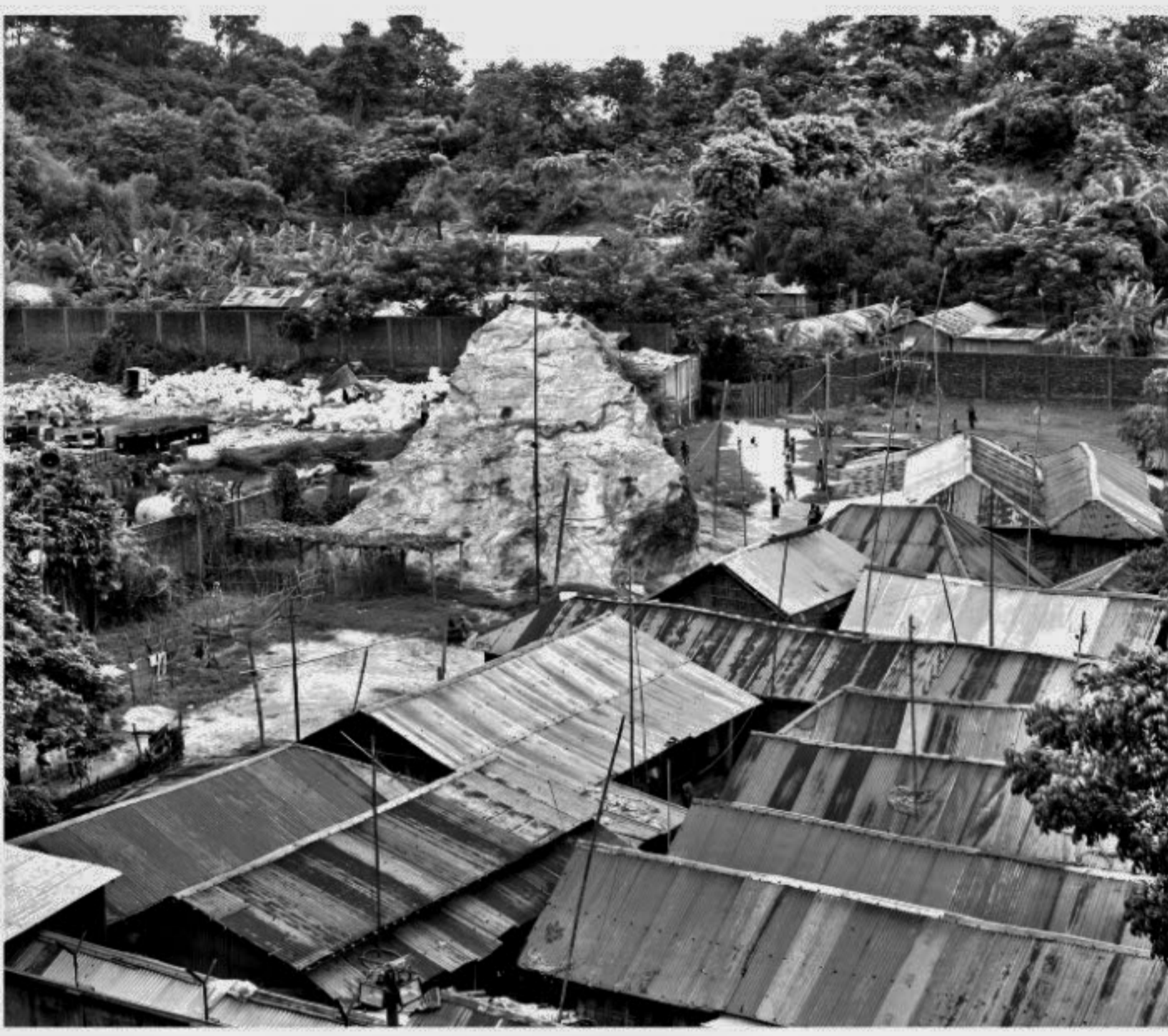


Respect indigenous rights

As population pressure built all over Bangladesh, more and more Bengalis started settling in the Hill Tracts. Many of us who saw the injustice of it remained silent.



FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

IN Bangladesh, a nation with limited land and unlimited population, land grabbing by the mighty has assumed alarming proportions. Every village has stories of the powerful enlisting the assistance of goons to grab lands from the poor and the hapless -- lands that the poor had owned for generations.

Laws in Bangladesh tend to favour the criminal and the powerful, and penalise the law-abiding and the weak. An innocent person can be cast into jail in Bangladesh only on a criminal complaint, whereas a criminal convicted on several counts of murder, but with powerful political connections, can be free on bail *ad infinitum*. No nation can prosper unless laws apply equally to every citizen.

Utter lawlessness has descended on the

Chittagong Hill Tracts since the third week of February. By all accounts, and according to reports published in *The Daily Star*, violence and death have been triggered by the illegal land grab by the Bengali settlers, sometimes aided and abetted by local army personnel.

Many Jumma indigenous people have been killed, several more injured, and many of their dwellings have been set on fire by the Bengali settlers. Bengali settlers, too, have suffered deaths, injuries and arson in retaliation, although much fewer in number. The 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Accords delineates certain areas as indigenous land; Bengalis have absolutely no legal right to settle on or grab those lands.

Of all the districts allotted to "East Pakistan" during the partition of India in 1947, the Chittagong Hill Tracts had the fewest number of Muslims -- less than 2 percent of the population. Buddhists consti-

tuted 85 percent of the population, followed by the Hindus (10 percent) and animists (3 percent). While the rest of the "East Pakistanis" were ethnically homogenous (Bengalis), the Jumma, or the indigenous people, were different -- they belonged to the mongoloid race.

The writer was fortunate enough to attend Faujderhat Cadet College, which had a few Jumma students. It was a revelation! The Jumma students looked different, spoke in a different tongue, ate different food, and their songs, religion and culture were totally different.

As a part of Faujderhat Cadet College's Outward Bound and Adventure Camp, the writer made his first trip to Rangamati as a seventh grader in 1959. We swam in the Karnaphuli river, were feted to a sumptuous lunch by Raja Tridiv Roy, and we all fell in love with a gorgeous Chakma girl named Jayasree, after her beautiful rendition of Lata Mangeshkar's immortal Bengali song: "Banshi Keno Gai, Amare Kadai..."

Underneath all the fun and festivities, there was an undercurrent of sadness. We were repeatedly told that the "old" Rangamati was going to be under water soon, and that our subsequent camps would be in "new" Rangamati. Being young and naïve, we were wondering: how could the natives be happy if their town was going to go under water soon?

Sure enough, catastrophe hit the natives in 1961 when the Kaptai dam was opened! Vast areas of the pristine forest and native households went under water forever. The natives lost their ancestral homes of generations. It is doubtful that they were consulted or compensated by the Pakistani government who constructed the dam.

It is now generally acknowledged that such hydroelectric dams are of marginal benefit, but are ecological disasters. After fifty years, it is now time to rethink the wisdom of keeping the Kaptai dam functioning. If the dam could be dismantled, Bangladesh would be able to recover about 1 percent of its land, and restore some of the lands to its rightful Jumma owners.

Over the years, as population pressure built all over Bangladesh, more and more Bengalis started settling in the Hill Tracts. Many of us who saw the injustice of it remained silent. With no political solution in sight the indigenous population resisted, and the Shanti Bahini led an insurgency for

twenty years until the Peace accord of 1997. One thought that the matter had a happy ending there, but it did not. Many of the terms of the Accord have not been implemented, leading to frustration, which has triggered the current explosive environment.

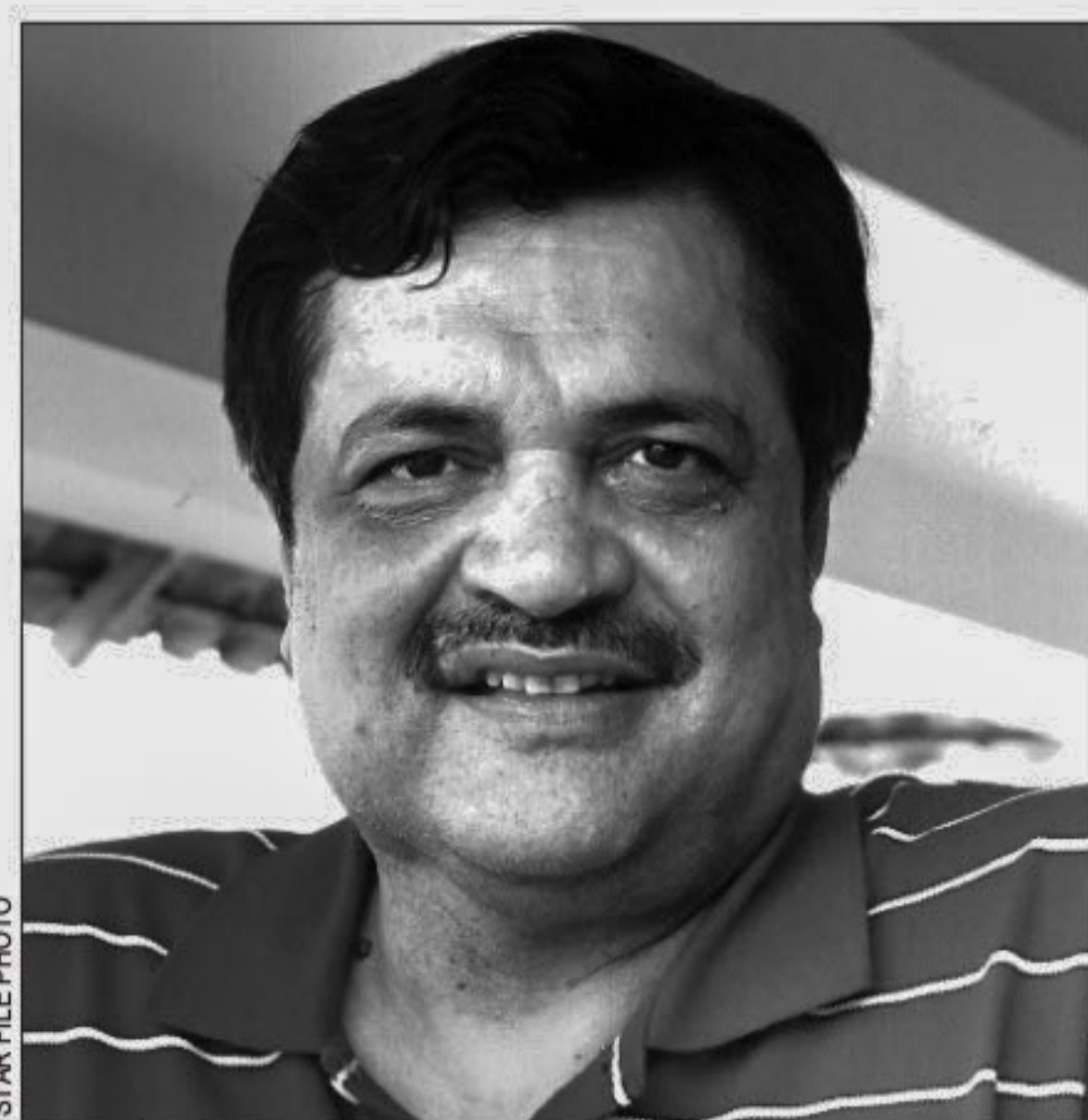
The eleven tribes of the Chittagong Hill Tracts that constitute the Jummas desire the sympathy and generosity of their fellow Bangladeshis. Land may be in short supply in Bangladesh, but that is no reason for Bengali settlers to illegally grab land that belong to the Jummas. The Awami League government had signed the CHT Accord in 1997. Now that they are back in power, it is their duty to ensure that every facet of the Accord is implemented.

Bangladeshis and the Bangladesh government must honour the agreements they sign. Because, if we do not, the likes of Amnesty International and the European Union will lecture us forever about how naughty we are! I have always been amazed at how much patta or importance we offer to personnel from Amnesty International in Bangladesh. They are treated like celebrities, featured on the front pages of the newspapers, are feted and interviewed like superstars. Yet, all they ever do is criticise us. And we grovel to, and worship them for it! How about some self-respect and backbone for a change?

Whenever the Amnesty International criticises US policies, they are dismissed with utter contempt. Amnesty International personnel are not featured in, or interviewed by *The New York Times*. Amnesty International is treated as a pariah in Israel, which, in case anyone has not noticed, has been stealing lands from the Palestinians for the last 62 years! If the Israelis ever allowed Amnesty International into their country, believe me they would not be treated like heroes/heroines like we treat them in Bangladesh; they would be castigated for their "bias" towards the Palestinians!

A wrong has been committed against our Jumma brothers and sisters. Let us correct it ourselves. Let us restore their lands to them, compensate them for their losses, and punish those responsible for their suffering. Let us not let foreigners tell us what we should do; let us do what is right ourselves.

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed is a Rhodes Scholar and a Daily Star columnist.



STAR FILE PHOTO

You touched our hearts

NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

WE shall all have to depart from this world and be where our good friend Manu is at this moment. Yes! Some may have addressed him as Manawar Hussain Chowdhury, but to his family, relatives, and friends he was simply Manu.

So when a person leaves us, we all say he was a loving son, a dear brother, a good husband, a great father, an enormous friend, and the same admiration is showered on a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother when she is raised to the heavens.

My schoolmate at Dhaka Residential Model School and hostel mate at its Nazrul Islam House in the mid-1960s, Manu was all that and more.

To his parents he was a loving son who became a dashing cricketer for Azad Boys and was not far from national selection; an MBA from Dhaka University, a gradation that has eluded many an aspirant; an unusually cheerful but committed banker at home and abroad; and a successful businessman with us taking all the advantage from his Bamboo Shoot.

To Tutli he was a great brother. To Rashed, Yasmin, and Soheli he was a friend more than a brother-in-law.

To Gazzu, he had been a wonderful and sincere husband. To Mehran, Aashna and Fareha, he had been the best dad in the world. No exaggeration this, but Mr. and Mrs. Chowdhury led a wonderful life and had a very happy family. We have a lot to learn from Manu and Gazzu.

To us he had been a friend whose place shall never be taken. Manu remains with us.

Manu was an achiever. On a family trip to Shillong with Sajjad Bhai and family, Manu walked up a hill. Reaching the top he exclaimed, "I've done it." Manu had begun using the inhaler.

Manu was a keen golfer. He loved the sport. Once I saw him using the golf car and asked him why? He said he could not walk like we did, breathing problem, but he loved to take a swing. Manu would often skip putting even if the ball was on the edge of the green. Given two, he would say, Little did we understand that it was because of his breathing problem.

Another time, I saw him sitting on the KGC veranda. I asked why he was not playing. "I can't dosto," he said without being offended, nor with any trace of anger or grievance. He took life with ease, and to golfers golf is life.

Later, Manu stopped going to the golf course. But that did not deter his love for the green. Only a few weeks ago he asked a friend for a golf hat. Shawkat asked him expectantly: "Are you going to start playing again?" "Nahhhhh!" said Manu, "I want to wear it and sit on my veranda and enjoy the sun and the greenery outside." That was Manu. Shawkat gave him a hat.

Some of Manu's friends' earliest memory of Manu is him riding a motorcycle. Manu sported long hair and a really long moustache then. There was a flair about Manu that people took notice of. And he was an endearing person.

His friend-turned relative and then again a friend, Rashed Chowdhury summed up Manu's character: "He was harmless, absolutely harmless." That coming from a brother-in-law is a big compliment.

His friend Jainal had this to say about Manu: "He was always smiling, took life as it came, and responded to most matters with kono byapar na.

Dora also remembers Manu's kono byapar na, and so she somehow held the belief that Manu would be ill, but would be somewhere around us. Dora says: "I can't believe he is gone."

Tauhid Samad Bhai recalls Manu as being full of life. He had so much energy, and he loved living, said Tauhid Samad, who remembers Manu as going out of the way to help everyone who came to his bank. Most of you will agree that BCCI and IFIC banks never had a better PR manager than our Manu.

According to Tauhid Samad, Manu would sometimes convey important national news to him in the most secretive of ways, so that no one else could hear, as if it were breaking news. Unfortunately, says Tauhid Samad, Manu's "secret news" had already appeared in the national newspapers five-six days earlier. But then that was Manu's manner of sharing with people he respected.

Manu was full of humour, and enjoyed a good laugh and the good times. After his janaza prayers, Yousuf, Tipu, Mitu, Naushad, Milu Bhai, Imran Bhai, and so many others shared anecdotes about Manu, which is special tribute for a just lost dear friend, and they all remembered how full of merriment life with Manu had been. Says Shawpan, quoting Fida Dastgir that "Manu had touched our hearts in a joyous way." Not many people can do that.

His days with Azad Boys were glorious to say the least. He always played the confidence ticket. Once he was badly injured by, I remember correctly, a delivery from Mohammedan's fast bowler Daulatuzzaman. At a party that evening he came all bandaged up. So we asked Manu: "Is Daulat Bhai fast?" Despite the apparent pain he was in, Manu responded with "Dhurrrrrr!"

Manu had a great sense of responsibility. When at BCCI he used to leave a late-night party saying: "I have to open the bank in the morning, I have the keys." He mastered the panache of mixing business with pleasure; many of his best friends are his workmates.

The last time I talked to Manu was when he called me up a few weeks before he fell ill. Actually, I should have called him because he had arranged a small party for us at Bamboo Shoot. I did not. The morning after the party he had called to ask how it went. He need not have, but he was a great friend, a responsible businessman, a remarkable soul, an honest human being.

Manu, you shall be sadly missed. Manu is now batting in his second innings. Let us all pray to Allah subhanu wa ta'ala that his second will be as flourishing, as charismatic, and as successful as his first.

Dr. Nizamuddin Ahmed is an Architect.

Face-off in Sri Lanka

In a bid to capitalise on his popularity, Rajapaksa is now seeking to raise his party's strength in the new parliament. UPFA thinks it will obtain an absolute majority in the 7th parliament.

MAHMOOD HASAN

PRESIDENT Mahinda Rajapaksa dissolved the 6th parliament on February 9, calling for fresh elections. The unicameral parliament has tenure of six years and is elected on the basis of proportional representation. More than 14 million voters will go polls on April 8 to elect the 7th parliament, which is expected to sit on April 22.

The dissolution came following the presidential elections on January 26, which Rajapaksa won with a massive (?) mandate. Many in Sri Lanka believe that the results of the presidential election were rigged. General Sarath Fonseka, the former army chief, who challenged Rajapaksa, landed in jail soon after the elections on charges of revealing military secrets, planning a coup and conspiring to assassinate Rajapaksa. The general now faces court martial.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa, as commander-in-chief, and General Sarath Fonseka, as army chief, were together the architects of the victory against the LTTE. They worked hand in glove to decimate the Tigers in May last year. The dreaded Vellupillai Prabhakaran was killed in battle and with that the 26-year old insurgency came to an end. While Singhalese sighed in relief, the two architects squabbled over who should actually get the credit for defeating the Tigers. Soon, the two men fell apart and were at loggerheads politically.

The last parliamentary elections were held on April 2, 2004, in which the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) secured 105 seats out of a total of 225. President Chandrika Kuratunga then appointed Mahinda Rajapaksa as leader of UPFA, and appointed him as the prime minister. UPFA, led by Rajapaksa, formed a minority government with the support of Eelam People's Democratic Party. The 6th parliament met for the first time on April 22, 2004. Since then, UPFA's coalition strength has waned and waxed with desertions and new entrants. Most of the newcomers were rewarded with ministerial berths. When Rajapaksa was elected as president in November 2005, UPFA had 129 MPs in the parliament.

Ever since the annihilation of the Tigers in

May last year, the elated Rajapaksa has been seeking a new mandate. He called for fresh presidential elections two years before the expiry of his term. In a bid to capitalise on his popularity, Rajapaksa is now seeking to raise his party's strength in the new parliament. UPFA thinks it will obtain an absolute majority in the 7th parliament.

Many were outraged in the manner Gen. Fonseka was arrested and put behind bars. Having ordered arrest of his most outspoken critic and challenger, Rajapaksa left for an official visit to Russia on February 6. On February 8, dozens of military police entered Fonseka's post-election hotel office in Colombo and forcibly dragged the general to a waiting vehicle, according to some eyewitnesses. A military spokesman however denied any manhandling of Fonseka.

The main charge against Fonseka is that he got involved with politics while still in uniform. He was made chief of defence staff in July 2009 soon after the victory over the LTTE. Allegations are that it was at that time that the Marxist party Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) approached Fonseka to become a presidential candidate. According to the Army Act, an officer cannot get involved in politics for at least six months after retirement. Fonseka's incarceration was followed by a purge in the armed forces. Some senior officers were transferred, 14 senior officers were retired and around 40 serving and former soldiers arrested.

Analysts think that the main reason lies somewhere else. During the brutal campaign against the LTTE, the army is alleged to have been involved in atrocities against the Tamil population. Some 8,000 Tamil civilians were killed by the military, according to different Human Rights organisations. General Fonseka has also alleged that Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, brother of the president, had ordered that all LTTE leaders should be shot dead and not allowed to surrender.

Human Rights Watch has been calling for an international inquiry into these allegations. The general has been talking about these alleged abuses and has offered to give evidence to any international tribunal on war crimes. Unnerved by Fonseka's accusations, Rajapaksa decided to silence the gen-



TELEGRAPH

No stopping him.

eral by removing him from public view.

Fonseka's detention has raised a storm in Sri Lankan politics. Even UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon raised this with President Rajapaksa. Failing to unseat Rajapaksa, and now losing their rallying figure Fonseka -- the opposition parties seem despondent. The coalition of parties, which had fielded Fonseka as a presidential candidate, is in disarray. They have decided to go alone for the upcoming elections.

JVP parted with United National Party (UNP) and formed Democratic National Alliance with smaller parties, and has decided to contest the elections under the jailed Fonseka. Strangely, the largest opposition party -- UNP, led by the veteran Ranil Wickremesinghe -- which got 82 seats in the last parliament, has been unable to put together an alliance so far.

Wily Rajapaksa is in politics for the past four decades and knows the ropes well. He did not bring any charge against Fonseka during the presidential vote. That would have been seen as politically unfair and strategically unwise. In his estimation, the time to ditch Fonseka and weaken the opposition was after the presidential election. With a new presidential mandate under his belt and the opposition in disarray, Rajapaksa is set to win a large mandate in the

upcoming elections.

The danger is that Sri Lanka may see a bout of authoritarian rule under Rajapaksa and his family. Civil societies from all over have been decrying the way Sri Lankan politics is being vitiated.

Free and fair election campaign has become impossible for the opposition parties. Critical newspapers have been shut down. Local journalists have been arrested, foreign correspondents thrown out and opposition activists hounded by the state machinery. Muscle power has been frequently used by the president's goons to intimidate and silence the opposition. In short, Rajapaksa has decided not to tolerate any dissent.

When the LTTE was going strong the Island was divided ethnically between Tamils and Singhalese. Now it is divided politically between the Rajapaksas and the opposition.

After winning the presidency Rajapaksa was expected to be magnanimous towards his opponents. He has an enormous job at hand-lifting the emergency and starting the process of political reconciliation with the traumatised Tamils. There is an adage "in victory revenge, in defeat malice." Rajapaksa will do well by not following it.

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