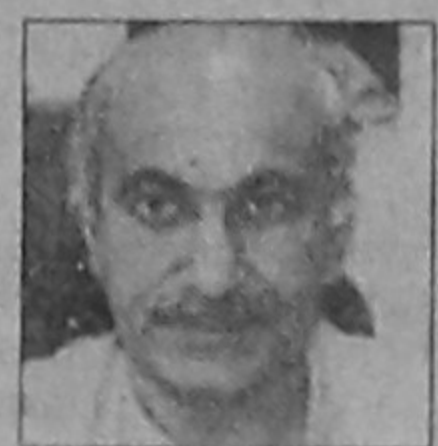


1649 and all that



M.J. AKBAR

Press precariously placed Protective role of the state missing

LET us repeat what we said in our editorial comment on January 29 (*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 reason is obvious: yet another journalist has fallen prey to highhanded hoodlums. Prabir Sikder, the Faridpur correspondent of a Bangla news daily, has landed at the Suhrawardy Hospital in critical condition, having been shot twice and stabbed indiscriminately by identifiable terrorists.

The *Daily Star* and the *Prothom Alo* have jointly launched an initiative to raise funds for journalist Tipu Sultan's treatment abroad, so that the Feni correspondent of UNB doesn't go handicapped. Just a reminder: Tipu was severely roughed up by the musclemen of a ruling party lawmaker on January 25 this year and left out in the open to die from his injury. While he received treatment at the National Orthopaedic Hospital, Feni police refused to register any official complaint from his family and friends, even after a High Court ruling had been issued in this regard. Meanwhile, Tipu's family, especially his parents, had been threatened several times with dire consequences if they dared complain to the authorities.

Prabir and Tipu are not the only ones to have paid the price for being true to their commitment to the people's right to know. Shamsur Rahman, the Jessore-based correspondent of the news daily Prabir works for, was gunned down in broad daylight by a gang of hitherto unidentified hoodlums. Before him, Mukul, editor of the *Ranar*, was shot dead. A 'death warrant' was also issued against a *Prothom Alo* correspondent by a Laxmipur legislator of the ruling Awami League, who is also a state minister, for running a 'damaging' report against him.

The government has so far talked tall on freedom of press and free access to information. On the ground, however, it's the ruling party men - lawmakers, ministers and everybody who is anybody - who have disdainfully treated the journalists and got away with impunity. Criminal elements cannot be allowed to hold sway over the law of the land. Therefore, whoever has been behind the killing of Rahman and Mukul, or the attack on Tipu and Prabir should be given what's their due. Otherwise, free press would be just a topic for academic discussion, far away from reality.

Tk. 100 crore owed to BTTB

DCs should be made answerable

PLAIN and simple, this is making a mockery of the system. An outstanding amount of at least Taka 100 crore is owed to the Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTTB) by the district administrations. The amount itself is staggering. Added to it is the shocking revelation that each and every one of the 64 Deputy Commissioners in this country is responsible for this breaking of norms from within. The biggest defaulters are Sylhet, Chittagong and Rangpur, with Dhaka, Rajshahi, Khulna and Barisal not far behind.

Such rampant and wilful financial indiscipline, across the board, is nothing short of a national disgrace. Not only have all 64 District Commissioners failed to clear telephone dues, but also in some cases DCs have run up amounts that are far in excess of past arrears. Since DCs are regularly transferred from one district to another, the arrears are left for their successors to deal with. New incumbents refuse to clear outstanding accounts and add to these by running up their own charges. They have been flouting the rules and passing the buck with impunity. In the process, the BTTB's financial health declines year after year.

If a private customer's bill exceeds Taka one thousand, BTTB summarily cuts the defaulter's line but telephones used for state business' enjoy immunity from such a penalty. Are we to understand that because of this immunity, can run their affairs as they please, without being held accountable? What does this say about government's accountability? When the administration itself is defying the rules, what kind of message is it giving to the common person?

Payment of telephone charges falls under a budgetary head of expenditure. There is no possible excuse for non-payment, nor for allowing arrears to accumulate. We demand an end to this gross malpractice. When a part of the government itself operates outside rules and regulations that it imposes on ordinary people and the national exchequer is deprived of revenue by the administration, there is something most seriously amiss in the machinery of the state.

NO one can quite recall why Haidergarh is called Haidergarh. Who was this Haider who gave his name to a place that echoes through a myriad layers of India's history and collective memory?

This was one place where the Pandavas found refuge during their 14-year-exile, and where King Kuru sprinkled the water from a famous yagna into the wells, blessing them thereby with a spiritual power: unmarried women still carry water from its wells to the Mahadev temple at Barabanki to offer it to Lord Shiva on Shivratri.

The spirit of miracles travelled through the centuries. When Raja Bhalchandra Singh Chauthari, then ruler of Haidergarh, died in the war of independence against the British in 1858, his body, it is said, kept fighting even after it had been beheaded until the last drop of blood had oozed out.

That vision of freedom made it a hub of the nationalist movement. Rafi Ahmad Kidwai, whose relative Mohsina is now a senior leader of the Congress, emerged from Haidergarh to become a close friend and member of Jawaharlal Nehru's Cabinet.

The Congress won the Assembly seat consistently till the debacle of 1989, and such was the historic strength of the party that it won the seat back in the debacle of 1991. Since then the seat has travelled back and forth between the Congress and the BJP, and went tricolour again in 1996.

In 1996, under the variable leadership of Sitaram Kesri, the Congress got 46,998 votes. In 2001, under the able leadership of Sonia Gandhi, the Congress has got 1,649 votes. Losing an election is no longer news in Congress circles, or among Congress squares.

But getting 1,649 votes out of the 131,676 votes given to the candidates of the recognised parties still is, or should be. This is a little more than one per cent of the votes cast for the known parties and therefore even less as a percentage of the total votes cast.

If Haidergarh had been the only criteria by which the Election Commission recognised or de-recognised parties, the Congress would lose its symbol; you have to get four per cent of the vote to retain your symbol.

Mrs Sonia Gandhi may have other reasons for worry as well. The constituency is a neighbour of Amethi, about halfway between Lucknow

become a three-figure vote.

Congress spin doctors (frankly, they talk like compounders and vets rather than doctors) are trying their best to offer some sort of explanation to this performance. The sitting Congress MLA, for instance, unusually, resigned to vacate his seat for an incumbent BJP chief minister, Mr Rajnath Singh. That is not an explanation, that is an excuse.

No candidate carries more than a small percentage of the party vote when he defects; the bulk vote belongs to the party, not to the candidate, except in the most unusual circumstances. The voting pattern reflects that. Ram Pal Varma of Mulayam Singh's Samajwadi Party got 29,059 votes and Mata Prasad Choudhary of Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party received 28,650 votes.

SP and BSP supporters also knew that the BJP chief minister was going to win; there is sufficient general and

to vote for the Congress.

The Yadavs did not forget to vote for Mulayam Singh Yadav and the Dalits did not forget to vote for Mayawati; that is why they received those respectable numbers.

The Congress candidate was a Brahmin, Sarvesh Bajpai, son of a former Congress MLA, Shyam Lal Bajpai. Brahmins constitute the largest single caste bloc in the Assembly segment, commanding roughly 38,000 votes (Thakurs, Raj Nath Singh's caste, are second with about 32,000 votes).

There was no other serious Brahmin candidate. And yet the Congress could not get a single Brahmin vote. I can say with some assurance that it is unlikely that Sarvesh Bajpai's family voted for him. Certainly Rafi Ahmad Kidwai's family did not.

Haidergarh is more evidence that the Muslims of Uttar Pradesh have turned decisively away from the Congress. There are some 23,000 Muslim votes, and the turnout

great validity in his view that a temple has already been constructed at the site of the disputed Babri mosque.

This happened on the day Congress president and Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, with the able assistance of a heap of Congress leaders like Ghulam Nabi Azad, permitted the mosque to be destroyed and a temple to be built on the razed site.

The temple was small, but it was a Ram temple; it still exists. In fact, the dispute over whether a temple should be built here or not is in effect over. The only question is whether a huge temple should be constructed by the VHP over there or not.

The Congress enabled this, as it enabled so much else. Sonia Gandhi could have begun the process of reversal of Muslim hostility.

But her chief advisers are either those who advocate a toe-dip during Kumbha, not out of faith in Hinduism or even out of respect for the

its strength once lay in the weakness of its support base: the poor, the minorities, the Dalits, the dispossessed.

It was these Indians who gathered under this historic tricolour and gave the party strength through their unity. Alone, they were weak; together, they ruled. The Congress was intelligent enough to include strong sections of the upper castes in its demographic and democratic combination, because it needed their involvement to exercise power.

The Brahmin vote was the most loyal, at least partly because the Nehru-Gandhi family was Brahmin. Was. Today that identity has weakened to the point of dilution and no toe-dipping in the Ganga is going to restore the respect that Panditji commanded and the adoration that Indira Gandhi got from the Brahmins.

The Muslims find nothing in either the idiom or the ideology of Sonia Gandhi to enthuse them; even when they want to consolidate behind the Congress as an alternative to the BJP, they find that motivation is missing. The Congress has done nothing to revive its appeal among the Muslims or the Dalits.

The Congress exists only in those regions where there are only two political parties, as in Gujarat and Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. There the backlash effect helps it retain a seesaw existence.

But the absence of sustained ideological commitment or a programme that can define a government makes it ineffective in victory and irrelevant in defeat. The Congress now exists merely because it was. It does not live for the future.

That is the message of Haidergarh. Membership of a coalition that might win in Kerala, or some success in Assam, or even a psephologist's victory as a humiliated junior partner in Bengal will not change this fact.

We have a popular saying that even a dead elephant is worth something. The Congress is now feeding off the remains of a rich history.

BYLINE

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and Amethi and a whisper away from Rae Bareilly, Conlagon could exact a heavy price.

One has noted before that the Congress over the last few elections has become what might be called a "calendar" party; that is, its votes are now within four numbers, as in the years of a calendar. That is bad enough.

But unlike normal calendars which measure the advance of time, however slowly, this one is regressive. From a vote puddle (you can hardly call it a bank) ranging between 2000 and seven or eight thousand, the vote seems to have slipped to less than 2000. All it has to do now to enter the Dark Ages is to

specific patronage available to ensure that. But their support base is intact; it is the floating vote that has walled towards the winner.

In different circumstances, the floating vote will come their way as well. What the Haidergarh elections prove is that the Congress has lost its core vote. An independent, R.D. Sharma, got some four hundred votes more than the Congress.

To get some idea of how appalling a figure like 1,649 votes is, do remember that the Congress brand name, even in its pathetic state, tends to get some votes by a sort of historic inertia; in other words, about a thousand of those 1,649 voters have probably forgotten not

would have been low in the absence of any meaningful campaigning, since the results were never in any doubt.

Analysis of the votes polled in Subcha could provide an indication of the trends in the Muslim vote, but the larger share has almost certainly gone to Mulayam Singh Yadav with perhaps a slice to Mayawati.

The Congress does not exist in the Muslim mindspace of Uttar Pradesh or Bihar. I assume that every Congress leader knows why. If not, do please refer to Mr Lal Krishna Advani's submission to the

Liberhan Commission recently. Whatever the merits of any other claim or contention there is

central faith of our country, but because they think that such gestures can help manipulate the Hindu vote in favour of Sonia Gandhi. She should check with the Brahmins. Haidergarh how deeply they have been moved by her toe-dip at Allahabad. She could of course also use the opportunity to check with Ghulam Nabi Azad what he was doing on 6 December 1992, although of course Mr Azad's memory might have become fragile in the difficult decade since then.

The dilemma of the Congress is very clear: it belongs to no one. No community, or combination of communities, has any emotional bond with the Congress any more.

Will Benazir be let go off the hook?

LETTER FROM KARACHI

The military will also be faced with the challenge of taking quite difficult decisions. A major decision on Taliban or CTBT or terrorism or on Indo-Pak negotiations can create the necessity for a realignment of forces. Also, Benazir can push things in a direction that will make her support necessary for the adjustments.



M.J. ZAHEDI

A seven-member bench of the Supreme Court of Pakistan has set aside the conviction of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto and her spouse, former Senator Asif Ali Zardari, in a corruption case and ordered a retrial by a court of competent jurisdiction.

The Ehtesab bench of the Lahore High Court had convicted the two in April 1999 for giving pre-shipment inspection contract to SGS of Switzerland.

The prosecution had alleged that the contract was awarded in consideration of a commission of 6 per cent of the total amount received from the government of Pakistan. The commission was paid to Boomer Finance Inc., owned by Zardari. Both were awarded five years' simple imprisonment each and a fine of \$8.6 million besides disqualification as MPs and confiscation of property acquired through corruption.

Benazir and Zardari had appealed the conviction. The Supreme Court had heard the appeals for more than five weeks

and concluded the proceedings on 5 April. The military government had inherited the case from the PML government of Nawaz Sharif; it defended the judgment vehemently spending Rs 10 million in legal fees and other expenses.

Naturally, Benazir is happy. Local newspapers quoted Benazir who is presently in London, as saying that the decision would put the reputation of the Pakistan judiciary back on the track to recovery, which had been dented by the decision of the trial court. She said there was no reason for the government to keep her husband behind bars any longer. Benazir said that she wanted to go back to Pakistan as soon as possible. "But we have to weigh different options before taking a final decision", so she had called her colleagues for consultation. Indeed her return may not be very soon or without consultation with PPP leaders because there were nine other cases filed against her and Asif Zardari. Five relate to kickback of amount totaling up to \$23 million. Two cases relate to the assets of Benazir and Asif which amount to \$1.5 billion and two cases relate to misuse of her authority. The cases will continue in the court, according to the chairman of the National

Accountability Bureau. An accountability court has already issued non-bailable arrest warrants against her in the assets reference. As for the case under discussion, the government's prosecutor general said that it respects the judgment and will decide whether or not to appeal against it only after the detailed judgment. The Supreme Court has kept Benazir's fate hanging in the balance by remanding the case for retrial.

The question that is being asked here is: will Benazir be let go off the hook? The answer depends on many other things not in the control of the current arbiters who vow to keep her out. Undoubtedly the Supreme Court verdict has given a big psychological boost to Benazir's political fortunes. She will now be able to challenge her detractors with great vigour and newfound strength from a morally boosted high ground. She may now try to take over the mainstream opposition by capturing the centre stage. If she decides to come back to lead a leaderless ARD, most observers feel, there could not be a better time than this. But many feel that she will possibly take measured risks because as a practicing politician she knows that politics is not



just a high drama, it is also a game of real calculations. The probability of her conviction a few months hence may not really materialise if she is to make it highly improbable for the powers that be by capturing the leadership of mainstream opposition. In realpolitik, scales can turn any way and any time. No doubt Gen. Musharraf has ruled out the possibility of her return and she can be convicted in another case, but there is always many a slip between

cup and lip. By capturing almost two-thirds of the local body seats, both the PPP and the PML(N) have already scuttled the grounds from under the feet of the National Reconstruction Bureau's great design. After getting rid of the high political focus that Nawaz Sharif had occupied, it will be too distracting to recreate a new focus by keeping Benazir on the leash. If the regime decides to get her convicted again, she will have

enough time to rebuild her political flanks. In fact, according to most observers, her conviction in the SGS case or another case, closer to the next elections, will politically suit her more than anything else.

In the meantime, the military will also be faced with the challenge of taking quite difficult decisions. A major decision on Taliban or CTBT or terrorism or on Indo-Pak negotiations can create the necessity for a realignment of forces. Also, Benazir can push things in a direction that will make her support necessary for the adjustments. A decision of the regime can create room for an alignment with Benazir. And if it did not, then its increased isolation will make Benazir the other alternative for the world community.

If the regime persisted in its resolve to keep Benazir out, it will have to create an alternative that could keep both the parties' leadership out. That seems to be a difficult task, and doubly so, without actually rigging the whole process. Already it has exhausted much of its energy and legitimacy by packing one major leader to Saudi Arabia. For Benazir, too, it will not be an easy decision. If she stayed out in self-exile, she would waste the last opportunity to take a new political birth, observers feel. The traditional establishment has not forgiven the Bhuttos, it will not do so out of its sweet will. The PPP has suddenly come to life since it lives on the Bhutto charisma. Benazir's comeback will make it once again a force to reckon with. The ball is now in her court. Will she play or let it go is the question.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.

Road in bad shape



The adjacent road to the second Buriganga bridge is in a deplorable state for quite some time. Due to lack of maintenance and renovation, the road has become unsuitable for smooth traffic and this may lead to serious accidents. For how long people will have to put up with this nuisance?

"Biman officials assault passenger..."

According to a report item under the above heading (April 11), a Bangladeshi-born British citizen was assaulted on board a Biman flight and also illegally confined by some Biman officials at the ZIA. The fault of the victim was - he asked about the delay of the flight he boarded from Bangkok to Dhaka. The Biman officials assaulted him upon landing at ZIA. They even tried to frame him as a drug carrier.

Such incident is not new. But it is very unfortunate that the officials of Biman, our national flag carrier, treat the passengers in such a manner.

This is absolutely unthinkable with any other international airlines. Such behaviour will shatter the image of Bangladesh in the international community. We hope the inquiry committee will not only track down the culprits but also punish them for the greater interest of Biman.

S.M. Enayetur Raheem
Dhaka

Deplorable state

The celebration of the Bengali New Year at Ramna Batamul witnessed a

new phenomenon: the emergence of human-bomb squads, as operating in some other countries. Terrorism is now spilling from the political arena into the cultural field. The previous phase was in the religious field.

The hate campaign by the politicians is one of the root causes for encouraging violence in the country. Unless and until the political parties give up use of violence through armed gangsterism, there is no point in shedding crocodile tears, fuming, foaming, and tongue-lashing.

Are the leaders aware that they might be the next victims in the near future, regardless of political affiliation? The politicians talk about religious extremist and fundamentalist groups, but keep silent about a silent fact: the political parties are themselves in the fundamental and extremist stage of development.

The politicians have to salvage their tottering image and stop being hypocritical. Many citizens are now in favour of longer tenure of the neutral caretaker government. We may try it out as a pilot project. The unfocussed politicians need some rest period for orientation and self-reappraisal.

AMA
Dhaka

Devastating governance

Every day the newspapers are filled with devastating news, revealing the state of governance in our country. We have read daily newspapers of several countries. In no country was the front page of daily newspapers like this!

Our two main political leaders are busy attacking and counter-attacking each other. Do they bother about these devastating news? Do they realise that people have lost faith in them! There is a limit to the orgy of harming people and destroying their property.

The politicians should realise that they are entrusted with the grave responsibility of representing people, protecting and promoting their interest. Monetary and property loss can be measured, but can anyone measure the loss of the future of our children? Every day we pray to Allah for the safety of our children. They are unable to go to school due to haral. How long will this political unrest continue?

Anxious mothers
Dhaka

I am speechless

I am speechless at the bomb incident at Ramna Batamul. The people

who are involved in this inhuman act, do not care about the damage they have caused.

What a disaster they have made out of our long cherished Pahela Baishakh. This is not the first time that they have bombed in a public place. These culprits continuously disrupt the daily life and now they have started killing innocent people.

I was already sad on the eve of Pahela Baishakh thinking when I would get the chance to attend this ceremony again; we miss this occasion so much. I called the next morning to greet my parents 'Shoobho-Noboborsho' and was stunned to hear the shocking news!

When we were in Bangladesh we attended this ceremony every year. This time our white sari with red border has swept away with red blood! The flowers we used to wear on our hair on Pahela Baishakh have become the flowers of the grave. Have we lost the tradition and beautiful memory forever?

I know I will not be able to stir the conscience of those who did it, but still I want to share my grief with the nation.

Naushin Farzana Amin
California, USA