

A Loss for the Region

The brutal assassination of Shri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa has not only robbed the island state of an effective, forward-looking leader but has also deprived South Asia of a statesman whose enduring commitment to regional co-operation will be long remembered by all countries concerned, especially Bangladesh. Through his visits to Dhaka and close consultations with Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, the late President had endeared himself to the people and a cross section of officials in Bangladesh, establishing an understanding with Prime Minister Zia. It was this understanding that helped Dhaka in proceeding with the holding of the Summit of South Asian Association of Regional Co-operation (SAARC), with Begum Zia taking over the chairpersonship of the seven-member grouping. In the untimely death of Premadasa, Bangladesh has indeed lost a friend.

Every political assassination creates a vacuum, especially when a no clear-cut successor to the slain leader is in sight. This was the case when another outstanding Shri Lankan leader, Prime Minister Solomon Bandaranaike was shot dead in 1959, leaving the island with no choice but to bring in his wife, Sirimavo to take over the leadership. In many ways, it is worse this time. The 71-year old Prime Minister Dingiri Banda Wijetunge who has taken over as the Acting President is a non-controversial dark horse whose ability to maintain peace and order in the troubled island remains very much in doubt. He is due to hold the presidential election within one month, the time stipulated by the constitution. However, with the ruling party caught in a power struggle of its own and the opposition in disarray, with its most promising leader Lalith Athulathmudali shot dead by a lone gunman a week earlier, even an acceptable replacement of Premadasa may be very hard to find.

Whatever may be the speculations, claims and counter-claims as to who was behind the assassination of Premadasa — and, for that matter, that of Athulathmudali — one sincerely hopes that the island state will not be back to "Square One" in dealing with the Tamil insurgency in the north, the rebellion in the central part or in starting afresh with its new economic reforms. Despite his somewhat controversial political style on the domestic scene, Premadasa had won significant victories against the Tamil rebels and most certainly against the radical Sinhalese factions in other parts of Shri Lanka. His commitment to rural reforms, based on reduction of poverty, like his support for SAARC projects, was on the point of showing results. However, much remains to be done to step up the momentum of this programme. Herein lies the challenge facing the next president, whoever he (or she) may be. The Tamil Tigers may have been put on the defensive, but the island state is still crying out for a political solution; one that provides peace and stability to a country whose potential has remained overshadowed by endless strife.

True, the brutal murder of Premadasa has created a dangerous vacuum. But we should not underestimate the capacity of the highly resourceful people of Shri Lanka to bounce back, to face up to the challenge with courage and determination and to demonstrate their ability to put the country back on the road to progress. In reaching this goal, Shri Lanka can count on the support — and prayer — of the people of Bangladesh.

Welcome to Aga Khan

Prince Karim Aga Khan arrives in Dhaka today on a four-day state visit to this country. His stay here will be marked, among other things, by the signing of two agreements between the Aga Khan Development Network and the Government of Bangladesh. A welcome one on every count, this is the second of this charismatic leader's visits to Bangladesh. Indeed, his active involvement in a number of internationally reputed welfare organisations has helped accomplish excellent humanitarian services throughout the globe. He is rich by any standard but that is a qualification only because it has helped him in extending his unlimited generosity to the suffering humanity.

Aga Khan's speciality lies in that he knows how to manage his financial affairs and, more importantly, he does not find any contradictions between his mundane business and spiritual or humanitarian matters. That the government of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia attaches so much importance to his visit to this country is only natural. The two agreements to be signed here will expand the area of his organisation's works in Bangladesh. The Harvard-educated leader of the Ismaili sect has a special liking for countries fighting against overwhelming odds.

Bangladesh has been one such country and it was also a beneficiary of his generosity in the past. This time, the agreements speak for themselves and hopefully they will widen the area of institutional co-operation on a more solid foundation. The fact that the projects the Prince undertakes to run in a country runs so admirably owes to his organisation's efficiency. A successful man, he is leaving a lesson for those who have the sole aim of accumulating wealth in life without care for the hapless millions. The hospital run by his organisation in Pakistan illustrates the point that an institute of excellence is made possible if the guiding force behind such establishments are none other than men of Aga Khan's stature. It also proves the point that he has lived for other people as much as for himself. Most other millionaires or billionaires, on the other hand, give the impression that the self-seeking interests of theirs have left the world overbearingly upset and hostile for the majority of its population.

Pakistan: Two Views from Dhaka and Delhi

POLITICS in Pakistan has taken a dramatic turn. Nawaz Sharif wanted to clip the president's wings but the wily old man acted fast and ruthlessly. He seems to have gained an expertise in dismissing elected governments. The excuse given is same as before: corruption. Benazir Bhutto was also dismissed on the same ground but in more than two years of investigation and litigation nothing, as far as I know, has been proved against her or her husband. In fact, in the strange twist of fortunes it is Benazir who has become an ally of president Ghulam Ishaq Khan. Mr Zardari, Benazir's husband, has been appointed a minister in the interim government led by Mr Mazari. No one can complain that Pakistani politics lacks drama and excitement.

In the latest episode of political maneuver involving the president, Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto cynicism seems to have won. Commitment to principles and consistency seem to have gone out of fashion in Pakistan. These are matters in which these actors on the stage seem to have no interest. Winning power is the only goal and any method to achieve this is acceptable. If this was not the case Benazir would have surely paused before throwing her support behind a man who sacked her unjustly and most unceremoniously only two and a half years ago. As the victim of the dictatorial powers of the president it would have been most natural for her to give political support to Sharif. Such a stand would have demonstrated her commitment to democratic values. Instead she supported the president in his attempt to cling to these powers inherited by him from a dictator. The promises of election within three months cannot justify her cynical stand in favour of Ghulam Ishaq Khan. Election was not the issue on which Sharif was swept out of office. The issues was the dis-

Is Democracy under Threat in Islamabad?

cretionary powers of the president. Why should a president have the power to dismiss an elected government? The Parliament represents the nation and as long as the government enjoys the confidence of the Parliament it has the mandate to govern. Except in a presidential system this is the basic principle of a democratic system of government. In Pakistan late Gen. Ziaul Huq amended the constitution to ensure his absolute control over the levers of power. His was a thinly disguised military rule but to-day Pakistan is supposed to have a democratic system of government. Accountability is the foundation of such a system. In exercising these powers the president is accountable to no one. Of course he has to have the support of the armed forces. In the present case the newly appointed army chief General Waheed seems to be fully on the side of Ghulam Ishaq Khan. What else could he do? Sharif favoured another General for the post while the president wanted Gen Waheed.

Nawaz Sharif made an emotional appeal to the nation against his dismissal. He complained about the conspiracy against him hatched by the president. The desertions from his cabinet prior to his dismissal were the result of machinations by Ghulam Ishaq Khan who was desperately trying to prevent the passage of amendments to the constitution to curtail his powers. Unfortunately Sharif also lost his credibility as a champion of democracy when, in 1990, he supported the same old president's dictatorial action in removing and elected government from office. Thus all three actors are engaged in a naked power play. Pakistan has, of course, a long tradition of such palace intrigues and military interventions. Quite apart from the coup d'etat staged by the army on several

occasions, the key role played by the ISI — the military intelligence agency — in the politics of the country is common knowledge. Rightly or wrongly, this agency which represents the military establishment, is believed to be manipulating even the day to day business of the government. One may recall the dark days of autocratic and erratic rule by Ghulam Muhammad. Physically decrepit and morally bankrupt, the man could dismiss an elected government headed by Khawaja Nazimuddin because the army stood by him. Army is also with Ghulam Ishaq but no one knows for sure how far will it go in backing an autocratic old man.

This question is relevant now because Nawaz Sharif

Ishaq Khan's high handed action. They are afraid that the programme of liberalization of the economy undertaken by Sharif may be halted or even reversed under a new regime. Sharif's defiance of the president is thus not an empty threat.

Given the complexities of the situation the political uncertainty and unrest in the country is not likely to end soon. The Afghan civil war has left a destabilizing legacy for the country. Vast quantities of illegal arms pose a threat to public security. The guerrilla training centre in Peshawar attracted thousands of Mujahedin from different Islamic countries. With the end of the Afghan civil war these fanatics are fanning out

Perhaps the Mohajers from India can claim to be true Pakistanis but in more than forty years have they been accepted by the local people? Over the years the Sindhis have watched with dismay and despair how their land has been usurped by outsiders and their language and culture coming under alien assault. Their resentment is strong and deep. Similarly the Beluchis consider themselves to be the victim of rapacious businessmen from other parts of Pakistan who are exploiting their natural resources while they continue to remain poor. The Punjabis and the Pathans have deep rooted cultural distinctiveness which remain strong. One may ask: if this is the situation then how Pakistan has survived so long? Actually it has not survived in fact. We all know how the eastern part broke away. Even the remaining parts are held together by two factors. The first is the perception of a common external threat. To be more precise, it is the fear of India which is acting as a cementing bond. The second factor is the army. The army is an important factor in preventing the disintegration of Pakistan. Since the army is linked with the external threat the two factors reinforce each other. Whether the unifying influence of Islam and these two factors will be strong enough to neutralize the centrifugal forces is yet to be seen. The present crisis may be a test.

The events unfolding in Pakistan should be seen against the background explained above. Sharif could pick up the courage to throw the gauntlet at Ghulam Ishaq because he is a son of Punjab. Unlike Benazir Bhutto whose stronghold is in Sind, Sharif can mobilize the most populous and powerful province of Pakistan against the establishment in Islamabad. The army

might move against him but one is not sure. Will Punjabi soldiers shoot Punjabi civilians? The army may avoid this problem altogether by staging a coup d'etat. They have saved Pakistan so many times in the past that saving the country once more will surprise no one. General Waheed is an unknown factor and the mood of the top brass is not known. But there is little doubt that Pakistan is heading for serious trouble. The fragile democratic structure may not be able to stand the stress of the conflict which Ghulam Ishaq Khan has thrust upon the country.

Moreover a new problem in the field of external relations has arisen and it is causing a great deal of anxiety.

The Washington Post, in a recent article, pointed out the serious deterioration in the US-Pakistan relations following the end of the cold war. In recent months, the United States has warned that it is considering adding Pakistan to its international list of countries deemed to sponsor terrorism. A terrorist-state listing would cut off all aid from the United States, the World Bank and other international agencies.

Pakistan would lose all trade with the United States, its principal trading partner, which last year bought \$885 million in Pakistani goods. US and Pakistani officials said that declaring Pakistan a terrorist state could destabilize the area and worsen further its relation with India. Such a move could also force it into closer relation with Iran and enhance the strength of the anti-Western Islamic fundamentalists. The domestic political turmoil has, therefore, compounded the problems confronting the country. This will indeed be a testing time for the country's leadership. Not only democracy but the unity and stability of the country seems to be at stake.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

happens to hail from the Punjab and the Punjab rules Pakistan. Vast majority of the armed forces personnel — perhaps as much as eight per cent — are from the Punjab. How will they react if the province stands by Sharif? Will they continue to support Ghulam Ishaq Khan — a civil servant from the Frontier province? In the short run army discipline may prevail but not one will be able to rule Pakistan from Islamabad if the Punjab is in a rebellious mood. Benazir Bhutto may have made a big miscalculation this time. She may get the support of Sind but the Punjabis are not likely to desert their favourite son in favour of a Sindh. Even in Sind the picture is blurred.

The Mohajers have their own agenda which may not suit Bhutto. It is significant that the business community in Karachi and other big cities has reacted unfavourably to Ghulam

to other Muslim countries to continue their guerrilla operations to establish fundamentalist regimes. Drug trade has become a major source of crime. But the more serious and long term problem for Pakistan is its lack of a sense of nationhood. Religion, in many instances, is a powerful factor in the growth of nationalist sentiments but by itself is not enough. Pakistan and Afghanistan are neighbours and the people are Muslims but no one will claim that they are one nation. Thailand and Laos are neighbours and the people are Buddhists but they are certainly not one nation. Language, culture, literatures, historical memories and common heritage contribute, over a long period of time, to the growth of a sense of national unity and cohesion.

In Pakistan there are Punjabis, Sindhis, Beluchis and Pathans but who is a Pakistani?

Fate of Representative Government Hangs on Balance

THE ousting of Nawaz Sharif by Pakistan President Ghulam Ishaq Khan brings before me the hectic days when Giani Zail Singh, then India's president, was under pressure to dismiss the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The two had gone apart for some time. So much so, Rajiv had not only cut off his official trips abroad but had also reduced the number of government papers reaching the president's table. Rajiv had not even nominated the Giani for a second term, a normal practice, unlike Nawaz Sharif who chose Ishaq as the presidential candidate.

There were many other things that had slighted the Giani. Still when he was submitted a list of Rajiv's acts of omission and commission, including the Rs. 64 crore kickbacks from the Bofors gun deal, the Giani did not act. Many known people had asked him to dismiss Rajiv on the charges of corruption and maladministration, the two main counts against Nawaz Sharif.

Top legal luminaries argued that the Giani was within his legal rights to oust Rajiv. The Giani too was convinced that he had the necessary constitutional authority under Article 75, which says that "the ministers shall hold office during the pleasure of the President". Buta Singh, then Home Minister, was all the time at Rashtrapati Bhavan, requesting the Giani to "forgive and forget", a move which Nawaz Sharif too initiated towards the end through some of his close supporters, particularly the outgoing Punjab chief minister. The Giani still recalls those

days. It is not that he developed cold feet, as some allege. In fact, he did not have more than a couple of months in office to go. What stopped him was the realisation that an elected prime minister should be thrown out in parliament, through numbers, if democratic procedures had to have pre-eminence. He made his own calculations and found that the Congress (I) dissidents and others did not number more than 20 per cent in the 546-member Lok Sabha, the directly elected house.

Ishaq Khan has missed that point. He was hurt, humiliated but this has nothing to do with the office he occupies. Like the Giani, he has been elected indirectly. Members of the National Assembly, the senate (equivalent to the Lok Sabha) and the Rajya Sabha in our case) and National Assemblies constitute the electoral college. Such office cannot support a directly-elected position of prime ministership.

True, Nawaz Sharif failed on many fronts. Reports of his maladministration and the interference by his family in the working of the government had persisted for long. The allegation of corruption were galore like the kickbacks from the Rs. 2,400 crore motorway project and the misuse of deposits at cooperative commercial banks. But there are procedures to deal with them. The maladministration is a charge that should have gone before the National Assembly and corruption before a law court or a commission of inquiry.

The President is not an institution robbed with such au-

thority. He could have at best asked Nawaz Sharif to step down and the ruling combination to elect another leader till the prime minister was cleared. In a democratic set-up, procedures, principles and institutions are far more important than the personalities. Ishaq Khan has effected dismissals twice: once when he dismissed Benazir Bhutto and now Nawaz Sharif. In both cases his personal dislike has come out more prominently than anything else. No elected prime minister can afford to give the impression of being the president's instrument.

8th amendment to the Pakistan constitution authorises the president to do so, dissolve the National and state assemblies and hold fresh elections. He is also the appointing authority of the military chief of staff. But this amendment was Zia's handiwork. When he became president, Zia wanted to safeguard his position — and power.

It was but fair that the 8th amendment should have gone when the sapling of democracy was replanted after Zia's death. A martial law measure should have ended with the withdrawal of martial law rule.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

The prime minister heads the administration and he has to run it according to his lights. He is answerable to the people. If he fails they will not return him.

This is his punishment and this is what a democratic institution demands. But it is not fair to tinker with the verdict, nor end the period for which they have given their mandate. New Delhi is guilty of doing it 76 times in India — recently in Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and UP. Thank god, there is no provision for president's rule at the centre; otherwise India would have also experienced dictatorships.

On paper, Ishaq Khan is correct in dismissing the prime minister because the

Ishaq Khan, a seasoned leader, should have realised that the two parallel points of power cannot stay if democracy has to flourish.

Perhaps, Nawaz Sharif should have made a joint cause with Benazir Bhutto when he came to power. But he was so busy running her down and instituting cases against her, her husband and supporters that he did not have time to think that he would also one day go the Benazir way. Unfortunately, Benazir has not acted wisely.

It is said that Ishaq Khan went ahead with the dismissal only after she supported his proposal. She has every right to be angry with Nawaz Sharif but it is the institution she has hit at, not Nawaz Sharif. Tomorrow if and when she

come to power, she will have to reckon with Ishaq Khan or his successor.

Reports have it that the army felt relieved after Benazir Bhutto's support. Military trucks began rolling on the streets only after Benazir's meeting with Ishaq Khan. It is apparent that the military, even though on the side of the president, was keen to get some popular leader on its side. Over the years the institutions have got a lot of bashing. The people have come to associate them with extra-constitutional authority and even though the army is back in the barracks, its presence is felt in every move in Pakistan. No wonder its hand has been seen behind the ousting of Nawaz Sharif.

Cassandras may predict that Pakistan has again gone under military. This is not true. Only the National Assembly has been dissolved and fresh elections have already been fixed for July 14. The bureaucracy stays. Those who see in the process the beginning of martial law have not noticed a change in the people of Pakistan. They have tasted democracy. However imperfect, they have seen its advantages: freedom to live and speak. They will not go back to any authoritarian rule.

The fixing of the polling date within 24 hours of Nawaz Sharif's dismissal indicates that both Ishaq Khan and the military are conscious of it.

The president may think that he has won. But it is a short-lived victory. An elected prime minister cannot have

domocle's sword of the 8th amendment hanging over his head. Whoever wins at the next polls will pick up the thread where first Benazir Bhutto and then Nawaz Sharif have left it off. I wonder if the military, the third chamber in Pakistan, will continue to rescue the chestnuts from the fire. From all accounts, it is clear that the military does not want to come back. The chief of staff, Gen. Abdul Waheed, has said: "The people will decide whether the dismissal is 'constitutional or otherwise'."

I am more worried over the developments on the death of General Asif Janjua, the late chief of staff. His widow has filed an FIR with the police that her husband was poisoned. Accusing fingers are pointed at Nawaz Sharif. Ishaq Khan has also said that "the highest functionaries of the federal government have been subverting the authority of the armed forces."

If this were to stay only at the level of 'crime investigation', it would not be so messy. But when a former prime minister is involved and when the president has dismissed him from office, it can send wrong messages. The law and order machinery in the sub-continent has touched such low level that the police looks only towards the ruler. Benazir has gone through the experience. In Nawaz Sharif's case, it may be worse because the charge has been made by the widow of a popular chief of staff and the president has backed it.

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.

Behaviour of a teacher

Sir, Your editorial under the caption 'Teachers Need to Set Better Examples' is timely as well as an eye-opener. The atrocious behaviour of an over-ambitious university teacher of Jahangirnagar University towards the Vice Chancellor has shocked us beyond measure. Gone are the days when high thinking and simple living was the motto of the teaching community. It is true that with the change of time our attitude towards material life has changed too. But that does not mean that we should tramp upon the traditional value systems and the ethical norms of civilised life. We know how the process of dehumanising the talented students has started over the past few years. The consequence of this process is

widespread violence, brutal killing and the erosion of values. The holy precincts of the educational institutions have now turned into battle fields of the violent elements. And there are politically motivated teachers, too, though they are few in number, who reportedly goad the violent party activists to achieve their selfish goal. These so-called teachers are also responsible for destroying the image of the educational institutions.

The question that constantly agitates my mind is: Where from do they get support? How can one carry on his near-ovious activities with impunity without support from the powerful quarters?

It is now an open secret that the teachers towing the lines of powerful quarters in an obsequious manner are given 'rewards' in the form of high appointments.

Time has come to resist these elements collectively. The Government if it cares about the future of education in our country should also take positive measures in this critical situation. I would suggest the following measures:

a) The University Order of 1973 should be thoroughly revised;

b) The appointment of all categories of university teachers should be the responsibility of the University Grants Commission;

c) Quick procedures of dismissing the unruly teachers should be adopted.

We do not like to see a violent and unruly teacher like the one at JU any more on campus.

Ziaul Huda Chowchurypara, Malibag, Dhaka

Slums and human rights

Sir, We in the human rights community are deeply disturbed over the bulldozing of the houses of 1200 families of poor people in a slum of Mirpur on 28 April. Although several warnings were issued

in advance, it is still a highly disturbing experience for hundreds of people to be thrown out into the open with all their belongings at a time when rains are falling almost every day.

Most disturbing of all, however, is to read about the assurances of the former Prime Minister that the people would not be evicted. When a big eviction took place in August 1991 the newspapers published the news that the Land Ministry had accepted the recommendation that no one should be evicted without being provided with alternative accommodation and this recommendation was approved by the President.

Those who looted the belongings and the mastans who helped the police and set fire to the houses should be brought to book, as well as the influential exploiters who openly collected rents for many years on property owned by the government, not by themselves. Just two days before the eviction, the mastans had collected a levy of Tk 30

and assured the victims that no eviction would take place.

Slum evictions have become a regular feature of Dhaka life, but the authorities never seem to learn the lesson — that they are dealing with precious human lives in a way which mocks their dignity as equal human beings, as well as their basic right to a basic need for shelter.

Rosaline Costa
Commission for Justice and Peace
Dhaka

Self-billing system

Sir, Under domestic accounts, self-billing systems are in practice for Gas, WASA and Electricity bills. For non-meter gas account holders, self-billing is the easiest and quick process for payment. The authority is only to check if the party is paying the bills regularly.

Self-billing system for WASA bills was in practice for limited number of regularly paying customers, to pay bills every alternate months within 15th of next month. But this has

been stopped because of supplying computerised bill to every customer after taking meter reading by the WASA authority, for payment, with one month grace period. This system will delay receipt of money by nearly 1 1/2 month (compared to self-billing system).

Self-billing system under PDB for electric bills was also in practice for limited good customers. After introduction of DESA, the authority started to supply six months' bill book, instead of one year book. But for the last 4/5 months they have started to supply only one month's bill leaf, creating immense problem to the customers. I wonder, how DESA is failing to supply simple self-billing books while they are trying hard to realise arrears and reduce system loss! Customers are being harassed in approaching the DESA authorities to collect bill book every month by spending money, time and energy. I hope this is stopped now.

M S Haq
Mohammadpur, Dhaka.