

ELECTION IN CAMBODIA

Beginning of an Era of Peace or the Prelude to Civil War?

The stage is set for a new phase in restoring Cambodia to normal condition. The Phnom Penh regime would not have peacefully surrendered power if the power sharing was not worked out. No one can forecast with any certainty if the arrangement will work.

An Academic Aberration

Educational institutions have long lost their sacrosanct image, so have the teachers. But at least during the examinations held under the education boards at the national level, the examination centres try to pull together some of its missing aura of respect — notwithstanding the fact that the pretension to do so is sometimes amply betrayed. This false sense of sanctity associated with our education system is now being nakedly exposed. Thursday's abominable incident at Chittagong's Fatikchhari College centre — where an invigilator's eyes were gouged out and two others' bones of various organs, including breast and rib case, were broken by merciless beating in a room by unruly mobs — only throw the residual respect in shreds.

It all started with a magistrate's attempt to stop a student from copying in the examination. The so-called student punched the magistrate and later on he and others of his type aided by several hundred outsiders ran amok, turning the examination centre into a battle field. For long three hours did the student-mob frenzy make a mockery of the law and order. During this barbarous attack on invigilators, teacher, magistrate and law enforcing agency, they particularly singled out the man of justice and two other invigilators from other colleges of the area.

If a student can, instead of feeling remorse when prevented from committing a wrong, take on a legal authority in a manner he did, situation is already bad. But when fellow students take his side, it is worse, and when outsiders, none of whose business this is, join in the fray, all hopes of salvaging the situation disappear. Evidently, this was a preplanned attack on the magistrate and teachers whose integrity dictated them to stop copying in the examination hall. We do not know about the college authority's role in this matter but going by one of the reports on the incident we understand that the police, college authority and the academic council of the college were only conspicuous by their absence when the victims were confined in a room and tortured. The principal of a neighbouring prestigious college was very critical of this laxity.

The troubling question is: how could the law enforcing agency let it happen? If still it can happen — and it has really happened and is happening — one wonders if society is sliding into Mafia rule following Italy's example of dominance by the dreaded underground groups. Sure enough, the wielders of arbitrary powers do not always unleash a reign of terror by default of the legal presence but with patronage from powerful quarters in the face of which the law enforcers are either helpless or are made to extend their active or tacit supports. What is most baffling in this particular case is the outsiders' involvement with a vengeful mood. What price was paid for ensuring this mob attack or were it voluntary participation? In the answer to this question lie all the symptoms of a degenerating society.

The incident at Fatikchhari College can no more be seen as an isolated one. According to Deputy Commissioner A H M Abul Kashem, this year's practice of unfair means has far surpassed last year's level in the Chittagong Division. So have increased the incidence of attacks on magistrates, invigilators, vehicles and of ransacking of examination halls, reports confirm.

It seems the malaise did not become so complicated unnoticed but nobody cared to have it nipped in the bud. Today the vice has already assumed an unmanageable monstrous proportion. Tomorrow, the disease will gain further popularity, like the spree of acid throwing, in the until-now uncontaminated other boards. But this apparently incurable malaise can be rooted out. A not-too-sophisticated playboy minister in the Ershad regime made a try and was considerably successful in his attempt. What is needed is a strong political will — one that is solely concerned with the improvement of the standard of education. Anyone found bringing the academic activities to disrepute must be meted out the harshest measure of laws. In the Fatikchhari case the criminals have to be brought to book through a judicial enquiry and be given exemplary punishment so that none dare act in the same devious manner in future.

A Stitch in Time

A sub-committee of the US House of Representatives has recently passed a resolution strongly opposing the candidature of Beijing as the 2000 A.D. venue of the Olympic Games. The action, prompted by human rights considerations, would go before the full House and eventually to the Senate. Whether or not this is passed finally and becomes the official stand of the United States on the 2000 Olympics, the resolution already constitutes an intervention in the working of the International Olympic Committee. We are happy that the IOC chief did not lose a moment in calling this as much and expressing his reservations about the same in very clear terms.

Attempt at politicising sport is nothing new. Most of the nations of the world had used sporting boycott, beside other sanctions, against South Africa to pressure it to give up its inhuman policy of apartheid. The boycott of the Moscow Olympics and a retaliatory one of the Los Angeles Olympics by a number of nations were, however, not born of any highminded idealistic staff that prompted the action against apartheid, but on the contrary were heights of intolerance and absurdity. Is the action in Washington by any chance a lengthening shadow of those unfortunate episodes?

IOC chief Antonio Samaranch counterpoised the human rights argument with a better one when he pointed out to what can justifiably be called the IOC's South Korean achievement. An Olympic games held in Seoul, which had no better human rights records than the China of the Tianan massacre, can indeed be credited with helping a breeze of liberation to blow over the whole of that country.

Samaranch has said IOC members are not impervious to human rights implications and they can very much vote, on their own, against the choice of Beijing over the other contenders that include Berlin and Sydney, Manchester, Brasilia and Istanbul. But they do not at all need to be told to do so. In fact, it has patently been a faux pas on the part of the US House sub-committee to go for such an unprecedented resolution. And Samaranch's has been a truly redeeming action taken very timely to stem the bad thing before it travels any further towards involving the US government in it. We congratulate the IOC chief.

THE plot in Cambodia thickens. The aging hero, Prince Sihanouk, has assembled all the major actors or rather, all but one of the actors, on the stage. The United Nations is supposed to be the director of the show but no body knows for certain who is directing the play.

It is often said that the UN operation in Cambodia is the most ambitious that it has undertaken so far. With a price tag of two billion dollars it is certainly the most expensive. But its mandate was rather modest. It was charged with the task of bringing back from Thailand nearly three hundred thousand refugees and organizing national elections in order to install a legitimate government in Phnom Penh. Since it was placed in saddle by Vietnam, most countries believed that the government headed by Prime Minister Hun Sen lacked legitimacy. Of course, in order to hold the election the UN had to secure a large measure of administrative and financial power, partially disarm the rival armed forces and repair the physical infra structure. This was the essence of the Paris accord which all the contending Cambodian factions as well as the five permanent members of the Security Council had signed. The ASEAN countries, which spear-headed the long campaign against what they believed to be Vietnamese expansionist designs in the region were also party to this accord. Accordingly the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was established with Y Akashi, a seasoned Japanese diplomat with long UN experience, as its head.

The repatriation and resettlement of the refugees from Thailand proceeded smoothly. Having been in charge of their care and welfare for five years and it was, for me personally, a matter of much satisfaction that these unfortunate victims of turmoil, brutality and civil

war had at last returned to their own soil in peace. But the UN operation came across its biggest hurdle when the Khmer Rouge, the fanatical Marxist faction with a large and battle hardened force, refused to disarm. Soon it was clear that the Khmer Rouge, fearing electoral defeat, was determined to sabotage the election preparations. The UN as well as the United States and other great powers who were shaping UN policy reacted rather mildly. The reason was simple. The Khmer Rouge faction had the backing of China which did not want the Vietnamese influence in Indo-China to increase at its expense. The other four permanent members of the Security Council wanted the cooperation of China in order to make their decisions unanimous and hence they treated the Khmer Rouge faction with kid gloves. Thailand also had a soft corner for the Khmer Rouge which was operating from Thai sanctuaries for the last ten years. UNTAC thus faced a serious set back when the partial demobilization of Khmer Rouge forces, a major condition of the Paris accord, could not be implemented. However the UN proceeded with the preparation for the election without the participation of the Khmer Rouge. This faction had established its physical control over a sizable part of the country — mainly in the western provinces but some in the central province — by force and it was clear that no matter what the UN did it was not going to give up territories it held. Its hostility to the UN forces was shown by several clashes and ambushes when some UN personnel lost their lives. Yet the UN military force, some 22,000 strong, could not fight back. They were lightly armed

but more important, they were not supposed to enforce the Paris accord but merely implement it, with the voluntary support and cooperation of the four factions. In other words, the UN forces were not supposed to fight the Khmer Rouge or the other factions. The Japanese and the Australian governments were not prepared to get their troops involved in military operations. It was therefore a most difficult and delicate task for UNTAC to continue the preparations for holding the elections without derailing or disruption. The Khmer Rouge actively sought to discourage voters from participation in the polls by threatening retaliation. When it appeared that the UN would go ahead with the polling despite these subversive efforts, the Khmer Rouge, in a clever move to weaken the regime in Phnom Penh, threw its support behind the royalist party, popularly known by its French acronym Funcinpec. Sihanouk's son Prince Ranaridh is the effective leader of this party.

In the election held under the auspices of the UN the Funcinpec — the royalist party — has secured 58 seats and the Cambodian People's Party led by the government in Phnom Penh headed by Chea Sim and Hun Sen got only 61 seats. The Buddhist Liberal Party led by Son Sann secured 10 seats. Despite protests by the Cambodian Peoples' Party about alleged irregularities in the polling, the UN stood its ground and the attempt to over turn the election results

failed. Prince Sihanouk realized that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to peacefully dislodge the regime headed by Hun Sen and sought a coalition between Funcinpec and the Cambodian Peoples' party. In fact, he announced the formation of a government of national coalition with Hun Sen even before the counting of the ballots was completed. When the UN protested that this would preempt the election results, the Prince backed down. However, he was determined to ensure a peaceful transfer of power from the regime in Phnom Penh and a coalition seemed to be the best way. Therefore, once again, af-

ter the UN duly announced the results, and the relative strength of the parties were known, a compromise with Chea Sim and Hun Sen worked out under which Sihanouk has assumed the position of the Head of state and his son, Prince Ranaridh, the leader of the majority party and Hun Sen, the leader of the second largest party, are designated as the co-chairmen in running the executive government. It is not an elegant arrangement but compromises are not often very elegant. The two men will jointly run the ministries of defence and interior. Meanwhile the UN will have to begin a massive operation of pulling out of Cambodia. It has been a thankless task for the UN but it has given the organization much needed experience in assuming the responsibility of running a country's administration under extremely trying conditions.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

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Approaches to Drug Abuse Prevention

by Dhiraj Kumar Nath

major breakthrough by deciding that a 'balanced approach' was needed to deal with the plague affecting society and that the prevention of drug abuse and treatment and rehabilitation of drug abusers should be accorded the same importance in policy and action as the reduction of supply and illicit traffic. The 26th June of each year is thus observed as an International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking. The Comprehensive Multi-disciplinary Outline of Future Activities in Drug Abuse Control (CMO) as adopted unanimously in the Conference contains 35 action targets in its four chapters as follows: i) Prevention and Reduction of demand, ii) Control of Supply, iii) Suppression of illicit trafficking, and iv) Treatment and Rehabilitation. TARGETS FOR DEMAND REDUCTION: Let us concentrate on the prevention and reduction of demand, considering it as an appropriate approach for a country like ours. To attain the objectives, targets have been identified as follows: i) Assessment of the extent of drug misuse and abuse. ii) Organisation of comprehensive systems for the collection and evaluation of data. iii) Prevention through education. iv) Prevention of drug abuse in the workplace. v) Prevention programmes by civic, community and special interest groups and law enforcement agencies. vi) Leisure time activities in the service of the continuing campaign against drug abuse. vii) Role of media. STAGE AN STRATEGY OF DEMAND REDUCTION: There are basically three stages to achieve the goals of drug abuse prevention considering the demand reduction as an appropriate strategy for a developing country like ours. These are as follows: [A] Primary (Incidence Reduction): At this stage, it is necessary to ensure that non-users of drugs specially children and adolescents do not initiate the abuse of drugs. This can be achieved by — i) Generating Awareness through Press Conference, Public forum, advertisements, ii) Public education, eg coverage on TV, Radio, newspaper features, school curricula, etc. iii) Attitude and behavioural change enforcement, such as, Peer counselling, parent-teachers training etc. iv) Social and public action, eg school programme, creation of drug

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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.

Oh Calcutta!

Sir, Dhaka wails, while Calcutta sings! The cosmetic facade of Dhaka city becomes meaningless when the contrasts form a bizzare mosaic of socio-economic inequality.

In Calcutta at least one is comforted by the fact that the entire city is plain, simple but efficient. Old buildings, indigenous cars and a low profile people contribute to create an atmosphere of class congeniality!

Truly, Jyoti Basu has done a good job! Despite ethnic and religious differences the mass of Calcutta appear much more calm, controlled, united and humane than the Dhakaites!

If the poor man carries a chip on his shoulder, at least he doesn't throw it down at the least provocation.

The most remarkable achievement has been the near elimination of the beast of burden called the 'Rickshaw-wallah'.

Doctors are sincere and teachers dedicated. No wonder many guardians who can scrape together the money are opting to send their wards to India for education. The number of patients visiting Calcutta has increased tremendously! These are disturbing signs. Signs of no-confidence on our own Politicians should well understand the ominous signals.

The so-called 'Intellectuals' of Bangladesh should be buried in the past and a new set of young educated patriots must come forward before it is too

late to take action and accounts. Politics of dis-unity must end. Let 'Bangladesh Zindabad' and 'Joy Bangla' be united under a single slogan .....! Joy Bangladeshi

AB Sattar Mohammadpur, Dhaka

"Tariff burden on books"

Sir, I fully endorse Mr Shahabuddin Mahtab's views under the heading 'Tariff burden on books' published in your paper on the 16 June 1993. I only wish the gentleman was more vociferous.

He gives three possible reasons for the government to have imposed these tariffs: a) to boost the publishing industry of Bangladesh; b) to increase badly needed taxes; c) keeping away harmful books of foreign origin.

It seems that only the third is a valid enough reason. Even this is a non-runner since far stronger harmful imagery is available invidious that are supposed to be banned but are equally easily available at any video shop almost anywhere.

So banning books is not going to solve anything. It's our minds we ought to worry about.

Any government that talks about an 'uplift in', 'education must for progress' etc. and then goes and imposes taxes on books is just mouthing platitudes and cannot possibly be serious about this aspect of its policies.

I sometimes wonder whether donor countries/organisations take note of the attitudes of our government on issues such as these. I hope one of these groups is reading this letter.

It is high time for a Government Book Policy. It would be better still if the Finance Minister puts forward his reasons for the imposition of tariff on books. I certainly did not give him my mandate to restrict the scope of my education.

NR Choudhury Sylhet

OPINION

New Medical Colleges

Your editorial 'Go Slow on New Medical Colleges' (The Daily Star, June 17) is indeed timely, factual, realistic and deserves serious consideration (or re-consideration?) of our policy-makers and government. Having spent more than half a century on teaching, research and management of education and research, closely observing the conditions of our educational institutions and studied the various areas of education in home and abroad, examining critically many systems of education of the East and the West, specially as the chairman of the Bangladesh National Education Commission, I lend my full support to your statement: 'Lack of funds and lack of technical support have reduced our current medical colleges into mere lecture centres.... Visit any medical college and the inadequacy of the facilities becomes obvious.... This has resulted in the drastic fall of competence of the doctors we produce....'

While no body will object to wide spread of education, far less for professional education and would welcome well thought-out plan of the government, a move that hinders the progress and deter the quality should certainly call for reexamination and critical study. Let us remember, our medical colleges are short of adequate resources for proper running. Government has undertaken a gigantic task of offer-

ing primary education to all, effective implementation of which is no easy means. It calls for a capable and competent management, constant watch and supervision, regular scrutiny and evaluation and consequential changes based on such studies and sincere efforts of all concerned — teachers, guardians, officials, local MPs and finally overall controlling authority. A successful implementation would do immense good to our nation and bring a big ovation for our democratic government.

Higher education, be it general or professional, is in deplorable condition. A closer look at the practical classes of all science classes starting from SSC to M Sc of all boards and universities reveals a colossal mess. All practical classes are more or less outdated, devoid of required equipment and facilities. Practical examinations are held just to satisfy the minimal requirements of certificates and degree awarding processes — not for imparting supporting knowledge of the theoreticals. Examinations are held on minimum number of experiments based on available equipment, chemicals etc. A condition is only helpful for deterioration of educational standards in fields of science and technology.

Our government had started an equipment board for secondary education and a project

for degree (pass) with assistance of aid giving agencies but the effect is of little or no significance. The situation is no better in our higher educational institutions including universities.

Now it indeed necessary to invigorate the existing science education-general as well as professional in terms of qualified teachers, equipment and lab. facilities and modernise the practical syllabuses and implement those in letter and spirit with adequate support for the theoreticals to enables the students to learn science through experimentations and apply them for economic development.

Therefore let our government rethink and reconsider the setting up of new medical colleges which is by itself praiseworthy but not desirable in the context of the existing condition of science education in general and medical education in particular. I would thus join you in urging the government to opt for a decision which is not based on political or partisan considerations but serves the national interest best.

The writer is a Professor Emeritus, Dhaka University; formerly, Founder Vice-Chancellor, Jahangirnagar University; Chairman, Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research; Chairman, Bangladesh National Education Commission.

Mofiz-ud-Din Ahmed