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VHP DELEGATION VISITS BHUTAN

It could hardly have been mere coincidence. Five days after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) formed the government in New Delhi, His Majesty the King granted an audience to a delegation of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Federation) on May 21.

His Majesty reportedly commended the VHP delegation for its important role in promoting religious and social harmony around the world and said that the visit would further strengthen the close understanding and ties between the people of India and Bhutan.

The VHP delegation was led by the Working President Ashok Singhal, and included Vice President Shrish Chandra Dixit and Acharya Giriraj Kishore, Secretary General of VHP International. The team also met senior government officials, including Home Minister Dago Tshering, and discussed "matters of mutual interest." It may be recalled that a VHP delegation led by Singhal visited the Bhutanese refugee camps last spring and met representatives of refugees in Chandragadhi, Jhapa.

This is the second visit by VHP to Bhutan. In 1990, the Royal Government presented the first delegation with a symbolic consecrated brick for the temple at Ayodhya, a disputed site which has threatened to destroy the Indian secular fabric. In December 1992, the Babri Masjid, a Muslim mosque that stood at the site of the proposed Ram Mandir was destroyed by a rampaging mob reportedly instigated by the VHP. The Congress government vowed to rebuild the mosque but was unable to fulfil its promise, and the issue remains unresolved. In the aftermath of the Ayodhya debacle, a shocked nation punished the BJP, considered the political arm of the VHP, by voting against it in subsequent state elections but, as the recent election results bear witness, the issue has been put behind them by a significant percentage of the Indian electorate.

In view of the early fall of the Vajpayee government, the decision of the Royal Government to "invite" the VHP to Bhutan might appear in hindsight to be an error in judgement on the part of the regime. One would be extremely dim-witted, however, to miss out on the regime's desperation and its unabashed ability to cover all bets.

ONE KILLED IN STORM

Abhi Narayan Khanal who was injured during a storm which hit eastern Nepal on May 29 succumbed to his injuries on the way to Dharan Hospital. Khanal was in his hut in Beldangi when a tree uprooted by the storm fell on him, injuring him critically.

74TH NATIONAL ASSEMBLY SESSION STARTS JUNE 28

The National Assembly Secretariat has announced that the 74th session of the *Tshogdu* (National Assembly) will begin on June 28. According to the rules of the Assembly, the body should meet twice a year in regular sessions. In times of "emergencies and under extraordinary circumstances, the Speaker, with the Royal Command of His Majesty, may convene a meeting at any time."

The two-sessions-a-year rule was generally observed until 1988, with Spring and Autumn sessions held each year. Since the crisis in the country, however, the Assembly has met only sporadically, with meetings called to session only when it suits the government. The 73rd session was convened after a

gap of two full years and the 74th session will make it within a year only if it takes place according to the recently announced schedule.

The urgency of calling the Assembly session is understandable. The seventh round of bilateral talks with Nepal ended without progress since Foreign Minister Dawa Tsering ostensibly felt it necessary to discuss Nepal's proposal with his cabinet colleagues. During the talks in early April, hard-pressed to come up with an adequate response, and playing for time, the Bhutanese Foreign Minister promised to get back to the Nepalese side with Bhutan's response after discussions in the *Lhengyel Shungtshog* (cabinet). Now going one better, the Royal

Government clearly intends to act out the complete "Bhutanese-democracy-at-work" routine by putting the proposal to the Assembly.

Nearly five years ago, the very same National Assembly put the resolution of the southern problem completely in His Majesty's hands. They 'gave' His Majesty complete freedom to decide as His Majesty pleased, and agreed they would not 'question' royal decisions. In return His Majesty even promised to abdicate if he failed to find a solution. But despite their promises, the honourable members were not deterred from ensuring that each of the three sessions since continued to be filled with 'debates' on this same issue. They members played their part, the-

atrically exhibiting a hardline and demanding a stop to bilateral negotiations even as His Majesty and the Royal Government were the epitome of moderation, begging to be allowed to continue with the talks with Nepal. Meanwhile everyone conveniently forgot other important assurances and promises!

It is certain that the 74th session will once again witness 'debates' and 'discussions'. Dissidents will be denounced, the southern Bhutanese community will be insulted and threatened with expulsion, and yet again a decision will be taken to bar the return of refugees who were earlier forced to leave the country. In the districts, rehearsals for this theatre of the absurd have already begun!

GOONGDA WOOLA, DOWN BUT NOT OUT

To the relief of poor Bhutanese, in his National Day (December 17) address last year His Majesty the King announced the discontinuation of *goongda woola* throughout the kingdom. This royal proclamation was followed by a Government order in January, officially terminating this mechanism of compulsory labour conscription in force since 1988.

Earlier, besides a number of other unpaid 'voluntary' forms of labour conscription (which still continue), the administration mustered workers on minimum wages for government projects, invariably a long distance away from home, through *sumdom*, *dugdum* and *chunidom*. In effect during the early motorable-road-building efforts of the 1960s, *sumdom* required village headmen to provide one worker for every 3 adults in villages under their jurisdiction to work for one month. This meant that in a family with three adults, one was engaged throughout the year. The contribution was compulsory and the administration ensured that men and women reported for work according to instructions.

The rural economy suffered heavily as people were unable to look after their own fields and cattle while also paying this stiff labour tax. Many families from the south and east were compelled to migrate to Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Meghalaya in India, and to eastern Nepal during this period. When it became evident that such a heavy load was having an adverse economic impact in the villages, the government pro-

vided relief by introducing *dugdum*, which required the people to supply one worker for every 6 adults. Once the main north-south and east-west highways were completed, the burden was further reduced and *dugdum* replaced by *Chunidom*, or one from every 12 adults.

Chunidom was phased out in 1988 and replaced by *goongda woola*. In this last method, each household, regardless of family size, contributed one person for 15 days of paid labour each year. To accommodate the well-to-do and urban dwellers, provision was made for the payment in lieu of labour at twice the minimum-wage rates.

If there was country-wide euphoria over the government decision to do away with *goongda woola*, according to recent reports, people in the south are coming in for a rude shock. Groups of government officials are reportedly scouring the villages in an operation directed, the administration claims, to collecting past dues relating to the now defunct *goongda woola*. According to sources, armed with records of non-contribution of *goongda woola* since its inception, these officials are demanding immediate payment, failing which the particular household is threatened with deletion from the census records. The implication: with the household removed from the record, the occupants automatically lose the basis for their citizenship.

The onus of utilizing the pool of manpower made available through the various means of labour taxation has always rested with the government. If

there is a requirement for labour, the administration takes step to collect the workforce: villagers cannot make themselves present at their convenience to demand work in order to fulfil their yearly labour obligations. For this same reason there is also no question of cumulative obligations - if the government is unable to use the year's supply of labour, the dues are not carried over to the next year. Also, payment in lieu of labour is due only when a particular household has been called up to work but is unable or does not wish to send a worker.

The demand by the authorities that villagers in the south who either did not physically labour for the government or did not compensate the authorities for their absence sometime over the past few years, now cough up an accumulated amount is absurd. If there ever was any failure, it is unquestionably a case of failure to collect rather than a failure to pay. Especially considering the numerous extreme measures the administration has successfully undertaken with such ruthless efficiency since 1988, also coincidentally the year *goongda woola* was introduced, it would be ridiculous for the regime to expect anyone to believe that people withheld their labour taxes despite government attempts to collect. The current insistence by the regime that people pay for their share of compulsory labour which has allegedly accumulated in their account over the years is not only ludicrous, it is clearly one more means to harass and intimidate the southern Bhutanese population.

UNITED FRONT GOVERNMENT IN INDIA

After the world's largest democratic exercise (590 million registered voters) conducted in April-May indicated that no single party had a clear mandate to govern the second most populous nation on earth, India had three Prime Ministers in the space of a fortnight.

P.V. Narasimha Rao who surprisingly lasted a full five-year term despite starting off with a minority government in 1991 was forced to tender his resignation after his Congress party turned in its worst-ever performance and trailed the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) by a wide margin.

Amid much speculation and debate, the BJP, by virtue of its position as the single party with the largest number of seats, was invited by President Shankar Dayal Sharma to form the government. However, unable to muster the 70-odd additional votes needed to ensure a working majority, the Atal Behari Vajpayee government which took the oath on May 16 was forced to resign after only 12 days in office.

The United Front's H.D. Deve Gowda was sworn in as Prime Minister on June 1 and is set to prove his majority in the Lok Sabha (lower house of Parliament) on June 12. With the Congress having promised to support the Deve Gowda government, this is expected to be a formality. However, how long this government which has as many as 13 partners and is dependent on the Congress for survival will last, remains a matter of conjecture.

The Bhutan REVIEW

PERILOUS COUNSEL

For someone who arrived in the country a full five years after the crisis in southern Bhutan was engineered by the regime and nearly a sixth of the population had already been forced into exile, a foreigner who lived and worked exclusively only in the northern half of the kingdom, an expatriate who missed out on the opportunity to compare the country's past peace and harmony with the troubled situation of the present, the young man from Switzerland who set down his thoughts on "the southern Bhutan problem" on paper [reviewed on page 3] can be forgiven for failing to fully grasp and appreciate the nature of the "problem" he felt compelled to write about. Indeed, as much as his views seem to draw heavily upon the regime's propaganda for sustenance and rationalization, and however one-sided his arguments might therefore appear, it would be unfair to be disparaging of his general perceptions on the matter. However, what cannot be quite so easily condoned is his outright advocacy and ringing endorsement of racist beliefs and philosophy that does Bhutan more disservice than government propaganda and dissident rhetoric combined.

It is a matter of fact that whenever one seeks to achieve a sense of objectivity, however painstakingly conscious one might be in one's efforts, there will always remain that fine imbalance even on the most unassuming and staid argument. Much as one may try, it is nigh on impossible to be completely neutral and altogether impartial on any subject. But when an individual sheds even the pretense of being objective, as Altherr has opted to do, the results can be quite reckless. As he tackles an issue which is clearly much more complicated than he realizes, Altherr makes no attempt to hide his loyalties. And therein lies the problem. In true neo-convert fashion, in the mistaken belief that he is serving the interests of those he supports by being needlessly vituperative, he discards all inhibitions to suggest solutions which even the regime should find tasteless.

Altherr begins by admitting that he, like other expatriates, was "inevitably confronted with some consequences of the 'problem'" and initially got "a negative impression of the Bhutanese authorities where this issue is concerned." He got over it, he says, and reversed his opinion "after a year or a little longer." Coinciding with his marriage to a 'Bhutanese' perhaps? A week-long vacation in Tibet and Nepal at the end of his contract apparently helped reinforce this new-found faith in the regime. Strange what a brief week-long trip can do when one is looking for justifications for preconceived notions.

The report makes no attempt to differentiate between Nepalese and Bhutanese citizens of Nepalese ethnicity. Whether this identity or identification problem for Altherr is real or his blurring of distinctions deliberate, this failure to distinguish between the two is crucial and helps the author establish completely false and misleading battlelines. For Altherr, only *drukpas*, or *Ngalongs* and *sharchops* are 'Bhutanese', others are not; southern Bhutanese or *lhotshampas* (two terms he uses just once each) are consistently referred to as 'Nepalese'.

Having thus re-stated the "problem", altering it from the original which concerns a section of the Bhutanese population and the policies of the government towards this community, to a hypothetical conflict between 'Bhutanese' and all the Nepalis of this world, Altherr is ready to prescribe remedies. If he stops short of directly proposing "ethnic cleansing" - which he is quick to claim the government is not guilty of - he resorts to a chilling allegory about two big trees in the garden, one of which must be cut, to drive home his argument for total expulsion of 'Nepalese'. The one which is a rare species must naturally be given precedence over that which grows predominantly in the close vicinity, he demands righteously.

After having made his case for extreme measures, including the use of "violent means" if need be, there is just a hint of remorse. But even while acknowledging that there are people suffering needlessly and that justice is being thrust aside, he still steels himself sufficiently to insist that Bhutan is doing what it is "not because it likes it, but because it is forced to." He claims that "Lhotshampas in Bhutan, whose scopes may just now for some time not anymore be equal to their Drukpa countryfellow's" will be rewarded for their loyalty. But one can take little comfort from that when he has already argued earlier for not retaining "the most recent immigrants" and warned of problems in future "with a strong minority of Nepalis remaining in the country."

The toeing of the government line by Altherr in his report is not disturbing - many more highly placed and obligated expatriates have been doing that to greater effect already. What is worrying is that the young expatriate son-in-law, mistaking nativism for nationalism, advances an openly racist cause and advocates measures which, if allowed to fructify, can mean only civil war.

It seems ironic that someone who belongs to a nation which prides itself for its ability to hold together people with disparate cultures should be the one to suggest that "in view of the many bloody ethnical conflicts today, it seems preferable if different people keep territorially apart." We hear Altherr's racist refrain, "Nepali, go home!" loud and clear, but wonder if he would likewise propose that his own country disappear after appropriate territorial parts are merged into Germany, France and Italy. Switzerland can consider itself fortunate that few Swiss, whether they speak German, French, Italian or Romansh [See Lingo-lovers, Mediascan], are afflicted with such rabid bigotry.

Screaming for Democracy

BAHRAINI FIREWORKS

The West can best help its friend by urging it to listen to demands for basic democratic rights

Citizens of a small but absolute monarchy call, at first politely, for a small say in the running of their country. Do western democracies lend a sympathetic ear? They do not. For the would-be democrats are in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia's little neighbour.

Bahrain's current troubles began in December 1994 with the request for a return to the liberal constitution and elected assembly that the state enjoyed, albeit briefly, after independence in the early 1970s. The protesters were not, at least at the start, revolutionaries: what they had in mind was something like Kuwait's modest parliament. But all thoughts of constitutional monarchy displeases the al-Khalifa ruling family: the reply to the democracy-seekers was a sharp kick in the teeth.

Bahrain's ruler is a good friend to the West. The place may be a speck in the Gulf, with only 500,000 people, but it is the administrative headquarters of America's Fifth Fleet, which keeps an eye on the comings and goings of both Iran and Iraq. Britain, still the influential colonial power, uses it for its air force. Thus political stability matters. But stability has now vanished. The struggle has grown bloodier. Demands have snowballed. The protesters have turned to arson and bombs; the regime has retaliated by arresting up to 2,000 people and, last

week, by executing by firing squad a man convicted of killing a policeman. Matters are set to grow worse.

Democracy remains the theme linking the protests. But that, insists Bahrain's foreign minister, a member of the ruling family, is not for us. No doubt, but to be more exact it is not for Saudi Arabia, Bahrain's heavy-breathing big brother. Saudis like to hop across the causeway to relatively liberal Bahrain where a drink can be had at the posh hotels; they do not want a nasty democratic virus hopping back in the opposite direction. Above all, they fear that an infection from Bahrain's Shia Muslims might start an anti-regime, anti-Sunni fever among the Saudi Shias who live in the sensitive eastern province nearest to Bahrain.

The Bahraini protest is not exclusively Shia; several liberal-minded Sunnis have added their voice and their authority and suffered for it. Women play a notable part. But the inspiration comes mainly from Shia clerics who, despite the security clamps, still preach a fiery message from their mosques. Although two-thirds of all Bahrainis are Shia, the ruling family and other top people are Sunni. The Shias, poorer and barred from many jobs, feel badly done by. Their grievances have swung the demonstrations to general complaints

about unemployment, to anger at the establishment, to occasional calls for an Islamic republic.

This last set alarm bells ringing. Shia disturbances mean only one thing to most Sunni Arabs: Iran. This is particularly so in the case of Bahrain on which Iran, from time to time, casts a territorial eye. Now the regime claims to have discovered an Iranian hand, as well as an eye, behind its troubles. But it has failed to provide evidence. Prisoners have confessed to being trained by Iranian-backed groups but tales of torture in Bahraini prisons make such statements pretty worthless.

Democracy as damper

Suspicion - both of Iran and of democratic practice - is rallying the Arabs behind Bahrain. There is even talk of an Arab security force. Bahrain's western friends should detach themselves from that Saudi-led crowd. The original request for basic democratic rights is alive and well, beneath a pile of explosives. The better advice to Bahrain's ruler would be to show that, while violence must indeed be put down, he is ready to negotiate constitutional changes with men of peace. He would have to defy Saudi Arabia to do so. Difficult, but surely worth it if the fuse now sputtering in Bahrain is to be put out.

BAHRAINI WOMEN

Better-educated and more likely to have a job than most of their sisters on the rim of the Gulf, Bahraini women have no say in politics at all. No surprise, therefore, that many middle-class women joined the call for democratic reform at the end of 1994. But it is the regime's heavy-handed response to the protest that has made many more Bahraini women, from all classes of society, forget traditional Muslim restraints on female behaviour and become active, often noisy, participants.

One of the 14 signatories of the original petition seeking a return to constitutional democracy was a woman from a wealthy Sunni merchant family that had always supported the ruling family (so much for the government's theory that the dissidents are all Shia, and that they mostly have an economic grievance). She was also a professor at Bahrain university - but has since been forced to give up her job and now has left the country.

The threat of job-loss is an effective government stick. After hundreds of (male) protesters were arrested a year ago, 50 women signed another petition calling for an end to violence and asking the government to talk to the dissidents. The signatories, who included Sunni and Shia doc-

tors, academics, lawyers and civil servants, intended this as a conciliatory gesture. The government's response was to demand a written apology from every woman, insisting that she withdraw her name from the petition. Those who refused to apologise were forced to resign from their jobs. Quite a few, particularly those in public service, had to do so.

Younger women have resorted to more direct tactics. At Bahrain university, veiled girls have taken to screaming, a frustrating tactic that makes teaching impossible and led to the closure of the university for weeks in April 1995. Classes in girls' schools too are disturbed or boycotted.

In the Shia villages outside Manama, the capital, women had little to do with the original campaign. But they have been drawn into the conflict by the harsh treatment meted out to their menfolk by the security forces. Policemen raided houses, often beating men in front of their families and making hundreds of arrests. As reports of torture began to circulate out of the prisons, women took to the streets to protest at the imprisonment of their fathers, husbands and sons.

They organised demonstrations outside the Interior Ministry. They began to speak

publicly to other women in the mosques, urging them to join the protests. There were reports of women throwing stones at policemen (and at the Asian workers who have increasingly become a target for Shia anger at the shortage of jobs). After a bit, women themselves began to be arrested: it is thought that at least eight are now held in jail. Unconfirmed stories have emerged of women being beaten while their husbands are forced to watch.

The situation is now a long way from the original attempt by a few academics to discuss democratic reform. The democracy-seekers try to stick to their thesis, distancing themselves from the more revolutionary demands. But the protests swirl around unemployment, dissatisfaction with the ruling al-Khalifa family, even the overthrow of the government and the introduction of an Islamic state. Politics and religion have become inseparable, as rallies are held in mosques and clerics send out a fiery message. An increasing number of women, especially in the villages, have begun to veil themselves from head to toe - an early signal of an Islamic revival.

The Economist, London, April 6, 1996.

EXPAT'S EXTREME VIEW

Michael Altherr, a young Swiss national, worked in Bhutan from January 1993 to June 1995 as an Assistant Architect under a contract with Helvetas, a Zurich-based NGO. During the two and a half years he spent in the country, Altherr lived in the heart of Western Bhutan, supervising construction activity at the Teachers' Training Centre (TTC) in Paro. He married a local girl in 1995.

Fulfilling a contractual requirement, at the end of his assignment Altherr submitted a 25-page report to Helvetas in October 1995. In it, he covered required ground and more: he devoted a full section to the "Southern Bhutan Problem" because, he writes, there was an "apparent lack of information among many expatriates and vague positions regarding the topic," and also, he says, because "two thirds of our own project staff are Southern Bhutanese, and this topic is, therefore, also part of the immediate context of our project."

In itself, a report by a junior employee on contract to his employer is insignificant and might not even warrant a cursory look. However, because it might be seen as representative of the typical young-expatriate-in-Bhutan viewpoint, a review of his "comments" seems to be in order.

Altherr wisely begins cautiously by conceding he "might not be competent to make any comments on it at all" but then boldly proceeds to make a full five pages of them. And, belying his initial hesitation, he has few qualms over making sweeping statements and passing quick judgements.

The thrust of Altherr's argument: "The decision [to deal with Bhutanese citizens of Nepali extraction] is not necessarily one of justice" because Bhutan is for 'Bhutanese' (who, according to Altherr, are "people of tibeto-burman/tibeto-mongolian origin and Buddhist culture") and any measures adopted by the regime to keep it so, including "violent means of self defense" against "most recent immigrants" (who, again by Altherr's definition, are people of Nepalese origin including those "born in Bhutan by parents and grandparents born in Bhutan"), is justifiable. And justice be damned.

Altherr warns his readers against going by natural instinct towards the "weaker party" and supporting the Nepalese immigrants his loose definition to be noted - because it is only in the context of Bhutan itself that the Nepalis are the weaker party, he states. Looking across the border, "all the odds are clearly against the Bhutanese," he says. But who are Altherr's Bhutanese? *Sharchops* and *ngalongs*, only. Other citizens, especially those with even a trace of Nepali blood, clearly are not.

The first Nepali immigrants in Bhutan, Altherr writes, were Newar craftsmen invited by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel during the 17th century, followed in the second half of the 19th century by "Nepalese woodcutters" and Nepali families "invited to settle down as farmers." He traces the migration of Nepalis settled in parts of India's north-east many of whom, allegedly following forcible evictions during the last forty years, also supposedly entered Bhutan recently.

"Tens of thousands of economical [sic] migrants of Nepalese origin, demanding equal political and economical rights, have been forcefully evicted from the Indian states of Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Assam, Bihar and West Bengal, and many have been killed ... many of the Nepalis who were forced to leave these places have come to Bhutan," Altherr writes. Lyonpo Dawa Tsering, who originally germinated this brilliant idea to initially attempt to explain away the presence of refugees in camps in Nepal, thought he could foist this preposterous theory on an unsuspecting world. Unfortunately for him and the regime, not many believed him, which is why the Foreign Minister himself is not quite as insistent lately that southern Bhutanese, either inside Bhutan or in refugee camps, have such dubious or circuitous origins.

However, apart from brazenly repeating such twists to facilitate questioning the *bona fides* of southern Bhutanese of Nepalese ethnicity as full-fledged citizens of the kingdom, to bolster his 'Bhutanese'-are-the-weaker-party-theory Altherr cannot fail, *a la* the Royal Government, to point to the actual numerical strength of the 'enemy': "ten millions of their kind in India and another twenty two more millions in Nepal." Having established the identity and reach of the real 'enemy' which, as far as Altherr is concerned, is the region's entire Nepali and Nepalese population, it is easy for him to begin justifying the Acts and actions of the regime.

"They will naturally always be and remain Nepalis with their own distinct background, more different from the Bhutanese," says Altherr of the Nepalese in Bhutan who, according to him, have no need to be culturally integrated in Bhutan. "Loyalties to family and culture are stronger than to structures as abstract as a nation," he says, and maintains that if Nepalis are not forced to integrate and their numbers restricted, then 'Bhutanese' will be forced to assimilate themselves. He also scoffs at the idea that the "human rights situation" would improve if Nepalese Hindu culture ever became dominant because, he writes, this culture suffers from inherent flaws with respect to caste and gender discrimination.

Altherr is relentless in his efforts to paint Nepalese as the hostile 'enemy' invading the country and threatening the very existence of 'Bhutanese'. As in the literature distributed by the Royal Government, however, there is no mention that in over a century of coexistence this Nepali plague has remained restricted to the southern region; the virus either could not or did not, take hold in 'Bhutanese' 'territory' up north - neither in its cultural nor physical form. Nonetheless, people like Altherr will continue to conjure up visions of a not-so-fashionable Hindu culture defiling the pure and pristine Buddhist values around Thimphu.

Faced with such an 'enemy' - the fact they happen also to be the King's lawful subjects seems inconsequential - the 'Bhutanese' have every right to deal with them in any manner they choose and "defend what is theirs," according to Altherr. But charges of

"ethnic cleansing" are exaggerated, he points out, and claims the government simply "forcefully stopped" alleged unchecked migratory movement into Bhutan and forestalled attempts by "a large group of non-nationalised and nationalised immigrants" to gain more political power. Indeed, the "Southern Bhutan Problem," he writes, has been "exceptionally non-violent" compared to other crises arising from similar backgrounds. Resorting to familiar language, he claims the Bhutanese army "exercised remarkable and exceptional restraint," and suggests the number of victims of "Nepalese terrorists infiltrating into Bhutanese territory" may have exceeded victims of the security forces. Altherr is unforgiving on this account and says "there is justification for violent means of self defense, on a personal as well as national level." Thus, he has little problems with the non-violent discriminatory practices and sees nothing objectionable about the "No Objection Certificate" (NOC) and Police Clearance Certificates which have become useful and powerful tools for the regime. Switzerland, too, has their equivalents, he rationalizes.

In Altherr's own words, the southern problem is "basically a conflict of interests between ethnical groups" and has little to do with democracy and human rights. In the same breath, however, he adds: "I have, however, in spite of 'the problem', never in the two and a half years that I have lived in Thimphu, witnessed any open discrimination of Nepalis, neither in action nor speech." Mr. Altherr certainly manages to tie himself in knots. If the core of the problem which threatens to tear apart the country has its roots in ethnicity, surely an entire community cannot be so forgiving that there isn't even a hint of anger. On the other hand, Mr. Altherr clearly holds a bizarre yardstick to measure human behaviour with - surely in his two and a half years he could not have missed the National Assembly dramas where the southern Bhutanese community repeatedly faces every indignity imaginable and where the threat of eviction of all southern Bhutanese is routinely recorded.

In the light of this contradiction, Altherr is perhaps almost correct in his evaluation. But only almost. And Altherr might not have realized how close he unwittingly came to the truth. But he missed, as he perhaps wished he would in the first instance, because he had willed himself to latch on to the wrong end of the argument, a malady that appears to affect so many westerners on whom blinders provided along with 'Bhutanese' hospitality seem to fit easily.

To begin with, democracy and human rights were never the issues when the "problem" first surfaced. The only issue at stake was the right to nationality, a right which the fraudulent 1988 census threatened to deny to southern Bhutanese of Nepalese ethnicity "born in Bhutan by parents and grandparents born in Bhutan." From this enumeration exercise designed with malafide motives arose the "southern Bhutan problem" and consequently resulted in refugees and subsequent calls for democracy and human rights. Even today, the demand for reforms remain linked primarily to the fundamen-

tal issue of citizenship and the right to nationality. Democracy and human rights, *per se*, one would agree with Altherr, were never the central issues to the problem.

As to Altherr's observation that this represents a conflict of interests of ethnic groups, his own observations indicate otherwise. True, one party to the problem comprises southern Bhutanese of Nepalese origin, but the other party to the conflict is not an ethnic group but the regime. It is possible that the latter makes believe it is protecting the interest of 'Bhutanese' while actually furthering its own cause, a subtle difference not perceptible to the 'jaundiced' eye, perhaps. While Altherr witnessed and diligently recorded the lack of rancour among the general 'Bhutanese' public for their 'Nepalese' brethren - an observation which does little to augment his "ethnic conflict" theory - he obviously chose to consciously ignore its implication lest it shatter his borrowed-from-the-government myth.

"IN QUOTES"

"In a democracy, there is often only a fine but very important line between nationalism and nativism. The former, at its best, helps unite a people without setting it aggressively against others. The latter is not only anti-foreign but exploits divisions within a nation by setting an "old stock" of inhabitants against newcomers - even if, in some cases, the later arrivals have been there for generations. Demagogues are always tempted to exploit nativist feelings, especially if they can be hitched to larger concerns of disaffected voters."

Asiaweek, Hong Kong, December 15, 1993

MEDIA SCAN

LINGO-LOVERS

Mussolini once had designs on the language, but was rendered speechless by a Swiss referendum. In 1938, shortly after the dictator noted that Switzerland's least-known language was close enough to Italian to merit being part of his future empire, 92% of Swiss voters decided to raise Romansh to the status of a Swiss "national" tongue. Mussolini piped down.

This month, in another referendum, the Swiss declared that Romansh - which, as Mussolini proprietorially implied, is indeed a direct descendant of Latin - should go another pip up the national scale. It will now be deemed "semi-official" - a gulp short of winning the full "official" rating enjoyed by German (spoken as first language by 64% of the Swiss), French (19%) and Italian (8%), into which all federal documents must be translated.

So bully for the inhabitants of a cluster of south-eastern Swiss valleys in Graubunden - Grisons, to French-speakers. Romansh-speakers (0.5% of the country) will be able to deal directly with the Federal government in their own language. That does not mean, either, that Romansh will be heard in parliament. But Romansh-speakers will, as a result of the constitutional change, get more than the annual Romansh-enhancing federal subsidy of SFr7m (\$5.9m).

Oddly, not all of Switzerland's 40,000 people who speak Romansh as their first language are yodelling with joy. Well-intentioned attempts by the federal government to create, out of the five different valley dialects that all bear the Romansh tag, a "unified" written Romansh, to be known as Romantsch Grischun, have already annoyed pure-minded Romansh traditionalists, who resist any such linguistic homogenisation even among themselves.

And, equally oddly, though two-thirds of the Swiss as a whole voted to be kind to Romansh, Graubunden's German-speaking majority were most carping; Romansh, they say, is not a language at all a bit rich, seeing that Swiss-German is itself a confection of regional dialects. Most Swiss use "high German" only in academia, officialdom and the media, but rarely chat in it.

Still, quadrilingual Switzerland values its success in avoiding linguistic strife - and the ethnic bad blood that might have been stirred - between its various parts. Federalism has spiked the guns of would-be autonomy-seekers. But they could yet start firing. Swiss Italian-speakers in the neglected southern canton of Ticino may now be tempted to demand more money and attention to their language. And irritations persist along the unmarked *rostigraben*, the "trench" that divides Switzerland's French-speakers from the German majority supposedly addicted to *rosti* - the fried potato and onion they heap on their platters. Indeed, lingering hostility between the two main groups of Swiss means that more of them now raise their voices at each other in a neutral tongue - English.

The Economist, London, March 30, 1996.

BHUTAN IN 1995 - Michael Hutt

Asian Survey, Vol XXXVI, No.2, February 1996

The Asian Survey, published by the University of California Press on behalf of the Regents of the University of California, is a monthly bulletin that reviews contemporary Asian affairs. Every February, the Survey carries a compilation of country reports, each written by an individual scholar, covering the political and economic situation in Asian countries during the past year.

Dr Michael Hutt who contributed this 1995 report on Bhutan is a Nepali scholar who lectures at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, UK. Hutt has been following the events in Bhutan ever since the problem surfaced in the media in 1990. He visited the kingdom in September 1992. In addition to meeting senior government officials in Thimphu and travelling to Chirang district, he was also granted an audience by His Majesty the King who spoke to him at length about the southern crisis. He also met with dissidents and visited the refugee camps in Nepal.

In March 1993, Hutt organized an international academic conference on Bhutan in London, 'Bhutan: A Traditional Order and the Forces of Change' which brought together, for the first time, the few scholars who held an active interest in Bhutanese affairs, mediapersons, and others drawn into the "southern Bhutan problem" either on behalf of the Royal Government or because of their involvement in refugee relief operations in camps in eastern Nepal. The Government deputed the then Home Secretary Jigmi Thinlay along with Kuensel editor Kinlay Dorji and Karma Ura from the Planning Commission to present the Thimphu view. Despite Hutt's efforts, dissident participation was foiled by "diplomatic sensitivities." Nevertheless, the conference generated sufficient debate and contributed greatly to a better understanding of the issues involved.

Weathering the Storm

THE ECONOMY

Bhutan's nonagricultural economy still centers on government investment and a handful of larger companies. Over 80% of the population are farmers, but agriculture, forestry, and fishing have now decreased to some 46% of GDP, mainly because of the development of hydropower (HEP) since 1986. The bulk of Bhutan's external trade is with India, and the main trading agreement between the two countries was enhanced in February. Electricity from the HEP plant at Chhukha now accounts for 40% of Bhutan's trade with India, and in April the unit price of electricity from Chhukha was increased, to raise an extra \$5.9 million per annum. Further hydropower projects are in progress or at the planning stage, including the Basochu Project, which is the largest single project supported by Austria in a developing country. A smaller HEP project, the \$4.34 million Rangjung Project, came on stream in December 1995, and Bhutan and India are currently discussing plans for Chhukha II and III schemes (the Tala HEP and Wangchu reservoir projects), which will have a combined capacity of 1020 megawatts. Bhutan's capacity to consume electricity remains tiny because the industrial base is small: Bhutan's largest factory, owned by Bhutan Ferro Alloys Ltd., began production of ferro silicon and micro silica in April 1995, with a workforce of 355.

FOREIGN AID AND FOREIGN RELATIONS

Bhutan's relationship with India remains intimate and crucial, as India retains a guiding hand on Bhutan's foreign relations and is its main aid donor and trading partner. Indian assistance is expected to increase to slightly over half of total foreign aid to Bhutan in 1995-96. In January the funding shortfall for Bhutan's Seventh Plan (1992-97) was anticipated to amount to \$142 million, and at a Round Table Meeting at Geneva foreign donors pledged only \$75 million. This had severe effects on the Human Resource Development sector, where a requirement of 9,500 fellowships had to be pared down to 2,162. However, the Bhutanese government recorded that 98.3% of recurrent expenditure had been met by domestic revenue during 1994-95. Relations with China are cordial, and the main forum for dialogue since 1984 has been ten rounds of ne-

gotiations on the demarcation of Bhutan's northern boundary.

Negotiations with Nepal

During 1995 Bhutan found it increasingly difficult to explain away the presence of 88,000 people in refugee camps on Nepalese soil. The refugees claim to have been evicted from their homes in southern Bhutan, and the majority hold documentary evidence of long-term residence in the kingdom; most have lived in the camps for over three years. A Ministerial Joint Commission (MJC) was set up by the governments of Bhutan and Nepal in 1993 to address this problem. Its fifth round of talks was held in Kathmandu in February-March 1995, and its sixth in Thimphu in April. The minority United Marxist-Leninist (UML) government elected in Nepal in November 1994 inherited a commitment to harmonize its position with the Bhutanese government on four agreed categories of people in the camps: (1) "bonafide Bhutanese if [they] have been evicted forcefully" (2) "Bhutanese who emigrated" (3) "Non-Bhutanese people" and (4) "Bhutanese who have committed criminal acts." The two rounds of talks had few tangible outcomes and no date was set for a further round when the two sides parted company in April. The Commission did exchange the names of people from each side who would make up a Joint Verification team to begin the job of categorizing the refugees, but each side blamed the other for the lack in further progress. The Bhutanese home minister said that the Nepalese side had "changed its position" and "introduced new issues," and wanted to repatriate "all the people in the camps" to Bhutan, while the Nepalese home minister said that Bhutan should "repatriate all those in the camps who are from Bhutan." A large number of the people in the camps had signed "voluntary emigration" forms before leaving Bhutan, and it is probable that the Nepalese side in the MJC feared such people were in danger of falling into Category 2, without any consideration of whether or not they had signed under duress. In September the UML fell from power, and it remains to be seen how the new coalition government in Nepal will handle this issue.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Political Dissent: The Detention of Tek Nath Rizal

Tek Nath Rizal, a royal advisory councillor, submitted a petition to the king of Bhutan in April 1988, which had been drafted with the help of seven other senior Lhotshampa (Nepali Bhutanese) bureaucrats, and it asked the king to reconsider the 1985 Citizenship Act and the census exercise that had been underway for some months in southern districts. Rizal was arrested and then released with instructions not to meet with more than three persons at any one time. Soon afterward, he fled with his family to Nepal where he helped set up a human rights organization in exile. Rizal was seized by Nepalese police on November 15, 1989, handed over to the Bhutanese security forces, and flown back to Bhutan. He was kept in solitary confinement until December 1992; tried during 1993 on charges based mainly on the National Security Act that came into force in November 1992; sentenced to life imprisonment for treason on November 16, 1993; and then granted a conditional, deferred pardon by the king three days later. The pardon was conditional upon the two governments finding a solution to the "problem of the people living in refugee camps in eastern Nepal." Rizal was adopted by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience in 1990, and the legality of his detention and subsequent life sentence remain key issues in the war of words between the Bhutanese government and its opponents in exile.

In March 1995 the United Nations' Working Group on Arbitrary Detention released a report on a visit it had made to Bhutan in October 1994. This report was chiefly concerned with the detention of Rizal, and stated in its conclusion that "the arrest of T.N. Rizal cannot be said to be arbitrary," and that his trial was fair. The reaction to these assertions was predictably mixed: Dasho Jigmi Thinley, Bhutan's ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, praised the Group for its "professional objectivity" and for the "methodical manner" in which it had conducted its investigations. The Kathmandu-based Human Rights Organization of Bhutan, on the other hand, claimed that the report contained many serious errors and contradictions and described it as an "outrage" that deserved "condemnation and denunciation in the most emphatic

terms."

The Druk National Congress

The Druk National Congress (DNC), founded by a group of Sharchops (eastern Bhutanese) dissidents in Kathmandu in 1994, is led by a well-known Sharchop businessman, Rongthong Kunley Dorji. DNC therefore represents the only group in active opposition to the Bhutanese government whose membership does not consist of Lhotshampas. On May 28, according to the *Bhutan Review*, DNC posters appeared on important buildings in many towns in Bhutan. Nine demands were made - respect for human rights, and independent judiciary, freedom of opinion and expression, an end to forced labour, etc. It is impossible to gauge whether the DNC's campaign reflects a widely held aspiration. However, the extent to which its leader was vilified in Bhutan's National Assembly may be significant. The arrest in July and subsequent jailing of the royal Bhutan police chief, ostensibly for allowing prisoners to escape from Chemgang jail, also may be related to this issue.

THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

The National Assembly met for its 73rd session from August 10 to September 2. This was the first meeting of the Assembly since July 1993, despite the requirement that the Assembly should meet at least once a year. The Speaker informed the Assembly that no session had been called during 1994 because many of the points submitted for discussion had been about the ongoing talks between Bhutan and Nepal and that this would have had a negative impact on those talks. He went on to declare that now, however, the Nepalese government was "not interested in the bilateral talks," implying that any negative impact would now be of little consequence.

Speakers from the floor of the National Assembly dismissed all forms of dissent with contempt. Particular scorn was poured on Rongthong Kunley: the people's representatives condemned him for "spreading false and malicious against the Royal Government of Bhutan" and asked the royal government to "extradite Rongthong Kinley following which he must be given capital punishment." They virtually denied that anyone had been forcibly evicted from Bhutan, and some representa-

tives argued that the royal government should "not even discuss the question of allowing any of the people in the refugee camps... to come to Bhutan." They viewed the relatives of refugees still living in Bhutan with mistrust, arguing that they should be dismissed from government service or even expelled from the country. As on previous occasions, the king and ministers took a more moderate line, restating their commitment to negotiations with Nepal.

The Bhutanese government tends to present the ethnic crisis as one of insecurity and "terrorism" on its southern districts because villagers there are routinely robbed and harassed, both by criminal elements from refugee camps and incomers from across the Indian border. The National Assembly resolved to discuss with the Indian authorities the matter of Bodo militancy in Assam spilling over the southern border. As well as debating developmental and budgetary matters, the Assembly also pressed for heavy punishments to be meted out to persons who desecrated and robbed religious monuments, reflecting a widespread concern in Bhutan about the need for cultural preservation.

CONCLUSION

During the 1980s a new, more exclusive kind of ethnic nationalism began to exert influence over policymaking in Bhutan. It began to be seen as axiomatic that Bhutan could no longer afford to consist of a northern and a southern sector whose populations lived in separate cultural spheres and with only limited interaction with one another. Nepali-led political activism of which there existed a very stark example in Darjeeling between 1986 and 1988 came to be seen as a major threat to the future of the Drukpa state. Thus, southern Bhutanese were given a choice between subscribing actively and visibly to the Drukpa cultural and political ethos or rebelling against it and losing their right to citizenship as a consequence. The tone of the recent National Assembly suggests that Bhutan is determined to weather the storm with few compromises, and so far it has carried most donors with it. In the longer term, few "bonafide Bhutanese" who "have been evicted forcibly" are likely to return to Bhutan unless some measure of political reforms occurs within the kingdom.