

## What next for AL?

**AL should grab the initiative now to throw off its authoritarian and anti-people outlook and image and get down to the task of wholesale democratisation of the party, and work sincerely to establish democracy and people's right to live with honour and dignity. It can cooperate with the caretaker government in the task of democratisation of the governance system and de-linking of politics from corruption and crime, and win back people's votes and confidence in the coming December election.**

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

**N**OTWITHSTANDING what people may say to the contrary, it is my firm belief that the caretaker government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed is seriously pursuing its main objective of installing a democratically elected political government and a parliament which will strengthen democratic traditions and culture and wipe out the legacy of burgeoning corruption and crime which besmirched our politics over the past sixteen years and has stigmatised us as the most corrupt nation in the world.

Obviously, there are plenty of reforms to be carried out, and new rules and regulations need to be in place to help materialise this

objective. The Election Commission and the government may have already identified areas where reforms are needed, and drawn up necessary reform proposals.

It is important that various political parties, members of civil society, and prominent citizens representing various professional groups are taken into confidence and, to this end, sit with the government to exchange views on the proposed reforms package before the government firms up its decisions. The on-going dialogue initiated by the government is a step in this direction.

The decision to send Sheikh Hasina abroad on parole for medical treatment may be construed as a climb-down by the government.

But, viewed in the larger interest of the country, it is a wise decision because the political dividend it is likely to pay off will be immense.

Just look at the immediate impact it has had on the political situation. AL has agreed to sit for dialogue with the government, which looked a distant possibility till the other day.

Once dialogue takes place in a friendly atmosphere and confidence builds up on both sides, AL may eventually end up playing a contributory role in the government's planned march towards good governance and a corruption- and crime-free society.

Let us not forget that it was AL which welcomed this government and attended its swearing-in ceremony while BNP recorded its



Leading AL to newer pastures?

reservations by staying away from the ceremony at Bangabhaban.

Sheikh Hasina started being critical of the government only

when the latter started rounding up AL leaders on corruption charges, which AL quickly condemned as an act of balancing, and

treating BNP and AL at par in corruption and crime.

At the moment, AL's posture seems to be friendly, if not altogether conciliatory, towards the government despite the fact that it has dubbed the polls schedule of 4 city corporations and 9 municipalities as farcical.

It should be borne in mind that AL and BNP together command loyalty of roughly 70% or 80% of the country's voters as per an earlier estimate, although this figure may have been sufficiently diluted by now because of large-scale corruption charges leveled against the top echelon leaders of these two parties.

It would, however, be wrong to equate AL with BNP in matters of corruption and wrongdoing, the onus tilting so heavily towards BNP that it would clearly outdistance AL by a long margin to clinch the championship trophy in corruption.

Although AL is the oldest major political party and has the singular honour of providing political leadership successfully, first by initiating the people in the war of liberation and then by guiding the

liberation war to our independence, it has, under Sheikh Hasina, suffered tremendous electoral setbacks resulting from growing loss of touch with the people over the years up to a point when in the last parliament of 300 seats AL could just manage 63 seats. It was the most humiliating defeat for a party like AL.

It occurred not because of any large-scale malpractices in the election but largely because of the dismal failure of the AL government to deliver, in that the elitist leadership interests of the party and the government had crowded out the interests of the people and the country.

It was a great pity that AL, which fought for democracy and people's rights against great odds during the authoritarian regimes in Pakistan, failed so utterly to come up to the minimum expectations of the common people when it had a chance to do so.

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lish democracy and people's right to live with honour and dignity.

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The party has far fewer tainted leaders as compared to BNP. It has leaders like Saber Hossain Chowdhury who can bring about the needed transformation. It is time to make peace with the government and book a berth in the train destined for a journey to the next terminus for power and glory.

It, however, does not mean that BNP has no chance to catch the train. All it needs to do is jettison the whole lot of its old and tainted baggage and make a new beginning by committing itself to democracy and well-being of the people. There are still people who can lead the party out of the woods.

Brig. Gen. Shamsuddin Ahmed (Retd) is a former military secretary to the president of Bangladesh.

## How to lose Iraq

**SOFA stands for Status of Forces Agreement, a type of compact that governs the treatment of US personnel abroad. With US troops scattered around the globe, these agreements are critically important, and there are some 90 of them in force, each tailored to the special requirements of the host nation. The Bush administration now wants to add Iraq to this list, in order to help formalise the long-term US security presence there.**

KARL MEYER

**N**O word better sums up the dangers the United States faces in Iraq today than a four-letter acronym you've probably never heard of: SOFA. Several decades ago, SOFA helped America lose Iran. Now it has become the biggest sticking point between Washington and Baghdad.

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long-term US security presence there.

That doesn't sound problematic, but there's a catch. Most SOFAs grant US personnel immunity from prosecution by the host country. In this case, according to leaked accounts from Iraqi leaders, Washington is demanding even more.

The proposed deal would guarantee US rights to more than 50 military bases, give Americans the right to detain terror suspects without prior Iraqi approval, ensure US control of Iraqi airspace and extend legal immunity to civilian contractors.

The Pentagon says it's all necessary for the security of Iraqis and US personnel. The government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has said the deal "deeply affects Iraqi sovereignty, and this we can never

accept."

It turns out that immunity grants have long been controversial and have an unpleasant history in the Middle East, where they've generated serious crisis in Turkey, Egypt and especially Iran.

Starting back in the 16th century, Ottoman sultans, to promote trade and gain European goodwill, began granting foreign merchants immunity from Turkish laws. But this irked locals.

Then, in 1905, Sultan Abdul Hamid was targeted in a failed bomb attack (27 bystanders were killed). Edward Joris, a Belgian subject, was arrested and condemned to death by a Turkish court for alleged complicity. But Brussels demanded his release, and two years later, Joris walked free.

Turkish reformers seized on the

controversy to demand the abolition of extraterritorial rights, which they formally achieved in 1923 under President Kemal Ataturk of the fledgling Turkish republic.

A related dispute struck Egypt around the same time as the Joris affair. In 1906, seven British officers hunting in the village of Dinshawai bagged a flock of pigeons that were actually tame.

Villagers protested, a melee erupted, and a Captain Bull collapsed and died from heat stroke, and Bull's comrades beat a villager to death. This murder went unpunished, but for instigating the scuffle, four villagers were hanged, eight were severely flogged and others were arrested.

British critics of imperial rule seized on the case as an example of colonial hubris.

George Bernard Shaw asked his readers to imagine their reaction if a party of Chinese officials turned up in an English village "and began shooting the ducks, the geese, the hens and turkeys and carried them off, asserting that they were wild birds, as everybody in China knew, and that the pretended indignation of the farmers

was a cloak for hatred of the Chinese."

Despite such protests, extraterritorial privileges were not totally abolished in Egypt until 1947. In Iran, the newly enthroned nationalist Reza Shah Pahlavi had abolished the guarantees in 1928.

But in 1962, the Pentagon began pressing his son and heir to approve a sweeping new grant of immunity in return for military aid, and in 1964, a compliant Iranian parliament approved the pact, ignoring widespread dissent.

"Isn't this part of the reason you Americans fought the British?" an Iranian friend asked the scholar James A. Bill. His outrage was shared by Ayatollah Khomeini, then a cleric in the holy city of Qom, who declared that the National Assembly had just signed a document that enslaved the country.

"If the Shah himself were to run over a dog belonging to an American, he would be prosecuted," argued Khomeini. "But if an American cook runs over the Shah, no one would have any claims against him." So great was the ensuing uproar that the Shah banished the ayatollah, who

sought asylum in Turkey, Iraq and France before his triumphant return in 1979.

The Pentagon may not realise it, but Iraq, too, suffered a SOFA-like arrangement during its decades as a British protectorate, inciting similar furies. Some sort of limited agreement is necessary to govern the status of US troops there, since they're likely to remain in Iraq for some time. But it should have a limited scope to counter the widespread impression that the Bush administration wants permanent bases for an indefinite occupation.

If Washington continues on its current course, the next president will find himself the inheritor of an agreement almost certain to haunt his administration, especially if, as reported, it offers legal immunities to contract employees as well as US military personnel. Americans -- and Iraqis -- deserve better.

Meyer is editor at large of the World Policy Journal and coauthor of *Kingmakers: The Invention of the Modern Middle East*.

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## Bangladesh and Western diplomacy

**It seems that human rights, democracy, and the justice system are the exclusive privilege of the West, to be preached to the developing countries but not to be practiced in London and Washington. The biggest donor Japan is relatively silent, but US and British diplomats are hyperactive on a daily basis in their undertaking to bring democracy, practice of human rights, good governance, and justice to the people of Bangladesh.**

MUNIM CHOWDHURY

**T**HE pathetic situation created by our politicians opened the door for foreign diplomats to appear on television and newspaper on a daily basis, telling the country of 150 million people what is good for them and what they should do to achieve Western prescribed democracy. As if ours is a nation that is incapable and we have no wise and honest leaders to guide us to the path of progress, prosperity and democracy.

Donors have taken for granted that Bangladesh is incapable of finding the best path for itself and that Western diplomats have an inherent right to dictate the right direction towards democracy. The world has not forgotten how enthusiastically the West prescribed the path of democracy to the Palestinians, but when the people elected Hamas, it was not even worth talking to since Israel refused to accept that leadership.

It seems that human rights, democracy, and the justice system are the exclusive privilege of the West, to be preached to the developing countries but not to be practiced in London and Washington. The biggest donor Japan is relatively silent, but US and British diplomats are hyperactive on a daily basis in their undertaking to bring democracy, practice of human rights, good governance, and justice to the people of Bangladesh.

The Americans themselves

have assumed the right to keep hundreds of people for years under questionable circumstances, and torture them in Guantanamo Bay prison without due process of law. These powers invaded Iraq on unfounded and fictitious grounds, and had the "right" to kill over a hundred thousand Iraqi people (mostly civilian casualties), bringing misery to millions, including hanging of its president in the name of justice and democracy.

By the same token, the Western powers do not hold Israel accountable for having developed WMD or for human right abuses in the occupied territories. They are super-active in condemning smaller nations for developing nuclear energy even for peaceful purposes. Over 90 percent electric-

ity in France is generated by nuclear power, but power hungry poorer nations have no right even to try the same.

In New York City during the time of Mayor Giuliani, there were some infamous cases of shooting of innocent unarmed black people by the police force in their zealous attempts to crack down on crime, and dozens of Afro-Americans were people killed in the streets of New York without arrest or trial. Mayor Giuliani was able to reduce the crime rate dramatically and made New York streets safe again. Many New Yorkers wanted Giuliani to run for the US presidency in the next election in recognition of his success in reducing crime in New York City.

Giuliani's significant contribution to New York City was crime

fighting and made New York City safe again. But when Bangladesh's RAB was trying to bring back law and order by eliminating some old infamous criminals and terrorists, who had made the life of innocent peace-loving people of Bangladesh intolerable, Western diplomats together with human right activists started the campaign about human rights abuses in Bangladesh.

No doubt the public utterances by the Western diplomats in Bangladesh are irregular and tantamount to interference in the domestic affairs of the country.

They meet the different high officials and the press on a regular basis, and make public statements and prescribe the path of democracy. A Bangladeshi envoy rarely gets an opportunity to meet even a deputy assistant secretary, forget meeting secretaries or secretary of state. Meeting a president or a prime minister in the Western capitals is a once in a life-time opportunity for a Bangladeshi envoy.

Most of the emerging democracies have national pride. They do not wait eagerly for statements

from Western diplomats on their domestic issues, and the media does not quote them.

For our best national interest some well-known corrupt political leaders, who had robbed the people for several decades, were taken into custody. The cry started for fair trial and justice for them. They talk about evidence of corruption and bribery while most of the corrupt politicians and bureaucrats have millions in their bank accounts, or have converted the cash into real estate at home and abroad. Many of those have their children living abroad, particularly in the US, who manage their parents' ill-gotten money abroad. It will never be fair just to go after the corrupt politicians alone, and we must also look into the bureaucrats' assets and earnings, including the financing of the expensive US education of their children.

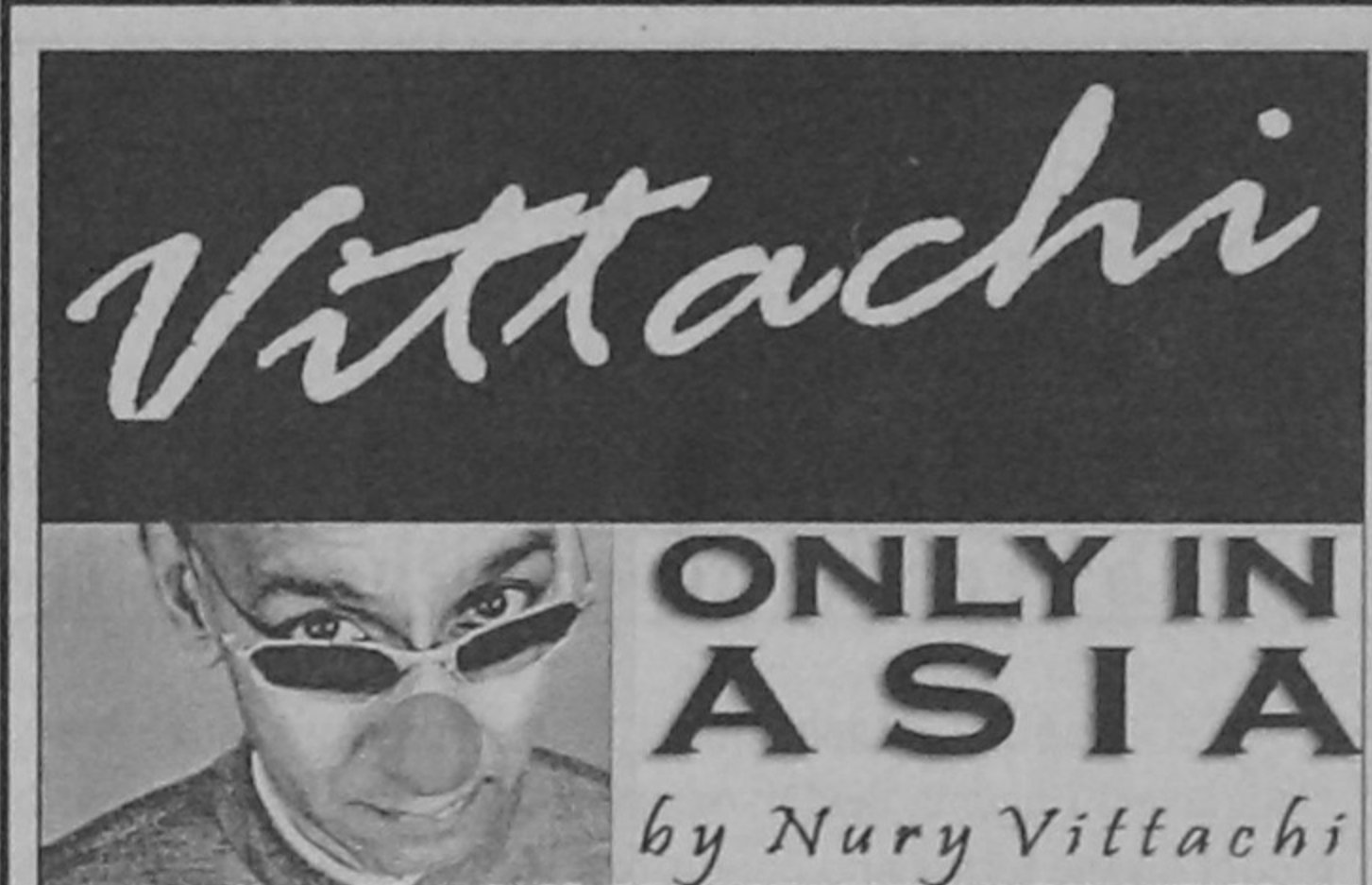
Here our benevolent friends, the ambassadors from Western democracies and protectors of human rights, can make a contribution by providing factual infor-

mation to the government since our own intelligence agencies are weak and are not sufficiently trained. Particularly the US and UK governments can help, since a lot of property in big Western cities has been purchased by the politicians, business tycoons, and bureaucrats.

When security personnel in Heathrow Airport, London, and US Homeland Security can grill, humiliate, and harass all Mohammeds, Abduls, Ahmeds, and Rahmans on arrival at the port of entry, they can certainly help Bangladesh in identifying the Bangladeshi criminals who are guilty of money laundering and converting it to real estate in London and New York.

Michael Moore in his book, *Stupid White Men*, which was a #1 New York Times best-seller, wrote: "Al Gore is the elected president of the United States. He received 539,898 more votes than George W. Bush. But he does not sit tonight in the Oval Office. Instead our elected president roams the country without purpose or mission, surfacing only to lecture college students and replenish his stash of Debbie's snack cakes."

Mr. George W. Bush occupied the White House in his first term by dint of his younger brother Jeb Bush's smart management of Florida, and the decision of the conservative Supreme Court judges appointed largely by the senior George Bush and his Republican predecessors. This is how the Western democracies function as models to the emerging democracies, hence Bangladesh needs to pay careful attention to the utterances of the Western diplomats and stop them from interfering in our internal affairs.



## Be sure to write your name in the Book of Morons

**S**TRANGERS were giving me curious glances. Were they attracted by my Adonis-like good looks? Bizarrely not. They were smiling, but in a sneering sort of way. I smiled back at them, but they became sneerier, and if that isn't a word, it should be.

An hour later, I discovered why I'd been to a breakfast symposium and had been wearing my name badge for the following two meetings, one bus ride, one nap and two coffee breaks.

name and passers-by assumed she was a celebrity. In fact, she WAS more or less a celebrity, and is well-placed to run for president of the world one of these days.

This woman had stumbled open a fact known already by religious types, such as a friend of mine who believes in a holy book called, unbelievably, *The Book of Morons*. He believes wearing a name badge is a great conversation starter -- although I haven't yet worked out why all members



One colleague told me she'd once gone to a morning briefing and forgotten to remove her name badge for three meetings, a formal dinner and a one-night stand. In the end, it was the hotel breakfast room waiter who finally said, "Do you know you are still wearing a big ugly name tag from some meeting?" All the people with whom she had interacted, some acrobatically, had not mentioned it.

But the record must go to the cousin of a friend of mine who went to a half-day symposium and then wore her name badge for the next SEVEN MONTHS.

This is how it happened. She'd accidentally had it on for about five hours when a particularly noxious co-worker gloatingly pointed out that she had forgotten to take it off.

"I'm keeping it on on purpose," she lied. "I prefer to."

After that, she HAD to keep it on. She soon discovered that having everyone know her name changed her life. She made dozens of friends from people who tried to help her. "People who take the trouble to try to save a stranger from embarrassment are usually nice," she said.

It soon became the case that at every shop and café she frequented, staff greeted her by

of his sect are spotty young boys called "Elder Johnson."

Anyway, businesses spend fortunes making sure their names are widely circulated, so why shouldn't individuals do the same? But, of course, it depends what your name is. Adolf L. Hitler Marak, a politician from Meghalaya in India, is possibly an exception.

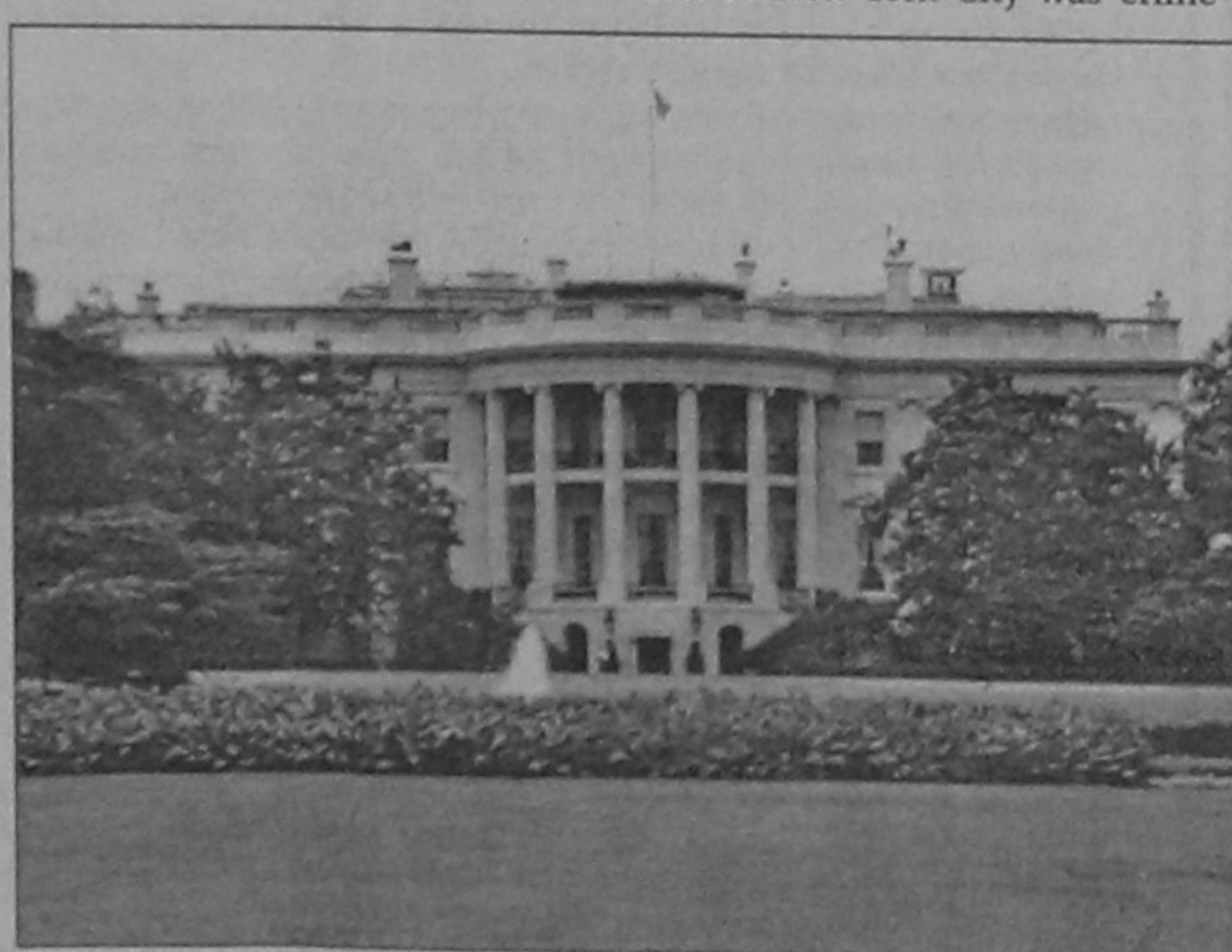
I once knew a Hong Kong pastor named Rob who always got a warm welcome when he visited prisons. He later discovered that new prisoners had their crime pinned on their shirts and everyone saw his name badge, and assumed he was "one of the lads" in for robbery.

Which leads us to the clergyman Jaime Sin in the Philippines who used to go to conferences with a name badge saying "Cardinal Sin." He took all the teasing about his devilish name with good humour, and would welcome people with the words, "Welcome to the House of Sin." His church was always packed.

So let's all be a bit more friendly and open and put on name badges at every opportunity.

That doesn't include you, Adolf.

If you have a sillier name than our columnist, tell him at [www.vittachi.com](http://www.vittachi.com).



Keepers of the world's conscience? Perhaps they should look inward instead.



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