

Very Nearly a Crime City

Saturday's murder of Aslam Sardar, footballer-turned-contractor, at three in the afternoon on Gopibagh main road, by a group of killers is a sure sign of this capital city's slide into the infamy of a crime-controlled zone of insecurity. There had been worse and open daylight murders in this city by groups of organised killers — the Lalbagh massacre is as hard to forget as the Mohammadpur Shahabuddin murder. But those were perpetrated patently at political behest and nobody thought Dhaka's crime or insecurity profile was largely aggravated by those. The same way, university shootings and casualties do not indicate a general fall in Dhaka's level of liveability. Aslam Sardar's murder signifies a rude shock to complacency about Dhaka's being a comparatively crime-free city.

The reason behind Aslam's murder may be anything from row over sharing Brothers Union takings from Eid cattle market to years-old vendetta over tender competition during Aslam's stint as a first class contractor. It is nevertheless true that known and since identified terrorists, either on their own or on hire, decided to kill Aslam and they thought slaying him on the crowded Gopibagh road around early afternoon was the best way to do that. This was exactly how another group of killers murdered a police officer's son. The officer, failing to get his superiors to move effectively against the killers, died with a broken heart months later. It is these that convincingly turns Dhaka into a crime city. Its roads and streets are fast becoming the preserve of killers.

The killers of Aslam have all been named. It's now a matter of building up legal certainty as to their crime. And then they will be in for hanging or a life sentence. How dare they then do the thing so openly? Well, don't they know even proven killers in Bangladesh do not stand to be punished? They know too well about Shahabuddin's murderers lording it over all around the city. What came of the police officer's death and his son's killing? And what about the Lalbagh massacre? In two of these cases the ruling party has reasons to be aggrieved. Has that helped matters?

We are happy that over the last two years there has been a marked improvement in the arrest of suspected culprits. But after that what? When murder cases of such notoriety and exposure as the present one keep on hanging for years, both the judicial and the police systems lose meaning by a large degree. The backlog of lakhs of cases at one end and a highly vulnerable police prosecution on the other — jointly give the killers the guts to give state and society, law and government a damn.

Let us all promise not to forget Aslam's murder and see what happens to his murderers — and when.

Tainted Tea

We are concerned at authorities' indifference to the reports on the sale of spurious tea in the local market. A front page item of a national daily screamed Sunday last to our horror that marketing of tea, deemed unfit for human consumption by experts due to presence of toxic chemicals in it, is going on in full swing.

It is shocking because it has been more than a month since the news was broken; already reports of enquiry committees formed by both Bangladesh Tea Board and Bangladesh Tea Research Institute have proved the allegation to be true. By now the government in tandem with tea planters and marketers should have found out a way to deal with the situation.

Reportedly some people, obviously very well networked, have been supplying spurious, sub-standard tea to the market for a fairly long time. They collect the pruning litter from the tea gardens and then pound it together with various chemicals. One of them is sodium carbonate, a chemical compound better known as a detergent. It is used to enhance the taste and colour of the brew!

We interpret the want of any remedial measure until now as an instance of criminal negligence to public health. Tea is a very popular drink. With tea price on an upward swing for quite some time, there is every chance that the better and costlier variety will be replaced by the cheaper tainted tea in the market. Come to think that has been the case what a mindbogglingly large number of people who take tea from hotels and restaurants regularly must have courted health hazard already!

Besides, this augurs ill for our future in international market. Currently, the competition in the global tea market is very stiff. If we cannot stem the rot at home now, what little edge we have gained over some of our rivals recently will be nullified sooner than later.

We demand the government look into the matter and help remove the malpractice in the domestic tea market immediately. Not only people's health is at stake but also the future of a foreign exchange earner.

Vanishing Trick by a Forest

Travelers to Cox's Bazar had over years a most diverse experience of journey. At the time of partition of India there was only a steamer service to Cox's Bazar. There was no other route. Now you can take a trip to the wonderful sea beach either by bus or by air. Overland you have to cross Chakoria thana. Decades back one saw in Chakoria a dense forest. Some more years back the Chakoria forest stood solidly preventing road connection between Chittagong and Cox's Bazar.

This was an extension of the mangrove forest of the Sundarbans. Five forest offices oversaw the 10 forest compartments in Rampur and 11 of the Chandrabadia zones of the Chakoria Sundarbans. Take a trip now across Chakoria to Cox's Bazar, you won't see a single gawa tree there. Shrimp cultivators every now and then come up against stumps and stumps of the trees that were once there. Chakoria is one big story of organised plunder of nature. The vegetation, indeed the geomorphology of the place together with its ecosystem has undergone a total change over a matter of decades.

Thanks roundly to shrimp culture, or is it cultivation? But may be not so roundly. For salt cultivation preceded the shrimp there. A growing population and all bent on salt or shrimp farming, with enthusiastic support from government functionaries, wrought a mindless vandalism on nature as well as on the future of this nation. Isn't it yet time to ask what price shrimping? Is it worth the loss we have to undergo in eco terms? Cannot the authorities make a distinction between shrimp hatcheries on forest lands, the same on rice plantations and on plain waste littoral land and allow only the last to be exploited as shrimp farms?

Coming Challenges for Democracy

The most potent challenge to democracy in the 21st century will perhaps be coming from the gradual erosion of nation state under an inexorable force of globalisation which has already crashed across national frontiers.

As mankind is about to be ushered into 21st century the transition is marked by sweeping victory for democracy the world over. For the first time in all history more people on the planet live under democracy than dictatorship, so declared President Clinton during his second inaugural address. The New York Times, after a close scrutiny of the claim, confirms 3.1 billion people to be living under democracies and another 2.66 under assorted other systems.

Indeed, the demise of cold war brought in its wake a new mood of triumphalism for democracy with the fall of authoritarian regimes across the world and great majority of third world countries either practicing or professing democracy. This is a peak that democracy could never scale during its long chequered history since the creed's inception in Greek city states 2500 years ago.

As regards the non-conformists it was earnestly hoped that the majoritarian propensity would ultimately result in the universalisation of western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. It is an apt moment for a fitting celebration for the pro-democracy forces of the world. Yet, far from a sense of euphoria the winners of the long struggle for liberal democracy, at the best, a guarded optimism for the future of democracy. This is not without a reason.

At the turn of the century, in 1900 also the people believed in the inevitability of democracy even more firmly because its prospects looked equally bright with the coming of an age of peace and rationality after prolonged upheavals in war torn Europe during the previous century. It was predicted that the man of 20th century would be hopeful man with unshakable trust in human ingenuity. Looking back it may be shocking to recall just how those hopes were shattered by hatred, irrationality and atrocity bringing mankind on the brink of peril.

One wonders how deeply democracy has really struck its roots in non-democratic countries only recently freed from the clutches of authoritarian regimes. There are factors which always put up challenges

to democratic experimentation, particularly in its nascent stage. Now there are developmental dynamics — never experienced before — to confront democracy. As the millennium comes to a close that is precisely the anxiety the freedom loving people across the world are seized with.

The most potent challenge to democracy in the 21st century will perhaps be coming from the gradual erosion of nation state under an inexorable force of globalisation which has already crashed across national frontiers. Democratic politics comes into play on the turf of nation state which is the traditional site for democracy to flourish.

The globalisation is about to obliterate the national identity — an essential ingredient of nation state. It has enfeebled national power of fiscal control, undercut national management of interest and exchange rates and denied nations the shaping of their own economic destiny. How can the democratic accountability be ensured under such conditions? How can democracy be evolved, nourished and perfected at all? The destruction or dilution of nation state is the first casualty of relentless global economy and democracy is the victim to the

loss of its traditional turf. Although modern democracy is the political offspring of technology and capitalism symbolised by industrial revolution, both pose strange new challenges to democracy now. The Industrial Revolution extended over generations and allowed time for human and institutional adjustment. The Computer revolution does not allow that time and therefore the transition from Factory Age to Computer Age is far more traumatic than one from farm to factory. The tremendous acceleration of technology strains the bond of social control and political sovereignty. The computerised world has already posed problems for democracy

stant responses but discourages pragmatic thoughts and offers outlet for demagoguery, egomania, insult and hate which are prejudicial to healthy growth of democracy. While the onrush of technology creates new problems which are, however, of matter of choice, an unfettered capitalism within the framework of globalised economy has even more disruptive consequences. Democracy does require capitalism and private ownership but they are no guarantee for democracy as have been amply demonstrated by authoritarian regimes of Deng Ziaoping of China or Pinochet of Chile. Capitalism is, no doubt, the supreme engine of innovation, production and distribution, but its method, heedless of little beyond its profits is destructive for democratic society. If capitalism is measured only in terms of making money out of it, its untrammelled intensification and spread of market values into all spheres of life will prove dangerous to open and democratic society.

The concepts of modern democracy are European inventions. With the end of Eurocentric era and now the advent of Asia Pacific economic magnetism there is a historic shift also in political balance. In contrast to European ethos the Asian traditions value the group more than individual, order more than argument, authority more than liberty and solidarity more than freedom. The Asian leaders have started to contrast oriental discipline and stability with disorder and moral decadence in the individualistic west. They are no more prepared to accept western democratic standards without putting them to question as to whether they are of any relevance to them.

This assertion of Asian leaders are most likely to prove harmful to the spread of classical democracy as conceived in more than one way. Whereas Industrial Revolution created more jobs than it destroyed the computer revolution destroys more job than it creates thus running contrary to democratic spirit of social wellbeing and fairplay. It creates more rigid class barrier with the creation of technological aristocracy and an underclass composed of all who are outside.

What is, however, more disturbing for democracy is an ominous prospect of computer affecting the traditional procedure of democratic politics. Now, the interactivity introduced by the computer revolution makes a state of democracy in which every citizen can participate in the conduct of public affair technically feasible on a national scale — at least in the advanced industrialised countries. A hyperinteractive state of democracy encourages in-

flourish. Some of the democracy's institutions are synonymous, overlapping and interrelated with those of state. Therefore, once the state is weakened or diluted in its power and composition the democracy is deprived of the base on which it rests.

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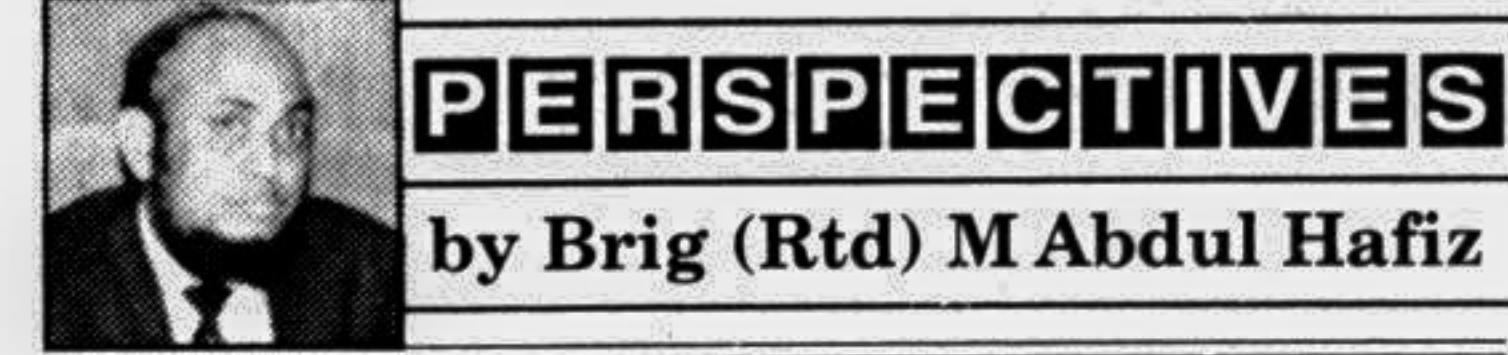
There is no alternative to great leaders to make world safe for democracy. Yet the best of the leaders in the democratic camp are dwarfed by Lee Kuan Yew or Mahathir — branded authoritarian by the West — in catholicity of mind, sincerity of purpose and highest standard of moral values. There are few signs of democracy producing leaders of the stature of Roosevelt or Churchill — not withstanding the latter's imperialistic proclivity — in decades.

Democracy has narrowly survived a turbulent twentieth century torn by wars and baffled by rapid rise of authoritarianism — both of communist and military version. In spite of a democratic revivalism after the cold war it cannot be expected to enjoy a free ride through the next century. Apart from democracy's inherent difficulty of transplanting it — essentially a western creation — to parts of the world with different cultures and traditions, democracy will have to run a gauntlet of challenges typical of the change of time. Any failure on the part of democracy will invite the rise of variety of alternative creeds.

The names for the appointment to gubernatorial posts I have seen in newspapers indicate that it will be a BJP show. Some who are camp followers of the party may also come in. Still more alarming is the appointment of judges. It goes to the credit of the late Law Minister Dinesh Goswami who appointed to the bench the best persons available in the country. State Law Minister Bhardwaj of Congress played havoc with appointments, and politicised them. Were the BJP to follow his example — as are the reports — it would introduce the element of religious chauvinism to the judiciary.

Press reports have it that the political appointees as envoys are being changed. In principle, this is a commendable step. But it will create problems for the foreign office. The way in which governments are tumbling at New Delhi may result into a change of political appointees every six months. How does the foreign office function or, for that matter, the political appointees settle down to their job. The period of contract to an envoy should be respected. This may be a practical way out till a single party attains a majority in Parliament.

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PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

Riding Roughshod over People's Verdict

Democracy is such a jealous mistress that even a small lapse in steadfastness leaves a train of doubts. The appointments of Parmod Mahajan as the PM's adviser and of Jaswant Singh as the Planning Commission Vice Chairman have damaged Vajpayee's image. The two were defeated at the polls only a few weeks ago.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

bomb blasts, the official figures indicate that there were as many as 333 bomb blasts during the five-year tenure (1991 to 1996) of Jayalalitha. That is, there was one bomb blast every five days. Some 135 people were killed and 394 injured. If the number of bomb blasts had been the criterion, she should have been dismissed within the first year of her regime.

The DMK may have faltered in several ways. Its faults should be pointed out to it. Not only that, the public should know whether or how far the Karunanidhi government has compromised law and order. Much was made of the Jain Commission report. The Inder Gujral government was pulled down because it refused to drop the DMK Ministers. Now comes the Commission's final report which has exonerated Karunanidhi. He and his party have been freed free of any links with the LTTE militants.

The government, too, was not immune to the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. Now all the hullabaloo has been conveniently forgotten.

The BJP, more so Vajpayee, must realise that the country would raise hell if the Tamil Nadu government is dismissed under one pretext or the other. The semblance of cooperation which exists at present between the government and the opposition will end beyond return. The governance will become difficult and several extraneous

matters may come to hold the stage. Once the DMK government is dismissed, Vajpayee may not be able to say 'no' to the ouster of the Rajiv Devi government in Bihar, even if he resists Mamma Banerjee's pressure against the CPI (M) government in West Bengal. The ousting of the Bansal government in Haryana may be manoeuvred through the withdrawal of the BJP support, but Vajpayee will look like paying the price for Chauthala's support.

Vajpayee should realise that the luster of morality is lessening day by day. He appears to be wilting under pressure. Maybe, his reiteration not to contest another election indicates a frame of mind, which is tired and disillusioned. But he should know that the BJP projected him as the prime minister. A substantial number of wins is because of him. He cannot betray the confidence of the people. All that he has to see is that his own actions do not smack of pressure as has been in the case of Jayalalitha. Favouritism is equally wrong.

Democracy is such a jealous mistress that even a small lapse in steadfastness leaves a train of doubts. The appointments of Parmod Mahajan as the PM's adviser and of Jaswant Singh as the Planning Commission Vice Chairman have damaged Vajpayee's image. The two were defeated at the polls only a few weeks ago. No doubt, they repre-

sent in the BJP a streak of liberalism which the fundamentalist RSS is out to scotch. Their presence in top government hierarchy may provide Vajpayee the kind of psychological backing which he needs in a welter of confused signals. But Vajpayee weakens himself when he rides roughshod over the people's verdict. Congress President Sonia Gandhi has realised her mistake in nominating the defeated person for the Rajya Sabha contest. Strange, a sensitive person like Vajpayee should be thinking otherwise.

At least, he should not insist on their inclusion to the Rajya Sabha. This will not be fair even to the House, which is not structured for the persons rejected by people.

I recall the BJP, when in the wilderness, demanding certain norms for the appointment of governors. It was even suggested that the opposition leader or a committee of eminent persons should be constituted for selection so as to eschew considerations of politics or patronage.

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Lack of seat is not the only problem in the DU. We, the students learn our final exam results after six months. It is too late to wait. Bangladesh is the only country where the students learn their results after such a long time. In the USA, the UK and also in my country (Turkey) you cannot go to the next class without learning the last exam results. Authority should be concerned more about this.

Another problem of DU is the disturbance from outside. Horns of the transports are disturbing to both teachers and students. DU Authority should not allow any private transport inside the campus (including rickshaws and baby taxis).

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To the Editor...

Why this year?

Sir, A few days before the holy Eid-ul-Azha, a news item, published in some newspapers that the leather experts expressed their deep concern about export of finished leather target would not be attained this year if the commercial banks do not sanction sufficient loan to the leather exporters. This means, they had shortage of fund to buy skin and sheets during Eid-ul-Azha. Earlier it was known that owners of leather industries had some default loans with 8 different commercial banks till February this year. As a result, the government has taken legal action which worried the genuine entrepreneurs.

In contrast, we see the entrepreneurs are complaining about the shortage of fund where the Bangladesh Bank in its press release issued on 7.4.98 stated that four nationalised commercial banks and a private bank will disburse a total of Tk 242.17 crore for purchase of skin and hide. The press release also stated that, 'under the circumstances, total loan sanctioned appears to be reasonable.'

But in our locality (Sobhanbag, Tallabag), we saw a few buyers to buy the raw skin this year contrasting the last few years. Even none had come to be used nearby houses. So we along with the others donated those to a local

madrasa.

I have never seen this before. My question is: is the claim by the Bangladesh Bank true? If yes, why we did we fail to sell the raw skins this year?

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SSP and TSP

Sir, Both SSP (Single Superphosphate) and TSP (Triple Superphosphate) fertilisers are used as a source of phosphorus, which stimulates early growth of plants and accelerate seeding or fruit formation in later stages. SSP contains 16-20 per cent phosphorus pentoxide and TSP contains 42-50 per cent; phosphorus content is three times higher in TSP than SSP. But the price of SSP is not the same that of TSP. By all means, TSP fertiliser is better than SSP, so, why we use SSP?

If the price of SSP is three times lower than that of TSP then it would be reasonable. Most of our farmers are illiterate and they have not sufficient knowledge about fertilisers. Generally farmers cannot differentiate between SSP and TSP. By attractive advertisements, our poor farmers are using SSP fertiliser but they do not understand the reason, as a result they are cheated. From the economical losses of our

the west. The emerging clout of Asia on the world scene, the absence of historical democratic tradition in Asia as well as the self interest of some of the Asian rulers suggest a period of Asian resistance to the spread of the democratic ideas.

Perhaps no form of government needs great leaders so much as democracy. Because it is sustained by the skill and vision of the leaders whose intelligent diagnosis and guidance are essential for constant self correction of the system. Democracy in 21st century must be able to manage the problems of nation state which will continue to decline as effective power unit of the creed. It must manage the pressure of Asian dissent, of technology, of unbridled capitalism and cope with growing frustration and yearnings of many million across the world.

There is no alternative to great leaders to make world safe for democracy. Yet the best of the leaders in the democratic camp are dwarfed by Lee Kuan Yew or Mahathir — branded authoritarian by the West — in catholicity of mind, sincerity of purpose and highest standard of moral values. There are few signs of democracy producing leaders of the stature of Roosevelt or Churchill — not withstanding the latter's imperialistic proclivity — in decades.

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OPINION

Towards a Poverty-free World

Helal Uddin Ahmed

I have read with much interest the piece written by the internationally famed economist and pride of Bangladesh Dr Muhammad Yunus titled 'Towards a Poverty-free World' published in the 2 April '98 issue of The Daily Star. I am a great fan and admirer of Dr Yunus and I have read many of his interesting write-ups. But this piece has disappointed me. It seems who says what got the better of what he says in its publication in The Daily Star.

It seemed to me that while writing the article, Dr Yunus suffered from an excessive degree of economics myopia which at times gave rise to hysterical outbursts. He seemed to be holding the view that economics is the root cause of all evils and can instead be transformed into a panacea for all troubles. He appeared to be blaming the monster created by Frankenstein instead of the creator himself.

In the very beginning, Dr Yunus claims that economics is responsible for creating the world we live in; interrelationships among individuals, nations and institutions, day-to-day activities of all people are shaped in a large way by the role assigned to them by economics.

A sweeping generalisation! It challenges the very basis of different disciplines of knowledge. Empirical knowledge is a reflection of the reality — not vice versa. It is not economics which assigns role to us human beings; rather it is we economists and human beings who assign role to Economics as a discipline of Social Science.

The various themes which Dr Yunus considers have not been adequately covered by the discipline of economics such as creativity of human beings, exclusive treatment of labour and entrepreneurship, self-employment, credit and social consciousness-driven enter-

prises demonstrate an economics-bias and the myopia of a brand-loyalist specialist. Dr Yunus seems to be promoting a notion that economics and to the economists are responsible for what is incorporated in the discipline; what is not included in economics does not exist in the realm of knowledge. But in reality the themes have definitely been covered by other disciplines of social science and the humanities. So why not broaden our views rather than confine ourselves to the narrow alleyway of economics.

Actually, the crux of the problem lies not in conceptualisation or theoretical frameworks of individual disciplines, but applications of those frameworks, by us human beings. Consequently, in one of the most corrupt societies in the world like ours (currently ranked fourth in the world by Transparency International) poverty merchants prosper in the name of redressal of poverty, all-pervasive corruption give rise to corruption — entrepreneurs, the various social-groups and professionals use their trade marks and labels for self-seeking and self-aggrandisements rather than serve their clientele groups and ultimately 'the means to an end' become 'ends in themselves'.

We are really idol-worshippers of different kinds. We create idols of frameworks and concepts; we then worship them to the exclusion of other and ultimately we use those idols to serve our very own interests. The problem is a fundamental one haunting the human civilisation since its very inception; it is unlikely to be altered simply by reconceptualisation of a discipline of social science called economics.

The writer is the editor, Bangladesh Quarterly, Department of Films and Publications.