

## New political realities in Nepal

*Maoists in power should be pragmatic*

THE electorally victorious Maoists in Nepal have served notice on King Gyanendra that he must leave Narayanhiti Palace in the next four weeks. The move is certainly an indication of the dramatic way politics has been transformed in a kingdom about to turn itself into a republic. There is no question that the emergence of the Maoists as a pre-eminent force in Nepalese politics was as sudden as it was unforeseen. That only places a heavy burden of responsibility on them as they prepare to take charge of the country's next government. For the Maoists, at this point, it becomes necessary to acknowledge the confidence reposed in them by the electorate and move on to build a durable democratic structure in the country.

The challenge for the Maoists, given their armed past, is now to convince people not only in Nepal but around the world as well that they will now, by turning away from their radical past, embrace democracy as part of governance. The legacy of the bitter, recent past in which 13,000 people have died as a result of the Maoist uprising, is one the new rulers of Nepal must turn away from in order for them to acquire credibility as a formalised, democratic political force. Radicalism must now give way to tolerance and there should be no hint of reprisals in their actions and policies. This is important, for it is on how they perform in the next few years that the future of Nepal as a democracy will depend. They will be doing much good for themselves and for the country if they can rise above ideology and become part of the bigger political mainstream. The reality in these times, as has been proved since the end of the Cold War, is that ideology is not a sure guarantee of a nation's progress and that pragmatism is the basis on which social and economic policies can be worked out and implemented. Nepal's Maoists, having been guerrillas for years and having had no experience of government, cannot therefore afford to fail with the heavy burden now coming to rest on their shoulders.

A very important way in which the Maoists can convince the outside world as well as their own people of their readiness to uphold and promote democracy is by ensuring that democratic practices are strictly adhered to. Having spent years as an extreme leftwing guerrilla force, they will now be expected to uphold such values as the necessity of a free press in the interest of pluralism. Such an attitude to governance will also effectively contribute to an upholding of the SAARC spirit in South Asia. Anything less than that can only raise some uncomfortable questions about their performance in office.

## Trees on DU campus

*Take measures to save them*

WE are alarmed at the rate century old trees have been going down on the pristine campus of Dhaka University. After standing tall for decades they are being cut down to make room for some brick and mortar structures. In the past, powerful yet unscrupulous factions within the student parties sold off valuable trees from the campus. It was a shameful act that went unchallenged.

Now, in the latest move, the Jagannath Hall authorities have taken the decision to chop down some magnificent trees on the hall premises to construct a new residential quarter for the students. Reportedly, the blueprint has been finalized and the axe has been sharpened for the purpose. According to the members of frontline environment activist group Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (BAPA), the intended residential quarter can still be constructed without destroying the trees. Obviously it would need some changes in the original plan. We are happy to learn that BAPA has further assured that the Institute of Architects Bangladesh would come forward with required technical support in this regard. So, we believe, the ball is now in the court of the Jagannath Hall authorities.

Dhaka University is known and admired for its green ambience and cool environment because of the large trees spread across the sprawling campus. In fact, it is the lofty trees that give Dhaka University the needed campus look. We must not also forget that those trees are a safe haven for birds of many different species. Therefore, our question is, what good will remain of Dhaka University campus if one by one the beautiful trees are chopped down for the sake of constructing buildings?

We sincerely urge the Jagannath Hall authorities to take the opinion of the architects, students, teachers and environment activists pertaining to changing the building plan so that the trees can be saved. If trees are felled indiscriminately, one day we shall only have buildings to look at. All the trees and all the birds will be gone by then.

## Elections in Nepal



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

ELECTIONS are held to enhance the welfare of the people. In developed countries it is taken for granted that the party that wins majority of votes from an electorate that has given thought to the words spoken by the candidates and the party manifests forms the government.

In developing countries, one may see the Zimbabwean situation where the people are kept in suspense for the results of an elections held weeks before. More often than not, money, muscle and serpentine entry of political influence in the state institutions play a significant role in the outcome of the elections.

After long struggle against authoritarian rule, the Nepalese have voted the Maoists to power to signal not only the end of the monarchy but also a change in the belief of many Nepalese that the king is a reincarnation of God Vishnu and hence is to be revered. It appears that the roots of centuries old religious tradition is less stronger than the grinding poverty that has

After long struggle against authoritarian rule, the Nepalese have voted the Maoists to power to signal not only the end of the monarchy but also a change in the belief of many Nepalese that the king is a reincarnation of God Vishnu and hence is to be revered. It appears that the roots of centuries old religious tradition is less stronger than the grinding poverty that has been instrumental in the decision of a large number of Nepalese to vote for the Maoists who had declared that the Constituent Assembly that would be formed should decide in favour of the abolition of the monarchy.

Even with a landslide victory the Maoists will find it difficult to dislodge the hold of the monarch on the well-equipped army that reportedly remains loyal to him. But for the tragedy of June 2001, when King Virendra along with the queen and number of members of the royal family were allegedly killed by then Crown Prince Dipendra that catapulted Gyanendra to the throne, the Maoists in all possibility would be still fighting in the jungles and the Nepalese Congress and the United Marxist Leninist Party would be in control of the government.

The general impression that the present king and his playboy son, the crown prince, had a hand in the assassination of the popular King Virendra had sealed the fate of the monarchy, and it was only a matter of time for the monarchy to end. It would, however, be naive to think that the woes of Nepal would disappear with the exit of the king, as the country is mired in abject poverty that in Walt Rostow's analysis of stages of economic development has not gone much further than pre-Newtonian agrarian society.

The urban-rural divide is skewed with 88% of the people living in rural areas. Literacy rate is 45%, with gender inequality being very pronounced. Though male-

female inequality is fairly pervasive in Asia and Africa it is a guide to the way of life, and often influences the socio-economic life in the developing countries with consequent influence on the political life as well.

The victory of the Maoists in the elections is a reflection of the accumulated frustration of the down-trodden majority who, for generations, remained deprived of the essential and basic amenities of life and was politically marginalised.

But then Nepal, dependent as it is on foreign aid and assistance, can hardly take on an agenda that Chavez could in Venezuela. The US considers the Maoists as a terrorist group. Reportedly, the White House wanted some sort of accommodation between the king and the rebels. But Maoist second-in-command Bhattarai's comment that the royalists would have to flee to the jungles if they go against the peoples' wish as expressed in the

elections do not give the impression that the post-election scenario would be peaceful.

If the Bush administration follows the same policy of creating difficulties for the Maoists as it did in Gaza by not recognising the Hamas as the true representatives of the people then the situation in Nepal could become murky.

One could argue that American interference in Nepal would be an affront to the country's sovereignty. But the realists would argue that in the absence of absolute sovereignty in the world today a peaceful co-existence with the global hegemon would help to bind the influence of the Maoists within the borders of Nepal.

One has to take into account the formation of Coordinating Committee of Maoists Parties and Organisations in South Asia (CCOMPOSA) formed in July 2001 by nine Maoist outfits from India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka (Asia Report 132 International Crisis Group), and the CPN (M)'s crucial role in its formation. CCOMPOSA's twin aims are to struggle "for the achievement of people's power in one's own country" and "fighting against American imperialism and Indian expansionism."

Given India's close relations with Nepal, starting with the Indo-Nepalese Treaty of the fifties, it is doubtful that India would allow Nepalese Maoists to assist Indian Maoist insurgency. One would imagine this was made clear when

India unofficially mid-wifed talks held in Delhi among various Nepalese political parties including the Maoists that has finally resulted in the just held elections to the Constituent Assembly now dominated by the Maoists.

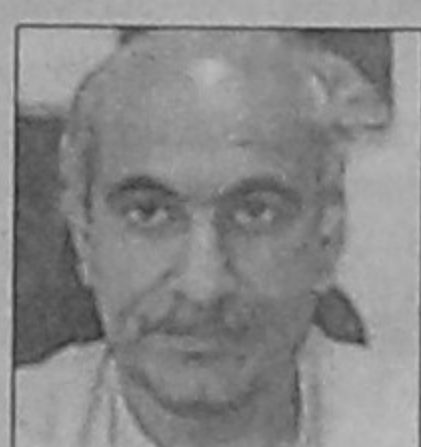
Among the key players -- India, US, UK, and the UN -- India has the greatest potential influence and most sophisticated understanding of Nepalese politics. New Delhi's official assessment is that the Nepalese Maoists do not do not provide any significant material help to their fellow brethren across the border.

One must, however, admit that the ownership of this revolutionary change in Nepal belongs to the Nepalese alone, and any claim by external entities of effecting the change beyond encouragement given to the Nepalese could be misunderstood and have negative impact with that entity in Nepal's future relations.

While the return of democracy in Nepal should be a matter of great satisfaction to South Asians, we have to be on guard that the fledgling democracy in Pakistan after a long period of military and quasi-military dictatorship, and expectations for a return to democratic rule in Bangladesh are not threatened by inimical forces or by misguided politico-economic policies that would further confound the ill effects of natural and man made disasters.

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## Inflated Egos



M.J. AKBAR

IS inflation some kind of a sudden plague, which hits without warning, spreads contagious havoc for a while and then disappears as mysteriously as it came? Finance ministers would love such an explanation, wouldn't they? Government propagandists could command a high premium from their masters if they managed to sell such a myth. Unhappily for governments, and fortunately for mere mortals, the voter is not gullible.

Inflation is an interesting phenomenon. It is a consequence of decisions not taken, as much as decisions taken.

A simple analysis of statements made in Parliament during the debate on inflation by finance minister P. Chidambaram and cricket minister Sharad Pawar (who also looks after agriculture when he gets time from running the Board for the Control of Cricket in India) will indicate what I mean.

The most startling analysis of basic causes was made by Pawar when he pointed out that the poor had acquired more liquidity, were therefore buying more food, and this, in conjunction with a change in dietary habits was pushing up food prices.

Well, that's it then. All you

have to do is tell the poor to behave. They should remain semi-starved, as they have been for thousands of years, so that the middle class and rich can buy food at acceptable prices.

The poor, Mr Cricket Minister, are not fools: they do not think that any government can suddenly change their diet from bajra roti and dal into pilao. Even a government that pompously claims to belong to aam aadmi, or the ordinary people, does not raise hopes among ordinary people. Life has taught them to be realistic. The poor do not expect pilao, but they do believe that if they began life with just two rotis for a meal they have a right to three rotis after a while. Is that too much? The insensitivity of Pawar's statement did not seem to upset anyone in the political class, proving how insensitive everyone has become.

The point is more moot. When did the shift in dietary patterns as for instance, the rising demand for wheat in traditionally rice-eating South take place? On the morning of the debate in Parliament? This change in food habits has been a slow turn, years in the making, and the agriculture ministry has been studying this pattern for a long while. So what did the agriculture minister do about it? Nothing. Did he

encourage a shift in crop production through, for instance, incentives to ensure that India did not face a wheat shortage? Here is a consequence of decisions not taken.

There is a further twist to the story. We underestimate the role of corruption in inflation. There was a wheat shortage earlier. When did Sharad Pawar step in to import? Not when world prices were low, but when prices had peaked and you had no option but to buy at available rates. The importer of that wheat on behalf of Sharad Pawar is probably flying around in the private jet. A check might unearth some interesting details.

On 16 April finance minister Chidambaram announced that action would be taken against cement and steel cartels. Were those cartels formed over lunch that day, forcing the finance minister to leap into action immediately? These cartels have been in business for many months. Prices have been rising for on an incremental basis for a while. Why didn't cartels attract the attention of the finance minister before 16 April?

On the same day the government announced it would import one million tonnes of edible oil. Had prices of edible oil begun rising at the stroke of the midnight hour on 16 April? Why did the

## BYLINE

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Honourable Minister suddenly wake up before a debate in Parliament? As long as prices only threatened the livelihood of the poor, the government of Dr Manmohan Singh did nothing. When prices began to threaten the life of the government, there was a flurry of activity.

The government of Dr Manmohan Singh is guilty of collusion in inflation. The economic principle that has driven this government is the oft-repeated "trickle-down theory", a favourite of World Bankers infesting this administration. Every economic phrase has a human meaning. This particular phrase means that the government knew that there would be a waterfall for the few at the top floating in swimming pools, and only a trickle would reach those dying of thirst at the bottom. Its attention has always been focused on the management of the waterfall.

We should have expected this, but we do not have a memory. What was the rate of inflation during the five years that Dr Singh was finance minister under Narasimha Rao? In 1991-92 inflation was 13.7%, and these are the figures for the subsequent years of his finance ministership: 10.1%, 8.4%, 12.5%, 8.1%.

There is a correlation between inflation and political instability. Food prices are not the only factor, but they are a principal reason because food security is an important basis of collective national confidence. The government of Dr Singh, Chidambaram and Pawar believed that food security could be left to market forces. Market forces have now begun to bleed this government.

Inflation during the Jawaharlal Nehru decade, between 1951-52 to 1960-61, was 1.8%. That was undeniably the most stable period of the last sixty years. Inflation averaged 6.3% in the Sixties, and the Congress was swept out of power in the states between Punjab and Bengal. It barely managed to survive at the Centre in the 1967 general elections. Inflation rose to 10.3% during the Seventies; the turmoil was as high as inflation. Two national governments were voted out of office. Inflation dropped to 7.2% in the Eighties and 7.8% in the Nineties, but the people still considered it too high and the turnover of governments was high. Calm returned when inflation was reduced to less than five percent in the first half of the new century, despite a serious drought for one year. Anything above five per cent creates political tremors.

Dr Manmohan Singh's five years as finance minister reduced the Congress Party from about 240 seats in the Lok Sabha to 145 seats. At the same rate of attrition his five years as Prime Minister could take the Congress to below a hundred seats.

Dr Manmohan Singh's government is so dazzled by market forces that even now it is reluctant to ban futures trading in

agricultural products. Let me quote an American columnist, William Pfaff. He was not writing in The Theory and Practice of Soviet Marxism but in the distinctly American International Herald Tribune (Speculators and soaring food prices, 17 April 2008): "Speculative purchases have no other purpose than to make money for the speculators, who hold their contracts to drive up current prices with the intention not of selling the commodities on the real future market, but of unloading their holdings onto an artificially inflated market, at the expense of the ultimate consumer... It is astonishing in the present situation that the international financial institutions and government regulators have done little to control or banish this parasitical and antisocial practice. The myth of the benevolent and ultimately impartial market prevails against all contrary evidence."

Dr Manmohan Singh has been kept out of the politics of power since he became Prime Minister, but the administration of power has been his responsibility. If he had spent even half the time examining the earth beneath his feet as he did staring transfixed at a nuclear deal with George Bush, he would have seen that angel of death known as inflation approaching many months ago. There was so much hope when Dr Singh became Prime Minister. He will now be remembered for a nuclear deal that was waylaid by allies, and an economic policy that was shredded by the arrogance of ministers and the complacency of servitors.

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## Hillary Clinton's Sister Souljah moment

### LETTER FROM AMERICA

Ironically, with his gaffe that Pennsylvanians are "clinging to their guns and religion" because they are "bitter," Barack Obama provided Hillary with her Sister Souljah moment. Now she is sending coded messages to the working class whites.

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

RECENT successful white Democratic presidential candidates, who were perceived to be pro-black, had sent coded messages to blue-collar white voters assuring them that whatever they may have said on the campaign trail, they were actually "one of them." Candidate Jimmy Carter did so by saying in 1976 that there should be some "racial purity" in the residential neighbourhoods. Meaning: blacks and whites should not necessarily be neighbours. And Bill Clinton invented the Sister Souljah moment in 1992.

In the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots that followed the acquittal of police officers who had mercilessly beaten an innocent black man, Rodney King, black rapper Sister Souljah made the infamous comment: "If black people kill black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people?"

Presidential candidate Bill Clinton pounced on the comment, publicly criticised Sister Souljah, and also Jesse Jackson for allowing her to be on his Rainbow Coalition. The blue-collar whites were reassured, Clinton went on to win the presidency and the Sister Souljah moment was born.

Things are tougher for Hillary Clinton. Six months ago, Barack Obama was not "black enough" for the blacks; now blacks have accepted him as a brother. Four months ago, 56% of the blacks supported Hillary; now only about 15% do. Here is Hillary's dilemma: Unlike Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, Hillary's primary opponent is a black.

In spite of the candidates' coded messages to the blue-collar whites, blacks had no choice but to vote for Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, who were both pro-black.

But now they have a choice in the primary: Hillary or a black man. Hillary cannot send soothing

coded messages to working class whites without alienating the blacks, who may be voting for Obama in the primaries, but without whose support she has no chance of winning the presidency were she to be the nominee.

Barack Obama would not be leading the Democratic presidential race without the enthusiasm and high turnout of the black voters. Obama has won the majority of white votes in only a few states such as Iowa, Wisconsin, Virginia and Vermont. Under the radar, working class whites have been reacting to Obama's overwhelming black support. Analysts believe that Obama's heavy black support is nudging some working-class white Democrats into Clinton's camp.

Hillary won nearly two out of every three white votes in Ohio, and 56% of those in Texas. 18% of white Ohio voters said race was an important factor in their decision and, of that group, three in four voted for Clinton. Strategists are

pondering the results, wondering if Pennsylvania's demographic similarities to Ohio will deliver a resounding victory for Hillary on April 22.

In general elections, which pit Democrats against Republicans, the racial sensitivity of white voters has been pronounced, and well documented for decades. It is a major cause of the realignment of the South, where blacks remained intensely loyal to the Democratic Party as whites moved to the Republican Party.

In the intraparty world of Democratic primaries, racial divisions are less pronounced, and harder to measure. Many white Democrats, especially in the South, tend to be liberal, racially tolerant and happy to join blacks in opposing Republicans.

The Obama-Clinton rivalry is straining that harmony. Some blacks resented remarks Clinton made in New Hampshire, which they viewed as minimising Martin Luther King Jr.'s role in achieving

landmark civil rights laws. And after Obama's South Carolina victory on January 26, former president Clinton seemed to equate the Illinois senator with Jesse Jackson as a candidate who could not draw widespread white support. Many blacks felt that the Clintons "were trying to use race to their political advantage, to cede the black vote to Obama and take therest."

Ironically, with his gaffe that Pennsylvanians are "clinging to their guns and religion" because they are "bitter," Barack Obama provided Hillary with her Sister Souljah moment. Now she is sending coded messages to the working class whites.

While John McCain refused to call Obama an "elitist," Hillary is running ads in Pennsylvania calling him an "elitist" who is "out of touch" with working class Pennsylvanians, and labeling his remarks "demeaning," "condescending" and "patronising." In their presidential debate in

Philadelphia on April 16, which pundits opined Hillary won decisively, she reiterated her accusations.

To identify more with working class whites, Hillary shored up her gun credentials (she is anti-gun) saying she shot ducks (did not say when), stressed her Methodist religious upbringing, and went pub hopping in Indiana. With the cameras rolling and in a perfect impersonation of "I pretend, therefore I am," Hillary downed a shot of whisky and a mug of beer. Take that elitist Obama! sneered Hillary, as she redefined herself as a beer-drinking, working class waitress!

The problem with that is that the "working class" Clintons had just reported an income of \$109 million over the last seven years! Because of such hypocrisy, the latest polls show that 56% of the Americans believe Hillary is "not trustworthy!" A milder version of the disease that afflicted fellow front-runner of last summer, Republican Rudy Giuliani, also debilitates Hillary the

more people see her, the less they seem to like her. By contrast, the more people see Obama, the more they like him. By a margin of 31% Democrats believe that Obama is more electable as president than Hillary.

And Hillary may have shot herself in the foot in the Philadelphia debate. Pressed by moderator George Stephanopoulos, a former Bill Clinton White House aide, whether she stood by her comment to New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson that "Obama can't win," Hillary retracted and said: "Yes, yes, yes," he can win.

Everyone knows that, contrary to her public pronouncements, privately Hillary's main argument to super delegates has been that since "Obama can't win," she should be the nominee. If she were to do so now, the super delegates will remind her: "But Hillary, in the Philadelphia debate you said 'yes, yes, yes' to Obama's electability!"

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