

Tragedy of 21st August

Grossest example of criminal investigation stifled by partisan politics

WHAT happened on August 21, 2004 at the city's Bangabandhu Avenue is a blot on the country's political culture. The grenade attack took a toll of at least 23 lives and overtly brought the element of terrorism into politics in blatant violation of all norms of civility and humanity.

While the law must take its own course and everything has to be judged strictly from the legal point of view, the question as to how the then four-party alliance government handled the issue can hardly be evaded. The attacks on the Awami League rally which also injured the party's chief and the then leader of the opposition were vicious and barbaric. Yet, the government of the day could not do anything beyond setting up a one-member judicial commission, the report of which was never made public. It was anything but farcical and so was the ostentatious attempt to bring in foreign agencies to probe the crime -- no cooperation was reportedly extended to them.

People have every right to know why there was no progress in the investigation and at what stage it is stuck now. The general query is: how could a crime of such magnitude fail to spur the then government into taking a just and non-partisan stand against the killers?

AL leader SAMS Kibria's assassination in an equally brutal manner on January 27, 2005 only confirmed the truth that the failure to punish the August 21 killers gave all such criminals a kind of impunity. Here, too, not much was heard after a ruling party MP was charge-sheeted for his complicity in the gruesome crime. The question arises, who were working from behind the scenes to make sure that the killers would never be brought to justice?

One may also recall that the immediate past government failed completely to contain religious extremism which resulted in cultural activities coming under a fierce assault by the obscurantist forces. The bombing cases are yet to be solved.

Now, these are all examples of politics becoming devoid of morality and humanity. But such politics cannot have a place in a civilised society. As for now, the perpetrators of the ghastly crimes and their patrons should be brought to light and made to face the due legal processes -- something that they have been able to evade so far.

Reckless abuse of power and corruption

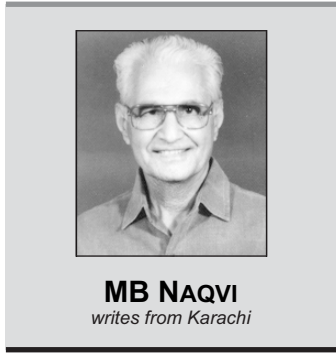
Find out similar instances and punish all perpetrators

WE are flabbergasted, outraged and hard done by at the most blatant form of corruption committed through contemptible abuse of power during the erstwhile four-party alliance government as revealed yesterday through our front-page investigative report titled Houses up for grabs. We have earlier commented on how agahst we were at the magnitude of expropriation of government khas lands including lakes and river banks but now the public are getting acquainted with an added dimension to plundering of national wealth.

We now come to know that out of 18 government houses on prime locations at Gulshan, Dhanmondi and Banani, at least a dozen were allegedly bought off at throwaway prices by high profile people like the two sons and relatives of former prime minister including a host of ministers and lawmakers of the former government. Rajuk sold these costly real estate property through auction. It is a legitimate question to ask as to why the auction was necessitated in the first place? The mystery is yet to be revealed. But the collusion between Rajuk and the purchasers can be gauged from the fact that the so-called highest bidders acquired the houses and property at an overall cost of Tk 65 crore while the market price was estimated at Tk 300 crore. Much of the property was bought by concealing the names of the real beneficiaries using front men and there have been also complaints lodged by dispossessed original owners in some cases. The matter must be gone into in greater detail.

We regard all this as state-sponsored looting of public wealth. There must be many more instances of such reckless expropriation of national property just waiting to be unearthed. We urge the caretaker government to roll its search engine on to find out the fullest extent of the anti-people crime and ensure that deterrent punishment is meted out to not only the persons who committed it but also those who colluded with them. It is not enough to redesignate 32 Rajuk officials, including former chairman and the ex-chief engineer as officers on special duty. The ACC should probe them thoroughly, let alone pursue the cases of those already in jail.

Two perspectives



MB NAQVI
writes from Karachi

IN the current political situation two major perspectives dominate the political scene; they contend with each other. On one side, President General Pervez Musharraf and his underlings have underlined several main points. Musharraf says it is the responsibility of every citizen to ensure the sanctity of and reverence for ... armed forces.

Explaining the context, he said that what happened in the Supreme Court auditorium was an "assault on the superior court." The gravamen of his charge was that the lawyers had "humiliated" the armed forces.

From there his ministers took over -- they went on to threaten the press and the media: "the media must abide by the code of conduct approved by Pemra." Asserting that the media had been "granted" unprecedented freedom, they

PLAIN WORDS

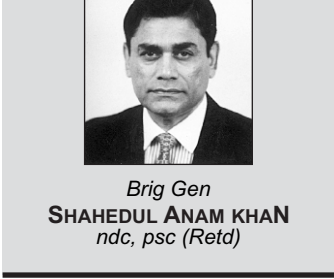
As for the constitution, the poor darling has been mangled, and the present regime came to power not through the constitutional or legal process but through a coup d'etat. Whatever political gerrymandering may have been done by effecting defections from other parties to create Q League in next to no time, it cannot claim constitutional sanctity. The president himself implied that the freedom of the press he has "granted" can be taken away as easily; the hint is loud and clear. For the rest, May 12 explains the state of high political affairs in the country.

implied that what had been gifted could be taken away. This is the logic of Musharraf's philosophy.

In any case, Mr. Muhammad Ali Durrani and others have "underlined the need for responsible journalism, and avoiding exaggeration in reporting judicial crisis." Among the duties of the media he emphasised were "they must not demoralise the nation by spreading despondency, distortion and ambiguity, while submerging the achievements of the government in the propaganda of vested interests."

In short, they should assist in what the regime is trying to achieve. Their definition of responsible journalism would require the media to be subservient propaganda arm of the regime.

However, panic in governing circles is now apparent. The higher

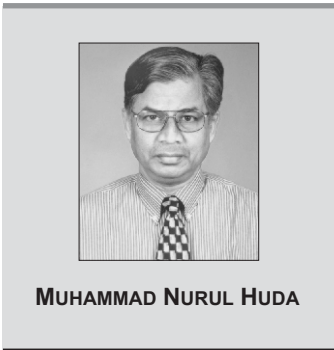


Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
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WE ought to feel happy that Bangladesh has reached such a point of "eminence" that it has merited the only superpower to demonstrate more than a passing interest in our country, which had for most part of its existence been relegated to insignificance, being, to them, nothing more than a dot in the backwaters of the Indian Ocean. That was our worth right through the end of the Cold War and up to September 11, 2002.

Things have changed quite a bit since then. We became a willing supporter of the US war on terror in as much as we welcomed the anti-Taliban offensive in Afghanistan. But, we went along unwittingly, and unwillingly too, with the US occupation of Iraq, as did most countries of the region and outside, fearing the backlash of failing to be on the right side of President Bush's "either you are with us or against us" policy.

The government chose to be on the right side of the US, a policy that found little resonance in the popular



Even the most naive have been baffled by the depth and rapacity of the corruption of those that have been apprehended in the recent anti-corruption drive. However, we seem to forget that no stigma was attached to black money in our society. Incentives had been given to black-marketeers, tax evaders, drug barons, gun-runners and smugglers.

In Bangladesh, the really corrupt elements are the ones who had condemned corruption in the strongest possible terms in public speeches and after dinner talks. Their constant hypocrisy and contradictions have not surprised anyone. The corrupt have been tolerated in all social gatherings. They never encountered ridicule and insult.

The corrupt in our midst found time to relax, to enjoy family life; to go on vacations and to take proper care of their health; they had no qualms about displaying their ill-gotten worldly possessions. Therefore, despite the hazards, many had joined the ranks of the corrupt, given the lack of accountability and general acceptance of corruption as a way of life in the country.

Whether one likes it or not, the fact remains that negative politics and shady politicians, for reasons better left unsaid, occupy a disproportionately large portion of our media reports. The cynics, however, say that, in varying degrees, the politicians are the promoters-distributors of favours, more so in

echelons look like compounding their earlier mistakes by committing new ones. Sedition cases are being registered against prominent lawyers.

Courts are clearly under pressure from the government, which is hinting at various measures that will ultimately result in a purge of recalcitrant judges; the legal wizards of the regime can be trusted to think of altering the topography of the judicial field.

The president himself has threatened to take recourse to "extra-constitutional" methods to ensure continuity (of his regime). On the other hand, the judicial crisis has, in fact, put the Supreme Court judges on trial; the full weight of an aroused public opinion is weighing them down.

The second perspective, in

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

There is, of course, a vast difference in what the political parties call "better days" and the "better days" that the people are hoping for. And while the political parties may be in hurry for their better days the people are willing to wait a little while longer for it. That is what our friends and well-wishers must understand.

mind, primarily because of the lies and deceits that the US government resorted to, to justify "Operation Enduring Freedom."

Coming to the recent past, recall the suggestion made to the US government by a high-powered security delegation consisting of, among others, retired generals of the US military, which visited Bangladesh last month. It called on the US government to accord high priority to charting the future course of US-Bangladesh relationship. In fact, the delegation went so far as to recommend that Bangladesh be considered a strategic partner of the US.

These are very significant developments in the relational matrix between a superpower and a developing country. We would have felt flattered had it not been for the fact that it was not so much for Bangladesh, per se, but rather for realising its strategic objectives in the region that the US planners are contemplating such arrangements.

Apart from that, the political developments in Bangladesh occasioned comments from the State Department's spokesperson, ranging from the urgency and the

STRAIGHT LINE

It is now generally accepted that the election-oriented political culture provides incentive to explicit illegal practices. During elections, a large amount of unaccounted money comes into circulation, and it has not been possible to effectively halt that. A large chunk of such money is spent for the musclemen or thugs, for whom election time is booming business at almost no investment.

swappers tried to become guardians of public morals.

It was also the time when the sense of propriety disappeared from public life and religion was put to unpredeented misuse. Accountability, both administrative and financial, was at its lowest ebb, and conspicuous consumption was officially patronized. All in all, there was a deliberate effort to convert our society into a conglomerate of self-serving lesser individuals.

The time has come to cleanse our political and public life. The so-called over-bearing political heavyweights, whose real worth is doubtful, need to be exposed so that people can choose at the appropriate time.

Let the media be unequivocal and forthright in saying that the single-minded pursuit of money impoverishes the mind, shrivels the imagination and desiccates the heart. We should not take any more wrong turns at the crossroads, or misuse our time and take gold for cross and dross for gold. We can face any crisis if we have the facts.

Thinking men and women must take the trouble of giving public expression to their views, otherwise the loud and vociferous voice of an incompetent minority will pass as the voice of the polity. They have to overcome the inactivity resulting from fatalism. The falsehood of the political brats cannot be allowed to have too long an innings. Identity of views may not be possible, but harmony of goals is. The profligate must not be allowed to overtake the pious in the political battle.

need to give a timeline for elections, to reminding the caretaker government not to forget the legal obligation of the state towards, and of the need to follow the procedures in dealing with, the gentlemen hauled up in the government's anti-corruption drive.

What has Bangladesh done to elicit so much US interest, and the status of a potential US strategic partner? We will leave that question for some other time. For now, we will dwell on another US visitor to Bangladesh.

Mr. Milam is an old acquaintance of Bangladesh. But I believe renewing old acquaintance was not the primary motive of his end-of-May visit, going by the comments he made during the visit and also in his bi-weekly column in the Daily Times of Pakistan of May 30. We will expand on some of his comments since those have great bearing on the bi-lateral relationship between the two countries.

The purpose of his visit was to get a first-hand account of what is happening, and what is going to happen in Bangladesh on the political front, in the near future. And, of course, his opinion, he being an

expert on the region, would be of help to the US establishment in getting a clearer picture of the likely turn of events in Bangladesh.

And the fact that the Woodrow Wilson Center, of which he is a Senior Policy Scholar, is a bi-partisan establishment having no political agenda to serve, his suggestions will be particularly acceptable.

Apparently, the establishments and think-tanks that help inform decisions of the US policy planners are not clear about the likely future course of actions of the caretaker government. They are very anxious that the democratic arrangement that is on hold now may be put permanently on hold by a different dispensation, as sequel to the compulsions of circumstances beyond the caretaker government's control.

That is why his very first public comments, on the conditions that will determine the future US-Bangladesh relationship, which he considered to be at a critical point now, must be taken seriously by our authorities. The former US ambassador at a seminar at the BEI said that Bangladesh's future relations

with the United States hinge on whether the caretaker government is successful, or the military takes over in future.

He cautioned that relations between the two countries might turn for the worse if Bangladesh fails to "return to a revived democratic system." We will be wrong in dismissing such cautionary notes because they come from a person not directly linked with the US government; that it echoes the attitude of the US policy makers we can be sure.

Perhaps Washington is still unsure of the military's role in a future political arrangement. Even after our special envoy's trip to the US to assuage any misgivings that US authorities might have in this regard, we are cautioned in a veiled fashion about what might befall our lot should we fail to return to the democratic ways.

However, one is glad to note that his apprehensions have been put to rest after his interactions with various personalities, including the CAS. That is the impression one gets from his column, entitled "Dhaka's spring of eternal hope," in the Daily Times of Pakistan of May 30, wherein he states very clearly that the junior and mid-level officers of the army appear to have very little interest in running the country. I presume very few will have any objection to theirs being interested, nonetheless, in how the country is being run.

One would like to hope that Mr. Milam will be able to convey to the US policy makers that the government is trying its best to overcome

adequately compensated by the state, although the compensation may not prove to be satisfying for a capable professional. But then, that is the price one has to pay for being in public service.

The important issue here is that after one ceases to hold power, one goes back to one's previous profession or occupation. In other words, it is expected that politicians will be in definite professions or occupations, and have the means to support themselves.

How close our political scene is to the proposition described above may be the subject matter of serious discussion. Do we have people in the political scene whose actual sources of income cannot be ascertained?

One has to bear in mind that parasitic leadership can neither inspire nor help in the creation of a healthy political culture. The political parties themselves should discuss these issues seriously because, barring honourable exceptions, politicians with income that can be accounted for command respect. One recommendation would be to enlist people of different professions or occupations in the parties, and to attract educated and honest people to the political mainstream.

When the initial shocks in the seventies were being absorbed, quite a number of sensational criminal cases were withdrawn on alleged political grounds. Many deaths caused by the then special forces were not even investigated, and murderous actions by politically blessed vigilante groups were not taken note of.

The situation turned for the worse with the tragic murder of the father of the nation and the four national leaders. For many years the establishment, neither legally nor appropriately, ignored these offences until a favourable political scene unfolded. Such realities do have substantial impact on the enforcement and adjudication temperament and culture.

Between 1976 and 1979 many heinous criminal cases involving

the current imbroglio. Has he not seen how the nation was subverted, and its ethos undermined, by unscrupulous and immoral persons holding the offices of ministers?

The people will not accept the likes of those who damaged our legal process for a hefty sum, to return to power. Mr. Milam has acknowledged the challenges being faced by the caretaker government, which, if left unattended, has serious portends for the country in the form of a more robust military involvement.

Not even the suffering multitudes who have endured the "benefits" of the democratic rule in the last decade and a half would wish for more vigorous military intervention. But certainly the people's hopes spring eternal in the "spring of eternal hope" for better days ahead.

Recently, the Awami League chief called upon her party workers to wait with patience for better days to come. There is, of course, a vast difference in what the political parties call "better days" and the "better days" that the people are hoping for. And while the political parties may be in hurry for their better days the people are willing to wait a little while longer for it. That is what our friends and well-wishers must understand.

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handled by the uniformed personnel.

Every act of the government is a fit subject for political reaction. All citizens are at liberty to criticize or support the official action; that is politics as it should be.

A third element that needs to be discussed is (so far) the mini clampdown on the electronic media and the general lecturing on the "freedom of the press having been given (by this government)," which carries a hint that the favour is going to be withdrawn.

In the context of this mindset, it can only be taken as a threat that the regime will control the press and the media the way previous dictators did -- the way Ayub Khan regimented the press; the way Yahya Khan withdrew his relaxation, post March 25, 1971; or the way ZA Bhutto controlled the press; and above all else how dictator Zia reversed his press policy after his second refusal to hold a free polls, and the unique way he imposed censorship on all newspapers. (There was no private radio or TV then).

As for the accuracy or otherwise of the two perspectives, an ordinary citizen is the final judge. The government claims to have achieved a great deal in the political and economic fields.

Many fault this assertion and say "look at the growing lawlessness

virtually all over the country, with frequent breakdown of law and order climaxed by the May 12 carnage in Karachi, not to mention the mayhem that Taliban-like groups are creating in northwest Pakistan, and Balochistan Liberation Army's insurgency."

As for regime's economic achievements, no matter how substantial they may be for the government and the top 15 percent of the population, they affect the population mostly adversely. The gains, instead of trickling down, are rendered nugatory by persistent high inflation rates.

As for the constitution, the poor darling has been mangled, and the present regime came to power not through the constitutional or legal process but through a coup d'etat. Whatever political gerrymandering may have been done by effecting defections from other parties to create Q League in next to no time, it cannot claim constitutional sanctity.

The president himself implied that the freedom of the press he has "granted" can be taken away as easily; the hint is loud and clear. For the rest, May 12 explains the state of high political affairs in the country.

There is no doubt that the lawyers' agitation has introduced a new factor in Pakistan politics. It can morph into a popular revolution. But many lawyers have said that their agitation is purely legal, and is

intended merely to reinstate the CJP after the constitution and the legal processes have been applied.

This is a profoundly mistaken idea. The objective character of the agitation is entirely political, as it should be: it requires stripping the military of its control over the polity. Nothing can be more political than this.

The regime rests on the support of mainly turncoats and defectors who would OK any action by the president. The strength of the regime is not in the hearts and minds of the people but rests on a bipod: the army and America.

Some people needlessly bring in Allah, which probably is a hint at the ineffable links between the Mullahs and the military; perhaps also because the way the regime is blundering into facilitating the Talibanisation process.

The lawyers will do well to look at the strength of the opponent, i.e. the regime. Needless to say that it is supported by the army, which can, in an extreme situation, impose another Martial Law.

The army itself is fully supported by Americans of most stripes. The regime has achieved marvellous success in assembling a coalition of economic elite: the feudal, big business, bankers, industrialists, civil bureaucracy and rich professionals are all behind the Musharraf regime.

As for the nominal opposition parties -- PML (N), PPP and MMA -- they entirely agree with the major policies of the regime; if they are ever associated with the regime they would happily continue the policies hitherto followed. There is no genuine opposition party of notable strength.

Thus, the regime can ignore what the Supreme Court is seized with, and decide to proceed with electing the president in uniform through the outgoing assemblies, which would then organise a 2002-like election and rule happily thereafter.

Unless, of course, the popular outrage becomes too loud and too explicit; in which case the army, with American concurrence, can impose a Martial Law. Don't forget that the president has himself said in a TV interview recently that he can resort to extra-constitutional means to maintain continuity -- to his own rule and policies.

Unless the lawyers' struggle grows into a raging and tearing movement for democracy, free elections and representative rule, the country may be in for baffling times and the worst may happen. The mind boggles at the consequences of what may be afoot.

MB Naqvi is a leading Pakistani columnist.