

All for It

The Kathmandu conference on regional cooperation in harnessing eastern Himalayan rivers concluded on Sunday with India, Bangladesh and Nepal reflecting an upbeat mood, albeit on the non-government level. The experts thought that the time was opportune for prising open the hitherto suppressed bounty of their common river basins.

There cannot be any second opinion on that: the political atmospherics have been vibrantly conducive on this side of the region to the three countries' forging closer ties on water and environment; and they have Mahakali and Ganges water treaties as the fountain-head for an energetic harnessing of the eastern Himalayan water resources.

We are pretty clear in our mind that this kind of sub-regional cooperation envisaged to optimally utilise natural resources commonly possessed by the three countries needs hardly invoke, or even remotely hurt, any political or SAARC sensibilities. In fact, it had been a pet idea with all the governments here that there be trilateral cooperation among India, Bangladesh and Nepal for flood-control in the monsoons and augmentation in the flow of the Ganges during the dry season. We are, therefore, entirely for a concerted action plan to fully employ the eastern Himalayan water resources for the collective benefit of our poverty-stricken peoples. They should no longer be held ransom to political vicissitudes while other such comparable natural geographical formations in the rest of the world advanced rapidly with compacts and treaties transcending the caprice of politics at the bilateral levels.

We have a long way to go in that direction. The Kathmandu conference having merely expressed a non-governmental resolve, the governments need now to take up the matter in earnest, duly inspired by the fact that the required collective will can be mustered now with a relative ease because of the changed political outlook.

We suggest that further information dissemination along the line of Kathmandu conference take place. This needs to be based on free exchange of data (there being no secret information in the age of satellites), so that opposition political parties are drawn into a debate thereon for the sake of arriving at a political consensus on the issues involved within the countries concerned.

Urban Transport Project

The government plan seeking to implement a World Bank-financed US \$ 125 m transport project for Dhaka city over the next two years looks rather ambitious. It promises almost everything one could wish for the city to improve her traffic system: side-walks, special lanes for cycles and rickshaws, bus-only lanes, junction overpasses, supports for smooth traffic management, training for transport agencies and the like. It will take cast-iron synchronisation of efforts to complete all these in two years.

We really feel happy that an improvement to the city's traffic system has been conceived so comprehensively and on such a grand scale. The emphasis clearly is on developing an integrated transport system centring around an efficiently-run bus service with rickshaws providing feeder services. As part of a long-term plan, the project has been mindful of the future growth of the city in accordance with the capital's land-use planning for the future. So, the entire range of infrastructure, regulatory system for traffic, training for drivers and traffic police have been taken into account. We only wish that the radical transformation in our transport system will take place step by step and that no quarter would be given any handle for using it politically.

In this context, we would like to focus on the governance of the city. The coordination committee of the city's service agencies has been in operation for sometime now. But this has not impacted very visibly as yet on the quality of services. Putting their acts together will prove crucially important for the successful implementation of the Dhaka Urban Transport Project (DUTP) as detailed above, including its subsequent operational aspects. Unless the interconnected and supporting systems and mechanisms are fully in place, the project could yield only lop-sided benefits.

In the Public Eye

The journalists' high rating in respect of public esteem has been established in a survey conducted by an organisation called Democracywatch. All of us in the journalism profession have reasons to be proud of this better public acceptance compared with that being enjoyed by doctors, politicians and the police as an agency. But this should not make us complacent, for some of us are prone to weaknesses, shortcomings and even journalistic deviations. We must notice that even in a sample survey, out of a score of 10, we have managed to a rating of 6.03 points. A disapproval ratio of about 40 per cent is far from flattering.

On the other hand, both politicians and the police have more reasons than one for a thorough soul-searching. Politicians have a rating of 3.37 and the police 2.99. Politicians as public representatives bank on people's confidence in them. In fact, it is the life-blood for them. But look how poorly they have fared in the public eye! The same goes for the law enforcers. To a large extent, the fundamentals of a society are directly dependent on the service the police render and the confidence they enjoy among the public.

Neither of the groups surveyed has an enviable record, but for sure the country's politicians and police might feel sorry and embarrassed because of the study's revelation. A survey such as this one will have served its purpose if the concerned quarters picked up the right messages.

By the way, it would have been interesting to know how our teachers fared in this contest.

Council for Defence and National Security

Formalising an Unofficial Watchdog Mechanism

Unfortunate experience has shown that the elite involved with governance in Pakistan over the years have been primarily motivated by personal ambition, greed and the hunger for power rather than the supreme interests of the country.

FOR the past 50 years we have been engaged in the search for a system that will make this country governable. That the forces inimical to our survival as a country label us as a 'failed state' only adds salt to our wounds, more so because this motivated piece of disinformation is meant to give truth to that lie. Despite all our vicissitudes, we are manpower-rich and resource-rich. Pakistan remains very much a dynamic, potentially prosperous country, with resilience enough to survive the likes of the Zardari duo who mercilessly looted this country and are directly responsible for the financial emergency that we are passing through.

That the loot was engineered in the name of democracy under the cover of the Constitution only underscores the necessity of a definitive check and balance in the system. Trying to put in place such a mechanism has been an inexact science, based on such selfish motives that any sincere effort to make positive corrections in the system release fears and raises doubts about the motives.

The parliamentary system envisaged by our founding fathers was soon taken over lock, stock and barrel by the British-trained organised civilian corps of bureaucrats, first, Ghulam Mohammad and then, Iskander Mirza ruling the roost through manipulating of politicians behind the facade of democratic rule. In recognition of (or rather as a sop to) the other 'organised force' in the country, the serving Commander-in-Chief was taken in as Defence Minister in a 'democratic' government. By 1958 democracy had become a bad joke, the mess providing a window of opportunity for the 'other' organised force to impose the first martial law. The presidential system that followed was simply an civilianized extension of the Martial Law regime and was in turn replaced by another Martial Law in 1969. The break-up of the country in 1971 saw an extension of the Martial Law till an interim Constitution led to the 1973 Constitution, a complete document that was emanated by its own author by significant amendments within hours of its unanimous adoption by the parliament.

While there was a titular president, the amendments ensured that the Prime Minister became the President (inclusive of a Military Secretary and ADCs) in all but name. The excesses of the autocratic rule under the garb of democracy that followed gave another window of opportunity for Martial Law in 1977. This time more of a military-civil compact than

during the previous Martial Laws. The facade of democratic rule re-appeared in 1985 under the 8th Amendment, a Sword of Damocles exercised by the dictator President to keep recalcitrant PMs in check. When the chief beneficiary departed from the scene in 1988, we reverted back to the type of 'democracy' overseen by the bureaucrats of the early 1950s except that this time the military became an equal partner. Instead of resorting to Martial Law, Article 58(2)B was available to the incumbent President to take out elected governments. An informal 'Troika' came into existence comprising the President, PM and the COAS. It was generally thought that the COAS was more equal than the others but this depended not only on his personality and circumstances but also the combination thereof at any given point of time.

Whether the application of Article 58(2)B was right or wrong depended upon the judgment of the solitary person of the President. In essence like Article 58(2)B was envisaged to stave off Martial Law, we badly needed another mechanism to ward off misuse of Article

58(2)B. Systems and rules are respectively as good or bad as the people who run and implement them. Unfortunate experience has shown that the elite involved with governance in Pakistan over the years have been primarily motivated by personal ambition, greed and the hunger for power rather than the supreme interests of the country. No inherent check and balance in the system controls the pendulum from swinging to extremes. A monitoring mechanism in the form of collective decision-making was needed that would keep the ruling elite within the parameters that could have prevented the Zardaris from not only taking the country to the cleaners, but continuing to thumb their noses with impunity at the failure of the system to hold them accountable. A system for accountability has been long overdue, an instrument at the highest level formalising the informal role of the President and the Armed Forces Chiefs in not only decision-making about important issues facing the country, but also dissuading the elected government from riding roughshod or circum-

venting the very Constitution it drew its authority from. Late President Ziaul Haq envisaged this as a National Security Council (NSC) but his aim in trying to form such a Council were hardly altruistic and he fell back on the bludgeon of Article 58(2)B, used to good effect by his civilian successors, both rightly and wrongly. In 1981 the then Bangladesh Chief of Army Staff, Lt Gen H M Ershad had proposed such an NSC mechanism in Bangladesh to President Sattar, assassinated President Gen Ziaur Rahman's successor, but to no avail. The ensuing economic and political mess left Ershad with no alternative but to impose Martial Law.

There is a school of thought that believes that formation of a super watchdog body like the NSC involves the Armed Forces into the controversy of politics.

What use are the Armed Forces if there is no country left to defend? Whereas Martial Law did not remove the last three elected governments, could the President use his powers without the support of the Army? We are deluding ourselves if we do not accept the public perception that conforms to the reality

that in a Muslim country the Army will always have a say in the affairs of state, better to institutionalise this process within the parameters of the Constitution. In Pakistan, Article 58(2)B does not act as the buffer it was originally envisaged. Instead of the informal 'Troika' comprising only the President, the PM and the COAS, an expanded forum of a 10-member Council would debate and counsel on important national issues. That the proposed forum is being labelled as an 'advisory body' is simply unnecessary semantics that should be discarded in favour of presenting the truth as it is.

A spade should be called a spade! The Council for Defence and National Security (CDNS) is a tongue twister that inculcates the original concept of a National Security Council, providing a pragmatic check and balance mechanism whose absence led to the derailment of whichever government was in place. Instead of the 'Turkish Model' of having the military have a say in important matters in state affairs or the other extreme of the 'Indonesian Golkar Model' or the 'Burmese State Law and order Restora-

tion Council (SLORC)' in which the military becomes the state, we may have finally hit upon the ideal combination to protect us in the future from Zardari-type governance. The economy is so intertwined with national security, it is important for the heads of the Services to be associated at the formulation of policy considerations. Martial Law always envisaged accountability, not governance, invariably the military soon forget that accountability was the *raison d'être* for their interference and got bogged down in governance which was neither their mandate or within their capability. As an advisory body chaired by the President, if the CDNS can successfully monitor the mechanism of accountability, it would have succeeded beyond any measure.

Anybody who thinks that accountability can be carried out by the FIA should have his (or her) head examined, the present process has got FIA personnel laughing all the way to the bank. The heart of their integrity having been eroded by politicisation, the result has been unbridled corruption. Except making FIA personnel who have replaced the previous ones (or have survived) much richer, their commitment is a figment of our imagination. The entire FIA staff lock, stock and barrel (the 10 per cent or so innocents included as acceptable casualties should be sent home), including in Armed Forces personnel in rotation for short stints in a revamped FIA in the same manner as is done for the Anti-Narcotics Task Force (ANTF). Article 245 of the Constitution should be invoked to hand over the accountability process to the Armed Forces in order to apprehend, investigate, interrogate and prosecute suspects in front of Tribunals especially constituted in consultation with the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

The formation of the CDNS set in motion rumours about the elections being held at all. The formation of CDNS should have better come along with the caretakers on Nov 5, 1996 or later under the aegis of an elected government but atrocious timing notwithstanding, one has no reason to doubt the credibility of the Presidential initiative. The effectiveness of the CDNS in ensuring meaningful accountability will force-multiply the potential of democratic governance. This is an important milestone in the 50th year of our existence, one that should certainly help in elongating our existence beyond the period being mandated by a bunch of pessimists who have eyes only for a hint of dark clouds and miss out the silver lining.

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

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Politicians Dodge Issues in Fight for the Moral High Ground

British voters raise a sceptical eyebrow at the outbreak of moral crusading by politicians out to woo them in the run-up to a general election. Apart from hypocrisy and scapegoating, this championing of values and virtues may also betray political impotence and inaction, writes John Booth from London

PRIME Minister John Major opened election year in Britain by saying he would put defence of the family and traditional institutions at the centre of his drive to win a fifth consecutive term of office for the Conservative party. Like many politicians, he seems happier talking about values, families, communities and even God, than about jobs, homes, the trade balance and other issues once considered the stuff of political debate.

It is difficult to pinpoint where all this righteous thrashing about started, but it received a boost during the Easter religious festival last year when opposition Labour Party leader Tony Blair gave a long newspaper interview about his Christian convictions.

In the course of his leadership election campaign two years earlier, Blair had invited the cameras to see him and his family in church, and this time round the other parties were not going to miss out.

Without hours of publication of Blair's interview, we were being told about the Christian convictions of Prime Minister John Major and Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown. By the end of the week, there were even published comparisons of the time each of the trio spent daily in prayer.

This display of conspicuous Christianity may impress the small proportion of the British electorate who attend church. But it seems doubtful that the wave of moral rhetoric which now suffuses political debate in Britain will do much for the country, says social analyst Andrew War.



Blair, Major, Ashdown: Praying for success

Few would argue that self-discipline, respect for the law, consideration for others and responsibility for oneself and one's family were unimportant. But plainly, those applauding him did not see failings in themselves. These worthy virtues could only be lacking in others.

Ward's research makes clear who — in the eyes of Major's government and his press supporters — these moral defectives were: single mothers. The author cites a clutch of ministerial speeches summarised by one journalist as rage over 'the (social welfare) burden on state finances by the increasing number of single-parent families'. These women were not only having children at the expense of others and in order to quality for scarce public housing, but they were, in the words of Tory MP Alan Duncan, 'undeserving'.

In a storm of moral outrage, other prominent Tories blamed single parenthood for increasing crime rates and other social ills. The Government's crusade was quickly reduced to face when, within weeks, leading Conservatives had to explain how one of their junior minis-

ters, Tim Yeo — a man married with two grown-up children — had fathered a child to a single mother. He was forced to resign, while 'Back to Basics', says Ward, 'was thrown onto the rocks.' Little has since been heard of the campaign, but why does moral rhetoric still seem to be the order of the day? Do politicians not realise that voters are quick to spot hypocrisy?

At one level, some politicians do not grasp this obvious truth and carry on moralising, apparently blind to the public awareness of their failure to match behaviour to publicised precept. There are many examples, from the politicians who back tough wage controls on low-paid public-sector workers while voting themselves a big salary increase, to the MP prominent in promoting arms sales to the Third World who passionately denounces the sale of hand-guns in Britain.

But at another level, the moralising, the very public exhibition of that most private of matters — one's belief in what matters most, in God or whatever principles we accept as guidance for our actions — is a sinister development. There are

three causes for concern. The first, as Ward makes clear, is that politicians' moral outrage is usually directed at scapegoats. For Major, single mothers were the target. For his predecessor, Margaret Thatcher, coal miners became 'the enemy within.' Scapegoating is a divisive force. At its least dangerous it vilifies the already weak and pushes them further to the margins. At its worst, with the full force of the authoritarian state, it has sent millions this century to the gulags and the gas ovens.

Secondly, while moral concern is to be encouraged, moral panic — the creation of an atmosphere in which snappy, simple 'solutions' to complex problems are introduced — is not. A recent comparative study by Britain's Luton University of deprived housing estates in Paris and London revealed how long-term, grassroots-based public investment in the French capital was for more successful in cutting crime than the patchy short-term projects in its British counterpart.

The third reason for concern is that the recent moralising betrays political abdication. An old definition says politics is the business of settling who gets what. Political space is where democratic decisions about resources should be made, not a television set for earnest looks and moralising displays.

But in a world where many politicians seem resigned to the dominance of global forces, where they appear impotent in the face of media barons, transnational corporations and ever-shifting computerised assets, perhaps asserting their acknowledgment of a few old-fashioned virtues, is all they feel able to offer. If this is true, we really are in moral danger. However righteous may be the words of our leaders, their actions — or, more likely, inaction — will speak even louder.

Dhaka Day by Day Leaning on Nature

by Fayza Haq



Masuma Khan, who had her solo exhibit at the Alliance Francaise, has been drawing and painting since she was three years old and always hoped to be an artist. 'When I am painting, I feel I am out of this world. All that interests me when I'm painting are my colours, lines and forms. In my last exhibit I presented feelings like love, happiness, the state of insomnia and such abstract themes. This time I concentrated on nature. Weary and blasé with the industrial development of the cities I have turned to subjects like water, sky and plants. When I teach students it also gives me tremendous delight. My work-shops at Alliance Francaise on Fridays is something I look forward to. I deal with different ages of children and varied media.'

Masuma's mixed media 'Utsuva' has brought in items like banana leaves, Bangladeshi had fans and chikkas. The forms have been brought in but not the colours. The colours of festivity — pink, yellow and green — cover the composition. Happiness, youth, optimism and nature are blended into one creation. 'Awaiting' has blue and green on canvas paper. The subtle and economic strokes depicted a woman standing by the door of her village home hoping for her family to return. Nature has been brought in by the soft forms of the overhanging banana leaves. Brown and mauve splashes have been included to give depth to the composition while inserts of white give it relief.

'Nature-14' is a gorgeous depiction of a field with tall flowering plants. The sky, interspersed with clouds and birds, has been brought in. The green and blue impressionistic strokes of the plant stands out bravely against the wash of blue and yellow.

'Kashful' is another deft portrayal of blossoms growing in abundance in vast fields. The white blossoms are blown by the wind. The sky and trees in the background are brought in with simple strokes. The painting done with apparent easy strokes has a vibrant and dy-

amic effect.

Multicoloured flowers in 'Youth-5' are used as a symbol of lively, daring and young people. These orange and mauve flowers are done in a semi-abstract way so that one can see vivid splashes of orange and pink amidst a vast mass of pale green and blue.

'Water-2' depicts water waves in semi-abstract forms with fish, flowers and leaves. The scintillating water waves and its inhabitants are seen as buoyant squiggles and splashes highlighted by white and gold.

'Intimate' has two turtle doves billing and cooing in a garden. Splashes of colours complete the birds and also the leafy surroundings.

'Wari' is a purely abstract depiction of the area the artist lives in. Triangles, rectangles, circles and squares in blue, green and red completed the picture. One could easily imagine houses, trees, streets and people arising from the abstract strokes.

'Worried Women' brings in the theme of downtrodden women in a beautiful country which has so many flora and fauna to boast of.

Masuma says, 'Earlier I had done many realistic works. This time I had only one realistic work 'Life and Nature' which was used by Banque Indosuez for their '97 calendar. I don't want to be left behind by my contemporaries so I've embarked on semi-abstracts since '88. Earlier on, I had relied on impressionism to give me a style. Now I do semi-abstracts as I feel this is the demand of the time. I like Mansoorul Karim's work tremendously. I care for his work not just because he is a prize winner but because he has so much to say in his work.'

Of Masuma's 23 paintings five were oils, eleven water-colour and seven mixed media.

Masuma who has her BFA from the Bangladesh College of Arts and Crafts in '72 held 11 solo exhibition in Dhaka. Earlier in 1960 she had won the President's Medal. She writes art reviews for journals and has held workshops for children at the Goethe Institut and the Alliance Francaise.

To the Editor...

Red-taped education

Sir, Following the results of the BCS examination in 1994, I was posted to a thana-level degree college in Serajganj. This professional placement really put me and my family in the soup, because I am the lone earning member of my family which is settled in Dhaka. On Sept 26, 1996, I wrote an application, recommended by an incumbent minister, to the DG, Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education, seeking a transfer to any place in or around Dhaka. The then DG instructed, on the same day, the authority concerned to send my file to the ministry. From here begins the tale of my real woes.

I was asked to complete some formalities. While I was doing that, I was told, to my horror, that my file was missing. I was asked to give a photocopy to pursue my case. Following that, the DG office proposed my name for a college in Gouripur, Daudkandi. It did so responding to the demand of the authorities of that particular college, where the students had staged frequent agitation, and at one stage, put it under lock and key. It was learnt that the lone post of an English lecturer there had been lying vacant for quite some time. And this vacancy continued despite repeated overtures to the DG office by the local authorities for a teacher.

Returning to what I was saying, the official proposal to put me in the vacant slot of an English lecturer at the Gouripur college hit the snag on the ground of not having arrived through the 'proper channel'. They said the application was not forwarded by my Principal. While it is true that I did not have it forwarded by the Principal at that instant, I had nevertheless procured the same well within the period of the authorities' consideration of my case. For reasons best known to them, they did not show any interest to work further on my file.

My plight multiplied when I learned that they were more interested in placing another file in which a transfer proposal was arranged very subtly between two teachers — one from my college and the other from another one — in the guise of mutual transfer. And it seemed that they were busy in getting it approved even at my cost. What was really galling

was that the dealing assistant in an absolutely mind-boggling display of impertinence did not carry out his boss's (who seemed to be a thoroughly honest man) order to table my file. Having seen the ways of this world, it seems money or rather my refusal to use money to get things done, opened the Pandora's box for me.

A suffering citizen  
Dhaka

'The Lonely'

Sir, This is in response to a letter titled 'The Lonely' printed on January 11, 1997. First of all, I would like to appreciate the thought about the unfortunate old people of our society. The case of the old people is much the same as that of the youth of this country. The youth have nothing to do, and as a result, turn to activities that lead them to crimes. The old, on the other hand, having no work engagement in their retired life, become psychologically depressed and hence physically ill.

In the end, they pose as more of a burden to their families, simply because they are viewed as incapable of earning and yet a liability requiring both the time and abode of the family. Situation, therefore, compels them to forget that they can still be a productive member of the society.

Being a resident of Uttara myself, I am pleased to find someone who thinks for the old of the Uttara community. It is true that there is much difference between the lifestyles of the old people of the upper-class and the middle-class. The upper-class have the capacity to engage their retired members. The problem lies with the middle-class families who have neither the money nor the time to support their aged members, since they themselves are struggling for their own survival. If we wish to contribute to the welfare of the society, we must first realise that we cannot allow such human nature to stand as an obstacle in our way.

In this regard, the idea of an old home is quite praiseworthy. I myself have a few ideas on my mind I believe, it would be very useful if we could try to do something in a unified fashion by exchanging our thoughts and beliefs.

Ali Durlou Khan  
Uttara, Dhaka