

Political Drama in Moscow

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

Mr. Boris Yeltsin came into power by democratic means. He was able to guide Russia through the inevitable social, economic and political turmoil since 1991. To the surprise of a pessimistic world, he has managed to oversee the reforms in Russia in an atmosphere of relative calm. The people of Russia do not want that he tarnishes his image as a great democrat by manipulating the ensuing elections.

PRESIDENT Boris Yeltsin (67) has done it again. He has dismissed his Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin on 9 August after 90 days and appointed Mr. Vladimir Putin (46) in his place. In the last 18 months the President dismissed four Prime Ministers and it appears to be a record. Interestingly when the perennial economic malady in Russia seems to subside, a new crop of men are put into place by the President.

While appointing Mr. Putin, the President said that: "One should not forget that exactly within a year there will be a presidential election. I now have decided to name a man who in my opinion is capable of uniting society, based on the broadest political forces, to ensure the continuation of reforms in Russia." He asked the State Duma (lower House of Parliament) to confirm his appointment.

The President announced that he wanted Mr. Putin to succeed him as Russian President next year. He further declared that Russia would elect a new State Duma on December 19. The date has long been expected and now the announcement has made it clear. The dismissal has led to the shares fall between 10 and 17 per cent, and the rouble has weakened.

Mr. Putin is known to be a poor public speaker and seldom appears in television. He became the Secretary of the Advisory Security Council in March this year. He had a long intelligence career and served

with Soviet foreign intelligence, then a part of KGB secret police, for many years in Germany. He is known to be a market reformer and is close to Mr. Anatoly Chubais, the architect of Russia's privatisation programme.

Has President Yeltsin any hidden agenda in the dismissal of Mr. Stepashin? His critics might say: yes.

For some time President Yeltsin was not happy with the work of Mr. Stepashin in the run-up to the parliamentary elections in December this year. The fighting in Dagestan by the Muslim militants may also have an impact in the President's decision to dismiss the Prime Minister. There is a view that Mr. Stepashin's warm welcome in Washington has not been to the liking of the President. So the axe came suddenly on Mr. Stepashin.

There is a view that Mr. Yeltsin felt threatened by the new coalition recently constituted by the Mayor of Moscow Mr. Luzkov who is known to be a Presidential contender in 2000. This coalition is broad based and might include the popular ex-Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov (Mr. Primakov was dismissed only last May). This coalition is getting prepared for the parliamentary election which will establish the political trend for the more important presidential election in mid-2000.

By law Mr. Yeltsin cannot contest the presidential election. Therefore the critics of

the President say that he is keen to ensure that his successor is favourably disposed towards him and his family, close advisers and aides. Two of his aides Boris Berezovsky and Roman Abramovich are known to owe their huge wealth in large measure to favouritism by the Yeltsin government and they stand to lose everything if the next President supports a rival faction. His family is accused of making fortunes in many contract-deals and there is a fear that they might face criminal charges by the next government.

The other story is that Mr. Yeltsin wants to stay in power as long as possible to save his family and friends. He does not wish to hold the Presidential election on any pretext. One of the suggestions is that if Belarus becomes a part of greater Russian Federation in terms of the Treaty of Union of 2 April, 1997, then it will need a new constitution. The document might declare that Mr. Yeltsin to continue as the President of the larger Federation. If that occurs, the Presidential election in Russia may not be held in 2000. His term could be extended to another 4 or 5 years by the new constitution.

However all the guesses are dismissed by the aides of the President. They assert that the President is a great democrat and he is committed to democracy for global security.

The writer is former Bangladesh ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Crimean resort was heroic. He had the courage to denounce the coup as illegal and climbed over an armed vehicle near the headquarters of the parliament of Russian Federation and declared that he was assuming command and called for a general strike. Mr. Yeltsin's call sparked demonstrations throughout the Soviet Union and on 21 August the coup collapsed.

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ONCE in a while it is a refreshing change to read what a non-politician thinks about Bangladeshi politics, in stark contrast to the world of politics, where the politicians live, and how they themselves look at politics, their own profession (self-assessment).

Our current brand of politics have most of the characteristics of our traditional weather: overcast, cloudy, thunder and lightning, drizzles, showers, rain and downpours; sultry, stormy, cyclone — and, sometimes like hurricane lantern, if not blizzard. The depressions are percolated; and during overflows (the floods are taken into normal stride by generations of Bangladeshis) many reputations float, and are washed away, never to return.

Khurshid Hamid's *Musing on Politics in Bangladesh* (DS, Aug 2) was a good read, as he appeared to have no axe to grind.

Perhaps yet! At present, all egos

aspiring for political careers are suspect, carrying axes or representing an axis.

Bhadraloks (gentlemen; and also ladies) are not expected by the unambitious society to go for this profession yet, as the cynics would like to point out.

It is doubted that the politics of movements cannot take root spontaneously and automatically, unless deliberately planned by the leadership to be diverted and channelled into relevant public institutions: beginning at the base with centres of micro democratic institutions, (like our GB micro credit base?). Little grains of democracy, like grains of sand, make the mighty nation, and the pleasant land.

The politics of publicity has

to pause, and grow up in the womb of democratic institutions; as a small sapling grows up into an oak tree. In this deltaic region, the erosion due to political silt is similar to the national erosion caused by the deposit of two billion tons of silt washed down annually by the two mighty rivers and 500 smaller ones.

The poor, docile and overburdened inhabitants are at the receiving end of both these kinds of silt. So far no possible solution is forthcoming on the easiest, the fastest, and the most acceptable way of dredging our political silt. No foreign investment, aid, or technical assistance programme is required (no copyright law is involved in making use of the principles embodied in Emerson's essay on self-reliance). The project is low-cost, but priceless.

With such resilience in an electorate of 60 million, how can we possibly fail — ultimately? It is a battle of tolerance and patience. The politicians may fail, but the citizens have somehow survived. We have been taking the bouncers patiently for 28 years. How's that? It is not cricket, the cricketers' shout. Sometimes the bouncers are changed into googlies, to discourage appeals.

The problem with local politics is the security syndrome — how to cling to power, for self-survival; because political power is still a business in the third world countries. In England, the blue blood or the aristocracy, not the rising generation (it is a movement), ultimately created the House of Commons, through the House of Lords. In the under-developed countries, we also have the House of Landlords (zamindars). The principle involved is tested: a changing curve (of a data graph) is not a

sign of stability.

In other professions, there is always position, no opposition. In politics, the existence of Opposition is not openly and sincerely respected by the professional politicians themselves — to come back to power quickly is not a very divine wish.

Anything hurriedly done leaves loopholes and small black holes (this is a general statement for universal application). Applied to political activity, the successive political regimes have to carry out the nasty job of public washing of the dirty linen left behind by the previous regimes; preceded by the mopping up operation. It is not a peasant job, and the three parties involved in the game feel unhappy: the two opposing parties and the civic society represented by the citizens (the unhappy voters).

In mathematics there is a wavy curve called SHM or simple harmonic motion. Politics has its oscillating stage during the teething period, although the critics and analysts are tempted to classify it as complex, disharmonic motion (CDM). For political stability, CDM has to move towards SHM or normal cycles. In music also, the more the harmonics, the better the music. The developed countries have reached this approachable stable condition after many generations, starting with feudalism and tapering towards democracy, with autocracy, socialism and communism thrown in between.

This tapering process has turned into barbed-wire fence in many instances — the politicians are inside under protection, not we citizens; although there is serious difference of opinion on this issue! The problem is that the politicians take

their job very seriously, and their responsibility rather lightly. Their virtual earnestness is apparent watching the fierce faces on the television screen. Why the politicians do not display something like the Mona Lisa smile, especially when both the major parties are led by ladies? Why are we losing the art of smiling? — laughter comes once in a while. Perhaps it has something to do with the dictum 'Live, and let live'.

Using IT (information technology) analogy, database or DB is a familiar term. We need a political d-base for upgrading or enhancing our politics: DB standing for de-base, to weed out and filter the undesirable components, such as illiberal democracy, of charisma and chauvinism, and other complex types of political viruses. As per demand, various kinds of political virus killers should be available in the market as and when required. We have already succeeded in eliminating some kinds of viruses.

The pendulum demonstration can also be used to create awareness about the state of our politics. From the mid-rest point, a free swinging pendulum comes to the rest position after a period of damped oscillation. This may be likened to the teething stage of any new system, in all disciplines including politics. In Bangladesh these teething troubles are continuing even after 28 years of independence; in spite of national and cultural homogeneity.

One wonders if the pastime of politics is available in after-life; otherwise the deprived politicians would be bored, not till death, but eternally!

The author is a former technocrat.

The Politics of Politics

by A M M Aabid

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TOM & JERRY

