Is There Good Architecture in Dhaka?

by Kazi Khaleed Ashraf

If we are concerned about the common good, about the greatest benefit for the most, and if we accept architecture as a collective art whose value is shared and benefited by many, then it will be really futile to look for such things in Dhaka.

OOD architecture" is like the proverbial golden stag, something deeply desired but hard to find. Ed Robbins, a well-known anthropologist interested in architectural issues, used to give an exercise to his architectural class at MIT in Boston. What is good architecture? What is good actually? Ed Robbins used to make a long list of things that is conveyed by the term "good", and a long list of descriptions of the term "architecture".

Needless to say, matter remained quite inconclusive. One item would lead to another, or one item would contradict another. Anyway, it was a therapeutic lesson, much in the vein of a Socratic exercise when a certain idea is taken and its given meaning is interrogated to finally realise that there is much more to it or something else to it than is generally realised.

One sense of the good relates it to the ancient Greek conception of the "good" and the "beautiful". The Greek sense was tied to their idea of the common good, something to be shared and benefited by the citizens of the polis. The meaning of architecture meanwhile fluctuates from aesthetics to functionalism, from technology to a host of other slippery themes.

Is there good architecture in Dhaka then? If we are concerned about the common good, about the greatest benefit for the most, and if we accept architecture as a collective art whose value is shared and benefited by many, then it will be really futile to look for such things in Dhaka. Flashy and flamboyant, yes. Substantial and serious, hardly.

In Dhaka, the appreciation of shared "goodness" is unheard of. Almost everyone, from public institutions to private enterprises, lives in a myopic world, not seeing anything else beyond the perimeter of one's immediate kingdom. The reality and symbol of living in Dhaka is this one little plot, sequestered from everything else even if the rest of the whole world is blown to smithereens.

The word "plot" has the highest currency in development vocabulary in Dhaka. One sells a plot, one owns a plot, one builds on a plot. One also plots, that is, hatches a plot. The relation between these two kinds of plot is certainly not coincidental. There is everywhere a severe plot-mindedness: my own plot and nothing else. What does it matter what is happening to the plot next door, to the city as long as I have my gold

plot. Not a gold pot at the end of the rainbow, but a gold plot right here that starts my rain-Then there are schemes and projects, with visions of "Tillot-

toma Dhaka" and the promise of carrying the city into the twenty-first century. I see instead pictures of fake drawings of a glitzy tall building in some surreal cityscape with beskirted women, flashy sports cars and landscaped sidewalks which are at best copy of a copy of a common western building. It is this image that is selling fast in Dhaka. If Dhaka's so-called development can be described in two words, it would be 'plotting' and 'scheming'.

So, what is architecture all about? It is about tall buildings, it is also about low buildings; it is about glass blocks and thatched cottages; it is about steel structures and mud houses; it is about the most sophisticated system and the most spontaneous process. It is about all these, but it is also about what is specific in a particular place and culture.

Moreover, architecture is not only about buildings, it is also about what takes place inside and around buildings. As the Italian architect Ettore Sottsass points out: ".... the problem of the architect is not so much to build a house and then place the drama of life inside. But on the contrary, it is to understand what the drama of life is, and build things around that." The task of the architect is first to comprehend fully the implication of that drama the dialogue of personal life. collective life, and public life. This is one way of saying to understand the dynamics of the cultural and societal life, with all its continuity, changes, and contradictions.

Architecture is not only about buildings, it is also about those in-between spaces between buildings, about what takes place there. A city is not a collection of buildings, no matter how elegant they are - a city is a fabric of buildings and spaces. In fact, in the context of the city, the in-between spaces are as important as what frames them. These spaces are known more formally as urban space, public space, street, Louis Kahn would say that the street is a room.

In Dhaka, we have little clue about the meaning and significance of well-organised public spaces, and about how to make them. Dhaka did have some semi-natural public spaces (the Buriganga river-front, for example) which have slowly been gobbled up. The only serious architectural public space in the city now is the South Plaza of

Sangsad Bhaban, and for that thank god for the thoughtful little architect Louis Kahn (who just happened to be the world's foremost architect at the time he was active here). I do not have to point out in what kind of horde people go there in the afternoon to escape their miserable dwellings and neighbourhoods. Le Corbusier, another master architect, once declared: "Architecture or revolution." People are discontented because of the kind of physical spaces they inhabit, so Le Corbusier warned in the 1920s, a little too sweepingly perhaps. that either you provide decent architecture to the people or there is going to be a revolution.

Now that's another term : decent architecture. Not good, not aesthetical, but decent. That is, it has an optimum size, there is ample light and air, there is reliable service of electricity, gas, water and sewerage. There is a little veranda from where you could stand, much better if you could sit with a cup of tea, and view something gracious, and not your neighbour's latrine. And when you retire at night. you know that rain water, or worse, sewer water, has not flooded your floor, or the roof

has not collapsed on you. When you cross the threshold into your home in the evening, you know that you have entered a very special domain. Unquantifiable desires and dreams are nurtured there. In such decent architecture, there may be a little less compulsion to run to South Plaza just to maintain one's dignity and sanity. Those who can retreat to one's enclave, the plot. In a city which is increasingly becoming devoid of parks, playgrounds, and proper public spaces, violence becomes a regular option.

And decent architecture is not to be conceived for only the lucky few, but the whole citizenry of Dhaka. If this is a pipe dream, then it should be converted into a manifesto for the coming millennium. The biggest mistake is to think of architecture as a luxury item, as some kind of expensive cosmetic application that one slaps onto a building after it has been built. As if to say, the thicker the cosmetic, the better the architecture. Nothing could be more fallacious than that.

The misconception about architecture is that it is an aesthetical product, where aesthetics is conceived as something extraneous. Architecture doesn't start at the end of construction. In fact, it begins before anything is built, at the very moment when the first thought strikes about building something: Why build? What type of building? Where? In what manner? With what plan?

Architecture should definitely charm and architecture should rightfully delight, but there is a deeper task. Architecture is not about aesthetics or functionalism; it is about the very condition of existence how we occupy and dwell in space, how we create a container for the drama of life. If architecture is an art, it is an art of existence.

In Dhaka city, a city of one crore, in the burgeoning capital of a growing nation, architecture does not begin with an "idea" : What better to offer? Held captive by "free-market", and manhandled by the fury of plotting and scheming, architecture begins and ends with a calculation: How much to make?

In Dhaka, there is no inspirational civic architecture or public space, no serious evidence of urbanism (that is, how a city is put together), and there is hardly any example of a decent housing or settlement which can be touted as a model for organising buildings, streets, urban amenities, and community facilities. There are only plotted out enclaves where each man is his arbiter. Or. there are box-like barracks and

wastelands. Osmani Memorial Hall could really have been a stunning civic building than being a mute uninspiring box which it is now. Nikunja could have been the occasion for a fresh idea for a new settlement; it is merely rows of plots. Boxes in the Azimpur-style still dictate Dhaka's landscape. Government housing projects, in such places as Bailey Road and Dhanmondi Road 7, give sorry proof of the impoverishment of architectural thinking.

"Architecture! O Architecture! O Mother of the Arts, what have they done to you!" laments the Indian architectural satirical writer Gautam Bhatia. He addresses the sly archi-

tect: "You are a specialist in mimicry; a middleman with a bagful of gimmicks. You stand solemnly between client and contractor, trying for your one per cent fee to reconcile the obscene ideas of the one with the medicore practicality of the other. You know that such architecture requires no genius. no common sense. All that is needed is a readily available catalogue of spare parts and cheap labour to set them up." The situation may very well be Bangladesh. Art may be the voice of a so-

ciety, but architecture has a two-fold job : to be a voice and a critic at the same time. The eminent architectural historian/critic Kenneth Frampton has urged how a major task of contemporary architecture is to offer "resistance". That is, putting up resistance against the global homogenisation process (which certainly is an alarming world-wide phenomenon), whereby the particularities of specific cultures are being flattened out; putting up resistance against the monetarisation of architecture, the process where architecture is reduced to be a servant in the great economic game; and throwing resistance against the mentality that anything goes, that architecture is a decorative activity and so on. The job of architecture is not only to delight and charm, and certainly not to be a billboard of money. but also to be an art of resistance. Where is that architect of resistance now? Architecture no doubt is a cultural product, but there is

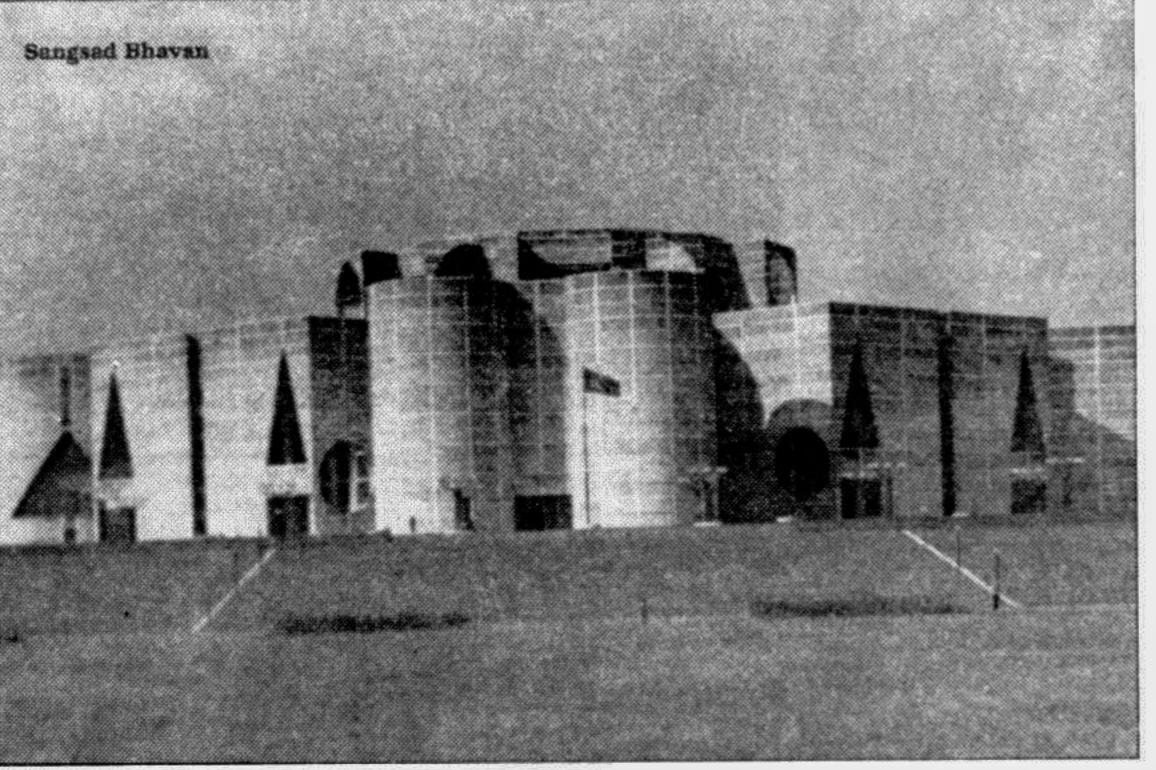
another subtle and important condition here. While most of culture is ultimately portable, architecture is not. One can import culture (these days beam it), one can transport life-styles in an instant, and one can speak the same Bengali in Begumganj, Bricklane, or Brooklyn, but one is stuck with a very rudimentary truth : architecture needs a specific site and place, a concrete climate and a very real atmosphere of wind, water, rain, and sun to reckon with. A specific place has a particular history and myth that is shared by all. And the criterion of a decent architecture is to engage with all these dynamics of a real place.

The nature of architecture does change, but it is a very slow process, and it can never escape this inevitability: to be stuck in a real place with real wind, water and sun.

Dhaka still awaits that architecture that is responsive to place, that is conscious of the history and myth of the place, that is of its time, and that is immensely livable. Dhaka needs a lot of decent architec-

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dustries puts the global envi-

ronment at greater risks com-

pared to the situation where the

factors were unable to move.

Dirty industries are defined as

those that have to pay high

assa (1979) and Yeats (1985) try

to reconcile this theory with

empirical evidence. A sample

109 industries show that be-

tween 1965-88 their share in to-

tal trade was 18.9 per cent. Dur-

ing 1988-89, it declined to 16

per cent - a decline of nearly 3

per cent in world trade share of

these dirty industries. Data re-

veals that the share of dirty in-

dustries for industrial

economies as a whole and

southeast Asia remained more

or less stationary. But East Eu-

rope shows an increase of over 6

per cent. Asia as a whole also

witnessed an increase in its

share. Thus, when compared

with the overall decline, their

increase in share is indeed sub-

wise exports share is concerned,

G-7 countries remain the domi-

nant suppliers. Taken as a

whole, their share in the dirty

export is about 45 per cent of the

total. Thus, their stringent laws

have done very little to prevent

them from being exporters of

dirty goods. As far as the shift-

ing pattern is concerned, the

comparative advantage of de-

veloped countries' has increased

with underdeveloped countries

which have been able to raise

their stake four-fold. This ex-

pansion of polluting industries

in underdeveloped countries is

remarkable in comparison to

shift in 'non-polluting indus-

tries' (over all 56 per cent as

compared to 36 per cent of the

earlier, do not share the con-

cerns of environmentalists,

and most of them find nothing

wrong with this shift. Accord-

ing to them: environmental ca-

pacity in terms of pollution as-

similation differs, and this

shift is innocent since it is

known that LDCs are environ-

mentally affluent countries;

social preferences can have an

edge over the environmental

preference: in a country where

the level of activity is low, the

scope of employment genera-

tion can rightly be rated higher

than the environmental prob-

these industries.

lems caused by the expansion of

these industries are highly

labour intensive and, therefore,

shift to exploit only cheap

labour. Environmental regula-

tion may not have any business

They also argue that most of

Economists, as mentioned

latter type).

The advantage, clearly, is

from 6 to 12 of such industries.

But as far as the country-

stantial.

Separate case studies by Bal-

compliance fees in the US.

Nagar Bhavan

Legitimacy of Harmonisation at all; and, most of these indus-

THE last few decades have witnessed a considerable A shift in the focus of economic policies at the national as well as the international level. Environmental issues are now at the forefront of these policy objectives alongwith traditional concerns over poverty alleviation, employment generation, etc. One of the consequences of this shift has been the mixing

other issues. Previously restricted to problems of human rights and the like, protectionist measures are now being used to enforce environmental standards, too. The recent US ban on the import of skirts from India which contain inflammable materials or the ban on fur import in the European Community (EU) if the animals are caught by 'leg

hold' trap are examples of this.

of merchandise trade with

Contributing more to the level of pollution, industries in developed countries (DCs) have to adhere to more stringent environmental standards than industries in less developed countries (LDCs). Since compliance to stricter standards may involve some cost, vested interests propagate that it leads to a loss of competitiveness. This so-called problem is more severe in 'dirty industries', where pollution content is generally higher.

Keeping these facts in mind, an attempt has been made here to explore the legitimacy of harmonisation. An idea of harmonisation of environmental standards has been put forward, where irrespective of the economic status every economy would have to comply with similar standards for the production of any goods.

Environmentalists and economists take conflicting stands over harmonisation, a concept strongly favoured by the former and discredited by the latter. Environmentalists favour this idea as it allows: direct control over environmental outcomes; and, the imposition of external preferences without the disharmony of diplomacy.

They also think it promotes fairness, believing as they do that producers should compete on a level playing ground, which includes environmental costs. Besides, they find it easier to control trade policy at home than to try changing the environmental policy in developing countries.

Industrialists, whom these stringent standards affect the most, have tried to project it as discriminatory. They claim it gives undue advantage to producers in developing nations who do not have to incur environmental costs, and thus are able to get a competitive advan-

tage by charging a lower price. Perceiving it as a threat to their own environmental standards, they feel that dissimilar standards would induce them to lower their standards, which would, in turn, hurt the global

by Saradindu Bhaduri environment. They have also

tried to represent the discontentment among the population as most multi-national corporations, attracted by the low price, would transfer their production plants to LDCs. DCs would suffer a setback in terms of rising unemployment and an increasingly destabilising economy In this context of policy

harmonisation, an important distinction must be made between product standards and process standards. Product standards call for uniform treatment of all goods in the domestic market irrespective of their country of origin. On the other hand, process standards relate to production processes and methods (PPM). PPM says that if any process raises questions then the government is answerable as to how much of the production externality is internalised. It is this PPM which has become the main target of environmentalists and industrialists.

Economists have dealt with this argument of 'loss of competitiveness' in some detail. Though work done in this area is not sufficient, various attempts have failed to show a positive correlation between stringency of environmental standards and loss of competitiveness. Some have even said that the cost of compliance has been magnified by the industrialists who are reluctant to pursue the regulation.

Perhaps the most scathing attack against the cry of socalled loss of competitiveness is advanced by Porter and Van der Linde in Towards a new conception of the environment-competitiveness relationship (1995). They define competitiveness by the average productivity of an industry. Making a distinction between the idea of a static competitiveness and a dynamic one, they favour the latter. According to them, the stringent standards apply external pressure on industries to stop using hazardous methods, hinting at innovation. The innovations are supposed to act as a buffer to many external

shocks. They find innovation an offsetting force in two ways: product offset, where new, high quality products come into being; and process offset, where recycling, safety at place of work and more monitoring leads to less wasteful expendi-

They defend their argument with case studies. One somewhat credible criticism against them is that by investing more on environment-related investment many other avenues of investment become blocked. But many studies show that the compliance fees and related investments constitute a very small portion of total investment. Thus, this criticism can also be overridden by empirical evidence. In DCs environment cost is 1 per cent of total GNP.

tries are essentially at the initial stage of development. Thus, We now take a look at the it seems to be an obvious fact case of shifting dirty industries that as industrial activity inand the related question, "can creases more and more of these the shift be justified in the context of maintaining environindustries would shift LDCs (this is a phase of development mental standards?" The main DCs, too had been through this advocate of harmonisation is the environmental lobby. To They also point to the 'Industhem, the shifting of dirty in-

trial Fight Activity' which seeks to relate the amount of foreign domestic investment and transfer of MNCs with lenient environmental standards, an attempt that failed to achieve any considerable result. Economists maintain that any uniform policy may hurt the growth and development process of the Third World as a whole if it stops or affects the shifting of dirty industries. They say that shifting does not necessarily imply deregulation as the social value may well exceed the environmental costs. For example, as specific case study regarding Chile reveals that the transfer of MNCs has been accompanied by cleaner technology and, therefore, overall environmental quality has been beneficial to Chile. During the last few decades,

GATT has been the centre of most, if not all, economic activities. Whenever there is an attempt to relate merchandise trade with non-trade related regulations, people resort to GATT rules. Anticipating likely environmental fallout due to free trade, they demand uniform standards. Free trade, according to some, is 'bad' because it implies even more exploitation of economic as well as environmental resources. GATT, however, provides some regulatory steps to prevent environmental deregulation. But GATI laws are often not very transparent and are at times misused as a non-tariff barrier by many countries. GATT rules lack transparency and are not very

hard to violate. In most cases, the need for harmonisation arose from incomplete knowledge and deliberate attempts to prevent others from becoming market leaders. As far as the question of competitiveness is concerned, there is very little reason to accept enforced harmonisation both in practical and theoretical ground. Though it is true that countries with lenient environmental standards have shown a strong bias in favour of dirty industries, attempting to relate it merely with environmental standards would certainly be a crude over simplifi-

cation. The requirement for different stages of development should be taken into account. GATT or WTO have very little to do. Both of them adhered to, at least theoretically, the fact that a country's sovereign policy choice should be given priority. The empirical findings also support the fact that any kind of policy cooperation would give better results than enforced

harmonisation. CSE/Down To Earth Features

The President of Gabon, one of the politics to French aid.

world's longestruling leaders, looks set for yet another poll victory. Critics regard democracy there and in certain other parts of francophone Africa as a sham, reports Gemini News

Service. But the old patriarchs are getting worried by the fading of their special relationship with Paris. Andrew Manley writes from

London. MAR Bongo, head of state in Gabon since 1967, appears on course to win presidential elections due in December, as the debate continues over the value - or even relevance — of multi-party politics in much of francophone

Africa. Bongo, long viewed as a wily operator, faces a demoralised and rudderless opposition in the central African oil-producing nation, and is not above resorting to violence if necessary to get his way. In some respects, however,

moment for a veteran African head of state with little time for democratic ideals. How much longer can Bongo and his fellow "dinosaurs" in the Franc Zone - which links

Paris financially with 13 for-

election time is coming at a bad

mer colonies in Africa plus Equatorial Guinea — continue to manipulate the political pro-France's ruling Socialist Party was furious at President Gnassingbé Eyadéma of Togo for blatantly rigging June's poll there after having billions of CFA francs in European Union electoral funding. Eyadéma, viewed as an embarrassing

anachronism in many western capitals, is a holdover from the era of French African clientelism in the Sixties and Seventies — a period when France viewed "stability and order" as top priority in its African sphere of influence. Another head of state with similar views to Bongo, President Paul Biya of Cameroon, was re-elected in highly dubious

fashion in 1997. But there may now be limits to how far Paris is prepared to back up its former clients. Officials at the French ministry of foreign affairs are more open in their worries over the future of democracy in the Franc Zone than at any time since the late

Time Running out for the Political Dinosaurs President Francois Mitterrand's speech at the 1990 Franco-African summit, when he explicitly linked democratic

> The speech came as a wave of discontent rocked capitals throughout francophone Africa and veteran regimes toppled in Benin, Mali, Niger and Congo-Brazzaville. Eight years later, zone-

watchers have coined the phrase "authoritarian restoration", as populations have grown disillusioned, and often fractious and self-seeking opposition politicians have thrown away the gains of the early Nineties.

Bongo is extremely wellconnected across the French political spectrum and knows enough about domestic French politics to ensure at least the passive support of France's political elite — something Eyadéma can no longer be sure

It this atmosphere, the Gabonese leader may have little to fear. Unlike the previous

Resistance, the opposition coalition founded at the height of the early-Nineties political crisis. But Mamboundou is thinly supported and uncharismatic. Neither man has much of a chance.

It is this that is Bongo's best guarantee. In Gabon, as in several other countries, the political activism of the early Nineties has been replaced by apathy and cynicism as veteran leaders have repeatedly manipulated representative institutions in what locals call a "sham democracy."

To make certain of success, a presidential decree has stripped the Gabonese national electoral commission of most of its powers and handed them to the Interior Minister, Antoine Mboumbou-Miyakou, the man accused by critics of organising state terror tactics at the 1993 polls. Few Gabonese are surprised at the switch.

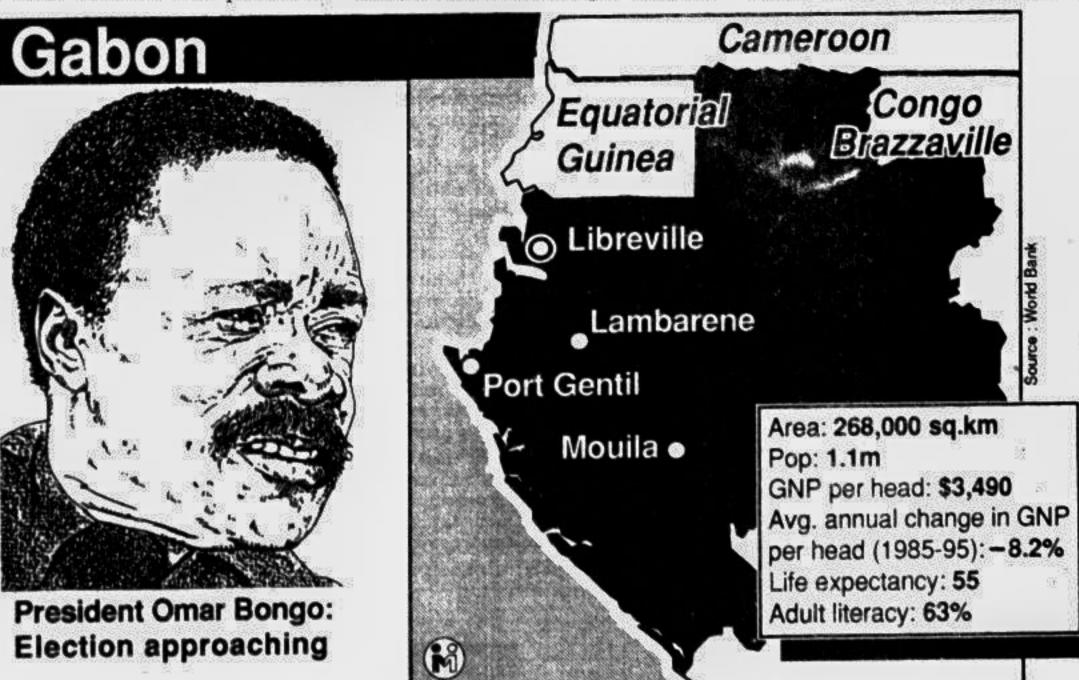
However, changing French priorities in the region may be weakening the grip on power of people such as Bongo. The oil wealthy Gabonese to travel freely to France.

The downgrading of Franco-African special relationships is a worry to Bongo and others, symbolised nowhere more than in the withdrawal of permanent French garrisons from nearby Central African Republic.

Leaders of Bongo's generation have been used to having the French as the ultimate guarantors of their power. Now Paris is refusing to intervene in domestic struggles.

In the bloody civil war that rocked Congo-Brazzaville in 1997. French forces limited themselves to securing the evacuation of trapped French nationals. The defeat of President Pascal Lissouba of Congo was a blow to Bongo's regional policy. Despite marriage ties with Denis Sassou-Nguesso, who evicted Lissouba from power. Bongo had backed the

Combined with the arrival of Laurent Kabila in Congo-Kinshasa, the developments came as a blow to Gabon's tra



election in 1993, he may not even need massive vote-rigging and state violence to ensure victory. As in Biya's Cameroon, the opposition has already done a lot of his work for him.

Gabon's principal opposition party, the National Rally of Woodcutters (RNB), has been effectively split down the middle. Tit-for-tat expulsions of party secretary André Koubila Koumba and former RNB presidential hopeful Paul Mba Abessole have effectively paralysed the party as an electoral machine. Koumba supporters accuse Abessole, the mayor of Libreville, of "treason"

and of being on Bongo's payroll. Pierre Claver Maganga-Oussavou of the Social Democratic Party has already declared he will run. So has Pierre Mamboundou, the favoured candidate of the High Council of the

giant Elf-Aquitaine, a vital arm of French power in Africa, is more excited about Angolan offshore deposits, containing billions of barrels of good-quality crude, than Gabon's stagnant production of roughly

370,000 barrels per day. Bongo still has an unparalleled Paris address book and is one of the few African leaders who can still get automatic access to President Jacques Chirac of France. But a longrunning French judicial investigation into bank accounts run by Elf embarrassed him when it discovered that he was linked to some dubious financial transactions.

There have also been disagreements between Libreville and Paris over the level of French debt relief. And tougher French immigration policy is making it harder even for

ditional diplomatic pre-eminence in the region and a further reminder to Bongo of the dwindling mutual dependence between him and the French elite. For all his fabled skill at

turning situations to his advantage, Bongo may now be feeling the chill wind of political isolation as France loses interest. This is a slow process, and in

the short term, unlike Eyadéma, Bongo has the financial resources to ride out trouble and keep French and American business interested. Even after the 50 per cent devaluation of the CFA franc in 1994, Gabonese consumption of champagne and foie gras remained high. But if the oil price stays low and he again has to fire on the crowds to get reelected, Bongo could be in big

trouble.