

## Political reform: Myth and reality

**G.M. Quader is right when he says that even if reform measures are taken to enhance effectiveness of all other political institutions excepting political parties, they might be jeopardised if the political parties who will run the show afterward do not continue with them. So reform should begin with the political parties, and by the political parties themselves, for their acceptability and sustainability. And if reforms of political parties are imposed, such attempts are sure to fail.**

NURUL HUDA

THIS article is intended to support some of the views expressed by G.M. Quader in his piece, "Political reform: Myth and Reality," which was published in The Daily Star on July 23, and also to add some of my own views. It is true that there is need for checks and balances as regards governance so that none can enjoy absolute power, which corrupts absolutely. The people of the country have witnessed one-person rule, not only under military ruler Lt. General (Retd) H.M. Ershad but also during the time of Sheikh Hasina Wazed and Begum Khaleda Zia. But the country switched over to parliamentary system of government through amendment of the

constitution following the elections of 1991.

The question being raised today is whether the country enjoyed parliamentary democratic culture when the two top ladies in Bangladesh politics were in power. Nobody will be available to answer this question in the affirmative. Neither of the two ladies would allow any dissenting voice, within the party or outside.

There were, unfortunately, no checks and balances on matters of governance, though the country was under parliamentary democracy during their time.

The responsibility for creating the atmosphere of accountability lies on both the ruling party and the elected representatives who are known as the opposition. But we

have a different experience in Bangladesh regarding the functioning of the political parties.

In a democratic society, political parties are known as the most important political institutions. G.M. Quader has rightly identified the Jatiya Sangsad, the Election Commission, the executive branch, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), the Public Service Commission (PSC) and the University Grants Commission (UGC) as some vitally important democratic institutions.

Reports of irregularities and corruption were discussed, and even came out in the press, during the rule of Jatiya Party, BNP-led jote and Awami League led alliance governments. The degree of irregularities in the functioning of these

institutions during the immediate past BNP-led alliance government, however, surpassed all previous records.

ACC Chairman Lt. General (ret'd) Hasan Mashud Chowdhury has frankly admitted that even after 1/11 corruption prevails in society as before. He is found asking people to take a vow anew not to get involved in corruption in an attempt to free society from the all pervasive corruption. Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) in its annual report said that there was no decline in corruption in the country.

Quader has said that to strengthen the political institutions any reform, if needed, falls within the responsibility of political parties. Sustainability of the effectiveness of political institutions also lies with them.

He was quite right when he said that if the political parties did the opposite by serving their personal and party interests, the institutions could be used to create havoc for the nation. In this regard, the examples of corruption, which he has

given, are also largely true.

Let us forget, it needs to be recalled here that the people were silent witnesses to hijacking, bank loot, rape, smuggling, black-marketing and hoarding by the supporters of those who were in power since the country's independence.

It, however, needs to be recalled in this context that the country's image suffered seriously during Ershad's rule, who, through use of his unlimited power, was involved in acts of corruption.

He was convicted in the Janata Tower corruption case, the memory of which is still fresh in our minds. Ershad, during his nearly nine year rule, generously distributed favours to those whom he considered useful for him.

The allotment of Ganobhaban in the name of former prime minister Sheikh Hasina (during Awami League rule) was also seen by the people as a glaring example of corruption. The allotment was, however, subsequently cancelled by the caretaker government of Justice Latifur Rahman.

This piece is, however, not

intended to malign anybody, but only to remind the readers of the excesses and abuse of powers by those in high places.

G.M. Quader is right when he says that even if reform measures are taken to enhance effectiveness of all other political institutions excepting political parties, they might be jeopardised if the political parties who will run the show afterward do not continue with them.

So reform should begin with the political parties, and by the political parties themselves, for their acceptability and sustainability. And if reforms of political parties are imposed, such attempts are sure to fail. There cannot be any sustainable or successful reform of political parties without sincere involvement of political personalities in the process.

In the context of our country, reform of political parties appears to be quite a Herculean task as the political personalities are not used to seeing national pride or interest over partisan interest.

Quader has rightly said that the concept of caretaker government



Political reform: Break down the old.

was introduced in view of the failure of the political parties to conduct general elections neutrally. The introduction of the system has, in fact, demonstrated the hollowness and weaknesses of the political parties.

In other words, it can be said that the introduction of the CTG system has shown that the political parties do not practice democratic political culture though they are loud in raising slogans for it.

It is true that political parties

need thorough reform for practising sustainable and meaningful democracy that would provide a welfare-oriented and accountable government. So far, as it appears, little tangible progress has been made towards that goal. It needs to be made clear that all other reforms carried out will neither be useful nor sustainable without reforms of the country's political parties in the true sense of the term.

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## Presumptive US president

**Within about 5 months Obama takes over the office of US president. For the first time a non-white president will head the only superpower on earth. Broadly speaking, the American media is not friendly to Obama because of his Muslim heritage and African ancestry. At this stage, it could have been excellent if his running mate had been Senator Hillary. For reasons best known to him, Obama has chosen a different person for vice-president.**

A.B.M.S ZAHUR

WHATEVER the illusion the American media is trying to create, it is certain that Barack Obama will be the next president of US. He is a Christian but, no doubt, he has Muslim heritage. He will be the first African-American US president. So far, Obama has proved to be a good, smart and popular person among Christians and Muslims (American), and among blacks and whites. His attitude toward world peace is generally acceptable, though, after his assumes office, there may be some changes due to exigencies of the situations.

He finds no reason to maintain a huge military establishment in Iraq for an indefinite period by compelling the common Americans to bear the huge cost. His views will further be firm up after he completes his Middle East and European tours.

The Iraq conundrum is the most serious concern for the presumptive president. As per the latest Washington Post/ABC News polls, 63% of Americans believe the war in Iraq was not worth fighting and 51% believe the US has been unsuccessful



Already presidential.

ful in taking on the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

In his last foreign policy speech in Washington, Obama argued that the Iraq war diminished American security, their standing in the world, their military, their economy, and the resources they need to face the challenges of the 21st century. He concluded that single-minded and open-ended forms on Iraq was not a

sound strategy for keeping America safe.

The politics of Iraq are complex. Even president Bush has called for a return of some soldiers deployed there. For the security of American soldiers in Iraq the Bush administration is considering a treaty like Status of Force Agreement (SOFA) with Iraq.

However, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri-al-Maliki says that such a deal

will "deeply affect Iraqi sovereignty."

It may be stated that such pacts generated serious crises in Turkey, Egypt, and especially in Iran (particularly because of the provision for grants of immunity to the US soldiers in the pact). It may further be added that Iraq itself suffered a SOFA like arrangement for decades as a British protectorate.

As we know, the Bush administration committed a great blunder by attacking Iraq based on the completely wrong information that Saddam was manufacturing weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Later on, we were told that it was not WMD or Saddam's close relation with Osama Bin-Laden, it was in fact the desire of Bush to establish a democratic regime in Iraq by destroying Saddam.

It is controversial whether George W. Bush has won the war in Iraq. The following arguments are being put forward by analysts who believe Bush has won:

- Peace is emerging slowly.
- Civil society is turning against the violent enemies of the Iraqi state.
- Iraqi government is becoming forthright and determined with its agenda of governing and development.
- The economic situation is improving. Iraqis who left the country are beginning to return.

However, it is generally agreed that:

- War was not justified.
- US military was too violent.
- Cost of the war, which has a serious impact on US economy, is too

high. Amongst these mistakes, failures, deaths and destruction, some positive signs are visible. They are:

- The Kurds who considered Americans as their protectors, are happily building their own society.
  - The Sunnis (who were against the Iraqi government and the Americans) have largely (as reported) switched sides (due to influence of Saudi Arabia), and
  - The Shias (under Maliki) are determined to protect their interests. In fact, none of these groups want the Americans to leave. Once the common people start believing that the present government is effective protection for them they will begin to inform on the insurgents who will be caught quickly.
- Slowly but steadily the economy of Iraq is coming to life. Electricity and water supplies work better. Iraq is now moving towards rehabilitation of its oil fields. If the US remains for a sustained period in Iraq that nation may experience a rebirth of economy, culture and science. Quick withdrawal of US may trigger a gradual increase in violence, leading to civil war until a new military dictator takes over.

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excellent if his running mate had been Senator Hillary. For reasons best known to him, Obama has chosen a different person for vice-president.

As president, Obama will have to walk a tightrope. He will have to consider the Iraq issue coolly and carefully. All the aspects of American withdrawal may be examined, keeping in view the democrats' view. As far as possible, he need not bother about a pact like SOFA. For the interest of Americans he must not show any anti-Islamic attitude to satisfy Israel.

What is important at this stage is to bring peace and stability, particularly in the Middle East. It is definitely an outlandish dream to visualise true democratic states either in Iraq or in Afghanistan soon.

With regard to Iran, it would be advisable for the US to start dialogue in right earnest. Any attempt to stop Iran from going ahead with peaceful use of nuclear energy may trigger great trouble in the whole of Middle East, oil price may reach sky high. This will have awful effect on the trade and economy of the whole region. Apart from this, Americans are feeling the pinch of the stupendous cost of the Iraq war.

We accept that the US is extremely powerful. The only way that position can be eroded is by its own actions and imprudent leadership. We hope Obama adopts measures to make him as popular as former president Clinton.

A.B.M.S. Zahur is a former joint secretary.

## It's about cricket

**In the last few decades, cricket has undergone tremendous transformation. Currently, test cricket is just one component of the game. In fact, shorter-versions of cricket such as one-day internationals and twenty-20 cricket have more popularity worldwide compared to tests. The underlying causes of these changes are obvious -- greater commercialisation and corporatisation. The commercial side of the game was most apparent during the recently held Indian Premier League (IPL).**

AHMED TAREQ RASHID

DR. M. Shah Alam's article, "Sorry, it's about cricket," published in this newspaper caught my attention for a couple of reasons. First, it quite rightly highlighted the decline in the standard of cricket in Bangladesh. I have no doubt that most people in the country share this disappointment.

The decline is particularly disheartening because we did taste success at the top level, albeit sporadically, and the expectations are high. Indeed, success in cricket can generate tremendous nationalistic fervour, as we have seen in the recent past.

In the last part of the article, Dr. Alam discussed the importance of different forms of cricket and what it means for Bangladesh. I will give particular attention to this point.

I will start by saying a few words about the tradition of test cricket. Test cricket should be assessed in terms of its value as a sport, not where it originated historically. It is true that being regarded as a "gentlemen's game," cricket did have certain exclusionary undertones, within the English society as well as throughout the world.

But many decades have passed since then. Just because cricket

originated in England does not mean that we have to condemn it. At the same time, conservatism should not be confused with tradition. The customs and traditions of test cricket make the game unique.

The influence of these customs and traditions has been so strong that they often take precedence over the rules and regulations.

In the last few decades, cricket has undergone tremendous transformation. Currently, test cricket is just one component of the game. In fact, shorter-versions of cricket such as one-day internationals and twenty-20 cricket have more popularity worldwide compared to tests.

The underlying causes of these changes are obvious -- greater commercialisation and corporatisation. The commercial side of the game was most apparent during the recently held Indian Premier League (IPL). Twenty-20 cricket is perfect for an evening out; it is easy to follow and, most importantly, it is perfect for television. In sum, twenty-20 cricket proved to be a marketing dream. This type of cricket is more symbolic of the contemporary world where time is, literally, money.

According to some commentators, while an innovation such as twenty-20 has been extremely positive in terms of the commerce,

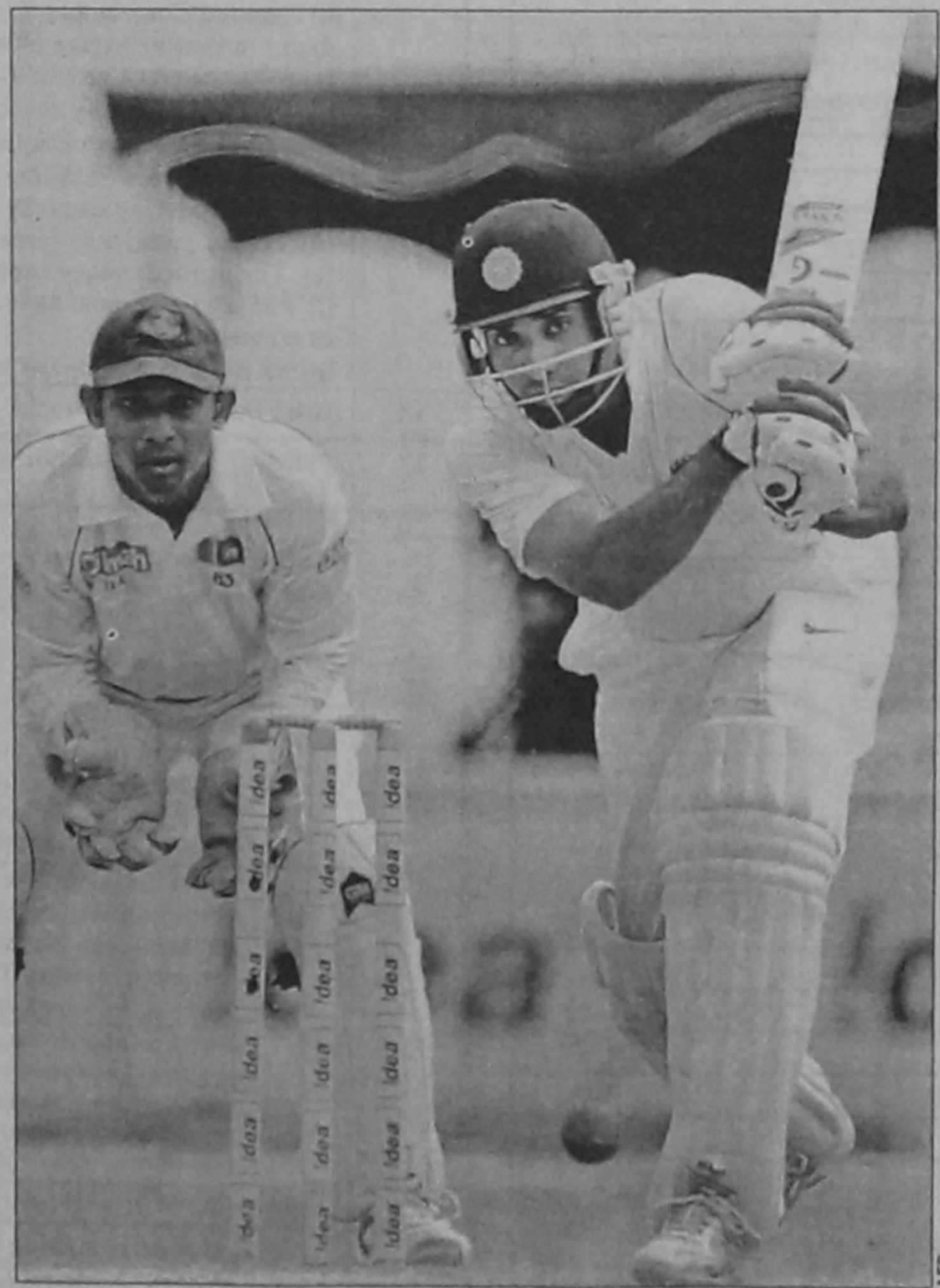
it has eroded the essence and aesthetic values of the game.

In some cases, innovations have altered the way the game is played. For example, in the shorter versions of cricket, the battle between ball and bat is not equal. As the onus is on making runs, the bowlers are disadvantaged in terms of restricting runs or taking wickets. Powerplays and fielding restrictions are designed to ensure that massive amounts of runs are scored. Yet, the contest between bat and ball is the central essence of cricket.

Many aspects of the game are suffering due to the fact that saving runs is more important than taking wickets. To the purists, the craft of slow bowling, particularly one of its most exotic forms -- leg spin -- is probably the most fascinating and difficult of the arts of cricket. But effectiveness of spin bowlers has declined because of the potential threat of conceding more runs.

The concern among many, then, is that cricket is losing its identity and character. For them, test cricket remains the ultimate contest because it allows the major skills of the game to be expressed to the fullest.

For others, it is difficult to fathom how the sport can hold spectators' interest for five whole days. But the fact is that test cricket still remains as absorbing and exciting as the



shorter versions of the game.

The subtleties, the idiosyncrasies, the ability to differentiate the skill levels of players make test cricket unique. To label the leisureed nature and pace of test cricket as anachronistic is missing the whole point, because it is these very qualities that make cricket the game that it is.

Let me say that I am in no way undermining the importance of one-day or twenty-20 cricket. In fact, I agree with Dr. Alam that, in order for the global expansion and democratisation of cricket, greater emphasis needs to be placed on the shorter versions of the game.

Cricket does need to adapt to changing times, and it has.

Coloured clothing and white balls are innovations that revolutionised the game. At the same time, cheerleaders, loud music, and other entertainments have made the game more attractive for the audience. Different forms of cricket can co-exist peacefully without encroaching on one another.

I will conclude by recommending that Bangladesh focus more on test cricket, where skills, and mental and physical endurance are of paramount importance. Players who are capable in the longer version of the game generally tend to do well in the shorter version. However, the same is not true for the opposite -- many players who excel in the limited-over version do not necessarily possess the qualities to survive in test cricket.

Let us consider the case of Sri Lanka, once regarded as a team to be taken seriously only in the one-day game. Many overlook the fact that Sri Lanka has a formidable test team as well, which is almost unbeatable at home. Players like Sanath Jayasuriya, Arvin de Silva and Muttiah Muralidharan were equally adept at performing in tests and limited-over games.

Therefore, I think the choice in front of us is clear. We need to focus on building a team that will demonstrate real strength of character, endurance and skill. Once we have a solid foundation in the key aspects of the game, we will excel in all types of competitive cricket. This will not be an easy task but it is very important that our priorities are articulated in a coherent manner.

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## Ghosts and other dead creatures are alive and well in Asia

IN Asia, there are many reasons why you may wish to dig up a road: to lay pipes, to remove pipes, or just for somewhere to sit and smoke a pipe. Or, of course, you may wish to build a traffic bypass to foil a killer ghost hitchhiker.

That's what happened in India. Truckers driving from Mumbai to Pune used to see a female thumbing a lift in the mountains of Bhore Ghat. She would beckon them and they would drive off a 5000-foot drop to their deaths, their last words being something like: "Hi, sugar, wanna riiiiiiiiiiii...".

But now a bypass has been built. "The old Bhore Ghat road now lies abandoned -- and perhaps the phantom figure too has finished, with no truck drivers around to be lured to their deaths," reporter Vasantha Raghunath wrote in the Deccan Herald earlier this month.

Ghosts may be able to do clever things like walk through walls, but they are actually pretty dumb. In Hong Kong, where the number four is unlucky, floors are numbered one-two-three-five-six-seven because scientific tests have proved that Hong Kong ghosts cannot work out which is the fourth floor. They end up hot and bothered in the landing between floors numbered three and five, calling the Citizen's Advice Bureau on their mobile phones. ("Excuse me, but what comes after three?") I reckon this gives them a level of numeracy less than the average three-year-old, but higher than me by nine pm on a Friday night.

But perhaps the award for dumbest ghosts should go to the pee-paubs (entrail-stealing demons) of Thailand. Whole herds of them can be rounded up using songbooks.

Pee paub panic broke out when rural Thais noticed that a number of elderly people had (cue scary music)... died! Using unshakeable logic, they deduced that ghosts must be killing very old people, it having entirely slipped their minds that the most popular pastimes of very old people are aging, dying, being dead and soon.

That summer, residents of the town of Phrae stuck banners on their homes saying (and this is not a joke): "Dear Pee-Paub, No Old People Here. Try Next Door." But the signs were abandoned after they were told pee-paubs couldn't read.

To the rescue came a fearless ghostbuster from Wat Banpotwanaram temple, motivated by a noble and selfless desire to collect a one million baht fee from the villagers.

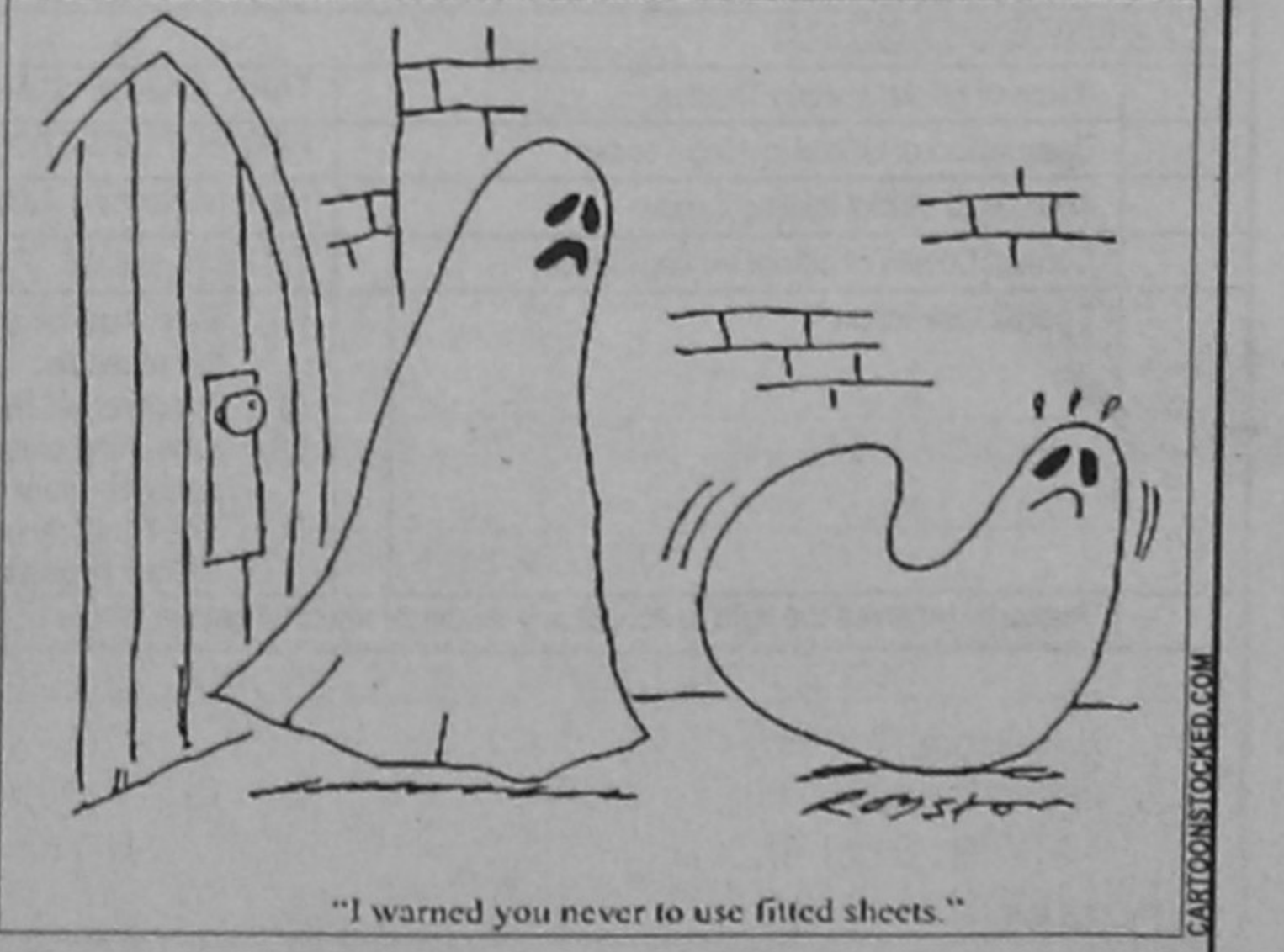
He sang from a songbook, incapacitating the ghosts. I cannot find any record of what he sang, but I know from personal experience that a karaoke rendition of Feelings can leave the manliest of men (i.e., me) blubbering on the floor.

In 2004, an evil spirit took up residence in an outhouse toilet near Jaipur. People who used it were afterwards prone to fits, the United News of India reported. Of course, I would argue that anyone who used outhouse village toilets in India would afterwards be prone to fits. Indeed, the fits usually start as you approach.

In rural Malaysia in 2003, headless ghosts terrified school kids. The state education chief urged people to keep calm, saying: "I have not heard of anyone being injured from being mauled by these ghosts." If you think about it, headless ghosts would have a tough time haunting anyone.

They also wouldn't be able to hear anyone singing Feelings. Lucky them.

Check out our columnist's website for ghostly or ghastly humour: www.vittachi.com.



"I warned you never to use fitted sheets."