

FOCUS

Is it Coup or Terrorists' Action in Fiji?

by Harun ur Rashid

It was thought the Constitution has been able to restore racial harmony between the two sections in the country. But that is not to be the case. It appears that under the thin veneer of harmony racial tension remains. The 'coup' attempt appears to be a reminder that Fiji continues to be politically unstable. One of the immediate effects is likely that Fiji-Indians would seek to migrate to other countries.

Coup or overthrow of an elected government is nothing new to Fiji. The nation had gone through two coups before. They were led by military commander Colonel (later Major General) Sitiveni Rabuka. The last one was in 1987. The irony is that General Rabuka is now engaged in negotiations with the 'coup' leader to restore constitutional government.

This time seven civilian armed men led by an American-educated businessman George Speight burst into the Parliament on Friday 19th May, firing at least two shots from automatic rifles before locking up Fiji's Indian-origin Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and his mixed-race Cabinet. George Speight declared that he took executive powers of the government and had taken this action as requested by the Fijian indigenous communities.

At the time of writing it is reported that Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry resigned in writing from his position and was held captive in the Parliament although a few MPs had been released.

Within 24 hours it appeared that Speight's lone attempt to overthrow the elected government had collapsed. Media reports indicate that neither the army or the police lent their support to the coup attempt by George Speight. President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara (an indigenous Fijian and a former Prime Minister) had declared emergency and imposed curfew. He warned the terrorists to release the hostages and leave the Parliament building. He also assured that all grievances from indigenous Fijian community would be investigated and redressed.

The 'coup' attempt came on the first anniversary of the election of Mr. Chaudhry as the Prime Minister. The indigenous Fijians accused the Prime Minister of promoting pro-Indian policies. The incident sparked widespread riots and looting of Indian-origin Fijian shops in Suva, capital city of Fiji, and in two cities in other islands. Hundreds of indigenous Fijians who took part in an anti-government protest march on the same day gathered outside the Parliament House chanting slogans against the Prime Minister.

Many governments including Australia and New Zealand condemned the attempt to overthrow the elected government.

throw an elected government in Fiji. The Commonwealth Secretary General Don McKinnon reportedly spoke to Ratu Mara and took the view that the 'coup' had failed and the country's President Ratu Mara was in charge.

Background of the 'coup' attempt

Fiji became an independent country in 1970. It is an island nation (332 islands) with around 900,000 people in the South Pacific Ocean. Most of the people live in two large islands. Its population composition is about 52 per cent indigenous Fijians and 44 per cent Indian origin Fijians. The British

brought the Indians from the sub-continent for sugar plantations during the 19th century.

Although the indigenous people own 90 per cent of the land the cultivators are the Indian-Fijians and the economy is run by Fiji-Indians. The indigenous community has felt increasingly suspicious over the attitude of Chaudhry's government to lands—an extremely sensitive issue for the indigenous community in Fiji.

There has been a racial tension between the indigenous Fijians and the Indian settlers in Fiji. Rabuka amended the Constitution to assure indigenous domination but ultimately he had to accept multi-racial constitution in 1997. The Constitu-

tion came into force in 1998.

Under the Constitution Fiji's parliament has a total of 70 seats, out of which 25 are reserved seats for indigenous Fijians and 19 for Indians, with the rest being open to election to all. Both the President and the Vice-President have to be indigenous Fijians in terms of the Constitution. The election took place in May 1999 under the new Constitution and Mahendra Chaudhry became the Prime Minister.

Chaudhry's government restored the confidence of the foreign investors and in the vital tourism industry, about \$265 million worth of hotel construction contracts were signed since he came to power in 1999. The economy was expected to grow by 4 per cent. He scrapped VAT and took a few economic reforms. But the land remained his biggest challenge.

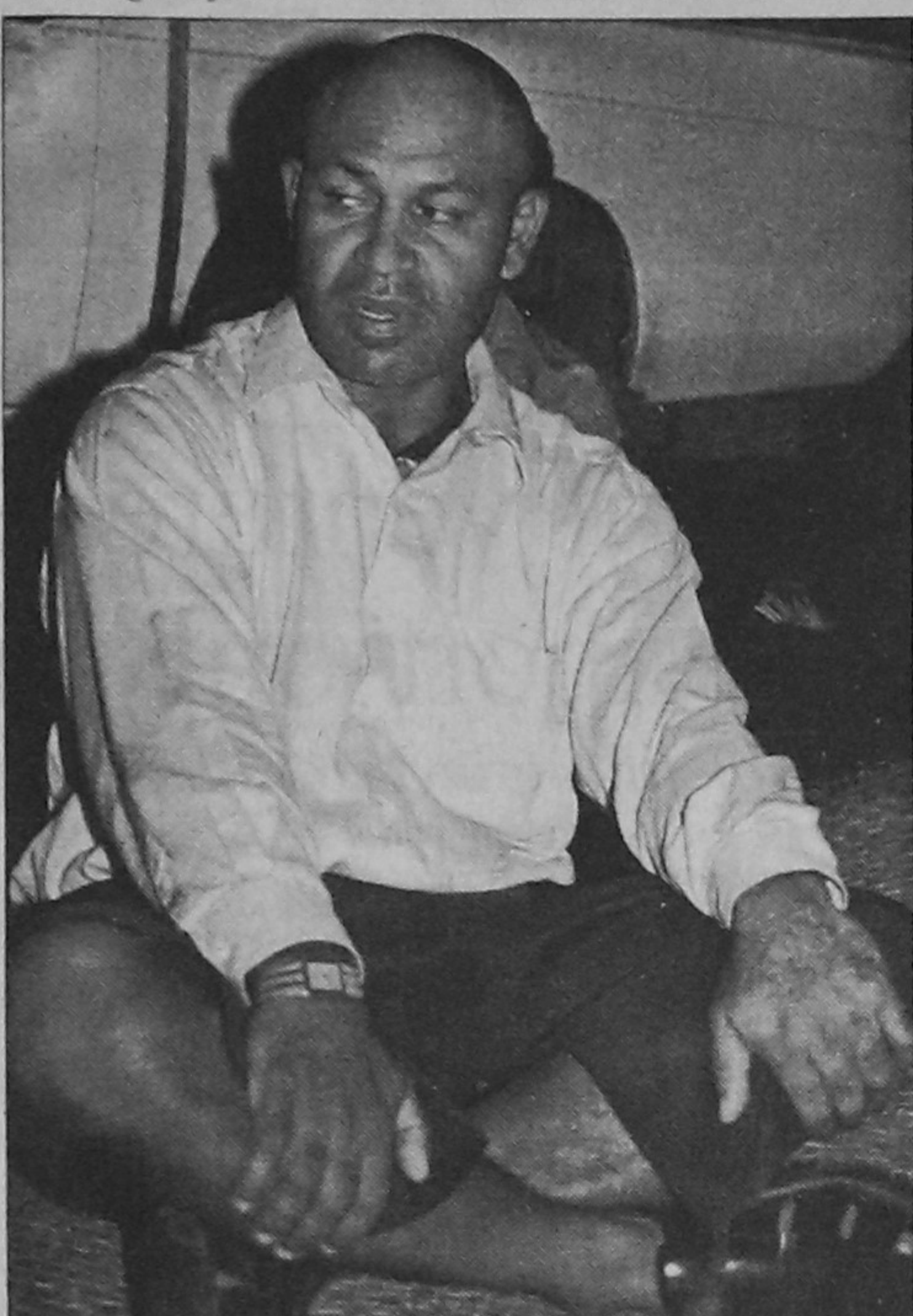
George Speight is the son of opposition MP Sam Speight. He was educated in Michigan USA and spent about 8 years in Australia as an insurance broker. A Sydney insurance industry executive said to a media that George "was big on talk but no delivery."

He returned to Fiji and was the head of Fiji Pine Ltd. and Fiji Hardwood Corporation Ltd., companies with interests in the nation's valuable forests. He was reported to have lost a mahogany hardwood contract and blamed the government. The Government chose another company in a tender participated by George's company. He has never made a secret of his antagonism towards the government. George had reportedly lost business after the installation of the government led by Mr. Chaudhry. He lost election in 1999.

Conclusion

It was thought the Constitution has been able to restore racial harmony between the two sections in the country. But that is not to be the case. It appears that under the thin veneer of harmony racial tension remains. The 'coup' attempt appears to be a reminder that Fiji continues to be politically unstable. One of the immediate effects is likely that Fiji-Indians would seek to migrate to other countries. Since 1987 coup an estimated 70,000 Indian-Fijians had left the country.

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



Coup leader and self-appointed Prime Minister of Fiji, George Speight sits on a kava (local drink) ceremony outside Parliament House in Suva, 21 May. — AFP photo

Legacy of a Long-drawn War

With soldiers dying in rebel ambushes in Chechnya, Russia's military is having more trouble than ever filling its ranks, leaving some units seriously undermined, writes Nick Wadhams of Associated Press from Moscow

NEVER popular, military service enjoyed a brief surge last fall when Russian troops moved into Chechnya and scored a string of victories.

Eight months later, with the army bogged down in a war against elusive guerrillas and suffering mounting losses, the enthusiasm for military service has faded. The military says some 2,300 soldiers have been killed in the war, but critics say the true figure is at least twice as high.

Nowhere is that trend more visible than in this spring's draft call-up. Men aged 18 to 27 are eligible for two years compulsory military service, with the armed forces calling up recruits every spring and fall.

The number of draft dodgers has doubled since the war began and there are growing gaps in

the military's ranks, said Col. Gen. Vladislav Putin, head of the military's mobilisation department.

For the first time in four years, the army has been unable to replace all soldiers as they leave the army after finishing their tours of duty, Putin said. "The deficit is about 40 per cent of demand," he said, speaking on NTV television.

Even last fall, when the Chechen war boosted enlistment, about a third of the more than 210,000 men called up got exemptions or deferments on health grounds, and 20,000 went into hiding, according to the Defence Ministry.

To counter the shortage, critics contend the military is approving physically and mentally unfit teen-agers to fight, and is targeting high school

students so they can't get exemptions by enrolling in higher education.

Tatyana Korovkina said her 17-year-old son Alexei got a draft card telling him to attend call-up at the end of June, a day after his 18th birthday. The timing means Alexei won't have time to get into a college.

"They want to get him now so he doesn't get a chance to apply to college," Korovkina said.

Military doctors increasingly overlook severe health problems in recruits to meet quotas, according to the Soldiers' Mothers Committee. Some doctors demand bribes to exempt young men from service even if they are unfit, the group said.

"A mother comes to me with documents that showed her son's kidney wasn't functioning

properly and he was unfit to serve," said Lyudmila Obratsova, one of the group's founders. "The doctor said, 'We won't call him up, but that's going to cost you' dollars 1,400."

Life in the cash-strapped military is hellish. Hunger and squalid living conditions are part of recruits' daily routine along with frequent bullying and beatings by older soldiers. Soldiers sometimes beg on the streets.

President Vladimir Putin has tried to boost the military's image and make service more appealing by reviving Soviet-style military training in secondary schools. He decreed earlier this year that students 15 and older receive combat training and take classes in military history starting in September.

But the plan is not expected to have much impact, with even military officials saying it's more likely to turn kids off. "These ideas haven't caught on," said Col. Oleg Falichev of the military's Red Star newspaper. "With the military so poor off, all this talk of ways to militarise society don't have any real foundation."

Some young men have tried to exercise their right to alter native service, but efforts to set up such a system have languished in parliament for years. Lawmakers fear there would never be enough recruits for the military if they approve an alternative service system, said Sergei Sorokin, who leads the Movement Against Violence, a private group championing alternative service.

The lack of enthusiasm was palpable at a recent call-up outside Moscow, where some draftees said they agreed with obligatory service but struggled to explain why. Others said they'd had no choice.

Asked if he had tried to dodge the draft, a 19-year-old who would only give his first name, Vitaly, said, "There wasn't any time."



Russian troops: Having more trouble than ever. — AFP photo

Tension Mounts over Land Crisis in Zimbabwe

by A S M Nurunnabi

IN Zimbabwe's land crisis, international observers say, the country's president is fighting for his political survival. The struggle steadily intensified since a new opposition party, built on labour unions, demonstrated its muscle in February last in a referendum.

Voters rejected a draft constitution that would have given President Robert Mugabe up to 12 more years in power and government the right to seize land without compensation. The focus then shifted to parliamentary elections, which must be held by July.

Subsequently, groups of young men led by members of a war veterans' association began to invade white-owned farms and set up squatter camps, demanding a share of the land. The squatters ignored a series of court eviction orders. Police stood by as the protesters abused farm owners and their employees and the number of invaded farms grew to more than 1000.

Then came a couple of murders of white farmers by groups of war veterans. Police made no arrests. And far from denouncing the violence, Mugabe effectively overruled his own judiciary. After a speech on the occasion of the 20th anniversary

of Zimbabwe's independence, he declared that white farmers are "enemies of Zimbabwe." He said nothing to discourage the farm invasions.

Violence erupted when Mugabe loyalists suspected that white farmers supported the opposition Movement for Democratic Change. The party leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, openly courted white support. Meanwhile, squatters' demands escalated: first they wanted tents, then meat, then whole cows to be slaughtered.

Farmers who had not fled the land were jumpy. Most felt that the land issue is a red herring: the government already has purchased thousands of acres of arable land, much of which lies fallow. Their organisation, the 5,000-member Commercial Farmers' Union, says the government is welcome to buy any member's land for a fair price. The farmers note that Britain, the former colonial power, and other donor countries have withheld funds for land purchases in recent years because Mugabe's land-reform programme has been riddled with corruption and inefficiency. And many among the white feel that after living 20 years under black

rule, they have the right to participate in politics.

A tense deadlock between white farmers and black squatters on their farms continued although leaders of the occupations pledged to halt spiralling political violence that has convulsed the nation. Chenjerai Hunzvi, head of a war veterans' group that led the two-month occupations said his followers would stay where they are until they are certain they will be allowed to settle on seized land. It is far from clear how far veterans of the bush war that led to independence in 1980 were in control of thousands of squatters countrywide.

Regional political sources indicated that president Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, Sam Nujoma of Namibia and Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique were in favour of offering Mugabe a deal linking an end to the farm invasions to new financial aid. Britain and the United States were expected to help fund the purchase of white-owned land for distribution to black peasants.

Southern African heads of state who met with Robert Mugabe at Victoria Falls rallied around him on land redistribution, but made it clear they were deeply concerned about the

stability of the entire region. Their solution was to call on donor countries — notably Britain, the former colonial power, to honour old pledges and provide the funds necessary to buy the properties to allow the Harare government to settle landless blacks on them.

In London, British Foreign Office Minister reacted by saying the money was available, but only if the land reform was "within the rule of law." Britain recalled that initial redistribution had been tainted by nepotism and corruption with about 70 million dollars handed over.

Meanwhile President Mugabe rejected international intervention to ease the land crisis, saying it would be resolved peacefully. "The long way." In any case, prospects of a rapid end to Zimbabwe's land grab crisis seem to be fading. But the real battle for Zimbabwe's future is being waged, quietly, in its townships and rural shantytowns. There the current feelings are: "We, too, fought for the ground, for the soil, but we are saying, give the land to the people, not the politicians." There is also the usual litany of complaints: Mugabe's corruption, and budget-busting spending over the last few years.

Royalty in Democracy!

by Alif Zabr

THERE is royalty in monarchy. There is also royalty in western capitalism, thanks to the philosophy of trading by the multinationals (main market is the South, especially Asia, the continent with the fastest growth rate now. Everything depends on interest. Big business is full of interest, whether in the stock exchange, or the exchange of stocks and inventories. Export raw materials, and import finished products.

The UN system is crying hoarse about conservation, ecology, and environment (control), while modern capitalism is entirely dependent on consumerism: produce more, consume more, and, in the indiscriminate, denude the Good Earth, and create the Greenhouse Effect. And stop those who are not in the game, i.e., the industrialisation of the LDCs and the DCs. The IMF has been caught with its pants down, and the turbulence in Wall Street is real, not virtual. The Internet is not the outer net.

This is the Information Age (IT), but look how information is subtly suppressed at source and at the highest levels, by 20 per cent who control 80 per cent of the money and the tapped resources of this exploited globe.

As for the untapped resources, the potentialities are subject to pre-conditions of the foreigners, who have every finger in the pie, and one in the mouth! This additional finger is the problem with the Third World. Some wonder if there is a Fourth World — but gentlemen would not like to denude the poor in public. Economics is practised with the red light on; and those who are waiting for the green light have to take it easy. This slack (an economic term) is the devil, according to the economics experts.

Now in this age of technology the genetic seeds have been introduced — each grain supplied has a royalty number tagged on it; enough to return billions of dollars in investment during the life cycle of the seeds (or the users, whichever lasts shortest). Exploited benevolence has a market value today (the priceless has a price), and its price is paid in foreign exchange. Join, or be left out, say the WTO. Who are WTO? That is the question of the day. Why it was created? Like to define it from the Eastern point of view? No dice.

The notorious East India Company of the British Empire days is back, fully BMR-ed. Now the concept is internationalization, and economic domination is the way to the heart through

the back doors. Thereby more heart ailments are predicted; as also cancer, as the latter is due to the cultivation of hatred, according to cosmic wisdom (as some books say). Another modern disease, gastric ulcer, has something to do with digestion. Digest the indigestible!

Russia tried to woo capitalism, and is paying the royalty. There is also the royalty imposed by the autocratic regimes. The latest exposure is in Indonesia. The military juntas have their own levies. Other examples can be found in S America and Africa. Central Asia is in turmoil. It is not boring to bore the earth; some bounty of nature lie concealed, and the vicious ones, like gold, hide deeper in the soil.

How to separate democracy and economics? It is not a far-fetched question, but the time has come to take a closer look at this unholy alliance in private. This joke (a Bangla term, meaning alliance) appears in public properly dressed, and its formality is impeccable. The damage is done underneath, which may be termed as the economic eczema. The South nations are having this epidemic, introduced as a skin bleach lotion by the beauty therapists of the heavenly North. The NGOs are not run by the angels.

AIDS is not financial aid, but a divine curse, as a punishment for violations incurred during the non-office hours. VD and syphilis are transmitted to the next generation; but Aids automatically control the future population growth. There is negative population growth rate in some industrialised countries, encouraging automation, and discouraging the discovery of potential husbands for over-qualified spinsters who lead lonely corporate lives in high-rise flats (a flat life indeed). Biological reproduction is a sacred act, until the economic indices objected (GDP, GNP, materialistic-economic growth rate, etc), and the UN and donor agencies started acting in queer fashion.

What are these problems? Decline and rise in two separate worlds (N.S.). Change comes, and proceeds, leaving the conservancy job to the economics experts. The poor victims pay the price of economic theories at the higher levels. In between is the no-man's land, claim the middle class, who have lost the tail and the bite. Add a recuperation camp, when there are no outlets for brewing the sweat on the brow. The counterpoise is action, and waiting. That's what we are supposed to be doing (the latter).

TOM & JERRY



By Hanna-Barbera

AS I was planning to write a piece to break the general trend of offering glowing tribute to a personality only after his/her death, the news of sudden demise of Nowajesh Ahmed at 88, possibly the last political personality of the last century in Bangladesh, reached me, who expired on 13 March 2000 at his residence in Chudanga. The Chudanga bar decided to take a day off on 14 March to respect to pay the departed soul who was also a renowned lawyer.

A man of integrity and commitment, Nowajesh Ahmed was held in high esteem by the people of his constituency despite his association with late Dr Abdul Mutalib Malik's cabinet, who had been branded as collaborator, and sentenced to imprisonment following the independence of Bangladesh.

Nowajesh Ahmed, who was inducted in Governor Dr Malik's cabinet in September 1971 hardly three months before the liberation at the personal request of the latter, was also among those imprisoned, but was released on being acquitted honourably from Kushtia jail. He was the one, who succeeded in saving many lives in his area and provided financial assistance and other help to countless people during the war of liberation. These charitable acts resulted in mobilizing strong public opinion to storm the Chudanga jail and free him by force immediately after he was jailed. Having seen the frenzied crowd, the authorities immediately transferred him to Kushtia jail. Nowajesh Ahmed, who made personal contributions to the meritorious poor students of his locality, became almost legend in his constituency during his life time. Many top ranking gov-

ernment officers and business magnates in today's Bangladesh are among those who received the blessings of Nowajesh Ahmed during their career as students.

Born in February 1910 in Shyamnagar under Krishnanagar of Nadia district Nowajesh Ahmed graduated with distinction from Krishnanagar Government College. He was admitted to Law Department at Calcutta Ripon College from where also he received his degree with distinction. He began practicing law as a probationer at Alipur Court, Calcutta. During this time he had the privilege of working with Barrister Hussein Shahid Suhrawardy.

He moved to Ranaghat in Nadia to begin his career as a legal practitioner. In those days, Nowajesh Ahmed was one of the two Muslim lawyers at Ranaghat. In 1938, he enrolled in Calcutta High Court when Subhas Chandra Bose was crowned with the presidency of Congress. Prior to joining Calcutta bar, he was also involved in social welfare activities in Ranaghat, where he became Chairman of the Local Board and was elected Commissioner of Municipality. Apart from these, he was elected Secretary, Ranaghat Cooperative Bank and member of Bengal Cooperative Societies. Nowajesh Ahmed also held the post of Chairman, Jute Regulation Committee. He was made honorary recruiting officer for messenger service, appointed as Chief Warden at Ranaghat and was elected Deputy Leader of National War Front during Second World War. In recognition of his selfless social service, the British government offered him the title of Khan Bahadur, which he rejected.

It was possibly in 1945 when

Nowajesh Ahmed decided to join politics. He joined Muslim League and contested the election to the Bengal Legislative Assembly in 1946 and won. It may be noted that this seat was vacated by his father-in-law Md. Mohsin, who was an equally prominent legal practitioner. It may be worthwhile to mention that the Muslim League's success was spectacular



Late Noajesh Ahmed

In 1945, Nowajesh Ahmed was offered to join Krishak Proja Party, but he did not accede to the request. President Ayub Khan made a similar offer to him in 1963 to legitimize his military rule through general elections. He was also requested to join Awami League. But his principle of not switching his allegiance to any other party stopped him from doing anything beyond.

In 1946, Nowajesh Ahmed was associated with the establishment of Kushtia College at the initiative of Moulavi Shamsuddin Ahmed, who was a Minister in Suhrawardy cabinet. This time Nowajesh Ahmed also helped set up a High School at Badhikulla.

After the formation of Pak-

istan, Nowajesh Ahmed moved from Ranaghat to Chudanga in 1948. In 1949, he was elected chairman, Kushtia District Board and in the same year, president of Kushtia District Education Board. He became president of Kushtia District Muslim League in 1954 — the year Muslim League witnessed a crushing defeat by the United Front and was virtually eliminated as an effective political party in erstwhile East Pakistan.

Nowajesh Ahmed was instrumental in establishing Chudanga Girls' High School, Kedarganj High School and Padarganj Kindergarten School, offering financial assistance for their establishment. He was also a founder member of Chudanga College and Chudanga Girls' College. Nowajesh Ahmed although enrolled himself as an Advocate in Dhaka High Court in 1967, but he remained at Chudanga. A number of times he was elected president of Chudanga Bar Council. When Chudanga became district headquarter in 1984 he became the first president of Chudanga District Bar Council.

It is interesting to note that despite rendering multifarious social services in his constituency he never cared for winning any general elections in the post liberation era. May be because people developed negative attitude towards Muslim League and he did not build up his supporting force otherwise to sustain the vigorous campaigning needed prior to the general elections.

As a widower he left behind three sons, two daughters, a host of relatives, friends and well-wishers to mourn his death.