

Press terrorised, muzzled

Govt looking the other way

WHAT was a feather to the cap is now hanging around the neck as an emblem of shame. This shattering realisation could not have come at a more appropriate moment than during the observance of the World Press Freedom Day yesterday. That global day was baptised and adopted by the UN in 1991, the very year that saw democracy restored in our country with a relatively free press bursting forth.

But where do we stand today? No black law or official censorship happens to restrict press freedom now. As if to begrudge the fact, gangsters with godfathers in ruling party stalwarts seem to have been let loose on journalists. Newsmen are harassed, threatened, maimed and killed with complete impunity as they attend to their calls of duty. They are waylaid and brutalised, their offices ransacked with a pattern of terrorisation reflecting an unprecedented degree of intolerance of criticism and a pathological hatred towards revelation of truth.

As the lists of journalists left dead and crippled in the course of discharging their professional responsibilities lengthen so does that of known culprits loitering under the very nose of the authorities. In July last year courageous journalist Shamsur Rahman was shot dead in Jessore. Earlier in April newsman Nahar Ali had been knifed to death in Khulna. Their killers roam freely about. Similar has been the fate with the 1996 murder case pending about Sathira journalist Alauddin and that of 1998 in Jessore concerning Daily Runner editor Mukul. And now comes UNB correspondent Tipu scarred with grievous wounds inflicted by the goons of a ruling party MP and Probir whose badly bruised right leg had to be amputated, all victims of wanton political patronisation of criminal elements. Chittagong Jubo League leader and Ward Commissioner Mamun who brutalised journalists at Dainik Purbokone office is still at large despite definitive directives by the PM and the Home Minister to book him.

Such is our image of press freedom to the world at the moment. While the government looks the other way as the press is muzzled by hired hoodlums, the journalist community is not unified in voicing their concern over the growing insecurity and hazards to physical safety they are confronted with.

At a time like this we look forward to robust public support and readership cooperation towards the cause of press freedom without which the people's right to know can not be served.

Encroachments are a disgrace

Comply with High Court order

DHAKA'S roads and pavements are a disgrace. Being badly maintained is not the only problem. The city's major thoroughfares have become virtually impassable.

Encroachments of all shapes and sizes, from construction materials and activities, to illegal markets and dwellings, are obstructing vast and vital stretches of public passage, in blatant violation of the law. We have been crying ourselves hoarse on this matter, to no avail. Dhaka City Corporation and Dhaka Metropolitan Police, together with the ministries of public works and home affairs, have callously ignored civic concerns.

Now, the situation has taken on an even more serious connotation. An order by the High Court, to the DCC, DMP and the relevant ministries, has failed to elicit action. On February 11th, the High Court issued an order directing these bodies to take necessary steps to free the city roads and pavements from illegal occupation. So far, nothing has been done to comply with this order.

What explanation can the authorities provide for this defiance? We urge them to comply forthwith. Start cleaning up this mess immediately.

Wanton encroachments are not only a widespread city problem, but also have taken on a semi-permanent status. Portions of Manik Mia Avenue have become a storage site for more than four months. Here and in many other areas, contractors are using public roads and pavements to store materials and for building works that should take place inside factories or within construction sites. Illegal markets have been allowed to acquire virtual hegemony over public areas. The law has retreated, allowing the defiance of civic rules to become entrenched.

We can only express a sense of outrage at the authorities. By their negligence and callousness they have allowed the city to become a virtual nightmare for ordinary people. We urge them to heed the directive of the court. They must immediately remove the most blatant encroachments and mount a consistent campaign to prevent the city from slipping further into the depths of disorder and chaos.

Journey to the end?



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

ELECTION is just round the corner. Barring act of god or a major upheaval election to the Jatiya Sangsad seems set to take place within the period fixed by the constitution. The chances of an early election following declaration from Medina have evaporated without leaving any trace. Nor is there any possibility of the government being forced to hand over power through hartal and street demonstrations. In retrospect the whole spectacle of heightened political confrontation taking precipitous turn after the declarations and ripples appears to be an exercise in one-up-man (woman?) ship. The verbal duel between the two party supremos was mind-numbing and dismayed the nation more than it amused because it was not like a show prearranged by the World Wrestling Federation where such exchange of vituperative is de rigueur. As regards the antagonists, the feelings of bellicosity and intolerance may have reached their nadir following the recent war of words, if abyss was not already reached.

An emotionally charged and hate-filled atmosphere is not congenial for holding a peaceful election. Violence in every imaginable form can be apprehended. Except an apocalypse nothing can be ruled out. Black money and muscle power may rule the roost threatening the

fairness of polls. If these dark forebodings prove to be true, neither the election nor its outcome will be cause for rejoicing by the hapless citizens. Election will not bring relief from the agonies of purgatory if the nightmare of living in the nether world lingers through its subversion. If election is metaphorically compared to a tunnel, it must not only be safe for the journey, there must also be light at the end of the tunnel. At the moment neither the tunnel looks reassuring for the journey nor is there any convincing sign of light at its end.

the people becomes binding on all parties. It is the precondition for governance with legitimacy. The importance of a free and fair election cannot, therefore, be overemphasised.

Starting with the assumption of having same prospects in the hustings the major parties should abide by the rules and procedures prescribed for election under the law. Let a party try to bend these rules or procedures in its favour the Election Commission will have to maintain strict neutrality and guard against any overt or covert pressure

holding of the next general election. They may start with the assumption that their opponent(s) will resort to unfair practices and their recommendations should follow from this. This approach will have a good deal of sense as the secrets of purloining election results are known to the parties. Of course, all parties are not equally placed and so their recommendations will not be always common. Because of this all proposals and criticisms against attempts to foil this need to be considered on merit and with urgency. For instance, the opposi-

tion before election can find their place in election rules. The overriding consideration should be not to give any excuse or ground for crying "foul" by the opposition later. Being in power the government has greater responsibility in this regard.

While the responsibility of holding election rests with the Election Commission, maintenance of law and order will be in the bailiwick of the caretaker government. It will be its major task and the main challenge. Since the Election Commission can very well apprehend the various manners in which

should not present them with an intractable problem and should have enough space for cooperation.

If the election is free and fair it will pave the way to the acceptance of the results as credible. Credibility will ensure respect by all parties for the verdict given by people. The losers should gracefully allow the party with the majority mandate to form government and complete its full term. In its turn, the party forming the government should show due tolerance to opposition and observe democratic norms in subsequent governance. Simply because it has the majority in the parliament and has formed the government it should not take measures that are blatantly partisan and anti-democratic. The opposition is also part of governance and they should be allowed to make their due contributions. Their legitimate role should be recognised and their leaders shown proper respect. A free and fair election can be perverted through autocratic policies and conduct that deny the role to opposition. Because of this need for collaboration among parties (in power and in opposition) democracy means more than free and fair election. The political malaise that has made the nation suffer for the last one decade is largely rooted in the failure to govern democratically after the election. Total or near total disregard of the opposition's viewpoints has contributed to this failure in no small measure. If we have not learnt this bitter lesson after all these nightmare years the end to our plight will not be marked only by a free and fair election this time around. An election is the beginning of the journey. It is important that the first step is taken correctly. But more important is the rest of the journey when democratic governance is put on trial. It failed abjectly in the past. It must not be allowed to do so in future. The nation is sick and tired of democracy gone awry. Let the next election be the beginning of the end.

IN MY VIEW

An election is the beginning of the journey. It is important that the first step is taken correctly. But more important is the rest of the journey when democratic governance is put on trial. It failed abjectly in the past. It must not be allowed to do so in future. The nation is sick and tired of democracy gone awry. Let the next election be the beginning of the end.

In spite of overwhelming pessimism there is no alternative to election. For a nation that has made so much of sacrifices for so long there should not be any other choice. It is through election that the majority should choose the party to govern the country for the next term. If there is to be a change in government it should be through ballot and not through extra-constitutional means. Even demonstration of people's power on the street cannot be re-enacted without the risk of tampering the script for democracy. Ensuring a free and fair election may not be sufficient but it is the most important means of bringing about change in governance in a democratic manner. If the election results are not challenged on the grounds of malpractices and irregularities then the mandate given by

to tinker with the system. Furthermore, where necessary it should introduce new rules and procedure under the authority vested to it to prevent anything that may vitiate the process of fair election. Since these will have to be accepted by all parties on the basis of their intrinsic merit, there should be complete transparency in all the preparatory activities of the Election Commission including changes in rules. For this the Election Commission should hold regular meetings with the leaders of political parties and give due publicity of the discussions. The Election Commission should not only be independent, it should be shown to be above all partisan interests. The parties in their turns should come forward in a free and frank manner with suggestions and proposals for

tion is now criticising the government for using government officials and logistics for holding public meetings where election campaign is being made. The opposition and the media have also pointed out that on the eve of election large-scale transfers and postings are being made by the government with ulterior motive. Not having any power and authority the Election Commission cannot stop these. But it can discuss these matters with the government and use moral suasion to stop the controversial activities. The party in power should feel confident and generous enough to set precedents in these regards. If the criticisms by the opposition are heeded and government responds in a spirit of accommodation one sore point can be cured. In time, do's and don'ts by an incumbent govern-

disturbances can be created before and after election, it should be in close touch with the caretaker government for their timely prevention. For a peaceful and free election the Election Commission and the caretaker government have to work together as one body. It should also take the help of various national and international election monitoring agencies. Needless to say, the challenge to the Election Commission, the caretaker government and the monitoring agencies this time will be far greater and grimmer than in the past. They have to use all the ingenuity and skill with the limited resources (and time) at their disposal to acquit themselves satisfactorily. A botched election will not only bring disaster to them but will also spell disaster for the future of the country. The political parties

Why good things don't last a little longer?



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

I saw him at the tailoring shop after many years, the suited-booted bloated-gloated man who was my boyhood idol. I thought he was the best singer in the world, one whose baritone voice could thaw the ice in the hearts of many a girl. Those were the heady days of life, when, like many other boys, I thought success had to be measured in the unit of girls. But my favourite singer looked plump and tired after all these years, the fatigue of bygone days showing in the bags under his eyes. He reminded me of the silent movies. The struts and frets were there, but the voice was gone.

My favourite singer doesn't sing anymore, because he lost the magic of his voice to temptation of the bottle. He didn't know how to handle his success and drank it off for mysterious reasons. There is a Nigerian saying that a man is not dead until he is forgotten. The hero of my boyhood had died a long time ago since people started to forget that he ever sang. What I saw in the tailoring shop was a dead man walking, one who was still breathing from within the tomb of his lost fame.

The list of such living deads grow very long as their names tumble down the memory lane: Bashir Ahmed, Mohammed Ali Siddiqui, Khondoker Farukh Ahmed, Khurshid Alam, Syed Abdul Hadi, Anjuman Ara Begum, Shahnah Rahmatullah and Runa Laila. Sabina Yasmin is rumoured to have left the country recently to live with her third husband in India. Amongst the film stars, where are Rahman and Shabnam, the heartthrobs of my father's generation? Nasima Khan appears in cameo roles in TV serials every now and then. Anwar Hossain, the one-time nabob of our tinsel land, competes for parts in real-estate commercials. Quader Kibria and Al Mansur are lost in their American Dreams. Sarker Kabiruddin and Rokeya Haider have vanished into the feeble resonance of a long-gone past.

Is it simply nostalgia that we miss them, the noise of the unquiet ghost of vacuum created by their

absence? It is not unusual for people to disappear into silence or oblivion, because there is a time for everything in life. There are friends and relatives we don't see as often as we did when we grew up with them. And celebrities, like meteors, might vanish once they have covered the trajectory of fame. Yet there is certain incontinence in the manner they keep disappearing from our public life as if there is a cultural disorder akin to malfunction of the kidney when the proteins slip away from the body. Is our culture very competitive where these people have been pushed towards Darwinian death? Or, is it because the culture doesn't have the capacity to retain its very best and, therefore, lets them waste away?

Greek physician Hippocrates cautioned that life was short and art was long. We are talking about people whose arts have been shorter than their lives. Why? May be their talents were not commensurate with their fame. May be their fame didn't have the time-conquering force. Some of them, of course, became self-destruct, and others exiled themselves to foreign countries for private reasons. Yet one would like to know what happened to the arts of their fame?

Couple of years ago I had met Dilara Hashem at Heathrow Airport, who was returning to Washington DC after accepting an award from Bangladesh. She reminisced on her days in Bangladesh as a writer and resented how she found during her trip that her readers had forgotten all about her. She said that she felt hollow because she had squandered the love of her readers, her prized possession as a writer, in the lure of a more comfortable life abroad.

I would say, that was a failure on

the personal front. Samuel Beckett lived in Paris, but he never failed to make his presence felt in the English literature. Many writers, philosophers, painters, actors and musicians lived in exile for political reasons, and they didn't cease to produce their work of art. Art is portable like a laptop; it can be carried from location to location so long as one means business.

But there can be failure on the cultural front as well. The culture can eliminate the artist as much as the artist can alienate the culture. In fact, culture is to art, what fragrance is to flower, luminescence is to light and melody is to music. It is the ecology of excellence arising from love of enlightenment and refinement, its brilliance shining through the letters, manners and tastes of people who live and grow inside it. For a singer, for that matter, culture exudes from his voice; its cadence showing how

well he has been marinated in the juice of his cultural heritage. Similarly, culture is manifest in the grace of a dancer's movement, the finesse of an actor's expression and the style of a writer's prose.

In other cultures of the world, art is a lifetime commitment. Artists grow old like fruits ripen, their talents adding flavour to the culture with passing time. Ashok Kumar, and Dilip Kumar are the stalwarts of the Indian cinema, their popularity and honour undiminished long after they have crossed their primes. Lata Mangeshkar is still the queen of Indian music, her crooning voice reverberating through the fabric of Indian culture like the absorbing experience of a deep religious chant. On the other hand, the Carpenters, Bee Gees or Earth, Wind and Fire are US bands, which prematurely slipped into oblivion, because they couldn't produce top-

of-the-chart hits for many years. But Cat Stevens, who became Yusuf Islam after he embraced Islam and gave up music, set an example of how art evaporates when the artist is in spiritual crisis.

This art is the expressive form of spiritual connection between artist and culture, while the common man appreciates one through the other. The singer of my boyhood no longer looked connected to either. The man had committed creative suicide by taking the life of his art with his own hand. He still drinks heavily, I am told by the tailor master, perhaps to wash down the void, which must be rising to his throat like a lump. I was thought about it a lot. Whose fault is it that gifted men and women keep vanishing like stars after daybreak? Is the artist or the culture to blame for it? I don't know the answer. Some people tell me the satellite channels are to blame, because they enforced in our culture what is equivalent to the opposite of Gresham's Law: the superior culture drove the inferior culture out of market. While I don't want to debate over what is superior and what is inferior, I am not convinced by their argument. Many of the names I mentioned above were long lost before the satellite era even started. For some reason I am convinced that he would have become a great singer, if he were still singing. God his voice was so good, only if it had lasted a little longer!

CROSS TALK

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You can hide, you cannot run

IKRAM SEHGAL writes from Karachi

THE arrest of former Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Mansurul Haq from a select posh area in Texas, USA marks a significant step forward for the process of accountability in Pakistan. Substantial evidence is on record about the Admiral's financial indiscretions, even the lavish abode and the manner of his living in the US was way beyond the means of a retired Naval officer. His incarceration, pending extradition to Pakistan, will act as a model to bring other fugitives to justice. The Chinese say that a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step; to get the American system of justice to acknowledge that the evidence being presented from Pakistan was not tainted by prejudice is one very giant step. From the statement of witnesses it is apparent that the Admiral's only salvation lies in becoming a prosecution witness, i.e. blowing the police whistle on his collaborators, among them politicians, bureaucrats, uniforms (and retired) colleagues, arms merchants, brokers, etc. all those involved in skimming millions of dollars from purchases made by the Pakistan Armed Forces over the years.

The ruling military elite cannot be accused of bias against the Navy, this case was instituted by the political regime of Mian Nawaz Sharif, as against Air Marshal (Retd) Waqar Azim, jailed because of the PIA computers case. The Army has utilized the maximum portion of the Defence purchases. Rumours abound of several hundreds of millions of dollars pocketed in commissions, ranging from helicopter gunships to artillery shells to tanks, etc. Why has no senior ex-Army person been prosecuted for corruption in arms trade? The perception of justice being seen to be fair and equitable is only when it is applied even-handedly, on friend and foe alike. The much vilified former Senator Saifur Rehman did yeoman's work in going after the corrupt, unfortunately some cases were blatantly politically motivated; on the contrary very obvious evidence leading to logical conclusion

cerned that other countries may apply corruption laws to US citizens in a selective and whimsical manner, that fabricated evidence may be used by countries to target political opponents (non US-citizens) presently out of their reach. Mansurul Haq's case signals that the US judicial system recognizes that the NAB presentation of evidence is not tainted by any other motivation but to bring the corrupt to justice. The US cannot afford that it be seen as a safe haven for fugitives on the run, as a pleasure island of last resort for criminals, those who thought they could live forever off the gravy they had looted. For them it is very bad news, the long arm of Pakistani justice is about to catch up. They can run, they cannot hide!

The Chief Executive (CE) recently unveiled a very pragmatic plan to turn Karachi into Hong Kong, the "Proposals for the Economic Revival of Karachi" (PERK) were exceedingly well thought out, pragmatic and do-able. The problem was in naming Hong Kong as a model rather than Singapore. The CE was probably sensitive to former PM Mian Nawaz Sharif's fascination for Lee Kwan Yew and Singapore. Hong Kong is a very bad example to emulate, being built on a foundation of evil, viz drugs, smuggling, prostitution, etc. Singapore's leaders were acutely aware of this when laying the foundations of their city-state. Hong Kong was controlled and in many ways is still run, by a cabal of businessmen who pragmatically combine their legal commerce and industry with more than centuries old thriving illegal trade. Hong Kong did become the commercial capital of the East, at what

price? For every moderately affluent Hong Kong citizen, ten still live well below the poverty line. The CE meant well in inviting Karachi business houses to be part of the revival process, most of their acquired wealth has been by illegal means and mostly at Pakistan's cost. Millions may have been brought back and invested in Pakistan, a major percentage remains untaxed, abroad in safe havens beyond the reach of taxation. Why does the NAB not investigate the barter trade of the late 70s and 80s when every year several hundreds of millions of dollars were siphoned from Pakistan? European countries (nowadays) are very sensitive to corruption at their government level, why not seek their assistance formally to unearth the millions of US dollars, etc paid to the local Pakistani agents of their government trading companies doing barter trade with Pakistan during that period? Why not look into the Ministry of Commerce's files to see how traditional items among the "export" list was increased and non-traditional decreased to suit those looting Pakistan?

The government is really sincere about targeting those who have benefited at the cost of Pakistan, why not let NAB write officially through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to (1) Sweden, (2) Finland, (3) Hungary, (4) Czechoslovakia, (5) Poland and (6) Romania and ask them, viz (1) since 1976 till the barter trade terminated who were the local agents in Pakistan of their government trading companies nominated for barter trade with Pakistan? (2) What was the amount of commission, discount etc paid to

them for services rendered pertaining to the barter with Pakistan? (3) What amount (with details) was sent to Pakistan? (4) What amount was sent to overseas accounts of the companies or individuals or offshore companies and their details? Currently engaged in framing its code of conduct pertaining to corruption, money-laundering, illegal trade etc EU should have no compunctions in helping Pakistan to nail down those who have spirited money abroad. If the various businesses have brought their commissions to Pakistan and paid taxes on them, then there is no reason for grievance. But if they have secreted money abroad, then what is the difference between them and our former naval chief? Coincidentally one of them is the prime witness against Mansurul Haq. NAB should show its commitment to accountability by immediately seizing all the files with the Ministry of Commerce pertaining to barter trade in the last two decades.

This brings us to the heart of the problem, to differentiate between the honest and the crooked. In this country the crooked invariably find a niche close to the rulers that allows them a "protection" of sorts; they stay beyond the reach of any investigation, what to talk about indictment, prosecution and incarceration. On the strength of the illegal money stolen from the impoverished people of Pakistan, they then build fairy castles in Karachi, for the rich only. But then the government is sending conflicting signals by the single-minded pursuit of Admiral Mansurul Haq, that they will not tolerate corruption in any quarter, whatever the level. A strong element among the rulers seem to genuinely want those who have looted Pakistan to be brought to justice, that represents the core of Mosharraf's moral authority to rule Pakistan. In fact Mansurul Haq's arrest in the US by US authorities, pending extradition, sends a clear message that one hopes will not be compromised by motivated interests that join the bandwagon of every government. The clear unambiguous message is, you can hide, you cannot run!

We have received an overwhelming number of letters, particularly on the recent border clash with India and are therefore bringing our readers a special letters section on page 7.

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.



Encroaching on the road
The front of the Baitul Mukarram Masjid, the national mosque, is occupied by a number of encroachers, starting from chatpatala to juice vendor, turning the place almost into a mini bazar. These encroachers also hamper the beauty of the mosque and disturb prayers. The authorities concerned should stop overlooking this civic nuisance.