

Whither Russia?

Russian leader Boris Yeltsin has acted in the way that only Russian leaders know how — with a violent force, quite disproportionate for the purpose. In a military operation, with regular tank fire providing the teeth of the action, the parliament building was attacked, set on fire, killing hundreds of people. Some reports quoting the figure to be as high as five hundred.

What are we to make of this obviously brutal and apparently unnecessary action, that Yeltsin repeatedly promised never to take? Till the very end, it was thought that Yeltsin's conflict with the law makers — let us not forget who the so-called rebels are — could be resolved through negotiations. It was within the last few days that the situation deteriorated dramatically. The responsibility for instigating, while it rests squarely on Yeltsin's shoulders for the final act, falls equally on those of Russian Khasbulatov and Alexander Rutskoi, who called upon their followers to occupy some government buildings, including the Mayor's office.

But, as we said, what is to be made of all this? With Yeltsin emerging victorious out of the rubble of the 'White House', we are assured of stability in an otherwise fast changing situation. We are also assured of continuity in the Russian leadership. The reforms which Yeltsin, and before him Gorbachev, had set in motion, will be continued. But the question is, at what cost? The reforms that we have been welcoming in the former Soviet Union, and especially in Russia, cover not only the economic but also the increasing democratisation of the Russian society. However, the emergence of the all-powerful President, and one who not only dissolves the parliament when it does not suit his own will, but attacks it with tanks and the military, is certainly not the archetypal President, who is expected to lead Russia to democracy. If Yeltsin, as the elected President, represents the people, so do the elected parliamentarians, many of whom have been gunned down on Monday.

Frankly, the promptness with which the West, especially the United States, give support to Yeltsin, took most observers by surprise. The attitude appeared to be Yeltsin at any cost, even if the cost be the very values that the western countries hold to be so dear in their own countries. Ever since Yeltsin came on the Russian political scene, the West, especially the United States, has extended almost unqualified support to him, giving the impression that he was the only man who could steer Russia to its economic recovery. By being a bit too quick in backing Yeltsin in his struggle against the Russian Parliament, and refraining from criticising him for this bloody affair, the West is giving a very unhealthy signal of preferring the creation of a 'dictator President'.

As a people who believe firmly in the superiority of the Parliament over any single leader, we in Bangladesh cannot but feel extremely uneasy at the developments in Russia and the role western countries appear to be playing. We are reminded of the Cold War days when western democracies did not hesitate to back even the most outrageous of Third World dictators, as long as they pledged to be anti-communists. This often led to the establishment and strengthening of military rule and civilian dictatorship in many countries.

Could the West be unwittingly creating a "monster" and handing Russia over to a dictator, just because they feel certain that Yeltsin will deliver the Russian market to the western investors? That will happen even without Yeltsin. Principles should not be so easily side tracked for the sake of short term gains.

A struggling democratic Russia has a much better chance of being a long term positive force for the world than one under a dictatorial President.

Oh, These Avoidable Deaths

How is this possible? And to whom shall we address this question? In the Kamalapur tragedy of Monday night three of a family and the driver of their car was first bludgeoned by a ramming rail wagon and then charred into ashes and coal by an unintentional fire set off by clumsy rescue workers. A driverless container-wagon moving, naturally without light, on the rails in the process of shunting caused the havoc?

It was not a case of sheer bad luck. There is a short-cut, a very wide one although, between the Kamalapur and Mugda sides of the Dhaka Rail Station that separates two such thickly populated zones. This unofficial road runs across railway tracks used exclusively for shunting. The short-cut is taken advantage of by all kinds of traffic including motor cars and trucks and even more by rickshaws. As this is very much a rail yard, and a busy one too, the road shouldn't have been there and the whole yard area should have been out of access for vehicles. How would then the big and necessary service rendered by the road be taken care of? Not by an overbridge — a kind of which is already there but hardly used even by pedestrian traffic. If the railway station has at all to stay there in the midst of a very populous urban zone, there can be no answer other than building a flyover. Perhaps at the point of where the short-cut is, the point where the tragedy took place.

It was a case of double accident. It is suspected, and not without foundation, that even after the car was smashed not all who were in it were dead. It is believed that when an oxygen-acetylene jet was trained on the smashed-up heap in order to free it from the rails, it ignited the fuel leaking from the tanker of the car into hellfire and all inside were burnt into charcoal. This second and truly infernal tragedy can be squarely blamed on the inexperience and lack of proper training on the part of the Fire Brigade shock troopers. A genuine mistake, but how costly! Training and experience minimises the chance of such mistakes popping up from nowhere. For our Fire Service there can be no substitute for these and the sooner they acquire both the better.

Every tragedy, even the worst possible ones, have some human element in it — edifying, elevating. When the float of a wagon with its load of at least 15 containers hit the car and the latter was inescapably clawed to the rails by the impact, the father, in a flash of humanity and wisdom, threw his two-year old child out of the window. Panicked, he couldn't have done so. On that precipitous edge every second falling off into certain death, he thought of the child and not of himself. Here was a measure of man — glowing and everlasting.

SOME 30 women in black assemble every Thursday near Mahatma Gandhi's statue in the heart of Bangalore. They have been doing it since December 6 when the Babri Masjid structure was demolished. They disperse after observing silence for 15 minutes. But the placards they carry are eloquent enough: "Down with violence"; "Down with communalism."

Karnataka is a placid state where life flows untroubled. It has experienced riots but a few in number, more ethnic in character than communal. Muslims are six to seven per cent. They have intermingled with Hindus linguistically and culturally so well that one has often asked the name of a person to know his religion. At least this was the case till the other day.

The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) fought the assembly elections in mid-1989 but polled less than 10 per cent votes. The rath yatra by L. K Advani, the BJP chief, in September 1990 apparently made the difference. Since then, the Hindu mind has been making a sowing and the Muslim mind refurbishing its identity.

The BJP has gone on to secure 26 per cent of votes in the Lok Sabha elections in June 1991, in two years' time. And I have it from official sources that the pilgrims to the make-shift temple at Ayodhya, where the Babri Masjid structure stood once, are mostly from Karnataka.

There are many reasons why the saffron is attracting more and more attention. The main one is the discreditability of the Congress party, which has

Karnataka, unlike other southern states, has no regional party to represent. Andhra Pradesh has Telugu Desam, Tamil Nadu the AIADMK or the DMK and even Kerala has the Christian-dominated Kerala Congress and the Muslim League. Therefore, the loss of the Congress and the Janata Dal is BJP's gain.

ruled the state for nearly four decades. The Janata and the Janata Dal, which remained six years in office, did only marginally better. No chief minister has escaped the stigma of corruption in the last 30 years. And none among them has been tall enough to rise above the mediocrity and dissonance in which the state has got stuck.

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The BJP is considered the best alternative available. "We have tried all political parties, why not the BJP?" This is a typical comment which one hears. The BJP itself is making the same point. Apart from peddling the thesis of Hindutva-

In fact, the RSS, the BJP's guide and philosopher, is doing the job of a peddler. It has stealthily captured many schools and other local power centres. Even innocuous social and voluntary organisations have been penetrated. After AK Subbiah, prime light of the Karnataka RSS, bolted the organisation some years ago, it has not allowed any leader to emerge. The initiative has stayed with the inner circle,

which has seen to it that members remain faceless and the Hindutva ideas get ingrained.

Another factor that has helped the BJP is the alienation of Lingayats and Vokkaligas, the upper castes, which have ruled Karnataka historically. Dev Raj Urs, himself belonging to an upper caste, was the first Congress chief minister who played the backward card in the seventies.

Urs not only reserved seats for the backward in medical and

The backward have a smattering of Muslims, who also enjoy reservations. This too provides a grist to the propaganda mill against them. Bangalore and Hubli have, of course, a prosperous Muslim community. They are entrepreneurs, technocrats and the executives. An insidious propaganda against them is bad enough but worse is against artisans in Bidar, Gulbarga and other northern parts of Karnataka, which was once the territory of Nizam of

Muslim and Hindu habitations have become more pronounced than before. Muslims prefer to live in a locality where their community predominates. Hindus are avoiding such areas; some old residents have even moved away from there.

Since social contacts are confined to the elite, an average Hindu or Muslim tends to live in a world of his own. He, indeed, bears the brunt of misinformation and religious propaganda. The RSS clan is trying to inculcate a false picture of Islam in the minds of Hindus. The mullahs and maulvis, on the other hand, talk more about the Islamic world and its virtues than India. Their chauvinism is no less than that of Vishwa Hindu Parishad or the Bajrang Dal.

Some groups, limited in reach and resources, are trying to demolish the rising walls of prejudice. But they cannot accomplish the job singlehanded. Secular parties are either interlocked in their personal feuds or fighting against one another. The Congress party has had three chief ministers in its three-year rule. Moly is the third chief minister but he has been challenged by the party's dissidents from day one.

The Janata Dal, once hopelessly divided, has sunk its differences. Deva Gowda is now the leader and Ramakrishna Hegde, his rival, has accepted him. But it is too soon to say how the unity would go down

with the electorate. Muslims would like to vote for the Janata Dal but there is gnawing of old fears, of being let down.

The Congress, which won 177 seats in a 224-member House in the last assembly election, is without even a semblance of unity. No amount of patch work can retrieve the party (prime minister Narasimha Rao is best at such endeavours). The issue is not whether Moly should be retained or replaced but whether the Congress as such can retain the confidence of the people.

It looks a doubtless task when some Congress leaders at the district level have already joined the BJP and when some important ones at the state level are in constant touch with it so as to cross over at an opportune time. Like the rest of India, the Congressmen in Karnataka face the challenge of commitment. They too have been taken in by the propaganda that there is "an appeasement of Muslims."

Figures of Muslims' employment in the government indicate that they are less than three per cent. Most of them live in the ghettos. Bangalore's Shivaji Park, where many Muslims reside, is a big slum, although the city abounds in posh localities and tall buildings.

The women attired in black have a point in their protest: secularism, pinnacled in the state, has come down by several notches. But then that has happened in many parts of the country. As witnessed in Karnataka, it is not that the BJP is gaining ground; it is that the other political parties are vacating the territory.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

technical institutions, going up to 90 per cent, but also had a special quota in jobs. 67 per cent, for them. He stayed at the helm of affairs for nearly a decade. After a sort eclipse, the backwards are back in power. Chief Minister Veerappa Moly is from a backward community and so was his predecessor S. Bangarappa.

Lingayats and Vokkaligas want to be rulers again. They feel safe with the BJP which they perceive as their own ilk. Moly's implementation of the Supreme Court's directive to abolish the capitation fee has only hurt the upper castes, who would buy admission to medical and engineering colleges.

Hyderabad. They fear that their prosperity may one day invite the wrath of Hindu communalists, as happened some years ago in Bhiwandi in Maharashtra and Moradabad in UP.

Fundamentalists among the Muslims only exacerbate the situation. Not long ago they went on a rampage in Bangalore when a local English daily published a short story that allegedly injured their religious sentiments. An unqualified apology by the daily and the government's firm handling reestablished peace. The rioting in the wake of the 6th December demolition has, however, reignited the smouldering remains of estrangement.

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Polls may Prolong Political Uncertainty

Javed A Malik writes from Islamabad

Pakistan's major political groups led by two former Prime Ministers, Benazir Bhutto's Peoples Party and Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League, are facing an uphill ballot battle. Sharif has seen his electoral base eroded by his former ally, the hard-line religious Pakistan Islamic Front. Bhutto has had trouble with her family. And the ordinary voter has lost interest in politics. Neither of the two main groups are likely to gain a majority in the National Assembly.



NAWAZ SHARIF
Astute campaigning



BENAZIR BHUTTO
Family trouble

The country's first industrialist Prime Minister has conducted his election campaign in a professional manner, forcing his opponents onto the defensive. His biggest drawback remains the split in the rightist conservative vote.

his power base: the PIF has nominated candidates in 102 constituencies, and the total number of candidates for the religious parties and alliances is 187.

During the last election, a major reason for the success of Sharif's ally, the Islamic Jamhoree Ittehad (IJI), in winning two-thirds of the seats was the strategy of combining forces to run one-to-one contests in several constituencies against his rival group, the PPP-led Pakistan Democratic Alliance (PDA).

This resulted in almost all conservative votes being bagged by the IJI, giving a humiliating defeat to the country's single largest party, the PPP, with a vote of nearly 40 per cent.

This time around, the PIF and other religious parties have nominated their own candidates in almost all seats, with one-to-one contests limited to only nine seats.

The PPP is also suffering from problems of splits. Benazir Bhutto's brother Murtaza joined the electoral contest under the banner of the Shaheed Bhutto Committee, challenging his sister in the family's power base, Sindh province, and forcing her to divert a lot of attention to countering his campaign.

Murtaza, living in exile in Syria, has a number of cases of terrorism pending against him in the Pakistani courts, and apparently feels that he will be in a better position to ward off the charges if he is a parliamentarian. He resorted to terrorism after his father, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was deposed and hanged. The mother of Benazir, Nusrat Bhutto, supported her son and conducted his election campaign, in his absence, against the candidates of her own PPP, of which she is the chairperson. He eventually decided to back down.

One characteristic of the campaign has been a lack of excitement on the part of ordinary voters. Three general elections in five years and a widespread dissatisfaction with politicians are the main reasons for his apathy, a cynicism which was reinforced by the recent tussle between President Gulam Ishaq Khan and the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

The number of people bothering to vote, which has declined in the last three elections, is expected to sink further.

The PIF has based its campaign on the need for clean politics, ridding society of corrup-

tion, and administrative reforms, slogans which are sprinkled with religious rhetoric.

It has also targeted the United States and called it anti-Islamic. Its leader, Qazi Hussain Ahmed, has been saying he intends to follow the pattern of Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front.

The party's leadership maintains that the 1993 elections will lead to a hung par-

An Observer's View

THE caretaker government has published the names of hundreds of loan defaulters, and many whose names have been listed have been barred from contesting the elections. One of the casualties has been Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi, caretaker Prime Minister during the brief period before the 1990 elections.

The caretaker government has also been more vigorous in the apprehension and extradition of several druglords, primarily in NWFP. To this point, there has been little if any electoral fallout from this issue.

It has been suspected by many quarters including the

manifestos of the two major parties consist largely of rhetoric. Essentially, the PPF is for a mixed economy while the PML espouses free markets.

But the caretaker government of Prime Minister Moeen Qureshi has finalised a structural adjustment programme with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and whoever is elected will have little choice but to follow the economic policies of the twin organisations, at least for the next three years. — Gemini News

JAVED A MALIK is a reporter on 'The Daily News' in Islamabad.

Whilst Memory Serves

by Sadri Ispahani

In the Time International dated 4th October 1993 there is an article on the Middle East under the caption 'I can kill him now'.

In this article it is mentioned that Israeli officials considered the option of assassinating Yasser Arafat on four occasions. Only once it was decided to go forward with the plan but the attempt was unsuccessful.

This reminds me of the time

a few years ago when General Ziaul Huq, President of Pakistan was accused of attempting the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, in Delhi. The attempt was not successful.

General Ziaul Huq when confronted about the charge he said, 'Hamara goli aur wah nahey. Ya naheen ho sakta'. ('My bullet and it did not hit the target. This is not possible.)

When it is possible to pray and work on Fridays without much inconvenience, the objection to Sunday need not be strong, keeping in mind that Sunday is not being proposed on religious grounds, as is the case with the Christians. Ibadat is a 24-hour exercise, a state of the mind, in addition to the rituals. In fact it is going on every minute or every second, on a simultaneous basis, even when one is engaged on mundane activities. The proposal for Sunday does not involve religious compromise worth fighting for.

The argument is similar to the observance of the calendar followed internationally. The world is getting smaller, and the communication gaps are closing fast. Under the circumstances, it is advantageous to operate at international level in a spirit of cooperation to enable the developing countries to share the numerous benefits.

The observance of the weekly holiday need not be argued ONLY from the religious point of view, otherwise the government will have to bring about many

fundamental changes in our life styles. In the other daily spheres, thereby running in risk of taxing the tolerance and patience of the citizens in trying to arrive at a consensus. This is happening right now in the form of campus violence and other forms of activities by a section of the fundamentalists.

A senior citizen, Dhaka

Participation in the capital market

Sir, We see that following the government disinvestment policy many public limited companies are floating shares for public subscription. Some of these companies are giving good dividends and the prices of the shares of some of these companies have appreciated handsomely.

Unfortunately, all the people of this land do not have the opportunity to try their luck to get these shares. Because at present the application for these shares have to be made through the application forms supplied by these companies or else photocopies of the forms may be used. But the companies do not send these forms to the small towns away from the capital. Even if these are sent to very few designated banks of the small towns these are exhausted very quickly and then a master copy for making a photocopy is not available.

Now that a democratic government is installed in the country, we hope that opportunity should be made for all the citizens of the country at least to be able to apply for the shares of various companies. This may be done if the applicants are allowed to apply in handwritten or typed application form as per the proforma of the application form printed in the prospectus of each company which usually goes in the national dailies before the subscription.

I draw the attention of the Finance Ministry and particularly that of the Securities & Exchange Commission, in this regard, so that a provision for applying in handwritten or typed form is kept in the prospectus of the company. This will ensure the participation of more citizens in the capital market of the country.

Zahirul Haque Charalal, Sonargaon Narayanganj

Film pollution

Sir, I am not a regular cine-goer but I happened to have visited a popular movie-house of the city recently to view an English action film. Our's is a conservative society, but I was surprised to know that the movie-houses are now-a-days taking liberty of exhibiting erotic and even nude scenes on their big screens pulsating

enough excitement for the youths to be pushed towards perversion, and sex-abuses. They don't even seem to bother labeling such films as "strictly for adult" to restrict entry of the teenagers. Next to me and around were many teen-aged viewers and I felt shocked to read from their faces that many of them probably took entry apprehending that such scenes could be shown.

A question instantly sparked into my mind if the members of the Censor Board are really loyal to their vested responsibilities or they are willfully ignoring the ill impact of these movies on our society.

As a conscious citizen of the society I plea to the Censor Board and our government to stop such film pollution and strictly administer the censorship so that any erotic film never gets clearance for public screening and our youths are saved from moral erosion.

Debabrata Roy Arambagh, Dhaka

Foreign policy

Sir, One may well ask — what are the aims and objectives of our foreign policy? Some of our policy makers in the foreign desk have got by heart the words 'malice to none and friendship with all' which they very nicely utter in every meeting, conference and reception. But it appears that our foreign policy has lost its dynamism

and vitality. It is complained that we are following a subservient foreign policy. We wonder what subservient policy or what appeasement and to whom and what for?

The water of the Ganges river has stopped flowing for the last 19 years, the repatriation of the stranded Pakistanis is stalled for last 22 years and the return of the Rohingya refugees is moving at a snail's pace. Who suffers?

We need to create a world public opinion to solve our problems. We also require to take active part in the international affairs for a just and expeditious solution of the problems like partition of Bosnia and US-Iraq dispute. We cannot sit dull and remain idle. We must be active and take initiative. Because of our strategic geo-political location we can play a very important role both in the regional and international arena.

Consistent with the changing world scenario in the economic, military, political, industrial, science and technology fields, we also need to make more closer friendship with China, Japan, Germany, Brazil, Australia, OIC and ASEAN countries and the USA and also to increase the volume of our trade with them.

O H Kabir Dhaka