

Bahrain's ban on Bangladeshi workers

Dhaka should raise issue with Manama in earnest

THE manner in which the Bahrain authorities have imposed a ban on any further recruitment of manpower from Bangladesh is cause for extreme concern. At the same time, it is for us a genuine reason to feel outraged. Coming on the heels of the sufferings Bangladeshi workers have been going through in Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, this new move can only add to our growing disquiet about the future of our manpower export sector. What makes the Bahrain move extremely shocking is that it was recommended by a group of lawmakers in that country following the alleged perpetration of a crime by a Bangladeshi.

Any crime committed by anyone in any country is reprehensible, which is why we think that if a Bangladeshi has violated the law in Bahrain he should be dealt with under the law. But for the Bahraini authorities to suppose that one man's crime can be a cause to punish an entire nation through stopping its workers from coming to work in their country is an act that lacks reason itself. Indeed, individuals involved with human rights in Bahrain have protested the move and have described it as an act akin to 'racism'. On its part, the Bangladesh embassy in Manama has made its strong feelings of shock known, calling the Bahraini move unacceptable. What the action now does to Bangladeshi is two-fold. In the first place, those who are already in Bahrain will be treated with suspicion and will find it psychologically difficult to work there. In the second, those who have obtained jobs in Bahrain but are yet to go there will now find their avenues of a happy future blocked. In other words, what we have here is a precarious human rights situation.

In a recent editorial on the plight of our workers in Saudi Arabia, we had recommended that the Bangladesh government adopt a strong position by taking up the issue with the Riyadh authorities. What has happened in Bahrain only reinforces our feeling that the Bangladesh authorities, notably through the Foreign Office and the manpower ministry, must now work out a strategy to assist our workers in all the countries where they happen to be in a state of distress. Let special teams go out to Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain for some hard-nosed discussions with the governments of those countries. The remittances of our workers abroad are a huge prop for our economy. These workers also bolster the economy of the host countries.

We urge the Bahrain government to rethink its entire move in the interest of friendly relations and human rights.

Nepal becomes a republic

Spirit of tolerance can underpin democracy

THE abolition of the monarchy in Nepal by an overwhelming parliamentary vote on Wednesday heralds a new beginning for the country. With as many as 560 lawmakers in the newly elected 601-member constitutional assembly voting to declare the country a republic, it is clear where the sentiments of the population lie. While it can be argued that the struggle against the monarchy was spearheaded by the Maoists, who now dominate Nepalese politics, it is also true that Nepalese in general have been yearning to see the back of the royal family for quite sometime. Former king Gyanendra made matters worse not only for himself but for his people as well when a few years ago he tried to impose his arbitrary authority by pushing politicians aside. He has now paid the price for that miscalculation.

The task that Nepal's political classes now face is immense. The sense of euphoria which has greeted the emergence of the country as a republic must now be followed by all those measures which strengthen democracy and underpin a society in the long run. The Maoist rebellion, spanning a decade before the 2006 peace deal brought it into the political mainstream, ended up leaving 13,000 people dead. Now that the Maoists are the single largest bloc in the assembly and will be the dominant force in governance, the onus will be on them to ensure that pluralism takes roots in Nepal. They must prove to Nepalese and people outside the country that despite their militant background, they are intellectually equipped to transform themselves into a democratic force for change. All the elements of behaviour necessary to keep a democracy going must be demonstrated by the Maoists. It is their example, and a good one at that, which can inspire other political forces into building a relationship of trust with them. Never has Nepal been in such need of political accommodation between its political parties as now.

We wish the people of Nepal well in their journey to democratic politics. There will be a few stumbles and some fumbling along the way, but it all promises to be a healthy experiment. Meanwhile, let the new men in charge avoid the temptation of engaging in anything that even remotely smacks of retribution against the lapsed monarch and his family.

Is referendum a first step to democracy in Myanmar?



HARUN UR RASHID

ON May 10, the people of Myanmar (in 1989 the military leaders changed the name of Burma to Myanmar) voted on a referendum for a new constitution that military leaders claim is a "road map for democracy." The 75-year-old military强人, Than Shwe, heads the referendum.

The constitution, as the military leaders assert, is the centerpiece of the beginning of democracy in Myanmar, but critics say little of democracy in it. Critics say that a constitution endorsed by a popular vote will provide formal legitimacy to their power, seized twenty years ago.

Some 27 million of the country's 57 million people were eligible to

vote, although balloting was delayed for two weeks in the areas hardest hit by the May 3 cyclone. The constitution requires a simple majority of total eligible voters.

State TV said on May 15 that the constitution was approved by 92.4% in the referendum held on May 10.

On the other hand, a spokesman of Aung San Suu Kyi's party, National Democratic League (NLD), reportedly said that the referendum "was full of cheating and fraud across the country." On May 17, it was reported that NLD had rejected the outcome of the referendum.

David Mathieson, a spokesman for Human Rights Watch in Bangkok, reportedly said: "This is really insulting to the people of Burma. There is simply no way that 92% would have voted 'yes' on a document that they knew very little about, and most had never read."

Referendum under adverse circumstances

The referendum came just one week after Cyclone Nargis reportedly left more than 100,000 people dead or missing. The UN estimates that at least 1.5 million people have

been severely affected.

There was a call for the referendum to be postponed because of the devastation caused by the cyclone on May 3. However, the Myanmar government thought that if the referendum was postponed, it would delay the roadmap of democracy in Myanmar. Some critics say that the Myanmar government would see postponement as a victory for outside elements who were trying to destabilise the country.

Even as a million homeless cyclone survivors fought for their lives, the cheerful young crooners on Myanmar's state television were urging the country to forget the catastrophe and march to the polling stations.

State television repeatedly showed a video of a group of smiling

and dancing young women, singing a tune of praise to the military regime. "Let's go to cast a vote ... with sincere thoughts for happy days," the women sang.

Thousands of civil servants in the new capital, Naypyidaw, voted on the referendum -- and they were required to identify themselves in writing on their ballots to ensure their compliance.

The regime announced on May 11 that the referendum was held successfully with massive turnout of the citizens.

Provisions of the constitution

The referendum seeks public approval of a new constitution, which the generals say will be followed in 2010 by a general elec-

tion. The referendum on the new constitution is an essential element of what the military leaders believe is the process of democracy in the country.

The proposed constitution, according to media, guarantees 25% of parliamentary seats to the military and allows the president to hand over all power to the military in a state of emergency, and no president could be chosen without consulting the military. These provisions, critics say, defy the professed commitment of military leaders to democracy.

It also barred Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, the detained leader of the country's pro-democracy movement, from public office under a provision barring anyone with a foreign

spouse. (Her husband, now deceased, was a British citizen.)

Myanmar's opposition says that the referendum on a new constitution was marred by fraud and intimidation. They allege voters were threatened with imprisonment if they voted against the constitutional changes the military rulers wanted to introduce. Others allege people had voted in their name without their consent.

Military rule

Myanmar has been ruled by military regimes since 1962. Eighteen years ago, Burma was renamed Myanmar by its military rulers who seized power in 1988 and threw out the country's last constitution. The military refused to honour the results of the 1990 general election

won by the National League for Democracy party.

Critics argue the military regime's greatest weapon is its utter indifference to domestic or foreign opinion. It cared little when it was vilified around the world for killing dozens of protesters in the streets of Rangoon last fall. It ignored international condemnations of its military crackdown and its arrest of hundreds of Buddhist monks. It refused to allow a United Nations human-rights expert to enter the country. And it has snubbed a UN envoy who tried to mediate between the regime and the weakened opposition.

Myanmar's geopolitical strength

Myanmar is richly endowed with natural resources. It is potentially a rich country, and has timber, gemstones, and large deposits of oil and gas off-shore. It is self-sufficient in rice. The country is about four and half times the size of Bangladesh, with only 57 million people.

The country is strategically located facing the Indian Ocean. Its geopolitical importance is not lost to China, that feels encircled by the

mighty not be possible for the parties to do by themselves, but with tacit or even overt support, their chances of success would be far higher.

One imagines that this would

most likely be unacceptable to the army rank and file, but a possible scenario might be for one faction to quietly take sides to help smooth the transition; maintaining enough control over the process such that the rank and file are kept happy, but quietly coming to an understanding with one or the other parties. The identity of which party would most likely be chosen for such a partnership should give the other party pause for thought.

This would be the worst of all worlds, and we trust that such a move would be unacceptable, both to the general public, who surely have not sat patiently for the past 16 months only to see us return to precisely where we were prior to 1/11, as well as to those who have put their lives and reputations on the line for the past year and a half.

The biggest misapprehension the public has going into the coming showdown is that the powers that be are a unitary entity. They are not. As with any other entity in Bangladesh, there are currents and cross-currents and factions and counter-factions. Everything depends on which element ultimately gets to call the shots.

It is cards on the table time. Let's see what everyone has got.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Cards on the table



ZAFAR SOBHAN

STRAIGHT TALK

Taking a different tack, aimed at going to elections, ensuring that the elections are free and fair, and then using the popular mandate as a springboard to free their leaders might have seemed a more sensible course of action. Certainly, in the case of the AL, who are seen as the party most likely to prevail in free and fair elections, it seems as though the waiting game might have been a more prudent move.

trial working committee is no surprise. Indeed, haven't we all been bemoaning for years now the lack of internal party democracy within the AL? Well, this was internal party democracy in action.

The BNP decision to also boycott the talks and upcoming elections strikes one as a trifle opportunistic, in that until the AL had made its decision, the leader of the BNP had instructed her factotum to attend the talks. It was only after it became clear that the AL would not take part that the BNP followed suit. Nevertheless, this makes perfect sense: in the first place the party cannot allow it to seem as if the AL is a more staunch opponent of the current dispensation, and in the second, the party has learned to its cost that an election without the AL has limited legitimacy and utility.

However, whether the decision was a good one, is an entirely different question. On this count, there are misgivings, even among the senior leaderships of the political parties, especially the AL. After all, it is by no means clear what would be the outcome

of the street showdown that is now looking increasingly likely. There is every chance that the political parties will be unable to prevail or that if they look like they are doing so that their actions will trigger a tougher crack-down.

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Thus, there are whispers that while many of the party faithful are perfectly genuine in their belief that elections are not the way to go, that the decision not to participate was helped along by those who either have something to fear from elections or are in cahoots with the hard-liners looking for an excuse to crack down.

Where do we go from here? It is possible that there will still be a

turn-around. Sheikh Hasina's point has been made loud and clear. It remains beyond question that she retains the full support and loyalty of her party. In addition, she can now argue that it is she who is the moderating element within the party: you want an AL without me, she might now say, good luck controlling it.

Perhaps, having demonstrated her strength, she will be willing to accept some kind of a deal. The official AL line is that the cases against her are fabricated and must be withdrawn. But perhaps a "compassionate" release on medical grounds might be a compromise that is acceptable all round.

As for the BNP, they have a different outlook. It is true that the party has less to gain from the two ladies. They will be waiting to see the outcome of the showdown, in which they are confident that they can prevail, and counseling against any kind of accommodation or settlement.

Then there are those who might see their best bet as trying to claim the mantle of political restoration, perhaps reversing everything that has been done in the past year and a half. This shift. We no longer mind a speck of smut in a bowl of milk. Hence, nothing is lost when character is lost, something is lost when health is lost, and everything is lost when money is lost. Hence, a company is known by the man it keeps. In shift. We no longer mind a speck of smut in a bowl of milk. Hence, nothing is lost when character is lost, something is lost when health is lost, and everything is lost when money is lost. Hence, a company is known by the man it keeps. In

that trend is, therefore, to dilute the defamation, to corrupt corruption with undue admiration. Some people even go as far as giving scientific explanation mixed with historical realism that corruption is an inherent human tendency and greed is the mother of all material progress. It isn't important how the money is spent. What is important is how the money is spent.

That, I must say, remains one more battle of our Independence War. The New Conversation is growing from clamour to chorus, trying to introduce a new wisdom that sounds like an Orwellian doublespeak: Corruption is wrong, but honesty is worse. The current campaign against corruption is but an undertow in a surging tide.

It isn't enough to throw people in jail, if we fail to mobilise zero tolerance against corruption, that any amount of it is too much. Why? If you give corruption an inch, it takes a whole yard.

Mohammad Badru Ahsan is a columnist for The Daily Star.

The New Conversation



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSEN

CROSS TALK

The fear is whether the slain monster will regenerate and multiply from the drop of its own blood. It's like that Arnold Schwarzenegger movie in which the enemy is dissolved into a puddle of molten metal, and then the liquid quickly gathers to morph the enemy into his original form. Believe me, if you listen to the New Conversation you will start worrying whether corruption is growing back at a pace faster than it has been set for eradication.

ated employment. Only if those people were out of jail, they could take care of the market and control prices in the blink of an eye.

Somehow the ripples of a counter-culture are trying to become waves. There is a silent campaign to justify corruption, a kind of internalisation that nothing is wrong with taking bribes, dodging taxes, stealing public money, practicing fraud and doing all other groovy, naughty things to stay well. There is a silent campaign to remove the stigma of corruption, so that it doesn't look so bad.

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eradication.

One thing has happened though, which is important. In so much talk about corruption, we have made it a household word. It has been repeated so many times that the word has lost its obnoxious meaning like a fabric is faded after many a wash. As a matter of fact, corruption is probably the most-spoken word in this country after two other words: birth and death.

How will future generations react to this word? Will corruption be a big deal many years from now? Will it shock our children to know that their elders are corrupt? What will it mean to them? Will they feel ashamed? Will they learn about it in the classroom like today's children learn about sex?

If we look at it, corruption is no more appalling than biology, when the lurid details of male and female bodies are explained in a scientific manner. Perhaps corruption unravels the darkest secrets of human psyche. Perhaps it's the natural reflex of human

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Carl Jung said it in different words. "What you resist persists," he stated. Corruption is a vice because it's a matter of resistance. Our prevailing sense of virtue refuses to accept it, which is also the same reason why it refuses to go away. To repeat Carl Jung, corruption persists because we resist. It exists because we expound it.

The New Conversation, therefore, demands that it's futile to resist corruption, which is as old and inalienable as human instincts. From the dawn of mankind until the last star falls from the sky, human beings will remain flawed in body and soul.

They will remain weak in fervour for the same reason they are weak in flesh.

Hence, we see the paradigm

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China reaches the Indian Ocean through Myanmar's Coco Islands, and is building highways to Myanmar. It is also gradually integrating Myanmar's economy with its own, developing mines and other natural resources, and counts on Myanmar's vast reserves of oil and gas for its growing economy.

It is reasonable to say that, given the regional security environment, China does not want Myanmar to fall under the influence of Japan and India.

The new constitution will be what the military leaders call a "developed, disciplined and flourishing democracy" in which civilians together with the