

Forged visas and misery of jobseekers

Identify and punish the cheats

NO fewer than 87 Bangladeshi jobseekers were sent back home from Dubai airport on Monday, after the UAE immigration officials found their visas to be forged. Similar incidents took place in the past also, but no effective measures have so far been taken to save the jobseekers from being swindled by the racket issuing fake visas.

The matter is to be deemed serious enough to draw the attention of all concerned as the cheated jobseekers incurred huge financial loss without being aware of the trap that they were walking into. The report on the latest batch of deportees states that there are some procedural shortcomings which make it possible to forge visas. The biggest problem is that the authenticity of the visas issued by the UAE government cannot be verified here in Bangladesh, as only photocopies of the visas are received by the jobseekers. The governments of the two countries should address the issue and find a way to prevent issuance of forged visas. This is necessary to protect the job seekers' interest and also to avoid the highly embarrassing and regrettable situation created by their deportation.

Our workers are facing all sorts of problems in the Middle Eastern countries like poor salaries and violation of their basic rights. Some host countries are treating them very shabbily even when they are asking for only what is due under employment contracts. This is most unfortunate as violation of workers' rights is not expected in any civilized social setting. But the misfortune that befalls the jobseekers at Dubai has more to do with the failure on the part of our government departments concerned to stop fraudulent activities than anything else. When Bangladeshi workers are detected with forged visas at a foreign airport, it does little to lift our already sagging image as a manpower exporting country.

The problems that are arising with our workers in the Middle Eastern countries should pretty much convince the decision makers that recruitment of our workers abroad is still not organised the way it should be. And there are too many loopholes in the recruitment process that expose the workers to all types of foul play. The decision makers should handle the issue on two fronts. First, there should be a clear agreement with the host governments on the terms and conditions of the jobs that will be offered to Bangladeshis. Much emphasis should be laid on the question of their basic rights being upheld. Secondly, the activities of local recruitment agencies must come under some kind of regulation. We cannot allow such a huge number of people being cheated in the name of employment abroad.

Mobile phones the harbinger of change

Democratisation of access, expansion of opportunity

YESTERDAY one of the mobile phone companies operating in Bangladesh announced that it had hit the 10 million customer mark, and the total number of mobile phone users is now in the region of 50 million, or approximately one phone for every three Bangladeshis. We congratulate all the mobile companies especially the leading ones, who have contributed tremendously in bringing about a fundamental transformation.

The rapid and continuing expansion of this sector has had a tectonic effect on Bangladesh. With the prices of mobile phones and sim cards getting ever cheaper, the mobile phone has found a firm foothold within the middle classes and is already making inroads among the working poor. No longer is it a luxury or a toy of the urban elites. The best thing about the proliferation of mobile phones is that they allow everyone who owns one to access information and communicate freely.

From the taxi driver to the carpenter to the small businessman, owning a mobile phone can massively increase people's ability to earn a good living and transform themselves into more productive citizens, to say nothing of the fact that mobile phones can connect people from even the most far-flung corners of the country and help people to stay in touch with friends and families wherever they might be in the country.

Now, with more and more ingenious applications available every day, we find that the opportunity afforded by mobile phones to the common people is even greater. Now a farmer or a fisherman can check via his mobile phone the price in distant markets and can thus receive a fairer price for his produce. People searching for jobs or second-hand computers need look no further than the mobile phone in their hand to see what the market has to offer.

In the future, mobile phones will be the vehicle for expanding banking and healthcare services to the poor and rural citizens who are currently underserved. The humble mobile phone has morphed into a composite radio, music-player, and internet access -- who knows what benefit it will bestow next?

One dark cloud on the business is that a number of the prominent mobile phone companies have been found guilty of operating illegal VoIP. We are saddened that they would thus tarnish their reputation, and trust that in the future that all activities of the companies will be above board and beneficial to the people.

The mobile phone industry has really transformed Bangladesh and put opportunity into the hands of many who previously didn't have it. It is a prime example of how new technologies and private enterprise can transform a country for the better.

Exit of a military dictator



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
psc (Retd)

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Although Musharraf's departure has been a great relief for everyone in Pakistan, not least of all the army, yet it is a cause for concern to those in Pakistan committed to the flourishing of democratic culture and strengthening of the country's democratic institutions, that the army continues to play an active power broker role in Pakistan, and by all indications, will continue to do so in future.

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Musharraf will perhaps go the way his predecessors have, to oblivion, unlamented and unremembered for the so called "good acts" that he is supposed to have done for his country during his nine-year rule.

These "good acts" are sheer illusions -- the dictators hardly comprehend the unmitigated damage they do to the national institutions. By the time the country recovers from the ill effects, it is time for another military man to emerge as Pakistan's "saviour." And the same story is repeated.

Musharraf had completed almost ten years of rule, most of it in uniform, a cycle that sits in the annals of Pakistan's history as a decadal phenomenon, proving once again that what goes round must come round.

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The consequences of military takeovers, or the aftermath of prolonged military rule, has been the singular most debilitating factor standing in the way of Pakistan's progress and the consummation of democracy in the country. (So has it been for Bangladesh.)

Unfortunately, the greater part of Pakistan's sixty years history is the story of military rule interspersed, as an interregnum, by democratic or quasi-democratic rule. And the periods of democratic rule were underwritten by the military with the pervasive influence of the ISI all too evident.

Musharraf's regime was termed as a period of "controlled democracy" guided by "enlightened moderation." Controlled democracy is an oxymoron, as made evident by the controversial redrafting of the constitution by Musharraf just prior to the 2002 election, giving the president unlimited power including the power to dismiss an elected parliament.

That was his idea of taking Pakistan down the path of democracy. And excesses and machinations to keep politics under his thumb defiled the notion of "enlightened moderation."

He started off as the "chief executive" and ended up as an arrogant and autocratic president. In his first

address to the nation on October 17, 1999, he tried to assure the people of Pakistan by saying that the dispensation he was heading was not martial law, only another road towards democracy. And like all military usurpers he said: "The armed forces have no intention to stay in charge any longer than is absolutely necessary to pave the way for true democracy to flourish."

The people of Pakistan are only too painfully aware of the nature of "true democracy." And when it is left to those wielding illegal power through coercion, the definition of "absolutely necessary" assumes unbound elasticity.

At the very seminal stages of his tenure, Musharraf's Pakistan was almost sidelined -- having been castigated by the US for going nuclear, till 9/11 restored Pakistan's geopolitical clout. Pakistan became indispensable for the success of US operation in Afghanistan and indeed its so-called global war on terror.

For Pakistan, it was the second time that the Afghanistan situation resurrected its importance to the West, particularly the US -- the first time was when the Russian's invaded Afghanistan. According to

one author, immediately after 9/11, "concern for the state of Pakistan's democracy melted away and the

military government was hailed by the West as an "exemplary country in the fight against terrorism."

Musharraf claimed his policy was guided by the need to preserve Pakistan's national interest. But he had very little choice but to join Bush's war on terror, having been given little alternative when, on September 12, 2001, his chief spy Gen. Mahmood Ahmed, who was coincidentally in Washington when the twin towers were attacked, was very tersely conveyed the US "you are with us or against us" option by Richard Armitage, and later reinforced by Powell's telephonic message to the Pakistan president that the American people would not understand if Pakistan was not in this fight with the United States. And Pakistan was paid handsomely for this; among other things was the \$12.5 billion debt rescheduling.

It has been a resounding victory for the people of Pakistan. Much would depend on how the two parties play their role in this critical moment. So far they have been seized with the issue of Musharraf.

The issue of terrorism and religious radicalism remain the major problem for Pakistan.

Now that they have seen to their "common opponent" it would do very little good to Pakistan if the leadership failed to realise that it is only a liberal and participatory democracy that can combat extremism and terrorism effectively.

There are lessons for us too, and only those that will stop and ponder will internalise those. Military rule is never an option -- but as one eminent historian has said: "History repeats itself in the large because human nature changes with geological circumstances."

Human nature and mindset must remain alive to the need of the time.

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Clean and competent candidates in elections



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

BY THE NUMBERS

What is particularly significant in the local body elections, and which has frustrated the people most, is that the clean and competent candidates were not elected. Most of the candidates elected in the mayoral and councilor posts are persons of dubious and questionable credentials.

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In all, 1,600 candidates contested in the August 4 elections. Of them, 992 for the city corporations, that include 46 for the mayoral posts, 752 for the councilor posts and 194 women candidates contested in reserved seats of councilor. 608 candidates contested in the elections for nine municipalities. Four mayors and 157 councilors were elected in the four city corporations, and nine mayors and 108 councilors were elected in the nine municipalities.

These are really some positive signs that convince one to believe that transition to democracy would finally be turning into a reality through holding of the parliamentary election in a peaceful manner, and acceptable to all, following the footprints of the August 4 elections.

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and lawmakers of the major political parties.

These high profile politicians, who were so long in jail on the charges of crimes and corruption under the Emergency Power Act, are now being released on bail because of delay in investigation.

The High Court, in a month, has stayed the proceedings of nearly 70 cases filed by the ACC against high-profile graft suspect politicians, including two former prime ministers.

Only one bench of the High Court has granted bail to at least 76

graft suspects in a month, 33 of whom were among those listed by the ACC.

The newly elected mayor of Khulna City Corporation is accused in five cases. Out of 31 newly elected

councilors of Khulna City Corporation, eight are accused in criminal cases. Two of them contested from jail while one elected

councilor is still absconding to avoid

arrest. Six newly elected councilors of the Rajshahi City Corporation are charged with various criminal cases.

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