

## EC and govt at loggerhead

### In holding polls EC must reign supreme

HERE is the Chief Election Commissioner categorically saying that in his reckoning no 'acceptable' UP elections can be held without the army being deployed for the purpose. He even went on to add that non-compliance with his request for army assistance in this specific case was 'unconstitutional'.

He is basically making one point: as the constitutionally mandated authority, he is both entitled to as well as in the best position, to be judging what his requirements are to hold the elections freely and fairly. It is not for the government of the day to question why he is asking for something nor make any value judgement on it but to create an enabling environment for and materially assist the Election Commission in conducting the polls efficiently. That's why he has been given the statutory position to act independently within stated constitutional terms of reference. There cannot be any second opinion on this point.

But to our utter surprise and consternation, for the second time in a row, Haris Chowdhury, the Prime Minister's political secretary has reacted, we must say rather abrasively to the CEC's request for army assistance. He has had the temerity to assert that his observations are 'unacceptable' and that a congenial environment exists for the polls in his perception. Who, may we ask, is he to say what is acceptable and what is not in reference to comments by no less a person than the CEC?

Election is about getting a new generation of leaders. If army's involvement as the watchmen for law and order during the polls improves matters why should the government have any reservations about it?

The important question to consider is: does the CEC's concern reflect public opinion or not? We think it does. Most people would like to see the EC discharge its responsibilities in its own light and according to its best judgement. Its risk perception is credible. For, this must have been based on weather-taking as to vulnerability of different areas to trouble in the case of such a big electoral exercise.

The bottom-line is, when it comes to holding elections there is no scope for any friction of opinions between any government functionary and the CEC on the congeniality of environment. Conduct of polls is an electoral, not a political matter, with the CEC entirely in charge there. His judgement of what he needs for the polls has an overriding importance.

Haris Chowdhury's reactions to CEC's request for special law and order support amounts to interference in the conduct of UP polls.

## Police reforms

### The first step is to stop political interference in its work

WITH the army back in the barracks after an 87-day countrywide clampdown on criminal, punctuated with alleged deaths and violence in custody, there is an apprehension of a surge in crime and violence in society. The responsibility clearly lies with the police to dispel such misgivings with efficient and effective law enforcement. However, the police have, as Prime Minister Khaleda Zia summed up at the Police Week function on Saturday, "crisis of confidence" to overcome. Needless to say, the government of the day only highlighted the crisis when it had called the troops out of the cantonments to arrest an alarming law and order landslide. In other words, the Khaleda administration itself gave a ringing indictment on police credibility while launching the Operation Clean Heart. Nevertheless, now is the time for the police to redeem themselves and it will not be possible without the government's full weight behind the law enforcers.

To this end, the first thing the government should do is to undertake the long-overdue, comprehensive police reforms. The men of law need to be motivated, empowered, trained and equipped which call for a complete overhaul of the police forces. This, the government has over the years, talked at length about, but never quite paid serious attention to. As the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) pointed out in its country report last year, the police do lack an operational environment and the government of the day needs to make sure that the inadequacies are properly dealt with. Alongside motivation and training, there is the dire need for a revision of the police pay-structure, which, everyone would agree, is grossly out of touch with reality.

Beyond personnel and logistic supports, what the government must ensure is that there should be no political interference with day-to-day operations. It has been said over and over again that the police need operational freedom to live up to public expectations. However, successive administrations have found it convenient to use the police as a tool to further their partisan objectives. While the prime minister talks tough on negligence of duty by the policemen, she could not be oblivious of the fact that political interference from within has traditionally inhibited the police from delivering goods.

# Through India's looking glass

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

In a speech last month to the French Institute for International Relations Indian Foreign Secretary speaking on terrorism said, "Virtually all our neighbours, by choice or by default, by acts of commission or omission, compulsions of geography or terrain, have been or are involved in receiving, sheltering, overlooking or tolerating terrorist activities from their soil directed against India". Given the centrality of terrorism in the international matrix of the day, one would have looked forward to some explanation of the alleged enmity, either wittingly or unwittingly, towards India by all her neighbours. After all none of the surrounding states are failing or failed states though each has her own unique domestic difficulties which but for Pakistan should not have external dimension. Relating to Bangladesh he alleged that the country "has long been used as a sanctuary for insurgent groups engaged in violence against India, especially in the North East. Bangladesh effectively refuses to recognize that this problem exists, as some lobbies in that country want to use it as a pressure group". A few days back Chief Minister of Tripura said that his government had definite information, which has been corroborated by reports from Delhi of the existence of fifty-one anti-India bases in Bangladesh funded by Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). Since it is an inter-state matter he has requested Delhi to take up the matter with Bangladesh in order to dismantle these "anti-Indian terrorist infrastructures" through joint operations. He, however, admitted that immediately after October general elections in Bangladesh some opposition politicians who also allegedly were criminals had taken refuge in Tripura and have now vanished from his state. The significance of this statement is to display the porosity of Bangladesh-Tripura border as Tripura is hemmed on three sides by Bangladesh. The added significance of this statement is that it is a reiteration of the same allegation made earlier by Home Minister L.K. Advani, Foreign Minister Jaswant Sinha and former West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu. Predictably Bangladesh has totally denied both the existence of the bases and ISI funding. But denial alone does not more do the Houdini trick of disappearance of a problem. Unless faced up front and with transparency suspicions will remain.

Indian ascription has acquired sinister deportment because of the impudent nature of this stratagem, which has become choric at the cusp of the millennium. Some Indian agencies have also been accusing Bangladesh of leaning towards Islamic fundamentalism (totally refuted by the US ambassador at Dhaka) and that after the fall of Kandahar in late 2001 several hundred Taliban and Al-Qaida fighters escaped by ship from Karachi to Chittagong. South Asian Intelligence Review (16.12.02 no. 1.22) interpreted the recently held Biswa Jtama at Tongi, the second largest congregation of Muslims from 52 countries as emphasizing "

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The question, however, remains to be answered as to why should Bangladesh, surrounded on three sides by India and having a robust trade (both formal and informal) from Indian point of view, added with the fact that Indian intervention had hastened Bangladesh independence, would feel inclined to harm India and that too with the help of the bitterest erstwhile enemy?

the role the country has come to play in the context of Islamic brotherhood. Although the government in Dhaka has reacted fiercely to any suggestion that the country is becoming a haven for Islamic extremists, reports from Asian and Western intelligence services suggest otherwise. One would have wished that India had provided irrefutable evidence to back up its allegations unless these are for domestic consumption. Encouraged by Gujarat victory extremist elements in BJP may see Hindutva in its intolerant anti that alleged sustenance of anti-Indian elements almost totally believed in the case of Pakistan can also be used in the case of Bangladesh by projecting that Hinduism is in danger not only on the western front but on the eastern front as well. The question, however, remains to be answered as to why should Bangladesh, surrounded on three sides by India and having a robust trade (both formal and informal) from Indian point of view, added with the fact that Indian intervention had hastened Bangladesh independence, would feel inclined to harm India and that too with the help of the bitterest erstwhile enemy? If the containing canard against Bangladesh is for domestic politics (with presumed credibility given due to the fact that two Islamic parties are coalition partners in the government) then Indian secular parties would be well advised to be on guard in order to resist communi-

unified by the thread of Indianism, an intangible yet an unbroken bond, then sacrifice of secularism at the altar of expedient politics could lead to eventual Balkanisation of one of the greatest civilizations of the world. One should remind oneself that an estimated twelve percent of thirty-nine million people in the seven North Eastern states are Christians and they dominate the states completely. Christians account for nearly 90 percent of Nagaland's population; about 65 percent in Meghalaya; and over 85 percent in Mizoram. Christian church plays the most important role as an intermediary between the Naga insurgents and the Indian government. Church reportedly helped in the removal of 12-year long ban on National Social Council of Nagalim (NSC-NIM) by the Indian government in November last. Church's role can also be gauged by the code of conduct issued by the church for the forthcoming elections in Nagaland and Meghalaya. Last month the Archbishop of Shillong declared the church's Ten Commandments for enforcing discipline in the forthcoming elections. Such pro-active role by the religious leaders has to be seen in the light of the separatist's refusal of 'Indian electoral system' in Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal and Meghalaya.

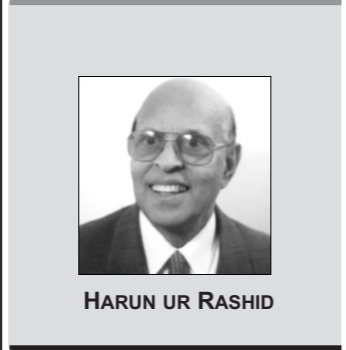
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Kazi Anwarul Masud is retired Secretary to the Bangladesh government and former ambassador.

# Why has US popularity declined in so many countries?



HARUN UR RASHID

THE US administration has recently found that US Policy is being misconstrued in many countries and its rate of popularity has considerably declined, reportedly as many as in 34 countries. While the popularity of President Bush has risen in the US, his image and policy got a battering outside the US. This is despite the fact in the current economic and political environment in various parts of the world the continued engagement of the United States is extremely important. However the present form of interaction presents a huge problem for the US. It is reported that one Public Relations expert has been appointed at the State Department to improve its image across the globe. The question is why has it happened? There appear to be several reasons for the decline. As the only remaining superpower in the world, the US has the special difficulty in getting itself heard across the globe. The reasons could be:- the fact that the US is a Western power and does not understand Islamic World; -the historical legacy of the past where the US played a high interventionist role in Asia, Africa and Latin America; -the fact that the US has been seen as the greatest protector of Israel; -the growing opinion that multilateral organisations such as the UN Security Council, and the international financial institutions, IMF and

are stationed in Central Asia, Turkey, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Philippines, Okinawa (Japan) and South Korea. The US has a base in Diego Garcia (Indian Ocean) where B52 bombers, now capable of dropping satellite and laser-guided "smart" bombs are located. The B52 have been used in Afghanistan to topple the Taliban regime in 2001.

In South Asia the engagement of the US appears not to be deep or

were ignored by the US in 1988. In South Korea the presence of 37,000 US soldiers is viewed as a problem and not part of the solution of the divided Korean peninsula. The Presidential candidate won the election in South Korea with an anti-US campaign. South Koreans, who have benefited from US assistance, have now turned against the US hard line policy towards North Korea.

In Latin America, the covert and overt intervention in Panama,

"We are in danger of looking like we want to sanction everybody who disagrees with us and not help anybody who agrees with us". The US recently proposed economic sanctions against North Korea for its resumption of its nuclear programme.

The US and the European Union disagreed on the issue of ratification of Kyoto Protocol of 1997 and the Statute of the International Criminal Court of 1998. President Bush was isolated in his call for the removal of

dominance of the view that the region, and indeed the whole world, is divided into friendly "tyrants" and liberal democratic countries. Veteran political scientist Stanley Hoffmann recently wrote that the US policy of "regime change" in Iraq, if pursued across the board, would topple friendly "tyrants" on whom the same US policy-makers rely.

All these paragraphs demonstrate that the US is in real difficulty in being understood at a political level. US President Roosevelt once said "Speak quietly and carry a big stick". The US administration now appears to speak loudly and carry a big stick. Former British Foreign Secretary (Minister) during the Gulf War Douglas Hurd wrote on 2<sup>nd</sup> January in London's *Financial Times* that the overthrow of an Arab regime, however odious, by an overwhelmingly Anglo-American military would seem to the Arab world different in principle from the liberation of Kuwait in 1991. No friendly countries, Arab or other, would this time pick up the bill for the military expenses, as they willingly did in 1991.

However for the US all is not that doom and gloom. There is a quieter pervasive American influence all over the globe. Coca-Cola and McDonald's culture have reached every corner of the globe. TV shows have carried US values and aspirations into billions of homes in a culture-reach that is historically unprecedented. Despite unpopularity of its foreign policy, American movies, singers, fast food and life style are immensely popular in most of the countries in the world. This is an interesting dichotomy of image of a country that is one of the most liberal and democratic countries in the world. Napoleon while in exile said: "There are two powers in the world, the sword and the mind. In the long run, the sword is always beaten by the mind".

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

## BOTTOM LINE

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serious, particularly over the disputed Kashmir. The policy in the region appears to lurch from one crisis to another guided by narrow US interests. In Afghanistan the commitment of the US before the emergence of the Taliban regime was temporary and once the Soviet troops left in 1989, the US lost its interest in the country.

During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), the US supported the Saddam Hussein regime and about 150 US companies with the approval of the US administration provided ingredients of biological and chemical weapons to Iraq. Donald Rumsfeld, a Special Envoy of the US visited Baghdad in 1983 and reportedly met President Saddam Hussein and the same person, now as Defence Secretary, appears to be one of the influential persons to pursue a hard line policy towards removal of President Saddam Hussein. It may be recalled that the chemical weapons attacks in Halabja on Iraqi Kurds by Saddam Hussein regime

Nicaragua and Chile are well known. Panama's strongman Manuel Noriega who acted as an agent of CIA for years together has been serving life imprisonment in the US on conviction of drug related crimes when he, as the President of Panama, defied US. Chile's dictator Augusto Pinochet (1973-90) pursued open door economic policies in return of alleged US support.

The policy of the IMF and World Bank is allegedly manipulated by the largest shareholder US towards a recalcitrant country. Unless the US gives a nod, it is difficult to obtain loans from the financial institutions. The institutions are viewed as a vehicle to establish US hegemony in various parts of the world.

There is also an impression that the US has become one of the champions of imposition of economic sanctions on countries which do not "kowtow" to it. President Clinton himself went on record in 1998 as saying that the US policy had become "sanctions-happy".

Remember the messy handling of the two foreign journalists by the government in recent times and the EU's report on our alleged violations of human rights and the government's sharp reactions thereof. All these are a sequel to the resultant effects of government's immature handling of matters.

I believe that our foreign policy interventions are also wrongly focused. Looking towards East and China is fine but at the same time there is no sense in "going overboard". Despite the world turning into a global village in this age of globalization and the development

of the IT technology, the fact remains that you cannot turn, twist or ignore the effects and historical realities and impacts of power-play as they exist in the region including other related geo-political considerations. In the past several decades both China and the US have been "known" allies of Pakistan yet, history has it that in times of national emergencies caused by wars and severe diplomatic debacles they have not contributed in any significant way. Just recall our War of Liberation and the so called arrival of the famous Seventh Fleet of America at the port of citation to the rescue of the Pakistani forces. Similar

situation prevailed during the war between India and Pakistan in 1965. So much so that Pakistan had to seek the assistance of the then Soviet Union to mediate and in working out of a "respectable ceasefire." And now Delhi is planning to "push back into Bangladesh" so called 20 million illegal Bangladeshi immigrants! Our foreign policy is also packed with uncalled for rhetoric and accelerated propaganda based on too many assumptions of "quick returns".

Yet another headline in a local daily reads "Partial Army pull out begins in a week". Yes a good news which is now followed by an extraor-

dinary news, the coming of the RAT (Rapid Action Team), a very specialized team of law enforcers designed to contain and sustain the good works(?) of the Clean Heart Operations. What happened to our regular police forces? Who is going to oversee their actions? Does the government plan to come up with yet another "extraordinary agency or agencies to combat and complement police failures"? Is there, indeed, "no way out" of this tapestry of miserable state of affairs?

Shamsher Chowdhury is a management specialist who earlier worked for ADB, USAID, WFP.

# Miserable state of affairs

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

I am simply appalled at this senseless stand off and the growing bitter relationship between the Chief Election Commissioner and the current ruling class. A front page headline in one of the leading local dailies of 9 January reads "CEC crossed the line -- BNP high-ups say." I have carefully gone through the entire news report and find a comment made by one of the senior Ministers in the BNP Cabinet as rather unfortunate, uncalled for, derogatory and certainly tantamounting to character assassination of the CEC himself. Other things being equal, it also does not reflect too well on our image. To the best of my knowledge in all matters of election the CEC's "decisions" and requests are almost mandatory for the government to consider on a priority basis at all times. As a matter of fact CEC's intents in conducting elections should get a priority over routine Administrative matters of the Government. The ruling class must realise that the office of the Chief Election Commissioner is not just another extended wing of the government machinery. Surely our venerable ministers have better things to do than blocking the path of the CEC and bringing a disrepute on the institutional infrastructure of the office of the Election Commission.

And now the episode on detention of Saber Chowdhury and others vis-a-vis the High Court ruling on granting of bails etc. It looks like by its repeated senseless actions the present regime is giving the signal that there is no need of the judiciary since it can act in all capacities as the judge, jury and the executor. What kind of historical heritage are we building for our coming generation? Today we are living in yet another kind of insecure and terrorized environment not far away from the terror alerts caused by armed gangs and extortionists. I sincerely hope that good sense prevails and the government will quickly act in reversing these anti-people, anti-democratic acts leading to serious human rights violations. Talking of human rights violations, this is an unending story. The way things are developing from the deaths in custody to chasing and hunting down of journalists the entire path resounds with horror stories of human rights violations of the worst kind. So acute that we now have many of the local mission representatives of the EU desirous of monitoring "the cases against opposition political leaders."

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## OPINION

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