williams. In December, some 14 Vietnamese fishermen were killed and 14 wounded during a night time attack by Khmer Rouge troops on a village on the Tonle Sap River in central Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge's monopoly on anti-Vietnamese sentiment is being challenged by other political groups. The



non-communist Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) blames the term — "savage," a pejorative term for the Vietnamese — for Cambodia's economic problems.

Many within UNTAC say that such sentiments could easily spill over into further discontent against the peace plan. "It is no coincidence that UNTAC is being increasingly referred to as 'youn-TAC' by many Cambodians, says one UN official.

Thousands of Vietnamese were imported into Cambodia by the French to administer the colonial government's rubber plantations. By the time of the right-wing coup under Lon Nol in early 1970, it was estimated that there were

about 500,000 Vietnamese in Cambodia.

Their number shrank drastically after 1970 when, under the pretext of a hunt for Vietnamese communist agents, Lon Nol unleashed a vicious pogrom in which thousands of ethnic Vietnamese and part-Vietnamese were killed. Thousands fled or were killed after the Khmer Rouge victory in 1975.

Although the Vietnamese were initially hailed as liberators by the Cambodians when they overthrew Pol Pot in 1979, it did not take long before old wounds were reopened. Stories quickly circulated that occupying Vietnamese had systematically looted Phnom Penh, sending

convoy of trucks carrying electrical appliances, furniture and precious sculptures back to Ho Chi Minh City.

Since the arrival of the 20,000-strong UNTAC contingent, many more Vietnamese have come to Cambodia to earn a living, further exacerbating anti-Vietnamese feelings. Most who come end up as itinerant construction workers or prostitutes in the many brothels and dance halls that have sprung up throughout Cambodia. Many do seasonal work with the fishing communities along the country's major rivers.

"They do the dirty and the hard jobs that Cambodians will not touch," says John Vijghen, a field worker for the World Food Programme, who has been in Cambodia for two-and-a-half-year and travelled extensively throughout the country. "Their presence is nothing new. What is different is that rather than coming and going, all these people are now staying permanently due to the economic problems in Vietnam."

The exact number of Vietnamese in Cambodia today is unknown. The KPNLF put the number of Vietnamese in Cambodia at 600,000 — 20,000, of which they claimed were disguised Vietnamese soldiers and intelligence agents. The Khmer Rouge puts the figure at one million. Neither group has supplied any firm evidence to back up these claims, despite repeated requests by UNTAC.

"The truth is no one really knows how many Vietnamese are in the country," says Vijghen. "Depending on how you count, you could come up with a figure anywhere between 50,000 and one million.

Do you include part-Chinese and Khmer Vietnamese, only recent settlers, or what?"

Although it has contacts with the Vietnamese community, Williams admitted that UNTAC's Human Rights Component has "very little concrete information" on their numbers and status.

Non Government Organisations are similarly in the dark. Deborah Brodie, Executive Secretary of the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia, an umbrella group representing 56 NGOs working in Cambodia, says that "while NGOs are concerned with the problem, there are none with any programmes involving the overt participation of members of the Vietnamese community."

Cambodians claim the Vietnamese are responsible for fishing illegally in Cambodian waters, illegally registering to vote in the upcoming elections, depriving Cambodians of jobs, and some even claim that Vietnamese prostitutes are solely responsible for spreading AIDS in Cambodia.

Brodie believes that UNTAC, not NGOs, should be tackling the problem. "We don't have the resources. Efforts need to be made at a government to government level, which only the UN can do," she says. "Yet there is little evidence to suggest that UNTAC is equipped for the job."

UNTAC monitors Khmer political broadcast for racist statements, but has no means to stop them.

The Human Rights Component has ten staff in Phnom Penh, and one officer in each of Cambodia's 21 provinces. "This means we are limited in what we can do,"

says Williams. "We have no powers of prosecution or arrest. In several Vietnamese killings we know full well who is responsible — the Khmer Rouge — but without their full cooperation in handing over the culprits there is nothing we can do."

UNTAC Civilian Police have similar problems. "Along the 1,200 km border between the two countries are a lot of isolated Vietnamese communities who are the first target of both the Khmer Rouge and bandits. We simply can't patrol the whole area," says one senior officer.

Some believe that what is needed are not greater efforts to seal the border, but economic growth to take away the basis of much Cambodian discontent. One diplomat says the situation is similar to Europe. "The Vietnamese have become the scapegoat for a growing strata of young dispossessed Cambodians... they have no money and no job prospects and want someone to blame," he says.

Vijghen agreed: "Certainly the worst racism that I have seen against the Vietnamese occurs in the city among young people who, because they are not sharing from the spoils of the process, are not scared of taking action that might jeopardise it."

But even those who can understand Cambodians' fears that their country is being swamped can't understand the antagonism against Vietnamese. "The Vietnamese here make small money compared to the Thais, Chinese and Malaysian businessmen. Yet Human Rights has not received one complaint of harassment that I know of from these other groups," says Williams.

The biggest risk for UNTAC in challenging this racism is getting further off-side with Cambodians. "Given how prevalent these attitudes are across the broad spectrum of Cambodian society, there is a real risk that such an effort could backfire," said Williams. — GEMINI NEWS

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.

Biman's snacks

Sir, At present Biman serves juice to passengers on domestic flight. This is good. But for passengers unwilling to take juice and for the diabetic there is no other option. Hence either diet coke or some saltish item should be offered to this category of passengers. This can be easily done by applying a little imagination and planning by the concerned authorities. The matter is trifling but will help improve Biman's image.

Saleh Ahmed Choudhury
Dhaka Cantonment.

Maid servant

Sir, Sometimes back I came across an article (Tackling Maid Servant....) written by your regular writer Ms. Fatza

Haque in the page 'Living'. I fully agree with her views/ideas that in our middle class family it is hardly possible to get a good and faithful maid servant due to some hidden reasons she explained in her article.

My thanks and best wishes to her for the articles concerning our daily problematic life.

Mrs. Saraya I Habib
Zikatala, Dhaka

Our democracy and election-expenditure

Sir, There is a stipulated expense-limit for any candidate in the parliamentary polls and it is Taka 3 lacs for each candidate, according to the Bangladesh Election Commission. But it is a matter of regret that this limit is

hardly maintained. And this is true about any candidate whether he/she belongs to the party in power or the opposition. This is nothing but a mockery of law and it can never be auspicious for our new-born democracy.

Democracy has its origin in Europe. But it did not come there automatically. People had to struggle hard to establish it there. During the first days of democracy in Europe we see that people usually elected them who were able to buy them. In Swift's "Gulliver's Travels", we have similar allusion in this regard. In Swift's time, there were only two parties in England — Whig and Tory. And the candidates of both the parties flung away money like anything before election to be elected in the House of Commons.

The two main parties of Bangladesh are doing almost the same thing in the different polls and the other parties, big or small, are blindly following their footsteps.

Illiteracy is the main obstacle on the road to democracy, and that is now prevalent in

Bangladesh. But we are optimistic that our country will be a democratic one in the true sense of the term one day.

Bangladesh is now passing through its infancy of democracy. After the partition of 1947, this region was ruled by military dictators some way or other. Most of the time until our war of independence, democracy did come and go here like a comet.

Bangladesh emerged as an independent country in 1971. Democracy did not last here for a long time even for once since our liberation for obvious reasons. Through the mass upsurge of 1990, we have again entered a 'democratic phase' but we don't know how long it will exist because we have a long tradition of martial law.

In a democratic country like Bangladesh, it is expected that people's verdict will be automatically reflected in its different polls. But the irony is that the prospective candidates of different political parties spend a huge amount of money to win the elections. There may be ideological differences between the candidates but we find hardly any difference in their squander-

ing before election. And most of the candidates exceed the spending limit of Tk three lacs. Their only aim is just to win the election, as it seems, by hook or crook. Perhaps the candidates know it well that if they are once elected some way or the other, they would very easily be able to regain their financial loss and may be that is why they become so extravagant in spending money before election. During the parliamentary polls in 1991 we experienced such things and the newspapers of that time were full of such reports. The same is the case with any other elections of the country. This is a dangerous trend that may play havoc with our hard-earned democracy.

If there is a law, there should be its enforcement. A law no longer remains a law unless it is being applied. Since there is an expense-limit for each candidate in the parliamentary and other polls prescribed by the Election Commission, it should be properly maintained by the commission and obeyed by the candidates. After an election, when a candidate submits the

vouchers of his election expenses to the Election Commission, I suggest the Commission, try to find out some way through which they could easily detect the extravagant ones.

Rushad Ehsan Shupol
Dhaka.

UN Resolutions

Sir, The UN resolutions are to be obeyed by all concerned. It is really a binding obligation for the nations/person concerned to comply with it. But this norm is not found equally applicable in all cases. The Israeli Government may deny the UN resolutions regarding life and death of Palestinians, one after another. The Indian Government may deny the UN resolutions in respect of the Kashmiri Muslims. On the other hand, any violation of UN resolutions in respect of exercising national sovereignty by Iraq is being seriously dealt with.

How can we admit this anomaly?

Md Abdul Latif Khalifa
Befpara, Jessore.