

## Further vandalism on dissent

Can the govt. shirk responsibility?

WHAT retired army major MA Mannan has done is merely exercise his democratic right to quit BNP, resign his membership of parliament as a natural corollary and join Dr Badruddoza Chowdhury's newly-launched political platform. Is all this earth-shattering; has he proclaimed the end of the world for BNP; could he possibly do it?

The steps he took were taken by many like him in several democracies around the world. But then what were the reactions of the ruling parties there? For all we know, attempts would be made to play such dramatic defections down with governments in such democracies putting up a brave face as if it was a fly in the face. But hardly ever did they stoop to orchestrated ransacking of the houses and establishments of political detractors. Brave face the ruling alliance here did try to put up for a time, then followed a series of virulent attacks on Dr Badruddoza and MA Mannan. These happened with a blatant criminal flourish bent upon setting a new record in political intolerance.

The price Mannan is having to pay for his alienation from BNP through vendetta exactions by ruling party thugs let loose on him is unheard of, except perhaps in totalitarian states. The latest in the retaliatory strike on him consists in bombing and looting of his beverage companies which left some innocent workers badly hurt. With each passing day the elected government despite being the mandated custodian of law is increasingly appearing in the role of the breaker of law. The way thugs have cut loose in an atmosphere rife with swearing and declaratory statements by top party and JCD leaders vowing stiff resistance to the alternative political initiative, people at home and abroad are likely to wonder whether the government is party or accessory to it. If upholders of the law break it, then what future lies in store for the country? The government must do all in its power to allay the highly negative impression it has created about itself by allowing the retaliatory assaults on the political dissenters.

Clearly, Khaleda Zia needs to draw a line between her role as party chief and that as the chief executive of the country.

## Trade unionism in EPZs

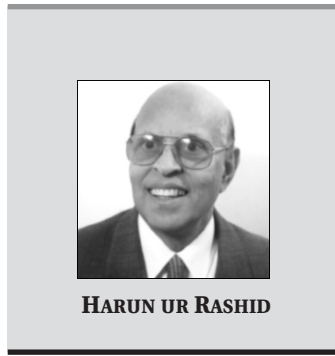
Balanced approach welcomed

THE government's decision to allow 'limited trade union rights' in the export processing zones (EPZs) of the country represents a move forward. For, it has broken the stalemate over an issue that has been lying with the government for the last few years since a threat was issued by a US company to stop importing goods from EPZs unless the latter abided by the ILO convention on labour rights. The government was initially in two minds, especially as the majority of investors in the EPZs were not in favour of granting trade union rights to their workers. They apprehended disruption in the factories if trade unions with political links were allowed. But perhaps the provision not to allow the trade unions to get involved with any political party has allayed their fears.

The government is prepared to give effect to the compromise formula reached on the subject between the stake-holders within a time-frame through an ordinance, if necessary. The agreement has struck two different kinds of balance: one between the welfare of workers and the investors' interests; and, secondly, between the investors' rights and the export interests of the country.

What seems to have clinched the issue is the US authorities' flexibility in not insisting on their earlier stance for wholesale trade unionism in the EPZs. We must also thank the World Bank for mediating the meeting that produced an agreement acceptable to all concerned. Balanced trade unionism can provide a fillip to productivity just as a rabid form of it can cause harm to industrial and service sectors.

# Why did president Putin appoint an outsider as prime minister?



HARUN UR RASHID

RUSSIA'S Presidential election was held on 14 March and by all calculation of political mathematics President Vladimir Putin is re-elected (80 per cent of Russian people support him for bringing stability and prosperity to their country after the turbulence of the Yeltsin era of the 90s).

As the President wants to be back immediately in business, he does not want to waste time to form the new government after the election. Furthermore, before the election he wanted his people to know who would be their Prime Minister.

President Putin is known to be a quiet and contemplative person and his past intelligence background with former KGB has given him a secretive nature of personality and as a result his motives are not easily understood or predicted by his close associates. He is physically a small man by Russian standard and does not say much but is quite quick in making decisions, quietly and firmly.

After Putin became President, he gradually increased his firm grip on power and was determined to restore credibility of the authority of state. Russian Federation is the largest country in the world (nearly twice the size of the US) and comprises of twenty-one republics. It extends from the Baltic Sea in the west to the Pacific Ocean in the east, a distance of 10,000 kilometres. It shares borders with twelve countries.

Being a vast country, since the

time of Tsars, it always had a highly centralised executive power and within four years of his Presidency, Putin has restored it. Putin believes that a diffusion of power in Russia may end up with anarchy that prevailed during the Yeltsin years. He reportedly believes in transforming his country to restore the old glory of the Soviet Union and is in favour of more aggressive interventions in state affairs.

The election raised no excitement among Russian people

prizes to anyone who could predict correctly of President Putin's choice of Prime Minister. The main suggestions swirled around two persons: Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov and Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin.

Putin, although different in his personality from that of Yeltsin, played the same game of surprise on his colleagues and people by nominating for a six-day interval, an 'outsider' Mikhail Fradkov (53) as Prime Minister of Russia. Putin

experience in the present job as an envoy to the EU will be immensely useful to cementing Russia's relations with the EU in the coming years. It is speculated that Russia and EU will cooperate more closely in the years ahead and one day Russia may even become a member of the European Confederation. Then Europe could be a formidable entity, a counter-point to America, in global affairs.

Furthermore, America's unilateralist policy has marginal-

favour to one of the group's candidate as Prime Minister.

Third, Fradkov was the head of the tax police and fought tax evasion and corruption in Russia. This appointment gives a signal that corruption including tax evasion in corporate Russia will not be tolerated and Russia's rich individuals who had a comfortable time during Yeltsin's period will be held accountable. Already Putin put behind bars a few corporate personnel for alleged fraud or tax

In the above context, Fradkov with his past background as head of the tax police is ideally suited to fight against corporate fraud and corruption. In that way he will be able to trim power of Russian oligarchs (a group of people who overnight became billionaires by acquiring in the 1990s state companies for a song). Fradkov fits in with this policy.

Fourth, Fradkov is known to have a moderate and liberal view on diversification of economy and will be an acceptable figure for investors. Russia under Putin's rule has boosted remarkably its economic strength. Russia desperately needs foreign investors to exploit its vast natural resources including oil and gas. (One of the reasons why Russia is not ratifying the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on environment). Fradkov, with no particular political ideology, is basically a technocrat and will play a quiet "second fiddle" to an increasingly powerful President.

Conclusion: Russia under the Presidency of Vladimir Putin's second term is likely to be more assertive both in domestic and global affairs. Domestically, it will ensure that the Kremlin is the boss and oligarchs duly acknowledge it. Globally, in post-September 11 world, Russia is likely to be distancing itself from America and will map out its own geographic setting and strength in the context of global and regional stability. It wants to have the ability to curb increasing "imperial power" of the US.

## BOTTOM LINE

Russia under the Presidency of Vladimir Putin's second term is likely to be more assertive both in domestic and global affairs. Domestically, it will ensure that the Kremlin is the boss and oligarchs duly acknowledge it. Globally, in post-September 11 world, Russia is likely to be distancing itself from America and will map out its own geographic setting and strength in the context of global and regional stability. It wants to have the ability to curb increasing "imperial power" of the US.

because every one knew its outcome. Leading Russian opposition figures of both left and right political persuasions decided not to contest the Presidential election after a huge pro-Putin majority in the parliamentary election. Many had criticised the result of the parliamentary election as being unfair because media was allegedly closed to air the views of opposition leaders before the election.

Political observers believed that President Putin had to provide some political surprises so as to get Russian people energised prior to the Presidential election. On 24 February, he suddenly dismissed the Prime Minister Kasyanov (Kasyanov belonged to Yeltsin's team) and the entire cabinet. Although such event had occurred during the rule of former Russian maverick President Boris Yeltsin who loved dismissing every now and then Prime Ministers and cabinets, people in Russia did not expect it from Putin.

Moscow radio station reportedly ran a competition -- offering

said on 1st March: "The decision was not easy. I needed some one who was highly professional, honest and experienced in various branches of government." Fradkov has been working as a Russian envoy to the European Union (EU), considered a low-profile job.

Moscow Times, however, criticised the appointment saying that instead of appointing a credible successor, Putin unveiled a 100 per cent compromise figure, convenient and controllable who did not represent any threat to the President and who could be easily dismissed.

Why did Putin select Fradkov? There are several reasons but four in particular deserve mention.

First, he wanted a very loyal bureaucrat as Prime Minister. Under Russia's constitution, the function of Prime Minister is primarily managerial, whose principal task is to follow the "word of Kremlin". Fradkov has always been a very hard working and experienced administrator. His

ised Russia's influence globally, even in its backyard (Central Asian Republics). Putin appears to be uncomfortable at America's military presence in the Caucasus region and has been gradually increasing Russia's hold in areas of its sphere of influence. For example, Russia has not withdrawn its bases from Georgia, earlier promised and established a base in Kirghizstan, almost near an American base.

Second, domestic politics played a significant part in the selection of Prime Minister. There are at present two groups that reportedly dominate in the Kremlin. One is the Petersburg group and the other, Yeltsin-era officials. Putin comes of Petersburg and some officials working with him in Petersburg followed him to the Kremlin. Putin wanted to demonstrate to both groups that he wanted a new person who did not belong to either of the groups, thereby giving them a strong message of the favour of his new future administration. Both groups now cannot accuse Putin of showing his

evasion (for example, former chairman of YUKUS, one of the world's largest non-state oil companies, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Russia's richest man, has been in jail).

Observers believe that Putin has made an example of Khodorkovsky to the business tycoons in Russia indicating bluntly that they would meet the same fate if they would evade tax or involve in corporate fraud. After the arrest of Khodorkovsky, Russia's prosecutor office reportedly delivered a message to the business community: "Let those who are still at liberty think hard about what they are doing". Observers however believe that Kremlin's wrath fell on Khodorkovsky because he had eyes on the Presidency in 2008 and funded a few opposition political parties in Russia. It is believed that after the arrest of YUKUS chief, business tycoons are now paying homage to the Kremlin as there is a saying in Russia: "Never say that you will never go to jail or end up begging on the streets."

The post-September 11 world has been creating new prisms through which Russia views international relations. Economic strength of Russia will be a major factor in building its strategic policies and President Putin needs a Prime Minister who will be a loyal and good manager with an exposure to EU and Fradkov appears perfectly to suit the bill.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former [Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.](#)

# Cricket -- a catalyst in improving the South Asian political climate!



ZAGIUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

WHEN India and Pakistan were engaged in a nail-biting finish in their first one-day cricket encounter in Karachi, the anti-Indian sentiment was largely absent among the over-capacity packed stadium crowd and commentators described the mood as unusually friendly for the guest side. Karachi is a city known for Mohajirs (immigrants coming from India), who are generally anti-Indian in their attitude as much as those who migrated to India from Pakistan perceived as anti-Pakistan. But the behaviour of the crowd was remarkably positive as many with Pakistani flags and green-coloured T-shirts clapped and applauded the Indians when they played the commendable performance. Mercurial Indian fielder Mohammad Kaif (who is now seen as the best fielder in the world after just-retired South Africa's great (Jhony Rhodes) turned the game in their favour by a splendid catch with incredible speed and accuracy at a critical time of the match. The home crowd knew the significance of this catch but did not hesitate to extend ovation to the fielder for the marvellous feat. All these are indicative of a qualitative change in the hitherto hostile attitude between the two arch rivals which has not only vitiated their bilateral ties but contributed adversely to the over-

suspense and thrill of unbelievable proportion. The love for the game is now a binding factor for the countries of the area whose ties are often marred and bedevilled by various bilateral issues -- not between two major neighbours India and Pakistan alone but involving others as well.

When present Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was an opposition leader after a stint as external affairs minister many years ago, he took credit in Parliament by claiming that India-Pakistan cricket series in both the

peace-loving international community.

As the contending parties rolled back from near-war situation, the overall ambience improved but not to the extent of being enmity-free to holding the Seven-nation south Asian summit. Anyway, summits did take place in Nepal and of late in Islamabad only after the bottle-necks were cleared through painstaking process. The 12th and last SAARC summit in Pakistan was possible only after a degree of improvement in the New Delhi-Islamabad ties. But what was no

boundaries and only a few lag behind in extending kudos to the deserving regardless of their national identities. The Karachi match -- first of the scheduled matches between India and Pakistan in the latter's soil after 15 years was no exception. This is something noteworthy and should come as greatly positive for the South Asians. We in Bangladesh not being directly a party in the series are also in great cricket mood surrounding the two high class teams. And this is the general expectation from people of the region.

At the moment none is talking about tensions and belligerence along their borders or clashes in the international conferences over "Kashmir". Those problems have not evaporated but have taken a back seat. Now the talks centre around Sachin Tendulkar, Sourav Ganguly, Zaheer Khan and others on one side and Inzamam, Shaoh Akhtar or Yusuf Youhana on the other. Not millions but crores in the region and elsewhere are enjoying the matches. The series has come at a right time in the sense that the SAARC needed a further boost following a successful summit in Pakistan. It will be, of course, a height of folly to expect that such sporting extravaganza in the true sense will resolve the political problems in the region and more so between two traditionally hostile nations, but this can definitely and vastly improve the climate that may help settle the problems or minimize tensions in the future. We all must keep this spirit up not only for the sake of sports but also to fulfil the aspirations of the peoples of the region.

I had the opportunity of watching cricket tests between India and Pakistan in the Indian capital way back in the 1982-83 when the New Delhi-Islamabad ties were not at their best. But there was no dearth of cheers for the Pakistani team in the Feroz Shah Kotla ground as Asif Iqbal or Majid Jehangir Khan received no less ovation than Kapil Dev, Dilip Vengsarkar or Syed Kirmani. Barring a handful of the zealots whose attitude is governed by rabid political considerations devoid of sporting spirit, sports or cultural events are welcomed by people transcending national

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## MATTERS AROUND US

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as culmination of a complex and long-drawn political process. South Asians are crazy for cricket as seen from the fact that three of the regional countries -- Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka -- have reached the zenith of the game by capturing world cup while Bangladesh is also struggling and slowly improving in this discipline. Even Nepal, not a cricket playing nation as such, is turning towards it and took part in the recent under-19 world cup in Bangladesh. True, cricket was earlier seen in our region as a game not much associated with the common people as much as football but things have significantly changed over the last few decades. Cricket has become a passion in South Asia and it was only a normal spectacle when millions in Bangladesh remained glued to the television sets for the Karachi one-dayer till the last ball was bowled amidst

countries was the result of the foreign policy pursued by the then Janata government of which he was an important member. His critics had hardly any answer to the contention because the political climate in the South Asian region was one of the best during the Janata Party's government in India despite the fact that inherent mistrust and misconception did exist to a large extent. However, recent years with Vajpayee at the helm of the government saw a bad state of the bilateral ties marked by ups and downs. That, however, is characteristic of their relations but what was alarming was that the two sides more than once had reached a situation of being on the brink of war. Fortunately, that did not finally turn into a full blown conflict, thanks to the wisdom of saner sections of the people in both the countries and pressures of the

less important is the much needed contacts between top leaders of two countries which occurred on the sidelines of the summit facilitating improvement of bilateral ties. The Indo-Pak cricket feast in Pakistan is the outcome of a largely successful bilateral discussion that followed the Vajpayee-Musharraf contact in Islamabad. Sadly, the visit of the Indian team appeared to hang in the balance even after improvement of relations because of the stance of the hawks in India and also in Pakistan. But the strong attitude of the top leadership helped clear the uncertainty which ultimately gladdened millions not only in the region but cricket lovers across the world.

South Asia remains an international flash point because of tensions stemming from two nuclear-armed neighbours. The bilateral disputes are sensitive and some-

nations whereas disputes among countries particularly neighbours are not uncommon. Links in different fields like sports and culture can help improve relations greatly. Even persons otherwise hostile to a country may get carried away by the euphoria caused by such links.

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Zagiul A. Chowdhury is a senior journalist.

# Crime statistics: Foreigners conspicuous

MONZURUL HUQ writes from Tokyo

JAPAN'S National Police Agency has released last week its yearly statistics of crimes committed in 2003, where once again alarming voice has been raised about the crime scene of Japan getting dirtier due to the involvement of foreign hands. According to National Police Agency, total number of crimes committed by foreigners in Japan is alarmingly increasing since 1998 and as such crimes have been detected in many parts of the country, they are no longer confined within a few big cities. The number of criminal cases involving foreign nationals who are in Japan for a specific period of time rose to 40,615 in 2003. The increase is 16.9 percent from the previous year and the number exceeds 40,000 for the first time since 1980 when the National Police Agency began keeping such statistics. The number of foreign suspects sent to prosecutors last year also reached a record high of 20,007.

Almost half of those arrested last year, 45 percent, were Chinese, followed by 9 percent Koreans, 6.7 percent Filipinos and 6.1 percent

Brazilians. Of the crimes included in the survey, theft tops the list with around 23,000, followed by intellectual crimes like fraud and forgery and violent crimes. Heinous crimes, such as murders and robberies, were recorded as about 330. Sixty-eight foreigners were charged with murder and another 369 were charged with robbery. But the majority of charges against foreigners, a total of 13,357, were for offences like prostitution, illegal possession of weapons, or overstaying The National Police Agency report also mentions that in last year police in Japan handled an overall 2.79 million criminal cases. The figure, according to the police, is a slight decrease from that of 2002 and represents the first decline in eight years. The crimes for which foreigners were arrested or charged thus represent a mere 1.49 percent of the total crimes reported last year and the share is about the same as the non-Japanese proportion of the population. Moreover, looking at the nature of charges against foreigners, it becomes clear that a large number of those were charged for crimes the nature of which are not outrightly clear, as they were

## CLOSEUP JAPAN

The number of long-term resident foreigners in Japan climbed from 980,000 in 1989 to 1,850,000 in 2002. But there is no single government organ responsible for consulting with them and dealing with many problems related to their presence. Amid such a situation, the report of the National Police Agency focusing more on crimes committed by foreigners in Japan can only lead to further anti-foreign backlash among the Japanese.

involved in activities that are being run and supervised totally by Japanese nationals. Prostitution and overstaying visas easily fall into that category.

The police figures, highlighted in Japanese media with the emphasis on foreigners' involvement in criminal activities, do not also say clearly how many of such crimes were committed in association with Japanese contacts. But some hints are there, and going through the report in detail, one can easily get an idea of this increasing joint ventures where foreign hands are vulnerable to become scapegoats as the real crime is being committed by them with the planners and main beneficiaries remaining out

of the scene. As a result, critics of the police report have already termed the findings as a classic case of scapegoat technique.

The police report merely says that foreign gangs working in some cases with their Japanese counterparts have much to do with the rise of foreign crimes in Japan. But the report gives few details of such collaborations and doesn't mention the involvement of well-known organised criminal gangs of Japan in such activities, despite widespread suspicion of their hands in drug and weapon related crimes and prostitution.

The report mentions about an illegal withdrawal of deposit scam

exposed by the police last year where the suspects consisted of eight Chinese and 14 Japanese. Five Brazilians and one Japanese were implicated in a robbery case in Shiga prefecture.

Some observers say there are number of other cases where Japanese charge fees to help foreign nationals commit crimes. One example often sighted is that of marriages between foreign and Japanese nationals. According to National Police Agency, the figure topped 100 for the first time in 2002. Such marriages involve falsifying immigration documents for allowing foreign nationals to obtain spouse status. Under usual dealings in such cases usually

involve high amount of fees from foreigners and at the end it is they who are most likely to be apprehended for committing forgery.

A group of Japanese politicians have always shown keen enthusiasm in using the police data for verbal attack on foreign nationals of specific origin. The leading among them is the Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara, who has gone furthest of all by describing illegal immigrants as the most dangerous threat to the safety of the nation's streets, bypassing the important point that those illegal immigrants are being employed not by foreigners, but by small scale Japanese entrepreneurs who find in them a lifeline for their own survival amid

extremely high cost of labour. No doubt the latest police report would supply ample food to satisfy further Ishihara's extreme nationalist hunger.

At a time when a group of researchers and academics in Japan are focusing on accepting a large number of immigrants in coming years to cope up with the shortage of human resources, the yearly police report stressing on crimes committed by foreign nationals will not help improve the image that many Japanese have of foreigners. The negative trend has already been reflected in a recent survey conducted by the government in connection with a campaign to double the number of people visiting Japan. One in three respondents were against the idea of easing visa requirements for tourists, as they were afraid the process would bring more criminals to Japan.

According to some estimates, at the current level of population, it would be necessary for Japan to accept around 30 million immigrants in the first half of the twenty-first century. A number of researchers even suggest that the number will not

be sufficient to perform the crucial functions that the country requires. As a result, they also stress the need for Japan to start building a multi-ethnic society that would easily attract outsiders. Politicians like Ishihara had so far ignored such calls as they run contrary to their narrow view of an untainted nation state. As a result, a number of services essential for foreigners are also painfully lacking in a country trying hard to show its international face.

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