

Nepal's Hour of Political Trial

Nepal's experiment with democracy under a constitutional monarchy has run into a rough clime within a little over three years of launching it in earnest. The results of the general elections held for the first time in 30 years since after the abolition of the Panchayat system in 1971 have not produced a stable government. The Nepali Congress Party government led by Girija Prasad Koirala has failed to last its full term up to 1996 despite the fact that he had a workable majority of 114 members in a 205-strong Parliament as against the communist or leftist opposition's 82. The arithmetic worked against him in a crucial parliamentary vote on government policies. The motion was defeated 74-86. Notably it is the high figure of abstentions — as many as 43 — that tended to signify he created enemies within, let alone some of his allies falling out with him.

To Koirala it seems the debacle appeared as a blessing in disguise or at least he wanted to make the most out of a bad situation. His advice to King Birendra for the dissolution of parliament and fresh general elections on November 13 has been heeded. He obviously hopes that a re-run could give him the majority he needs for a smooth sail as well as the passage of his reforms.

But the mixed and overlapping pattern of support mirrored by the parliamentary vote had in the first place induced the opposition comprising the Nepal Communist Party and the United Marxist and Leninist Party to try and ask for a formation of a government of their own, with the dissidents joining in. Their followers have now hit the streets protesting the dissolution of parliament and announcement of mid-term polls in a copy-book fashion with the King nodding in approval at the suggestions of the prime minister without so much as giving them a chance to form government. This being a subject-matter of an academic interest at the moment, the opposition Communist Party and its allies in Kathmandu have urged upon the King to dismiss the Prime Minister, whom he has already asked to continue till the elections, and have him replaced by an all-party government to hold the polls in a "free, fair and impartial manner".

Although Nepalese politics is constitutionally a different ball game with the existence of monarchy in the system, there are a certain familiar rings to it, regionally speaking. The Nepali Congress Party is said to be soft towards India while the leftist opposition towards China. It is, however, the economic planks that intrinsically differ between the two parties. Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, the key player in the political arena on behalf of the Nepali Congress Party (NCP), was himself defeated in the last polls but NCP was nonetheless elected with a majority, however tenuous it may have proved lately.

We welcome the mountain kingdom to the process of trial and error they are going through as a neighbouring SAARC country to evolve into fully-fledged democratic country side by side with other democracies in the region.

We believe that mutual consultations between the parties concerned will yield a common ground for political maturation in Nepal from what has been a mere baptism in democracy.

Demonstration — a Novel Way

The diploma engineers of the country have come up with a novel way of demonstration to press home their demands. The novelty of their agitation lies in the fact that the engineers have decided to work half an hour in excess of their normal duty hours on July 25. This undoubtedly is an unprecedented — and certainly positive — move the central body of the diploma engineers could think of. This is not just a way of expressing their protest, it certainly marks a qualitative difference from the hitherto practised modes of protests or attempts to have one's case heard.

The Institute of Diploma Engineers (IDE) has, in fact, decided upon a two-week action programme for realisation of their three-point demands. Accordingly, the diploma engineers of various services will hold demonstrations from July 19 to 25 and send memorandum to the Prime Minister through their departmental heads. July 26 will be observed as the demand day. Of the demands, one is for the publication of a report of the committee that was constituted on the Prime Minister's bidding. Apart from the 6-point demands and 13-point recommendations of the IDE along with the demands of the Polytechnic Teachers' Association, the first one surely merits immediate consideration.

This is simply because of the fact that the committee's report need not necessarily be left under the carpet giving rise to suspicion and confusion in the minds of the agitating engineers.

Stalling decisions for umpteen times is no solution at all. The report is supposed to be a fair analysis of the obtaining situation and also equally fair reflection on the benefits the engineers ought to deserve. However the engineers' response, to the government's go-slow policy is commendable. After all they have attempted to prove a point. The point is that they think quite positively of the job they perform and even perhaps — to stretch the idea — of the country. Doing voluntarily an extra half an hour's duty — even though just for a single day — is an expression of committing something to the nation. When most demonstrating agencies and groups consider work strapping the best means and even do not hesitate to get violent, the diploma engineers' is a step worth emulating. Apparently, they are appealing to the good sense of the government by demonstrating their own good will. The more reciprocal their gestures and offers are the better. What the engineers have initiated can be improved upon in any future strategy of demonstration. If all the demonstrations are marked by such positive approaches, the country will stand to gain immensely. What a nice way of contributing to the country even when employees are protesting!

If the situation obtaining in Maharashtra and Karnataka is any indication of what will happen in the assembly elections, due in a few months, the ruling Congress Party may lose its majority in both the states. It may still emerge as the single largest bloc provided it works hard and gets over its squabbles. The Congress looks tired and lazy in power in the face of communal and caste factors that have come to the fore.

After visiting the two states, one feels that the people are turning away from the Congress. The businessmen, academics, journalists or jurists one meets confirm the lessening of the party's hold and the government's credibility. True, the same scene more or less prevails before the polls. But the difference this time is the sense of insecurity, the cumulative instances of law and order breakdown and the polarisation on communal and caste lines.

Take Maharashtra. The state has not yet recovered from the one and a half-year-old communal riots and the bomb blasts. The old equation — and the confidence — between the Hindus and the Muslims has not yet returned. Even the underworld, which has strong links with the ruling party, is polarised.

The detention of the 450 odd Muslims out of the 500 jailed under TADA, after the riots and blasts, gives the community a feeling of discrimination. The Muslims, who constitute nearly 12 per cent of the electorate, have turned their back on the Congress. They also find the party soft towards the Shiv Sena and its chief, Bal Thackeray, who makes no bones about his an-

Lesson for Congress

The Congress exudes an air of secularism and modernity. But in reality, they seem to be mere slogans. The party's liberalism is in proportion to the votes it can swing by parading to be so. It only believes in power.

imus against the Muslims. Chief Minister Sharad Pawar is seen indulgent to him. And the police is found contaminated. The Bharatiya Janata Party, which secured 42 seats in the last election, looks like having alliance with the Shiv Sena once again. This may hurt the party in the rest of India because even the pro-Hindutva elements perceive the Shiv Sena as a chauvinistic, anti-South group. But the BJP's predicament is that it has the same electorate as the target. The Shiv Sena may drive a hard bargain this time.

Muddying the state politics is Kanishi Ram with his caste-biased appeal. He is taking his campaign to the pitch of hostility and hatred, although making less impact on Ambedkar's followers. Maharashtra has always been their stronghold and they have articulated the abominable plight of Dalits, the socially and economically backward. They have been inclined towards the Congress but they are going distant from it, wanting to establish an entity of their own.

One segment of their Republican party is still steadfast in its support to Pawar. He has tried to win back others by renaming the Marathwada University as the Ambedkar University and by implementing the Mandal Commission recommendations on reservations. But most of the Dalits remain unmollified — and hence alienated from the Congress.

Pawar enjoys the reputation of a good administrator. G R Khairnar, deputy commissioner of Bombay Municipal Corporation, has damaged his reputation by characterising him "more dangerous than the underworld don, Dawood Ibrahim." Still Pawar is a vote catcher.

The sugar lobby in western Maharashtra is loyal to the Congress, more so after the recent muddle which helped it earn large sums of money. The Congress is also strong in the

has sought to placate women by setting up a separate commission for them and he has met several leaders of the Muslim community and the backward to allay their misgivings about him and the party. He knows that his reinduction at the Centre, something the very much wants, depends on his performance in the state elections.

Karnataka chief minister Veerappa Moily does not want a seat in the Union cabinet. But he wants free hand in the

justment. He feels that Karnataka will have a hung assembly and that he will have enough members to dictate terms for support.

The Janata Dal, which once ruled the state, is trying to stage a comeback. "We will be in power again," says R K Hegde and S R Bommai, former chief ministers. But it is unlikely. The party has been split, united, resplit and reunited so many times that it has lost a bit of its sheen and most of its credibility. At least it seemed recovering from a trough it had reached in the state but the open quarrel and bargaining over the seats in the state's upper house has damaged it once again.

The BJP, which secured 29 per cent of votes and 66 assembly constituencies in the last Lok Sabha election, may have done well if it had a tall leader in the state. The party's central leaders — L K Advani, A B Vajpayee and Murli Manohar Joshi — are on frequent visits to the state to make up the deficiency. But this has only highlighted the absence of local leadership.

The party is also bereft of issues. The demolition of the Babri mosque has cost it dearly. It is trying to raise Kashmir but with practically no effect. A local controversy, whether the 999-year lease of the land to the Idgah at Hubli is a public property or not, has come in handy to the party. Its fire-breathing Uma Bharati has declared that she will hoist the

national flag at the place on August 15. It is yet to be seen how far this issue can influence the Hindu mind.

The Muslims, with 14 per cent of votes, are unhappy with the Congress but not alienated. Central railway minister Jaffer Sharief has some say with them and he may swing part of Muslim electorate to the Congress side, much to the chagrin of the Janata Dal which considers them its preserve.

Moily is also catering to the Karnataka chauvinism. He has ordered the English-medium schools to switch over to Kannada medium of instruction. State Congress leaders are still hopeful to scrape through which seems unlikely. As of today, the party looks like losing substantially, definitely reaching nowhere near its present strength of 180 in a 224-member house.

The lesson for the Congress in both the states or, for that matter, wherever it is in power is that unless the party can find policies which express the values it once held, the values which harnessed the support of the common man, it is doomed. In the recent past, financial scandals have destroyed the party's credibility. It cannot sustain people's confidence if the dishonest go scot free as the Bofors gun kickbacks, the Bank scam and the sugar muddle prove.

The Congress exudes an air of secularism and modernity. But in reality, they seem to be mere slogans. The party's liberalism is in proportion to the votes it can swing by parading to be so. It only believes in power. Communal and caste forces indulge in their type of politics openly. The Congress seems to be doing so on the side.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

countryside. This may counter some of the disadvantages the party faces. But the pre-condition is that the factions in the Congress must cohere. The standard of revolt raised by Villars Rao Deshmukh and Ram Rao Adik does not offer much hope.

Worse comes to worse, the Congress will lose. In the last election too, it secured only 142 seats in a house of 288. Nine independents were 'won' later to make the majority. With the loyal state governor, P O Alexander, who had enjoyed a string of favours from the Congress, the party can expect to constitute the government even if it does not have a majority.

Pawar is trying his best. He

nominations of candidates to the state elections. The straight-jacket formula, which former Bihar chief minister Jagannath Mishra shaped a few months ago to satisfy various interests in the Congress, has hamstrung Moily. He is further depressed by the rumours that he will be replaced after the polls.

Chipping the Congress support is Bangarappa, former chief minister, who has an appeal among the backward, once the party's vote bank. "Bangarappa may not be of much use to others but he will definitely damage us," says a senior Karnataka cabinet minister. Bangarappa has reportedly reached an understanding with the Janata Dal on seat ad-

'We Want Rule-based, instead of Deal-based Global Trading System'

DS: It is the same Congress Party that authored the policies that you are now reversing. How were you able to get the backing of your own party?

MS: I am a very small cog in the political machinery. The task of selling this policy to the political party was undertaken by the Prime Minister, who I think did a brilliant job. We had three plenary sessions of the Congress Party, in which the main agenda item was the economic policies. We started with the session in 1992, then the Faridabad session of 1993, and last month, the New Delhi session. All the three sessions had detailed debates on the reforms and economic policies. So the political leadership now has a clear understanding of the sea-change that has taken place in the global economic field. The fact that several East Asian and South East Asian countries, much less endowed with resources than India, have done so much better than us, has had a tremendous impact on the thinking of the Indian political leaders.

Today, all political parties, whether of the right or the left, are agreed on the way we are moving. The only difference is that the left parties say that they want foreign investment, but they want to be more selective. I think we are selective. I don't think India will become a foreign investors' paradise. I still believe that the bulk of the resources for India's development will continue to be mobilised domestically. Foreign investment will only play a part in it. Everybody — the Communist and the BJP — agree that we did the right thing by removing the "License-Permit Raj." So there is a consensus about the reform policy that we are following.

DS: We can also say that there is a consensus in the SAARC region itself, because all our countries are following, more or less, the same policies.

MS: Yes, I think we now have a great opportunity to forge greater co-operation on the basis of the similarity of policies that we are following. I see no reason why our region

Following is the concluding part of the Interview with the Indian Finance Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, published yesterday. The interview was conducted by the Star editor Mahfuz Anam, assisted by chief reporter M Anwarul Haq.

cannot become one of the most flourishing regions of the world. When we became independent, we had a head start. We gave lead to the process of decolonisation. We were much better off then many other developing countries in terms of human resources. In 1960 the per capita income of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were not too much different from those in East and South East Asia. But somehow all the other countries got far ahead of us.

That is our challenge. If South Asia does not want to be marginalised — one fourth of humanity we are talking about — we must face this challenge. There is nothing wrong with our people. The desire for savings are most deeply rooted in the poorest of our people. The challenge is to devise economic policies that will make use of the latent creativity of our people.

In this process, I believe that, there is immense scope to promote regional co-operation. My vision is that our future is interlinked. India cannot prosper if Bangladesh cannot prosper and vice-versa. It is this spirit that should animate our collective efforts, and help us to write a new chapter in South Asian co-operation.

DS: You have made a statement to the press here that defence expenditure in the SAARC region should go down?

MS: I was answering a hypothetical question. But as Finance Minister, my interest has always been to see how we can reduce our defence expenditure, making it as low as possible. If you take the devaluation of the Rupee in 1991, then India's defence expenditure is lower today than it was three years ago.

Part of the problem is of course India's strained relations with Pakistan. It is most unfortunate that our two countries have not been able to evolve a pattern of relationship which could end this bitterness, which is a legacy of partition. It is unfortunate, but we

feel that it is not for want of trying on our part.

DS: Pakistan would say the same thing.

MS: We have problems with Pakistan, that is a fact. But we believe that all problems can and should be solved through constructive and meaningful dialogue. I would also like to say that while India has problems with Pakistan, India has other borders to defend also.

My own feeling is that if the



Indian Finance Minister Manmohan Singh being interviewed by The Daily Star Editor Mahfuz Anam.

Today our relations with China are improving and we are making efforts to keep India's borders with China peaceful. All indications are that we are making progress. But one has to recognise that China is a nuclear power. Therefore unless there is a process of nuclear disarmament, India has to recognise that reality. These things cannot be achieved in isolation. We do hope that we can create an environment which permit all countries to divert scarce resources for more meaningful purposes.

DS: Is there any new thinking on Indo-Pak relations at the moment?

MS: First of all, I think, there must be a common recognition that we cannot solve any problem without negotiations. Whatever differences that exist, one has to make honest

efforts to solve them through discussion. Secondly, I feel, that when we cannot solve all problems, then let us intensify co-operation where it is possible to do so. As Begum Khaleda Zia said in her speech to the Conference, that if we expand our areas of economic co-operation, we will create an environment in which more difficult political problems may also be solved.

My own feeling is that if the

meet the combined needs of our two countries.

If we do not want the water issue to become a perpetual eyesore, then together with the short term need, we must explore the long term solutions to augment the supply of water into the Ganga system. There have been technical discussions, but unfortunately there has not been any progress. I think the time has come for us to move forward in both these areas. On our part, we honestly want, to find a durable, productive and mutually satisfactory solution which will take into account all the legitimate concerns of Bangladesh.

DS: How do you think the latest GATT negotiations will impact on countries like ours?

MS: First of all we have to recognise that developing countries today are not in a position to rewrite world trading system in their own image. World economic relations are a power relationship. We are a

marginal player in that power game. The GATT agreement reflects that. There are opportunities for us if the world trading system remains open. All our countries need more export earnings. If the world system does not become more protectionist, than it is all to the good. Also because we are such small players, we cannot deal bilaterally with powerful countries and get a good deal. We need the rule of law in international relations, especially in trade. This we need more than the strong countries who can twist our arms whenever they want... So if we have a "Rule based, rather than a deal based" trading system, it is to our benefit.

In GATT or in the new world trade organisation, the majority of the countries will be the developing countries. And so we will be able to bring certain amount of influence on the situation. So there are opportunities, the most important of which is that GATT can help roll back the wave of protectionism, which is otherwise getting stronger in the developed countries.

DS: Thank you so very much for your time.

OPINION

Controversial Writers

Khursheed Erfan Ahmed

NUMEROUS examples of controversial writers and thinkers have sparked the world of literature and scientific discovery in the past. Taslima Nasreen seems to be one such post-cum-columnist, whose writings have received an undue eminence through the recent reaction from the government authorities and religious extremists.

One discerns different undercurrents in the opinions voiced about this writer: Firstly, the loudest voice explodes from the religious fundamentalists who see nothing but blasphemy in her writings, deserving a punishment of death. Secondly, response from the rational progressive religious scholars who feel that Taslima Nasreen has no scholarship to dabble in religious discourse, but that she has a right to free expression and such expression cannot be condemned on death or imprisonment.

Neither of these opinions can be termed as public opinion. The public, 80 per cent of which is illiterate, uninformed and poor, have little or no opportunity to express that views.

A small percentage of the elite, some progressive and some conservative, have passed opinions on this writer according to their level of information, emotional reaction or scholarly response.

Two particular opinions published in The Daily Star by Munira Khan and Md Abdus Sattar Mollah may not represent the thought levels mentioned above. A studied rational approach is certainly easier to take than an opinion based on heresy. The analytic approach demands an overview of various such historical landmarks, where writers, philosophers etc have risked their life for articulating their convictions. From the earliest inquisi-

tion to the present times, history is replete with (then) controversial sayings of Galileo, Alhaj Mansoor, Hasrat Basra, Ibn-e-Gazzali to the modern era of Hume, DH Lawrence, Bertrand Russell and nearer home, to the subcontinent, as in the case of Shadat Hassan Manto, Ismat Chughtai, Akhtar Hameed Khan, Doud Haider, Ahmed Sharif and now Taslima Nasreen.

It is true that Nasreen is a loner. She is a writer who has chosen to strike out on her own. Most writers share this isolation, since they do not claim to be development workers. It is not possible for all writers to bring about a change, neither is it possible for them to reach an appropriate scholarship level. The readers (provided they've the opportunity to read the books) have the choice to reject the writings. The dissenters have the right to dissent through the media.

Sentiment of the majority of the public who remain illiterate and poor is easily roused by rumours and hearsay. Over the ages, political power of religious authority has been maintained by rousing such sentiments.

The writer's and society's roles are complementary. These roles of responsibility and participation are ideally possible in an educated society where laws of blasphemy have perhaps ceased to apply. In such societies, the writer has the freedom of expression, at the same time he/she must be open for public criticism, if any, as long as this does not lead to violence or death threats.

In case of a violent public dissent, the writer has the right to state security.

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To the Editor...

Maradona

Sir, The expulsion of Diego Maradona from the World Cup on doping charges has caused a great deal of heart-ache and frustration amongst his countless fans in Bangladesh. In a frenzy of emotion fans, commentators and journalists (especially of the vernacular press) have accused FIFA and its president Joao Havelange of conspiring to keep Maradona out of the World Cup. Various reasons have been put forward, including the desire of FIFA to see Brazil as champions; to protect the image of Pele and to prevent Maradona from playing a record number of matches. As an impartial viewer I would like to make the following observations:

1) FIFA has got nothing to gain by discrediting Maradona. In recent years the primary motivation of FIFA has been monetary, which is the main reason why the World Cup had been awarded to the USA in the first place; Maradona is the biggest crowdpuller in world football, so why should FIFA

remove such a huge potential source of ticket revenue? Maradona's offence was genuine.

2) Nothing needs to be done in order to protect the reputation and image of Pele who has done more than enough to secure his place in history. Furthermore Joao Havelange is the last person who will do Pele any favours, his treatment of Pele during the World Cup draw in Las Vegas shows his animosity towards him.

3) If FIFA really wanted to help Brazil win the World Cup it had the opportunity to do so on five occasions after 1970. Yet in every World Cup since 1970, Brazil not only failed to become champion but reached the semi-finals only once.

The apologists of Maradona should note that his footballing record is chequered with controversy. After all didn't he score with his hand against England in 1986? If instead of Maradona, an English player had scored with his hand, I feel the matter wouldn't have been dismissed so lightly by

the Bangladeshi footballing public. In Italia '90, Maradona scored another goal with his hand (cancelled by the referee) and saved a near goal with his hand (not noticed by the referee) against the USSR. This is a player who was banned for 15 months for cocaine abuse, who was arrested for shooting at journalists and who was sacked by two clubs for not appearing at practice and for general indiscipline.

Maradona should have been careful in view of his past record and should not have taken any drugs without his team doctor's permission. Maradona should have realised that he had a responsibility towards his team, his coach and most of all towards his country. Maradona is not above the game of football and he has no right to humiliate his nation once again in this manner.

While I admire Maradona's footballing skills, I do not feel sorry for him; my sorrow is for all other Argentinians.

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Ambulance in Sirajgonj Sadar

Sir, Sirajgonj General Hospital is running without any ambulance service for years.

Ambulance is very necessary to carry critical patients from their residence to the hospitals and in some special cases to send patients to a specialised hospital from the local general hospital, for higher treatment.

The people of Sirajgonj Sadar faces much difficulty in want of ambulance. So they have demanded for an ambulance for a long time. There is an ambulance under the control of Sirajgonj Zilla Parishad but people generally find it very hard to avail the opportunity of using it. If the authorities concerned draw their attention to this matter, the entire population of the locality would be benefitted.

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