The Baily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. All

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Bangàbazaar Afterthought

Our follow-up news item yesterday on Bangabazaar shed some new light on the disaster that befell the market-place twice in a row within a stunningly short period of time. The inner story, as revealed, read sinister, almost to a point of being spooky. It seems that a well-laid-out plot by self-seekers was executed by them to the finish with heinous ruthlessness. Witnesses to the fire incident said that a group of people making, appearance on the spot with a plea to help the fire fighters ended up doing the exact opposite: They pulled the water pipes away and threw CI sheets towards the fire fighters slowing down their activity. Allegations have also been made that 'unidentified outsiders' had, in first place, blocked the main entrance of the fire brigade headquarters near Bangabazaar to impede movement of fire fighters to the scene. These have been corroborated by a few fire bridge people themselves.

Then came the looting phase as people with gunny-bags, masquerading as relatives of shopowners, spirited away whatever they could lay their hands on. Many observers felt that loss by looting was bigger than that by arsoning which emphasises the designed nature of things.

That the whole episode could have been a product of sabotage has been underlined not by the victims alone but, quite significantly, by some experts who suspected that gun-powder or an explosive was used to trigger a fire on that scale. Furthermore, it could not have been enacted without some assistance from inside the market-place.

The allegations by the leaders of shopowners' union, accounts of witnesses and the corroboration by some fire fighters all give sufficient ground to make a thorough inquiry into the matter and ferret out the culprits behind it. Today it is perhaps gun-powder, tomorrow it might be a more sophisticated device adopted to whet commercial jealousy by administering shock effects on opponents. So let us put a brake on diabolical designs by merchants of tyranny.

Leave the Hotel Alone

The country's only five-star hotel, Hotel Sonargaon, witnessed on Tuesday the worst management-employee bickering to date. Reportedly, two officials were stabbed, a few others beaten up and even the general manager had to flee through a broken window. The group of employees responsible for the unfortunate incident were demanding reinstatement of one of their colleagues sacked earlier. There is nothing wrong in standing by a colleague but there are definitely rules and procedures to be followed while making such a demand.

What is missing in the reports is if there was any kind of provocation from the management side. Follow-up reports, however, revealed that a state minister was busy trying to free the 28 employees arrested in connection with the incident. This is purportedly because the accused are members and office-bearers of Jatiyatabadi Sramik Dal.

Our politics thrives on mutual support the leaders are keen on proving their popularity through lobby groups and the supporters are overzealous to prove their allegiance in return for the patronage.

In the case of Sonargaon Hotel we come to see display of politics relating to an establishment that can thrive only on international goodwill and reputation. Hopefully the hotel has not suffered any setback to its image because of the incident. Can't we learn to leave a few institutions or establishments alone so that their quality service is not brought down in a highly competitive world of hotels? Let the Hotel Sonargaon be free from any meddling and internal squabbles to prove the professional standards required to be maintained by a five-star hotel.

Weather Sense

The early morning bus-plunge into a canal on Friday, three kilometres off Demra police station, brought a death tally of nine persons. It is not very clear as to what exactly caused the accident when this is being ascribed to three reasons: fogging, over-loading and speeding.

Odds against the bus mounted with the early morning fog thickening to block vision of things even a few feet away. But even without that blinding mist the mishap could have occurred due to the sheer speeding of an overloaded vehicle.

So, what are the precautionary priorities for the bus owners and operators? Surely in the winter season, early morning trips should not be undertaken without paying attention to weather forecast for the day in broad terms. This is time for picnic-lovers to hazard outings and the fact that we have not yet had the misfortune of hearing any bad news on this is no guarantee that we will not. So. please beware.

Fogs can be unpredictable. Hence, the longdistance bus and coach drivers need to scrupulously avoid speeding and sardinepacking.

Engine or tyre troubles are said to go down during the winter. Even that should not induce them to take chances with their vehicles, many of which are basically in a poor shape and should have been off the road.

Coup in Niger: The Background

by Prof M Maniruzzaman Miah

Since military-rule is not being supported now by the major donors it may not last long. So there will be perhaps another interim government, a fresh election, another newly elected government, and another series of bickerings perhaps over sharing the "cake" resulting in people's sufferings.

Mahamane Ousmane, suspended the constitution, dissolved the pean colonial occupation. in parliament, banned all politithe wake of the war, nationalcal parties and took over the ist movement surged across reign of government by the length and breadth of this vast landmass. Excluding declaring himself president. The army strongman in an the special case of Libya, Suinterview said that the armed dan (1.1.56). Morocco (3.3.56), and Ghana (6.3.57) forces captured power out of patriotism and not for selfgot their independence earlier than others. Most of the Niger is a huge country. French colonies acceded to 13 times (1.19 m. sq. km) self-rule in 1960. By the midbigger than ours, but has a sixties almost all the counpopulation of only 9m. This tries became free from coloeighth largest African counnial rule, except the Portry, much of which is desertuguese colonies where inde-

HE local dailies of Ja-

nuary 29th carried a

news-item mention-

ing that there was a coup-d-

etat in Niger on January 27.

One colonel Ibrahim Barre

deposed the elected

tic, is one of the poorest in

the world. We have two char-

acteristics in common with

Niger. Both Bangladesh and

Niger are members of the

OIC and both belong to the

category of least developed

countries of the world, an

euphemism for poor coun-

tries. Niger is a far off land

and events there do not have

any bearing on any of our

policies. However, it would

be interesting to know the

background of army takeover

briefly at the African political

scene after the Second World

War for a better comprehen-

sion of the current politics of

the continent. Right after the

Second World War, in 1945.

almost the entire continent

of Africa was under Euro-

HERE are two main

functionary is obliged to eat

and drink as a part of duty,

namely when invited to social

events such as receptions.

lunches, dinners, etc in an

official capacity by foreign

diplomats and visitors and

international agency per-

sonnel; and when he/she is

officially inviting distin-

guished foreigners to similar

events. These get-togethers

are not mere opportunities

for socialising and exchang-

ing pleasantries. On the con-

trary, these are meant to

serve many important pur-

poses by providing an infor-

mal and homely atmosphere

for such activities as cultivat-

ing and deepening friendship

with people who matter,

conducting official business,

exchanging information and

views, clearing misunder-

standing, and even for brush-

ing up one's spoken English.

These also provide opportu-

nities to present the best of

our country and society to

our foreign hosts or guests.

in one word, the while idea

is to mix pleasure with busi-

ness to the mutual benefit of

guest and host. This subject

when a government

occasions

types of

But, first, let us look

president

aggrandisement.

During the three decades that followed. African countries experienced a variety of government. Many of them were under military rule. some passing through several coups and counter-coups. But there was also one-man rule (Malawi, Zambia, Cote-d-Ivorie. Tunisia, etc.) or one party rule (Senegal. Botswana, Kenya, etc.) although the latter group of countries used to have elections at some interval. In Cote-d-Ivorie President Houphouet Boigny remained president till he died at the age of 92. In Tunisia President Borguiba who because of old-age (84) was unable to

give any decision on state-

matters had to be removed

pendence came a decade

on the strength of a medical certificate by a team of doctors. Thus in a general way most African countries were being governed by autocratic rule of one variety or the

Things began changing in 1989 when the Berlin Wall was crumbling. Now was the time for multi-party democratic governments. Democracy had to come not only because the political climate everywhere was changing but also because western donors notified their African clients that aid could be channelised only if the political system changed. By 1992 most of the countries accepted pluralist democracy based on adult franchise as their system of government with Benin leading the way in early

Niger provides a typical example of how the new democracies are functioning in the third world. This country became independent in August, 1960. Later the army took over in April 1974 and remained in control of state power till the end of 1991. Around that time there were popular movements for a multi-party democracy and to satisfy people's aspirations a transitional government was formed on November 1st

1991. This government was charged with framing the constitution to pave the way for an elected government by popular vote. Election to the parliament was held in February 1992. This was followed by Mahamane Ousman's election to presidency

directly by adult suffrage.

So far so good. But things began changing later. The President appointed Mahamadou Issoulou as prime minister in April 1993. The opposition parties in the parliament began conspiring from the very start to unseat the government. Finally they were successful in enticing to their side one of the factions which earlier supported the president in his presidential election. Consequently the prime minister lost a no-confidence vote and resigned in September 1993. The president dissolved the parliament and new elections were held. But as ill luck would have it, his party could secure only 37 out of 80 parliamentary seats thus being reduced to a minority in the parliament. Later in February 1995 the president appointed as per constitutional provision one Amadou Boubacar Cisse, a former World Bank executive, as

prime minister out of a list of

three names given to him by the opposition-dominated parliament. However the new cabinet did not last long.

According to reliable reports one of the factions of the combined opposition which was earlier promised the office of speaker withdrew its support from the new prime minister when the promise was not fulfilled. The prime minister consequently lost a vote of confidence only 19 days later. A new prime minister. Hama Amadou was installed on February 21st. But then a trial of strength between the elected president and the prime minister began. The president accused the prime minister of usurping his powers; the prime minister made counter-allegations. Each one was interpreting the constitution in his own way. Controversies arose even about such a trifling matter as to who should frame the agenda of the cabinet. The matter went even upto the Supreme Court. There were efforts at mediation and reconciliation from various quarters, but without any positive

The controversy came to a head on July 6th, 1995 when the president refused to convene the cabinet meeting.

Reportedly the meeting was to decide on some important administrative appointments which could influence future elections.

Right now we have no precise information as to what exactly happened just on the eve of the army takeover. But the intelligent guess is that administrative authority must have collapsed due to the wrangle and political bickerings, which resulted in a stand-off between the president and the parliament for a almost three years now. The economy which was showing signs of strain must have suffered implosion and the people must have been at the end of their tethers. All these paved the way for an army take-over. Mahamane Ousmane's integrity, his education, his refined culture. his personal charm, his youth and above all his patriotism combined with his vision for the future were of no avail to him. He is perhaps not cut out for the society he lives in.

What will happen next is difficult to predict. But since military-rule is not being supported now by the major donors it may not last long. So there will be perhaps another interim government, a fresh election, another newly elected government, and another series of bickerings perhaps over sharing the "cake" resulting in people's sufferings. The circus will continue. One would say the ghosts of the former autocrats have come home to

Eating and Drinking on Duty

In social events hosted by us, the sole emphasis is on food, and that too not typical Bangladeshi food. What we serve in the name of Bangladeshi food is Mughai dishes which the foreigners have perhaps already tasted in Delhi and Islamabad.

servant, one can easily notice a number of things going wrong on our side. Firstly, attendance in these events is hardly made with any one of the deeper motives outlined above. The aim is basically to spend a nice evening, and that is about all. So it is simply pleasure and no business at all. Secondly, some officials attend these religiously, neither to socialise nor to eat. but mainly to consume as much liquor as possible. That is why if you ever happen to ring up these officials late in the evening for any official purpose, the maid will always give the standard reply. "Sahib and Begum Sahib have gone to an embassy party". This kind of drinking is not only against our values, but it is also a despicable sight which gives the worst kind of impression about the 'administrative elite" of the country. So here it is neither normal pleasure nor business, it is simply booze all the way. Thirdly, instead of spend-

ing more time with the hosts is, therefore, not at all trivial. and foreign guests, the usual Indeed, it deserves serious treatment, and that is what is tendency of some of these attempted below. functionaries is to form their Let us first discuss the soexclusive cluster and start cial events to which our loudly conversing in Bangla. Such "social incest" is no functionaries are invited by foreigners. If sufficiently obdoubt counterproductive

since it prevents us from gaining something positive out of these social events. It is also outright rudeness. which creates a negative impression about the country as a whole. Then there are others who after showing their faces to the host vanish without a trace so that their brief presence is of no use for business and does not give them any pleasure either.

have perhaps made ourselves rather cheap. In fact, even in National Day receptions, it does not appear proper to have more than one Minister from our side. Finally, there are no firm ground rules on attendance at these social events, including any rule on who should permit whom to attend, and on what criteria. Indeed, there have been so many changes in whatever

Making Government Work

Fourthly, some of our functionaries are generally blissfully oblivious of the "level" of the host and the principle of reciprocity when accepting invitations from foreigners. Would a functionary of the level of a Minister or Secretary in country X usually attend a reception hosted by our Ambassador in that country? The answer to this question should guide us as to what level of our functionaries should attend a social event hosed in our country by the Ambassador of country X. Unfortunately, we hardly follow this basic crite-

ria, and in the process we

rules were formulated years ago that now every organisation has adopted its own set of practices. This free-for-all situation is hardly desirable.

We may now turn our attention to government/state banquets, dinners, lunches and receptions thrown in honor of foreign guests. this type of event also, several incongruities may be observed. Firstly, there are generally too many invitees from our side, with officials dominating the scene. we seem to hardly realize that our guests may already be pretty tired of seeing the faces of officials during business encounters, and would, therefore, be looking forward to meeting interesting people from Independent professions, such as teachers. writers, scientists, journalists, actors, politicians, singers, sportsmen, etc. Secondly, in social events

hosted by us, the sole em-

phasis is on food, and that too not typical Bangladeshi food. What we serve in the name of Bangladeshi food is Mughai dishes which the foreigners have perhaps already tasted in Delhi and Islamabad. And there is always wastage of food. The practice of combining eating with cultural shows is still rather limited, although with a little more patronage, the latter can be more frequently organized through not only the Shilpakala Academy but also private cultural organizations. Thirdly, the protocol in terms of seating arranges ments and dress is rather heavy and outdated. This does not permit real mixing in an informal environment during

the social events. Fourthly, we are still weak on punctuality. But the more unfortunate aspect is that we do not allow the number two host to start off the event in case the number one host is held up for reasons beyond

his control. Consequently. foreign guests sometimes have to wait long for the host to arrive, which hardly creates the right kind of impression. Finally, we are still unable to control the anarchic traffic that builds up when guests are departing after a large banquet or reception given by our side. At that time. Bangladeshi hosts generally rush out, showing little courtesy to the foreign guests, and our traffic police also does not give the impression of being profession-

During the last twentyfour years of our nationhood. our officials through trial and error must have gathered a great deal of experience in handling both the types of social events discussed above. It is high time that we now try to distill these into detailed instructions and guidelines to be followed by officials in future. These may also be used as training materials. Perhaps a small committee consisting of the Cabinet Secretary, the Principal Secretary, the Foreign Secretary and the Chief of Protocol should be entrusted with this task. Through wide-ranging discussion with relevant officials and other knowledgeable persons, they could come up with a set of recommendations which could then be sent up for the approval of the relevant authori-

Time not Ripe for Polls in J&K

Rajinder Sachar writes from New Delhi

If J&K election is sought to be used by the Prime Minister, there is no doubt that the parties like BJP would make it a furious election item.

ving considerations/ policies though morally reproachable nevertheless broadly accepted by the public as an inevitable compulsion for political parties. But even making all allowances there are certain parameters which cannot be allowed to be crossed. The most urgent and non-

N electoral politics, the

mundane and self-ser-

arguable parameter is that no action should in any way jeopardise the security of the country or encourage dissipative trends in the country.

These parameters are being crossed by Prime Minister Mr Rao in stubbornly still insisting on holding elections Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) in March, inspite of all impartial signals from J&K that holding elections earlier to Parliamentary elections would be disastrous.

The sole consideration for the above step is the supposed advantage which the Prime Minister feels he can

derive in the next Parliamentary election. A barrage of planted leaks by the Government in the newspapers has become a regular feature. suggesting that conditions

are ripe for elections in J&K. In my view such an assessment is politically unacceptable. In last December, National Conference and Mr Farooq Abdullah were half inclined to participate, of course, on certain conditions being satisfied. But now even they are vehemently opposed to holding elections and accuse Central Government of working against the interest of J&K.

Distrust against Government of India has sharpened amongst moderate militants. with whom some talks had taken place. But as usual this

exercise was not done in a genuine manner by the political leadership, rather in a cloak and dagger manner by

the intelligence agencies.

Such is the reckless manner of conducting these talks (according to some of the militants they were even shown a draft of the political package, if they were agreeable not to oppose holding of the election). But to their disgust they find themselves left out in cold by the unexplained silence from the Government quarters putting some of those militants and intermediaries in a compromise position with the result that bitterness has increased further. In such circumstances any attempt to hold election would accentuate

the complex and serious situation. The question is not whether the Government could initiate election notwithstanding the opposition of the Election Commission -my own view is that if could (of course the final word has still to be said by

the Supreme Court). The question is not of legality, but of practicability and of ground reality. Even if now the Election Commission agrees with the Government (though there is no changed circumstances on which it could legitimately do so), the holding of election would result in various parties, groups in J&K to sink their differences and join up together to form one front against this blatantly provocative action of the

Government of India. Inevitably, situation favourable or against the militants and the pain and suffering borne by the average person in J&K may be forgotten against their fight to oppose determinately an election which no one in J&K supports. This will halt the process of disillusionment with the militants and all the gains expected from the suffering and change of mood of the average person will be dissipated. This will negate any possibility of a peaceful solution of J&K in near future.

If J&K election is sought to be used by the Prime Minister, there is no doubt that the parties like BJP would make it a furious election item. Necessarily the temper.

fury and propaganda that will be built on this issue would create communal tension in the country.

Even the supposed advantage which the Prime Minister believes in, if he holds elections (when not even the most optimist envisage a vote turnout of beyond seven to ten per cent in Kashmir vallev), will also show the futility of the exercise. The Prime Minister in those circum: stances will not appear to be a strong administrator and a peace maker but as a bungler who would try to act in his own self-interest under any circumstances.

A satisfactory solution can only take place after the Parliamentary elections when the parties are free from the uncertainties of political repercussion Mr Rao's lame duck Government has no such mandate.

- Mandira RAJINDER SACHAR is a former Chief Justice of High Court, Delhi.

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.

Book is the best gift

Sir. Every year our friend circles greet and wish their respective friends and relatives, kith and kin through different kinds of cards on the occasions of Eid. New Year, Durga Puja and other domestic, social and national festivals. To my opinion it is a mere wastage of money and thus unnecessary. Generally, no one preserves the card though valuable and costly enough apart from its aesthetic sense. After a momentary enjoyment, it is left carelessly and even thrown

into the waste paper bag. It will be a noble and wise deed if a book is gifted instead of a card. Anyone can easily present a book to his beloved at a minimum cost but with an inner and intrinsic value. Moreover, an ordinary card also costs no lesser money.

A book's value is ever-lasting and imperishable. Indeed, books are the best gifts for all. I think everybody welcomes this gift whole heart-

Some also advocate for flowers. Undoubtedly, a flower has its own flavour.

glamour, dignity and valu**é**. Its holiness and beauty is beyond description. But can we save its dignity, significance. purity and goodness for long? Ultimately its haven and fate is the dustbin. So, the result is the same. We cannot maintain its material value and ethical importance. But a good book is, as it were, the sun. It washes all sorts of mental limitations and boundaries. It brightens our heart and broadens our mental horizon and lightens up our intellectual corridors. Leo Tolstoy said. "Three things are essential for a man's life and these are Books, Books and Books".

As good books are the source of knowledge for both here and hereafter, we can be benefitted reciprocally through book-media on different occasions. This everlasting message, I do think and believe, will save the nation as a whole from all sorts

of vices prevailing around us. of course, if we follow and practise the teachings contained in the books.

I like to urge all to present books, of course good books, to their near and dear ones on the occasion of the ensuing Eid-ul-Fitre instead of presenting Eid Cards and the like that create insignificant impressions on our hardened souls.

Md Aamir Shamsi 127, Laibagh Road, Dhaka

US foreign policy

Sir. Before 1914 the American people, like many others on planet Earth, were abysmally ignorant about international affairs. US President Monroe's

Doctrine of December 02 1823 warning the Europeans to keep "hands off" of the

western hemisphere had more or less "cut off" the USA from the rest of the world for about a century.

This so called isolationalism" of the USA. however, has vanished long

The USA applied successfully Monroe Doctrine as justification for the overthrow of the Guatemalan government in 1954, Bay of Pigs adventure in 1961 and the Domican Republic invasion in

Not only that the USA also began poking her nose in the internal affairs of Latin American, Asian, African and European countries but many of the countries as well willingly started inviting and seeking USA's intervention was a view to mitigating their vari-

ous sufferings in domestic. regional and international What are the aims and objectives of US foreign policy

Where there is money there is USA, where there is comedy there is USA, where there is tragedy there is USA. US policy on Palestine and

Bosnia is commendable. Today the USA claims herself to be the greatest civilisation on earth. We would request the USA

to pursue a foreign policy based on Universal Declaration of Human Rights in letter and spirit and thus help solve problems like Chechnya, Kashmir, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, as well as UN economic embargo against Iraq. India's unilateral withdrawal of the Ganges river water, poverty, hunger and disease, for the sake of world peace.

O H Kabir Dhaka-1203

