

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S.M. Ali

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Bangladesh Bank Annual Report

A central bank's annual report, based as it is on statistical records, has to be the mirror-image of reality, almost in the same way that photographs cannot lie. The just-released Bangladesh Bank Annual Report, 1999-2000 is no exception to the rule; for, in its portrayal of progress or decline on the major economic indicators during the fiscal year ending on June 30, 2000, the report has been faithful.

It is, however, the analytical or interpretative aspect to BB's annual report which we do not find ourselves entirely in agreement with. Higher agricultural production, stepped up industrial activity and increased export contributed to a GDP growth rate of 5.5 per cent in 1999-2000 as compared with 4.9 per cent a year ago. We have certainly fared better in those aggregate terms from the benchmark 1998-99 which seems all the more creditable in the context of power breakdowns during the year under review. Were it not for that serious drawback we would have done still better.

Does it mean though that we are in good economic health? The most relevant question to ask would be: are we in any better position than before insofar as dealing with the soft bellies to some of our major macro-economic indicators go? Government borrowing is dreadfully up, accounting for a public sector credit growth at 31.3 per cent. This raised broad money supply to 18.6 per cent from 12.8 per cent only a year ago, which in itself was regarded as a high risk factor then in terms of exerting inflationary pressure on the economy. Good agricultural harvests helped cushion off that pressure, but nobody can be sure that our luck with inflation will hold indefinitely in the face of government borrowing which remains at a critically high level despite some whittling down lately. **This being the election year the outlook could change for the worse. The Bangladesh Bank Annual Report has, therefore, rightly urged the government to watch on its lending figures and call a halt to excess borrowing. Indeed, there is a case for much better coordination between the monetary policy framed by Bangladesh Bank and the fiscal policy followed by the government respectively.**

The rates of saving and investment remain worryingly poor. It is hardly inspiring to note that during January, 99 to June, 2000 foreign investment committed to industrial projects amounted to US 630 million dollar only. Our package of incentives notwithstanding, even the fact that we have very bad traffic congestion can be off-putting, let alone political unrest and law and order failure.

Trade deficit is only slightly down, remittances are up and there is current account surplus from what was a deficit in the year preceding. The foreign exchange reserve 'equivalent to import bills for two months' is clearly short of the stipulated three-month cover, which looks a little vulnerable to unforeseen circumstances.

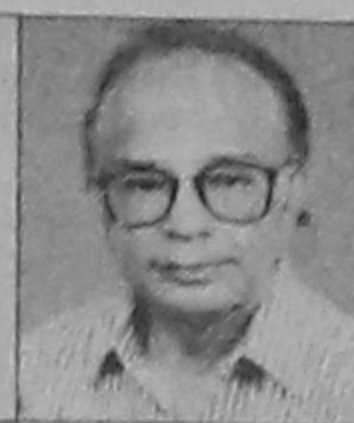
It was within the realm of possibility but did not seem probable. Possibility is just that a mere chance with a big dollop of accident that can neither be predicted nor measured. Probability has a statistical range of happening in reality and therefore predictable, albeit within a margin of error. The possibility of Jarina's getting back her stolen money was there but the odds were so stacked against her that it did not look probable. For one, such theft of money and other valuables of arriving passengers at Zia International Airport has by now become commonplace and routine. Then, a very important factor in our country, she is no hot polloi, possessing political or other clout to push the juggernaut of administration. And yet, the unthinkable was thought and the miracle happened. Jarina's probability of getting back the stolen money became probable and finally a reality. The epiphany for the poor wage-earner came when newspapers published her story on the front page. First, the sordid story with picture of walling Jarina sitting forlorn by her broken suitcase was splashed in a number of national dailies. It was followed up by seething editorials in at least two English papers. One of these came up with a second editorial expressing great indignation and asking brusquely, "What about compensation for Jarina?" in the caption. The next day fortune smiled on her and news was published that the airline in which she travelled from the Middle East to Dhaka had agreed to compensate her. The national airline also came forward pitching in with a grant.

Judged by the amount involved, little over seventy thousand taka, the whole affair might have appeared blown out of proportion. But for poor Jarina it was a huge amount, her entire savings from work that perhaps was no better than bonded labour. Secondly, more than money, the principle of justice and fair play was involved. It was the call for justice, for the poor and powerless, and ultimately its vindication that made the publication of Jarina's story in the newspaper so important. The righteousness with which her case was pursued made the newspaper reports and editorials so extra-ordinary. In a country where persons or institutions having influence exercise it selectively to promote narrow individual or group interests such display of compassion for the poor and dedication to the

Jarina is not only a news. The publication of her story is another milestone in the endless journey of the Fourth Estate to protect public interest. It is largely due to the vigilance and timely coverage of news involving misuse and abuse of powers that government's accountability has been kept alive. But for this role of the print media, the organs of the state, particularly the executive branch would have frequently indulged in arbitrary and autocratic use of power. There would have been greater violation of human rights, more widespread misuse of public resources and other irregularities if our newspapers did not act as sentinels.

IN MY VIEW

Hasnat Abdul Hye



cause of justice should make the entire nation proud. The victory in the campaign to give compensation to Jarina is a glowing tribute to the profession of journalism in the country. The fact that this is not the first time when newspapers became vocal against injustice make it clear that our newspapers have often acted as the conscience of the nation and guardian of the disadvantaged.

Newspapers do not have the formal power and written responsibilities like the three organs of the state. They do not figure as an organ with a distinct role in the Constitution. Yet the power and responsibilities acquired by them through tradition and practice sometime surpass those of the formal organs of the state. In promoting public interest through publication of news, analysis of events, giving views and help form public opinion, newspapers exercise almost sovereign powers on behalf of the people. It is, therefore, no exaggeration of their role to give them the appellation of the Fourth Estate. In fact press an institution of its kind, with no parallel or comparison.

The unwritten powers and the all-encompassing role of newspapers have evolved overtime. Democracy and rule of law not only recognise these ungrudgingly, but are conducive to the functioning of a socially committed press. Countries firmly believing in basic rights and accountability of the government to the people get valuable feedback from newspapers. Public policies are often based or modified on the basis of such constructive journalism. To exercise this role sincerely, the print media in its turn has to follow a high standard of conduct and set for itself unsalable norms. These are now more or less taken for granted in developed countries with mature democracies, though exceptions remain. But in countries with weak democratic tradition and rampant opportunism the pursuit of these norms and ethics by the professionals working in the Fourth Estate become problem-

atic. In these countries threats and coercion are often held out at the flick of fingers by the high and the mighty making a mockery of freedom of press. Bangladesh press suffered this fate at various times in the past. Then again, narrow interests of the owners of newspapers sometimes run counter to honest journalism forcing a character and voice to papers that not only deviate from the norm but appear downright suspect to discerning readers. At another level, individually, journalists may fall prey to temptations from time to time, making them mere puppets pulled by invisible ventriloquists. Because of these and other reasons it is not easy for healthy and responsible journalism to flourish in countries like Bangladesh. That

is why story of Jarina published in newspapers, making out a case for justice, is so important as a symbol and is worth mentioning. It shows that in spite of lurking dangers and myriad of pitfalls most of our newspapers are aware of their obligation to the people, particularly those without voice.

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indulged in arbitrary and autocratic use of power. There would have been greater violation of human rights, more widespread misuse of public resources and other irregularities if our newspapers did not act as sentinels. Unrelenting critique of criminalisation of politics, random terrorism and undemocratic activities by political parties may not have led to their disappearance but surely have reined them in, even if marginally. The important point is that these malaise have been identified and cracking them has been put on agenda for action. The dark forces of evil conspiring to take over the society have not been allowed to go unchallenged by the ever-watchful Fourth Estate. In the process the civil society has been galvanised and emboldened to be articulate and come forward.

Taking everything into account, particularly the political milieu, the role of the Fourth Estate in Bangladesh has been exemplary. Because of its record and in the absence of an alternative, expectations of not only maintaining the present profile but even a higher standard of performance have been raised. In order to have the environment that is conducive to the strengthening of the Press several exogenous and endogenous developments are required in Bangladesh. First and foremost, newspaper readership has to be increased through spread of literacy, including adult literacy. The government and the NGOs have to collaborate here with greater urgency because the spin-off from literacy is much wider than newspaper reading. Secondly, advertisement being the lifeblood of newspapers and government still being the largest advertiser, the policy followed in this regard should be equitable and realistic. It should not be a source of distributing patronage among the favourites. The government, cognisant of its role in creating the enabling environment, should give Press access to all information except in matters of national security. This will also

result in greater transparency and accountability. The present Press Council should enlarge its role and functions and be supportive of an independent and responsible Press through guidelines and norms.

Among the endogenous issues, the owners of newspapers should carefully nurture the independence of their papers and check the temptation of turning these into personal mouthpiece or as the conduit of particular political views. If one is not sure of resources to pay the journalists adequately and timely, he/she should not bring out a paper simply to make a splash in the media world or to promote interests other than that of positive journalism. Disgruntled and underpaid professionals cannot give their best nor can they avoid changing papers. For developing a group of committed and experienced journalists the owners of papers have a great responsibility which unfortunately is not always appreciated. In the area of internal improvement, growing awareness among journalists of their important role should be reflected in a high standard of professionalism. They should realise that news or views expressed in papers with an axe to grind undermine their credibility and lower the paper in the esteem of readers. Firm commitment to professional standard should be accompanied by loyalty to the paper for which they are working. This combined pride can be the making of a successful journalist while its absence can break the backbone of many. Journalism as a profession is a very demanding one in terms of experience, knowledge and integrity and there is no short cut to success. For a journalist learning the skill and using it with depth is a continuous process. The search for truth brooks no compromise. In the comic strip The Flintstones, a journalist interviewing Flintstone tells him to leave out the facts and give only the highlights. The comic character succeeds in entertaining but his attitude is hardly illuminating. The readers may like to be entertained some of the times but above all they expect to be informed of facts without frills or obfuscation. Only journalists who consider themselves as explorers of truth and crusaders for justice fulfil that expectation. In the case of Jarina this happened. Between the ideal and reality there was no shadow.



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Friday Mailbox

"Sinister seepage"

Sir, I have gone through the above-headed report published in your esteemed daily on 3rd November 2000. I have also read very carefully the comments made by various experts on the issue. Whatever comments they have made are welcome but as far as I understand no Environmental Impact Assessment was carried out prior to starting of the project by the proponents. According to the DoE, projects like this should obtain clearance from the DoE as per prescribed rules and regulations. As a matter of fact if the EIA could have been conducted then the issue of taking clearance from DoE would have come up automatically.

The Environmental Conservation rules '97 (ECR '97) have been promulgated to meet such issues. The Environmental Conservation Act '95 (ECA '95) also has undergone amendment in the year 2000 and has since been named as the Environmental Conservation (Amendment) Act 2000. The ECA '97 lay down principles for obtaining environmental clearance for new development projects for expansion and modernisation of existing projects.

In this amended ECA, there is provision that if a proponent violates any provision of the Act he/she will be penalised Tk 1,000,00 (one million) or 10 years rigorous imprisonment or both. The Act was placed at the National Assembly, passed and signed by the President on 20th April 2000. But unfortunately, till date no such proponent has been penalised/punished for violation of the ECA.

M Shamsuzzoha
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Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Cadet college directorate

Sir, Bangladesh inherited four cadet colleges from the then Pakistan that has now reached to ten occupying very significant position in the educational arena of Bangladesh.

These ten cadet colleges are directly controlled by the Adjutant General's Branch of the Army Headquarters contributing to maintaining a decent and disciplined atmosphere, which is the pre-condition of an educational institution. However, Adjutant General, though assisted by an A A G (Lt. Col), remains busy with many army establishments and hardly gets time to give attention to these cadet colleges. In this regard the officers, faculty members and staffs feel the need of establishing a separate directorate headed by a Brigadier with three wings namely (1) Executive/Administrative, (2) Finance (3) Education.

These three posts should be occupied by the faculty members whose rank should be at least an associate professor on transfer basis. At present there is not even an accounts officer in this branch to handle the financial matters. When situation demands, an A. O. is invited from any cadet college to the A. G. office hampering the activities of the college concerned.

If a separate directorate is established then executive branch will deal with all administrative matters like transfer and promotion case. Education branch will deal with academic activities, exchange programme etc. And financial branch will handle all financial affairs.

If this is done, a kind of novelty will be brought in the service. The teachers will then have the option

to visit all the military academies on deputation. In comparison with other jobs, cadet college service is much better. Even then, most of the staff and faculty members are not satisfied with the job due to some internal reasons.

Again, often a question is raised whether cadet college teachers are civilians or military. When they expect some opportunities like teachers it is said that they are not civilians. But when they want to enjoy some military facility, they are refused with the answer that they are not military. Well then what are they? When cadet college serves, as a mixed unit of civil and military official then why cannot a directorate be run by civil and military official? Cadet college is a very successful and gigantic project run by army headquarters under the Adjutant General's Branch. As huge amount of national exchequer is being spent on this project, the deep-rooted anomalies in this field cannot remain unheeded. This institution cannot remain a subsidiary institution.

Therefore, I not only advocate establishing a separate cadet college directorate but also a separate education board for the cadets as cadets are brought up and taught in a different atmosphere. The system of teaching in cadet colleges is also different. Hope the authorities concerned will consider the matter.

Md Masum Billah
Lecturer, RAJUC Uttara
Uttara Model College, Dhaka

Religion and transient politics

Sir, The way Awami League is reacting to global and local trends in Islamic fundamentalism is neither realistic nor practical; and the party is taking a risk against losing support from a sizeable percentage of Muslim voters at the next general polls. The historical background has been analysed by Ali Ahmad Ziauddin in his commentary (DS, November 7), and the presence of secular principles within Islamic socialism has to be studied carefully for modern application. Globally, the religious sensitivity is on the rise, over-riding political themes.

Man cannot live without a religion, and religion, being a way of life, cannot be pushed into a dark background all the time by passing politicians with their ad hoc ideologies. The changing phase in Islam all over the world has to be monitored neutrally and then applied to Bangladesh in the right context.

Personalities and extremist groups should not be denounced right and left, but the pent up motivations must be analysed publicly. Tradition cannot be denounced as an enemy until modern channels are identified for proper ventilation in a disciplined manner.

AL should hold seminars regarding public information and debate, allowing all shades of opinion to participate freely, instead of depending on identified sycophants. There is too much hate campaign in our national politics today, creating scope for misunderstanding. Political parties will rise and eclipse, but religions have stronger tides and ties.

A Muslim Citizen
Dhaka

Views expressed in this column are the writers' own. The Editor may or may not subscribe to those views. The Editor reserves the right to decide which letters should be published

The Blasphemy at Bethlehem

What happened last week in the US presidential elections, may have been a precursor to the dwindling fortune of the most popular political ideology of the twentieth century. Maybe it was just another anomaly of democratic movement similar to what happened in the 1920s and 1930s when democratic regimes were swept aside by rightist dictatorships in Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain and elsewhere. Although this time democracy got warned in the womb, it might find a new soil to strike its root. For us the watchword will be to hang in there and march on the road of democracy.

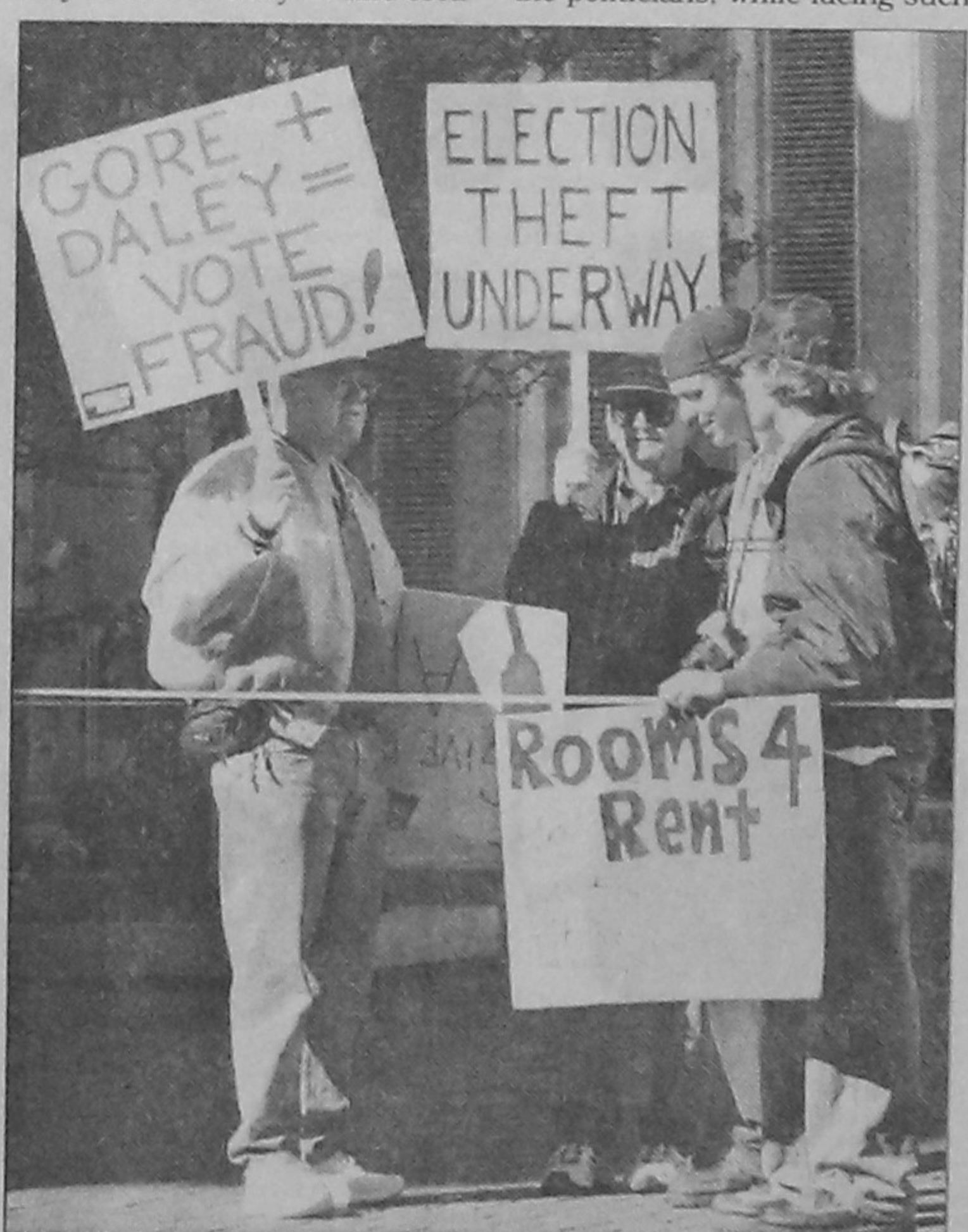
CROSSTALK

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan



this incident, which happened in far-away America? Will they be tempted to build on and repeat it? Will they treat it as yet another lesson to pave the way for democracy in this country? While esca-

lating violence and confusion dominate the scene, political air is already charged with suspicion if next elections will be fair and peaceful. It is highly unlikely that the politicians, while facing such



Whether the flawed design of the ballot paper is entirely to blame for the goof-up, the fact that it happened in Florida where brother of George W Bush is the governor will rankle popular imagination long after this issue is settled.

an inclement political weather, will take time to weigh the pros and cons of the American tragedy. Rather, it will not be surprising to see if it inspires certain degree of moral laxity and dare-devilry are in the elections next year.

How does one reckon with defalcation of democracy at this advanced stage of its journey, which started with the French Revolution of 1789? Despite all its violence and excess, the Revolution further spread the democratic idea by proclaiming the rights of man and sovereignty of the people. By the end of the 19th century, elected governments had been established in much of Western Europe and some parts of Latin America. Countries like Spain, Portugal and Greece digressed from democracy to rejoin the ranks of free nations in Europe in the mid-seventies. In Philippines, Haiti and South Korea, democracy didn't show its firm footing before the late nineties. Bangladesh, Pakistan, Burma and Indonesia are still wrestling with the tension between totalitarianism and democracy. Much of Africa still seethes with internecine wars where individual rights and sovereignty of people are overshadowed by tribalism and other parochial interests. While the Middle East remains wedged between monarchy and modernism, the former communist countries are busy negotiating prejudices of past with felicities of future.

Lest our politicians be tempted to disregard democratic precepts in the wake of the American faux pas, they ought to know that democracy is the longest running mode of succession after monarchy. And the reason why democracy worked is that it combined political freedom with market forces to unleash full potentials of human intellect and enterprise. Stanford University economist Paul Krugman caused a stir in late 1994 as he maintained that innovation in the workplace was needed for improvement of TFP.

Lee Kuan Yew agreed, stating that new industries require work units with freedom to plan. Quite naturally, Lee concluded, such liberties could lead to demands for similar prerogatives in the political sphere, including the right to elect leaders.

In a presentation for the US National Endowment for Democracy, Minxin Pei, an assistant professor of politics at Princeton University, described how the liberalising forces of democracy started to work in China. The decreasing state-control over people's economic decisions, the formation of thousands of business and professional groups, the widespread election of village councils, and even the expansion of a non-government press have happened one after another.

Thus democracy, in spite of its occasional shortcomings, is the best form of government for a country like ours. French Political Thinker Jean-Francois Revel argued in his book *How Democracies Perish* (1983) that democracy could turn out to have been a historical accident. He argued that communist leaders were able to allocate resources and plot strategy without public scrutiny or accountability and thus enjoy an overwhelming advantage in military and foreign policy. In less than a decade he would be proven wrong as allocation of resources without public scrutiny would prove misguided and futile.

This is not to say, however, that democracy shall never expire on its agenda. Samuel Huntington, director of Harvard's Centre for International Affairs, took a dim view of democracy looking at the slow rate of economic development in the Third World, the military power of the Communist bloc and the high level of political violence in many countries. He concluded: 'The limits of democratic development in the world may well have been reached.'

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