

Praying for calm

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

It is unfortunate and ominous that the incident of August 20 on Dhaka University campus did occur. However, the authorities concerned took swift and proper action to arrest the protests that subsequently took place from developing into anything more.

It is more or less common knowledge that CTG is already passing its days in tension because of pressure of issues like price hike of essential items, galloping inflation, post-flood rehabilitation of more than ten million people, bringing corruption down to a minimum level and holding a free, fair and credible election by December 2008.

In addition, the uncertainty of legitimising their decisions by the

next parliament is also agitating its thoughts.

Truly speaking, this government is surviving on the good will of the common people. If the people get any wrong signal because of some indiscreet acts of its partner armed forces (or the police, for that matter) the ability of the government to remain effective will be lessened.

People are silent because they are watching and waiting for election. Failure of CTG would lead to a grave crisis. Thus, no provocative action can be allowed by the government. All out efforts may be taken to cool down the rage of the students and teachers of DU through consultation among student leaders, vice chancellor and teachers, senior army officers, and designated adviser of CTG immedi-

ately. Such consultation brooks no delay.

The armed forces may realise that it is a tricky business when they are doing something even for the benefit of the people, because in doing such jobs they may be hurting the interest of some people who will certainly try to obstruct them so that they are spared of their possible loss. The government knows well that due to its strong drive some corrupt but powerful people have been badly affected financially and socially. These people are either serving sentences, or under trial or absconding or their charge-sheets are under proper processing. Some extortionists are either hiding or under trial. Their lifestyle has been badly affected.

It is fairly clear that some major

parties may lose their supporters because of increasing exposure of misdeeds like corruption, extortion, land-grabbing, tax evasion or illegal arms handling of some of their stalwarts. As such, they may try hard for failure of the government as early as possible. They may have even approached some law makers in certain countries such as US, UK, Canada and Germany with cooked up facts and figures to convince them about abuse of human rights by the CTG. They may not even hesitate trying to stop remittance of Bangladeshi expatriates. It is reported that Khaleda Zia has advised some BNP activists abroad to agitate for release of her son Tarique Rahman.

It would be unjust if we ignore the contributions of students from

1940s. In fact Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was a front-ranking student leader till 1947. In the liberation movement of Bangladesh the students not only actively participated in large numbers they also made great sacrifice in the war.

Even a dictator like Ziaur Rahman paid due importance to the students who could organise them as the largest and the strongest student body in Bangladesh. In throwing out dictator Ershad, the students played the dominant role. Thus, students are intimately involved in restoring democracy for which the CTG and the armed forces are now striving hard.

The Chhatra Sangram Parishad has come up with the following demands:

- Immediate dismissal of the

- accused army personnel.
- Withdrawal of army and police all academic institutions.
- Release of arrested students.
- Reinstating the constitutional
- Rights of the people.

It is learnt that teachers of DU have agreed with the demands of the students. One of the difficulties in handling this incident is that the armed forces are not under the chief adviser. They are under the president, as per the provision of our constitution. However, we do not think it may pose any big problem because this government is jointly run by civilians and the military. Both are responsible for successful running of the government.

It is reported that both army and police have already been with-

drawn from the DU campus. They are, however, patrolling the campus from outside. The demand for free treatment of injured students appears to be reasonable. As for disciplinary action against the accused army personnel, the army will doubtless take the necessary steps. In regard to lifting of emergency, it may be little delayed due to this ominous incident because it is reported that the students were joined by a number of displaced vendors, hawkers, small shopkeepers and college students.

In view of the grim situation, the CTG did not have any other option except to impose curfew in Dhaka city and five other divisional headquarters. Needless to say that if no peaceful atmosphere prevail during the preparation of the voter list,

election may be delayed and commitment of holding election by December 2008 may not be possible.

Thus our fervent appeal will be to all concern to remain calm and cool during the coming 16 months. We wish to utilise the opportunity (under the CTG) to banish the land-grabbers, tree-cutters (officials of forest department), constructors of illegal structures, and tax evaders. Let us wish for a successful solution of the crisis arising out of misunderstanding between DU students and some military personnel.

The writer is a former joint secretary.

Remembering a unique mutiny

SAAD S. KHAN

THIS year was the 150th anniversary of the bloody events of 1857. The year marks the beginning of the end (for 90 years) of South Asia ruled by the sons of soil. The events that followed led the symbolic power change seat from the imperial palace in Delhi to Buckingham Palace in London by 1858. It was then even the Peacock Throne of the Indian emperors as well as the legendary dazzling diamond of the imperial crown, known as Koh-i-Noor (literally: the mount of light) was looted and physically taken to Britain by the mutineers.

In this year's commemorations in India and Pakistan, since most of the areas where conflagration started or the heaviest fighting took place, like Delhi, the imperial capital, Agra, Khansi, Ahmadabad and Meerut, lie in present day India, celebrations there were much more emotional.

Tens of thousands of Indian people marched from Meerut to Agra to trace the path of the imperial troops who came to succor the ailing emperor, exactly 150 years ago, and had declared his sovereignty over the whole of India.

At the Red Fort in Delhi, the prime minister of India Manmohan Singh addressed the celebration and paid rich tributes to the warriors of 1857 who laid down their lives for the defense of the empire. The prime minister reminded the South Asians that it was in the true spirit of inter-faith unity between Muslims and Hindus that all came together to defend the emperor who was a Muslim. In fact, all the seven major

dynasties that ruled India since it started its journey towards a political unity had been Muslim ones.

In Pakistan, the National Commission for Historical and Cultural Research held a widely attended symposium in which the historians debated the causes and effects of the war and its real nature. President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz of Pakistan also in their messages paid rich tributes to the defenders of South Asia who tried to resist impending colonization of their land and tried to sustain the moribund empire from the Western powers' "scramble for Asia." Calls were made to make a monument to remember the countless heroes and heroines, five hundred thousands of whom were butchered mercilessly by British troops after the defeat of the emperor who was exiled to Rangoon, where he died and got buried five years later in 1862. It was also demanded that the remains of the emperor be brought back and re-buried with full military honours either in India or in Pakistan.

The British call the war of 1857 as the great Mutiny. Mutiny, it definitely was, but not a "great" one. It was a mutiny of British officers of the company in the service of the Indian emperor against him, and not the other way round. That is why I have chosen the word "unique" for this mutiny since it is the first major mutiny the facts of which have been so disfigured by the new British rulers that our own textbooks sixty years after independence still call it as a mutiny of the Indian emperor against his British ser-

vants/subjects. What a mutilation and dishonesty towards history as well as a linguistic paradox. Mutiny is a rebellion by servants against master. A master cannot be said to be rebelling against servants.

Let us understand the nature of the 1857 war first. In many parts of the Indian empire, it had been a franchise issue just like the governance itself in the last century of the imperial rule had been. Most provinces were fully or semi-independent and owed little or nominal allegiance to the emperor at Delhi. This all changed when the subjects of the emperor felt the existential threat to the empire due to the division and fragmentation.

Bakht Khan, a military general from the independent state of Awadh, descended in and defended Delhi, while taking over the command of the imperial forces on the emperor's behalf. The Rani of Jhansi, Satay Ram, Maulvi Ahmadullah Khan, and many local political and military leaders rose to the occasion, professed their allegiance to the emperor and tried to expel the rapacious British servants of the East India Company from the India soil. It is a misfortune that neither in India nor in Pakistan, any of the top military medals is named after the military heroes of the 1857 war.

Now, let us shed some light on theoretical part, on war's historiography, that is. 1857 was not a war of independence for the Indians since the British had not conquered India till that point in time. True, the Company was ruling three presidencies but that was area-wise less than one tenth of India, and in fact, even there it was ruling and collect-

ing the taxes in the name of emperor to whom they paid an annual tribute.

Till as late as 1835, Persian had remained the imperial language for the court and the country and official one for the Company too. The Company's so-called governor of Bengal paid ritual obeisance to the emperor every year. The emperor's was the de jure government and Company was exercising de facto delegated authority mainly on revenue and law and order matters in a limited part of his domains.

Same was the case of around 564 other rulers, sultans, dukes and princes, who were ruling their own mini-kingdoms within the empire. Bahadur Shah Zafar, the 38th ruler of united India and the 17th and the last one from the Mughul dynasty, was on the throne.

At the beginning of the outbreak of hostilities, history tells us, the old and ailing poet-emperor was not hopeful of winning the war to expel the British intruders, but seeing the zeal of his subjects, he gave in and accepted to lead them as their symbolic head. Since it was the emperor who wanted to get rid of the British, it would be frivolous to call it as an independence struggle since emperor is not supposed to be getting "independence" from disloyal subjects. We can call his campaign as the one of retribution towards his British subjects who had shown seditionist tendencies, i.e. the officers of the British East India Trading Company that was operating under a license by the great ancestor of the incumbent, Emperor Shah Jehan in consideration of medical help that the British

doctors had provided in a serious burn injury to a princess.

It may be recalled that Indian sub-continent boasts of one of the oldest civilisations of the known history. The Indus valley civilisation whose relics are found in Punjab province of what is now Pakistan, date back to 2500 BC when people lived in properly designed urban settlements and were fairly advanced in arts and learning. The Arab Muslims first conquered and annexed parts of India between 668 to 712 AD. The latter date marks the conquest of Deebal a town near the present day Karachi, now a bustling port metropolis of 12 million people, by the Arabs. Between 998 and 1030 AD the Afghans, who had by then turned Muslims under Sultan Mahmood of Gazna, invaded India seventeen times for plunder. By 1206, the Muslims had captured Delhi and at least the northern half of the sub-continent had become a political unity under Sultan Kubluddin Aibak, the first Muslim ruler of Delhi and the founder of slaves' dynasty. The rule continued for around seven centuries under successive dynasties like the Tughlaqs, the Khiljis, the Syeds, the Lodhis, and the Suris. It was under the Mughals that the whole of India came under a single rule. By the early 19th century, anarchy and chaos best described Indian political landscape. A trading company, named East India Company became powerful and a time came that even the emperor was apprehensive of its power. Though the trouble started with Indian soldiers of the Company over the use of gun-lids allegedly made of cow fat, but once the emperor saw his



Bahadur Shah Zafar in 1858, just after his show trial in Delhi and before his departure for exile in Rangoon. This is possibly the only photograph ever taken of a Mughal emperor.

opportunity to throw his weight behind and try to get rid of the British it became a national struggle. Now it was emperor and his loyalists fighting against the ones, whom the emperor wanted out of his realms.

Let's un-write the British-centric history of the 1857 war and let's unread their interpretation. Let us call it a mutiny on board HMS (sic) Indian empire, where the British

servants mutinied, captured the palace, deposed the emperor, murdered the crown prince and four other princes, and then went on to slay countless of men and women on the streets in cold blood. The Company captured the Red Fort and turned for political guidance to Windsor Castle which decided to annex India to British domains and company's rule ended no sooner had it formally began. British rule

had some positive effects, but, and large, it was a 90 year-long spell of oppression and suppression.

The writer is a Research Consultant with Juris-Consults and an Oxford-published scholar on politics of the Muslim world.

America a Chinese protectorate?

MAHMOOD ELAHI

WHILE it is embroiled in a mindless war in the name of spreading democracy in Iraq, once-dominant America is becoming an economic protectorate of China. And the United States is trying to put the blame for its own failures on China. Lyn Cockburn, a columnist for The Ottawa Sun, recently wrote: "Watch the evening news or pick up a newspaper and you're almost certain to see something about China's many sins - economic and moral." Cockburn has succinctly pointed out the tendency in the West, especially in the US, to find "a big bad guy" to test its mettle. The Soviet Union served this purpose during the Cold War. Now, Russia is not as powerful as it used to be. After 9/11, al-Qaeda provided some kind of threat. But it is too amorphous, too weak militarily to become a threat on its own, despite the Bush administration's best efforts to make it one. So China, with its large population and growing industrial might, seems to fit the description.

By the end of 2006, China achieved several important milestones: It replaced the US as Japan's biggest trading partner, it replaced Japan as America's second biggest trading partner after Canada (for a brief period, it even replaced Canada as America's biggest trading partner), and it replaced the US as the European Union's biggest trading partner. And it surpassed America as the world's second biggest trading nation after Germany.

It is also interesting to note that US-China trading is a one-sided affair. While China exported a staggering \$287 billion to the US, America exported a paltry \$55

billion to China, leaving a \$230 billion trade surplus in China's favour. By the end of July, China's trade surplus for the first half of this year rose to \$112.5 billion, marking the first time that it has exceeded \$100 billion in a six-month period. If the economy keeps growing at this blistering pace, China's total trade will reach more than \$2 trillion this year, surpassing Germany as the world's biggest trading nation.

These would be staggering numbers anytime. As Goldman Sachs, one of America's biggest investors put it: "This level of trade surplus is unprecedented for China or any other major economy in the world." It is also doubly surprising, given all the bad news about the safety of Chinese products. The U.S. and other governments are threatening to put restrictions on Chinese imports. But none of this seems to have put slightest crimp on the demand for cheap goods from China. Shoppers in the United States, Canada, and other Western nations continue to snap up televisions, computers, cameras, shoes, garments, and toys that flow in an ever-swelling caravan of container ships from China.

The United States blames China for deliberately keeping its currency under-devalued to gain unfair advantage. But the American policymakers may be reminded that both Japan and Germany have been able to maintain a balanced trade relationships with China. It only shows how uncompetitive the US economy has become while America remains embroiled in a ruinous war in Iraq.

It is undeniable that American demand for Chinese goods, more than undervalued Chinese currency, helps Chinese surplus to grow by leaps and bounds. Despite the US Congress's griping about

the unfair advantage of an undervalued yuan, the Chinese currency has, in fact, risen against the US dollar by 8.9 percent since China stopped pegging to the greenback in July, 2005. This suggests that the yuan alone can't be the reason for China's rising trade surplus vis-à-vis the United States.

The surplus is a product of demand and supply: the huge demand of America's consumers for relatively inexpensive Chinese goods and China's ability to supply such goods in vast quantities are the real reasons behind China's success. Consumers in the United States, meanwhile, save between \$70 billion to \$100 billion a year because they can buy cheaper products from China. They also enjoy lower borrowing costs and easier home ownership because China uses some of its trading surplus to finance the US budget deficit, helping to keep interest rates down.

If China didn't buy the US Treasury Bonds, the United States would be obliged to borrow in the open market, pushing the interest rates up and causing private borrowers to pay more. The United States can help itself by keeping budget deficit down, and by exporting goods that China needs. Both Germany and Japan mostly export cars and trucks, heavy machineries, and high-tech products, which China needs. The United States should try to regain a competitive advantage vis-à-vis Japan and Germany for such goods, instead of opening more McDonald outlets in Beijing and Shanghai.

The US budget deficit is the result of President George W Bush's misguided policy of tax cut. It may be recalled that when former US President Bill Clinton entered the White House, his first act was to

raise taxes on wealthy Americans to stem a runaway budget deficit left behind by earlier Republican administrations. Clinton's tax-hike, denounced by the Republicans as "a passport to recession," balanced the budget, produced a surplus, lowered the long-term interest rate, and triggered the longest economic boom in recent history. Bush has squandered the surplus by his staggering \$1.67 trillion tax cut, producing a massive \$400 billion deficit. Now China, by lending massive sums, is bankrolling America's budget deficit.

China's economic and financial clout is underscored by the fact that it has accumulated well over a trillion dollars in US currency reserves, with at least \$400 billion of US government treasury notes, and it is now second only to Japan in holding American debt. If China decides to unload the US dollars it possesses, it will have catastrophic implications for the American dollar, which will plummet in value and the interest rate will rise steeply leading to a deep recession. Although China will not do such a thing because it has a stake in the U.S. dollar, the fact that it holds the key to the dollar's stability speaks volumes about its economic prowess. China is also using some of its surplus to provide loans to poor countries, especially African countries.

With such dependence, America is hardly in a position to bully China. In fact, by trying to paint China as a "big bad guy," the US risks biting the hand that feeds it.

Mahmood Elahi is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Recirculation of elites in Thai politics

THANONG KHANTHONG

THAI politicians usually come and go through a process known in political theory as the "circulation of elites." According to this theory, about 20 per cent of the old faces will disappear every four years. New faces will step in to replace them and take a role in the continuing circulation of elites. But the Constitution Tribunal's rulings on May 30 has turned this process upside down.

Not only did the Constitution Tribunal rule to disband the Thai Rak Thai party; it also banned 111 executives of the party from politics for five years over electoral fraud. In one swoop, the Thai Rak Thai, which had controlled 377 out of 500 MPs, was destroyed along with a vast number of the political elite.

To his credit, former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra had brought in several new faces and gave them prominent roles in Thai politics such as Somkid Jatusripitak, Suriya Jungreangkit, Purachai Piumsomkun, Suranand Vejajiva, Sudarat Keyuraphan and Chaturon Chaisang, among others.

But with most of this new generation of political elites axed by the Constitution Tribunal, Thai politics has only to turn to old skeletons. Samak Sundaravej and General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, who belong to the Jurassic Age of Thai politics, have found themselves as valuable assets once again. At least they have name recognition, something the new faces do not have.

This is "recirculation of the elites," in the words of my old political-science professor Dr. Montri Chenvidkarn. "This is similar to a situation in which all the key

players of a football club die in a plane crash. Now the club must scurry for the second- or third-class players to rebuild the team," he said.

If only five or 10 executives of the Thai Rak Thai were banned, Samak would never have made a comeback and become a potential leader of the People Power Party. The Thai Rak Thai group has now transformed itself into the People Power Party. Samak is an ultra-rightist politician, known for his anti-Communist views of the past and his strong alliance with the military. Of late, he has forged an alliance with Thaksin and has made it clear that he stands at opposite sides with General Prem Tinsulanonda, the president of the Privy Council.

Samak still commands loyalty from his former Bangkok constituents. As a former MP and governor of Bangkok, he has hard-core support of at least 200,000 to 300,000 people in Bangkok, although he has been deprived of having any youth left. Samak's comeback to Thai politics reflects the desperate wish of the Thai Rak Thai group to stay alive. Still, it is better for the Thai Rak Thai group to go for Samak rather than pick a nobody without name recognition.

Imagine what would happen if the People Power Party manages to win enough seats to form a coalition government with other parties? Well, Thailand will have Samak as prime minister. Again, you can imagine that a lot of fierce opposition would turn up again.

The same story goes with General Chavalit, who went through a disastrous premiership between 1996 and 1997. During that time Thailand devalued the baht and had to seek a financial-rescue package from the

International Monetary Fund. His political future was declared dead in the water. Yet after selling off his New Aspiration Party, which commanded a political stronghold in the Northeast, to Thai Rak Thai, General Chavalit managed to stay on with the party until he was forced to the sidelines as Thaksin rose to the heights of his power.

But General Chavalit has refused to die. During the early days of the Council for National Security, he was able to rock the Surayud government and the top military brass with his behind-the-scenes manoeuvrings. Some believe that he still has links with Thaksin. Others believe that he can change at any time to suit the politics of the day.

There are rumours that he might join the People Power Party, but General Chavalit might instead opt to return to his stronghold in the Northeast. He now hopes that he can also become prime minister for a second time if his political base gives him a decent number of MPs.

The Matchima group of Somsak Thepsuthin, who has also been banned from politics, is still a political force to reckon with. There are rumours that Pinij Charusombat is bringing his MPs to join him instead of Suwat Liptapanlop, who commands a stronghold in Nakhon Ratchasima. There is a possibility that Matchima, the Democrat Party and the Chat Thai Party will form a coalition to contend for power in the next election. The Democrat Party dominates the South and about half of Bangkok. Abhisit Vejajiva will have to prove that he has the guts to carry him to Government House.

In the referendum on the 2007 charter last Sunday, there were largely three groups of voters --

those who were still loyal to Thaksin and the Thai Rak Thai group, those who were suspicious of the military and those who wanted the country to move on. The first two groups voted against the referendum, while the last group cast "yes" votes. The margin in favour of the charter was very narrow. This should send a strong signal to General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, the army chief, that he should stay out of politics or risk facing a strong political uprising.

It is ironic that after the coup, old faces are returning to Thai politics because of the uprooting of the Thai Rak Thai. It looks as if little has been achieved in terms of the political advancement of the country. With Thaksin fading away, there have been no new strong contenders for the Thai premiership. Only Abhisit has stepped out to declare that he is ready for the top job. Others are nowhere to be seen.

Again, to his credit, Thaksin built up a strong leadership, with the party's policy revolving around his personality and his premiership. He bypassed local leaders through his newly appointed managers. He pursued European-style politics, bringing virtually all the executive power under his sole control. In this regard, other up-and-coming leaders still have a long way to go to match Thaksin in style, although they have to be careful not to model themselves after his poor record of good governance.

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