

View from Dhaka The Power of Zeros

by A Husnain

Clinton has the power to influence, but he is losing friends, including his own Democrats, facing the November elections. Which brings us to Newton's Third Law, applied morally: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

ROSS Perot's assessment of Clinton is typically laced with Texan wisdom and openness of the wild west of the pioneering days. There is an additional qualification or freedom bestowed by nine zeros (billion) guarded by a number on the left, and positioned on the right side of the dollar sign (for example \$1,000,000,000). There is the additional advantage of the privilege of being patronizing, backed by a series of zeros.

He is reported to have remarked that he wouldn't employ Mr Clinton as a waiter or dishwasher in any of his restaurants. If that is the way the freedom of expression is expressed in the land of the dollar-eagle, then we Asians are better off in cultivating the traditional norms of politeness. Punishment need not be cruel — it doesn't sound obvious unless we realize it. We ordinary mortals cannot get away with such tactless statements.

The Perot news item reminded me of a book (1983) I have in my library, a bedside book written by a millionaire who passes his time with his family and a rare collection of foreign cats — the 'World of Knowledge' by Henry Roots. It is an alphabetical list of terms which come up during party small talks. The definitions are not there but spicy comments based on common sense, for breaking the ice, and get the

conversation moving. The editor has called it a sort of Dictionary of Common Sense. Let us look at a few pages at random, and see if we can localize a few observations — the human mind being universal with localised variations of the theme.

Our bank-loan defaulter culture is on the front pages. There is a connected item in the book. Looking at the attitude of the bankers in his country, a young man wondered whether he could loan a banker's daughter for a dinner dance without any security — a rather funny way of asking a girl for a date.

Last week there was press report on a seminar in Dhaka on an unusual topic: the art of literary criticism. Henry Roots has some good quotations: The essence of style is to write agreeably under pressure (Alexander Chacellor). It's an art effortlessly concealing content. Here is an aside: critics don't write books, they write about books. Perhaps like the eunuchs, who can only watch. The painters have not been spared. It is like fishing, either you catch something, or don't.

The conception about patriotism was different during the days of Dr Johnson, when it did not mean the love of the country but rather putting the so-called interests of the mob (vested interest in our days) above those of the sovereign. This provides us with a historical yardstick of the progress of

a nation at the fag end of the 20th century.

What is 'monetarism'? The term is hardly used these days. It is plain old housekeeping economics by dear old Mom till the economists came along after the invention of printing. A supplementary question: where was gravity till Newton discovered it through a falling apple? There is another book of entertainment written by a bright fellow who lived on a barge on a canal near London: 'How to Become Ridiculously Well-read in One Evening' (1985, Penguin), without actually reading any of the best-sellers past and present. It is like the instant noodles, when you are not allowed to boil water in your hostel room.

There is third book for quick reference — instant literature, but it is very well written by a master. Clifton Fadiman's Lifetime Reading Plan provides a summary of each recommended book and reasons why you should read it. It is a part of the pleasure of reading. Reading for pleasure is one of the small pleasures of life which money cannot buy, and for which there is no proxy.

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INDONESIAN SCENE

Political Situation under the New President

by A S M Nurunnabi

Most Indonesians have a murky vision of what politics is all about. The vast majority of the population have never been allowed more than fleeting participation in their country's political life over the past 32 years.

tary privately signalled that its tolerance of Habibie derived only from the constitutional manner in which he succeeded Suharto.

Gen Wiranto has emerged as a popular figure because of the perception that he tolerated the student protests and prevented clashes with the security forces. He also promised to punish soldiers found guilty of shooting dead six demonstrators. And he has consolidated his authority, mainly through the swift removal of Army Strategic Reserve Commander Lt Gen Subianto, Suharto's son-in-law.

Although engaged with civilians behind the scenes in searching for a peaceful transfer of power, the military is believed to be reluctant to fill the void Suharto left behind. It is also said to have an innately cautious approach to political reform. The armed forces have been deeply involved in the nation's political and economic life. As such it has yet to respond to demands that its special position be changed — and it is unlikely to accept a diminution of its role.

The second important centre of power is Ginandjar, who heads the economic ministers, made up mostly of holdovers from Suharto's cabinet. He represents policy-making continuity, which is probably an advantage in dealing with the IMF. Ginandjar is thought to have presidential aspirations and has called for new elections.

Habibie had at first appeared to be dragging his feet on the political issue. In his initial policy statement, he referred only to 'gradual' reform and seemed to be asserting his constitutional right to remain in office until 2003. Given his background, scepticism about the new president is hardly surprising.

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the population have never been allowed more than fleeting participation in their country's political life over the past 32 years. This will be real politics for the first time," noted a senior western diplomat. "Ambitious people competing for influence in an atmosphere where before it was impossible. The chance of that playing out smoothly is rare."

Whether Habibie stays through to early elections or is failed in a power struggle, the fact is that post-Suharto Indonesia is still evolving which makes stability hard to see on the horizon. Indonesia's youth are already ready to go to the streets again — if only to remind the elite that the time for dithering for reform is very limited.

Four months after President Suharto's ignominious exit, the country is feeling the full impact of the economic depression, and popular anger is getting out of control. Teams of looters have been brazenly looting shops, warehouses, rice mills, shrimp ponds and teak plantations on the islands of Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi and Java. In many cases police and soldiers have been unable or unwilling to intervene. With the start of the new academic year, student demonstrations have begun again.

Behind the new wave of unrest is the soaring cost of rice up three-fold since last year. Families on average incomes are struggling just to feed themselves.

Stability looks threatened by a crisis of confidence in President Habibie and the country's military. After four years in office, Habibie has failed to shake off his image as a Suharto crony. Public respect for the military is at rock bottom, severely undermining its capacity to hold things together. A majority of the politically

active students and several opposition leaders are calling for Habibie to step down. But it is far from clear who and what would replace him — and whether change of leadership would help.

Without any reliable guarantee of law and order, Indonesia's 5 million on ethnic Chinese — still in shock over the riots of last May — are bracing for more violence. A Chinese-dominated party spokesman said that the army has to take very serious action. If they just stand back, the looting will get worse and in the end nobody will be able to stop it.

According to a recent report, the National Coalition for Democracy, an alliance of 192 political parties and NGOs, is planning nationwide demonstrations to coincide with a special session of the People's Consultative Assembly beginning November 10 next. The activists of the different opposition parties said they hope to surround the parliament building with at least 30,000 people and "we won't leave until our demands have been met."

These demands include the replacement of Habibie with a "presidium" — a kind of collective presidency of prominent opposition leaders — and the withdrawal of the military from political and social affairs. Observers think that though the ruling Golkar party has a huge majority of seats in the Assembly, delegates could break ranks with Habibie if public pressure is strong enough. Alternatively, some observers fear a spate of military interventions could lead the military to intervene, postponing the general election scheduled for next May.

For Habibie the portents are said to be grim. While he has taken some important steps towards dismantling the corrupt and authoritarian system of his predecessors, the president is largely regarded still as

Legend is What I Speak About

by A Z M Obaidullah Khan



Justice Ibrahim

pursuing his graduate studies in Economics, Mother India called him. He left his studies and joined the Non-Cooperation and the Khelafat Movement. His father was deeply upset. Yet he pursued his light for a secular and independent motherland for three years. Perhaps he recalled the words of Herodotus (attributed by Dr Ahmed Kar), "It may be your interest to be our Masters, but how can it be ours to be your slaves."

However that may be, another great son of Bengal, Dr Naresh Chandra Sengupta, himself a litterateur, a legal giant, Vice Principal of Dhaka College and then Professor of Law in Dhaka University, persuaded the young intellectual to continue his studies in law. Rest of the history is known to all. A legal luminary, he practised law in Faridpur and Dhaka, taught law in Dhaka University, became a District and Sessions Judge and later elevated to the benches of the High Court.

After retirement from the judicial services, he was for a time Chairman of Election Tribunal and then Vice-Chancellor of Dhaka University. A rather unfortunate aside here. Quite recently, Dhaka University Alumni Conference was held. I was there in the audience. No one uttered a word about Justice

"Shall we like him be able to speak about poetry? Shall we like him be able to talk about liberty?"

Ibrahim, who first established the Dhaka University Alumni Association. I also wonder, how many of the students, teachers and office bearers of Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts remember that he was the founder and once the President of that institution. The other day I asked Habibul Alam, Bir Pratik and a leading enthusiast of the Scouts Movement. He recalled gratefully that Justice Ibrahim was once the Chief Commissioner of the Provincial Scouts Association.

But let me come back to Justice Ibrahim as a true believer in the rule of law and as a lawmaker. The black decades from 1947 till the liberation of Bangladesh saw the nightmare of autocratic rule and witnessed brutal wickedness in high places. Like all secular, elders, and democratic elders of ours then, Justice Ibrahim was deeply disturbed. When Chowdhury Mohammed Ali was the Prime Minister of Pakistan, he proposed to Justice Ibrahim to become the Speaker of the National Assembly. He declined. First, because he disagreed with the demand made by the then power holders of legitimate rights of the majority population; and second, because he never believed in entering the citadel of politics through the back door.

But then why did he join the Martial Law Government of Ayub Khan as the Law Minister? What is not so well-known, however, is that he gave a precondition, the drafting of a democratic and secular constitution. The precondition was accepted, but as is usual with deceitful autocrats, not acted upon.

It is in that context that I shall quote excerpts from the notes prepared by Justice Ibrahim, then Minister of Law (Memo No. 115/CF/60, Rawalpindi, the 6th May, 1961, Office of the Minister of Law). This note was supplied by Prof Dr Sufia Ahmed, National Professor, from her personal collection.

"Solidarity", he writes, "depends on the willing consent to live together. In order to do that it is essential that there should not be mutual suspicion, distrust, fear of domination and wide economic inequality between the East and the West. Unfortunately, East Pakistan has been suffering from under development and this has become a source of other evils such as suspicion, distrust, fear of domination and frustration, which are widening the gap between the two wings... In order that this situation may not further deteriorate, the responsibility for their economic development should be cast respectively on the provinces them-

selves and for that each province should be regarded as a separate economic entity. Having regard to these matters, and the events beginning with the Lahore Resolution of All India Muslim League and circumstances: geographical, social, cultural, linguistic etc., I think the structure of the State shall be as follows:

1. The Central Government should have only Defence, Foreign Affairs, Inter-wing communication and Currency.
2. All other remaining subjects shall be the concern and responsibility of the Provinces.

As to the form of Government my personal preference is for Parliamentary Government based on Adult Franchise subject to such provisions as may be appropriate for strict party discipline and for restricting eligibility for membership. This procedure of election will not apply to the present President who has already been elected for the first term.

I shall skip over the rest of the recommendations, in case a Presidential form is adopted. But I must add point number 12 of the note which illustrates his farsightedness.

"(12) Provision should be made for periodic revision of the Constitution in the light of experience gained so that flexibility is maintained. For a new growing country such a provision may be very useful; while on the other hand a rigid Constitution may hamper its growth and build up tension."

Dated: 5.5.1961

Sd/M Ibrahim
But, then the blue-print for neo-colonial occupation of the then East Pakistan had already been drafted by President Ayub's cohorts, namely Mr Manzur Kadir and Mr Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, long before the Constitutional Commission submitted its report. In November, 1961, when Justice Ibrahim attended the last cabinet meeting, he knew that the dye had already been cast. So he left Rawalpindi and came back to Dhaka. In April 1962, he tendered his resignation and later actively participated in the formation of the Combined Opposition Party (the COP).

It is in that context that I would invite my readers' attention to the address given by the Hon'ble President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed at the inauguration of Justice Muhammad Ibrahim Trust Fund Memorial Lecture '97, organised by the Asiatic Society. The President said, and I quote from a report by the The Bangladesh Times, August 19, 1997, "the Six Point

Demand placed by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the All-Party Conference in Lahore after the Indo-Pak War of 1965 for full autonomy of the then East Pakistan contained all the views held by Justice Muhammad Ibrahim.... President Ayub Khan sharply reacted to the Six Point demand saying that he would answer it in the language of weapon."

Yes, the demonic successor of President Ayub did use the most vicious language of weapon. But all the Bengalees stood up together and defied when Bangabandhu gave the clarion call: Today's movement is freedom movement, today's movement is liberation's."

Justice Ibrahim never saw the day. But I know in my own heart that as he is looking over us from the heaven, he is softly chanting the memorable lines of Goethe:

*We carry them away,
The ruins and shards of the world,
Ah! Sing well-a-day
For the loveliness gone,
For the beauty slain
Build it again
Great child of earth,
Build it with a finer worth.*

Before I say my last prayers, allow me to share with you a very personal treasure that I cherish. I was then young with all the courage of 17-year-old. So was Sufia, my class friend and daughter of Justice Ibrahim. On the fateful day of the 21st of February, 1952, we stood up like a mountain peak. Like an ancient melody sung by our mothers, we became one with each other and defied the white terror. Some of us died in fire and some with multiple wounds like full blown bunches of red petals. Some escaped and I was one of them.

Being a fugitive from the law, I could not inform my father where I was and how I was. When the poisoned serpents slithered back into their black crevices and the ruthless assassins hid themselves from the tribune of poetry, I came back to Dhaka. And almost immediately I went off to Mymensingh (or was it Jessore?) where my father was the District and Sessions Judge. He told me, "Look son, I was worried. But then my respected brother called me up. He told me that I as a father should be proud. Because You my son has the courage of speaking truth to power." That respected brother my father referred to, was Justice Muhammad Ibrahim.

That is my treasure, the courage that Justice Ibrahim blessed me with — the courage of Speaking Truth to Power. So I shall end with a repeated refrain in a poem, Legend is What I Speak About:

*"Shall we like him be able to speak about poetry?
Shall we like him be able to talk about liberty?"*

An NGO requested . . .

August 26, 1998

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India Tries to Pave Way for Digital Revolution

by K.S. Nayar

It was the first time in her life that she was looking at a computer. All she understood was that the strange box-like thing placed on top of a table in front of her would help her communicate with her husband working in a city hundreds of miles away.

Her face covered in a veil, a blushing Chameli Devi in the northern Indian Uttar Pradesh state's remote hamlet of Jaunpur recently inaugurated what cyber activists claim is the world's first commercial video e-mail service.

And as the photo of her husband — a taxi driver in far-off Mumbai — flashed on the screen, her joy knew no bounds. Chameli Devi is just one of the thousands of people who are expected to access the National Association of Software and Service Companies (NASSCOM) video e-mail facilities that enable users to transmit video images and voices at a mere Rs. 15 (about 35 cents) for a three-minute call.

The NASSCOM, and other organisations like it, are currently working to demystify the Internet and make it more accessible to common people, to

take it out of the swank corporate rooms and the glitzy cyber-cafes patronised by well-heeled yuppies and into the homes of the average Indian.

Though there are only about 130,000 internet subscribers in this country (India) of 960 million people, analysts predict an increase in the number of Internet users to about a million by year 2001.

They foresee a time when more and more people will log on to the Net for anything from mundane tasks like purchasing groceries and clothes to accessing medical information, keeping track of the stock market or conducting financial transactions.

"The only thing that is holding back the digital revolution from sweeping the country, as we enter the next millennium, is the awfully poor infrastructure," said an official of the Bangalore-based Microland, one of the country's largest information technology (IT) companies.

Efforts to remove infrastructural bottlenecks are, however, gaining momentum. The for-

mation of the Prime Minister's National Task Force on Information Technology and Software Development is a step in that direction, as is the Cabinet decision last month to open up the service to private Internet service providers (ISPs), a move that signals the end of state undertaking Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited's (VSNL) monopoly.

"We are now progressing from information super sidewalks into the information super highway," noted Dewang Mehta, executive director of NASSCOM and the spokesman of the Prime Minister's IT Task Force.

He said the thrust of the task force's report was on steps to remove the bottlenecks that hamper the spread of the Internet. This can be accomplished by opening the international gateway to private ISPs, who would be given license for a 15-year period.

Mehta said the task force had recognised the Internet as an important factor for economic growth and recommended that public telephone

kiosks be provided with Internet connectivity.

While the personal computer (PC) penetration level is set to increase from the present base of 2.3 million, the task force has recommended tapping the huge nationwide cable television network for accessing the Net.

"There are 37 million television connections and with a set-top converter these can be used for Internet access," Mehta told India Abroad News Service. A major suggestion by the IT Task Force for increasing the reach of Internet in the shortest possible time is to allow the railways, armed forces, power utilities, the public-sector National Power Grid Corporation, Oil and Natural Gas Corporation, Gas Authority of India Ltd., and the Steel Authority of India Ltd., to provide fibre optics backbones.

"The number of Internet subscribers is to witness a dramatic upturn with the entry of 15 to 20 ISPs," says Ravi Sangal, president of the India subsidiary of International Data Corporation (IDC), one of the world's largest independent IT market research firms. — IANS