

## Chief Adviser's role

*Left so much to be desired*

WE have reached a political dead-end. Only a stroke of super-ingenuity or luck or a miracle can have us wriggle out of the mire and ensure return on to the path of universally participated election within the given constitutional timeframe.

Yesterday we wrote in our editorial columns that all the major political parties including the caretaker government had had their share of the blame for bringing the political differences between the major alliances to a cul-de-sac.

But today we are going to concentrate on the failure of the chief of the caretaker government to act as a catalyst between the contending political parties so that one or the other major party would not boycott the election. That was not to be and the Awami League-led alliance has now declared itself out of the fray, something which seems fraught with all kinds of uncertainties.

Whichever way one looks at the latest turn of events, the biggest apportionment of the blame has to be taken by the chief adviser of the caretaker government; for, it's bound to go down as the failure of the man in charge, the man at the helms of affairs with a mandate to fulfil.

His failure has been threefold: first, he neither tried to nor could he gain the confidence of the Awami League-led alliance as a major partner in politics knowing full well that only a broad-based election is the essential guarantee for credibility of the polling exercise. On the contrary, every major step that he took was acceptable to one side and invariably rejected by the other. Secondly, his biggest failure lay in not being able to work collectively with his advisers; in fact, he sometimes appeared to work at cross purposes. He gave the impression of ploughing a partisan furrow and that too with sometimes lack of transparency. Thirdly, he has failed to depoliticise the administration left by the erstwhile BNP-led alliance government. We learn that by keeping 272 officials allegedly loyal to the BNP camp totally untouched, the caretaker government's so-called exercise for depoliticisation has been wound up. From the ministries to the field level the reshuffling has been, if anything, negligible.

The whole concept of the caretaker government rests on the ethos of neutrality and by not unambiguously upholding the same, to our mind, the caretaker chief has seemingly done disservice to his obligations.

## Commuting chaos during Eid

*Will it ever be organised?*

THIS was yet another year of unprecedented suffering for people leaving for homes in villages and townships as well as returning to their respective work places after celebrating Eid. While on their way home they were put to harassment and were subjected to misery at river and bus terminals including railway stations, the unfolding pattern of their return journeys shows similar agonies being faced.

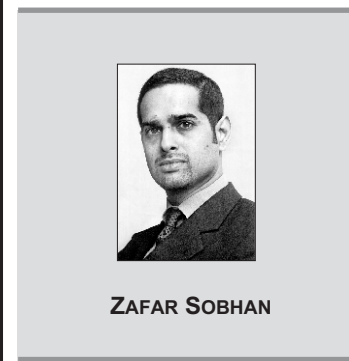
They suffered at the hands of dishonest and unscrupulous staff of both bus and launch operators including toll collectors who sold spaces on the deck of the launches. To top it all, operators of both buses and launches were charging fares at 2 to 5 times the normal rate.

It is also relevant to point out here that due to the indifference of the owners and lack of application on the part of the law enforcing agencies accidents have become a yearly feature on account of overloading and faulty transport equipment. As in previous year many died this year too.

Admittedly it is not an easy task to regulate and bring discipline to such a huge body of travelling people during the Eid vacation but surely the situation can be tolerably alleviated if the required level of commitment is shown by the relevant agencies of the administration. The public should also try to show a greater awareness of the need to refuse overloading of passengers and resist speeding. It is our observation that the number of law enforcing personnel posted at various terminals and stations are not only inadequate but all kinds of illegal acts by touts and toll collectors continue in their very presence most often through their slack and abetting.

When will the Eid time management of the transport sector show a marked improvement in planning and delivery of services?

# The Fourth Republic, 1991-2006, R.I.P.



**ZAFAR SOBHAN**

POLITICS in every country, it seems to me, is based on a series of fictions, that the public accepts, more or less, as the price for establishing a stable social and political order. In the context of Bangladesh, the fiction has been for the past fifteen years the fact that we are a fledgling democracy finding our feet and that things are progressing, be it ever so slightly, in the right direction.

But the truth of the matter is that since the election in 1991 things have been steadily regressing. The caretaker government system itself, as many have commented, is unique, not only in its ingenuity, but also in its underlying cynicism. And now, geniuses that we are, we have perfected a way of undermining even that check on partisanship.

What are the fundamentals of democracy? Simple in theory: each adult citizen gets to vote for his or her elected government, with the majority winning and constitutional safe-guards to protect minority rights and interests.

## STRAIGHT TALK

Each period has been longer than the one preceding it, and more stable, if not always necessarily more democratic. But each period came with its in-built limitations that inevitably led to its end, and each time we had to go back to the drawing board as a nation to come up with something new. Perhaps we have reached the end of the Fourth Republic and the time has come for us to put everything back on the table and start over.

Of course, however, it is not nearly so simple in practice. There are lots of conventions and understandings which are necessary for democracy to function.

For instance, in most democracies even though the speaker controls the parliament, there is a modicum of fairness in the proceedings. Even though there may not be any rules on the books that can guard against partisan judges or civil servants or police being appointed, there are conventions on which the entire democratic edifice is founded, and it is hard for a nation to move forward when that commitment to democratic institutions and processes does not exist at the political level.

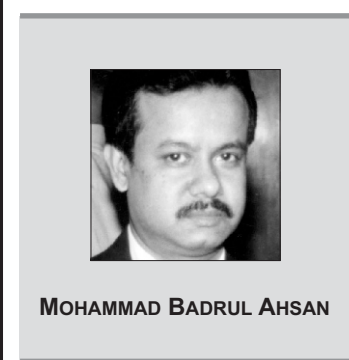
Similarly, on the other side of the aisle, a functioning democracy requires that the opposition voice its complaints in parliament and not shut down the country with coercive programs that are antithetical to democratic principles and ideals.

Thus, for all the trappings of democracy that we supposedly possess as a country, it seems perfectly apparent to me that democracy as a practice is something that the political classes of Bangladesh have not taken fully on board.

There are many fixes that can be suggested to try and make our democracy more functional. We could amend Article 70 of the Constitution to permit floor-crossing. We could introduce legislation to create a post of deputy speaker. We could institute Prof Yunus's idea of a share of the ministries going to the minority party. Hell, we could even put the Home Ministry under opposition control.

But the sad truth is that we would soon find a way to circumvent these measures as we have found a way to circumvent all other checks and balances -- including the caretaker government system -- we have put in place at one time or another to ensure that there are no abuses. What is missing -- and what we need to face up to -- is the political will on the part of the political classes to make it work.

# A ventriloquy of death



**MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN**

THERE was an art and there was a science to how Saddam Hussein met his death on the dawn of the holiest day in the Muslim world. The art is ventriloquy: when a speaker speaks with little or no lip movement so that the voice appears to come from another source.

The science is how that art was applied so that an Iraqi court would give an American verdict, so that the Iraqi hangmen would execute an American prisoner, so that the American wrath would work through the Iraqi retribution. The hanging of Saddam Hussein was a ventriloquist's act, which was executed by the dummy.

Part of the rope which hanged Saddam Hussein was his own creation and the Americans gave him enough rope to hang himself. The defiant dictator walked to the gallows spitting curses against the Americans and the Persians, and reciting verses from the Holy

## CROSS TALK

But one question will rise above the rest, and that question is why Saddam was executed in such a hurry. Perhaps it was destiny that he would die on a very special. It was an American slaughter done by the Iraqi hands. For others who watched, it was ventriloquy of death. The execution looked like a sacrifice.

Koran, until the trapdoor suddenly opened under his feet and the howling man was silenced like an interrupted music, hanging like a broken doll with a tilted neck, his head so close to the floor as if the ordeal had abruptly diminished him.

So the shell of the man was destroyed last week nearly three years after he was dead. In fact, Saddam Hussein died on the very day he had popped out of that spider hole, his matted hair, dirty clothes and spent looks conjuring the image of a defeated dictator who opened his mouth under the examiner's flashlight as if in the final act of surrendering his dignity. But then he was temporarily resuscitated in the farce of a trial which was preceded by its verdict. It is now clear that no matter what, Saddam's fate was already signed and sealed.

In the end, the former dictator died a feral death and how could anybody miss the irony that he vicariously suffered for the sin of Osama bin Laden. In the end, he would not die for keeping weapons of mass destruction or having links with the al Qaeda network or taking part in the 9/11 attack. In the end, he would be tried and executed for Dujail, where 146 villagers were put to death for allegedly conspiring to assassinate the president.

Everything else gets side-swiped and the background gets pushed into the background. Nobody talks about how Saddam was an American puppet, who, for years, got military and intelligence support from the Reagan administration to fight against Iran. Almost forgotten is how the US had encouraged Shiites to rise up against Saddam after the Persian Gulf War and then backed off and watched as he sent helicopter gun-ships to slaughter them. It is still shrouded in mystery whether the US had given the green light to the Iraqi dictator for the 1990 invasion of Kuwait via its ambassador, April Glaspie.

If anybody remembers, Dujail comes in the long tradition of that obscene complicity between Saddam Hussein and the United States and that the ruthless dictator had used American weapons to execute his enemies. But then if we assume that he who gave the gun is more to blame than he who pulled the trigger, then many US presidents including George Bush should have been hanged as well. A conservative estimate claims that more than 665,000 Iraqis have been killed since the United States invaded Iraq in 2003. Ward Churchill, a professor of ethnic studies at the University of Colorado determined that the population of American Indians dropped from 12 million in 1500 to 237,000 in 1900 as a result of ruthless genocide.

David Model writes in How to Commit War Crimes with a Straight Face that President Nixon had ordered 3,500 sorties which killed 600,000 Cambodians. In Vietnam, the American troops committed indiscriminate atrocities and were responsible for the death of nearly 2,000,000 Vietnamese

for democracy or deserving of democracy.

By no means. Quite the opposite, in fact. High voter turn-out and consistently defensible decisions, by and large, in past elections, and a high level of voter awareness and involvement point to the fact that Bangladeshis are both sophisticated and responsible democrats.

To the extent that they might be disenchanting, it is because they know that they are not being heard by their political masters and that their options to make themselves heard are very limited.

There is no evidence to suggest that they are not "deserving" of democracy (what would constitute evidence of this, one wonders. George Bush?) or that they are not "ready" for it. The problem is not the people, the problem is with the political parties.

Now, the question arises: what can be done in this situation? What is an aggrieved citizen to do? Well, he or she can always form his or her own political party and there is certainly nothing stopping this. There are countless parties in Bangladesh other than the big two, some very successful.

But there are high barriers to entry. There is the money and, more crucially, the violence factor (witness the burning to the ground the homes of those who split from the BNP to form the LDP). There is the fact that all the institutions are arrayed against one. There is the fact that a new party cannot dis-

pense largesse and patronage and thus buy people's votes. And there is the first-past-the-post electoral system.

So what do we need to do in Bangladesh to make democracy work? First, we certainly need some sort of institutional changes (e.g. president to be elected by super-majority) to make it work as well as it can given the constraints of our political culture.

But none of this will really bear much fruit until we ourselves change and begin to have some kind of respect for the systems and institutions and processes of democracy. This respect simply does not exist at this juncture in time.

I have written before that it is useful to look at our independence as four discrete phases, four republics, if you will: 1971-1975, 1975-1982, 1982-1991, and 1991 to the present.

Each period has been longer than the one preceding it, and more stable, if not always necessarily more democratic. But each period came with its in-built limitations that inevitably led to its end, and each time we had to go back to the drawing board as a nation to come up with something new.

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Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

people. Countless black Americans were tortured and killed under the watch of several US presidents.

Like a gallinule is used to trap another gallinule, and a slave is used to exploit a slave, the United States has used a puppet to hang another puppet. And it shows that the horror perpetuates because the world has no shortage of victims who are willing to sacrifice other victims in the false hope of overcoming their own destiny.

May be Saddam had lived under the same illusion. He trusted the Americans and oppressed his countrymen because he believed that his joyride of power was never going to end. May be Moqtada al Sadr desperately wanted to avenge the death of his father who was executed by Saddam Hussein. May be those Shiite hangmen wearing balaclavas chanted Moqtada's name because they thought at last it was under his leadership that they were able to vindicate their revenge against a Sunni tyrant.

But then everything boils down to the ventriloquist's game as the dummies slowly play into his hands. And every time the video of the execution is played on TV, it reminds of how it is the destiny of men to infinitely repeat their mistakes. It was the Americans who invaded their country on false pretense. It was the Americans who captured their

tyrant and held him in custody all this time because they could not rely on the Iraqis to protect their prisoner against lynching or escape.

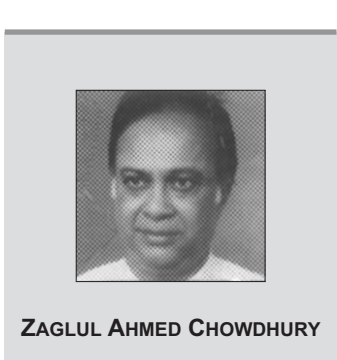
If anything, the Iraqis only gave legitimacy to what the Americans have done, and took the blame for all its insensitivities and goof ups. The Iraqi law prohibits hangings during religious festivals. The law also stipulates that an execution must be carried out 30 days after the appeal court's decision, which was not followed. The only law that governed the dummy was the voice of the ventriloquist.

There are many rumours surrounding the last moments of Saddam Hussein. It is said that he was offered tranquilizers which he refused. They offered him a last meal of chicken which he declined. He asked for a last cigarette which was denied. The guards denied him a few moments of sleep during his final hours locked up in the dungeons of Iraq's military headquarters.

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# An eventful year for South Asia



**ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY**

SOUTH Asia witnessed both turmoil and remarkable achievement during 2006, making the region more talked about in world affairs compared to many other preceding years. Most nations in the area saw political unrest during the period, while some landmark developments brought the region international laurels.

If Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh were rocked by political mayhem and other forms of internal convulsions, the unique honour of the coveted Nobel Peace Prize coming to South Asia makes us believe that the poverty-ridden region too can perform extraordinary feats.

Political instability stalks some of the smaller countries in the region in the new year as the hang-over of

## MATTERS AROUND US

It appears that the political environment in the South Asian region is clearly improving, and this definitely bodes well for the next summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) to be held in the Indian capital in April this year. The summits of Saarc leaders often suffer postponements, but this time the next summit is clearly on track, barring unforeseen developments

the last year, but these nations also made headlines across the globe like Nepal reaching a momentous government-Maoist accord for peace, and the Nobel Peace Prize for Bangladesh.

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The 13th conference of the South Asian leaders in Dhaka undeniably infused some degree of new dynamism in the regional forum, eliminating much of the inertia and frustration that had characterised it before, and all are eagerly looking forward to the 14th summit.

Certainly, this augurs well for the region, and the Saarc as a whole, even though the progress of the forum remains somewhat sluggish, falling short of expectations.

On the western front, ties between the two traditionally rival neighbours -- India and Pakistan -- are in the process of normalization, and a recent meeting in New Delhi between the two countries on a variety of bilateral issues was seen as a further development in their often battered relationship.

Needless to say, the Saarc -- particularly the summits -- had fallen victim to Indo-Pakistani hostilities many a time before. A scheduled conference of the heads of government had to be deferred indefinitely, and was made possible only when New Delhi-Islamabad ties improved.

The current state of New Delhi-Islamabad relations provides encouragement to the overall South Asian political milieu. There is hardly any denying that their bilateral ties have a bearing on the regional scene, which is largely contingent upon Indo-Pakistan relationship. Their topsy-turvy ties were marked by ups and downs in 2006. However, the bottom line is that both nations have returned to dialogue, and this is having a positive impact not only on their often battered relationship.

Needless to say, the Saarc -- individually, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh bore the brunt of political problems during 2006, causing a strain in their political and economic conditions. The island

state of Sri Lanka once again suffered most because of the civil war, and there was no respite in the last year even though flickers of hope for a negotiated settlement of the conflict had arisen, but only to be extinguished.

Talks between the government and the Tamil militants resumed in Geneva after a long gap, but with no progress in the complex exercise. Consequently, the war rages in the country with little sign of any cessation of hostilities.

Indeed, it is a sad spectacle for a nation that has achieved commendable socio-economic progress in the region compared to others.

Nepal had to experience one of the worst phases in its history when the long-drawn pro-democracy agitation against King Gyanendra paralyzed the land-locked nation for months. Happily, the people finally tasted a glorious victory when the king capitulated, and representative government was restored.

But that was not the end of Nepal's woes as problems involving the radical leftist "Maoists" had caused fears, but once again this seemingly intractable issue was resolved by the democratic government and the ultras by signing a peace accord that has raised new hopes of permanent peace in the Kingdom where the powers of the monarch have been considerably clipped, and the position of the "throne," even as a constitutional head, is now uncertain.

Seven political parties and the "Maoists" had jointly waged the anti-king movement, and now both shares the momentous decision of reaching a deal that has already pointed the violence-torn country towards a smoother path.

Hopefully, the two sides will not disappoint their people, and will turn the lovely land once again into a paradise for tourists.

The two main countries in South Asia, India and Pakistan, remained, by and large, peaceful during 2006, with the former remaining firm in the saddle with a multi-party government maintaining grip and the latter showing indications of political trouble centering national elections in 2007. The two main political leaders living in exile are seeking to throw bigger challenges to the government in Pakistan in the new year.

The Indian government did not face any major challenge from the opposition. However, the minority

government, depending on the outside support of the leftists, often suffers from uneasiness when ties with the leftists are afflicted on some issues.

Needless to say that survival of the UPA government is contingent upon the support of the communists who blow hot and cold in their ties with the government.

Incidentally, Bangladesh had been very much in the news, centering on the upcoming national elections, during the later part of the preceding year. The problems persist as the country steps into the new year, with the polls drawing nearer.

The diametrically opposite positions of the two main stakeholders in the political arena narrowed down, much to the relief of the people, but normal balloting hangs in the balance at the time of writing this column while the people's concern and anxiety heightened about the shape of things in the future.

It remains to be seen how the developments unfold, with many keeping their fingers crossed.

The king in the small Himalayan country of Bhutan is showing increasing signs of giving up his total grip on power by drawing up a long-term plan for some kind of democratization. This is being well received in the calm and peaceful kingdom.

In the tiny Indian ocean nation of the Maldives, a long serving president is giving in to the demand for multiparty democracy replacing one party rule, and this too marks the strengthening of representative government in South Asia.

The region -- the most densely populated in the world -- is fighting to improve the living standard of most of its 1.4 billion people who are mired in poverty. Political problems and huge expenditures in the defense sector by some of the countries make the challenge of poverty alleviation a difficult task.

Nevertheless, this task is being followed at both government and non-government level. Bangladesh's micro-credit "guru" Dr Muhammad Yunus and his internationally famed Grameen Bank winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 has added a rare chapter of glory and pride for South Asia, instilling enormous self-confidence.

This is the single biggest attainment of the region in 2006, and, in the fitness of things, the essence and the spirit of this should guide us in the days ahead.

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