

HUMANITY WRAP

Compiled by Roger Beaumont



They don't mess about in Bangladesh: more than 170 prominent people - including 60 parliamentarians and a gaggle of mansion and Merc-owning "ministers" - have been detained since a state of emergency was declared in January. They have been done, dusted and busted. All their assets have been shoved in the freezer, except the odd exotic pet that is still roaming the gated avenues of privilege.

Meanwhile, expensive cars brood silently in the crammed parking lot of a Dhaka police station. Is this over the top? Well, that depends on your personal taste in justice and entertainment. Security forces raided the home of a top Bangladeshi forestry official and found nearly 10 million takas (call it Bt5 million) stashed inside his pillow. Not that much in the scheme of things, but imagine putting your head down on five million in cash every night. Move over, darling, this is my pillow. "For a long time, it seemed corruption wasn't a punishable offence," said Iftekhar Zaman, head of Transparency International's Bangladesh office. "So this drive by the military should be a strong symbol. But there is one slight problem. We hoped it would happen in a democratic system," he said. So did we, Iftekhar old chap, so did we.

But it hasn't. You could reason then that so-called democratic governments are simply incapable of dealing with corruption. After all, if the Democrats had not boycotted the April 2 elections, and Thai Rak Thai had swept into power, the whole electoral-fraud case would never have reached the papers, let alone the court. Honesty would have created a whole lot of trouble. So it's fascinating to see the remnants of Thai Rak Thai doing everything they can to divert the publicity of their own reflection. Their moral indignation seems

Move Over, Darling

counterproductive. Asking the PTV pro-anti-everything crowd's policy on corruption in their own house would be like asking the Taleban for their expert advice on climate change. Power for a few is almost a fetish, but for most it's pure sport. Like many footballers, it's a game of tactical hypocrisy. I didn't cheat. But they did. And if any of us did cheat, they didn't tell the rest of us, so we are guilty of innocence. And politicians demand to be their own umpires. Still, if corruption ever reaches 50 bucks a barrel, what's the bidding for the drilling rights to Bangkok?

Those who complain about the lack of freedom of the press in Thailand might consider that in a real police state you wouldn't be able to complain about it in the first place. It's a question of perspective.

In the old Soviet Union people weren't just afraid to say what they thought, they were terrified to even think what they felt, and everyone knew something was up when the scheduled TV programmes were suddenly replaced by "Swan Lake".

Hours later some dour Soviet minister, looking like Brezhnev's mother-in-law, would announce either that the Kremlin was still functioning despite being attacked by tanks for six hours, or that a heroic Soviet meteorologist from the Max Krank Institute in Yamsk, who had laid the foundations for plate tectonics back in 1912, had been found frozen to death on a Greenland glacier. Anything but the truth at hand. And let's remember, if you lived behind the Iron

Curtain, happiness took the form of having the secret police knock on your door at midnight enquiring "Ivan Stravinsky?" and being able to say: "No, Ivan Stravinsky lives next door."

In the UK, things are hardly better. The Public Order Act 1986 was recently used to arrest Sam Brown, an Oxford student celebrating the end of his finals,

and lock him up for asking a mounted policeman: "Do you realise your horse is gay?"

If female news presenters in Gaza refuse to wear strict Islamic dress they will be beheaded, according to the latest threat delivered by the Swords of Islamic Righteousness in Gaza. "You are without shame or morals," it continued. "We will cut your throat from vein to vein if needed to protect the spirit and morals of this nation." So, it's immoral not to wear a hijab, but perfectly moral to kill people if they don't. This isn't a clash of civilisations, it's a clash about civilisation.

After Korean pop sensation Rain left town, a female booked his room at the Pathumwan Princess for Bt100,000 on the condition that everything in the suite was left untouched - so she could sleep in the unmade bed, use the used towels and drink out of the unrinsed glasses.

What makes us randy for relics? Isn't the music (or pictures or words) enough? Do we imagine the leavings of a life contain some ancillary truth? For a hundred grand, damn right we do.

When the writer Robert Louis Stevenson died, his business-minded Scottish nanny quietly began selling hair that she claimed to have cut from the writer's head 40 years earlier. The believers, seekers and pursuers bought enough of it to stuff a yak.

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