

Investigating corruption in the military

ACC move should be welcomed by armed forces

THE chairman of the Anti-Corruption Commission has clearly expressed the readiness of the ACC to inquire into corruption in the military. The reiteration of such an intent by General Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury points to the purposefulness of the campaign against overall wrongdoing the ACC is engaged in. It is certainly a commendable move, one that citizens in general and the armed forces in particular should welcome in the larger national interest. One reason why such a step is to be appreciated is the fact that it promises to add substance to the on-going drive against corruption in government, indeed in all areas that relate to the public weal.

It is our belief, one we think will be shared by those who serve in Bangladesh's armed services, that the military should cheer the move to investigate wrongdoing within its ranks and branches. There are a couple of reasons that make the thought of such inquiries significant. In the first place, the ACC's investigation will be aimed at the general corruption that may be perceived to have been committed in the military over the years. In the second, there is also a need for the forces to ensure that any and all instances of waste relating to military purchases and the like are thoroughly investigated and indeed that the ACC is given an unequivocal, free hand to delve into such happenings. In an era where accountability in the military is of fundamental importance (one can note the determined manner in which functions in the military are regularly brought under scrutiny by lawmakers in such countries as the United States, Britain and India), it clearly makes sense for our armed forces to match such a standard here in Bangladesh. One need hardly point out that Bangladesh's military as it exists and operates today is a fully homegrown one, meaning that it was built and came of age in the post-liberation period. It thus remains aware of perspectives in a modern sense of the meaning.

Beginning now, the process of transparency and accountability of the armed forces can surely be initiated through the annual military budget being placed before the nation, of course through an elected parliament, in the interest of a full, meaningful public scrutiny. However, it has also to be acknowledged that matters which clearly fall within the purview of sensitive national security considerations will need to remain within the bounds of classified information whose accountability will be assured through special oversight mechanism as is done in other democracies. Outside that, let all other aspects of administrative operations in the armed services be studied in the open. The ACC move will add meat to the democratic body politic we mean to build for ourselves. It will also greatly strengthen civil-military relations.

CEC's heartening assertion about elections

Firm commitments by Govt and EC should put doubts at rest

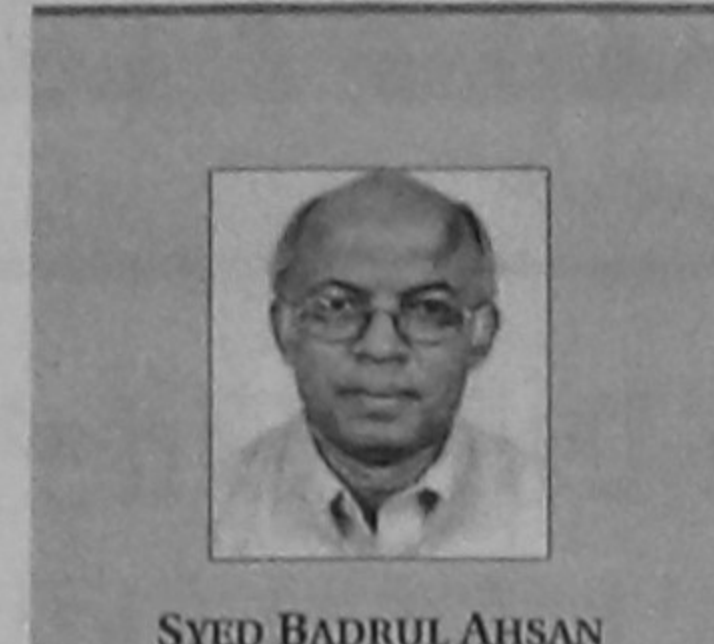
WE observe with a degree of dismay that despite the oft-repeated commitments by top functionaries of the government and chief of the Election Commission to holding national election by December this year, some political parties keep casting doubt in the EC's staging polls on schedule. This could give rise to a speculative atmosphere in which cynicism about timely election may grow among the people, something we surely can do without at this stage of electoral preparations.

The Chief Election Commissioner ATM Shamsul Huda in EC's talks with the Awami League on Monday made by far the most emphatic statement to date on elections. He went so far as to say that he and his colleagues didn't want to go down as 'national traitors' by reneging on the commitment to hold the ninth parliamentary election before the year-end. That he had to use such a strong expression to allay any creeping suspicion about the polls is a sad commentary on the level of confidence existing between the EC and the political parties. However, after this unequivocal statement from the CEC, none should be left in any doubt about the election taking place as scheduled.

Basically, EC's attention must now be focussed on the components of the roadmap in which they are lagging behind, so as to expedite the process for keeping within the timeframe. For instance, the dialogues with the political parties on electoral reform were scheduled to be completed by November of last year and a law put in place by January this year. While inviting the BNP leadership to the talks the EC formally approached one faction of the party impelling the other side to go to the court. The court's ruling of the issue is awaited keenly now and one hopes it will be available soon with the EC taking the initiative to expedite the process. After all, they brought it on themselves.

In the meantime, the EC would do well to announce a tentative schedule of election with a specific margin of a week between the earliest and latest expected dates. As well as giving specificity and tangibility to the commitment this will help allay any misapprehension among the doubting Thomases.

The death of an actor... and more



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

NOT many among us may have been in touch with Manna. And there may not be very many people we know who have watched his movies. Those of us now in our early or mid fifties stopped going to movie houses a long time ago, perhaps way back in the early 1980s.

There were, of course, all the good reasons why that kind of a situation cropped up. There were increasingly fewer good movies being churned out by our moviemakers. The scripts were going from bad to worse. Good actors were fast turning into tales of the past. And, most tellingly, obscenity was taking over where good sense once used to be.

Now, of course, you can spend some good time defining obscenity or the line where reality collapsed into obscenity. But what you cannot ignore is the truth that for a very long number of years decency has been a casualty, a hugely missing factor, in Bangladesh's movie industry. Which is why the middle classes, so much a factor in the shaping of social attitudes, have studiously avoided visiting

GROUND REALITIES

Manna's death removes a much needed voice in defence of movies with meaning. But that ought to be no reason for the campaign against a film industry of substance to falter. In an era where theatre reaches a crescendo of intellectual attainment in Bangladesh and music explores a diversity of possibilities, our films must find a way out of the pit they have been thrown into. They can reform. Else, they can die.

the many cinema halls here. The old trend of families making their way to movie houses on weekends to spend some quality time is now but part of collective memory.

That is where Manna comes in. He was not an artiste in the mould of Razzaque or Azim or Rahman or Bulbul Ahmed or Farook. But popularity was nevertheless his, a particular reason being his determined opposition to obscenity or everything that militated against morality in movies.

There was decency in his behaviour. An angry young man in tinsel town, he was forever aware of a need to build a stable future for himself. In the three hundred or so movies he acted in, there was a lot of verve he brought into a telling of the tales. The story lines may not have been great. Besides, the degree of acting people came by in the old tales in all those black and white movies was not to be spotted in Manna's co-actors. Even so, people flocked to those movies.

The middle classes may not have been convinced that Manna's movies needed to be seen, but with artistes like

Shabnam playing the role of his mother in a film called, simply, Ammajan, there was proof that a distinctive attempt at a turning away from bad deeds in the film industry was underway.

Manna's death, after a mere forty four years of life, prohibits us from speculating on the heights of artistry he might have scaled had he lived on. There are instances of actors graduating from mediocrity to greatness.

Manna was not mediocre, by no stretch of the imagination. But people like him, touched by shades of responsibility, or a sense of it, sometimes make it possible for people to begin believing once more in what used to be and what might yet be. And that is when, here in this country, you tend to fall back on actresses such as Kabori.

It was forty four years ago that she turned into a household word among Bengalis through her deftly played role in Shutoraang. All these years later, she remains an epitome of single minded, purposeful acting.

These days she is into directing movies, which is one more indication of accomplished individuals still being around and willing to help us go round the bend in search of films that

make sense. You could here think of Shabnam, of Nasima Khan, of Reshma, of Shabana, of Babita, whose contributions to Bangladesh's film industry have underpinned the strength of our movie industry.

Think back on the times when Subhas Dutta acted in films, and then got down to the business of directing them. Then there was Khan Ata. It is this legacy which, in our times, directors of Chashi Nazrul Islam's kind have tried to uphold.

It is a hard task they face. There are the glaring, pitiless realities that confront them. On the one hand, an overpowering desire on the part of a section of filmmakers to plagiarise, from Indian Hindi movies, and then present the concoction to the Bengali audience here has only created a kleptocratic class intent on earning good financial returns in place of eminence. On the other, there is the hollowness which comes from a projection of story lines that are as far removed from the truth as they can be. And that untruth is in the image of the unnecessary cleavage women in Bengali movies have of late demonstrated, or been compelled to demonstrate.

The point that must not be

missed, though, is that where the story demands certain situations, they cannot and ought not to be glossed over. Since movies in the Indian subcontinent have generally remained musicals, and since romance is a key ingredient in any story, it is quite natural for emotions to come in a package that might include anything from hand-holding to embraces to frenzied dancing to the sounds of music. But then comes the question: does such glitz in movie making take account of the critically sharpened sensibilities that define perceptions of films in our times?

There are the art films we have welcomed in recent years, but they do not appear to have made a dent in the public mind as yet. You do not blame the producers and directors of these films for such a state of vacuum.

It all has to do with the sordid stories of singing supermen and gyrating women coming from across the border. The imitations our producers do here are third rate, which is to say they humiliate our public sensibilities. We still have not reached a state where, in the interest of realism, men and women may kiss in profundity of passion in our movies.

But we have done worse, something that our filmmakers do not appear to realise. Take a typical song sequence in any of our films today. There before you is the lustful leading man breathing -- and nuzzling -- down the neck all the way to the region above the bosom, and beyond, of the leading lady who, in turn, is attired in a filmsy sari,

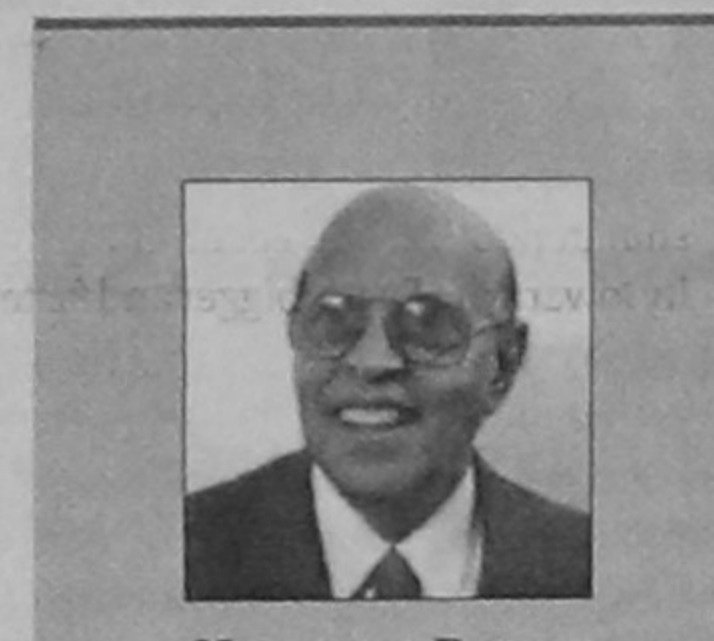
which convenience exposes a goodly part of her physical being; or she may be outlandishly fitted out in what is clearly an excuse of western fashion.

These are images that have infiltrated our movie industry relentlessly since the early 1980s. And you only have to observe the titles of the movies to understand how far Bengali movies in Bangladesh (conditions are not much different in West Bengal these days) have declined in terms of quality. Here is a pick: *Darhao Kotha Achhe* (with someone coming up with a crude translation, Stop, I Have Talk); *Shaami Keno Ashami*, *Baba Keno Chakor*, *Bhoyongkor Shonghorsho*, et al. And there are the literal translations from movies coming from across the frontier, with a local, meaning Bengali, touch to what is originally a Hindu story. How many of you have seen *Qeyamat Theke Qeyamat* after you have gone through *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak*?

Manna's death removes a much needed voice in defence of movies with meaning. But that ought to be no reason for the campaign against a film industry of substance to falter. In an era where theatre reaches a crescendo of intellectual attainment in Bangladesh and music explores a diversity of possibilities, our films must find a way out of the pit they have been thrown into. They can reform. Else, they can die.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

The Nepal conundrum



HARUN UR RASHID

NEPAL is going through a rapid and unprecedented transformation of politics and social life. For the first time, the Himalayan nation may turn into a republic from a monarchy, which it has been since 1768.

For the first time, a reordering of society seems to be in the offing, dismantling hierarchical society in which feudal lords and caste discrimination have been dominant.

While change brings new vision and new order, it always brings uncertainty. Political and social reforms in Nepal are initially likely to bring insecurity and upheaval among people, as perestroika (reform) and glasnost (openness) did for the Soviet Union in the late '80s. There are four inter-related elements that are visible in Nepal as of today. They are:

- Lack of unity among political parties.

BOTTOM LINE

What is being witnessed in Nepal is not the making of a few years. It is a situation that has remained for hundreds of years, and it is unfolding into a new system in which a new Nepal is being created. South Asia must be ready to ensure that a new Nepal will be a positive factor within its political and social environment.

- Demand of minority classes for political participation.
- Economic weakness adding to social tension.
- Interest of international stakeholders in the country's stability.

Political leaders, civil society, and the armed forces in Nepal are required to take into account that they face a new challenge where cooperation and unity of purpose will be required at all levels, otherwise the country may degenerate into a state of chaos and instability.

Let me briefly discuss the above issues.

Tenuous peace deal, and election on April 10

Former Maoist rebels signed a peace deal in November 2006 and formed an interim government. Soon after, the Nepali Congress-led government fell out with the Maoists on the question of abolition of monarchy. However, both parties need each other to move forward, and they patched up an agreement to

abolish monarchy. The minorities who were dormant in society came out in the open to ventilate their grievances. Openness of society has always brought new issues that need to be addressed politically.

The peace deal, however, cannot bring peace because it still excludes politicians from the lowlands of the south. Around two dozen armed ethnic groups have emerged in the Terai region to voice their grievances. They feel marginalised politically. They want their voices to be heard politically.

In recent days, three different groups representing the minorities formed an alliance for what they called "a final revolt" against the country's government, which itself is driven by tensions ahead of national elections set for April 10.

Protests were reported in the region bordering India, home to around half of Nepal's 27 million population and known as the country's breadbasket. Authorities in Kathmandu said

they were ready for dialogue, but warned that any fresh violence would not be tolerated.

A weak economy is another factor that leads to instability in the country. Many believe fiscal mismanagement has led to the chronic fuel shortages across the country; lines to the petrol stations in the capital extend for kilometers and prices have tripled in less than half a year.

Kathmandu residents face at least six hours of power cuts a day. Growth rate still hovers around only 2%. Trade unionism and general strikes disrupt production in factories. "We live in a broken state," says Mandira Sharma, a leading human rights activist.

The peace deal shows how unnatural the alliance is between the two sides, which represent different interests. The distrust between the two sides threatens the political stability.

The Maoists see themselves as "agents" of democracy and equal rights for all people, while the Congress is perceived to be

wedded to the ancient regime. These two contrasting views of the political sides may dominate the election campaigns.

The continued discord, according to many, may strengthen the king, and many Nepalese consider the monarchy as a symbol of unity and stability.

In the above scenario, there appear to be three sides -- the Maoists, the Nepali-Congress, and the supporters of monarchy -- in the next election in April.

The election is for a legislature that will draft Nepal's new republican constitution. The stakes are high for all three sides. If the polls do not go smoothly, there will be a fresh spate of violence in the country, whose consequences will impact on its neighbours.

South Asia is, regrettably, being torn politically. Sri Lanka and Pakistan are going through a politically turbulent period. International confidence and support for them are declining. International actors are worried that extremist elements are likely to be on the rise in the present turmoil.

International stakeholders

Against this background, international actors, especially the US, India and China, are watching closely the Nepalese situation.

Nepal is sandwiched between

India and China. India shares a porous border in the south while Tibet lies in the north. The train line between Beijing and Lhasa has brought China closer to Nepal.

However, India and China are perceived as rivals in Asia, and the China-containment policy of the US involving India is not comfortable for China.

China fears that any consensus between the US and India on Nepal's political system may be a boost for anti-Chinese Tibetan activists. China, in the past, continued to support the monarchy and did not support the Maoists in Nepal. In fact, China had nothing to do with them.

The local Maoists in Nepal are the product of India's Maoists movement and they are called Maoists because their strategy is to win the hearts and minds of the people of the countryside, like the Maoists in China.

What is being witnessed in Nepal is not the making of a few years. It is a situation that has remained for hundreds of years, and it is unfolding into a new system in which a new Nepal is being created. South Asia must be ready to ensure that a new Nepal will be a positive factor within its political and social environment.

Barrister Harun Ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

This is Pakistan's war



FAREED ZAKARIA writes from Washington

IN one of his many speeches on the sources of Islamic terrorism, George W. Bush argued, "when a dictatorship controls the political life of a country, responsible opposition cannot develop and dissent is driven underground and toward the extreme."

In Bush's opinion, the antidote is democracy. As he said in another address, "If [people] are permitted to choose their own destiny, and advance by their own energy and by their participation

Pakistan, like Saudi Arabia, is a state defined by religion. But its terrorism problem is recent, bred because it served as the conduit and recruiting ground for jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. This problem was then exacerbated by various forces -- a military eager for proxies, the collapse of state capacity in fields like education, and the continuing neglect of Pakistan's tribal areas.

as free men and women, then the extremists will be marginalised, and the flow of violent radicalism to the rest of the world will slow, and eventually end."

Pakistan took Bush's advice last week, and in a historic election voted for a democratic future. The results returned to power civilian parties that had based their campaigns on opposition to the rule of President Pervez Musharraf. And what has been the reaction of the Bush administration? Awkwardness and ambivalence toward the victors, affection towards Musharraf.

After the results came in, Bush

called the Pakistani leader to congratulate him on holding the elections. "We are going to continue to work with President Musharraf," said Sean McCormack, the State Department spokesman. In the most important real-world test of the Bush thesis -- that democracy destroys terrorism -- George Bush finds himself opposed to his own rhetoric.

If Bush the statesman is hypocritical, is Bush the political scientist right? Does democracy prevent the breeding of terrorism? The scholar Gregory Gause of the University of Vermont has pointed out that, by almost all

calculations, most terrorist attacks take place in democracies, not authoritarian countries.

According to one study, between 1976 and 2004 there were 400 terrorist attacks in India and 18 in China. This may be because terrorist attacks are easier to pull off in open societies. Such attacks are also more effective: if the purpose is to create mass panic and thus influence government policy, where better to strike than a highly responsive political system.

But the broader explanation is surely that the origins of terror-

ism are more complex than a simple lack of democracy. After all, the Soviet Union was a totalitarian dictatorship and it did not spawn terrorist groups. India has suffered so many terrorist attacks over the past four decades because it is a highly diverse country in which many different groups feel deeply about their identity and autonomy. Saudi Arabia has bred its terrorists by encouraging a purist and militant streak of Islam.

Pakistan, like Saudi Arabia, is a state defined by religion. But its terrorism problem is recent, bred because it served as the conduit and recruiting ground for jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. This problem was then exacerbated by various forces -- a military eager for proxies, the collapse of state capacity in fields like education, and the continuing neglect of Pakistan's tribal areas.

The notion that any simple solution, like elections, will magically cure these deep-rooted problems is a mistake.

Last week's vote will likely alleviate Pakistan's political and constitutional crisis. Musharraf had perpetuated his rule by sacking Supreme Court justices and altering the Constitution last year, moves that were extremely unpopular.

The rebirth of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's party, which went from 16 seats in the 2002 parliamentary elections to 69, is the best indication of how loathed Musharraf had become, since Sharif's only campaign themes were the restoration of the judiciary and ouster of the president.

While Sharif and Benazir Bhutto's widow, Asif Ali Zardari, have not worked out exactly how they will unravel Musharraf's 2007 actions, they

seem committed to doing so in some way. At the same time, the lawyers' opposition to Musharraf is being judicious.

The president of the Supreme Court Bar Association, Aitzaz Ahsan, has indicated that as long as the judiciary is restored, some compromises on other issues (Musharraf's fate perhaps?) could be worked out. This is how democracy should work.

But will this bring an end to the jihad? Sharif and Zardari have both spoken about taking a different approach to the militants up in the tribal areas than Musharraf, one that involves more diplomacy and less force. This makes sense in theory and is a version of the counterinsurgency strategy being tried in Iraq: Reach out to the militants, try to make a deal with those who are amenable, and isolate the true irreconcilables, who must then be captured or killed.

In fact, Musharraf himself has tried this strategy but with little luck so far. It may be that Musharraf was hesitant about the approach, or did not have the credibility to pull it off. In any event, whatever the civilian government wishes, the Pakistani Army will have to embrace any new approach.

One thing is for sure. If the two parties, which together won almost two thirds of the vote, adopt a forthright anti-terror strategy, it will be seen as a Pakistani strategy, not one being directed by the Army or the Americans. Until now, the battles against militants have been seen as America's obsession. What democracy could do is make Pakistanis understand that this is their war.

Fareed Zakaria is Editor of Newsweek International.

© Newsweek International. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.