

Couldn't Cut Ice

ALMOST word for word Pakistan's new military ruler Parvez 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 Umpteen 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 mafias 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 mafias.

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 'image' 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 unprecedentedly, 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 to-

wards a bipolar or two-party system, but towards a complex parties 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 has failed to draw its single biggest ally, Telugu Desam, into the Cabinet. This is because Mr Naik 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 agendas, 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 overtly communal agenda. Unless its "secular" allies resist this firmly, that can spell trouble for India.



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

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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?"

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 merciful 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 or 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 valid only for weak or weakened states or for all states without distinction?"

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 one 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?

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It is admitted that Australia's peace keeping role in leading the international force in East Timor is authorised by the UN. Even a UN agency is reported to have concluded that the amendments were in breach of laws of racial discrimination.

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

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