

Important chapter in the history of Bangladesh

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KEMAL DERVIS

THE long and winding road to democracy never really ends for any country. Even the world's oldest democratic nations must continually adapt to the changing requirements of their political environment. For younger democracies, the challenge can be compounded by the need to develop not only the institutions but also the culture of democratic practice.

Since independence in 1971, Bangladesh's democratic journey was twice interrupted by military coups and martial law. But this did not dampen the nation's fervent desire for, and belief in, democracy.

I had the pleasure of visiting this beautiful country for three days during mid-March. What I saw and learned about the country tells me that democracy belongs in Bangladesh. This is a people with a strong love for democracy, a passion for independence, and a need

for forthright discussion and exchange of views.

Today, Bangladesh stands at an important cross-road. Confrontational politics brought the country close to collapse in early 2007. The current government came to office determined to strengthen the institutions of democracy, enabling them to withstand the buffeting currents of political contestation. To its credit, the government has taken many positive steps to strengthen democratic governance.

Four weeks ago, an important milestone was reached when voter registration passed the halfway mark at 40 million. If I'm not mistaken, when the voter list is completed, Bangladesh will hold the world record in electronically registering the largest number of voters in the shortest time period.

I am proud that UNDP played a part in this, together with eight other development partners, pooling

contributions worth \$50 million. We will maintain our assistance to the government and its ongoing electoral process beyond the 2008 elections.

But we all know that elections are only the beginning of democracy. They are a means to an end. As important as elections is what follows thereafter. That is why the government has placed such emphasis on institutional reforms -- providing greater independence for constitutional bodies such as the judiciary and the Election Commission, trying to depoliticise the administration, enabling the Anti-corruption Commission to perform its functions, working toward the establishment of a Human Rights Commission, a Right to Information Act, and empowering local governance, to name a few.

These are all vital steps toward enhancing the performance of democracy, and establishing the

checks and balances to keep government responsive to the needs and concerns of ordinary men and women.

It will take time for these reforms to consolidate democracy. And this can only happen when all actors play their roles constructively. Political parties are the sine qua non, the quintessence of representative democracy. Their role is to aggregate and represent the diverse interests and aspirations of people, to shape a vision for the future, and to establish the conventions necessary to uphold the practice of democracy.

As the current phase of institutional reform progresses in Bangladesh, and as the parliamentary election draws nearer, we look forward to political parties playing their vital role, demonstrating vision, leadership, integrity and fair play.

Too often elections end with the majority winner appropriating all political power, and other parties, despite people's support, getting marginalised in matters of governance. Democracy, if it is to be truly representative of the diversity of people's preferences, cannot be consistent with "winner takes all" behaviour.

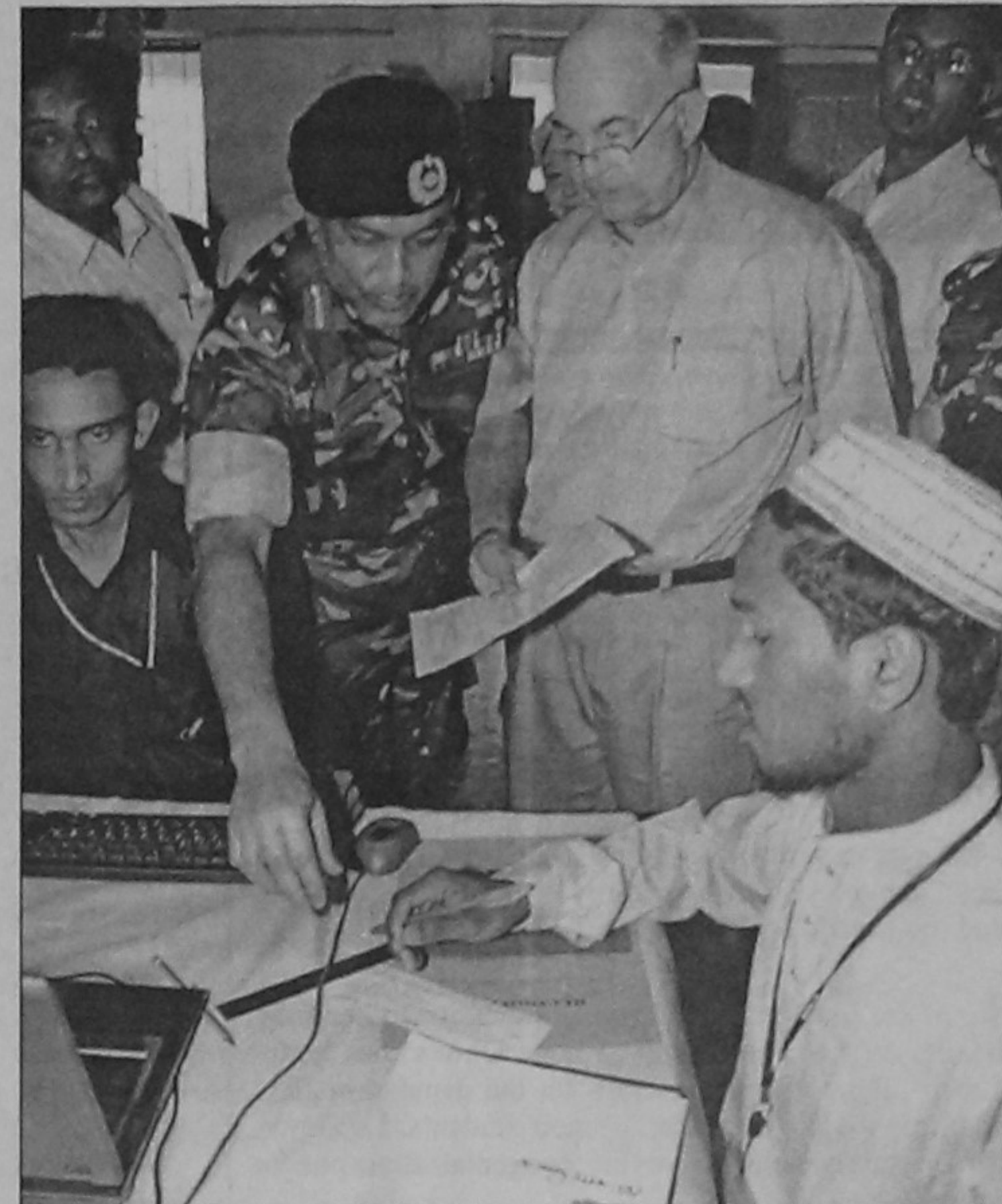
All elected parties must be given space to meaningfully participate in the political processes that mark

deliberative democracies. And political competition must be friendly. Yes, ideas must be debated and challenged, sometimes even vigorously, but that competition should be healthy. It cannot be at the expense of the nation.

The caretaker government's agenda to strengthen democratic institutions and practices is challenging enough in its own right. But the government was simultaneously hit with two devastating floods, a super-cyclone, and unprecedented global price shocks. These price shocks are hurting many countries around the world, not only Bangladesh. But they raise particular concerns here, given the country's ongoing and vitally important governance reforms.

For countries like Bangladesh, where large numbers of people fall short of the poverty line and spend high proportions of their income on food, the real issue is how to protect them. I had a chance to discuss policy options for this with leading economists during my visit.

Clearly the expansion of the government's social safety net is important, and will ease the burden on the poor. But equally important is the need to craft the government's response in a manner that sends the right incentive



Mr. Kemal Dervis visiting a voter registration centre.

signals to the business community, enabling them to play their important role as well.

But it is not enough that countries respond themselves to these

international crises. Rich countries, including oil rich countries, must also help. The international community cannot leave these huge world events unattended. I will be

advocating for additional international assistance for countries like Bangladesh at various upcoming high-level international fora.

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A peaceful, successful and democratic Bangladesh is important not only for the people who live here, but it is also important to the whole world. A Bangladesh that overcomes its current economic challenges and successfully makes its democratic transition is a powerful example to many other countries facing similar problems. I am confident that the important decisions facing the nation today will be inspired by the best of Bangladesh culture and tradition; that they will display the courage, wisdom and resourcefulness for which this country is known.

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Development through good governance

The governments of developing countries do not need any convincing to improve their governance. The need for improving service delivery and accessibility to justice, and ensuring political participation are well understood. Key instruments for improving the quality of governance -- such as administrative reforms, democratisation, ensuring human rights, decentralisation, and better management of public expenditure -- are integral parts of the policy agenda of most, if not all, governments.

AHMED TAREQ RASHID

IN the last decade or so, no other term in international development has triggered as much debate as governance. Governance now rubs shoulders with other big "G" words like globalisation and gender.

Arguably, the concerns about governance are the most overriding one for the governments of developing countries. Adjectives like "good," "bad," "poor" or "lack of" that are usually attached to governance have important implications for a country's overall development. Like it or not -- governance is here to stay.

What governance means While there has been no shortage of definitions and meanings of governance, there is at least a consensus that none of them fully explains what it actually is.

Governance can be defined as the processes and systems by which a government operates to conduct the affairs of state. Simply put, it is the way a country is being governed. Governance, then, is not only concerned with

institutional and administrative issues but also relates to political considerations of legitimacy, participation, and consensus.

At the heart of the "good" governance agenda is a transparent, accountable, and effective state, which would facilitate development process through increased growth, reduction of corruption and promotion of democracy.

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What is lacking, however, is a sharper focus on specific issues and strategies. Merely identifying

strategic goals and listing the names of those responsible for implementing them will probably lead us nowhere.

While the comprehensive nature of the governance is understandable, there is a need for a more focused approach and articulation of the key factors in context of particular countries. Otherwise, the whole process may be too overwhelming for those countries, and there is every possibility that it may suffer from being an enormous checklist of tasks to be accomplished.

Poverty reduction There could be little doubt that the worst victims of bad, or lack, of governance are the poor. Improving governance is seen as a way of removing the constraints of development -- in terms of service delivery, socioeconomic protection and access to justice. Indeed, the arguments for better governance for poverty reduction are compelling.

The government of Bangladesh, like other LDCs, has prepared a Poverty Reduction

Strategy Paper (PRSP). Debt relief and development have been made contingent upon the satisfactory formulation of this policy paper, which will presumably serve as a blueprint of a country's development strategy.

Like governance, the PRSP idea has come under flak too. Much criticism has been directed to themes like "ownership" (of what is essentially an externally driven instrument), and "partnership" (probably a non-starter because bureaucrats, politicians, civil society, private sector, may have conflicting interests).

Link between poverty reduction and governance needs better articulation. While the PRSP document tends to be comprehensive in its scope, there is an absence of interconnectedness and prioritisation of different approaches and strategies of poverty reduction. Identifying governance as a "supporting strategy" of poverty reduction, which would create a regulatory framework to help the poor, unfortunately may not be sufficient; these two roads may never meet. For example, a legislative or administrative change with a poverty focus does not mean anything for the poor until there are mechanisms, political or judicial, to ensure the implementation of the reform.

Similarly, a restructured local government system could still be

isolated in terms of participation of the poor with regard to healthcare and education. Agenda building through civil society engagement is attractive, but to what extent it reflects on shaping pro-poor policies is unclear. Also, there is an absence of strong agenda to make macro-economic policies more pro-poor, a trend most evident in Bangladesh's history. A narrow focus on governance often seems to sidestep issues of equity while preaching participation.

Towards a new agenda While developing countries are coming to terms with the what all these new jargons like governance and PRSP mean, for them the to-do list of achieving good governance keeps increasing; the 1997 World Development Report identified 45 aspects, and by 2002 the number increased to 116!

One can argue that Bangladesh's problems are numerous, and an all-inclusive program is necessary to deal with them. This has been reflected in the PRSP document. Pervasive corruption, weak institutions, absence of political consensus and a poorly managed state apparatus are only some indications of the enormity of the job at hand.

Given the overwhelming task, and considering the capacity of countries like Bangladesh to implement the necessary reforms, there is a need for priori-

tising the strategies taking into account the historical and contextual realities. Rather than going for grand solutions, we may look for strategies in light of what is feasible and what is not, or what can be achieved in shorter term as opposed to the longer term.

Going for grand solutions is a good indicator of the seriousness and commitment, or lack thereof, of the governments.

Making small policy changes, be they administrative, legislative, or otherwise, could be the most realistic and effective way of translating the goals at macro-level. Micro-governance could also be an appropriate device for involving non-state actors and institutions into the frame -- this process can lead to incremental reduction of state burden by offering flexible and demand-driven service delivery to the poor.

Whatever strategies are pursued, the onus still lies with our government. Increasing the ability to deliver justice, making administration accountable and improving the poverty situation are not just goals to be complied with for any specific policy agenda. Rather, the goals should be driven by the need to ensure that the people of Bangladesh get a better deal.

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Tadbir opens up takdir!

Tadbir (lobbying) has become a very common word in our language and culture. There is even a saying, tadbir-e takdir khole, meaning, "Lobbying changes luck." In this country, practically nothing happens if you do not do some tadbir, especially if some public institutions are involved.

ABDUL MANNAN

MY friend Shahid, who lives in the US, expressed his annoyance last night as I am yet to get a T&T fixed phone line, because he often gets tired trying to call me over my cell-phone. I am one of those few "anti cell-phone fundamentalists" still hanging around. I do have a cell-phone, but normally prefer to use it only for making important calls.

I tell my good friend that I have completed all the formalities needed for the transfer of my phone two and half months back and am still waiting to get the connection. My friend says that perhaps I had failed to do the right tadbir for the transfer of my telephone. He is right.

I am waiting to see how long it takes for the transfer of my telephone without tadbir. I also inform my friend that the BTB authorities had announced recently that from now on the quality of their service would improve, and transfer of telephones will be done without any

extra hassle. They also announced that before disconnecting a telephone line for non-payment of bills they would give a seven-day's notice to the subscriber. However, they do not spell out within how many days a line will be transferred, or a new connection given after one has settled one's dues.

Tadbir (lobbying) has become a very common word in our language and culture. There is even a saying, tadbir-e takdir khole, meaning, "Lobbying changes luck." In this country, practically nothing happens if you do not do some tadbir, especially if some public institutions are involved.

If you are an important person you may try doing your own tadbir. For some, just picking up a telephone and making few calls would be sufficient for getting his or her job done. Not many people are that lucky. Normally, you will have to find someone whom you perceive to be important enough to do your tadbir.

Once, I experienced an audacious request for a tadbir. Someone whose son qualified in a public

service examination asked if I could do some tadbir to a VIP for his gem of a son's inclusion in a particular service cadre. Somehow, the person had this strange belief that I had a hot-line connection with this VIP.

A few days ago, the police nabbed a lady found to be doing tadbir for getting some students admitted in a school. Over telephone, she even pretended to be the wife of a VIP. She was a professional tadbir-baji (one who is engaged in tadbir). There is a fee attached to her tadbir-baji, and she claimed that she was a specialist in school admission tadbir-baji, and did it for a living. Once arrested, she gave an honest confession to the police.

In the secretariat, there are dozens of tadbir-bajies in every ministry. If one has some important files that need immediate attention these professional tadbir-bajies are available for a fee, depending on the nature of the job. They have unhindered access to any government office. Newspaper reports say that some ladies head the list of professional tadbir-bajies in the secretariat, and once in a while they are

declared persona non grata in the secretariat area by the secretariat administration.

If you want a bank loan, have your wife transferred to Dhaka or your troublemaker neighbour to Teknaf, or have your land transfer documents registered, the service of a tadbir-baji is available. You just have to have the right connection, and pay for the service.

Again, there are some part time tadbir-bajies. There are plenty in the political arena, and they work overtime during the nomination period. The local alu bepari has amassed a huge fortune, beating even the good old Uncle Scrooge. The only aim remaining in his life is to run for the national election, become a member of the parliament, and serve the people. It is all about janashaha.

Now, how does one get the nomination from a winning party? No problem. The part time tadbir-baji will work overtime for you with the party bosses, and give all the presentation to convince them how important the bepari is for the party, people and country. He just needs a bit of extra grease in his palm. Everything will be taken care of.

Election over, the million dollar question is how one can serve the party, people and country without being part of the cabinet. Now you need a more powerful tadbir-baji. A few years ago, there was a rumour

that one bepari had got the chance to serve the party, people and country after the tadbir-baji made him poorer by Taka sixteen crore.

Once, when the office of the prime minister of India fell vacant there was a period of uncertainty as to who would become the next prime minister. Quite a few people were in the race. A journalist asked I K Gujral whether he was doing something (tadbir-baji) to become the next prime minister. In reply, he said with all the honour and dignity that the prime minister's post should not fall prey to tadbir-baji. Gujral is an honourable man.

Bangladesh is not the only country where one sees the presence of tadbir-bajies and their tadbir-bajis. In the US, across Capitol Hill, there are well-decorated offices of American tadbir-bajies, known as lobbyist firms. Many former US Senators and Congressmen are affiliated with these firms, whose job is to do tadbir with the US government or Congress on behalf of their clients for a fat fee. The clients are normally business interest groups, or even foreign governments and countries.

Bangladesh, on a few occasions, employed such lobbyist firms to do tadbir on its behalf with the US Congress or government. But I am sure one would not need to engage such a tadbir-baji in the US for getting a phone connection.

A couple of years back, BBC ran an interesting story on Bangladesh T&T. Mr. Rahimuddin (not the real name), after entering government service, applied for a telephone and waited for thirty seven years to get his connection. That, too, happened after his retirement. Rahimuddin told the BBC correspondence that there was no tadbir for his phone, and he had to wait for thirty-seven years before he could have his own telephone. He could not afford to buy a cell phone.

I do not miss a T&T phone as there are a couple of cell-phones in the house. The problem is only with my friend Shahid who, out of boredom, wants to talk to me regularly on a T&T phone. He thinks the sound of T&T phones is better.

T&T misses some revenue. Only if the T&T punters, instead of announcing their regular humbug, could just realise this and capitalise on it. In many countries, the traditional fixed phones are facing extinction. We hope the BTB realises this and spares the subscribers or the service receivers the ignominy of doing their own tadbir or taking the service of a professional tadbir-baji for different type of services available from the BTB.

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20 Rules of the Road for surviving off the beaten track

Survived your latest business trip to un-urbanized parts of Asia? Congratulations. It may be luck, or you may have been lucky enough to have absorbed the information you need to know to keep alive.

Here are the 20 Unwritten Rules of the Road for going off the beaten track in Asia (with thanks to Nigel Dahl, Sahir Siddiqui, Greg Botts and others).

Rule 1: There are no rules.
Rule 2: Except for the golden rule which is: Cows get priority.
Rule 3: All traffic drives on the left.
Rule 4: Except for traffic which drives on the right.
Rule 5: And the traffic which drives in the middle.
Rule 6: Instead of seat belts, wear a garland of flowers or a feng shui amulet, which offer better protection.
Rule 7: If you are driving a truck, paint "No Kiss" or "Horn Please" on the back.
Rule 8: Might is right.
Rule 9: Instead of driving in a manner that ensures you arrive at your destination alive, set up a small shrine (Ganesh, Kuan Yin, Buddha, the Virgin Mary, or all four). This ensures the worst thing that can happen to you is that you get to heaven faster.

Rule 10: You should only ever overtake on the right. Or the left. Or over. Or under.
Rule 11: Multi-tasking while driving is compulsory. Beginners may wish to drive, chew betel nut and talk on a mobile phone, while advanced drivers should do all three plus enjoy a three-course meal, drink a bottle of locally brewed wine, sing a karaoke song and watch television.
Rule 12: Signaling before you turn is considered bad form. Surprises are more fun.
Rule 13: When driving at night, headlights should be kept (a) at full beam to blind oncoming drivers, or (b) switched off (see reference to "surprises" in Rule 12).

Rule 14: Checking to see if there is any oncoming traffic before pulling out to overtake is considered the behavior of a "wuss".
Rule 15: You'd be surprised how many vehicles can fit abreast on a two-lane highway.
Rule 16: If the road is blocked, the hard shoulder may be used as a road.
Rule 17: If the road and the hard shoulder are blocked, the pavement may be used as a road.
Rule 18: Do not run over pedestrians, cyclists or scooter-riders, unless necessary.
Rule 19: But remember, there are no rules.
Rule 20: Except the one about the cows.

Frenchman Didier Fayolle wanted to update this column's suggestion that French men like to drive with a Gauloise (a stinky cigarette) in one hand and their passenger's leg in the other. "Gauloises are not the trend any more," he said. "But having your hand on the passenger's knee still is."

A note on driving from the Lonely Planet Guide to India: "The normal driving technique is to put your hand firmly on the horn, close your eyes, and plough through regardless."
Reader Vince A. says that drivers in Manila do stop when they see red traffic lights. "Unfortunately, they're looking at the traffic light at the next junction rather than the one they're approaching," he said.
Prize for the dumbest traffic campaign goes to the Hong Kong Government, for: "Hong Kong's Aim: Zero Traffic Accidents." In other words, they have blown taxpayers' money on a campaign that is (a) impossible to achieve and (b) guaranteed to fail in the first hour.
Way to go, lads.

Share horror stories from your road trips with Nury on www.vittachi.com

