

Security in Pabna

The by-election at Pabna-2, which recently graduated from a war of words to a war of nerves, has now turned into a clash of bullets. The violence that shattered the peace in the small north-western town on Saturday cannot be shrugged off as yet another instance of lawlessness, because of its relation to the by-election. There will be accusations and counter-accusations to apportion blame for Saturday's violence, but this would be of little interest to the public in general. The fact that 35 people were wounded may not have caused such consternation, had it not been for the liberal use of firearms and the evident failure of law enforcing agencies to crack down on those carrying and using arms under cover of political activity, in broad daylight.

The political atmosphere in Pabna is highly charged, and when bullets are added, then the environment becomes anything but conducive to peaceful conduct of elections. Without peace, the voters are denied the element of security which is so vital to ensuring a free and fair election. When the atmosphere in a given constituency is rent with terror, few ordinary voters will venture out to cast their votes. In such a situation, the armed goons of both the contending parties will rule the roost. What sort of an election would it be, if ordinary voters are unable to vote? It would be a farce — no more, no less.

The tasks before the Election Commission, therefore, are clear cut, and one of these is keeping a sharp eye on the law and order situation, particularly the conduct of the two main contending parties. It may be remembered here that, during by-elections, the civil administration and police of the given constituency come under effective control of the EC. This means the EC does have the administrative means with which to control the law and order situation. The EC needs to insist that local police and administration work flat out to prevent any further outbreak of violence. If necessary, there should be a special police drive to recover arms and put away criminal elements before the day of polling. The voting public must be given a sense of security, in order to ensure free and fair polls.

That Unity Gone Haywire

Eight years since the fall of autocracy and the ushering in of democracy at the crest of a three-party alliance-led popular movement the question to ask is: how could we in record short time squander the harvest of national unity and the 19-point agreement reaped in 1990?

Subordinating their divergent origins and political philosophies to the greater cause of forging solidarity in their ranks against a common challenge the three-party alliance took due care that the new-found spirit lasted beyond the fall of the autocrat. If they had not envisioned the benefits of that popular upheaval to continue in terms of the working relations they fostered they would not have entered into the covenant of understanding they did in the shape of the 19-point agreement.

For the argument's sake if a pure strategic consideration made them close their ranks then by the same token they should have been keen on preserving some of those basic working equations to make democracy work as they went on. What is of the essence here is that the downfall of autocracy was not an end in itself, it was palpably regarded as a means to an end. Otherwise the political leaders would not have visualised a furtherance of the struggle with a concrete set of agenda to wipe off the constitutional, institutional and cultural distortions, like the media abuse for one, which a long-lasting autocratic regime had left behind.

By hindsight, how would they feel if that glorious legacy is now described as a marriage of convenience, a one-off affair that was bound to flounder on the rock of the very first election as it actually did? If they were forced into uniting under a common programme by the sheer force of popular will then they should look diminished as leaders, and if they did it in their best wisdom then they should have felt unfailingly committed to it and delivered by now. But what we see is a virtual lip-service paid to the commitments made to autonomy for the electronic media and separation of the judiciary from the executive, among other things.

That 19-point agenda is now history before the partisan de-culturation of democratic values. If autocracy was the challenge then it is political insanity which is the challenge now.

Last Games of the Century

The last Asian Games of the millennium began at Bangkok yesterday. The longest ruling Thai monarch 71-year-old King Bhumibol Adulyadej, declared the Games open which has been termed as the biggest ever since its inception 47 years ago in New Delhi. A handful of Asian nations responded to the call for the Games organised on the lines of the Olympics for the improvement of standards of different disciplines of sports and games back in 1951. Thereafter these Games have survived the tests of time proliferating enormously. Today's Games can boast participation by 41 nations, big and small, new and old, as many as 38 disciplines and about 7000 athletes including 2000 plus women.

The Thais have the experience of having organised events of such magnitude and importance in the past. But times have changed drastically calling for utmost surveillance and security measures against international terrorism. Some 16000 policemen are to be deployed; of which a quarter will be engaged in untangling the terrific traffic knots of Bangkok for smooth and timely travel of the athletes and officials as well as the spectators.

Among the countries will be Bangladesh participating for the seventh time since 1974. Our performances in these games have been totally detestable. In whatever discipline we had competed we returned home with empty hands but loaded suitcases. This time also we have sent a large contingent of 67 heads to compete in eight disciplines. But our prospect, according to most liberals or experts, is a silver at best in *kabaddi*. No one knows what is in store for us in golf, billiard and snooker. Perhaps the patience of Robert Bruce has inspired us to try and try again. But he did it with his own time and money, while we are doing it at the expense of poor taxpayers.

The Great Game Revived in Central Asia?

Given the kaleidoscopic setting of the Central Asian ground for power play and the competitors of bewildering variety of motives the ensuing Great Game is going to be a long-drawn-out affair.

After the dissolution of Soviet Union as the matrix of the national identities in the region as well as the goals and instruments of the countries therein have significantly changed the region is once again vulnerable to a Great Game of greater intensity with more number of players having changed perception of the game. The new playing ground of Central Asia is inherently complex and is further complicated by a vast array of problems. These include intra-regional conflict, internal political instability and the threats of proprietorial and competing neighbours whose problems make the new states of Central Asia pawns in the rivalry of larger powers. To make things worse these states are not only landlocked, some of them — particularly Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan which share the majority of the region's energy deposits — are remotely located from the nearest exit port for their exports and thus vulnerable to unstable political evaluations both within and outside these countries. Nevertheless, the stakes involved in the game remains unchanged — power, influence, security, wealth. Also unchanged is the role of Russia as the principal player of the game although Britain has since been replaced by the United States as Russia's main contender.

Even after the break-up of Soviet Union and the emergence of fourteen independent states in the place of its constituent republics Moscow's ties with Central Asia remain surprisingly strong. Through an intricate network of telecommunication, pipelines, power grid, transportation and large Russian ethnic presence in some of the Central Asian states Moscow has been made an inescapable point of departure for life in the region. The disintegration of Soviet Union hardly changed that equation. On the contrary Russia has tightened her grip on the republics through the assertive policy on her 'news abroad' where she articulates the country's 'special responsibility' as the US does in Central or Latin America. As a result these republics have willy-nilly abandoned their 'sovereign stance' and the autonomous path they adopted with regard to the handling of their resources soon after the independence.



PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

in its backyard. But Russia's goals in the region are greatly restricted by her many deficiencies including those of capital and technology. While the conservative traditional school of Russian thoughts wants to see the region and its wealth as undisputed domain of Russia's influence others supported by former Prime Minister Chernomyrdin welcome external participation as a means of ensuring western capital and advanced technology. They also want to work for Russia's inclusion in western consortia as a means for improvement of its own technology and to have a foothold in world market with, of course, profit sharing. In spite of the conflicting outlooks on Russia's strategic and commercial interests in the Central Asia, Russia continues to exert immense influence over the region — particularly in Kazakhstan, the largest and most

endowed of the states with natural resources.

The US is the winner of cold war as well as the world's only superpower with a global strategic reach. That she will be profoundly involved in the affairs of the strategic Eurasian corridor of Caucasus and Central Asia is a foregone conclusion. By no means she could be oblivious of her crucial role in the region in the backdrop of post Cold War as well as post Soviet developments and her political and commercial interests in the newly independent states in Eurasia's heartland. Her interests however stem from her overzealous support for the independence and sovereignty of the countries in the region. She views mineral resources including oil to be the

she can be integrated with the west for common objectives to be pursued in Central Asia and elsewhere. She also continues to contain Iran for deflecting her from her anti-west tirade. On both counts there is little success leaving the US with limited choice — perhaps only of withholding the shock therapy she herself introduced for Russia and the containment which is in any case wearing out for Iran.

Among other players of the ensuing Great Game, Turkey has strong ties to Central Asian region, particularly its ethnic Turkic community. The demise of the Soviet Union has given Turkey an opportunity to renew its historical link with the region and increase once more its influence in Central Asia, vis-a-vis her traditional rivals, Russia and Iran. In an attempt to profit economically from new investment opportunities Turkey has presented itself as a model more attractive than Iran. Turkey has already concluded a number of political, military and economic agreements with Central Asian states. Ankara is particularly keen to build a pipeline to pump Caspian and Central Asian oil out through Turkey anticipating the substantial benefit it could bring to the country.

Like the traditional regional powers Iran has complex historical ties with Central Asia. For example, an estimated 16m ethnic Azeris live in northern Iran — nearly twice as many as in Azerbaijan itself — a source of tension in Iranian-Azerbaijani relations. Nevertheless Tehran also has been quick to take advantage of Soviet disintegration in 1991. Specific Iranian goals in the region include political influence, profitable economic relationship, the spread of religious ideology, procurement of Soviet weaponry and acquisition of nuclear expertise and materials. At a more profound level Iran wants to put on the mantle of regional leadership of an 'economic trade centre' which the Central Asian region is likely

to be. In 1992 Iran hosted what was considered a successful meeting of the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) comprised of Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan with Kazakhstan as observer — to take a regional leadership role in economic, particularly oil and gas matters.

Like Turkey and Iran China is also possible model for the countries of Central Asia — particularly ones ruled by more conservative and authoritarian leaders who wish to reform economically without doing so politically. China and Central Asia have several ethnic groups in common — Kazakhs, Uighurs, Tatars, Tajiks and others. Many include China's vast Xinjiang province in Central Asia while delineating its boundary. With declining oil reserves China, for the first time, became a net oil importer in 1993. All these factors are likely to combine for China to take increasing interests in oil rich Central Asia. There are already evidences of it in China-Central Asia relations.

Other Western and developed countries — the UK, France, Japan and Italy — share policy goals with the US for creating stable, independent, secular, democratic and market-oriented countries in Central Asian region. The last but not the least is Pakistan the leaders of which also talk nostalgically about the recreation of a silkroute linking Pakistan with Central Asia. In spite of a turbulent Afghanistan in between they dream of silk-route-style transport link with fellow Muslim countries of Central Asia.

Given the kaleidoscopic setting of the Central Asian ground for power play and the competitors of bewildering variety of motives the ensuing Great Game is going to be a long-drawn-out affair. For last two centuries the competition has been established over years of intermittent conflicts. In the past it was mainly for the empire building. Now the region's oil has been the focal point of competition. With the depleting oil reserves elsewhere this competition cannot be anything but gory, violent and savage.

Promises, Commitment

It is a fact that India's nuclear ambitions are different from our own, they perceive themselves as a world power, a member of the exclusive nuclear club. On the other hand, our only ambition is to counter the Indian threat to our own security.

AS the Cold War dissipated in the '80s and the Soviet Union became another footnote in history, Pakistan found itself in the crosshairs of a substantial shift in US policy. From being one of the cornerstones of US interests in being a frontline state in the fight against communism, Pakistan became overnight one of America's major concerns. As the emphasis shifted from nuclear missile confrontation between the superpowers to the awesome responsibilities on the US of being the only strongman on the block, its major worries became, in order of priority, viz 1) nuclear non-proliferation 2) terrorism and 3) drug trafficking.

Unfortunately in all three, Pakistan was on the wrong side of the dividing line. Escaping in 1992 by the skin of the teeth from being declared as a 'terrorist' state, a drastic comedown in US esteem. With the application of the Pressler Amendment, Pakistan found itself squeezed in a double-vise as both US economic and military aid dried up, the Afghan war in the meantime went on and on.

To add insult to injury, US froze the F-16 deal for which payments had already been made and the aircraft are now gathering dust in the Mojave Desert in the State of Nevada. Since 1990 Pakistan has been on the receiving end of almost all adverse propaganda that could possibly afflict us.

We had more or less the same troops as had Egypt in Saudi Arabia in Operation 'Desert Storm'. Egypt got all its loans waived, economic and military, we got the threat of a default. Matters started to get worse in May 1998 after the Indian nuclear blasts as the West, led by the US, alternately threatened and wooed us, to stop us from reacting. Within days, in the

face of massive Indian bellicosity and threats, even some heads who had counselled caution, were resigned to Pakistani retaliatory blasts.

While the US imposed sanctions mandated by the US Congress, it was clear that they recognised that we were the 'underdogs' and therefore the sanctions were imposed were done without any great enthusiasm when we actually carried out our series of nuclear blasts on May 28. The last Thursday of May 1998 changed a lot of things for Pakistan. For starters it stopped the drumroll of Indian threats being hurled by every tin-pot Indian politician. Next it brought us on an even keel as far as respect is concerned in a region that only recognises power. And most of all, among other factors, it shored up the sagging morale of the populace, especially the Armed Forces.

However in one punitive strike on ourselves the financial credibility of the country was destroyed by the act of freezing the Foreign Currency Accounts (FCAs). With the single prop of inward expatriate remittances dwindling to almost zero count, we were in serious economic trouble and if it had not been for our various uncles ranging from China to Saudi Arabia, etc., chipping in with an odd hundred million or two here and there, we would have defaulted months ago.

To add to Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations', foreseeing a confrontation between West and Islam, Pakistan faces more complications, of the Taliban-kind mostly. For the first time we are estranged from our traditional

ally, Iran and became isolated in the region because of the extreme Islamist policies of the government (that we support) of our wilful neighbour, Afghanistan. In contrast to the Taliban (and even the Government in Iran) our Islamic garb is far more moderate, but in the world perception we are the driving force behind the Taliban. While it suits us geo-politically in the short run to have the Taliban as the rulers in Afghanistan, their policies in the larger part do not suit either our world image or our vision

growing anarchy fed on different factions including religious bigotry very current in the international mind, the US made an 180 degree turnaround in its decision to finally come to the support of Pakistan.

Coercing IMF to come to Pakistan's aid with a massive infusion of funds, US President Clinton moved to waive some sanctions, he has continued to do so during the PM's visit underscoring the US support for the government. Very pointedly, the US President's certification to US Congress has been

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

as a nation at all.

In the circumstances our Shariah Bill, Constitutional Amendment-15 (CA-15) seems to be a form of pre-emptive strike against the Taliban mode of governance spilling over the porous borders. With India in turmoil due to BJP's Hindu religious nationalism that tolerates no other religion, Pakistan's instability became a cause for alarm among world capitals. As much as the perception at the establishment level was to 'punish' us, among the hierarchy there was a growing realisation that Pakistan needed to be 'saved', mainly from itself. The 'domino effect' was avoided in South East Asia, could that principle be valid here? With the example of

done for a year, signifying that there is a 'price' to be paid by Pakistan during the year of grace.

What is the 'price' to be paid? In the first instance Pakistan is already committed in principle to signing the CTBT within one year i.e. before the time of ratification of the Treaty runs out, which satisfies the US for the moment. Beyond that as Foreign Secretary Shamshad has pointed out, neither nuclear non-proliferation (NPT) treaty nor 'roll back' are in our vocabulary, or so he says. Like the BJP has discovered to be electoral horror in India, to the mass populace the price of 'onions' is more important than nuclear chauvinism.

No government in Pakistan would survive any unilateral step that would give India an inherent military advantage. If the population does not give it short shrift the Armed Forces will. It is a fact that India's nuclear ambitions are different from our own, they perceive themselves as a world power, a member of the exclusive nuclear club. On the other hand, our only ambition is to counter the Indian threat to our own security. As regards signing the CTBT, given that it does not compromise our nuclear potential, we have given a commitment of sorts to go that route, conditionally and eventually. The fear in establishment circles is that the US may extract commitments further down the line on rollback and FMCT. It may even force a 'freeze' on further development (and procurement), particularly in that of the delivery vehicle i.e. missiles and combat aircraft.

While one cannot expect Mian Nawaz Sharif to compromise Pakistan's legitimate security concerns there is a growing doubt about the quantum and mode of the 'price' we have to pay. One recognises that US understands our government's predicament but will the US 'rollback' its ambitions on the set parameters of nuclear non-proliferation for compliance?

Confronted by an angry mob, burning with religious fervour, at the height of the Salman Rushdie affair in February 1989, a somewhat bemused American (what had Rushdie to do with the US?) turned to his Pakistani friend and commented, 'I wonder how many would cross over this side

if I were to wave US visas at them?' The Pakistani had no answer because in the general sense he was right, why do we persist in befriending a country we profess to hate so loudly and so frequently? The answer is that we are basically double-faced hypocrites who love to label the US as a monster even while arranging to send our children to US colleges/universities and our parents for treatment at US clinics/hospitals.

The answer is that even while beating our chest about economic independence, we are tied to the apron strings of the world financial institutions mostly controlled by the US. The answer is that Mian Nawaz Sharif has finally learnt realpolitik and perfected the art of double-speak so assiduously practised by the Bhuttos, father and daughter, in carrying on a love-hate relationship with the US.

The PM's visit to the US has been momentous, if not for the US, at least for the Sharifs. In turmoil since the May 28 nuclear blasts, faced with turmoil on the streets and in the Boardrooms, the loss of its financial credibility among expatriate Pakistanis and a clutchful of bad policy initiatives one after the other, the Nawaz Sharif regime was in severe danger of collapsing like a house of cards, aided on the way by a looming debt repayment default.

With the White House glow of US Presidential attention and the glory shed by the elite in the world's capital shining on him, Mian Nawaz Sharif has nowhere to go but up in the esteem of the Pakistani populace. As a bridge-building exercise, the PM's US visit was a great success. The mark-up may come later and it may not be in the Islamic mode of financing either!

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

The X-Zone

Sir, I would like to draw the attention of the responsible minister of Bangladesh government (whom I don't know) to the following fact:

I had the great pleasure to be able to visit your country recently. Apart from meeting very nice and friendly people and admiring your landscape I also wanted to visit some of the historic sites such as Mainamati in Comilla. To my great disappointment, I found out that as a foreign tourist you can visit only 4 historic sites out of seven which are to be found in that area. The Ananda Vihara, Kotila Mura and Charchatra Mura are easily accessible by road but not for foreigners since they are in a 'military zone'. Bangladeshi civilians can enter this area, but the foreign tourists are denied this possibility.

In my opinion, it didn't look as if there were significant military secrets to be kept from the foreign tourists to keep them from entering and visiting these important historic sites, but it seemed more to be a matter of the military guards trying

to demonstrate their 'importance'.

I think if Bangladesh wants more tourists to come and visit the country, foreigners should have access to the sites most important and relevant to tourists, otherwise they will not come.

Dr Konrad Mück
Vienna, Austria

Why A 'Level'?

Sir, I am a student and have finished my O' Levels. I always wanted to be a doctor since my childhood. But now I find my doors closed. It's very tough to get admission in the medical universities if you are from an English medium school. Again you have to finish your A' Levels with three subjects before you can even apply to any medical university here in Bangladesh. Is it some kind of joke?

A student who has completed his high school from the US can directly get admission in these medical universities whereas we can't get admission after our O' Levels here, why? We must remember that after a student

finishes his high school in the US gets admission at the undergraduate level and take courses that are similar to the ones a student finishing O' Levels has to take. So it is quite clear that the standard of O' Level is quite the same as the US high school.

But then why the dissimilarity? Why do we have to take the extra burden and waste extra two years? We want an explanation from the Education Ministry in this regard.

A Student
Dhaka

Reforming the Rajuk

Sir, Rajuk is again in the news. The huge DND project (flood control) around Dhaka metropolis has been transferred from the WDB. Are the present structure and efficiency and image of Rajuk good enough to take up a big additional project, when the public has serious misgiving about its present negative image on duties and responsibilities and the discharge of public functions?

Is it not time to review the working of Rajuk and carry out a BMR programme so that it could serve better the needs of development of an overpopulated city of 10 millions (Greater Dhaka)? There are several areas of review: corruption and influence by vested groups; technical manpower and field staff; transparent paper and file

work; lack of professionalism in daily working.

The government is rather silent about Rajuk's bad image. A press conference would bring up many awkward questions.

Abul M Ahmed
Dhaka

A far-fetched image?

Sir, Countless are our grumbles so far as the performance of our police force is concerned. What pains us even more is their sheer lack of the sense of courtesy and mannerism. The other day I was riding down the Airport Road on my motorbike. I found the otherwise busy Airport Road almost without any traffic. I was in an awful hurry and the empty road paved the way for a good speed. Understandably, the road was emptied under the transport protocol of any VIP.

Near the Farmgate police box, the on-duty traffic police whistled me to stop by the way side. As I was in a speed, I had to cover a few metres to brake down my bike. A smart police officer with sunglasses appeared and asked me what made me not stop at the whistles. The language he used for the purpose was, on my part, unheard of. I just said sorry and got into a by-lane to wait. Perhaps I am not the first to encounter such a

sweet language form our police force.

My question is, who gives them the right to use filthy languages with the public who they are supposed to serve? Their responsibility, as our knowledge goes, is to bring the offenders to book, not to ask questions in obnoxious slangs. Is it a far-fetched image to imagine our police force to be a bit mannered, if not adept and qualified?

Debasish Biswas
Lecturer,
Dept. of English,
Seikh Burhanuddin College,
Dhaka.

Set the record right

Sir, I have noticed many heated argument in the DS in favour and against our Prime Minister's unilateral declaration for no-hartal in the future. There is no one on this earth who will say hartal is good for our country. What the PM is saying is right. Everybody must appreciate for what our Prime Minister has said about hartal. She sounded like a true patriot. She understands that the total loss incurred from hartal in the past three years is 70,000 crore taka. That's why she does not like any more hartal in the future.

She knows that the opposition called hartal 4 days in a row. This has certainly contributed more loss to our poor

country. She even knows the opposition is going to call more hartals demanding immediate election. If she really loves the country she can take some measure to stop hartal in the future.

She can resign immediately and allow free and fair election in the near future. In this way, she will get a chance to prove that she was serious. Her record of the past for calling frequent hartal will also be cleared.

Since, her party has contributed 67,000 crore taka loss to the economy only by calling hartal — she has a long way ahead to prove what she said is what she meant.

Tuhin Raihan
Los Angeles, CA, USA

"Explain, please"

Sir, in response to Sadat Omar's letter on 23-11-98, allow me to add a few more words.

Let's believe for the time being that the AL representative and minister Md Nasim is correct in saying: 'It is our responsibility, as an elected government, to recover public property from illegal occupation.' Let's also believe that Nasim had the right to say what he said and also asked Khaleda Zia to vacate her Cantonment residence.

Now, the question is, 'where has the court of law gone?'

Natasha Kamal
Wari, Dhaka