

Bad politics still rules our lives

Are calls for political consensus sincere?

RECENTLY the ruling BNP leadership has been highlighting the need for political consensus on important national issues. This is sensible thinking. However, this is not backed up by sensible politics. The ruling coalition, especially the BNP, continues its extremely highhanded behaviour against the opposition. The recent police assault on a procession of the student wing of the opposition Awami League is a clear proof of the insincerity of the ruling coalition's wish of a political consensus on fundamental political issues. Is it realistic to expect that the opposition will sit across the table when its student activists are being brutalised on the streets?

A more fundamental question. Why were they not allowed to hold a protest demonstration? Isn't holding such a protest march part of our constitutional right? Yes, police can intercept or even baton charge such a march if they start becoming rowdy and indulge in lawlessness. To the best of our knowledge the protest march was assaulted right at the start. It was a case, as it has been under the previous regime, of arrogant use of power by the ruling party to try to demoralise the opposition through brute force of the state. Such an attitude does not produce political consensus.

While the ruling party is arrogant, the opposition continues to be irresponsible. The most regrettable manifestation of which is in the refusal to participate in the committee formation process in the parliament. The difference, we understand, has now boiled down to chairmanship of some committees that the opposition want and the government does not. The latter's argument is that since the AL, while in power, did not give the opposition any chairmanship, why should the BNP do it. The habit of following the worst aspect of our opponent still dominates our actions.

Chairmanship or not, the opposition has greatly damaged the parliamentary process by not helping the early formation of the parliamentary standing committees. We are nearly into the second year of this parliament, and two out of five years of its term -- meaning 40 per cent of tenure -- have already elapsed without the parliamentary committees. We know that the real work of a parliament is done in those committees. The opposition's actions are rooted in its belief that not going to the parliament is depriving the government of its legislative legitimacy. Such mentality also leads to frequent boycott which, thankfully, the AL appears to have abandoned at the moment.

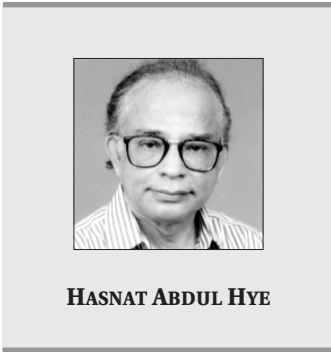
The opposition in its obsession to hurt the ruling coalition has not been able to understand the fact that the parliament is the House of the People, and not of the government, and it is here that the opposition has the best chance of serving the people by using the floor of the parliament to bring into public focus issues of grave public concern, and who does not know that there are plenty of them. The opposition may say that they have not been given sufficient time to speak. But can that justify not giving their nominations for membership in committees? By now so much important committee work could have been completed if they could have started at the outset.

To break this government-opposition stalemate, we have always argued that the government party must come more than half way. We said so when AL was in power, we say so now. But as the AL refused to listen, so does the BNP. Once in power our ruling parties believe that they will be there forever.

Arrogance, ego, desire to crush rather than co-operate with the other side, and extreme partisanship rules our political life. We regretfully notice that though the governmental players have changed, the ruling parties have changed, but the politics has not. It continues to be dominated by the singular aim of partisanship and not patriotism. Greed, corruption, abuse of power and self-destructive policy of replacing professionals with sychophants appear to dominate the government's actions. Corruption is becoming uncontrollable simply because there is no attempt to contain it but only to see how 'our men' benefit from it and not the others.

After 12 years of democracy, three elections and so many mistakes from which any sensible and intelligent political leadership could have easily learnt, we are blindly circling around the same old political follies.

Designer democracy



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

THESE are the days of designers. Everything and everyone aspiring to inspire awe and admiration has to have a designer's imprimatur. A brand name with logo lends respectability and is considered eligible, for whatever end one may have in mind. It has also become de rigueur because without it there is no security from attacks by standard bearers of, well, standard. In becoming universal designers' brand names have the potential of becoming popular. No wonder, a market of counterfeit brand names is thriving where look-alike fakes masquerade for the real. The counterfeiters make quick bucks in every sense of the term, the customers are lulled into a sense of Dionysian stupor and the genuine brand name is woe-begone. Intellectual property right? Forget about it. That is passe.

So not much surprise (awe?) and shock should be betrayed at America's attempt to redesign and rebrand Iraq from dictatorship of the dire kind to democracy with secularism, to boot. Iraq was secular before the war but not democratic. Right? That is the big difference now. It is democracy plus. Only ingenious designers can craft such artefacts. To brush the harried memory, the Second World War was fought to make the world safe for democracy. It was a shame that Iraq lagged behind all these years and the hapless people were groaning under the yoke of dictatorship. Funny, too, that this outrageous absence was missed out so long by, well, the standard bearers. The knight in shining armour could no longer ignore the challenge thrown by the situation. The champion of democracy had to come charging forward with evangelical zeal to give the Iraqis a taste of freedom and democracy.

There is nothing wrong with these noble concepts and ideals. Like motherhood, national flag and favourite national dishes (apple pie, Yorkshire pudding, etc.) these are to be cherished beyond reason-

ing. For Iraqis accustomed to one-man dictatorship for such a long time it was a blessing that their benefactor woke up to their woes at long last. They are even prepared to forget that not so long ago their oppressor was the darling of the democratic west doing multi-billion dollar business with oil and arms. But things change and people come to have different views when these suit their interests. Opportunism? Expedience? The cynics are incorrigible: Mercifully, history brushes them aside and moves on. It is written by the victors and arbiters, not their critics,

Remember? Having been freed by invaders who just invited themselves, the Iraqis are about to be administered democracy. By the invaders, who else? That was their ostensible mission and that is what they excel in, by their own account that is. You have to look at the way they elected their last President to realise what an epitome of democracy their country is. But don't be fooled by what they practice in the name of democracy. It is what they believe in and want others to believe that matter. And make no mistake that they believe in democracy. For them it is an article

operation Iraqi democracy. This is the second and the most important phase because on its success depends not only the wellbeing of Iraqis but also the long-term interests of their benefactors in the middle east and perhaps in the world. 'Operation Iraqi Democracy' may have been hatched in Washington but Iraqis will also have something in it. Call it collateral benefit!

It is both an advantage and a disadvantage that Iraqis have no inkling about democracy in practice. For a starter, anything can be passed off as being part of the

recalcitrant elements and saboteurs. Any attack on democracy builders can be blamed on the remnants of the last regime, who may be foolishly scheming to stage a come back. Among other advantages are the presence of Iraqi exiles in America who have been plotting for years to democratise Iraq under the guidance of their benevolent hosts. They bring homegrown expertise in their areas of specialisation and will give an Iraqi face to the Democracy project. According to *International Herald Tribune*, 150 Iraqi exiles, specialists in different fields, have

played by Garner and Bremmer duo.

Iraqis will not be left out of the democratisation process during the interim period. It would look ridiculous to do so. After all, it is meant for them, whatever may be the ulterior motive. Already a conference has been held and eleven representatives have reportedly been selected representing ethnic and religious groups. They are expected to be the nucleus of the interim authority that the Americans hope to cobble together to give their military administration (euphemistically called 'civilian') an Iraqi face. Apart from the fact that they will have little political power, like the 150 exiles flown in, the selected representatives will hardly be a cohesive group representing united positions on various issues based on consensus. This is the crux of the problem of introducing designer democracy in Iraq by the Americans. Their demographic composition does not lend itself neatly into the democratic design of the designers.

The cardinal principle of democracy being 'one man, one vote', the Iraqis should be able to elect their representatives on the basis of demography. This will bring a majority of Shiites and minorities of Sunnis, Kurds and Christians in the central government in Baghdad. But this pristine type of democracy is not acceptable to the Americans because they are chary of giving prominence to the Shiias on the ground of their suspected Irani connection. To reduce their influence in the democratic polity, that is on the anvil, the Americans have a plan to create three regions, cutting across ethnic lines. Instead of these regions being horizontal, coinciding with the present ethnic divisions, the new regions will run from north to south slicing Kurdish, Sunni and Shia populations. It is a shrewd move. But as a ploy it is too clever by half. This may temporarily facilitate the manipulation of one group against another and allow Americans to pursue the policy of divide and rule. But it will not produce stability and unity, based on consensus, so essential for enduring democracy. Designer democracy will succeed for a while but fail ultimately. Being counterfeit, it is a recipe for chaos and anarchy. Perhaps that is what is wanted by those looking for an excuse to stay for long.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

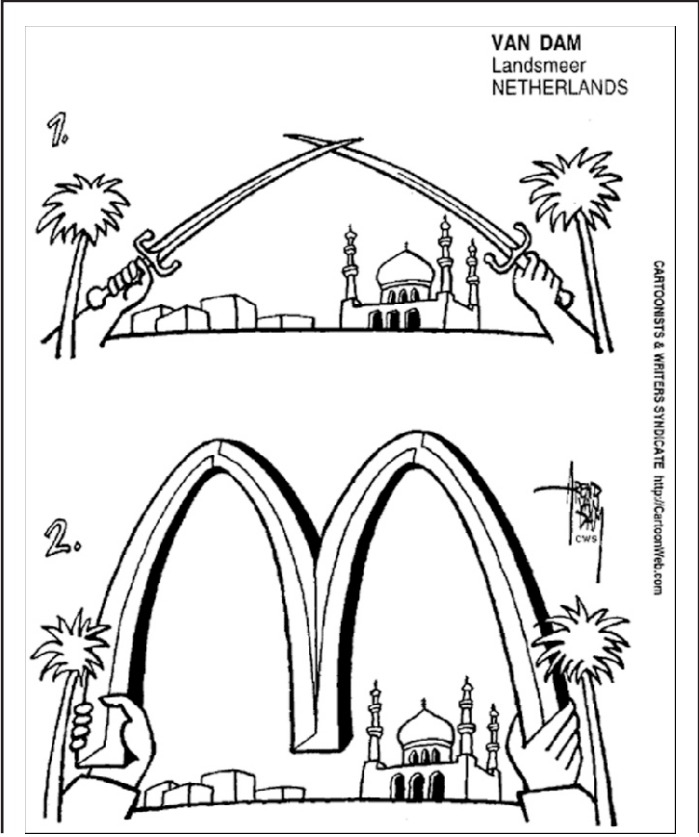
far less by the vanquished.

The Americans have used different pretexts and reasons to justify the war against Iraq. For the home constituency it has been touted as a part of the continuing war against terrorism. The outside world, excluding Iraq, was told that war was unavoidable if Iraq under Saddam was to be rid of weapons of mass destruction. As for the Iraqis, the message was in different form, the justification of the third kind: since you have been deprived of freedom and democracy so long we are going to bring them for you at your door step. After all we are the manufacturer and distributor of the brand name. Palming off the counterfeit ones is our business, too, just to pre-empt others. Destruction of national infrastructures, looting of archeological treasures, deaths and injuries to thousands of civilians are all a small price to pay for such a noble prize. Lest the historic significance is lost on Iraqis and is detracted from by critics, the war of aggression was given high-falutin and the romantic label of 'Operation Iraqi Freedom'. Never have doubts about the usefulness and seductive power of logo and slogans.

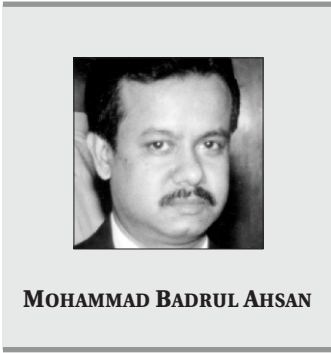
Freedom from dictatorship was the easiest part. It came by courtesy of B-52s, tomahawk missiles, cluster bombs and other awesome weapons of destruction. Don't use the term 'mass destruction' even if the scale of destruction and death is massive. It is a dirty word.

of faith as strong and inviolable as the faith in God. So, don't look askance when they are unfolding their carefully drawn design for

democratic project. Being helpless and at the receiving end, they will lap it all up. Besides, the presence of occupation army will take care of



US democracy is going backward!



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

PARDON me if it sounds wacky, but the occupation of Iraq has laid a siege on the United States. Driving on I-495 between Maryland to Virginia, you would be greeted by flashing digital boards urging you to report all suspicious activities to the Homeland Security. The security in the airports is tight, federal buildings and memorials are restricted, and the

White House is barricaded like a besieged fort. While they claim to have liberated the Iraqis, the Americans have lost their freedom.

And that loss has been more strident in the American minds. They are paranoid and xenophobic, nervous of unidentified luggage, middle-eastern males, Islamic rituals and Muslim association. They are often wary-eyed to share a flight with Muslim passengers. Bad service in a Muslim restaurant or an argument with a Pakistani cabby can become the trigger point for racial meltdown.

When a Muslim businessman in Virginia wanted to show his goods to a client, an unidentified caller tipped off the police that two suspicious-looking Muslim men had entered a warehouse. The police came and held the men, releasing them only after interrogation. Still they thought fortunate of themselves. According to the newly

constituted Homeland Security legislation, the police could detain a suspect for 72 hours without a chance to see a lawyer, friend or relative. The Miranda doesn't work for the Muslims suspected of terrorist activities.

These are but few examples that the land of freedom, which America was, has got the streaks of a police state. The *New York Post*, in its Page Six column on March 19, called in the name of Americanism that the entertainment figures who opposed the war in Iraq should be boycotted. Under the headline

suspension if they cut classes in order to participate in antiwar demonstrations.

Is the American democracy working backward? The polity, which once boasted the First Amendment, the Freedom of Speech and the Freedom of Expression, is now characterised with illegal detentions, denials of the due process, invasions of privacy, intolerance, suspicion, and hatred. Aren't these the stuff of totalitarianism? Aren't these the roadblocks to freedom to remove which the Americans have gone to Iraq?

Saddam, who used this as an opportunity to consolidate his power. All dictators start that way; they come as keepers and then turn into usurpers. Dictatorship is when rulers refuse to renew their power with popular mandate. Dynasty is when that refusal runs in the family as power passes from member to member within the same family.

If Saddam was allowed to retire from power and pass his mantle to his son Qusay, how would that compare to the election of George Walker Bush as the 43rd President of USA? Qusay was groomed in his

same family is like reviving a disrupted dynasty. It's like Qusay becoming the President of Iraq after eight years, when the coalition forces have left Iraq and the country has reverted to the Saddam frenzy. George Bush's political career started as the Governor of Texas, largely facilitated by his father's popularity and influence. His presidency marks something even more interesting. He is the ventriloquist's dummy for his father's friends.

Hence, the leader of the free world is someone, who never

can afford amongst its citizens." Never mind if it sounds grouchy, the war in Iraq has brought that worry to the American soil where the evil weed of ignorance has been cultivated amongst its citizens.

The well-meaning Americans are yet to realise that their intelligence has been harassed. First they were told that a war was necessary because of terrorism, then because Iraq had a nuclear programme. Then they were told that the war was necessary because Iraq has poison gas and that a regime change would save the world. Now it is the importance of bringing democracy to the Middle East, which stands out as the lone justification for the war in Iraq.

Thus the American people have been taken for a ride, which makes them comparable to the Iraqis when they were under a dictator. And now there has been a role reversal between Tikrit and Texas. From his hideout Saddam is asking his people to fight for freedom. He sounds like a champion. Bush is busy concocting means to suppress the truth from his people. He sounds like a chameleon.

Yet a recent poll showed that an overwhelming majority of Americans were convinced that the removal of Saddam was a sufficient reason for the war in Iraq. According to them if weapons of mass destruction were found at all, it would help explain the American position to other countries. Democracy has surely taken a giant leap backward in the United States. If they want to bring it to Iraq, it is coming at a cost to their own. Pardon me, if again I have shared with you yet another of my silly thoughts.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

The American people have been taken for a ride, which makes them comparable to the Iraqis when they were under a dictator. And now there has been a role reversal between Tikrit and Texas. From his hideout Saddam is asking his people to fight for freedom. He sounds like a champion. Bush is busy concocting means to suppress the truth from his people. He sounds like a chameleon.

"DON'T AID THESE SADDAM LOVERS," it listed the "appeasement-loving celebs", including Tim Robbins, Sean Penn, Laurence Fishburne, Samuel L. Jackson, Susan Sarandon and Danny Glover. The *Post* column went as far as asking for a boycott of their movies.

Roughly two weeks before that there was an incident at the Crossgates Mall in Guilderland, New York. A 61-year-old lawyer and his son put on T-shirts that read PEACE ON EARTH and GIVE PEACE A CHANCE. When the security guards of the mall ordered them either to remove the shirts or leave, the lawyer refused and was charged with trespassing. At high schools across the U.S., some students were threatened with

There is the irony of a contagious disease about the whole thing. The doctor who came to cure the patient himself became afflicted. Perhaps there is an aspect of recoil to it, the spring back of the weapon in the impact of discharging the ammunition. Perhaps precious something has been jolted in that recoil, which has dislodged the fine balance of the American democracy. The people have been inveigled to the ruinous course of war by the "Neo-Conservative" oligarchy.

May be that was how Saddam Hussein had convinced his people that an attack of Kuwait was the right thing to do. May be that was how he rose to power at the end of a bloody chapter in the Iraqi history. The Iraqi people believed in

father's shadow, the apple, which hadn't fallen far from the tree. He was preferred over his elder brother Uday, who lacked the composure and character to rule the country. It shows that some thinking had gone into it before Qusay would be selected his father's protegee.

What about George Bush? Until 1994, he was the 48-year old son of a President, whose life was devoid of accomplishments. His SAT score was ordinary: 566 verbal and 649 math. Later bloodlines and connections had put him into Andover, Yale and Harvard Business School, and even finally provided him with a fortune after years of business disappointments.

George Bush's election as the second President of USA within the

stepped out of his country before the election, except going to China where his father was an ambassador. Hence, the President of the highest democracy in the world is someone who didn't win majority of the popular votes. Hence, the Commander-in-Chief of the most sophisticated army has behaved like Caligula who declared war against another country and deployed his army in the swamp. Hence, the ruler of the most modern nation has acted like an unscrupulous salesman in the bait and switch of giving false excuses to push his own agenda.

British economist William Henry Beveridge wrote, "Ignorance is an evil weed, which dictators may cultivate among their dupes, but which no democracy

Woes of pensioners

AMIR ALI

THE remarkable pay revision of 1985 with cumulative time scale and other related benefits had improved the financial position of the public servants. This position was further reinforced by the next pay revisions of the BNP and the Awami League governments. But the three pay revisions offered only a pittance of 10 per cent increments to the basic pension. Eventually this discriminatory measures created a wide ranging disparity between the pensioners who had retired prior to 1985 and the pensioners who retired after getting all the benefits of these three liberal pay revisions. A single instance will clearly mani-

fest the gross disparity between the pensioners retiring in three different dates as a consequence of which a first grade officer e.g. a Dy Magistrate and a Munsiff who had retired prior to 1985 have been getting much less pension and gratuity than a 4th grade employee who retired after 1985. Many of these unfortunate pensioners have been undergoing enormous hardship and privations for over two decades without "sound and fury". As all these literally famished and withered pensioners are meek and docile they have scrupulously shunned the path of agitation unlike other vocal associations of discontented public servants as these are quite alien to their thought and practice.

It may be noted here that similar pay revision in India and Pakistan had created such disparity but this anomalies have been removed long since by readjusting the old scale with the new pay scale changing the old scale to bring it at par with the new scale to meet the ends of justice and fairplay. Here also this glaring disparity ought to have been done away with long ago for the dispensation of justice and equity. Numerous representations and appeals to this effect have appeared over the years in our national newspapers for its speedy removal in view of the strictly legal nature of the claims but it miserably failed to evoke the conscience of the successive governments. Though late than never the

National Pay Commission of the Awami League government for the first time adopted a judicious and pragmatic step fully realising the legality of the pensioners' long deferred claims and the awful miseries the lowly pensioners are subjected to. With a view to alleviating the prolonged affliction the commission made two reasonable proposals: (1) one for the 50 per cent increment of the net pensions and (2) the other for the fixation of the pay of the pensioners at the initial of the corresponding presumptive pay of the new scale, 50 per cent of which will be earmarked for the calculation of the gratuity and the remaining 50 per cent pay for calculation of the net pension. Now the pensioners who had

retired after getting the benefits of the three liberal pay revisions are financially better off, the apportionment of the 50 per cent increment of the net pension would do them necessary justice and the apportionment of the benefit of the corresponding presumptive pay of the new scale to those pensioners who had retired prior to 1985 and far beyond that year without getting similar benefits save and except 10 per cent benefit and have been suffering for more than two decades, can reasonably claim benefit.

As dire ill luck would have it, it is reported that although the implementation committee of secretaries made no alteration in the recommendation for the public ser-

vants but curiously enough the committee ruthlessly turned down the recommendations in its entirety quite in arbitrary manner adversely effecting the fate of the lowly pensioners at the fag end of their life. "This was the most unkindest cut of all" meted out to the erstwhile responsible public servants that were once the integral part of the administrative machinery toiling day in and day out very diligently in a relatively peaceful manner unlike some of our own progeny in the current administration clamouring with undue haste for accelerated lift.

No elected government anywhere in this sub-continent acted so harshly with the ill-fated pensioners flouting their lawful

demands without the semblance of any valid reasons. This unjust action will ever remain as a classic example of bureaucratic unaccountability and utter lack of human kindness and fellow feeling. The intelligent section of the society pause to think as to how a popular government committed to the democratic principles of accountability and transparency can absolve itself of its obligation of dispensing equitable justice evenly both to the in-service and out-of-service public servants and even does not desist from creating glaring disparity between earlier and latter pensioners as has been made by the two discriminatory provisions of otherwise a liberal pay revision.

Though frustrated beyond limit by the unprecedented harsh treatment of the committee of the secretaries, the stunned pensioners will not rush with undue haste to the court for seeking the much needed justice not because it is too costly for them and very much time consuming but as a last resort they will prefer an appeal to the ministry of finance and the Hon'ble Prime Minister for kindly adopting afresh the appropriate action to put an end to their continuing sufferings as such steps are off and on taken to meet the end of justice and equity and thereby rightly earn their heart-felt deep gratitude.

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