

Couldn't Cut Ice

ALMOST word for word Pakistan's new military ruler Pervez Musharraf's address to his nation on Sunday night sounded like reverberations of the speeches made by his peers on their seizures of power earlier on. He has unveiled a plan not for an immediate return to democracy but for running the country as long as it is 'absolutely necessary to pave the way for democracy to flourish.'

Wherever references to democracy occurred in his speech these were in the form of vague generalisations with equivocation to top it off. In justifying the military take-over the General gave a recital of how the economy was mismanaged into a shambles and democracy was hollowed out its essence. While very few will contest that misrule and corruption had crossed the critical threshold during Nawaz Sharif's two and a half years in power, they would invariably assert in the same breath that the judgment on his failures ought to have been delivered by the electorate, not the military.

Given the tone, temper and texture of his speech it does not appear as though the General is heading any transition and caretaker government, rather it seems he has embarked on a long-winded course.

It is a power-sharing technocratic-military oligarchy that General Musharraf has devised to run the country as the Chief Executive. And his agenda for a resuscitation of the economy and paving the way for a 'true democracy' sound like a tall order when the security and administrative functions need to be combinedly shouldered by the armed forces.

The crisis in Pakistan can also be an opportunity for General Musharraf to provide good transitional governance subject to a deadline set for the return of democracy to Pakistan. Musharraf has done well by saying that Islam is all about tolerance and not bigotry.

In the South Asian context, his announcement of unilateral troops de-escalation along the border should have a positive vibe with India because it comes from the horse's mouth now. But in the ultimate analysis, Gen Musharraf needs to be wary of vested interests who have a way of gravitating to the centre of power and thereby co-opting into the system.

After the Ban on Vetch

WITHIN hours of a disquieting revelation made at an Institute for Development Policy Analysis and Advocacy (IDPAA) press conference Saturday on the toxic effect of vetch on human health, came the ban on its import. What's more, the government has decided to send samples of vetch to different institutions to get a clearer picture. Also, the Australian Agriculture Ministry has been contacted to find out 'whether it is a food for human consumption or a fodder and whether it contains toxic substance'. Overall, the government has certainly shown a level of activism expected under the circumstances. Prompt and definitive as its actions have been, the government certainly deserves appreciation.

However, as this paper has categorically demanded in its editorial comment yesterday, only a ban is not enough, especially for the fact that import of vetch has been on since 1992 and in the last seven years or so, nearly 50,000 tonnes of the toxic grain has been imported. Ominously, some unscrupulous traders have even marketed vetch as lentil, thereby exposing many to the risk of sight impairment and tissue damage. That India, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and some other Middle Eastern countries banned its import as early as in 1992 strongly suggests that those involved in importation of vetch must have been aware of the risk factor. Yet, they get on with it, obviously with the help of the relevant government agency. Therefore, it is imperative that the government start an investigation to trace the unholy nexus and ferret out the perpetrators and punish them.

The vetch scandal has cruelly exposed the in-built inadequacy in the relevant state apparatus. How had the vile trade been allowed to continue for so many years remains a troubling question, especially when Sri Lanka slapped a 3,000-dollar fine on an Australian company for shipping vetch in the name of lentil. Corrective measures this time around, including punishment for the importers and their allies in the relevant ministries, would certainly act as deterrent for similar practices in future.

Powerful Power Thieves

WE are facing chronic shortages of electricity through the courtesy of a section of 'powerful thieves' working at the Dhaka Electric Supply Authority (DESA).

This organisation was formed to manage power supply efficiently to Dhaka city and some adjacent district towns and areas by buying power in bulk from the Power Development Board (PDB). But as in other public sector companies rendering utility service to the people like WASA, Telephone, gas etc. power sector has also gone into the hands of dishonest officials and employees, at least a major part of it, resulting in financial losses to the organisation and sufferings to the utility users. The story of pilferage and illegal use of electricity with the help of a section of power sector employees is as old as the story of Ali Baba and Forty Thieves. Only the title these days should be Ali Babas and Umpteenth Thieves.

A report in The Daily Star on Monday calculated that the marginal deficit in supply of power to the capital for which certain areas go under regular blackouts could be avoided if illegal connections given to the shanties, manufacturing units and makeshift shops were done away with. But that does not happen because powerful lobbies and strong-armed mastans see to it that none disturbed the flow of power to these establishments. These services are not available free of charge the users having to pay to the mastans.

The blame for this is squarely laid on DESA for its inept handling of the situation and its apathy towards punishing the culprits. Unless the organisation takes a firm stand on the question people are destined to suffer for no fault of their own.

Big Setback for Congress: Half a Victory for BJP

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

The Congress foolishly imagined that Sonia would somehow metamorphose into the Indira of 1971. The dynasty factor worked against it. Mr Vajpayee will find it painfully difficult to handle his partners without creating rancour. The NDA has at least half a dozen leaders who can barely contain their ambitions.

BY giving the NDA a majority of just 30 seats, and sizing the Congress down, the electorate has delivered a discriminating, complex and regionally differentiated verdict. This is not a decisive victory for the BJP.

Sounds odd? Consider this. If you were a committed cadre, you would admit there was a lot going for the BJP. There was the 'sympathy' factor from the toppling of its government by opponents who could not form a substitute. There was Kargil plus Pokharan-II, and the Vajpayee 'magic' for some, the Vajpayee 'magic'.

To top it all, there was the BJP's shrewd alliance-building and campaigning. Despite this, the BJP failed to improve on its seat tally. Its vote shrank by 2.5 per cent. Nor did it remotely secure an endorsement for its ideology.

The party won more by default than positive votes — despite diluting its platform. Its 'own' victories were limited to 100 seats. The rest came from clever alliances.

The BJP did badly in Uttar Pradesh, the original, invincible, fort of Hindutva in the heart of Aryavarta. It lost significant influence in the Hindi belt, and recovered it only partly through piggybacking in the east and the south.

In UP, many factors — including four-way or three-way contests, a pliant bureaucracy, and splits in Muslim votes favoured the BJP. But the Vajpayee 'magic' didn't work. The 'foreign origins' campaign was supposed to appeal powerfully to the Salt of the Earth. It fell flat on its face.

What happened? The voter saw through the cynicism of politicising Kargil. BJP factionalism flared unprecedently, with Mr Kalyan Singh openly sabotaging the campaign. Mr Vajpayee had to hold street-corner meetings. The voter again did what s/he has

been doing for a quarter-century: s/he threw out more than two-fifths of sitting MPs. The verdict confirms many political trends. Among these are growing regionalisation, declining importance of charisma and identity, and growing demand for accountability. The results underscore Dalit and OBC self-assertion and rising importance of secular-political choices for Muslims.

India is not evolving towards a bipolar or two-party system, but towards a complex structure, to which regional parties are crucial. The BJP-Congress collective vote is just about half the total — and not rising. Indeed, their political strength has decreased — no sign of bipolarity.

The BJP is not becoming what the Congress was until the mid-seventies. It still lacks that regional-geographical spread. It has never reached out to the poor. At its non-peak perfor-

mance then, the Congress had 300 to 350 seats. Even with 24 allies, the NDA commands just 300. The BJP's own vote is only 23 per cent.

And yet, the results are a setback for the Centre-Left. An alliance dominated by the Hindu Right has taken power. The setback is highlighted especially by the Left's decline. The CPI in particular has been marginalised to just four Lok Sabha seats, and wiped out in the Andhra assembly where it

once had 30-plus seats. The fulcrum of politics has moved a little rightwards. The real trick has been alliances. Whoever built coalitions wielded a massive advantage. That explains the BJP's success in Andhra, Orissa, Assam, and above all, Maharashtra where it must thank Mr Sharad Pawar for rescuing it and the drowning Sena.

The BJP shamelessly allied with forces with which it has nothing in common, and which brought down its government in April. This 'party with a difference' has embraced Meharchand Chautala politics.

The Congress has been a reluctant coalition-builder. It permitted itself the 'Pachmarhi delusion' — that it would romp to power on its own.

The people have accepted Ms Gandhi as an Indian citizen and national leader. Hence her largely effortless victory in two constituencies. But they have not endorsed her as a political strategist. She committed many tactical blunders, e.g. a terrible flip-flop in Haryana, relying upon discredited sycophantic advisers like Messrs Pranab Mukherjee and R.K. Dhawan.

Tactical blunders alone did not deprive the Congress of a sweet victory. The party started with an eroded base, and a rotten organisation, which it tried to rebuild by half-heartedly reaffirming secularism, but without a radical revision of economic policy or electoral strategy.

The Congress foolishly imagined that Sonia would somehow metamorphose into the Indira of 1971. The dynasty factor worked against it. It will have to do much more than a



Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (foreground, 2nd from R) poses with Indian President K.R. Narayanan (foreground, C) and his newly sworn in cabinet on the steps of the presidential palace 13 October 1999 in New Delhi.

—AFP PHOTO

Why has Australia's Role in East Timor Raised Eyebrows in Asia?

by Harun ur Rashid

Does the above pattern of conduct demonstrate Australia's total commitment to human rights? This is one of the anxious questions that is being agitated in the minds of many Asians on Australia's robust involvement in East Timor.

THE UN Secretary General has drawn the attention of the UN member-states at the ensuing session of the General Assembly to the issue of humanitarian intervention and how the UN peace-keeping force could be rapidly deployed in crisis-situations. The opinions by the delegates expressed in the UN appear to be mixed.

Many of the developing countries did not endorse the Secretary-General's views. China, the only Asian permanent member of the Security Council possessing veto-power, appeared to have voiced against the intervention on humanitarian grounds. The Algerian President seemed to have captured the mood of many of the developing countries when he was reported to have said in the Assembly: "When does aid stop and interference begin? Is interference valid only for weak or weakened states or for all states without distinction?" Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar echoed the similar sentiment when he said that "the circumvention of the UN Charter was never a good thing, whatever the magnitude, the scale and the moral content of the human rights violation may be." Obviously the Minister was referring to Article 2.7 of the Charter which prohibited interference in the matter of "domestic jurisdiction".

In the backdrop of the debate on humanitarian intervention, Australia's role in East Timor

has come under severe scrutiny in Asia. Although Australia-led international force in the territory is a peace-keeping force approved by the Security Council of the UN with the concurrence of Indonesia, a question begs: Is humanitarian intervention universally applied or on pick and choose basis?

It appears that the East Timor situation was triggered because of Indonesia's decision to go through a referendum under the supervision of the UN. Some analysts believe that Indonesian fragile economic position and political instability was one of the main reasons which prompted mercurial President Habibie to agree to the referendum out of sheer anger and desperation. Was it an appropriate time to ask of Australia to a transitional government for autonomy leading to self-determination in East Timor? Had Indonesia been economically much vigorous and self-reliant under a stable political regime, it is not known what response it would have given to the proposal mooted by Australia late last year. These are the questions which remain matters of debate.

It is admitted that Australia's peace-keeping role in leading the international force in East Timor is authorised by the UN.

At the same time it is a fact that Australia played a lead role in organising the international force in the territory. It induced the reluctant US to join the multi-national force in East Timor. It is argued that Australia was compelled by its public opinion to adopt a high profile role in East Timor situation. After all East Timor is less than 300 miles from its northern city, Darwin, in Australia.

Australia has taken a high moral ground on the human rights abuses in East Timor. However, a question that is raised in some countries in Asia is: does it stack up with Australia's past and present attitude to other human rights-situations inside and outside the country?

There is a strong view that Australia's treatment to the original inhabitants of Australia (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples) continues to be harsh and in neglect. The Aboriginal leaders have expressed that their rights are not enshrined in the constitution. They raised vigorous objections to the amendments to the Native Title Act, 1993 by the present conservative coalition Government which diluted, according to them, their rights on lands. Even a UN agency is re-

ported to have concluded that the amendments were in breach of laws of racial discrimination.

The appalling living conditions of many of the Aboriginal communities in rural Australia may easily be comparable to those prevalent in the third world and no one can possibly justify the presence of abject poverty, lack of habitable housing, sanitation and safe drinking water among some of the Aboriginal communities given the wealth and resources in Australia. No wonder the Aboriginal activist Mr. Charles Perkins (a former Secretary of a Federal Department) is reported to have announced that next year he would organise the visiting foreign media to see the living conditions of the some of the Aboriginal communities before, during and after the Olympic Games. The purpose of the visit by the foreign media, according to him, is to highlight the grotesque inequalities between the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal communities in Australia.

The question is: do the poor living conditions by some section of the Aboriginal community violate the human rights under the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social

and Cultural Rights? (Australia ratified the Covenant on 10 December, 1975). It may be argued that economic and social rights are equally as important as civil and political rights.

Furthermore, Australia had a policy to take away babies forcibly from the Aboriginal mothers for the benefit of babies until 60s. The babies, now grown-up adults, are commonly known as "the stolen generation" in the community. Taking away babies from mothers is a gross violation of human rights and the "stolen generation" wanted an apology from the government. Prime Minister Howard's failure to apologise formally on behalf of the government to "the stolen generation" is seen by the Aboriginal community to be extremely insensitive. However the Parliament has expressed "regret" (not apology) to the Aboriginal community. Interestingly, Australia's pre-Second World War generation expect an apology from present Japanese leaders for the human rights abuses during the Second World War.

Australia's House of Representatives (where government is formed or falls) remains unrepresented by the Aboriginal community. There is no quota or reserved seats available for the Aboriginal people because it is argued that the introduction of such system is against the democratic principles and may raise the difficult and complex question of representation of other ethnic groups in the country in the House. This position may have some validity but

cosmetic resignation exercise, a la Mr Pranab Mukherjee.

The NDA has a higher probability of lasting than its predecessor. But numbers cannot make it structurally stable. The NDA remains an office-driven, not ideologically motivated, formation. It has no ground-rules for power-sharing or dispute-resolution.

Mr Vajpayee will find it painfully difficult to handle his partners without creating rancour. The NDA has at least half a dozen leaders who can barely contain their ambitions.

The BJP has failed to draw its single biggest ally, Telugu Desam, into the Cabinet. This is because Mr Naidu feels threatened and does not want the stigma of communal association. For the past year, the BJP has tried hard to split his party. If Mr Vajpayee includes 'new' post-poll entrants into the Cabinet, he will have serious trouble with the NDA's original constituents.

There are contradictions galore among NDA allies: over river waters, attitudes to other parties, tensions between regional agenda, clashing portfolios, and, of course, personal ambitions. The JD(U), composed of highly temperamental mavericks, won't be less difficult to handle than AIADMK. Nor will Ms Mamata Banerjee miraculously turn reasonable. The real issue is what the new coalition does. In the short run, it may do a lot for the Sena, but little for the people. Its manifesto does not contain one iota of hope for the poor. It follows a completely right-wing line: indiscriminate privatisation, realigning the economy to the needs of the WTO and global capital, while starving the public services.

A frustrated BJP, seething with strife, could be tempted to push an overly communal agenda. Unless its 'secular' allies resist this firmly, that can spell trouble for India.

some may query: are those the only reasons? How is it that the neighbour democratic New Zealand has provided a quota for the original inhabitants, the Maoris, in the Parliament?

Australia refused to sign the standard cooperation agreement with European Union because it contains a human-rights provision. It appeared that the European Union was unable to comprehend Australia's objection to the human rights clause in the agreement. Furthermore, Australia does not lend its support to the US initiative to move resolution against China on violation of human rights in the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva. The government runs argument that it is engaged in a bilateral dialogue with China on human rights issue. However the critics say that trade is more important for the government than human rights in China and therefore the diplomatic cover of "bilateral dialogue" has been invented to pacify the human rights activists in the country.

Overlaid on this sort of attitude, Prime Minister Howard in an interview with a media considered Australia as a "Deputy Sheriff" in Asia-Pacific region, the US being the Sheriff. Later although he retracted from this position and denied he ever used the words "Deputy Sheriff" the perception of the Australian role by the Prime Minister in the region is seen to have underpinned its action in East Timor.

One may query: does the above pattern of conduct demonstrate Australia's total commitment to human rights? This is one of the anxious questions that is being agitated in the minds of many Asians on Australia's robust involvement in East Timor.

The author, a Barrister, is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN in Geneva.

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.

PM's remarks on bomb blast

Sir, The Prime Minister's remarks — "BNP behind bomb planting incident" — was unfortunate. Never did we find any report or even any hint in any of the news media that BNP was involved in that incident. If the PM is certain about the involvement of any of the BNP workers in the incident she should clearly declare their names to the people without keeping them in the dark.

In the past, we have seen that the PM and other AL leaders smelled sabotage by BNP whenever there was any unfortunate incident. But later on the allegation was proved false or baseless. This sort of remarks by the PM and her colleagues have already undermined the credibility and importance of their speeches. That the people have a pre-conceived notion — whatever the leaders are preaching may not be true — is very shocking to us. We think the PM is not only an individual but also an institution. Therefore, we earnestly request our PM and all the national leaders not to make any comments about their opponents merely to get a big-hand in the public meeting or to undermine the image of their opponents.

Mustafizur Rahman
Dhaka

Such seizure has not been done with any known lawful authority, nor there is any provision of law in Bangladesh to the effect.

Bangladesh is a signatory to General Agreement on Tariff and Trade (GATT) and a member of World Trade Organization (WTO) and has been given the status of a least developed country (LDC) which entitles its various concessions and relaxation in relation to the Intellectual Property Matters up to the end of the year 2005.

In consideration of the facts and circumstances and the socio-economic status of Bangladesh for which it has been given the status of an LDC, the government and the law enforcing agencies are requested not to allow any person or agency to take law in hand. If, however, any genuine violation of law is detected the concerned aggrieved party should take proper steps under the due process of law and take further steps only in accordance with the direction/orders from the court and take the help of the country's law enforcing agencies only.

A B M Shamsud Doulah
Chairman, Society for Information and Research on Business Intellectual Inventions (SIRBII)
Dhaka

Combating traffic chaos

Sir, Once again, Home Ministry has realised that traffic police, in one way or other, failed to regulate the capital's traffic chaos. On the other hand many have praised our defence

personnel's effort and success in this regard. Despite that the authorities did withdraw armed forces from the road by a vague statement, but with a confidence that others who got trained would perform well. I feel, once deployed, defence personnel should remain there till the problem is solved satisfactorily. "Off and on" deployment only affects the progress made.

Armed forces have rightly identified that intersections are the trouble spots. Because an intersection holds large number of vehicles and pedestrians by signal for some time and releases the whole lot at once. At the same time, similar or more number of vehicles gather on the other side in a confused way.

I would suggest, they should construct initially makeshift free-moving (without police or signal light controlled) roundabout at intersections. This way traffic might become slower, but all the time moving, as can be seen at Gulshan Circle-1 and 2 and also at Shahbagh and Sat Rasta. I feel, if roundabout at Sonargaon intersection is made free-moving, then it would improve the situation. This roundabout is needed to be redesigned, as wider and busy Panthapath has been connected in an offset manner, long after the fountain was installed.

Moghbaazar intersection is also needed to be made free-moving by placing a roundabout. Police obstruction makes it clumsy. At Kakrail intersection, dual control of police and signal perplexes even an experienced vehicle operator. Even here also a similar roundabout would improve the situation.

I hope the authorities concerned would ponder on these.

A R Choudhury
Uttara, Dhaka

Curiosier and curiosier

Sir, It may be a coincidence, but since the change of the minister in the ministry of home affairs, things have livened up in the law and order

sector, and the situation is going from bad to worse. Interesting things are happening in faster sequence, the latest one being the discovery of bombs in mosques.

It appears, there may be an attempt by vested quarters to create rift between different sects of the Muslim community by local or foreign agents under some plan, now under investigation. Then there was the story of the reported attempt on the life of the Prime Minister. The border incidents cannot be left out of the scenario either.

All in all a destabilising movement is being tried by interested quarters. The opposition leaders have come out with statements that it could be a machination of the ruling party to divert attention from the pressure of the combined opposition movement in the form of hartals and road marches.

Political diversionary movement is not a new political tool, and it has been seen in almost all countries, some in naked and vicious forms. But what is happening in Bangladesh appears to be too crude, lacking finesse. Also it has to be remembered that the ruling party is nearing the end of its reign, therefore attempts in many forms would be tried to consolidate the hold on power, for a possible return after the next general elections. The opposition alliance has declared that it will resist all future local elections till the resignation of the EC.

So the people are at the mercy of the politicians, but the politicians think that they are above the pressure of the public opinion. The authority has to clearly identify the difference between the political opposition and the public apathy to dubious political programmes and manoeuvres by the different political parties including those in power, judging by the abysmally poor political standards in the country.

A Z
Dhaka

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Forget the Apple a Day

IT isn't as easy to see a doctor as it used to be. I discovered this when I received a message from Dr Kastner last week. He wanted to see me to check up on something or other.

I called the next morning and told the nurse Dr Kastner wanted to see me.

She said, "How about Nov 15?"

"That's good," I said, "but since he wants to see me, could we move up the date?"

She said, "Just a minute. How about Nov 10 in case we get a cancellation?"

"Has the doctor any plans for me if something happens between now and Nov 10?"

"Most of our patients have to wait longer. I'm squeezing you in because you have health insurance."

"This is my problem," I told her. "I know after the doctor checks me out he's going to send me to a specialist. When I call the specialist, he will tell me that he can't see me until Dec 30. So, in truth, I won't see the doctor for two months."

"The nurse said, 'Everyone has to take his chances. Dr Kastner may send you to a different specialist to check you out with X-rays. In that case we'll have to get you an appointment with the lab. The last time I tried that they couldn't see anyone until the summer.'"

"Thanks a lot," I said and hung up.

Then I started to think about my condition. I knew there was nothing wrong with me at that moment, but Dr Kastner can always find something that needs to be looked into. That's why I figured he would want to see me in October.

So I called back and said to the nurse, "This is Mr B. Did anything open up since I spoke to you a few minutes ago?"

"Let me check. How does Nov 3 sound to you?"

"Sounds O.K. It will be great to see the doctor. It's for blood tests. Also, don't eat any breakfast on Nov 10 and bring somebody to drive you home."

"No problem," I said. "And I'll see the doctor that day?"

"He's attending a conference in Fort Lauderdale. I have to reschedule everyone. Can we talk about Nov 20?"

"Of course, we can. I'll try to stay well until we do."

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