

## Mass arrests have created panicky situation

It is widely being seen as harassment of political activists

IT is time to talk about mass arrests again, for the obvious reason that there is growing public disquiet about the whole sordid business. In the eight days since the government launched what was given out as a drive against known and listed criminals, as many as 12,000 people have been detained and carted off to prison. The sheer scale of the operation along with the ferocity of it has left an entire nation reeling. Most surprising is the fact that despite the government's stress on nabbing criminals there has been a wide-ranging operation against political workers throughout the country. In fact, more political individuals than lawbreakers have been taken into custody, which makes hollow the government's claim that the action is only aimed at people who have committed crimes and who have so long remained outside the bounds of the law.

The result has been the creation of unwarranted panic. Reports coming in from various parts of the country vividly describe a condition where workers of the Awami League and the BNP are on the run and party organisational activities are in disarray. And there lies the irony. The relaxation of the ban on indoor politics a few weeks ago had given rise to hope that politics was soon to get back to normal. Now the police as well as joint forces operations have undermined that very move. And at a time when the government says it is trying to bring the parties to a dialogue with it, the drive against political leaders and workers does not tally with its stated intentions. There is a huge disconnect between what it says it is doing and what it is actually doing. The message that is thus being sent out is a disturbing one, especially in conditions that should have been easing the way to the promised general elections. The home ministry has of course issued a statement of the routine sort on the arrests, but it lacks the credibility to be considered acceptable by the public.

The mass arrests, apart from the negative consequences they will likely have on politics, are also a serious instance of a violation of human rights. The wide powers the law enforcers enjoy makes it extremely difficult for innocent people arrested to find their way out of the mess. Over the last few days, the human dimensions of the arrests, similar to those witnessed during the rule of the four-party BNP-led government, have become morbidly clear. Absolute uncertainty about the fate of the arrestees has only compounded the problems for their families, whose anxious presence at the various police stations for news of their dear ones captures, in a large way, the mood of the country.

It is time for the government to evaluate the entire operation and rethink its purpose and effectiveness. The country needs to get back to talk of elections and the ways of their being organised. We ask that, barring those with specific cases against them, all other detained people be freed. And let all harassment against political workers come to an end, if restoration of democracy is the goal.

## Tackling global food crisis

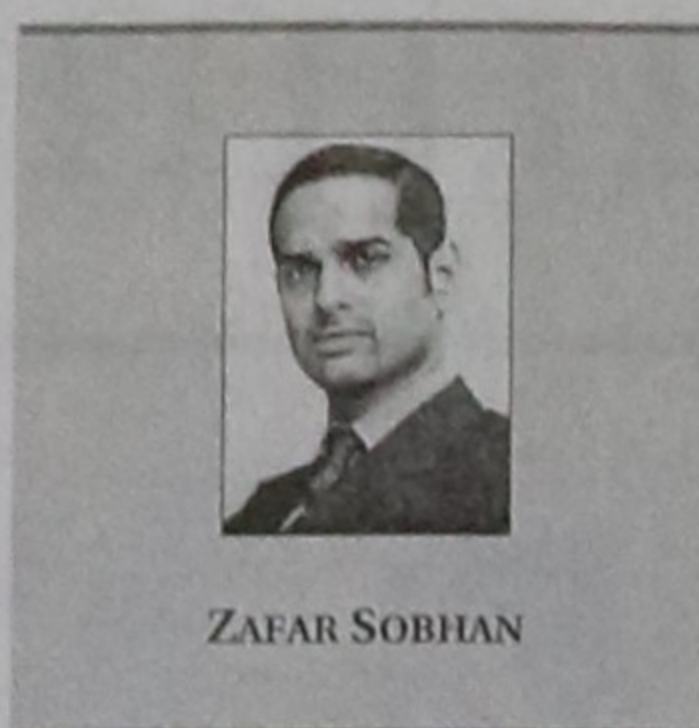
Will the rich countries respond?

THE Rome summit on tackling the on-going worldwide food crisis is a sign of the desperation nations are faced with. It is especially the poorer nations that have been at the receiving end, with all the rises in food prices in the past several months. The extent to which food has now assumed the shape of a serious problem can be gauged from the doubling of prices in the last three years. Prices are at a 30-year high, a terrible reality that calls for concerted efforts to be expended in handling the situation. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's belief that global food production must register a huge rise in order to cope with demand is in effect a broad hint of the problem on the world's hands.

There are, given the objective reality, two issues related to food today. The first is of course the unprecedented rise in prices, a fact that has led to riots in a number of countries. And the second is the shortage of food, a malady that calls for effective and efficient handling. Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda has indicated a way out of the crisis, tentatively at least, by asking developed nations to release their excess food stocks in order for people in poorer countries to be fed. Even so, much more needs to be done to help farmers in the underdeveloped regions of the world cope with their problems. The matter of subsidies being given to them merits serious consideration, especially against the backdrop of the significant help given to farmers in the developed world. There is too the question of whether the use of biofuels by developed nations has contributed to the fantastic rise in food prices. Brazilian President Lula has denied that it has, but that is certainly no conclusive answer. The fact is that biofuels have been instrumental in the making of the crisis. And then, of course, there are the other reasons.

The immediate future, unless handled in a mature way, promises to be bleak. Two billion people worldwide are struggling against food price rises and a hundred million are in danger of falling into poverty. It is an assessment from the World Bank's Robert Zoellick. And it is shared by others.

## Back to the future



ZAFAR SOBHAN

THIS week has been just like old times. It has been quite a sight to see. The ex-prime minister, resplendent in her trademark flowing chiffon, once again taking centre-stage to extol the virtues of her rule, defend the honour of her family, and dismiss as enemies of the state anyone who has the temerity to question her words.

This week her pronouncements have come, not from the Olympian heights from which she routinely delivered such tirades when she was head of government, but from the dock, where she has been brought to face serious and credible charges of corruption. But in terms of the arrogance and disconnect from reality, we could have been back in 2006.

It's not a lie if you believe it, and though I am no psychologist, it seems to me very much that Begum Zia might indeed believe what she is saying, as absurd and outlandish as her words may sound to anyone else's ears.

But that is what a culture of

sycophancy and obsequiousness will do to you. If you insist on surrounding yourself with courtiers and yes-men and lackeys who never have the nerve to tell you anything other than what it is you want to hear, then it is very easy to become detached from reality and live your life in some kind of parallel universe where up is down and black is white.

This, of course, was the problem with Begum Zia as prime minister. Then, she railed against any suggestion of misconduct or misstep on the part of her government as media concoctions or lies put out by her enemies. It seems that a year and a half on the back foot, indictment for corruption, and incarceration in a sub-jail have done little to change things.

Thus Begum Zia perhaps truly believes that her tenure in government was a golden age for Bangladesh. Perhaps she truly believes that her sons have not put a finger wrong and are being persecuted for political reasons. Perhaps she truly believes that the cases against her have been fabricated and that she is above

## STRAIGHT TALK

The upcoming elections could bring us something quite different. The upcoming elections could bring us reformed political leadership that is committed to change, that is committed to preserve the institutional reforms of the past year and a half, and that, moving forward, will try to govern responsibly and be responsive to the people.

reproach.

Nevertheless, sincerity, or willful self-delusion, or whatever you wish to call it, is no defence. It beggars belief that she could complain, apparently without irony, about blanket arrests -- as if she does not recall the tens of thousands of arbitrary arrests that were the hallmark of the BNP government.

Similarly, for the prime minister who presided over hundreds of extra-judicial executions and whose Law Ministry decimated the independence of the judiciary, rule of law, and due process, to, with a straight face, cast herself and her corrupt and criminal party-men in the role of injured, innocent victims, take a certain effrontery.

And one wonders, with what audacity the woman who put M.A. Aziz in charge of the Election Commission, staffed it from top to bottom with her party hacks, and produced an electoral roll of almost contemptuous shoddiness, dare suggest that the current Election Commission is unfit to preside over the upcoming elections.

Don't get me wrong. There are any number of legitimate and serious criticisms to be made of the current government, but to hear these critiques coming from the mouth of Begum Zia is like being lectured to on respect for international law by George W. Bush.

Let us not forget that, contrary to Begum Zia's confident pronouncements, the real reason 1/11 happened was that her hand-picked caretaker government and Election Commission were 12 days away from delivering a stolen election to the BNP. Had her party been willing to face the electorate in a free and fair election, 1/11 would not have happened.

This caretaker government has committed, and continues to commit, more than its fair share of wrongs. The on-going program of mass arrests is just the latest instance of this government's brazen flouting of due process and rule of law.

The last 16 months have been replete with due process and human rights violations and marked by the subservience of the judiciary and lack of trans-

parency and accountability. One can make the case that, from the handling of the anti-corruption drive to the handling of the economy, this government has staggered from misstep to misstep, from blunder to blunder.

But the lesson to be learned here is that criticising the caretaker government is not the same thing as whitewashing the sins of the last government and wanting to return to the days of pre-1/11. As bad as things might look today, that does not mean that we should, or that the people of this country want to, return to where we were.

This caretaker government will be gone by the end of the year. Looking back at its record is a necessary exercise, but, ultimately, should not be our primary consideration right now.

We need to be looking forward, to the elections. And as we look forward, the question we need to ask ourselves is whether we wish to go back to things the way they were or whether we want to see an improved, better, more functional democracy.

Make no mistake: it is quite possible that we will go back to 1/10, that everything will return to the way it was. The political parties, unreformed and unchastened, indeed emboldened and triumphant, will run things as before: elections decided by money and muscle, reforms undone, open season for corrup-

tion, no accountability, no transparency. The question, we, the people, need to ask ourselves is: is this what we really want?

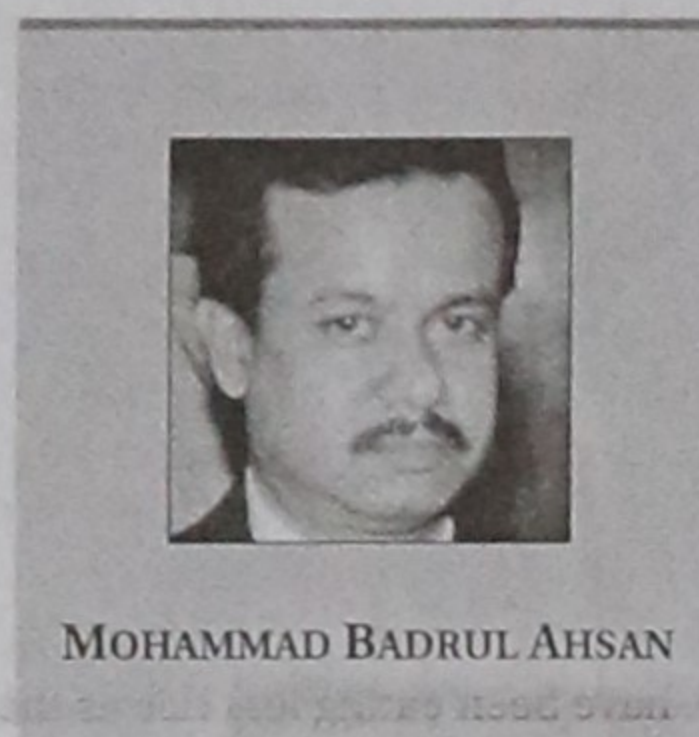
The upcoming elections could bring us something quite different. The upcoming elections could bring us reformed political leadership that is committed to preserve the institutional reforms of the past year and a half, and that, moving forward, will try to govern responsibly and be responsive to the people.

That is why Begum Zia's recent outburst comes at an opportune time. She has made it abundantly clear that she has learned nothing and that nothing has changed. If her Bangladesh is the Bangladesh we will return to after elections in December, we know what to expect.

The choice facing the country is not between the caretaker government and the political parties. The caretaker government will not be on the ballot. The choice in the upcoming elections is between business as usual and new politics. It is between the politics of selling nomination papers and plundering the nation on the one hand, and of, for the first time in our history, honest, open governance in the best interests of the people. The issue isn't the sins of the current government. The issue is where do we go from here.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

## The telecom principle of patriotism



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHASAN

NOT to worry if you haven't heard this expression before. It hasn't appeared in any textbook. It hasn't been discussed in seminars and workshops or debated in classrooms. But the telecom principle of patriotism does exist. It simply means that the love of country is directly proportionate to prospective cash flow. You only need to watch television commercials if you are looking for proof.

Measured by the airtime of commercials, the telecom operators should top the list of patriots in this country. Be it Language Movement, Liberation War, Independence Day or Victory Day, these companies are shelf-ready with an appropriate footage for national occasions. They probably give more sound bites to love of this country than the rest of us combined.

Three professors from New Economic School, London Business School and Cambridge

University have conducted a study, which explains why. In their report submitted on March 30, 2007, they determined what is called the Mobile Development Index (MDI). The index measures the attractiveness of the mobile industry in each country from the investors' viewpoint, and reflects key country-specific factors that determine the future profitability of mobile companies.

Guess what? In 2006 the MDI for Bangladesh was the highest in the world, followed by China and India. That explains the phenomenal growth in the telecom industry in Bangladesh. The number of subscribers rose to 34.37 million in 2007, a whopping 58% increase over 21.77 million in 2006.

But, what makes us the most attractive country for mobile business? Population, of course, is the main factor. Then high population density also makes it easy for network expansion. Then

## CROSS TALK

It's impressive that the telecom operators have discovered the secret tunnel of mass appeal. They have chosen the way to the heart of people through their love of country. It's quite interesting that five out of the six mobile companies are either largely or fully foreign owned, and Bangladesh ought to be more a market than a country to them. Let us not kid ourselves that the patriotism resonating in their commercials should be anything more than sales promotion.

there are these likely sub-junctives. We could be the most talkative nation in the world. May be, we like to stay connected more than any other nation on earth. Nearly 240,000 people are working so that we can talk day and night.

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And this is how it works. If Karl Marx had called religion "the opium of the masses," patriotism has been used as opium in the telecom business. For that

reason, the telecom companies deserve our wholehearted appreciation. They have successfully identified the softest spot in our minds and turned it into a marketing tool.

The historians claim that the bridge between 19th and 20th centuries was the occupation and enslavement of the African continent. The Europeans went there for the raw materials essential to fuel the Industrial Revolution. In the Belgian Congo alone, an estimated 10 million Africans were killed by the Belgians, who used Africans as slave labour to harvest rubber for bicycles and then for automobiles.

The connection is that what works on the supply side of market doesn't work on the demand side. In other words, it worked to kill for raw materials, but the same brutality can't sell finished products. In the new technique of enslavement, the consumers ought to be wooed. Their minds must be captured in a hypnotic

frenzy so that they will impulsively reach for their pockets induced by the compulsive lure of consumption.

The good news is that the successful marketing gimmick of the mobile companies is a testimony to our patriotic zeal. It confirms that this extraordinary sentiment still burns in our hearts, that our emotions are still swayed by the love of this country so much so that others can easily cash out on this emotion and make windfall profits.

That sounds familiar, because our politicians also do the same thing. So do our bureaucrats, businessmen and anybody and everybody who have the means to rouse and exploit the sentiments of our common people. This is where the Telecom Principle comes into play, creating an ersatz culture of commercial patriotism, mining into the hearts and minds of our people, extracting the raw materials to build private fortunes.

The pattern is that all power groups, foreign and domestic, are aligned towards the same objective. And here is the proof. When the telecom operators started their business in Bangladesh, they had signed contracts to share 15% of their revenues with the government. Subsequently, a number of options were devised during the Awami League regime, which allowed the mobile companies to share only 5.5% of their revenues with the government. When the 4-

party alliance came to power, they did nothing.

As if that wasn't enough, some of these mobile operators ran illegal VoIP business to make even more money. That is the catch of the Telecom Principle, that when people are being whipped up in their patriotic frenzy, the country is quietly plundered. By and large that is the face of neocolonialism. People are free to love the tree, so long as the fruits go to the vested interests.

Take the basic premise of the Telecom Principle and GATCO, Niko, Mig-29 down to pilferage of relief materials unravel as parts of the same obsessive whole. In 1952, students laid down their lives for the mother tongue, but leaders never stopped sending their children to English medium schools.

In 1971, common people fought and died for freedom, but leaders abused that freedom to grow fat and rich. In 1990, it was again the people who shed their blood in the struggle for democracy, and meet some of its beneficiaries inside our prisons!

The ultimate lesson of the Telecom Principle of Patriotism is that it isn't enough to love the country, unless people are aware of those who want to harm them. When you hear the next ring tone, think before you take the call. The cost to the country runs as long as you talk.

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## A decimated dictator's unintended contribution



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

OBSERVERS of the political scene of Pakistan would agree that the powerful extra-constitutional quarter in that country is in the habit of throwing out the civilian government at regular intervals on one pretext or another. Such quarter thereafter rules for some time. Pakistanis have reconciled to that embarrassing reality.

No wonder, therefore, that after nearly nine years of military-led government, Pakistanis have once again come fill circle. After negotiating many hurdles, there is a popularly elected set-up in place, heralding an era of tolerance, peace and progress. The interest-

## STRAIGHT LINE

No wonder, therefore, that after nearly nine years of military-led government, Pakistanis have once again come fill circle. After negotiating many hurdles, there is a popularly elected set-up in place, heralding an era of tolerance, peace and progress. The interesting development is that the bruised and reviled dictator Pervez Musharraf has, wittingly or unwittingly, been a catalyst for urgently required changes in Pakistan.

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There is no doubt that the general has silenced the cynics by jolting the Pakistani civil society from its deep slumber and catapulted them into action. Spearheaded by the lawyer community and aided by the electronic media, the campaign started for restoration of Ch. Iftikhar M. Chaudhry soon metamorphosed into a demand for an independent judiciary, rule of law, and transpar-

ency in government. The rest, as they say, is history.

Another major contribution of Pervez Musharraf was to bring Nawaz Sharif and (late) Benazir Bhutto together, who, for the first time in the history of Pakistan, developed bipartisan consensus on fundamental issues and signed the Charter for Democracy in London last year. If Pervez Musharraf had not sent Mian Saheb into exile and at the same time not banned Benazir Bhutto from coming back to Pakistan for eight years, Pakistan's ubiquitous intelligence agencies and the powerful establishment would

never have allowed them to come together and develop some sort of a consensus on the basic issues facing Pakistan.

One must give credit to Pervez Musharraf for bringing unity to the nation. Since 1977, Pakistanis were divided between pro and anti-Bhutto camps. All politics revolved round this big divide. When Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged in April 1979, half of the people grieved while the other half, or less, rejoiced and heaved a sigh of relief. To some he was a demon, but to others an angel. But when Benazir was assassinated in Rawalpindi in broad daylight, her

death was grieved by the entire nation and everyone called her a Shaheed, including Pervez Musharraf.

On February 18, when polling took place for the general elections, we saw another interesting phenomenon. For the first time in the history of Pakistan, the educated middle class, specially the younger generation (who were first time voters) came out of their homes and used their right of franchise in large numbers. Election arrangements by all standards were deeply flawed and voters were put to great hardships in locating their polling stations and names in the voters list, but they insisted on casting their votes. How could it have been possible if Pervez Musharraf had not jolted the urban middle classes out of deep slumber?

The media in Pakistan has gradually gained strength after a long struggle. Conscientious journalists fought the dictatorial regimes with courage and perseverance. Pervez Musharraf's government, no doubt, gave ample space to the newly emerging electronic media, but by

imposing black laws like the infamous Pemra Ordinance or banning independent channels like GEO, ARY and AAJ, on November 3, 2007, he made heroes of some anchor persons. Can anyone doubt that Pervez Musharraf unwittingly strengthened the press and started a process which cannot be reversed.

By ousting mainstream opposition parties in the 2002 elections, Pervez Musharraf had managed to bring in over 50 mullahs in the Parliament, and kept on using the threat of increasing militancy and Islamic terrorism to blackmail the Americans. He also gave an impression to the general public in Pakistan that the mullahs had a vast popular base and had the potential to capture other provincial governments like they did in NWFP. This constant propaganda became counter-productive. In recent polls, people not only rejected the mullahs in NWFP but also in their other traditional strongholds. Now there are hardly half a dozen mullahs in the national assembly. Don't we see the end of mullah-military alliance

at least at the political level? How could this have been possible if Pervez Musharraf had not overplayed his hand?

Another great contribution made by Pervez Musharraf is that previously there used to be only murmurs (that too only in Sindh and Balochistan) against the military intervention in politics. But by using coercive policies against the mainstream parties, and at the same time involving the army personnel in almost all affairs of the state, he forced the general public to openly criticise the military intervention in politics. Now for the first time in the history of Pakistan, the army's role in politics is being condemned in the strongest possible terms even in Central Punjab, which is the bastion of political power. Could it be possible before the Oct 99 coup?

Between March 9, 2007 and February 18, 2008 there is a sea change in Pakistani politics. We see a two party system, with strong regional parties entering into coalitions. At the same time we have a vibrant civil society; media is as free as it can be in a

democratic country; lawyer community is fighting for the independence of judiciary and is bound to succeed sooner than later, and the newly elected representatives are asserting supremacy of the Parliament.

With these changes people expect that Pakistan's transition from dictatorship to democracy will be smooth and (hopefully) permanent. But in their enthusiasm they forget that the vested interests in Pakistan are deep-rooted, well entrenched and well-organized. Pervez Musharraf is only a symbol of the power elite. He represents a whole class of parasites who are in danger of losing their pelf and power. His exit from the presidency and army's apparent neutrality can at best be taken as a tactical retreat. Pervez Musharraf has unwittingly started a process. But not much will change if we do not realise that it is going to be long drawn battle in which all of us have to play their part.

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