

## Street power after the party

FARID BAKHT

WHAT a difference a day makes. The day before was filled with colourful farewells to the visiting leaders from South Asia. The fine speeches and visionary declarations were still ringing in our ears. At night, on government buildings and "beautified" roundabouts, the fairy lights were twinkling in sympathy with the fairy tale concocted around a dull, boring summit.

The day after, two judges lay dead after an Iraqi-style suicide attack. The war against state organs, in particular the judiciary, had been temporarily halted in an understanding between terrorists and the law-enforcement agencies, to allow the Saarc jamboree to continue without a hitch. The districts had been emptied as police squads were called on to lay a cordon of steel around Dhaka. There is no doubt the JMB or any other underground guerrilla band could have struck at will in any small town. Now they have.

Then, the government, still in self-congratulatory mood at a "successful" summit of pomp and ceremony was then brought down to earth by having to meet the aid "partners.". The tactics employed by the donors suggested very little about partnership. A newspaper headline blared that the donors had given an "ultimatum" to the government for good behaviour over the next fifteen months, or the tap would be switched off.

### Back to the street

Now we await the spectacle of the Opposition challenge to the Government on November 22nd. This had been postponed for the Saarc Summit too, and moved from November 15th. What is in store? The regime is entering its final few months. By law, it has to vacate its offices by October to make way for a 90-day caretaker government to administer elections. Will it be able to survive until then? Not according to some in a suddenly "cocky" opposition. They are drawing up plans for an invasion of the capital city. It seems they expect several hundred thousand people to flock to Dhaka, to the rallying cry of "Cholo, cholo, Dhaka cholo." Will it be a picnic, a damp squib, or will it turn out to be the turning point?

**The opposition might want to ponder on another possibility. They are demanding the end to this regime. Have they thought about what they would do if the government decided to call snap elections for February? As a "concession," the government could dismiss the controversial election commissioner, amid the resignation of opposition MPs from Parliament, when they do not join next month. In this poker game, we will see who is going to call whose bluff. Meanwhile, the bombers are deciding where and whom to target next.**

We can still remember the fiasco of April 2004 when the illustrious General Secretary of the Opposition declared he was in possession of a "trump card." We waited with bated breath, but in vain. The finale was postponed. Without a trace of embarrassment, the opposition continued and found a new weapon. With some very coincidentally timed comments by a couple of ambassadors, they decided that the hitherto-successful electoral arrangements for ten years were no longer good enough to ensure a free and fair election. The aid "partners" felt it was necessary to hold a conference to discuss the best way to hold elections, giving us some pointers. No doubt we have a lot to learn from elections in Iraq and Afghanistan. The government realised they could not be held hostage to a set of criteria which would be used against them, and prevented the Tuesday Group of donors from staging the event in the volatile political winter season.

Sorry to mention that word Saarc again, but while the Saarc party was blaring away in Dhaka, the rest of us not invited were able to read in the papers what sumptuous delicacies were on their menu. Was it not uplifting to know that we can stage as good a party as the rest? Quail and salmon were on offer along with the birianis.

Meanwhile, the Opposition leader stood "shoulder to shoulder" with the people of North Bengal. She contrasted the celebrations in Dhaka with the "near-starvation" of Monga afflicted people. At last, we were seeing what would stand for normal politics. Taking the real issues to the people and passionately calling for justice.

Within a week, monga will join Saarc (sorry!) in the library of "don't use again till next year" and quietly shelved.

### Why has it come to this?

What has the regime done that means it must depart today? We know what it has not done -- govern. We know that it is a shambles, and that parts of it are odious. Nevertheless, what gives the opposition the right to remove them without an election? Neither they nor the donors felt the need to change the rules of the game in 2001, so why now?

If the Awami League had spent the last two years explaining what they would do and continuously carried that message to the villages, instead of paralysing the economy with strikes, they would have walked into power on a wave of popular discontent, electoral reform or no reform.

So, why then, with less than a year to go, does the opposition look so unprepared for an election campaign? Why have they felt they have no need for "normal" politics? Do they expect to gain power the easy way? Are they so deluded?

### Wild cards

Normally I would say this street confrontation is another waste of time and ineffective. The police and other forces remain in place. They are prepared to face the opposition, armed and ready. They may have, however, a chink in the armour.

To make the city look attractive they cleared the roads of rickshaws, the pavements of hawkers, and closed the wholesale market for food for several days. The huge market of Kawran Bazar has opened for business but prices are still at stratospheric levels. Traders are unhappy at their shabby treatment and the unnecessary losses they have had to incur. The rickshaw pullers are livid. They suspected they would not be allowed back on some VIP roads after the "temporary removal" during the summit. If the ban is not lifted, the government could potentially have provided tens of thousand of rickshaw pullers as foot

soldiers for street battles on behalf of the opposition. They would therefore be smart to let rickshaws and hawkers ply their trades immediately well before the 22nd. The Awami League of before could have exploited the situation. I am not sure about the current bunch.

If the barricades hold, batons are wielded, arrests are made, it may become a case of "Cholo cholo bhasha cholo" as the "activists" and "rent-a-mobs" pack up and go home on the 23rd.

### Don't push too hard

The opposition might want to ponder on another possibility. They are demanding the end to this regime. Have they thought about what they would do if the government decided to call snap elections for February? As a "concession," the government could dismiss the controversial election commissioner, amid the resignation of opposition MPs from Parliament, when they do not join next month. The regime could ask for a renewed mandate, go to the voters and ask them to decide who should rule. Their "investment" of four years of patronage could pay off and BNP-Jamaat might return in triumph! It would then be a case of "Cholo cholo bideshe cholo!"

The Opposition, which has done no grassroots preparation, would be caught flatfooted. Is this a plausible scenario? Yes. Is it likely? Perhaps not. The need to earn some more money and steal some licenses might dissuade some from this course of action. Moreover, the Old Guard of senior ministers know they are not coming back and would prefer a few more weeks of pleasure.

In this poker game, we will see who is going to call whose bluff. Meanwhile, the bombers are deciding where and whom to target next.

The author is a columnist and entrepreneur.

## Will the Leader of the Opposition tell us what is happening?

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

I am as much concerned as you are about the current state of affairs in the country. Very few in this country can claim to have suffered as you and your family has, at the hands of forces that opposed our independence, both during our struggle for freedom and after independence.

Without going into the details of those gory and tragic incidents let me assure you that I not only most sincerely empathise, but also can relate to that through my family's own tragedy, though of a lesser magnitude compared to that of yours.

I too lost one of my illustrious brothers in no less a person than Shaheed Munier Chowdhury. Your illustrious father and my brother suffered jail at the same time during the Language Movement of 1952. As security prisoners they were in two adjoining cells in the jail.

My brother and I, braving the scorching rays of the sun, were there to listen to that immortal speech delivered by your father at the historic Suhrawardy Uddayan on March 7, 1971. The euphoria, the aroma, the spirit of those days, still lingers on, not just in my mind, but in the hearts of millions even to this day. When I say aroma I mean the sacred and undying spirit of it all, surpassing the related tragedies and the horrors. But you must appreciate the fact that as much as history and legacy is of vital significance, for a nation one also has to look forward and live in the cruel and real world of today. Such is the way of life.

No one needs to tell you that the country is passing through terrible times. The Ruling coalition's list of failures is endless. But that is not what I would like to raise with you today. What I would like to do, if I may, is to humbly point out my perceptions of Awami League combating the various issues of the government's litany of failure.

In most instances, you and your party's focus have been heavily loaded with your party interests rather than issues of the people's interests and

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concerns. Take, for instance, the continued spate of bombings and terrorist acts. It is my observation that you and your party went about dealing with it in a wrong way, reflecting mostly individual and party concerns, rather than expressing concern for and on behalf of the entire nation, which the mainstream political opposition was expected to do.

Every time a bomb blast takes place you immediately declare that it has been the act of the ruling coalition. The nationwide August 17 bombings were also treated the same way. This judgmental statement has been repeated so many times that it has lost all its appeal to the public at large. I have often wondered as to what happened to the people of this country that they failed to rise spontaneously in protest nationwide when such tragedies took place with the deaths of SAMS Kibria and Ivy Rahman? Why did the Awami League fail to ignite or spark off a people's movement? I do not have the answer - but maybe you have! At best I can tell you of my assessment of the situation.

Over the years, people's trust in our political parties has continually been on the decline, and Awami League is no exception. Your party's relentless pursuit to unseat the government appears to be politically unsound and is reflective of a mindset, which to my mind does not fall under the purview of my understanding of democracy and democratic traditions.

One could also say the same thing about your stance on the hartal issue. It is not only anti-people, but also harming the economy of the country at a time when it is most vulnerable. Surely you cannot call hartal an instrument of political protest, particularly in a democracy. You cannot call

any process a democratic one, which interferes and take away the rights of others. Already we are burdened by the two-day holidays recently declared by the present regime. Any additional enforced closures of our economic activities and other essential services will further weaken the existing vulnerability of our economy. The only outcome of Hartal as I have observed is the destruction of private and public property giving rise to all sorts of vandalism and violence on the streets. The Hartal culture is also having a negative impact on the already poor state of our work-culture.

I keep wondering about this business of your "frequent" visits abroad. I am happy that your recent visit to India was treated almost at the level of a state visit by the Indian authorities, as reflected by the audience you had with as many dignitaries, including no less than the Prime Minister himself. I was wondering as to what really prompted you to make the visit at this time. There is a pattern in all major visits, which you have undertaken abroad i.e. the visits invariably seem to coincide whenever the country is in an unusual state of vulnerability both economically and otherwise. On the other hand I now seem to recall your last visit to the US. There is always something amiss between your declared agenda and what finally emerges or surfaces. Your trip to the US on medical grounds ultimately turned out to be an extended visit to meet your grandchild and extensive political lobbying of all kinds stretching over a period of three weeks or more. Trust me, lately people have begun to ponder on such issues!

You and your party's lawmakers, including yourself, have been absenting from attending parliament God

alone knows since when. Whatever be the reasons, I do understand that some of the reasons are genuine, boycotting of the parliament cannot be good for either you or the development of the institution of democracy in the country. If the parliament is rendered ineffective today you too are also to blame alongside the ruling coalition.

Of late I have been feeling rather uncomfortable with the way you have been using human tragedies, both personal and otherwise, to meet your political goals. On occasions I have felt that these actions are deliberate and carefully planned. To me it looks as though you have picked up the idea from the way the US administration uses the 9/11 incidents to meet its political agenda.

I strongly believe that some day again you and your party will be in the seat of power. Hence do not create any legacy, which in the course of time becomes too hot to handle by you and leaves permanent scars on the face of this nation. I mean damaging the ethical and moral fibre of this nation which are already at their lowest rung.

On the other hand, you see we, the people, had a bad bargain in this country since decades, right from the pre-independence days. We have always been sidelined. None of the political parties big or small told us of the actual happenings whether in power or out of power, they seem to always thrive on some hidden agenda.

While drawing the curtain on this brief message, let me say that I have said what I had to say. It is now up to you to reflect or ponder upon the observations or simply ignore or reject them.

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## The future of Saarc

### Between promise and reality

**For Bangladesh, whose skies, river-highways and transportation networks were closely monitored to prevent any form of terrorism, the main accomplishment was in the Prime Minister's display of proud control: she successfully halted Bangladesh's usual suspects for almost an entire week. However, it was only a few hours after the Bhutanese Prime Minister departed, that militants were back to kill judges who implement the laws of man, and not of God.**

MANEEZA HOSSAIN

THE 21st century may yet prove to be the century of Asia. In the case of South Asia, the global media, as well as unimaginative bureaucracies, however, seem to have failed to grasp this potential. The Saarc meeting, held this month in Dhaka did not attract the media attention it deserved. Then again, the meeting agenda itself, as set and discussed by Saarc country member representatives, lagged considerably behind the real issues and debates that the region faces and engages in.

One in three Muslims worldwide is South Asian. One in two of the world's poor are South Asian. Yet when the heads of seven South Asian states congregate and discourse on fighting terrorism, no major international news channel is present to cover the issue. Perhaps the media predicted, alas correctly, that nothing of substance would be accomplished: the very day Saarc ended, reality went back to danger-zone as usual. Two judges, a Hindu, and a Muslim, were bombed to death in a southern district in Bangladesh. The already banned Islamic militant group, Jagrata Muslim Bangladesh, claimed responsibility for the bombings.

Did Western opinion makers, like most citizens of Saarc, know ahead of time that nothing of substance could possibly be discussed, or worse, that nothing of substance can be reported on. It was with the usual extreme difficulty that journalists shyly penetrated the red-tape bureaucracy that guarded the Saarc compounds like a fortress. Entry to each ceremony was monitored carefully, each newspaper was accorded scarce tickets. Still, the event ran unusually smoothly. Bangladeshi consulates abroad, known to obstruct visas for foreign journalists, might have maintained their usual stature. However, since the event was a media opportunity for the government to showcase its successes, a few local, and even fewer international journalists were permitted to file stories about the development and beautification of the host country.

Against the backdrop of brewing trouble, the meeting itself was almost surreal in texture: many saw in it echoes of a glorious South Asian wedding.

Bangladesh proudly took this Saarc meeting to new and higher levels, not just of aspiration, but also of decoration. Major avenues and the whole skyline were outlined with white Christmas-like lights. A concerned Foreign Minister nervously inspected each event like a father-to-the-bride and made sure each detail was perfect. The lime-white gladiolas and locally cultured orchids framed the Saarc leaders almost angelically, their respective backgrounds notwithstanding. Street beggars were carried away by truck and ordered to beg in the newly allocated area. As an extension of the holiday spirit (Eid), citizens were given an extra day off as major roads were shut down, clearing Dhaka of its famous traffic jams, hiking the prices of essential goods to the level of ruining businesses. Against this opulence, in a not-so-subtle move, the main opposition leader Sheikh Hasina made sure to be photographed surrounded by the victims of monga (famine).

Substance could hardly be found in the echoing verses of each individual presidential reflection of South Asia's future priorities. Afghanistan was admitted into the congregation of Saarc and China and Japan were given observer status, making Saarc 2005 ever so slightly more memorable than its predecessors. For Bangladesh, whose skies, river-highways and transportation networks were closely monitored to prevent any form of terrorism, the main accomplishment was in the Prime Minister's display of proud control: she successfully halted Bangladesh's usual suspects for almost an entire week. However, it was only a few hours after the Bhutanese Prime Minister departed, that militants were back to kill judges who implement the laws of man, and not of God.

Substance, not form, ought to be the agenda of the next meeting. Maybe then the Western media, and the rest of the world would recognise the importance of South Asia.

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## Treasuregate (part 2): Media, a key player in the big story

RON CHEPESIUK

THE American media has not only reported about the Valerie Plame affair and Treasuregate, it has also become a part of the big story itself. Journalists from NBC television news, Time magazine, the New York Times, and CNN have been key figures in the probe by special counsel Patrick Fitzgerald, and they could become major witnesses against Scooter Libby, if his perjury case goes to trial.

Robert Novak, well known conservative newspaper columnist, television pundit and Washington insider, was the journalist who identified Plame as an undercover CIA officer in a column he published on July 14, 2004. At the time, Novak wrote that "two senior administration officials" leaked the Plame information to him. Later, he claimed on CNN that "nobody in the Bush administration called me to leak this."

But last July, the New York Times reported that Novak had talked with Karl Rove, Bush's top advisor, as he prepared his Plame identity-blowing article. Rove then told investigators that he learned from Novak the name of Plame and then told the columnist, "I heard that, too."

The New York Times noted: "White House officials may argue that Rove's conversation with Novak did not amount to leaking the name of the agent. But to critics of Bush, this is splitting hairs, and Rove in effect confirmed her identity, even if he did not name her."

Rove later told Time magazine reporter Matt Cooper that Plame "officially works" for the CIA. Cooper co-authored an article with Novak in Time, indicating that government officials disclosed Plame's name.

Meanwhile, Judith Miller, while a New York Times reporter, didn't write an article about Plame, but she did talk to Libby about the CIA agent's identity. Miller wanted to keep Libby's identity anonymous, but Prosecutor Fitzgerald threatened her, as well as Cooper, with jail, if they didn't reveal their sources. Both

**Meanwhile, the media's connection to Treasuregate gets more complicated as it evolves. As I write this column, Bob Woodward, America's most famous journalist, is now part of the Treasuregate story. Only in America, as boxing promoter Don King would put it. And some still wonder why the American press has such a credibility problem.**

Miller and Cooper appealed to the US Supreme Court, but it declined to hear the case.

Time finally decided to cooperate with Fitzgerald, and the magazine turned over relevant material to the special prosecutor, much to the consternation of many journalists who felt Time had caved in to government pressure. Miller still wanted to protect her sources, and she spent 85 days in jail until Libby gave her the go head to reveal the contents of their conversations. Miller, Cooper, and NBC's Tim Russert have testified before the grand jury about the Plame affair, but no one knows if Novak has because he's said nothing about it. Ironically, despite his key role in outing Plame's identity, little attention has been paid to Novak's connection in Treasuregate.

In terms of the media players in the scandal, almost all the attention has focused on Miller, even though she did not write one word about Plame's identity. That is largely the result of Miller's controversial role in reporting on the events leading up to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. She was prominent during that period with her newspaper reports that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. Her key source, it turned out, was Ahmed Chalabi, the Iraqi political magician who is now Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq. The Bush administration had no better source in the media than Miller to drum up support and help spin its rationale for going to war with Iraq, charge the journalist's critics.

In a New York Times article, Miller took cover: "I got it totally wrong," she conceded. "The analysts, the experts and the journalists who covered them, we are all wrong. If your sources are wrong, you are

wrong."

Indeed. No reporter has got it so colossally wrong. And while Miller talks about "sources" she got it wrong on her Iraq coverage because she allowed one source, the slick Chalabi, to manipulate her in the direction he wanted her to move. That was toward Adnan Ihsan Saheed al-Haidari, a concrete contractor and Iraqi exile who claimed the dictator had stashed hundreds of tons of WMDs, including nuclear weapons. Al Haidari failed a CIA polygraph test, but Miller later insisted she knew nothing about that.

One would think that, given the stakes involved, Miller would have done more digging to document the truth about the WMD document. In her reporting, Miller seemed to forget that she was a member of the fourth estate, not the first, second, or third. During the Iraq War, Miller was embedded with a special military unit that was hunting for unconventional weapons. Remarkably, as part of her assignment, she was given clearance to see secret information.

During her grand jury testimony, Miller explained that during her (July 8, 2003) meeting with Libby, "I might have expressed frustration with Mr. Libby that I was not permitted to discuss with editors some of the more sensitive information."

Say what? Was Miller an intelligence agent or a newspaper reporter when she went on her embedded assignment? And she couldn't share information with her supervisors at the New York Times! How could they verify that what she was reporting was the truth and not government spin? It is such revelations that have

made Miller a hot button figure among US journalists. Some colleagues view her as hero for going to jail to protect her sources. Many others see her as a stooge of a vicious Bush administration campaign to smear Plame and her husband Joe Wilson.

To give one example of Miller as a flash-point in American journalism -- the Society of Professional Journalists awarded Miller a First Amendment prize at its recent convention in Las Vegas last October. Since then, two SPJ chapters, one in Northern California and the other in Florida, have criticised the Miller award. In an open letter, Peter Y. Sussman, a former president of the Northern California group, and Linda Jue, current vice president, wrote: "We hope to set the record straight on behalf of conscientious journalists around the country who support journalists' First Amendment responsibilities but are deeply troubled by Miller's earlier unprofessional conduct and SPJ's failure to fully apply its own Code of Ethics to this case."

The authors explained: "In this case, the message has been sullied by the ethical misdeeds of the messenger. We deplore the careless and deceptive use of confidential sources, as exemplified in Judith Miller's reporting. We urge journalists to hold each other accountable before the government claims even more sweeping rights to interfere in the editorial process, eroding still further this country's noble ideal of a free press."

The controversy surrounding Miller has thrown the New York Times, once arguably the world's best newspaper, into discord. On three days, from October 21-23,

Miller was skewed by her employer. Times editor Bill Keller went on record stating that Miller "seems to have misled the newspaper." One New York Times columnist said it would be better if Miller did not come back to work, citing an October 16 story that revealed the "disturbing journalistic shortcomings (she) seems comfortable taking."

Miller finally decided to get out the kitchen. A few weeks ago, she quit the New York Times after 28 years of service. Rumors flew about the size of Miller's severance package. The feisty reporter has taken to the media trail and embarked on a "redemption tour" to defend herself against her critics.

Meanwhile, the media's connection to Treasuregate gets more complicated as it evolves. As I write this column, Bob Woodward, America's most famous journalist, is now part of the Treasuregate story. He claims that he learned about Plame's identity and her work at the CIA from a high ranking Bush administration official more than two years ago. Libby, Woodward said, was not his source.

The revelation, if true, would seem to contradict Fitzgerald's claim that Libby was the first to make known to reporters the information about Plame. Libby, however, is being charged with lying to a grand jury and the FBI and not with disclosing Plame's name. Unlike Miller, Woodward has never been embedded, but he, too, kept the information from his bosses at the Washington Post. His reason: "I wanted to protect my sources at all costs," Woodward told CNN.

Only in America, as boxing promoter Don King would put it. And some still wonder why the American press has such a credibility problem. Still, don't expect the Washington Post to pay a fat severance package to Woodward, its mega star, any time soon.

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