

Take Police Reform Seriously

IN the public eye the police are dishonest, corrupt and unfriendly. The police think honesty does not pay. They are fixated on the notion that they are blamed for everything that has ever gone wrong...

Police Commissions we have had a few; but their excellent recommendations are tucked away into the dusty file-cabinet of either the establishment or the home ministry.

Of the many faces the government has, it is that of the police which is practically the most important one for the simple reason that it serves as the credibility index of the government.

Regrettably, no government so far has taken police reform as a serious agenda. But given an all-time low trust being currently reposed in the police, we urge a genuine reform initiative...

Rehabilitate Them on a Crash Basis

THE decision of the nationalised commercial banks (NCBs) to fund rehabilitation of the slum-dwellers affected by the government's now-suspended eviction drive through micro-credit programmes certainly comes as a welcome development.

Surely, the government itself has let things go out of control as it did in the widely-criticised rehabilitation drive for the sex workers, by bungling up on the order of priority.

Nevertheless, it can redeem itself through expeditious execution of its rehabilitation programmes. While appreciating increased investment of time, energy and money on alternative housing for the evicted lot, we would expect a level of activism from the authorities similar to that which they displayed earlier while rendering thousands of poor families homeless.

Uncivilised Behaviour

THIS is just not done in any civilised society. The question is whether we live in one.

More than a hundred guests, invited by the deputy leader of the opposition on the occasion of his daughter's wedding on Friday last at the Senakunja, were denied entry at the Dhaka cantonment entrance without any reason.

This was a calculated political move by the authorities to harass Dr Choudhury which smacks of bad taste. It may be a practice to restrict visitors to such an important area; but how come MPs, who are elected representatives of the people, are denied access to Senakunja without any valid reason?

IN Indonesia a free and fair election in June last — the first in 44 years — was by itself a great news for democracy in that country.

The international community, the US in particular, commended the first few steps that Indonesia had taken towards transforming the country into the third largest democracy in the world.

In the election, the Indonesian clearly rejected the ruling Golkar Party and Ms Megawati Sukarnoputri rode the wave of a Sukarno nostalgia to lead her party the Indonesian Democratic Party — struggle, to victory although none is sure whether the victory can be carried to the last — till the presidential election due in November.

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Ms Megawati, the leader of

The Election in Indonesia More Than Just Change of Guard

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Today, Suharto, just like Sukarno once was, is reviled for having led the nation into a severe economic crisis, rampant inflation and a heavily devalued currency. Poll results have shown that there are enough impoverished, expectant in-

democracy was forgotten. That Suharto guided 'democracy' to suit his family's interests was presented. Popular nostalgia for the first President and discontent with the second, pushed Sukarno's daughter into the political limelight.

presidential poll. Indonesia's newly enfranchised reformists, political leaders and citizens alike would not, in all probability, let their latest 'sunrise democracy' to turn into an ironic sunset at the dawn.

In the meantime, if democracy is allowed to have its way a new incumbent in Jakarta's Merdeka Palace will mean more than just a change of guard. The administration since the fall of Suharto in May 1998 is practically in limbo. The ASEAN fraternity has been

eagerly waiting to see which direction would their 'Big brother' be moving in once its new president is in place. Not just Southeast Asian countries but many multinational and multi-lateral corporations and institutions are anxiously waiting to finalise their future tie-ups with Indonesia as soon as the new political leadership emerges.

The stock market in Jakarta has been nervously watching the faint signals of the change at the top. The foreign banks, the IMF and the World Bank are also to discuss new conditionalities with the country's new boss. Anything that happens in Indonesia — the largest country in the region — in the next few months has a lot to do with regional and international politics. The United States also has

great stakes in the country which turned to the West since 1967.

A major debt restructuring programme for the private sector costing up to Rs. 130 billion will have to be put in place with the cooperation of the new government. Though the IMF agreed on a \$43 billion relief package for Indonesia at the height of the 1997 economic collapse, only a fraction of the amount has so far been released.

This is not the problem of Indonesia alone. Because, hinged to the fortune of Indonesia is also the recovery of the economy of other Southeast Asian countries. The nation of 200 million people endowed with huge natural resources has obvious impacts on other regional countries.

However, the political fallout of Indonesian poll has yet more far-reaching implications. It will have pronounced effects particularly on Malaysia and Myanmar still in the grip of the region's old guards in politics. The cry for 'reformasi' is already audible in Malaysia. Myanmar still refuses to see the writings on the wall. The message from

Indonesia to these countries seems to be that of plurality of views and genuine democracy and a warning against benign dictatorship in the name of stability.

They fervently seek an atmosphere conducive to the regular transfer of powers to a new government. If South Korea and Thailand have somewhat recovered from their economic setback, their advancement in democratic practices have definitely something to do with their process of recovery.

The challenges in Myanmar seem to be more daunting. There is still no sign of breaking the log-jam. Not only the country's ruling junta has since scuttled the people's verdict in the last election it also refuses to recognise Aung Sun Kyi's national leadership. On the other hand, the military leaders are keen on securing a political role for the Army in Indonesian style in the new constitution it has been drafting for the last six years.

History has shown that the longer it takes to switch over from dictatorship or military rule to democracy, the more painful and violent will become the transition. Myanmar would do well by taking lessons from the fights of the students and youths across Indonesian archipelago which raged for more than 18 months before they could force Suharto to step down.

PERSPECTIVES by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

Indonesians to make Megawati, the fourth president of the republic. Indonesia is still going through the birth pangs of democracy and things are far from ideal for democracy. In spite of Golkar's poor showing in the poll, Megawati's passage to victory in the more critical selection of the country's next president is still strewn with impediments.

BJP's Growing Troubles Paying for Institutional Erosion

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi Perhaps the BJP's, rather Mr Vajpayee's, most deplorable action has been to create an extra-constitutional power centre in the PMO, which bypasses the Cabinet and defies accountability. The PMO functions like a cabal around one individual, autonomous of even the Cabinet.

GOING by the way Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee kicked off the BJP's election campaign in Ludhiana, Delhi and Lucknow, the party hardly appears ready to romp to victory on the shoulders of the 'hero of Kargil', Mr Vajpayee's rallies were poorly attended. He did not speak with his sights set on victory, but like a diffident politician, he only forecast a small gain — just 20 seats.

Those who believed that Mr Vajpayee would decisively loosen the RSS's hold on the BJP after 'Operation Vijay' had better think twice. He seemed asserting himself against the sangh when roping J.H. Patel and the Sharad Yadav-Paswan duo into the National Democratic Alliance.

But by August 8, he was at the feet of RSS sarasanghachalak Rajendra Singh, meekly offering him pranam and guru dakshina in a 30-minute song ceremony. He made vitriolic attacks on Pakistan, which were indistinguishable from the hardcore Hindutva line.

Perhaps Mr Vajpayee has turned unenthusiastic about the BJP's and NDA's prospects. The NDA, with Messrs Fernandes, Patel and Naidu sniping at their rivals, and the Yadav-Paswan faction at loggerheads with the BJP, does not present a picture of unity. Ideologically, its constituents are mutually further apart, from one another than those even of the United Front.

The BJP, once the party 'with a difference', is in poor shape. Two of its star women campaigners, Uma Bharati and Sushma Swaraj, have opted out of the electoral race. Intense factionalism plagues each of its state units. Enormous tensions

have built up between Mr Vajpayee and Mr Advani. In MP, there is open warfare between Mr Sunder Lal Patwa and Mr Babulal Gaur. In Gujarat, VHP-RSS hardliners led by Mr Praveen Togadia have launched anti-Muslim riots to embarrass Mr Keshubhai Patel.

In UP, the fight between the Kalyan Singh-OBC group and the upper caste Tandon-Mishra lobby has discredited what is one of the worst performing governments in the state. In Maharashtra, the BJP and Sena are not even campaigning jointly. The BJP's projection of Mr Gopinath Munde as the 'natural' CM has provoked Mr Rane to declare he would 'teach the BJP a lesson'.

The Sainiks' priority is as much to put down the BJP as to combat the Sonia and Pawar Congresses. The Sena is itself badly divided between the Uddhav and Raj Thackeray factions, corresponding to different business lobbies and protection rackets. Short of a near-miracle, the SS-BJP seems set to lose power in the Assembly.

None of this can cheer the BJP. True, the Congress is still to get its act together. It does not yet have a coherent electoral strategy or programme. It has not resolved its tricky leadership issue. It does have ammunition against the government on Kargil and telecom and steel-import scams. But it has not turned this into electoral advantage.

And yet, no one can deny that the Congress is now on the upswing. It stands to gain in diverse states. Given imaginative programmes, it could do far better than last year.

By contrast, the BJP may have peaked in many states — UP, MP and Gujarat, perhaps Bihar and Karnataka too. Even the most optimistic internal assessment of the party's prospects only gives it a one per cent vote-swing. The dice don't favour the Congress, but they certainly remain loaded against the BJP.

The BJP's leadership has itself to blame for this. Three things went wrong. First, the BJP's gains in the 1990s came on the strength of symbols, not substance. On coming to power, however, it failed to translate symbolic issues into substantive ones. Ultimately, people judge parties by their performance. Here, the BJP was found wanting.

Second, the BJP pushed policies that, at one extreme, were blatantly pro-business, and at another, jingoistic, communal and chauvinistic. Thus, it practised crony capitalism, mocking real liberalisation.

At the same time, its openly communal and hawkish agenda on nuclear policy, on education, and on the minorities, repelled large sections of the public. Its vacillation between these two poles reflected tensions between city-slicker types, e.g. Messrs Jaswant Singh and Mahajan, and hardcore RSS-VHP elements.

Third, the BJP got into a confrontation with democratic institutions. President K.R. Narayanan, one of the soberest individuals to adorn that office, had to intervene no fewer than 17 times on various improper actions of the government; e.g. dismissal of the Bihar government, the anti-Christian campaign, Indian Airlines' equity

sell-off, Rajya Sabha session on Kargil, the Rs 50,000-crore telecom scandal... The government tried to answer him back through partisan rationalisations — after leaking the matter to the media.

The BJP caretaker government took more decisions in three months than the regular one did in 13. It got into spats with the Election Commission, questioning its authority. Equally reprehensibly, it attacked the higher judiciary on the telecom policy. It made a mockery of the Telecom Regulatory Authority.

Perhaps the BJP's, rather Mr Vajpayee's, most deplorable action has been to create an extra-constitutional power centre in the PMO, which bypasses the Cabinet and defies accountability. The PMO functions like a cabal around one individual, autonomous of even the Cabinet.

Unlike in the past, the PMO is run more by non-officials than by civil servants. Today, Mr Ranjan Bhattacharya and Mr Sudhanshu Mittal operate out of it to bully the media, fix steel prices, organise extravaganzas, and draft telecom strategies.

The PMO now resembles its degenerate Emergency avatar. The difference is, Sanjay Gandhi provoked media anger; Mr Bhattacharya is shielded. The PMO now defends and lobbies for just one individual. Its role has eroded the government's credibility, undermining the Cabinet system, as well as the BJP's integrity.

In the long run, this does not bode well for democracy. In the short run, it cannot do the BJP any good either.

To the Editor

On the death of muggers Sir, Death of two alleged muggers by an angry mob near the premises of Baitul Mukarram Mosque invariably expresses the infringement of fundamental human rights.

This lynching might have been prompted among the mob following the prolonged frustration in deteriorating law and order.

People naturally expect the law-enforcing authorities to safeguard their money, property and rightful interest. But their perennial failure in this regard made them (people) desperate and caused such undesirable death. Had the law-enforcing authority been so vigilant in securing people's interest, then this unwarranted death would have been avoided. Md Wahaed Alam Dhaka

Defence purchase Sir, Recently, some headlines in the newspaper have drawn my attention, namely (a) JS committee on defence wants to deliberate on the issue of defence officers' retirement up to 1990 (b) the issue of purchase of MIG 29.

Deliberating on the first, why this particular date? Why this at the beginning of the year? Is it definite that no irregularity occurred before or after that period? What makes those involved after that infallible and above scrutiny? About the second matter, it will perhaps be right to first ascertain how ably the forces are

in utilizing the equipment they already have in their inventory before buying anything now. In '97 I asked an infantry officer a very simple question and he answered honestly. He had to say that the proficiency in rifle firing was only 40 per cent. The rifle is the basic weapon in the army. Every soldier is to carry one during war. If that be true, it would be interesting to find out how adept the defence personnel are with more advanced weapon and equipment. The proficiency on such issues will perhaps dictate whether it is justified to buy advanced weaponry. About aircraft and ship purchase, one hears from the well-informed that these days nations first identify opposition and then decide what

they need to defend against. Should not the lawmakers or at least a concerned group be made aware of such needs? Has the exercise of identification been carried out? AFMA Harris Dhaka

"The Controversy over Growth Rate" Sir, I was very pleased to read the article "The Controversy over Growth Rate" by Dr Manzur Alam published in the DS, dated 31 July, 1999. I was surprised at the constructive and logical presentation of the article. But why our government and opposition parties

cannot understand the reality that a country can achieve high GDP growth rate in spite of great disasters because a victim country can add new outputs by rebuilding and repaying the capital stock including rebuilding of houses, roads, highways, restoration of land for cultivation. We know that GDP is a measure of the total value of the final outputs produced in a year within a country.

I want to ask the policy-makers why they couldn't show the real factors and indicators and why they didn't present Japan and Germany as a model country in this issue. Mizanur Rahman Sourav 142, Zohurul Haque Hall Dhaka University

Bad governance outdoors and families indoor are not safe in the villages also. The regime seems to spend more time and energy in containing the opposition parties, and strengthening the party's illegal hold everywhere, including the JU through rape-smearred so-called youth leaders.

The party leaders may soon find the administrative situation beyond control within the party; and as PM, outside the party. The day of reckoning appears to be near. Administrative indifference attracts more retribution, philosophically speaking. Those who do not believe in divinity, it means Newton's Third Law, applied morally. There is no escape from bad governance. Abul M Ahmad Dhaka

"Save the Buriganga" Sir, I highly appreciate the appeal under the above heading published in the DS on 10th August 1999.

At least somebody is concerned about the decaying environmental state of the country. The people of Bangladesh suffer from many diseases and our present environmental pollution is one of the main reasons behind it. But nobody seems to care. Therefore, while reading this small column, which carries high moral value (no cost accountant can evaluate it) I felt happy at least for a day.

I have no language to thank The Daily Star. Mamun H Qadeer 7/4, Montipart Para Sangsod Ave Dhaka

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

A Budget Surplus

I have lived through three fiscal crises — a federal budget deficit, a balanced budget and now a budget surplus. None of them has been any fun.

When I was young, politicians, presidents and economists used to talk about budget deficits all the time. We were spending more money than we were taking in. Members of Congress always blamed the other side for the deficit but refuse to give credit when we have a surplus.

The answer to a deficit was more taxes. The Republicans have the budget deficit and said we were giving money to people overseas and those on relief and mothers who were having too many children. They declared that because of our deficit we are lazy and on the dole.

Somewhere along the way we suddenly balanced the budget. Both the Republicans and Democrats took credit for it. The problem was no one had seen a balanced budget before, so it was impossible to believe that we really had one. People went about their business, and no one made a big deal of it.

Then, under President Clinton — and no one gives him much credit for it — we had a surplus of billions of dollars, more money than even Bill Gates has.

Suddenly everyone started fighting over the money. Some wanted to give everybody a tax break of \$15.45, except for rich people, who could deduct eight rooms in their apartments and estates. Other people wanted to solve the Social Security problem, and still others wanted to paint Utah a deep purple.

The argument about the budget surplus is bitter. The United States is not used to having more money than it spends. Here are some of the ideas that have been floating around: We give the money to baseball players to supplement their paltry incomes. We pay everyone's Visa and MasterCard bills so they can start clean all over again. Everyone in the United States would receive two tickets to the Broadway show 'The Lion King.'

And the battle goes on. It's the same fight people have when they have too much money in the bank. Fight, fight, fight. But what I don't like about it is the way a budget surplus turns Republicans against Democrats.

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OPINION Real Estate Sector Facing Recession?

A Husain

The real estate developers of high-rise, high-cost apartment houses are not happy with the current market conditions, as reported in a section of the press, as the market appears to be depressed or has gone into a recession. If it was over-heated, a freeze or bearish cycle is not unexpected.

There are conflicting views from the different types of players. Some complain of the meteoric rise of the cost of plots in Dhaka (plot/land cost as high as 25 per cent of the total cost), some put the blame on the bank-loan environment, while some are of the opinion that the developers have lost the confidence of the buyers of the apartments due to poor and tardy service (confidence, quality control, unethical practices, and delay in handing over).

The market had to slow down, as the pace had been too dizzy, and the environment is clogging up, due to changing conditions in the other sectors of the market. One statistic which is not available is what percentage of the funds available for investment in the real estate sector is white, black or grey money (clean funds are always in a minority). The grey and black markets will be tapped first, and it will respond first; then normal conditions will return for the genuine buyers who will be careful to spend their hard-earned savings (along with legally clean loans from established institutions).

The top tier of the business has been milked dry; and the next grade of players (the mini-micro nouveau-riche and the upper middle class) are finding the going tough, as the options on better return of the investment shrink. With the tightening of

the government's measures around the toll collectors, rent seekers, extortionists and terrorists (who are armed with easy money to fling around), the buyers will shrink in quantity and amount, stagnating the market to a bearish state. There are similar patterns in some other Asian capitals; hence Dhaka is not being original. The situation is not subject to quick-fix, as the political confrontation is hotting up, the government is under pressure politically, financially and economically, and it is not very peaceful across the borders. Very few developers have gone for middle-class and low-cost housing (cheap flats) projects in a big way. There is nothing for the middle-class in the way of options, especially in Dhaka, where metropolitan migration has reached over-saturation point in people and money. What is required now is to formally create diversionary movement through official inducements for creating interest in business and property opportunities first at the divisional headquarters, followed by tempting offers at the district headquarter level (the tax holidays should be attractive inside the packaged deals). The pilgrimage to business centre Dhaka has to be discouraged through protective tariffs and other legislation. This poor overloaded city will collapse suddenly in the near future, sinking nearly all the new investments. DCC, Rajuk, and the starry metropolitan super projects cannot provide the solution at the pace the officialdom is going, unless the various undesirable inputs are strictly controlled, in public interest (not party or political interest).