

## Rice price record high

*Let's do something about it*

**P**RICES of all varieties of rice have soared taking up a huge portion of consumer budget with its diminishing purchasing power, as it is. Of particular ordeal is the price of coarse rice consumed by lower income groups forming a vast majority of the people. The low quality rice is selling at Tk 32 per kg and likely to rise to Tk 35 per kg.

The reports have it that Indian traders have failed to get approval from their customs for exporting several thousand tonnes of rice with LCs opened for US dollar 425 per tonne. The Indian customs are only releasing rice at Benapole with a price tag of US dollar 500 per tonne, the increase in price having been notified by Indian commerce ministry lately. At that rate, the cost price for Bangladeshi traders comes to above Tk 35 per kg.

The Indian High Commission in Dhaka has since dubbed the media reports here regarding India's raising of the minimum export price of rice as 'misleading and inaccurate'. The changes notified in the minimum export price taking into account availability and prices of rice in the Indian domestic market are not 'country-specific', the clarification pointed out. Which is not saying much as far as Bangladesh is concerned. But the redeeming thing is the statement that 'the restriction is not applicable to exports undertaken under food aid programme'. This is in keeping with the spirit of the Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee's announcement in Dhaka waiving the ban on export of five lakh tonnes of rice to Bangladesh, in a much-acclaimed friendly gesture.

We understand that Bangladesh and its agencies could negotiate with the State Trading Corporation of India Ltd and National Agriculture Cooperative Marketing Federation of India Ltd for procurement of rice at reasonable prices.

We expect the governments of Bangladesh and India to vigorously interact in making sure that the five lakh tonnes of rice that India has agreed to export to Bangladesh is delivered in quick time so as to help us bring down the prices in the local market.

## Positive changes in Bhutan

*Our felicitations go out to its people*

**B**HUTAN has lately been making history. When its people went to the polls the other day to elect a national council, it was a sign of how meaningfully the kingdom means to align itself with the rest of the world and carve a new niche for itself in the global community. Indeed, it is to the credit of the former king, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, that Bhutan's people find themselves on the threshold of a new era. Without any prompting and absolutely on his own, he sent out the message that Bhutan needed to change. And change was to come through people being given the right to vote for their representatives in the national council as well as the national assembly. Moreover, by abdicating in favour of his son, Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuk, the king established a rare precedent of a monarch voluntarily walking away from power and glory.

As we understand, polling has been held in fifteen districts of the country. For now, fifteen of the twenty five members of the national council will be elected, with another five to be elected later this month. The monarch of course has the power to nominate the remaining five to the council. It is also encouraging that Bhutanese will elect a 75-member national assembly, so long a nominated body, in February or March this year. All these steps being taken by the authorities to transform the country from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional one will certainly have a positive bearing on the future of the country.

We offer our felicitations to the government and people of Bhutan on such a historic step. As a neighbour and member of the SAARC community, Bhutan has always had a special place in our thoughts and priorities. We welcome the kingdom's entry into the councils of democratic governance.

## Blind faith



M. J. AKBAR

**I**F you want to understand Pakistan today, try and imagine this scenario in India. It is 1984, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale escapes during Operation Blue Star and disappears into an inaccessible range of the Himalach Himalayas. The Indian armed forces cannot find him; although Delhi will never admit it, Blue Star is a failure. The militants, operating under the command of General Shabeg, regroup, their loyalty to the ideological leadership of Bhindranwale reinforced by success in battle. Anger against Blue Star arouses the Sikh peasantry to the kind of fury and passion it displayed during Banda Bahadur's war against the Mughals. The young take up militancy in self-generating numbers, making casualties irrelevant to the insurgency. Bhindranwale remains in regular touch with the insurgents,

who now have safe sanctuary in certain gurdwaras, since the Indian government is hesitant to invade sacred space after the counter-productive calamity of Blue Star. Simultaneously, inspired by Punjab, a violent jihad explodes in Kashmir, far more intense than the conflict that lacerated the valley in the Nineties. The Kashmiri jihad finds its own leader, and works in coordination with Bhindranwale. India's military and paramilitary forces are so deeply engaged in the battles of Punjab and Kashmir that they have to thin out their presence along the China and Bangladesh borders, opening up options for those in the neighbourhood who are hostile to India's unity.

By 1996, the Indian armed forces are battle-weary at the base and defiant at the top. They have grown tired of civilian politicians and

# Dynasties and the law of diminishing returns



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

**P**OLITICAL dynasties make a mockery of democracy. And they do that through keeping power, or the possibility of arriving at it, limited to a self-chosen few. You might now want to explore the issue a little deeper. You can do that easily through observing the way matters have lately been shaping up in Pakistan. A nineteen year old young man has just been imposed on the Pakistan People's Party as its new chairman. His father, notorious for all the charges of corruption levelled against him not only in Pakistan but in Switzerland as well, will be the party's co-chairman for as long as the son does not finish his education at Oxford and return home to take charge of the organisation. It all reminds you of the old days when monarchies were the rule rather than the exception, when kings too young to exercise authority were guided by regents until they reached the first rung of adulthood. So what we now have in Pakistan, following the tragic end of Benazir Bhutto, is a very young king named Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, who will for quite some years be in the shadow of a regent called Asif Ali

Zardari. The irony here is that with such royalty in charge of the PPP, there is yet the expectation that the party will bring democracy to Pakistan and, indeed, make it possible for all Pakistanis to savour all the good things that pluralism throws up. But that is not how it works, especially in conditions where you keep thinking and talking of democracy as it ought to be. And such circumstances are not to be found in Pakistan alone. You will remember the alacrity with which a policy of shock and awe (even before such a term was invented) was planned and implemented in India moments after Indira Gandhi was gunned down by her bodyguards in Delhi in 1984.

Back in 1964, when Jawaharlal Nehru died, it was Gulzarilal Nanda who took over as interim prime minister, and stayed in that position until the Congress elected Lal Bahadur Shastri to succeed the country's first prime minister. In 1966, when Shastri passed away in Tashkent, Nanda again held the fort until the ruling party asked Indira Gandhi to take charge of the country. In October 1984, none of these precedents was followed. Pranab Mukherjee, the most senior member of the cabinet at the time, was

elbowed aside; a young, novice lawmaker called Rajiv Gandhi was summoned back to the capital from Calcutta and administered the oath of office of prime minister. That dynasties do not throw up competent politicians, particularly when their founding patriarchs have left the scene through demise, has been observed nearly everywhere across the globe. You would have thought that Gloria Macapagal Arroyo would make a good president for the Philippines because she was the daughter of former president Diosdado Macapagal. You would be wrong. Just look at her record in office. Or, for that matter, look back on the dismal presidency Megawati Sukarnoputri conducted in Indonesia before Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono entered the scene. The fact that she was the daughter of Achmad Sukarno did her no favours.

You could even think of Benazir Bhutto. Neither of her two stints as Pakistan's head of government was remarkable for any vision or purposeful, practical, day-to-day performance. She was a brilliant star, certainly; but it takes a whole lot more to administer as fractured a country as Pakistan. Rajiv Gandhi was a disaster for India. That his

widow Sonia has chosen to stay away from leadership of the country may be encouraging for some, but that still does not mean that the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty is not there any more. It is there. The way all those Congressmen fawn over the young Rahul Gandhi is a sign of bad days ahead for all Indians.

Here in Bangladesh, it has not been uncommon for people to spot walls extolling the virtues of political families. As graffiti once put it so astonishingly crudely, 'Zia is our philosophy, Khaleda is our leader, Tareq is our future.' After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Go into some simple mathematics and you will likely come up with figures that will leave you reeling. The dynamic is what has lately taken over politics in Bangladesh. Slightly over a year ago, when a minister in the BNP-led coalition government decided that his nephew would take his place as the lawmaker from his constituency, huge uproar was the result. Our surprise is not that the move was protested. It is that almost anyone you know in politics is, these days, happily projecting himself or herself as the future founder of a new dynasty. Tareq Rahman's rise in the BNP is but the other symptom of a malaise. Look deeper. You will not

like what you see. In the Jatiyo Party, in Bikalpadhara, for instance.

Think of distant Congo. The murdered Laurent Kabila was swiftly replaced by his young, pretty callow, son Joseph Kabila. The country has only limped from bad to worse. In an earlier era, we used to be horrified at the way things went on in Haiti. Papa Doc Duvalier was followed by Baby Duvalier. The country went to the dogs. In these times, everyone seems to have taken a cue from the Duvaliers. The Syrians have seen one Assad, Hafez, replaced by another, Bashar. The Hariris and the Chamounys and the Gemayels and the Jumblatts have had their own dynastic patterns run riot in Lebanon.

Muammar Gaddafi in Libya seized the state in 1969 and, nearly forty years on, shows no sign of an imminent departure. But when he does, it could well be his son, Seif, who will set yet another political dynasty in motion. In Sri Lanka, the Bandaranaiques had a very long innings, and in the process left a country divided along sectarian lines. It was SDRD Bandaranaike who first made the Tamils seethe with rage by his outlandish ideas of governance. His wife and daughter then improved on his methods. And, today, the Tamils, in the form of the LTTE, run around the place creating panic and fear among all Sri Lankans.

Political dynasties sap the strength of a democratic system. Where the objective is a creation of democracy, predominant political families, for all their promises of a fealty to democratic ideals, scupper the whole enterprise. And this they

do in two ways. They make sure that no one outside the family gets to be influential enough to become a symbol of future leadership. Such an attitude naturally and swiftly pulls the rug from under those who, in the deepest core of their hearts, believe in democracy as a way of life. And then comes the competence factor. Dynasties generally follow the law of diminishing returns. Our experience says it all. It is always the founders of dynasties who sometimes leave a big, positive imprint on the popular consciousness. Those who come after them, their spouses, siblings or children, demonstrate, in increasing frequency, unabashed philistinism where their ancestors were once dynamo and visionary.

Dynasts thrive on borrowed reputation, generally. Little of intellectual analysis is evident in their actions. But, of course, a surfeit of imperiousness marks their public behaviour. They are the new ruling classes. And as ruling classes go, they soon reveal the decadence that underlines the hollow glitter on their public faces.

And do not forget that political dynasties are, in broad measure, an insult to the intelligence of the nations they foist themselves on. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari believes, or has been told, that the future of the federation of Pakistan is inextricably linked to his leadership of his mother's party and of the country that Muhammad Ali Jinnah cobbled into shape. Nothing could be more ludicrous. Nothing could be more damaging for a country.

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## An assassination most foul



M.B. NAQVI  
writes from Karachi

**I**T appears Benazir Bhutto fell to an assassin's bullets and/or the bomb blast meant for her. Passing away of a charismatic leader is always tragic, and an unwelcome surprise. It always leaves behind a trail of bitterness. Even so, this was exceptionally so. What the country has to grapple with is its consequences, that may become trends.

Large numbers have gone on to protest, and express an anger that has a long history. Superficially, it may look like a sudden explosion of pent-up emotions. The kind of disturbances that have followed, and the loss of life and property involved, is troubling. Certain conclusions follow.

The apparent suddenness with which otherwise law-abiding people become rowdy in expressing anger, vandalising, or even occasionally killing, shows that the feelings had been pent-up for long and that people need an occasion to explode. They want a change. Not knowing how to proceed, or achieve what they vaguely wish to achieve, on the one hand, and, on the other, the inadequacy of national leadership -- government, political parties

and other leaders of opinion -- underlines a dangerous all-round confusion when too many interests are contending for supremacy.

Too many ideas about social reconstruction, without adequately equipped leadership, can cause a lot of trouble. This is what has happened. Political leaders are associated with vague ideals. Benazir was no exception. She embodied feelings of her followers that were not likely to be fulfilled by her, and was perhaps not giving the lead that the people wanted or were ready for.

The reality is that there is (a) widespread confusion of what should be done and how should things be reorganised; (b) there is a tendency towards violence that has grown over the years due to inadequate leadership or lack of guidance from saner elements, leading to disillusionment with what has happened. The structures of state that keep law and order are virtually breaking down. A growing section tends to take the law in its own hands because it does not expect anyone else to enforce the law. This is anarchy.

Anyway, two questions arise, the answers to which must be attempted. One is about the future of the PPP. While its charismatic leadership has made it into the largest party in Pakistan, it has now

chosen a new leader. Then, there have been complaints of distortions in the party's working because of the non-democratic way of its internal functioning. Shouldn't there be democratic elections for its top leadership. A new crop of leaders should emerge with every generation. The current generation has produced competent and attractive leaders: mainly lawyers and judges. This genuine new leadership is outside the PPP. Why? Will PPP remain the property of a dynasty?

The next question is about the future of Pakistan. The rampant ideological confusion and an unhappy, angry people sans responsive leadership make for a dangerous situation. With state structures becoming ineffective and people's tendency towards violence remaining uncorrected, the society's and the state's future becomes vulnerable. Vacuous patriotism of shutting one's eyes to actual grass-roots trends poses a danger.

The confusion arises from the deepening fissures in the polity over basic questions. The oldest confusion, that is simultaneously easy and very difficult to resolve, is the contention over the nature of the federation: On one side are believers in a strong central authority, presided over by a stronger individual, and, on the other, are people in the

regions possessing their own identity through distinctive language, culture, traditions and, perhaps, also race. Pakistan had come to grief on this question. If we continue as before, the next tragedy should not be unexpected. Isn't there a solution?

Another issue that now ominously divides the people is over the rise of a new Islam, represented by al-Qaeda, Taliban and other extremist groups that seize power from time to time in their areas on the ground that they are enforcing Shariah here and now, wanting to wipe out sins from society through Shariah punishment. The other side comprises traditional Islam, where the same "promotion of virtue and discouragement of sin" is taken to mean individual purity through good works and by persuasion. What is undeniable is that in Islam the relationship of individual with God is direct; there is no intermediary institution or group.

Everything desired by Islam is to be done at individual level by each Muslim without the use of force, except for jihad that requires all Muslims' consensus through a commonly accepted Caliph. In practice, most schools believe that injunction about jihad is no longer operative in the absence of its necessary requirements. Suppression

of sin by others and enforcement of piety and virtue in others with a gun are new elements in the body politic of Muslims the world over. This leads to a clash of civilisations, nations, and religions, which can end in misery for all. Therefore, it has to be contained. It will destroy the very fabric of Pakistan anyway -- and probably other Muslim countries.

Then there are social questions. The Musharraf regime's propaganda of having reduced poverty and increased prosperity all around is contradicted by the behaviour of common Pakistanis. They are dissatisfied and angry; they had to tolerate injustice for long in silence; and that makes for building up of an anger that occasionally finds expression in violent protests. Benazir was associated with the idea of equitable reforms. She was taken to stand for the state that looks after the interests of common people and does not serve economic and social elites. It was thought that she would run the economy for the benefit of the common people and would promote a development that was oriented to job creation and poverty reduction. The fact is, no politician is paying any attention to these objectives. Most political parties are failing on that score, including the PPP. But old images too die hard, if accompanied with cynical rhetoric.

The insistent question is, what should be done in today's political crisis? The year 2007 had seen one crisis after another. The world press informs us that the authority and power of retired Gen. Pervez Musharraf are declining. But the

observed fact is that his hold on governance is still complete, with America, conservative Arab kings, and Nato powers backing him; he remains a force who is suppressing the civil society, sacked an assertive judiciary, and is presiding over tumultuous events of the last few months with bomb blasts and suicide bombings in political gatherings. He does not look like fading away soon, though he had better take note of the new stirrings and popular anger. The state is becoming weak, and Pakistan is in real danger. Larger forces can be unleashed. The way he acts will make or mar the future of Pakistan.

Without much ado, it has to be asserted that, after him, there will be no deluge. The world's graveyards are full of indispensable men and women. He had better find a way out of his militarised "Islamabad." Otherwise, the cost to Pakistan would be just too great. He should transfer effective governance to a national government formed after an All Parties Conference -- like the one called by Ayub Khan in 1969. A new caretaker government comprising these leaders will help hold a free and fair election, sometime in late March or April. Postponement of the January 8 election is, anyhow, necessary. The best course is to evolve a broad consensus over initial reforms, but restoration of the pre-November 3, 2007, situation in respect of judiciary and media is the necessary first step. The ugly ducklings left behind by emergency and PCO need to be buried here and now.

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## BYLINE

**The forces at play in Pakistan are, of course, different, but the end result is a gathering anarchy. Pakistan is teeming with ideologues, banded under dozens of banners, each with its private army, who are determined to turn it into a theocratic state. Parallel forces operate within an informal alliance, their agenda overlapping; jihadis against the West, principally America; an Osama bin Laden still alive and officially untraceable, but in command of his armed sectarians.**

democratic institutions by swearing-in stooge politicians into their government, which, naturally, is headed by a toothless "prime minister." In fact, the government has lost control everywhere outside Srinagar, Ludhiana, Jullundur and Chandigarh. 9/11 saves the Indian dictators, because they rush help to the America-led Nato invasion of Afghanistan, and follow it up with division-strength support to the American invasion of Iraq. America guarantees the security of the China border. Pakistan is not a serious threat, except for its encouragement of the surrogate war, and Bangladesh too weak to challenge India militarily.

By 2005, prices have steeped, the economy has tanked, the nation is in disarray; defence swallows up the budget. If the insurgency has not succeeded it is only because of the

will of the Indian people, the sacrifices of the soldiers, and an extraordinary geopolitical advantage: India has space. The army can rely on supply lines and fresh recruitment; it can fight behind the Beas when necessary and at the Jhelum when it wants to. But the dictators have become deeply unpopular, and cannot hold back demonstrations that become more massive by the day. There is domestic censorship, but the world press cannot be prevented from reporting the turbulence. The generals are forced to call for elections. They are scheduled for the first week of January 2008.

The politicians return, some from jail, some from exile, some from hibernation, for the bitter campaign of December 2007. The insurgents choose their targets...

I could go on. But let us pause to remember the martyrs who did not let India succumb to anarchy. Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi must head the list, but there are thousands of officers, jawans, policemen and civilians on that roll call of honour. There are leaders who are now forgotten: Sant Longowal and Beant Singh, the chief minister of Punjab for instance. There are leaders who are still with us: Who can afford to forget the fight that Farooq Abdullah put up against three years of unprecedented mili-

tancy in Kashmir?

The forces at play in Pakistan are, of course, different, but the end result is a gathering anarchy. Pakistan is teeming with ideologues, banded under dozens of banners, each with its private army, who are determined to turn it into a theocratic state. Parallel forces operate within an informal alliance, their agenda overlapping; jihadis against the West, principally America; an Osama bin Laden still alive and officially untraceable, but in command of his armed sectarians; Taliban warriors who control regions on both sides of the Pak-Afghan border. Add to this a polity wrecked by inept civilian politicians and an obstinate military high command, and you have a cauldron brewed by the witches of misfortune.

Benazir Bhutto lost her life in a nation that has lost its moorings, and is in danger of being marooned. This phase of its history began with the judicial assassination of her father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, now known to the people as the "Shaheed Baba." It will not end with the death of the "Shaheed Beti."

General Zia ul Haq, motivated by personal insecurity, was the first dictator to use death as an instrument of state policy. He was not the first general to stage a coup. But

Ayub Khan ran a soft regime. Yahya Khan did not hang Sheikh Mujibur Rahman even though the charge was treason.

After Zia, the path to power became paved with peril and stained with death. The Afghan war changed the local dynamic. The gun was no longer in the custody of the state. It was handed, with the collusion of America, to non-state actors. They have not returned the gun. It has gradually become part of the culture of politics. Benazir Bhutto did not create the Taliban, but she gave it a nation and an unstoppable momentum by launching it in Afghanistan. The bullet -- or those shards from bombs that killed her -- has debilitated her country and broken yet another hope in a nation desperately in need of some.

Benazir's friends will remember her with affection; her followers with pride; both will live with tears. Others will ponder over the cruelty of the angel of death, who is meant to take away exhausted lives but seems to hover mercilessly over those who have returned from despair. Benazir had matured enough, according to those close to her, to dull the edge of error. Rajiv Gandhi was plucked away at the very moment when he might have blossomed again. Serfs of this merciless angel arrive from anonymity

to shift the course of history.

Blame is not a game, and yet it must be played out if only to seek some semblance of an answer, the only nutrient that can revive the fading embers of hope. Pakistan needs the courage of introspection. It did not introspect when an unknown assassin ended the life of its first prime minister, in Rawalpindi as well, Liaquat Ali Khan. It cannot afford complacency. Pakistan must look beyond the names of individuals to eliminate the forces that diet on havoc. Will it do so?

India is in comparative calm, but surrounded by nations at war with themselves. The calm is comparative, for Naxalites are asking for change from within the heart of India. There is one immediate lesson ahead of many larger ones that will emerge with thought, analysis and an honest look at the mirror. It is simply this: Terrorism is an unmitigated evil. Long before terrorism can wound an enemy, it destroys its masters. If the government elites of South Asia do not understand this stark, simple, fact, they will gouge out their own eyes. Blind elites cannot see either a horizon or a mirror. Who can the blind lead, except the blind?

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