

Attack on Press Again

It seems that we, the people in the press, have become the most vulnerable group of professionals in the country right now. The profession of journalism has never been risk-free. And we don't expect it to be so nor do we have any complaint whatsoever against this. We have accepted such a hazard as the price we must pay to uphold the basic tenet of journalism - the people's right to know. However, the increasing incidence of intimidation against, and manhandling and even killing of pressmen across the country testifies to one disconcerting fact: the fourth estate is under threat and does not feel secure in the discharge of its duties. Unfortunately, most of the attacks on the press in recent times have been either carried out or engineered ironically by leaders and activists of the ruling party, which came to power with a vow to establish rule of law and protect freedom of press in the country.

Last Thursday's attack on UNB's Feni correspondent Tipu Sultan, reportedly led by two local leaders of the ruling party-backed Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), has once again proved that neither rule of law nor freedom of press has been established. Tipu was picked up by a group of people from the Trunk Road, taken to the District Council Square and mercilessly beaten up. As surgeons at the National Orthopaedic Hospital tried to fix his badly damaged limbs, the assailants roamed around in Feni town. Even worse, a case has been lodged in this connection against people who have had no connection whatsoever with the incident - some leaders and activists of a major opposition political party. The accused in the case reportedly irked a local MP, a ruling party stalwart who has frequently hogged headlines unfavourably for the wrong reason. Needless to say, actual perpetrators of the heinous attack are his lieutenants, certain members of the committee he had formed earlier on. Tipu, we hope, may survive the attack, not without scars though. Doctors say he would have difficulty working with his left hand. However, the wounds would run deeper than that, deep into our collective psyche.

While the Prime Minister and her government have publicly claimed to have ensured rule of law and freedom of press in the country, some of her loyalists have established a reign of terror in their respective areas. Anyone opposing them in any way has been brutally dealt with. Members of the press have not been spared either. Issuance of a 'death warrant' against a Prothom Alo correspondent by a Laxmipur legislator of the Awami who is also a state minister for showing the temerity to carry a 'damaging' report against him is not a memory of the distant past. When the pressmen are not safe from the unruly and unlawful hands of the ruling party loyalists, how could people expect justice in the case of Shamsur Rahman, the Daily Janakantha staff correspondent who was gunned down in broad daylight reportedly by members of outlawed political parties?

The government has played the custodian all right; but not of law or of freedom to express in many cases. It has been in some cases, the protector of those who impinged on the people's right to know and express, and not quite infrequently at that, too. If no action is taken against Tipu's tormentors right away, including the lawmaker who inspired violation of law, we would have no choice but to infer that freedom of press is not a priority for the government.

Managing Waste in Dhaka City

EXPERTS at a roundtable discussion have provided valuable inputs on the critical issue of waste management in Dhaka city. That this is a critical issue must be underscored, for waste in all its manifestations needs to be managed with precise and comprehensive insight into its impact on the environment and life-support systems. We fully endorse the roundtable's call for the Department of Environment (DOE) to play a more effective part in waste management. The DOE's involvement is warranted by the fact that waste accrues from various sources, including clinical or medical waste, industrial waste and solid household waste. What must be managed, therefore, is not just household refuse, but also hazardous and non-biodegradable, chemical and toxic waste. These must be collected, dispatched and disposed of, without endangering the environment. The DOE should be adequately equipped with technical staff and duly empowered to take on a greater share of this responsibility.

From the air we breathe to the food we consume, from the water we drink or use for various purposes, to the abodes we adopt for habitation, all have been placed at high risk. All because of slipshod waste management. The prime responsibility for this state of affairs rests on the DCC, which has been unable to come to grips with even the most basic aspects of waste management, namely timely collection and safe disposal of the city's garbage. Inhabitants of Dhaka are exposed to open dumpsters containing mounds of rotting garbage that offer a breeding ground for scavengers. Both man and beast pollute the air and the environs indiscriminately. We have already suggested in this newspaper that the private sector needs to be drawn into the waste management plan on a more active basis and we do so again.

At the same time, as the roundtable also concluded, a vast range of government and non-governmental bodies must be pulled into the waste management net so that knowledge-based initiatives and activities could ensue to set things right. Initiatives such as the Bio-safety Act, formulated by the Ministry of Science and Technology, have borne little fruit, because basic standards of cleanliness have not been adopted by the garbage collection units of the DCC. The provisions of this Act must be disseminated to and comprehended by DCC and other public and private bodies as well.

What is needed to accomplish this undoubtedly demanding task of waste management is the establishment of one coordinating body that will be fully empowered and adequately equipped with technical expertise as well. We call upon the top leadership to take an initiative and set up this body without any more delay. This body should formulate and monitor a comprehensive waste management policy and severely penalise lapses. It should evolve coordinated mechanisms for waste management on a holistic basis, accounting for the diversity of material, as well as overlapping constituencies. As we have noted, the DCC has failed to fulfil its limited mandate. The bottomline calls for action from the top in order to provide a minimum quality of life for the inhabitants of this metropolis.

WHEN Vladimir Putin, the little-known KGB man was elected the president of Russia in March, 2000 with a comfortable 53 percent of the votes few believed that he could restore his country's fortune. Now there are cheerful signs in Russia in less than a year. The economy has picked up with a growth rate of 3.2 per cent last year and foreign currency reserve rising \$1 bn a month in a country that defaulted on the payment of loan in 1998 and devalued the rouble by 75 per cent.

For all the jolts of post ten years the market is at work and the standards are rising. The inflation is under control, more taxes are collected. The rouble is stable and the public finances are looking healthy at least by Russian standard. The economy is sustained by high prices since early 1999 for oil and other material exports which create a remarkable trade surplus. As a result of inflation and devaluation, the \$5.5 bn the government raises annually from the energy sector is worth twice as much as 18 months ago. Putin had both luck and good judgement to turn his country round. With that the transitional period from the Soviet days to a resurgent Russia that started with the advent of Boris Yeltsin ten years ago seems to be over. The continuing economic problem will make the resurgence of Russia take much longer than it could have, but what is of significance at the moment is the context of Russia's transformation.

Russians define the trend of this transformation in the context of their Soviet-era experience. 'Russia missed the 20th century' they argue. 'Therefore Russia is going back to 19th century to find guidelines for 21st century'. It is a traumatic journey but Russia is actually doing that by returning to its old tradition, although with a modern twist. Russia, a history-conscious great power is still coming to grip with having missed the 20th century. Searching for its own identity and destiny the nation is torn today between the conflicting visions of the Russophiles and

Eurasianists. In Russian view the resolution of this self-devouring conflict is far more crucial than the prospects of Russia's economic recovery.

The Eurasianists want Russia to rejoin the Orient, the China-led Trans-Asian-Axis and contribute to and benefit from its onslaught against the West. In contrast the Russophiles are committed to reviving Russia's traditional role as the eastern flank of the civilized world blocking the advance of a violent Orient the Mongols, the Tartars and a Trans-Asian-Axis in defence of Western Civilization which neither recognised nor appreciated Russia's historic role. Both have had, nevertheless, a common proclivity in pointing to threats brewing up all



Putin with Blair during the former's visit to UK late last year: 'We (Russians) are part of West European culture...'

Russia's Moment of Truth

In his April 2000 interview book 'First Person' Putin stated that "Russia is a very diverse country but we are part of West European Culture. No matter where our people live, in the far East or in the South, we are Europeans". He stressed that Russia will struggle to retain this posture against Western rejections and despite conflicting temptations. The world is yet to comprehend, let alone appreciate, the historical significance of Putin's decision.

PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

around Russia from the West as well as from the East.

The threats of the West are ironically from the quarters whom the Russophile would like to embrace in alliance - the US and her NATO allies. The US-inspired economic reforms, it is alleged, has destroyed whatever was left of the dilapidated Russian economy. The NATO expansion

eastward and its subsequent meddling in the Baltics and Caucasus raise serious doubt as to the end of East-West confrontation in Europe. Moreover the US interventionists policy in the Balkans touched the Russians' raw nerve over the viability of the US 'clash of civilisation' doctrine in which the Eastern churches are on the 'wrong side' of the

divide. The US efforts to prevent Germany's improvement of relations as well as defence cooperation with Russia suggests to Moscow that the US still remains hostile and the West in general is still a source of strategic threat.

The Russophiles however highlight the threats from the East and a disproportionate fear psychosis is built up around China's strategic, economic and military rise. China's ensuing cooperation with the Islamic countries along the Trans-Asian-Axis is also viewed with concern by some in Moscow. China's hostility towards India, a close and traditional ally, is not well taken by Russians. The Chinese embracing of Islamic militancy in the Middle East has been causing great apprehension in Moscow. To Russophiles, China's penetration into former Soviet and now CIS Central Asia constitutes an encroachment on Russia's sphere of vital interests.

Given the current economic woes of Russia as well as the tribulations of its socio-political system Moscow cannot address both the perceptions of threats simultaneously and still recover Russia from its present predicament. Hence the great challenge elucidated by the two ideological-political camps the Russophiles and Eurasianists is setting Russia's priorities right. This is not an abstract notion. The unique importance of these ideological-political camps lies in the inherent character of Russia's power structure: the triangle of power and the perpetual two-versus-one dynamic.

In Soviet times the three poles of the structure were the communist party, military-industrial complex and the security organs. During Yeltsin period they were the Russophiles (dominating the defence establishment), the Eurasianists (dominating the foreign policy and foreign econ-

omy) and the Yeltsin family (including the oligarchs). Yeltsin's tendency was to go with the Eurasianists because of the immense profit made by the family from legal and illegal transaction and money laundering etc.

Given the changed context, Moscow's policy in the Putin era and beyond will have to be determined through the redefinition of the triangle of power. Two of the three bodies, the Russophiles and Eurasianists remain entrenched, albeit more distinct and powerful because of overall dynamics in Russia's national security and economic posture. The key question however remains: what will be Putin's power base, the third pole of power?

The last year's elections both of Duma and the presidency as well as the former composition suggest that Putin already resolved to use the Duma as the core his power base. The new Duma is most diverse as far as the political and ideological composition of its membership. The Duma's diversity makes the Putin power base less ideologically rigid, less corrupt, more pragmatic and practical. Given the strength of Putin's Kremlin and its Duma power base the key to comprehending Russia's own perception of the future lies in the two-versus-one alliance. With the ideological divide between the Russophiles and Eurasianists, the future two-versus-one alliance will be between the Duma and one of these camps. Recently Putin has defined his Vision of Russia's destiny in Russophiles terms.

In his April 2000 interview book 'First Person' Putin stated that 'Russia is a very diverse country but we are part of West European Culture. No matter where our people live, in the far East or in the South, we are Europeans'. He stressed that Russia will struggle to retain this posture against Western rejections and despite conflicting temptations. The world is yet to comprehend, let alone appreciate, the historical significance of Putin's decision.

Hunger and Politics in Bangladesh

by Shahed Latif

The Awami League's popularity or their sustainability in power is due to and will depend largely on the thriving agriculture in the country. In recent years we have had an abundance of crops. This perhaps is the best way for our government to stay popular.

THIS article on famine and politics in Bangladesh has to be introduced with a short recap on rice and agricultural lands. I pray my audience will bear with me as I lead to the basis of my argument.

Bengal has traditionally been known as the land of milk and honey. The low flood plains are ideal for growing rice. Dry winter months give an additional irrigated rice crop. There are very few agricultural regions in the world with such plentiful land and water resources. There are a few locations where one can grow rice three times a year. Rice/paddy is a highly labour intensive crop.

Now let us consider the shortage of water. It is a veritable disaster. Immediately following liberation in December 1971, the Boro crop was saved due to abundance of rains. The rains that year were a unique gift from God. Thereafter, rains failed to appear. As a consequence both jute and paddy suffered heavily. No rain, no food.

And that is famine.

The liberation brought in a great deal of hope and plenty of aspirations. I ask fellow citizens, was famine only the last thing you expected to happen immediately

after liberation? I recall my frequent visits to the milk shed areas of the country. Pabna (Nagarbari Ghat) appeared to be the worst hit. Yet the government and the party circle remained unmoved. It was a tragedy of the worst kind. In those days I was busy with the implementation of the Milk Vita project. My work involved field visits to the low lands of Pabna, Manikganj and greater Faridpur districts. What I realise that we did have a strong reaction, that of bad governance. Our reaction to famine was sadly, the pattern of politics that has emerged in modern-day Bangladesh.

India gained independence from the British in 1947 and has never met with a famine since. Of course there have always been sporadic incidents of death from hunger and regions that suffer chronic hunger and malnutrition; but since 1947, India never encountered famine. As a result, a strong civil government engaged in rules of law including an effective judiciary could prevail. However, India is an enormous country and there are a host of problems that besiege the country including insurgency in the north-eastern states and communal violence that ignites at

the smallest provocation. Those however are a different story. What I am stressing here is the lack of Bangladesh-style governance problems in India.

The day Bangabandhu was assassinated was perhaps the worst day of our short history as a nation state. The famine had something to do with the growing unpopularity of his government. Famine produced the type of politics that kept the Awami League from power for over 21 years.

It may also be noted that presently the Awami League's popularity or their sustainability in power is due to and will depend largely on the thriving agriculture in the country. In recent years we have had an abundance of crops. This perhaps is the best way for our government to stay popular. As for famine, I for one hope that it is gone forever. May the age of bright sunshine prevail ever after.

(The author has been seriously ill for quite some time. This piece is written while he continues to struggle against his illness. We appreciate his continued effort to bring vital issues of national interest into public attention. -Editor)

To the Editor ...

Telephone Policy

Sir, The installation charges for a telephone in a small office or home office is the highest in the world: above Tk 20,000 including 'special payments' to facilitate the installation. Why are the middle classes being discriminated against by the popular elected government in this manner? In ten years, two elected regimes have not found a way to streamline the long waiting list of new subscribers. The government is keeping quiet about things like this, and instead is publicising mini-projects such as the routine digitalization of the district exchanges, failing to mention that there is no alternative, that is why the routine work is being done. It is not stating whether it is going to do away with the outdated line/cable system, and adopt the fixed wireless system in the future. This hush-hush policy is not in the public interest. What is the problem? These days, a telephone is a technological right.

Abul MAHMAD
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Repulsive political attitude

Sir, The Awami League's intolerance, of all opposing views from all quarters is simply repulsive. Unless they learn to develop respect for opposing views, they will ultimately weaken the party as a political platform, as all citizens are not, and cannot be, Awami Leaguers.

The way the party leader reacted to vandalism in the High Court premises implied that there is no other side of the coin and the honourable members of the bar had suddenly gone berserk, and did not understand anything, even at this stage of their lives, when they are mature middle aged men!

The AL's worst enemies are some of the senior party members themselves, who live in a world of imagination, finding fault with anyone who holds views different from the party's views. The time might be coming when most citizens will be laughing at the antics of AL. Already a large section of non-political citizens are fed up with the monomaniacs, who are adding to the decibel level of the polluted metropolis.

Perhaps we need an NGO to open an Institution for the Reorientation of the Political Cerebrum (REPOLICE).

A Semi-sane Citizen
Dhaka

Perfect Cover Drive

Sir, It was inspiring to see the photograph of an under-13 boy executing a near perfect cover drive during a tournament match (The Daily Star-January 13). The new nation-wide cricket coaching scheme for young people (under-13s, under-15s, and under-17s) is a move in the right direction to tap the vast potential of talent available in this crowded nation. 'Catch them young' is the right motto.

There is a vast untapped mar-

ket for local mass production of cricket gear in the country, but the news about joint investment in this global industry is scanty. Artificially transportable matting pitches can be mass produced from jute fibre and coconut coir, after some Research and Development to ease the time spent laying hundreds of natural pitches on the soil, as this needs a lot of funds and expertise. Cricket in Bangladesh can bloom as did the readymade garment industry. Our young boys can deliver, and bring laurels for the nation.

A Husnain
Dhaka

Genuine Freedom Fighters

Sir, Thirty years have elapsed and we are still fighting about the list of genuine freedom fighters! It would take pages to elaborate all the points and circumstances that led people to join as Freedom Fighters. Muktijuddo, which started as an act of patriotism, adventure and compulsion turned out to be a very good investment for many. The number of enlisted Freedom Fighters would be around 150,000. But the most important point is that they were actively supported by millions who provided them with food, shelter, information etc. All those good deeds of millions of patriotic supporters have been conveniently forgotten. Those in service received two years ante-

dated seniority. This act was the height of selfishness and was responsible on many occasions for severe breach of discipline.

The story is the same for the public sectors, governmental or corporate. Thirty percent quota in all government and allied jobs has been reserved for the Freedom Fighters. Even that was not enough. The present Awami League government made the reserved quota available to the wards of the Freedom Fighters, which when translated means their supporters. Well, what is the fault of the rest of the population, which is more than ninety nine percent. Does the country belong to the Freedom Fighters only? What right does the govt. have to deprive its citizens from their lawful right to employment. At the very onset, thirty percent was too big a quota. The Freedom Fighters should have been given land, money, as a reward but not seniority in service or jobs.

A few of the Freedom Fighter officers refused to accept the antedated seniority in 1972. That should have been the rule not the exception. Unfortunately our Freedom Fighters and their mentors behaved extremely selfishly and kept everything for themselves only.

I appeal to the government that for the sake of the country and for justice, please stop being partisan, stop giving preferential treatment to a small minority. Let only the dictate of merit prevail.

Dr.S.Nasrullah
Dhaka

Making Mountains of Molehills

by A Mawaz

The magnificent Parliament is a stony mansion without the soul of the nation. Political parties should be importers or exporters? The residents of choked Dhaka are aware of another shortcoming: choked politics needs a better political drainage system (bleeding is not drainage).

WHEN small minds struggle to think big, they turn, unwittingly, molehills into mountains. As per divine design, a human cannot look into his/her own face; and the face reflected from a looking glass is a reversed one. There are lessons for those willing to learn.

Examples are galore, and this space need not be turned into a list of bibliography. The cumulative effect on the voters, during the coming elections, would be a litmus paper test whether the party is self-destructing itself through overdoes of arrogance, pride, intolerance, self-indulgence, illusions, delusions, and self-righteousness.

An inward-looking party cannot look outward, and objectively. A prisoner of agendas is in a worse predicament. How to deal with a political party out with a (political) shopping list in a market thriving on black currency dominated by heavyweight VIP bank-loan defaulters, in an environment of structurally weak political culture in the formative stage of a new and struggling nation?

The misapplications of the SPA (the latest one in Chittagong against a standing MP, and still later, the New Year's jig in the HC), and the trade against the judiciary would not win over extra votes in the name of 130 million duped souls. There is a formal way of doing things, in contrast with the autocratic attitude of the despotic minds, utterly intolerant of opposing views. The party attitude (other parties not excluded) makes a mockery of the practice of good politics in Dhaka.

If *mastaan* politics is the hardware, then the society has to develop the proper software for the operating system of sane politics of the future. Where are the political programmers, and where do they sit and work? The magnificent Parliament is a stony mansion without the soul of the nation. Political parties should be importers or exporters? The residents of choked Dhaka are aware of another shortcoming: choked politics needs a better political drainage system (bleeding is not drainage).

No place to sit, and standing for long periods introduces stress, showing cracks in the political foundation. Pliable politics resists dynamically the brittleness of rigid stances. Sporty shoes increase springiness and mobility. When the political leaders do not feel safe and secure, the sense of security cannot be transferred to the masses and the followers.

There are two types of gaps in such a situation: communicational, and technological. The third gap is the *ad hoc* growth of a systems network which has failed to pass the commissioning tests time and again during the past decades. How the

victims of an environment can control and improve the very polluted environment in which they live? It is a horse-and-cart issue on which the political leaders are not very forthcoming.

Today bad politics is led by the armed internal activists, and the control is simply not there (who control the Control Room?). Change of personnel cannot provide solutions, unless and until the very political environment is changed. The present political leaders cannot bring about this basic change, as they have become the victims of the prevailing entrapped atmosphere. Violence and intolerance have to go, before appeals, from inside and outside, could be effective. It is a classical situation: 'Who will bell the cat?'

As man is mortal, so is a regime. Life has cycles of change (no straight-line on the graph paper), and the cycles in politics cannot be ignored. A former British prime minister forecast a 30-year cycle in political change; and we are facing a 30-year interval. There is no linearity in politics. A specific mission is for a specific period, before the pause takes over. All political parties, and politicians, have equal rights, for equal opportunities. There is no such ghost as enforced rights.

Equalizers do not seem to operate in Dhaka. That has something to do with the frequency response of politics. How to measure political fidelity? The frequency response curve is not flat (the booming bass prevails); and the output is highly distorted; and, it is out of tune. The aural garbage is nauseating. The local political culture is due for a BMR (not BMRE). Noise has no information content, hence the message does not get through. If the politicians overlook the basics, the nation has to go through a period of forced labour to redo the homework. The discredits are heaped upon whom? the voters might as well ask.

Puritanism in politics is introduced when is taken too seriously. In other words, our politics is passing through a phase of political fundamentalism, outwardly grovelling in the artificial scintillation of democratic jewelry. It is therefore not surprising that the mole in the others' eye is pointed out, hardly leaving any room for tolerance.

The local politics is facing traffic jams as we notice on the streets of the metropolis (there are hardly any roads, technically speaking). The political drivers could be honourably compared with the unlicensed drivers of the unlicensed vehicles. Ultimately, there is one lesson to be learned: if freedom comes in mere nine months, then the compensation has to be paid for in three decades, if not longer. The inevitable Law of Compensation cannot be bypassed, by any means, fair or foul.