

Governments prove wasteful

Financial discipline is the only way to self-reliance

THIS paper's follow-up story day before yesterday on the special and annual audit reports which the Comptroller and Auditor General's Office recently submitted to the President of the Republic might have served as another eye opener to the prodigality across the board of governmental expenditures. Economists Dr. Wahiduddin Mahmud and Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya and the immediate-past Comptroller and Auditor General Syed Yusuf Hossain voiced their concern over the waste of government resources adding that its curtailment could reduce our aid dependence significantly. In other words, they have set off the alarm bell for an early reversal of the trend to ensure if we are not to court any further bankruptcy than we are already reeling in.

Just how bad is the financial indiscipline plaguing the government, semi-government and autonomous institutions? Tk 15,000 crore was wasted and misused by 24 ministers in a space of seven years, the amount almost equalling the currently reduced allocational size of the Annual Development Plan (ADP). But this is just the tip of the iceberg; for only 15-20 per cent of the transactions of the government or sector corporations comes under the current audit system. A straightforward *pro-rata* calculation would take us into the neighbourhood of Tk 75 thousand crore drained out of the national exchequer in the seven years audited for. Besides, the underhand dealings of the government offices and sector corporations supposed to be in the order of millions every year are not reflected through the reports.

The question is: how do we plug the holes? First of all, the audit wing of the C&AG's office will have to be separated from its accounts department so that it is enabled to fully concentrate on the audit functions. Secondly, the auditing authority should have adequate, trained and well-equipped manpower to be able to deliver on its constitutional writ. Thirdly, there must be an internal auditing mechanism in each government ministry, directorate and office to enforce transparency and accountability across the board. Last but not least, the Public Accounts Committee of the Parliament must have more powers than merely a recommendatory role in ensuring that the ministries abide by its decisions.

Nepal's Maoist insurgency takes its toll

All concerned must exercise caution and work to bring calm

THE hills of Nepal are blazing with the flames of confrontation between the Maoists and the government troops. In the latest episode of violence at least 130 people died, mostly soldiers and police. But the real casualty may be happening outside the battle zones in habitats of the common man and none is talking about that.

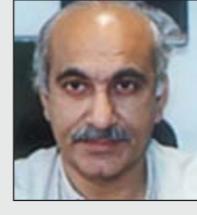
Speculations are on that the recent attacks are due to the Maoist strategy to push the government to the negotiating table. The Deuba government has responded to this by saying that no amount of violence is going to force the government to start negotiating. It has said that the recent attacks have in fact strengthened their resolve and they shall not talk till the Maoists shun the armed path.

The negotiations have been difficult because the Maoists have demanded an end to monarchy and cutting off all contacts with various powers including India. The government isn't even ready to discuss such pre-conditions.

The international dimension of the problem has also clouded the situation. Many critics within Nepal accuse India of providing covert support to the insurgents. On the other hand, India has officially given support to the Nepal government both hard and software and is deeply involved with the economy and politics there. Since Nepal is a proxy battleground for India and Pakistan, the shadow of ISI has also been seen. Another nearly invisible but a possible player is China whose stake in the buffer state between India and itself is a reality that could be influencing what goes within. All this of course translates into blood letting and battering of the economy and critical services which have all been disrupted. Ultimately, those who have the least say in the matter -- the common man -- are the ones who suffer most though it's in their name that the battles are being fought.

The insurgency or the problems associated with it will not disappear tomorrow. But the government and the Maoists should be able to bring together an element of calm in the situation when communist party has a legitimate place in the politics of Nepal. One can't say that the insurgency will not explode into a war beyond anyone's control. It's already time to defuse this bomb in the making.

Pollstars



M.J. AKBAR

that the rest of us do not understand? The results of the elections in Uttar Pradesh will be announced at the end of this week. The results of the exit polls have begun to come in.

In a state like Punjab, it does not matter what the exit polls say. The results of Punjab have been known for a couple of years at least. Support for the Akalis weakened among the Sikhs and collapsed among the Hindus even before the last general elections, and they would not have got the seats they did two and a half years ago were it not for the cushion

is that it would also be the sixth poorest country in the world, on par with Chad.

Governments of large states now consciously try to structure a stage-wise election in such a way that regions in which they are strongest go to the polls first. They expect a bounce from the results of favourable exit polls that will increase the enthusiasm of their support base in regions less inclined towards them. In Uttar Pradesh the BJP and its allies are strongest in the west. Chaudhry Charan Singh's son and heir Ajit Singh was made a Cabinet

list. He is also from Uttar Pradesh, albeit from its eastern side, having lived and worked most of his life in Allahabad. But clearly he is unaware of the law that Indian politics is like physics. If the first exit polls cheered the BJP then they also had an immediate and opposite reaction from the one community that is united in its opposition to the BJP, the Muslims.

A key to the complicated and splintered electoral politics of this teeming state is whether the Muslim vote consolidates behind the Samajwadi Party of Mulayam Singh

the campaign that this strategy was working. Muslims in particular were setting aside their doubts about Mayawati's intention of forming a government with the BJP after the elections, and opting for community sentiment over common sense. This was partly due to a feeling that the BJP had little chance of getting sufficient numbers to make a credible claim for participation in the next government; if the BJP for instance gets around 110 seats then even with Mayawati and Ajit Singh it will barely be able to patch a majority. But a positive first round exit poll will

counting Uttar Pradesh. By the same token they underestimated the Samajwadi performance in UP; not a single poll gave the party the 22 seats that it eventually won. The evidence indicates that the credibility of these polls -- pre-ballot or at exit point -- is uncertain where it really matters, among the voters. They have become part of election entertainment, like speeches or promises. The jury is still out on whether they manage to get anyone elected by creating a hard mood towards a frontrunner. They may have more influence of a negative kind, increasing worry levels among those hostile to any party that has become a frontrunner. The reputation of polls has not been enhanced by the arrival of serious money into the business, both from media companies as well as from political parties. There is mushroom growth of instant polling companies whose expertise is as fragile as their morality. Money has been known to purchase opinions before. To be fair, the reputed polling companies, who do market research for business houses, cannot be accused of underhand practices as they take extra care to be transparent. But this science has simply not reached a level of sophistication where the research can be treated with the confidence with which it is projected.

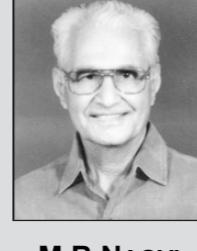
Nothing in any election matches the excitement of the day on which the results emerge. Thank God for that. Which opinion poll, after all, predicted that George Bush and Al Gore would finally slug it out in the Supreme Court of the United States of America? On the other hand, a respected astrologer in Jaipur, Pandit Kedar Sharma did. The next time you want an opinion, check with the stars. They could be more reliable than exit polls.

M.J Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

BYLINE

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Back to the old ways



M B NAQVI

writes from Karachi

ALL the talk now is of the aid America is going to provide or help obtain from others. There is familiar emphasis on common interests and values between Pakistanis and Americans as of yore, especially about democracy. The recent state visit to the US by the President of Pakistan was a great success, or so we are told by official publicists. But the point to ponder is about the meaning or extent of this 'success': whose success it is and who gets what from this visit? Also relevant is the query about the future: how will the political and economic life of the country fare after this renewal of the old American connection? Let's not forget there was a definite disconnect between the US and Pakistan's policies. The highest expression of that falling out was seen on March 25, 2001 when US President Bill Clinton visited Pakistan for just over four hours but how? The way he snubbed the CE and his government was notable; but the lesson he read to the Pakistanis in his televised address from PTV was unexceptionable from a democratic viewpoint. From that point to the recent visit of the same Gen. Pervez Musharraf is instructive.

Is all the past dead and buried? It would be odd if these were so. After all, this renewal of closer ties was the result of what was really an ultimatum from the most powerful government. That Musharraf's decision to give in was right -- because the course of action by

Pakistan, the bone of contention, were inherently unwise and wrong -- is the redeeming feature of Islamabad's current policies. But who can find it amazing that the Americans are still wary and are taking precautions in dealing with a regime that is the handiwork of the same generals who were the initiators of all that the several American governments have disliked.

This caution is writ large over what the packages of aid and cooperation that the Bush Administration is supposed to have given. Indeed it looks as if that the quantum of aid

minister last year in order to ensure that his Jat followers, famous for their ability to deliver whole villages by the simple expedience of preventing others from voting at all, supported the BJP-led alliance in the state. (Indian politics is like physics: every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Ajj Singh

entered the BJP camp and out went their former Jat ally, Om Prakash Chautala. Chautala put up candidates in west UP, not to win but to sabotage the BJP. To what effect, the exit polls did not quite indicate. The bigger question is: when will it be possible to write on electoral politics in our country without stuffing the column with parentheses?

The first exit polls were therefore from west UP, and served their purpose of inducing a smile from a decidedly nervous ruling party. At least one senior leader of the BJP, Dr Murli Manohar Joshi, is a sci-

Yadav or splinters, depending upon candidates, between the SP, the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Congress. If it consolidates then Mulayam Singh will get the edge that can tip him distinctly ahead in a tight race. If it splinters then Mulayam Singh could lose some fifteen to twenty seats by a narrow margin to the BSP or the Congress. (The BJP is sensible enough to have given up any hope of getting a Muslim elected on its ticket; it has named only one Muslim candidate.) The BSP leader, Mayawati, opted for a clever strategy to enhance her prospects. She took her own Dalit base for granted and distributed ticket liberally among Muslims and upper castes, calculating that these individuals would be able to add their community support to her captive vote and thereby enhance their chances of winning a particular seat. There were indications during

instigate a rethink among Muslims. They are more likely to rally around Mulayam Singh Yadav in the second and third stage of the elections to stop the BJP.

But the level at which the swing moves is not going to be very high. Polls and opinion polls can be depended upon to get, more or less, a particular trend right, but there is hardly an election in which they have not made a thorough mess of the detail. But then any intelligent observer with a gift of the tongue and enough time to spend at tea stalls and bus stops can get the trend broadly right. If clients pay serious money to psephologists then it is to find out the detail. In the last general elections some of the more enthusiastic pollsters had given the BJP thirty to forty seats more than it got, partly because they had more than ten fingers when

the 1950s coterie that cornered power, comprising Ghulam Mohammad, Iskandar Mirza, Ch. Mohammed Ali, Gurmani and Ayub Khan, secretly negotiated American support and aid for all they were doing. Later, the US role in the coup d'état of Oct 1958 is now easy to be traced; at all events it was the full US backing and underwriting of Gen. Ayub Khan's dictatorship that made it last over a decade. Washington would have sustained Gen. Yahya Khan also if only he had not been so politically foolish.

The Americans began by happily upholding Z. A. Bhutto's populism, and would have gone on, if only he had not disobeyed them. They chose to make him a 'horrible example'. Zia, who never deviated from the CIA line, could last over a decade again. His legacy may be excoriated today but, in his heyday, all establishmentarians were exceedingly happy and Islamic withal. In the succeeding 13 years of manipulated democracy American ambassador was regularly treated as the Viceroy by both Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto. Many Pakistanis talked of living under a condominium of the US, multilateral agencies and Pakistan Army Chief. Pakistan stands at the starting point of a new long march under American leadership. The government run by Gen. Musharraf is one of the better things to have happened to the White House. But what about the common Pakistani? We ordinary folks can only hope that President Bush's pledge to stabilise Musharraf Presidency -- and not Pakistan -- and his demanding and getting the assurances that Musharraf will stay on to see his reforms through is not a replay of Dulles' determination of giving permanence to Ayub Khan's rule.

more productive. No foreign power can be expected to provide Pakistanis' security. Nor can they be expected to ensure economic development with a humane face, all the current talk about poverty reduction notwithstanding. Self-reliance is unavoidable if we aim at democratic freedoms, including jobs for all, at least in theory as a start. In basic policies, the central purpose and the preferred means have to be the people of Pakistan.

A return to democracy -- without any adjective at all -- is only a preliminary step. The purpose,

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What cannot be welcomed is the kind of role the US played in the past, now that the friendship with it has been renewed. The US has to answer for many evil things and trends that were started as a result of that connection. This is no place to go into all the history. But Pakistanis would be foolish to forget how

the "lessons of September 11," by aligning itself 100 per cent with Israel, and promising to mete out more punishment to Iraq.

The other day the writer was joined upon hearing a respected commentator say that the Bush administration's nightmare scenario is that of the terrorists detonating some nuclear device on American soil. Depending on where it is, one shudders to think how many Muslim and non-Muslim Americans live that will claim, for we have learnt that the terrorists do not distinguish between Americans. Even if Muslims did survive such a blast (God forbid), it is unlikely that they would survive the popular wrath in its aftermath. It appears that nations and individuals alike reap the rewards of their deeds. Israel is reaping the bitter fruits of uprooting the Palestinians from their homes in 1948. India is paying a heavy price for capturing Kashmir by force around the same time. America is the only nation to have dropped nuclear bombs on human beings (of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) in 1945. A little humility and contrition is in order here. The best place to start is by being fair, in the Middle East and elsewhere.

PLAIN WORDS

The government run by Gen. Musharraf is one of the better things to have happened to the White House. But what about the common Pakistani? We ordinary folks can only hope that President Bush's pledge to stabilise Musharraf Presidency -- and not Pakistan -- and his demanding and getting the assurances that Musharraf will stay on to see his reforms through is not a replay of Dulles' determination of giving permanence to Ayub Khan's rule... The US has to assure Pakistanis that it will not go on always foisting dictators on them. Pakistanis need friends; they have had too many masters.

was further pruned as a result of the new misgivings resulting from the Daniel Pearl's abduction from Karachi. A lot of comment in the press has noted that the wells of American generosity are running low and the quantum of aid falls short of earlier expectations. Much of this is a regrettable manifestation of the dependency syndrome that has come to shape the thinking of the establishment types in this country: they judge the success of a ruler only in terms of how much aid he or she can manage to bring -- no matter if the aid adds to the debt services burden with its higher rates of interest. It does not occur to them that Pakistan, as a self-respecting nation of 144 million, should act in accordance with a democratic philosophy of its own in both external affairs and domestic matters, including the management of the economy. Would public policies in Pakistan never be conducted with

nate. The net result of the violent Kashmir insurgency is the tragic deaths of 70,000 young Muslim men, with India showing few signs of fatigue. Kashmir Valley is not an inch closer to Azadi -- whatever that implies -- and no end to oppression and suppression of Kashmiris is in sight.

Whoever may have actually started the violence in Kashmir, Pakistani generals cannot escape responsibility. Mischief lay in their theories of Pakistan's defence having become wholly invincible with the acquisition of nuclear capability. It allowed the generals to do what they pleased in Kashmir and elsewhere; all who supported the generals and were in their good books felt emboldened. Insurgency in Kashmir could only make sense on the assumption that a protracted period of strife would weaken India's morale. At that stage, Pak Army

apart from an all time preoccupation with being free, should be to reconstruct the economy. Its purpose has to be democratic: to ensure gainful employment to all able-bodied men and women. If jobs for all is too much to achieve in a short, measurable time, let the state accept the legal liability to pay unemployment allowance, no matter if it is small to start with. Politics as well as the economy, including its development planning, have to be participatory and people-centred. The country needs an assurance that it has made a clean break with the bad past.

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Barak. It is hard to imagine that Ariel Sharon (or Benjamin Netanyahu for that matter), who has opposed every peace treaty with the Arabs, will ever make peace with the Palestinians.

The writer's main concern is not Israel, or the US. Like other Americans, Muslim Americans were blindsided by the ferocity of the September 11 terrorist attack. No one, Muslim or non-Muslim, ever thought that human beings could be so evil as to turn planes packed with human beings into missiles, smash them into buildings, bringing the buildings and human beings inside them down. God knows what other evil plot they are hatching now. What Muslims did know was that 90 per cent of the grievances of the Muslims outside the US would be satisfied if the US was seen to be more even-handed in dealing with the Palestinians, and stopped the bombing of, and lifted the economic sanctions against Iraq, that kills thousand of children every month. If the US attempts to force a change in the Iraqi regime, great. The writer is yet to meet a Muslim who supports Saddam Hussein. If the US wishes to engineer a change in the Iranian regime, that is fine too (although isn't it better left to the Iranians?). As with the Taliban, the writer has never been in favour of rule by the clerics. What worries the writer is that while there is absolutely no moral equivalence between September 11 and the above grievances, the Bush administration has decided to taunt

LETTER FROM AMERICA

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Israel to Israel-friendly India, there are no hostile nuclear-capable Muslim nations to challenge it. What's in it for George W. Bush? Reelection. Mindful of what happened to President Bush Sr. after he stood up to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir in 1992, Bush Jr. is not about to make the same mistake. Although 64 per cent of the Muslim Americans voted for George Bush, and 64 per cent of Jewish Americans voted for Al Gore, for political expediency, George Bush has thrown his lot with the Jewish Americans and Israel. Every American President since Harry Truman has been a supporter

of Israel. No one, however, was as blatantly pro-Israel as George W. Bush. Mr. Bush condemns Palestinian suicide bombers, and rightly so. Bush never condemns Israel's targeted assassinations, demolitions of the Palestinian houses, and killing of Palestinian children by

cent, and has remained there. The feeling in the Republican camp is that as long as Bush keeps on fighting terrorists on different turfs, his popularity will remain sky high. The problem is that America's resources are not inexhaustible. If Bush keeps on spending billions of dollars on military missions abroad, sooner or later it will drain the treasury and intensify the already deepening recession. The danger for Bush Jr. is the same as it was for his father. America votes its pocket books. Within a year of Bush Sr.'s victory in the Gulf War with accompanying 90 per cent approval rating, the economy soured and Bush Sr. was voted out of office! The same fate may await Bush Jr.

In his February 3 article in The New York Times, Yasir Arafat agreed to sign a peace agreement with Israel if only Israel would withdraw to the pre-June 1967 boundary. As a reward, Sharon, who met