

Crime and corruption

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SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

IN a democracy, the entire state apparatus -- the government, the higher judiciary, the police, the magistracy, the intelligence agencies -- works in union towards ensuring peace and prosperity of the country and, to that end, combating crime and corruption with the zeal and commitment of a crusade.

The civil society, the intelligentsia, the media, the highly conscientious citizens groups etc., do not lag behind. They also play a positive role in seeing to it that not only have the wrongdoers been punished but have also been seen to have been punished.

A time-honoured culture of being wedded to the ideals of truth and justice makes the educated people across the political spectrum look down upon what is morally wrong and legally unacceptable, even when it involves

people of their own ilk. Quite naturally, it generates a healthy ambience where any aberration of the rule of law is condemned in the harshest possible language.

This makes it difficult for any wrongdoer, no matter how powerful and influential he or she may be, to face the people and the media without putting his or her career on the line. Seldom have we seen a politician or a social elite accused in the media of corruption and moral turpitude put up a brave face and say that he or she was innocent. Nor have we seen in the media any effort being made by people to even remotely suggest that the person indicted and facing trial on corruption charges is being victimised. Instead, we have seen very powerful people walk away in silence into obscurity because they felt it beneath their dignity to lie before the people. This is democracy.

Unfortunately for us in this

country, democracy has always been an illusion, as has been the rule of law, since time immemorial. Our rulers, both political and military, promised democracy every time they assumed power, but ended up invariably throttling democracy during their rule and governing the country as if it were their family property or, at best, a limited company they could run as they wished.

The upshot has been the alarming degradation and erosion of our moral values and ethos, the bedrock of a nation to rest its claim upon, for nationhood or statehood.

To loot and plunder state wealth and property, and to lie before the people, has evolved as a code of conduct for the ruling class. Our rulers have always considered the people as a bunch of goats and sheep, who can be cowed down by police brutality and made to swear allegiance to the ruling class in

return for a few crumbs thrown at them. In the process, they have thoroughly politicised and corrupted the whole lot of the state agencies geared to preventing and combating crime and corruption in the country.

They have not spared the civil society, the intelligentsia, the academics, the various professional groups, the media, etc., with the result that the presence of their camp followers is discernible almost everywhere.

The whole atmosphere is now vitiated. And, as a nation, we seem to be suffering from conceptual incongruities insofar as crime and corruption are concerned. Our age old values, ethics and norms, which we were once taught to cherish and live up to, are not there any more.

Our whole concept of crime and corruption seems to have changed, if you look at the behaviour of our ruling class. If murderers, rapists, smugglers, black marketers, listed criminals and people widely accused of being in possession of ill-gotten money and property could walk about freely both in and outside the corridors of power, as they indeed did over the last three decades or so, did we not get the impression that what we generally condemn as crime and corruption

were not precisely so in the eyes of the government?

Maybe it is not a crime as such to murder or rape someone if the murderer or the rapist happens to be somehow politically aligned to the party in power. In the same vein, it is also not corruption if someone belonging to the ruling class grabs a piece of land, wins a lucrative government contract, charges a commission on every single import and export transaction, be it public or private, and so on. This is a prerogative of being on the hot seat of power. After all, in the olden days, much before democracy flourished it was a maxim that a king or a queen could do no wrong.

In the absence of monarchy, we have rulers who can also claim that what they do cannot be construed to be wrong.

Did very many people say with a loud voice during the Awami League rule that it was wrong for Sheikh Hasina as prime minister to have enacted a law entitling her to own the sprawling Gono Bhaban Complex, the then official residence of the prime minister, and her sister to own another house; and entitling both the sisters to enjoy state facilities of personal security, transportation, protocol etc., for as long as they would live?

Likewise, did many people raise a voice of protest when Begum Khaleda Zia chose to arrogate to herself the right to claim a highly inflated house rent allowance for living in her freely donated cantonment house, while there were suitable state houses available for the prime minister to live in?

If you have noticed carefully, pervasive corruption and crime have taken away our sense of shame and self esteem as individuals, and collectively as a nation. A corrupt man or woman in police custody does not hide his or her face as a man or a woman of dignity and honour would do. Instead, he or she flashes the V sign, and is all smiles as if he or she has earned a laurel.

And, as if this is not enough, he or she will lie in front of the people and the media without batting an eye, and say that he or she has done nothing wrong, despite having a few dozen bank accounts at home and abroad involving huge amount of transactions hardly commensurate with known source of income. This is our democracy.

There is no denying that there was an unprecedented surge in crime and corruption in Bangladesh over the last sixteen years, especially during the rule of the immediate past BNP-Jamaat-e-

Islami alliance government. Our country topped the list of the most corrupt countries in the world for four years in a row.

There were a spate of bomb blasts, grenade attacks, and colossal amount of bloodshed across the country, by some misguided religious fanatics. No attempt was made by the government of the day to crack down upon the culprits and punish them. Why? Because the government and all other state agencies involved in dealing with crime and corruption were a party to it in one way or the other.

Now that this interim, non-political government headed by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed has launched a genuine crusade against crime and corruption, and many hitherto high and mighty political leaders including Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia have been hauled up and are facing trial on specific charges of corruption brought up by the Anti-Corruption Commission, the familiar forces inimical to democracy, good governance, progress and prosperity and wellbeing of the people are again at work.

The discredited politicians and their cronies, beholden for favours received during the hey-day of political misrule, have stepped up a vilification campaign against the

government.

The perennial power crisis, water scarcity, and price hike of essential food-stuff, the lingering legacy of corruption and inefficiency of the past political governments, have all been hyped up as grist to the mill for inciting public resentment against the government.

The objective is simple: To put pressure on the government not to punish and disqualify the corrupt political leaders for the next election, and to refrain from essential democratic reforms of the political system in vogue so that they can happily go back to the same merry-go-round politics of loot and plunder of yesteryears and condemn this country to the dust bin of history as a failed state and to prove wrong the founding fathers and the millions of our liberation war martyrs who dreamt of a viable, secular and democratic welfare state for the people of this country.

Will this government bow down before the dark forces of crime and corruption, or will it go ahead with its pro-democracy and pro-people reform package? This is the million-dollar question.

Brig. General Shamsuddin Ahmed is a former Military Secretary to the President of Bangladesh.

Cambodia's success story

Cambodia is home to one of the Green Revolution's greatest successes. In 1969, Cambodia's annual rice production was 4 million tons a year, a healthy output. But by 1980, the 6 million people who had survived the Communist Khmer Rouge era, from 1975 to 1978, were on the brink of starvation. By 1997, Cambodia had been virtually reborn: its rice fields were producing nearly as much rice as they had in 1969, but on half the land, making the country rice self-sufficient once again.

TAREQUL ISLAM MUNNA

FOR 30 years, the rice fields at a commune on the outskirts of Phnom Penh lay mostly barren and unused, a legacy of the Khmer Rouge, the Communist regime that led almost 2 million Cambodians to their death, many from starvation. But today Cambodia has a rice surplus. And these fields are incubating some of the most advanced rice technology in Cambodia, under the tutelage of the Cambodian Agricultural Research Institute (CARDI), which is at the center of Cambodia's largely unheralded "green" revolution.

As the global food crisis continues to spark riots and rationing, Cambodia's turnaround showcases the power -- and the limits -- of rice research, experts say. Few countries in modern history have engineered as dramatic an agricultural rebound as Cambodia.

In 1969, beginning in 1987, by applying the tool suite of the Green Revolution -- new rice varieties, improved irrigation, and better fertiliser -- the country has risen to a peak of rice output, producing enough rice to be self-sufficient for the first time in 25 years.

It has been a big achievement for (Cambodia)," says Men Sarom, CARDI's director. "And I think research contributed a lot to that."

The kernel of that research was first planted in the 1960s, when scientists at the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), a pioneering agricultural institute based in the Philippines, developed higher-yield varieties of grain and introduced new systems of irrigation and fertilising. Thus was born the Rice Revolution.

Of particular importance was IR8, a rice variety that had a yield double that of normal rice, was less susceptible to disease and more responsive to fertiliser. Dubbed the "miracle rice," it has been credited with averting massive famine in India, Africa, and throughout the developing world in the 1970s.

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The rebound was the result of collaboration between the Cambodian government, the IRRI, and the Australia government, which together invested millions of dollars in irrigation, infrastructure, and fertiliser beginning in 1987. They also trained 1,300 scientists and support staff to revitalise the country's agricultural system. And the new high-yielding rice varieties allowed farmers to produce more on less land.

Today, experts say, Cambodia's yields have risen from 1.35 tons per hectare to 2.5 tons per hectare. It produces enough to export -- more than a million tons this year -- but recently imposed export controls to ensure it has enough for its own people.

Still, as Cambodia also illustrates, scientific advances will only take rice production so far. Although Cambodia's yields have doubled in the last 30 years, they are only almost half that of



Thailand and Laos (where better soil conditions, seed varieties, climate and management make for higher outputs). Meanwhile, weeds here still cause rice yield losses of up to 30%, and poor seed quality in some areas means that 160,000 tons of rice rot every year, according to a report by the IRRI.

"There are still many problems that need to be addressed -- problems from climate change and market changes," says Mr. Sarom. Scientists also warn that the amount of land being farmed -- especially in the developing world -- has not increased substantially in the last two decades. Urban sprawl and industrial development continue to compete for farmland. "Even in Thailand (the world's largest exporter of rice), even if they wanted to, they can't produce more rice. There isn't much more farm-

land, and the production level is also already pretty high," says Paul Risley, a spokesman for the World Food Program in Thailand.

The recent global food crisis has sharply underlined that, despite the Green Revolution's benefits, many countries are simply not able to produce enough food for their exploding populations. But even if the biggest production advances have already been achieved, that doesn't mean scientists are giving up.

CARDI, continues to develop new varieties that can produce better quality rice and withstand inclement weather. Sarom says research is already pointing the way to higher rice yields. "In America and Australia, you have yields of six to eight tons of rice per hectare. Why not here? We still have the potential to increase productiv-

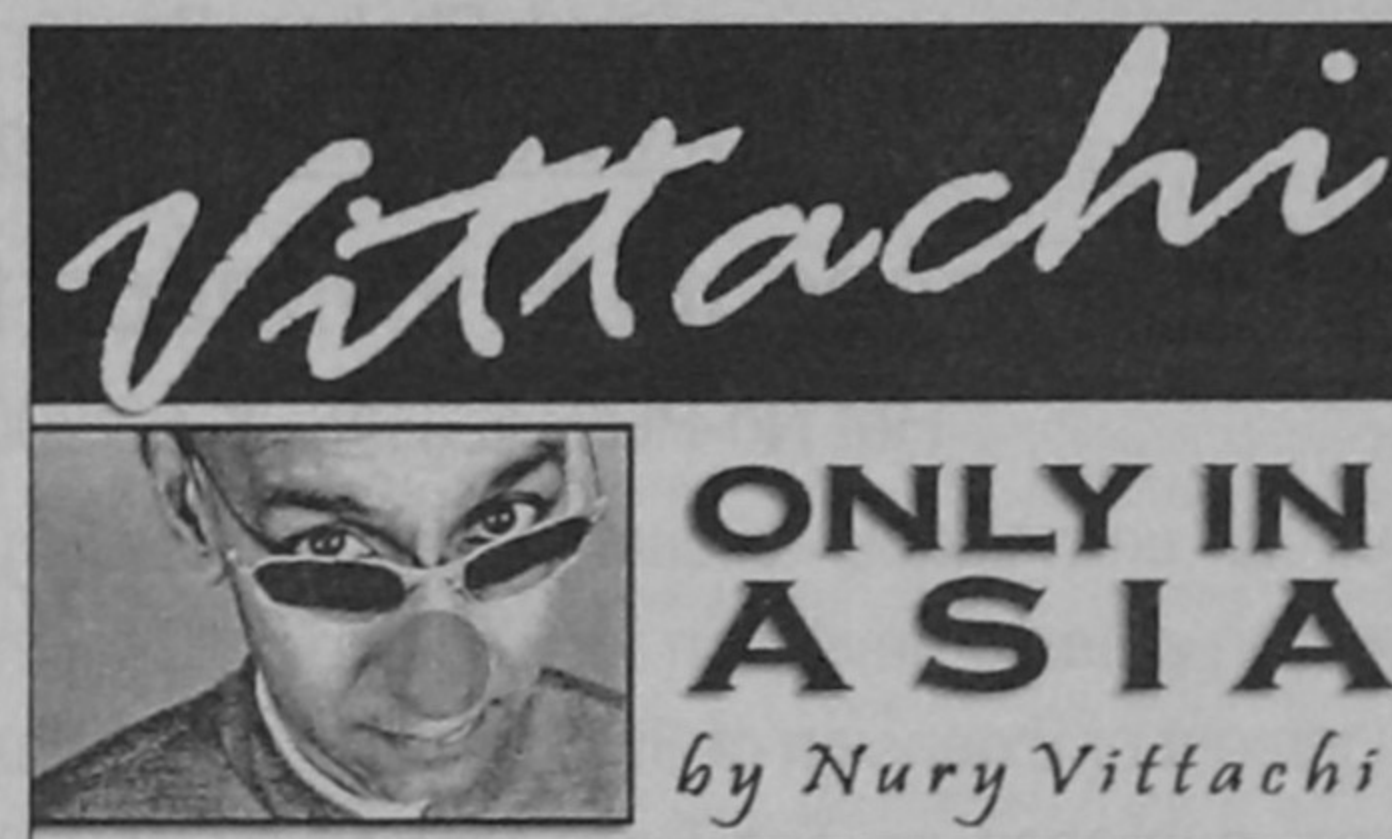
ity," he says.

That enthusiasm was echoed by the country's agriculture minister, Chan Sarun, who said that he expected Cambodia to produce enough rice to export some 8 million tons a year by 2015. That would make it one of the world's top rice exporters.

And around the world, research still offers the promise of better yields. For example, hybrid rice, a blend of three kinds of rice, grows faster, is more disease resistant, and produces 20% higher yields. Hybrids are only just starting to catch on: 800,000 hectares were planted in Asia outside of China between 2001-02, but only 1,000 in Indonesia, for example, and only 20,000 in Bangladesh, according to the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations (FAO). The expanded use of hybrids has particular promise for food security, the FAO adds.

The current food crisis may be creating an investment environment for a second Green Revolution, some analysts say. By averting massive famine, the first Green Revolution helped create an impression among world leaders that investments in agriculture were no longer as vital. Many countries stopped spending on agricultural development. That may be starting to change as Malaysia, the Philippines, and China have in recent weeks announced plans to boost investment in agriculture.

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Falling currency means that we all end up dirt-poor

I 'VE just come back from the bank, where I had to change money from one currency to another. This really annoys me. In the queue, I worked out that if you change your money 13 times, you end up flat broke without actually having bought anything. Worse still, I've just realised I change money 14 times a year. That means I can save time and energy by just staying at home and burning my life savings.

In ancient times, when the world was young (and Keith Richards had already begun to rot), the practice of changing one form of money to another every time you crossed a national border began.

This was particularly bad news for people from South Asia. Their currency, the rupee, was set at a very low exchange rate: one rupee was equal to one speck of dirt.

I recall my father's long face every time we used an airport money-changer. We got a handful of dirt. And those were the good days. Other times we just got a laugh.

Today, everything has changed. The various brands of rupee are still worthless, but thanks to financial terminology, the situation is expressed far more elegantly. We now say 0.9897 rupees equals 0.9897 specks of dirt or 1.075 seconds of laughter, which I think you'll agree sounds better.

In the old days, the most confusing currency was the Pound, a British banknote which (rather suspiciously, I thought) weighed only a fraction of a pound.

The British currency was famously complex. The pound was divided into shillings, pence, florins and penny-farthings, coins which were so large they were used in Britain as bicycle wheels. The British also had a huge variety of coins, such as guineas, half-crowns, tuppences, quids, grands, optics, drams and snifters.

The first transaction I ever had on a visit to London went something like this:

Me: How much is that?
Airport shopkeeper: Two grand, a guinea-half-crown, three shillings, half a snifter and

tuppenny-ha'pence-farthing.
Me: Oh. Do you accept rupees?

Airport shopkeeper: Yes sir. That'll be forty googillion rupees, but I will have to give you the change in dirt and snifters.

Only after I got a job as a financial journalist did I learn how the system worked. The main world currency was the US



dollar, colloquially known as Greenspans. The Greenspan was divided into bucks, dimes, nickels, quarters, eighths, sixteenths, semi-colons, jots and iotas.

And after many years of earning a monthly handful of dirt in Asia, I eventually got a job where I was paid in a currency fixed to US dollars. I pictured myself swanning back to my hometown, pockets overflowing with Greenspans.

But what happened? From the day I started that job, the US dollar started falling in value. Down and down it went, into a hole which makes the Marianas Trench look like a scratch in a piece of marble or Kim Jong-Il's head, whichever is denser.

The last time I visited Sri Lanka, I took a wad of US dollars and a wad of rupees. This was the way to get a good deal, I said to myself.

No such luck. At the airport in Colombo, I checked out the rates for both my currencies at the moneychangers. I got two handfuls of dirt and a double-portion of snifters.

Some dirt and lots of snifters can be found at our columnist's website, www.vittachi.com.

Dialogue for democracy

Though a little late, the CTG has started the process for formal dialogue with the political parties. The dialogue has to be an open and frank discussion of ideas to attain mutual understanding, though its outcome remains always uncertain. Its success depends on respect for each others' views, proper realisation of the situation, and realistic expectation.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

WE are all anxiously waiting for a free, fair and credible election, which is expected to be held before the year is out. The chief adviser and the army chief have repeatedly assured us of such an election. The Election Commission is reported to be working hard to complete work relating to voters, registration, finalising the discussions with the political parties about electoral reforms, and redrawing constituency boundaries.

The CTG has completed pre-dialogue deliberations in consultation with the political parties. Soon, the CA will announce the date for the final dialogue. Despite all the activities, we remain uncertain about the fate of the national election because of so many hurdles on the way.

Whatever may happen, there still remains a possibility of the return of political instability ahead of the election because -- lack of preparations by major political

parties and confusion surrounding the fate of the two detained former premiers. Some analysts observed that credible and participatory elections would be extremely difficult. However, though the situation has not yet reached crisis point, we have good reasons for accepting such an observation.

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Both the parties must make sincere effort and be ready to sacrifice to accommodate each others' reasonable and rational views. There must not be any mistrust between the two sides. The CTG must strongly believe that no roadmap for election can be viable if not agreed to by all major actors.

On the other hand, the political

parties should also realise the harsh truth that the longer they resist the initiative for internal reforms to sustain democracy in the longer run the more the chance of undercutting the movement and momentum towards democracy.

The dialogue must clear the air and build the confidence of the electorate and gain assurances of at least major parties. We should be clear about lifting of the ban on political activities outside Dhaka, and the status of the two detained former premiers.

The major political parties are unanimous about the election to transfer power to an elected government, freedom of political activities and lifting of state of emergency. It is obvious that the major parties may like to discuss about the release of their top leaders as early as possible to revitalise their parties.

Some say that the smaller political parties have a different view about the election schedule. They want emergency to continue as long as possible to assist the CTG in the clearing operation and to make

the field level before the election.

Indeed, the CTG is passing through a difficult time. Notwithstanding sincere efforts, it could not hold the price rise of essential commodities. The rate of inflation is high. This is hurting the middle class, lower middle class and the poor badly. The administration appears to be unhappy due to stalemate in the recruitment process of civil servants, existing civil servants are too busy in the preparation of routine reports, attending too many meetings, satisfying queries of various agencies like Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED), Establishment Division and the CA's office.

Despite working hard the EC is lagging behind, and it is not yet certain as to which should be given priority, the election of local bodies or the national election. So long as voter registration is not completed it may not be possible to announce the dates for election. What would be the fate of reform of the political parties is not yet clear.

The CTG, it appears, is under pressure from the donors for announcing the date for election. The civil society in general recommends an early transfer of power to an elected government. The common people are unhappy because of high price of essentials, inflation, and slowing down of development activities



The most difficult job before the CTG appears to be regularisation of work done by it, barring the rich and influential politicians with dubious pasts from re-entering the political arena. It is hoped that people would not like to go back to the days prior to one eleven.

Though some major political parties are not interested in reforming their parties the CTG may try to convince them of its need. They should be told that they failed to establish good governance, undertake political reforms, and even create a democratic culture in politics.

The days of political confrontation, street agitations, political

killings, taking soft line against terrorists, and dividing the nation into various camps are over.

Time is running out. The CTG must finish the dialogue as quickly as possible, ask the EC to complete its job rapidly, take clear and firm decision about political parties' reform, take proper steps to ensure regularisation of its works done so far and announce date of lifting or relaxing emergency.

To make the election successful, and to handover power to an elected government, let there be no creation of any hurdle. We wish for a democratic regime.

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