DHAKA TUESDAY MAY 21, 2002

Creeping control on Freedom of choice

BNP govt. annuls what BNP govt. launched

ONTINUED high rate of crime, slow-down in our economy, slide in exports, trade unions sucking the life out of public sector bodies -- as if the government does not have enough on its hands. It now it wants to become our moral guide. It wants to tell us what is good for us and what is not, what we should see and what we should not, as if we are children and have no judgement of our own. When the world is moving towards wider freedom, more openness and greater international interactions between peoples, we are moving towards greater censorship. First, an issue of the Far Eastern Economic Review, then the Cannes festival honoured film Matir Moina and now eight pay cable TV channels and a number of free ones have been banned because the government wants to protect our religious and cultural values. The irony is that it was the last BNP government that opened up the cable TV channels and received grateful thanks from the nation for literally revolutionising TV viewing in Bangladesh.

Cable TV is not free access TV as is the case with BTV and ETV. Cable TV programmes are supplied only to paid subscribers who, out of their own free will, decide to take a cable connection or not. So if any citizen or group should feel that their religious and cultural values are being undermined by cable TV programmes then they are free NOT to subscribe to cable TV and NOT watch such programmes. They have no right to impose their views on millions of others who do not see such a threat to our religious and cultural values from HBO. Star Movies. MGM and similar channels.

We find the information ministry's banning move incomprehensible because there was no public sentiment expressed against the cable TV programmes. Its claim to be acting in response to public demand is imaginary. The more likely reason is that the government is succumbing to creeping anti-freedom pressures from its alliance partners. Could this be the beginning of other bans in the offing? The information minister has practically hinted so, by saying "more channel banning could come if people want." Since he seem to have the monopoly of knowing what people want, we will not be surprised if we see similar moves in the near future. We seem to be determined to make ourselves more and more unattractive to foreign investors. On the one hand we complain of others conspiring to spoil our international image and yet we ourselves take steps that does the same, in fact more effectively.

We strongly protest the anti-freedom, anti-choice and antidemocracy move of banning the cable TV channels. We urge the government to withdraw this regressive decision. There are other methods that can sift out the bad movies and TV programmes from the good ones. Government should examine those possibilities instead of taking the 'banning' path.

(PS: This editoral was written prior to the government reversal of its decision. We are heartened by the fact that good sense has prevailed.)

East Timor is born amidst global cheering

Poor, small but a doughty nation

E welcome the birth of East Timor as the youngest member of the United Nation and new country on the face of the globe. This birth has come through a passage of blood but ultimately global concern and resolution of the people have endured and East Timor is a reality. We congratulate and wish the best to them.

Its history is mixed in the memories and actions of colonial and post-colonial histories. The entire area was colonized by Portugal after whose departure Indonesia came in and filled that gap. This change of masters was resented by the East Timorese and a long drawn out struggle began which ultimately caught international attention. And after that came support which paved the way for this independent identity to emerge.

In a way the East Timorese are lucky because their struggle began at a time when Indonesia was no longer the blue eyed boy of the western world. Once upon a time, the most horrendous possible butchery committed by the Indonesia army was cheered and condoned by the same western powers in the name of containing communism. For many years, Suharto was allowed to do whatever he wanted and as a trusted ally of the West was a hero. With a change in history and choice of villains, heroes changed and Indonesia was demonized effectively and the push for East Timor's independence was globalised. Finally, the independence referendum was held and despite terror tactics by Indonesian gangs the fight for independence was won.

But the new country is also a poor one and dependent on a high level of foreign aid. This scenario will continue because East Timor has mercifully gathered international attention of the right sort. Plus there is a large oil deposit that will do much to improve its vital signs. But given its size and strategic debts, it might find negotiations more difficult than expected.

Yet the key player will be Indonesia, the neighbour it fought in the final run up to freedom. Facts show that Xanana Gusman, its first president values Indonesian friendship greatly, even risking western ire to sustain it. Indonesia is its natural ally and potentially its best one if matters can be sorted out and the future becomes a joint venture for all.

Welcome, East Timor to the family of nations.

Is "Islam is in danger" slogan back in circulation?



AFSAN CHOWDHURY

ATIR Moina's certificate. almost delivered to the filmmaker Tareq Masud has been withdrawn or withheld on the ground that it will hurt "religious feelings". Whose religion and whose feelings are we talking about anyway?

But that's the official bottomline.

whether we like it or not. For a film like Matir Moina, produced for mass-market consumption by a filmmaker like Tareg Masud who is always aware of what the market wants and willing to adjust accordingly, the argument of Censor Board doesn't hold. Holds even less for those who have already seen the film, which is very sensitively made. This is beginning to look like plain and simple censorship of the earlier variety which one thought had died. The film has been viewed at Cannes, appreciated and distributed nationally. The government has walked into an image trap it wanted to avoid at a

IN 1970, when Bangladesh was launching its final phase of the autonomy movement, a number of books were banned by the then Pakistan government on such grounds. This incensed the intellectuals and readers to such a degree that they became part of the active political movement. Given that BNP isn't doing too well governingwise, one wonders what motivates them to take exactly those steps, which makes them controversial and unpopular? It's a mysterious political party.

" ISLAM is in danger "

PRAFUL BIDWAI

months

writes from New Delhi

This was the great catch phrase excuse to do anything to stamp down cultural opposition in pre 1971 Pakistan. It was so overused that it became a cliché and then a joke. "Islam khatra me hai" was such a bad policy that it lost all

T is a fateful, frightful

coincidence that an India-

Pakistan conflict should seem

imminent on the fourth anniversary of their nuclear tests. India has

cranked up its military machine.

already on high alert for four

A "limited" strike across the Line

of Control still cannot be ruled out.

Nor can harsh diplomatic mea-

sures. The likelihood of a military

conflict has greatly increased after

Jammu's ghastly May 14 terrorist

The visits of US officials Richard

Armitage and Christina Rocca only

highlight that grave danger. The

Islamabad's refusal to take "action"

them unconnected with the Decem-

Pakistan may be dishonest in

claiming it cannot stop militants

crossing the LoC, given the terrain.

But India too has practised brink-

manship and sent contradictory

signals. Is its bottom-line "action"

against the 20, or an end to border-

A "limited" strike is unlikely to

bend Pakistan to India's will--

except through mediation by the

ber 13 Parliament attack

crossing?

danger has certainly not passed.

moral value, denigrated Islam itself and served no purpose except to unite its foes. Worse, competence was replaced by manipulation and when the time came for the bureaucracy and politicians to act, they tried to take the easy way out. But force-- be it banning or killing-doesn't work when the people no longer support the cause.

Is this on because the same officers and clerks are serving the various governments and the mindset hasn't changed along with a small band of politicians who are calling the shots? This is Dhaka's latest buzz.

"You will be able to accelerate the programmes?"

"Family Planning is against Islam. As long as I am there no project will move easily.

IT'S a question of not tolerating dissent and we have set up a long tradition of that. What happens today are rooted in events far back. Pakistan was an intolerant state. India has a big question mark hanging after the Gujarat riots and Bangladesh is no different as much as its history displays.

WHEN Awami League came to power in 1971, it rode on the shoul-

the puia mark on his forehead. Almost without warning a group of men jumped on him and started to beat him. He was a Hindu. It was enouah

There are Gujarati rioters every-

WILL AL tolerate any criticism of Sk. Mujib during their rule? Is there a law against saying anything against Bangabandhu? Can one say that the Father of the Nation did many things wrong?

And BNP completely banishes. vanishes and invisiblises Sk. Mujib from history as if it was a government file that disappear regularly. are reading something guite different in the decision. They are reading a fear not of AL by the BNP, but of Jammat-e-Islami deserting BNP and these decisions are seen as political incentives being made to them. And with 8 TV channels getting closed as a move to protect the "national culture", we are moving dangerously close to being silly and stepping 30 years back. Censorship in an electronic media simply isn't possible. The same bureaucrats who advised the Information Minister may go to Iran and see what happens with such attempts. Instead of listening to

party cadres, they could do well to

A "Matir Moina" movement, which

will certainly go international, is

already on. E-mails are already

clogging our machines. But more

importantly, it's being nationally

released in France as a major film

and will probably be seen all over

Europe as a film that was banned in

Bangladesh. And with friends like

this BNP doesn't need enemies to

WE haven't been very successful in

improving law and order. Murders

and mayhem is so common that we

are getting used to it. Titas Gas

meter reading as a lucrative eco-

nomic activity is regularly providing

entertainment. Even governments

are blaming their own trade unions

for hassles now. Under such cir-

cumstances, the attempt to "pre-

serve national culture and har-

mony" sounds as false as it always

has. It begins from the idea that the

government has the right to decide

that its own benefit is that of all

others. An idea that nobody buys

MARTIN was from Argentina and I

met him in the worst days of

Pinochet. He was a writer who kept

on scribbling and publishing even

when anything critical was consid-

show it as a pro-madrassah politi-

cal party.

"So how can you survive? What do you write?"

"All our freedoms have been taken away. We have no space to say anything democratic and no freedom except to have sex in our bedroom. That's why I write pornography. It's the only way to express ourselves, our time, our

sense of suffocation. We have only

that freedom left." He gave me a cassette of Argentine folk music that I held on for long till it was lost in another of our regular moves from one rented place to another

Is pornography the only substitute for democracy or replacement for autocracy? And Pinochet had to face the Court one day. My friend writes on

MANY people still ask about

Taslima Nasreen, the feminist writer. I feel that she was created by three forces, the Indian BJP, the Bangladeshi BNP and the European media eager for a feminist stereotype in Muslim South Asia. Many have observed that if BNP hadn't done so badly in the Municipal polls before the Taslima affair, they wouldn't have tried to create an "Islam is in danger" bogev like her. Yet BNP gained little from it and Bangladesh gained a bad image. Unfortunately, with the international environment far less tolerant today about the dynamics of 4-Party Alliance politics, preventing Matir Moina from being publicly shown may create another threat. "Lalsalu", by Tanvir Mokammel, a filmization of a legendary classic, has already met with resistance from retrograde social forces and now Matir Moina is facing that too. It seems these are troubling times for culture that is not organised by the state or the parties in

SHALL we end up as a place where the only safe place to say or practice freedom is where the premises belong to a foreign embassy and the foreign envoy with the might of the West will be one person who shall be able to speak without the intolerant censor's long hand reaching out to still the voice?

Afsan Chowdhury is a Senior Assistant Editor of

dropped on Mumbai or Karachi will

kill 800,000-plus people, flatten

most buildings, destroy communi-

cations, and contaminate vast

swathes of land with radioactive

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

It seems these are troubling times for culture that is not organised by the state or the parties in power... Shall we end up as a place where the only safe place to say or practice freedom is where the premises belong to a foreign embassy and the foreign envoy with the might of the West will be one person who shall be able to speak without the intolerant censor's long hand reaching out to still the voice?

PRESIDENT Ziaur Rahman is recognised for many things but few remember to mention his role in having initiated the Liberation War History Documents Project. Complaints and praise are both given without reading the volumes and so a major task is undervalued. Face the fact, it was Zia the freedom fighter who did it. Awami League in its two innings never did manage to do anything like this. This is not to praise Zia but a fact of history.

worked in that project after finishing my university in 1978. Every Project is under a Section Officer (SO) and our SO did his best to make life difficult. In fact the then Ministry of Information staff regularly held up files and documents as part of a long tradition. Some even thought this would please the bosses. When Sukumar Biswas, a top-notch researcher on 1971 was hired as a part time worker, a MOI official asked. "Why are you hiring a Hindu? Couldn't you find a Muslim? "1971 was thought by some as an AL war. Since AL had always projected the 1971 war as a party activity rather than a national war this impression was inevitable.

This SO was one day transferred to the Family Planning Ministry. I happily congratulated him.

"Yes, now I will be able to do

Four years after Pokharan

"Limited" strikes will probably

Highlighting this deadly prospect

lead to open warfare which could

escalate into a nuclear catastrophe.

is a sensational (London) Sunday

Times report. This says the Paki-

stani army mobilised its nuclear

1999 Kargil war without the knowl-

Citing senior White House

edge of Prime Minister Sharif

ders of democracy and practised organised autocracy. The enemy of Awami League was considered the enemy of the people. And when dissent reached a high level and state management became very difficult, it imposed one-party rule--BKSAL, the most significant refer-

ence point of political intolerance.

It was during this period that most people were heard to praise AL and its leader. I don't know whether they liked having oneparty rule or not but except for two AL MPs-- Barrister Moinul Hussain and Gen. MAG Osmany, the army chief during the liberation war--no one protested. The pro-Soviets supported this most. All army chiefs joined including Gen. Zia. Everyone joined in processions.

The mind belongs to the puppet

I have two memories.

It was just after BKSAL had been declared. I was in a teacher's room in the Dhaka University. Two students passed by. Their voice was

"We shall sew the lips of any-

body who talks against BAKSAL." The other example was near the

Indian Embassy after the Babri Mosque incident. An elderly Hindu had come for his visa. He was a religious man and wore the rudrakkho mala with his dhuti and

* Nuclear weapons were mobilised

for actual use during a large-scale

conflict, involving 40,000 Indian

troops, numerous air-strikes and

naval manoeuvres. The chances of

army's nuclear preparations. He

was told that terrible truth by Mr Bill

* Pakistan's elected Prime Minis-

was totally unaware of his

use are highest in war.

Clinton in Washington.

change textbooks in reference to 1971. As if, if the government doesn't say it, nobody will know the facts. It's not just the present but even the past is not to be tolerated. Tareg Masud had problems with "Muktir Gan" till he made some

In one of the most pathetic

attempts at media manipulation

and self-delusion, they don't take

his name in the mass media and

adjustments, too. The movie is basically a one sided nationalist narrative which stokes the simplistic fires in viewers. As a source of information it's flawed and glorifies a political group rather than the people but he had a right to present what he did." His next film "Muktir Katha" though less seen is more

His "Matir Moina" may be flawed for many reasons but saying that it will not be shown because it hurts religious feelings is hogwash. This intolerance for what may be construed as criticism of the madrassah based education system is unacceptable because it's illegal. This system is an official and formal part of public education, which is open to any public debate and critique. It seems seminaries will be kept above criticism to calm political insecurity. So madrassah protection is a priority now.

The powers that be simply haven't figured it out that people

now anymore.

RSS pressure. The tests fulfilled not a nationalconsensual project, but a unique Hindutva obsession. No party other than the BJP has demanded India's calculations could start a nuclear full-scale nuclearisation--right since

> South Asia's 1.3 billion-plus people are paying for the historic stupidity of Vajpayee, Sharif & Co. We could all turn into particles of

poisons for thousands of years. There is no military, civil or medical defence against nuclear weapons. There is no cure for the health injury they cause. The costs of nuclear weapons

can be unbearable. The expenditure, of anything like Rs. 60,000 to 100,000 crores, on a small Indian nuclear arsenal will bankrupt the state and cripple the already feeble social sector. This would spell failure of the state.

No lighter will be nuclearisation's political costs: reduced global stature, internationalisation of Kashmir, and subservience to the

The India-Pakistan nuclear balance-sheet is strongly negative. Four years on, both have lost security. Nuclear weapons have become a liability.

Nuclearisation hasn't given India or Pakistan a greater voice in world affairs. Pakistan could soon return to its pre-September 11 "failing state" status once the US is through with its South Asian "anti-terror

India's profile has risen in Washington--despite, not because of, nuclear weapons, and because the Vajpayee government has become America's client-partner. That's no invitation to the world's high table.

something."

the nuclear danger is now!

irresponsible Pakistan's military

leaders are, and how irrational

These disclosures should chill many spines. They highlight how

cold comfort. For it is India's leadership which caioled, taunted and chided Pakistan into crossing the

The India-Pakistan nuclear balance-sheet is strongly negative. Four years on, both have lost security. Nuclear weapons have become a liability. Nuclearisation hasn't given India or Pakistan a greater voice in world affairs. Pakistan could soon return to its pre-September 11 "failing state" status once the US is through with its South Asian "anti-terror war". India's profile has risen in Washington--despite, not because of, nuclear weapons, and because the Vajpayee government has become America's client-partner. That's no invitation to the world's high table.

A "limited" strike on Pakistan adviser Bruce Riedel, it says the US won't reflect wisdom or rationality had "disturbing information" that on New Delhi's part. Rather, it will India and Pakistan "were heading demonstrate India's frustration at for a deadly descent into full-scale conflict, with a danger of nuclear on the list of 20 "terrorists", most of cataclysm".

This gives a hair-raising edge to well-founded fears that Kargil had a serious potential for nuclear escalation. This Column then recorded that India and Pakistan exchanged nuclear threats no fewer than 13 times.

Kargil was the world's biggestever conflict between two nuclear veapons-states Although Mr Riedel is silent on

this, it is likely that India too drew up plans to use nuclear weapons. The Sunday Times discloses that:

* The army fully controls Pakistan's nuclear activities--to the point of blocking information from civilian leaders. Earlier, Ms Benazir Bhutto had to beg the CIA to brief her on Islamabad's nuclear capability. Her own army denied her that-as Prime Minister!

When reminded by Mr Clinton of how close the US and the USSR came to nuclear war in 1962, an "exhausted" Mr Sharif recognised the "catastrophic" danger, and "said he was against [the preparations], but worried for his life back in Paki-

A troops pullback followed-much to Gen Pervez Musharraf's annovance. Then came the coup, thanks to the Sharif-Musharraf

nuclear threshold. Mr Sharif first balked at the

prospect of testing. He decided on the blasts only after Mr L.K. Advani made his May 18 Kashmir speech, warning Pakistan that the "geopolitical situation" had changed. In nuclear war, it doesn't take two

to tango. A single move can produce catastrophic consequences. Wreaking nuclear devastation upon the adversary after he has bombed you can only be an act of revenge. not of regaining security. Indian leaders deceived them-

selves that nuclear weapons would miraculously instill sobriety into khaki brains. They committed a colossal blunder in capitulating to

radioactive dust The danger is not imaginary. The

CIA's "Global Threat-2015" report says the risk of nuclear war is highest in South Asia and will remain "serious". Director George Tenet testified: "If India were to conduct large-scale offensive operations into Pakistani Kashmir, Pakistan might retaliate with strikes ... in the belief that its nuclear deterrent would limit the scope of an Indian nuclear counter-attack".

One of India's few genuine strategic experts, Gen V.R. Raghavan, concurs. He says a limited India-Pakistan conflict is likely to escalate to the nuclear level

A first-generation nuclear bomb

EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Murky millionaire

Does the government take the electorate and general members of the public as fools? I am simply agitated with the news published in your daily on the subject which refers to a Minister of the ruling party protecting Mr. Mahbub who has gone to the extent of suggesting that no drastic action be taken

against him. Did the government know about Mahbub's clandestine and corrupt practices when he was reinstated? Why did the government fail to take any action after he was arrested from the Zia International Airport? At a time when the government is considering replacement of the Home Minister on grounds of remarks made by him as having

embarrassed the government, is the mighty Mahbub causing no embarrassment to the government? At a time when in the name of curbing terrorism the law enforcing agencies are picking up individuals at random without any warrant of arrests what seems to be so extraordinary that he cannot be hauled up?

Strangely enough if and when the government feels the need to arrest an otherwise peaceful citizen believed to be belonging to a different faith away from its own there is no dearth of action. In no time the law-enforcing agencies pound upon the respective individual.

Day by day we are loosing our faith in this government. Our problem is also of yet another dimension, after this who? I hope and pray that a "drastic" change takes place in our political leadership and save us from our agonies which we had been undergoing for decades

S. Chowdhury

There they go again...

The American Judge Potter Stewart once wrote, "Censorship reflects a society's lack of confidence in itself." Judging by the recent actions of the Bangladeshi government, the last six months marked a supremely unconfident time in its history.

First, the government rashly banned the "Cocoon of Terror" issue of the FEER. As columnist Afsan Chowdhury waggishly noted, "We, the national media, criticise the government and say everything

against them but they end up banning the FEER for a story that has nothing original in it."

Then came the action against ETV. Now the censor board has refused a certificate to Tareq Masud's new film "Matir Moina".

The timing of this ham-handed

attempt at censorship could not have been worse for the government. The ban was announced two days before the film was due to open the prestigious Director's Fortnight at the Cannes Film Festival. Now the government will have to face the firestorm of bad publicity that will follow this action. In the end, after receiving the inevitable protest letters and condemnation from freespeech groups, the powers-that-be will have to retreat and grant the certificate. The result will be another

public relations disaster for a government that already risks becoming an international pariah due to global negative publicity about attacks against Hindu community, inclusion of two Jamaat members in their cabinet and the infamous FEER cover story.

Why do Bangladeshi governments (both the AL and the BNP) keep doing these things? The list of failed censorship attempts by various governments is endless (Farhad Mazhar's "Ansar Rebellion" article, Badruddin Umar's language movement, etc.). In almost every case, after repeated national and international protests, the government has had to retreat from an announced ban. But none of our politicians seem to learn anything from past fiascos.

Naeem Mohaiemen New York, USA

Your editorial of 16th May says it all. But I just wish to be clarified if Tareq Masud expressed (to BBC Bangla) his suspicion that the picture failed to receive the blessings as it showed scenes of '52 language movement and '69 popular uprisings giving credit to other quarters.

Tareq Masud should have found some way to praise the role of BNP and Shaheed Zia in some popular and democratic movements, even if not relevant to the theme.

JICA protests With reference to the "Unfair Japan

Scholarship selection" (May 14) by Mr A M Kamal. I would like to lodge a strong objection to his comments. The Japanese Government and

JICA have introduced a new ODA scholarship program from this year. The objective of the program is to support Bangladesh Government's effort to human resource development that will, be the basis of the nation building and development in various aspects. Under this program elected candidates will get opportunities for master degree level studies in Japanese Universi-

As the writer mentioned there are four stages for the candidates screening process. In each process, the results had been scrutinised by the Japanese Executing Organisation, Japan International

Co-operation Center (JICA) and approved by the members of the Operating Committee that consists of the officials both from the Government of Bangladesh and the Japanese side. The final selection was done by the members of the Operating Committee and not individually by the Economic Relations Division (ERD). Being a member of the Operating Committee and an interviewer for the final selection, I strongly oppose the comments made by Mr Kamal and clearly declare that there was no intervention from any outsider at all. Takashi Sakamoto

President Representative.

Japan International Corporation Agency (JICA)