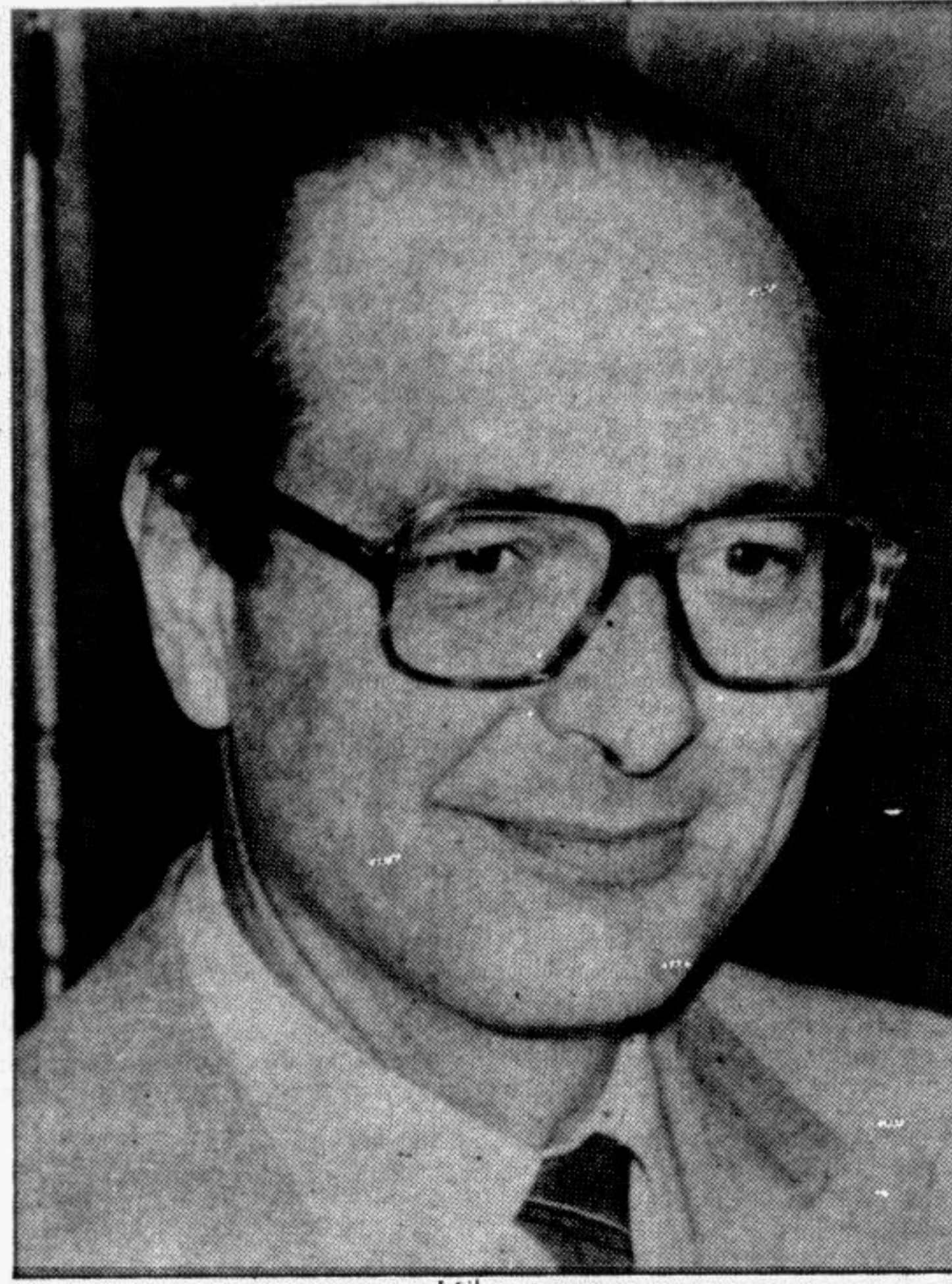


Letter from France

A Tale of Two Presidents

Salahuddin Imam writes from Paris



J Chirac



M Mitterrand

POLITICS in a democracy is often also entertainment. A chance for the masses to speculate on the outcome as their leaders jostle in the open for power and position. The French public is being treated to a particularly absorbing political drama of this kind as two men from the ruling political party, Jacques Chirac and Edouard Balladur (the current Prime Minister) manoeuvre discreetly but determinedly for the chance to become President in the next elections due in 1995.

To appreciate the full ironies of this battle between two men who, until recently, were close political allies, it is necessary to understand the structure of the French state. The French Constitution is unique among modern societies in allowing for not one but two sources of executive authority. In this it differs from the British system which has an executive Prime Minister presiding over a legislative chamber and the US model of a President who has a monopoly of executive authority which is wielded entirely separately from Congress (the sole legislative body).

The French Constitution is a hybrid which allocates specified executive powers both to a President (elected directly) and to a Prime Minister, normally the leader of the largest political formation in the legislative assembly. The system works more or less smoothly when both these executive positions are held by members of the same political party but, should this not be the case, it is easy to imagine that there is scope for endless complications.

The first time this occurred was in 1986 when the Rightwing RPR won the legislative elections. The President at the time, Francois Mitterrand, was a Socialist and he had another two years to go before his term ended in 1988. Given that the two parties represented radically different political philosophies and constituencies, it was predictable that running a dual-authority system would be difficult.

The leader of the RPR was Jacques Chirac, whose real ambition was to run for presidency in the 1988 elections. He faced the tricky choice of whether to take on the potentially stormy post of Prime Minister or to appoint someone else from his party instead and save his own energies for the Presidential campaign. After much of deliberations it was decided that Chirac would, after all, serve as Prime Minister, under a Socialist President.

This opened what the French termed the period of "co-habitation" and, as it turned out, the years 1986-88 were full of political strife and governmental confusion.

A major contributory factor to the discord was the fact that Mitterrand and Chirac, in addition to their political differences, were personally antagonistic. The two men's styles and basic objectives just did not match. Mitterrand wanted, at all costs, to preserve his chances to be re-elected President in 1988 and so he used his executive powers to undermine the RPR government's policy decisions whenever possible. Chirac, tall and handsome, was a much younger man than Mitterrand. He was energetic and self-confident but he seemed to have a knack for arousing controversy. Inspired by the Right's recent election gains he adopted a somewhat autocratic style as Prime Minister of France. In so doing he fell into Mitterrand's trap. The wily old fox outwitted Chirac at every step, playing in particular on the public's fears of capitalist excess. So much so that when the presidential elections of 1988 were held, Mitterrand comfortably defeated Chirac, gaining another seven-year term. To complete the rout, legislative elections, held soon after, brought the Socialists back to power in the National Assembly as well. Mitterrand had thus completely reversed the political tide which had started flowing against the Socialists in 1986.

However this represented only a temporary victory for the Socialists. It was now Mitterrand's turn to mishandle the country. From about 1989 onwards the Socialist government followed a policy of maintaining the strength of the French franc against other major currencies by keeping interest rates high. While there were some merits to this policy it was carried too far and had the effect of throwing the French economy, hitherto quite successful, into a sustained downturn. High unemployment rates hammered, in particular, the very people who tended to vote for the Socialists.

As a result, by the time the legislative elections next came around in late 1992, the French voters massively deserted the Socialists and a Centre-Right coalition won an overwhelming victory. In the wake of this huge electoral success, however, exactly the same dilemma emerged as in 1986. Once again Mitterrand was President with another two and a half years to go before his term ended, saddled with a legislature in the control of his political opponents.

Chirac's RPR was the largest party in the National Assembly

and he could once again have chosen to become Prime Minister. But the memory of the agonizing time he had spent in the previous period of co-habitation weighed heavily upon him. He confided to friends that he would rather "have his teeth pulled out one by one" than enter again into a dual-executive role with Mitterrand. Furthermore, in view of the strong shift in public opinion away from the Socialists, there was every chance that he would finally realise his life-long desire to be President if he presented himself as the candidate of the Rightist political parties in the 1995 elections.

It was in this context that Chirac promoted Edouard Balladur (who had previously served in his Cabinet as Finance Minister in 1986) to be the Prime Minister in the new period of co-habitation. Balladur's background was that of a technocrat not a politician and he had a gentle, malleable personality which mirrored perfectly his soft, pudgy physical presence. Not known to be terribly ambitious Balladur represented in Chirac's eyes a safe choice who would play the role of a diligent, low-profile temporary leader and who could be

counted upon to loyally pave the way for Chirac's ascendancy to the presidency in due course. Alas for Chirac the scenario has not unfolded as planned. Against all the odds, Balladur has become by today, in the short space of one year, the dominant political personality in France, far overshadowing not only Chirac but all other comers!

Clearly, one reason for Balladur's success is the fact that as Prime Minister of France he is much more in the media limelight than any other politician. But the impact of this constant public exposure has been reinforced by the peculiar way in which the very facets of his personality which seemed to render him politically neutral, such as his modest and self-effacing nature, have turned out to be his strongest points. In the depths of a severe economic recession the people of France are nervous, agitated and unsure of themselves and, as a consequence, they find Balladur's mild, cultivated persona immensely comforting. The last thing they would tolerate at this moment is any controversy that would divert attention from the need of the hour, which is to save their

standard of living. In this context, Chirac's generally abrasive image does him no good.

The French get a daily demonstration of the difference in the two men's styles when they see how well the current co-habitation is proceeding. Mitterrand and Balladur, even though they belong to different political formations, have gone out of their way to fashion a harmonious working relationship. They have managed to mesh their dual executive powers in such a manner as to ensure that the business of the French state is not disrupted. There are occasional disagreements between them but the government is never paralysed as was often the case when Mitterrand and Chirac were running things.

Balladur has reaped the benefit of the public's satisfaction at this state of affairs. In particular Mitterrand has taken care to delegate the handling of the economy almost entirely to Balladur, who enjoys phenomenally high ratings whenever the French are questioned about their confidence in his policies. This is a bit mystifying because, in terms of results, Balladur has not actually managed to significantly improve things in the course of 1993. Nevertheless he radiates an aura of reassurance which should ultimately lead to the growth of business and consumer confidence.

Balladur's one concrete success was the negotiation late last year of the GATT accords in which French demands were widely seen to be satisfied. This success was particularly significant for Balladur's future ambitions because it tended to confirm his stature as a statesman capable of handling international relations, which was until then a weak point in his make-up. This further enhanced his standing as presidential material.

The net result of all this is that from about June 1993 on, the opinion polls have been showing that Balladur would win handily in presidential elections against any other candidate. Chirac, by contrast, has been steadily slipping and the latest polls show him actually losing to the Socialist candidate for President if the election were held today!

The elections are of course scheduled for mid-1995 and anything could yet happen but the stage has been set for the end-game. Balladur and Chirac, being members of the governing political party, cannot start open hostilities but the first sniping has already started. Balladur began his term of office as Prime Minister proclaiming that he expected to stay in this post for the full 5-year term, which automatically implied that he had no presidential ambitions. In the course of the last year however, mindful

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Dhaka-Colombo Travel Tripping or Trudging?

by Fazlul Kabir

AS Biman's flight took off from the Zia International Airport for Calcutta on 9th November, 1993, I had fancied that the crucible we, the two, had undergone during the preceding one week was, after all, over and even aired my optimism to Mr. Shahidullah, my companion to the same destination — Colombo. The preceding one week was, for both of us, a week of exacting intellectual labour, on the one hand, and nerve-racking tension, on the other. While there was Bangladesh-EC Sub-Commission meeting on 11th November for me to attend and also prepare brief for, Shahidullah had, on his schedule, SAARC Committee on Economic Co-operation (CEC) meeting on 21st and 22nd November calling for a heavier preparatory work to do. A message had, in the meantime, reached the Foreign Ministry to say that the Sri Lankan Government, which had offered to host the SAARC third Inter Government Group (IGG) meeting, could conveniently hold the same only on 11th and 12th November. As Shahidullah and I were the two officers nominated to represent Bangladesh in the said meeting and all necessary preparatory work relating to the two other meetings was also to be completed before we would have left for Colombo, we had to work at a break-neck speed.

But a hitch had cropped up in the form of Biman's refusal to issue tickets except against payment in cash. In vain our Protocol Officer Shaifq Khan had argued with Biman's Sales Department that, the travel being on government account, there could be no question of payment in cash and that, at any rate, it was not possible for us to make payment in cash for the simple reason that we had not, till then, received our respective cheques from the Accounts office. But Biman's Sales Department was not to budge from its stand.

It was past 1 pm of 8th November, the last day for doing whatever was to be done if we were to go to Colombo at all — all the charms I had conjured up of that fabulous tourist resort had worn out and had been replaced by a worry of eventually facing the probable charge of not having explored all possible avenues and exercised what is an extraordinary gift but what, in official parlance, is universally known as ordinary prudence. While I could afford to forget all about the latter, I could not conscientiously do so in respect of the former, the reason being that I was personally known to the Civil Aviation Secretary and that his door — the last report for me — was yet to be knocked at.

It was, therefore, more for forestalling any possible charge of not having explored all possible avenues than in the hope of getting the goods delivered that I had a word with the Civil Aviation Secretary and, later, in pursuance of his instructions, had sent him a hand-written note. The Secretary was kind enough to give prompt orders to his officer concerned and the latter was equally prompt to issue necessary instructions to Biman authorities.

Aboard Biman's flight, we therefore, heaved a sigh of relief.

But only to prove to be wrong — to discover in about a couple of hours, that the ordeal was not yet over.

As we emerged from the Calcutta Airport's Passport and Customs counters and looked right and left in search of the person who was supposed to take charge of us during our five-hour free time in that metropolis, we received a shock. In the first place, there was no trace of him and, secondly, we were already in the midst of a motley of people either pesteringly whispering whether we had Bangladesh takas to exchange for Indian rupees or hazardingly enquiring where we would go and whether we would need a taxi.

Not having foreseen such a situation to have to encounter, we, who had kept sitting on two chairs in the airport's corridor for sometime in the hope of our expected person's arrival in the meantime, hurried back inside. Then, just because we had nothing else to do during the long five hours to follow, we decided to utilise some of that time by way of checking up with the reservation counter of the Indian Airlines whether everything was all right.

As Shahidullah thrust our two tickets across the lonely counter and the man at the counter, after a minute's look

at the tickets, pressed some buttons of his computer keyboard, his facial counters underwent a visible change.

"Oh my God!" exclaimed he "what to say of your reservation on our tomorrow's Madras-Colombo flight, you don't have reservation even on our today's Calcutta-Madras flight!"

For a long moment Shahidullah was speechless. And so was I, standing beside him.

"How could Biman okay the reservation status on our tickets", Shahidullah ultimately sought to argue, albeit patently feebly, when he regained his intellectual alertness, "unless it had received confirmation from you?"

That seemingly succeeded in cutting the ice.

"True", nodded the man at the counter and then, added impatiently, "but why does our computer screen not flash your names?"

"Maybe", intervened I, "your man forgot to press the relevant button while confirming our reservations to Biman".

This time the ice started melting.

"Well, maybe we can fix you up on our Calcutta-Madras flight", said the young man, resumming his seat and busying himself with his computer. "But, I am afraid, from here in Calcutta we can't do anything more than sending a message to our Madras office requesting your reservation on our tomorrow's Madras-Colombo flight".

Seating me along with our baggage in a solitary corner of the waiting lounge, Shahidullah hurried away alone on the mission of whatever was possible to get done by the reservation chief.

To be seated in a solitary corner of the waiting lounge, where the Taka-hunting money changers and unauthorised dealers in foreign exchange were prowling around, was not necessarily to be seated in a safe corner. I was soon spotted by one of the prowlers and approached with nagging repeats of his ilk's routine offer.

"I do deserve a special consideration from you sir," said he, a young man in his late twenties, with an affected Bangladeshi accent, "because I am from Gopalganj".

"How can you be from Gopalganj?" enquired I derisively. "You were not even born by the year 1947?"

Momentarily he was flabbergasted. But soon he regained his seemingly characteristic cunning.

"I mean my parents are from Gopalganj, sir," replied he. During the time I was busy shaking him off Shahidullah returned and, handing me a half-sheet piece of paper, said dejectedly, "this is the most that I could extract, Kabir Bhai".

The piece of paper was a copy of the telex message that Mrs. Shudmita Moulick, chief of the Indian Airlines' Calcutta airport reservation office, had, minutes ago, sent to Mr. Krishnamurti, her counterpart of the airlines' Madras office, giving our serial numbers in the waiting list of the Airlines' Madras-Colombo flight and requesting him to do whatever he could to fix us up on that flight.

Shahidullah was dejected but I was not. I had a hunch that Mrs. Moulick's telex message would click. So we got down to having some of the dollars we had with us converted into Indian rupees.

As I read the chart displaying the buying and the selling rates of US dollar, I could not help smiling sardonically. Arun Sarkar — that was the name of the young man who had remained glued to me during the short time I was alone in the waiting lounge — was no exception to the rule of the unauthorised dealers or brokers.

As I shoved my passport along with a few for my paltry stock of dollar notes inside the counter, the teller, a lean man apparently in his mid-forties, seemed to have observed me smirking. Surprisingly, he could guess the reason too and almost unerringly.

"They are all cheats", added he.

Our Calcutta-Madras flight was "smooth as silk", barring the disheartening news gathered by Shahidullah in the course of the flight from a — side passenger, that hotel accommodation nearby the Madras Airport — something that we had in mind because of the uncertainty of our reservation on the Madras-Colombo flight on the following day and the consequent possible necessity of our constant physical contact with the Indian Airlines' office at the Madras Airport —

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Traffic Problems in Dhaka Some Further Comments

by Jalal Alamgir

A few days back, SAMS Kibria published an article in The Daily Star about traffic jams in Dhaka. He analysed the Dhaka situation in light of his observations of the traffic scenario in Bangkok, and accordingly put forward some suggestions for tackling our problems. Noticing the great number of rickshaws, he recommended the withdrawal of rickshaws from the busy main roads of the city. He proposed, to compensate the loss in public transportation, an upgrading of bus and autorickshaw services, both by quantity and quality. He also underscored the need for cohesion among the authorities managing our road transportation system.

It is my contention, however, that some roots of Dhaka's traffic predicament lie elsewhere. Although his proposals are tenable, I think Kibria, has missed indicating some fundamental points. The objective of this article is to highlight these basic urgencies that need to be met for an effective abatement of traffic jams in Dhaka.

Relative to the "downtown" areas of many old European and American cities, Dhaka (except for the Old Town) is fortunate to have wider avenues, fit for the simultaneous plying by vehicles of different kinds and speeds. However, no road in Dhaka, or any city for that matter, can manage a haphazard and unruly traffic. Here in the mayhem buses trail rickshaws, "tempos" defy traffic signals, and cars and pushcarts wrangle over the same lane. I think the streets of the capital reflect the impasse all over the country: a total disregard for order and ethics.

Bus Bay

First of all, slow traffic has to be separated from fast traffic. Rickshaws need to move along a stipulated lane, preferably detached by a solid divider (as done in parts of Mymensingh Road). They shouldn't be allowed in the faster lanes, nor should larger vehicles be allowed to clog their domain. Second, local buses are to be permitted to move along only the leftmost lane of a street. They are not to stop and let passengers on at random points on the streets (at red lights, for example), as this danger causes nervous shudders for oncoming cars and the disembarked passengers alike. Bus stops should be separated from the street by

bus bays so that buses do not block the road by standing side-by-side. The construction of such a bay at Mohakhali has remarkably improved the flow of traffic along the main lanes.

Parking

Another root problem in jams lie in unplanned parking. Parking rules in the city are not enforced, and are at best vague. It is difficult to park in narrow streets (especially in Old Dhaka), true, but there should be no excuse for random parking in the wider avenues. To glimpse traffic jams due to parking irregularities, one can take a look at the New Market area on Mirpur Road. Another total disregard for planning is in Tejgaon. In front of Shaheen School, where some haphazard shops were permitted to sprout. Drivers there park cars on the main road, causing chaotic jams even on this wide boulevard. When I mentioned this to a friend, he noted that these shops were affiliated with the Air Force, and remarked that planners cannot dare intrude in military affairs, even at the city's cost. With all due respect to our democratic and civilian government, is it not time to heed civilians' needs a bit more?

Marked Lanes

The essence of traffic order is lane maintenance by all vehicles. The main arteries of Dhaka are two- or three-lane avenues, demarcated by solid yellow lines (or dividers) in the middle and broken white lines on the left and the right, the overall objective being an orderly flow of vehicles along set lanes. However, the drivers in this city seem to unanimously negate any purpose behind adorning our streets with these yellow and white lines.

Some say it's a lack of civic sense on part of the drivers. That may be part of it, but I think the main reason is the absence of a sense of duty on part of the licensing and monitoring authorities.

Licensing

Lane maintenance is not stressed at all during the licensing examinations, whereas, in an ideal situation, issuing a licence should be made conditional on adherence to order. The authorities should not be there simply to grant a licence, but also to educate licensees about driving laws. First comes education, then examination, and then practice. But consider reality.

It infuriates a responsible citizen to note that a front-page survey by a vernacular daily few weeks ago concluded that the vast majority of public transportation drivers either do not have a licence or have illegally acquired a licence. Having an insidious crew appointed to manage our traffic system, all

our hue and cry about law and order is sure to be in vain.

Planning

The state of lawlessness need to be reversed starting from the authorities who are supposed to preserve law and order in the first place. Simultaneously, the state of planning needs a great jolt towards positive action. Our city planners seem to occupy themselves with only two targets. One, to make our city appear attractive to foreign tourists. Hence, the construction of an overhead walkway at the gates of the international airport, or the proposal to build a flyover at Banani rail crossing. What a prudent use of resources in this resource-scarce country! Further examples abound. To offer just one: A SAARC fountain centred on a circular structure has been erected in front of Hotel Sonargaon — all good and well — but for no apparent reason whatsoever the traffic lights have been removed, causing incessant jams all the time. It seems that the author-

ities do not care to involve even rudimentary research on traffic movement before undertaking a construction or a destruction project.

Accountability

Target Number Two of our planners is to launch extensive road works whenever a mayoral election is at hand. Do the incumbents take Dhaka's people to be such fools as to elect office bearers on a road-improvement record starting just a month prior to elections? Our city planners appear ignorant not only of the busy intersections in the city, but also of the inconvenience caused by such haphazard street works. A traffic and city administration accountable to the public might work better. The last point in Kibria's article is on the mark: the need for accountability. For progress in traffic as well as city management, our demands for accountability have to take shape right now, and be directed towards the future officeholders of this city, whom we are to elect at the end of this month.



Rickshaw makes its way on Dhaka street