

Press censorship

Withdraw it immediately

WE notice with a sense of regret and serious concern that attempts are being made to censor the press. The telephonic press directives have already started to come, much to the discomfiture of the independent media, which, we believe, has played a very constructive role in upholding democracy and always sided with the campaign for establishing a just social order.

For the first time in 16 years, The Daily Star received a call from the press information officer (PIO) of the information ministry very gently reminding us of the state of emergency declared by the government and also that caution in publishing news was in order. On being asked what "caution" precisely meant, he was vague and non-committal and requested us to "understand" the situation.

Understand we do that this country was liberated at the cost of three million lives, then there was the struggle for establishing democracy which also needed a great amount of sacrifice by the people. Finally, we won press freedom -- a prized possession of any civilised society. So we are not willing to compromise even a bit of it, as we were co-travellers with the people in the fight against the oppressive forces opposed to freedom of any kind. The free press has served the people well and will continue to do so in future.

We also notice that a directive has been issued to consult the ISPR before any news about the army is published. We have always highlighted the dignity and professional excellence of the army whenever the situation called for. But it is the ISPR which could not always respond to our queries, thanks to its own limitations, when we tried to contact it for getting conformation or otherwise of any news.

Why has the ISPR felt the need to serve such a notice on the media is beyond our comprehension. We think relationship with the media is being soured quite unnecessarily by some people who have no idea how the world has changed, and how it is counter productive to try to harness the press.

There is no doubt that the caretaker government is ill advised to try and gag the press -- which will definitely create a conflict situation between the government and the press. It will also lower our image to the international community.

We demand that the chief adviser immediately issue a statement re-asserting his commitment to free press.

Carry on with the raids

The Augean stables must be cleaned up

THE drive by the army, Rab and police against some listed terror elements, black money holders and sponsors of criminal elements, better known as godfathers, has indeed gone down well with the public as something of a much-awaited move seemingly coming about at last. The arrested included persons belonging to both sides of the political divide and a huge number had gone into hiding in anticipation of apprehension and some have been debarred from leaving the country.

But no sooner had the raid made some dents giving the public a measure of relief and expectancy of a rule of law being asserted it has been reportedly suspended because the home ministry had yet to issue any directives as to what steps should be taken in dealing with the influential arrested persons.

Now that a full-fledged caretaker government is about to be in position, the raid, which has been temporarily on, hold for apparent lack of directives should be resumed in full-swing with clear-cut guidelines given to the law enforcers. The move should be carried out in a thoroughly non-partisan manner devoid of any witch hunting whatsoever. The very purpose of the raid would be negated if it is selective in any way and if the criminals are not prosecuted in a fool-proof manner to be eventually convicted. The way such elements have spread their tentacles across the society and the huge money they have amassed by default of law enforcement only make it imperative that the move against them doesn't fizzle out into a half-hearted one; it is taken to its logical, effective conclusion.

Such elements being harboured by major political parties have moved from strength to strength and with black money they could buy party nominations or sponsor candidates of their choice who would be ultimately held ransom to the benefactors' sweet will. They are the root cause of the abysmal criminalisation of society and polity and must, therefore, be weeded out with a relentless campaign before the upcoming general election.

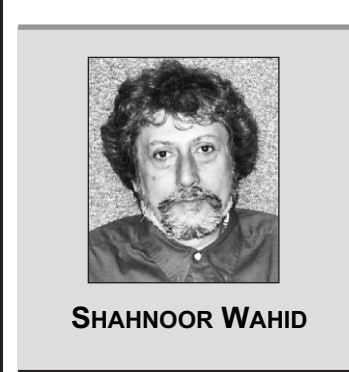


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Oh, those meddling foreigners ...

Diary of a heartbroken politician



WE are not happy at all. On the contrary, we are now very, very angry at the turn of events.

Only a day before we were so happy, looking cute in our comfortable office rooms, we were happily practicing target shooting on close relatives, eating singaras and guffawing at the pitiable state of affairs in the country.

You see, such a pitiable state of affairs is good news for us politicians who could become billionaires in a couple of years in a poor country like Bangladesh (it was hard work believe me).

So, for us the mantra is: the worse, the better. Only the other day we were patting each other's backs in glee as the "yellow brick road" to power looked so clear and so smooth.

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

Now, with the state of emergency clamped, we shall not be able to serve the people of the country. You see, we were born to rule. It is our birthright. There cannot be anyone else in this country but us who could go to power and rule. Therefore, we shall have to be strong and get united. Once again we shall have to start plotting and polluting, controlling and conniving, scheming and stifling everything that is decent, democratic, civil and orderly. You see, we thrive in disorder.

The throne at the end of the road looked so large and so close. Plan A was working perfectly well for us. Ah! Only ten more days to go and then power would have been ours, waiting there for us to grab once again.

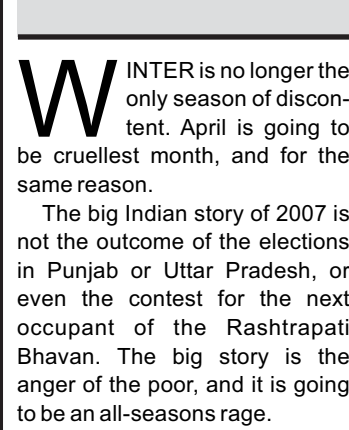
But, no! It was not to be! At least not under Plan A! Suddenly, we found out that things were not working anymore according to the plan.

The planted agents at the right places failed and faltered. And then the worst happened! Powerful people from distant shores were seen moving about the city on strange missions. We sensed intrigue in the air.

What are they up to, we wondered? Credible election ... all party participation ... international acceptability ... rejection ... no cooperation!

Why are they talking in a language we do not understand?

Anger mismanagement



WINTER is no longer the only season of discontent. April is going to be cruellest month, and for the same reason.

The big Indian story of 2007 is not the outcome of the elections in Punjab or Uttar Pradesh, or even the contest for the next occupant of the Rashtrapati Bhavan. The big story is the anger of the poor, and it is going to be an all-seasons rage.

Elections are a derivative rather than a primary story, since results will be a consequence of the heat at the ground level of democracy.

The message is the same, whether from Singur and Nandigram in Bengal or Pune in Maharashtra, where a planned Special Economic Zone has been put in abeyance: the peasant will not permit economic development as his expense.

Either the means will have to be found to make him a partner, or he will find the means to despoil the balance sheet. No brand, however sacred, is exempt. There cannot be another business house in India with a reputation for integrity as high as Tata's.

The Tata House has an envi-

able track record in the east, creating a major town, Jamshedpur, out of a steel factory, and building a network of social services out of their business profits. In politics, there is certainly no brand more closely identified with the poor than the CPI(M), flag bearer of the Left.

If Tata and CPI(M) are under siege in Bengal, what chance do others have? It is only a matter of time before the simmering in other states comes to a boil.

Fire encourages fire. The poor are not interested in waiting for an election to give vent to their anger. Buddhadeb Bhattacharya led his party to an unprecedented victory only a few months ago, but that triumph is already looking weary.

One might point out that whoever wrote the destiny of Mamata Banerjee, now leading the Singur agitation, was not a benevolent god. Her popularity seems to peak just after an election, rather than just before one.

So what is the solution: to stop all car projects or Special Economic Zones? That is defeatist. Before we attempt an answer, it is necessary to understand the nature of the question.

Let us turn to Jharkhand, a state whose chief minister blandly admits that only three districts are under the government's control (maybe this has dropped to two in the few weeks since he made the statement). The rest are more or less ruled by Naxalites, bolstered by support from tribes.

The tribes have not moved towards the extreme overnight, or without cause. It was gradual progression. They were with the Congress in the fifties, when Jawaharlal Nehru promised a tryst with destiny; and moved Left in the sixties when that tryst got postponed.

They tried variations of the Left-band, from the CPI to the individual radicalism of a maverick like AK Roy. Then came the tribal-specific Jharkhand "revolutionary" parties, led by men like Sibhu Soren, currently in both jail and parliament: he has been convicted of murder, but parliament retains him as member because he belongs to the ruling alliance.

The Maoist gun is a symbol of their despair with elective politics and the parties that have turned democracy into a corrupt oligarchy.

Jharkhand has a large Muslim population. Muslims in Bihar were early victims of economic development. It was not a deliberate attempt to victimise them.

to the Emerald City where the Wizard of Odd lived so securely.

He was kept in such a well-guarded place, surrounded by our own people so that none could go near him. He was doing a good job really, until that eventful morning when strange people barged in and persuaded him to read out a letter filled with strange words.

He has profoundly disappointed us, our clan I mean, though we have heard that his words have made most of the people heave a sigh of relief.

But I wonder why. Why people are so ungrateful. Just because we could not control the market price; just because we could not control the oil price; just because we could not give them electricity and fertiliser; just because our loyal policemen shot them down; just because we allowed militants to become too powerful and kill innocent people; just because our people tampered with BCS and other exam questions; just because we arrested people by the thousand before any political program; just because ...?

Don't they see that we have given them numerous satellite channels to be entertained when they go hungry? Don't they see that there is no one to question

how you acquire wealth and become filthy rich?

Don't they see that we almost eliminated the anti-corruption bureau so that our people could go about doing as they pleased? Don't they see that we have kept the civil administration guys at our beck and call (remember Uttara?)? Don't they see that we have kept the judiciary under our grip so that we may arrange bail for murderers and land grabbers, and stop the hearing of a case any time we wanted to?

Now, haven't we done all these things for the people?

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Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

change in the winner-takes-all approach. We don't have an economic policy. We have a sweepstakes.

Political parties enter elections still fixated on traditional group formations. While realities like caste and religion remain important determinants, there is a renewed, if not entirely new, identity emerging on a parallel track, an affiliation around poverty.

The anger of those who will not accept injustice, or indifference, in the name of economic growth will cause the decisive swings in the elections of 2007. Discontent will not be dormant. Weakness at the top will encourage extremists of all kinds.

The Uifa terrorists of Assam, who killed 70 Biharis, were an omen of a more virulent future. The government cannot remain static when the electoral earth is trembling, and Naxalite violence has made even the semblance of governance impossible in half the country.

If the central government does not remake itself, it will wither at gathering speed: stability is something more than the addition of numbers. Marxists have had their couple of years of joy, but power without responsibility will not work much longer.

They will have to enter government, and demand fresh priorities in economic policy.

There isn't much time. The key to Delhi lies in the outcome of the assembly elections in Punjab in February and Uttar Pradesh in April, for an indirect reason: provincial MLAs have a vote in the elections for the president of India, scheduled for later this summer.

A sharp defeat for the Congress, which is the principal UPA partner in the contest, will reduce the government vote. Final numbers will be known only after April, but they don't look very comfortable for the government.

Dr Manmohan Singh's alliance consists of family (the Congress, with all the plum jobs), brothers (like Lalu Yadav and the Marxists), distant cousins like Sharad Pawar, and despised outcastes like Mulayam Singh's Samajwadi Party (SP).

If the SP votes against the ruling UPA nominee in a secret ballot he could be defeated, making Dr Singh's government untenable. Any pre-contest deal would necessitate a bargain, with Mulayam Singh and Amar Singh doing most of the talking.

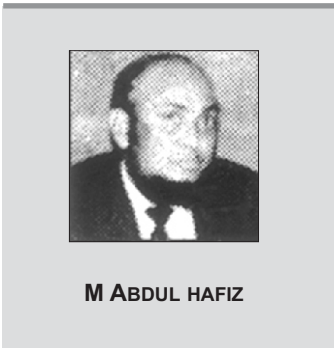
Logic suggests that the prime minister should invite this strong group of MPs to join his government, but Mulayam Singh is not going to be content with a marginal portfolio.

At all events, a combination of agitation and unrest on the ground, and turbulence at the top, will change the character of the government, even if it does not change the government itself.

Has this confused you? No one claimed Indian politics was easy to understand. Why do you think so many Indian politicians depend so heavily on astrologers to foretell the future? Because only astrologers can simplify sequence and consequence with such exemplary conviction. It is so much easier than working things out for yourself.

M J Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

The rape of Iraq



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PERSPECTIVES

It is not "war as politics by other means" -- it is, rather, war as free market opening by other means. It will give the US full access to the epicentre of the energy wars and the perfect geo-strategic location for "taming" in the near future both Russia and China. The silence of the US corporate media on this is also stratospheric. It is now only a question of how and when this law will be passed -- once that is done, the rape of Iraq will be complete, and that will be the last nail in the coffin of Iraq's fate.

turning Islam into truly a universal religion, no more constrained by geography. Baghdad the great capital of the caliphate was catapulted to the centre of the world.

From 786-809 under fabled Harun al-Rashid, Baghdad established relations with China's Tang dynasty and Emperor Charlemagne in Europe. Baghdad gave the world astronomy, alchemy, hydraulics, diplomacy, fiscal administration,

and postal service. Up to the early 12th century it remained the most important intellectual centre of the world. Modern Iraq was then yet to be born.

Modern Iraq was the creation of European colonial power. It was only after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire after World War I that the British carved it out of an area known as Mesopotamia. Baghdad continued to remain a capital -- now of Iraq.

Baghdad had been under siege by the Assyrians and later by Cyrus the Great from Persia. But it was only in 1258 that Baghdad was sacked by the hordes of Mongols riding their lightning quick horses under the command of Hulagu, Genghis Khan's grandson. Legend has it that he erected a pyramid of 700,000 skulls out of his victims. In 1401 another invader, the Turko-Mongol Tamerlan (Timur the Lame) devastated Baghdad

yet again.

In 2003 came the Christian army of George W Bush with the refrain of "shock and awe."

From the beginning of it the comparisons with Hulagu and Tamerlan were vivid in popular imagination. Over time Baghdadis, Sunni or Shia, were saying that they would dictate their rights over the occupiers. That's what is now happening. It's a wrenching story with rivers of real blood and a terrible accumulation of real corpses.

The story was scripted in Washington and the plot wouldn't be advancing were it not for the United States. The US bears the legal and moral responsibility for the destruction of the fabled capital of the caliphate. It is in this contest that the current avalanche of Iraq-related new-speak in the US should be placed.

The recent months in Iraq have reflected the hellish mechanism unleashed by the invasion and occupation, the daily gruesome banquet of death provoked by state-sponsored terror, counter-insurgency stoked by sectarian hatred, or the total collapse of social contract.

The logic of extermination of society and culture as well as their heritage was in-built in the process since 2003. In fact, the systematic annihilation of 2-3% of the entire Iraqi population according to the study by The Lancet, not to mention the one million people displaced since March 2003, follow more than 500,000 children who died during the 1990s as victims of UN sanctions.

Iraq has been systematically destroyed for more than 15 years. The great irony is this that all this death and destruction is, for the US administration, just a

minor detail in "the big picture."

In a perverse replay of what happened in the jungles of Vietnam, the Pentagon has lost the asymmetric guerrilla war raging in the Sunni Belt which is in favour of attacking the occupiers, no holds barred.

It is true that Saddam's regime had already started to disintegrate from inside after the war of 1991 -- a process coupled with the devastating effects of UN sanctions. Yet none of this translated into the western perception of Shia-Sunni division, and Saddam alone knew the magic keeping people from diverse origins under his tight grip. Contrary to the western propaganda myth, Iraqi civil society as a whole, apart from few factions, abhors civil war.

The real, not virtual, future of Iraq will be decided now with the enactment of the oil law -- which

is in fact the debt for oil program concocted and imposed by the IMF. This is the point of the US invasion -- a return on investment on the hundreds of billion of dollars of US tax payer money spent.

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Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BIUSS.