LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA WEDNESDAY JANUARY 18, 2006

## A master stroke or a fell stroke?

*A litmus test for EC credibility* 

HE induction of two new commissioners in the Election Commission ostensibly for the purpose of breaking the impasse in the EC over voter list preparation may have deepened the existing controversy on the issue rather than resolving it.

The constitution allowing for 'more than one commissioner' in the EC without stipulating any specific number, nothing would seem wrong in principle to be adding two more commissioners to the present strength, making it four in all. Were the revamping of the commission done before the controversy raged over the preparation of voter list on the plea that the conduct of national election is being a daunting task with the passage of time, no eyebrows would have been raised by it.

But that is not the issue here; what is of intense concern in the present case is the circumstances and background against which the new appointments have been made and these do render the intent and motivation behind the changes made at the top of the commission suspect in the public eye.

Leaving the nation in suspense and great confusion since the January 4 HC directive requiring the EC to revise the existing electoral role instead of having a new one and to hold the long pending meeting with his colleagues to decide a course of action accordingly, the CEC bided for time to see the new appointments made ensuring his majority in the decision-making process. With that accomplished, he is now making a move for a full meeting of the commission.

Two pertinent questions arise from the rather nontransparent handling by the CEC: first, why couldn't a meeting be held by him with the two commissioners in more than a couple of months to try and thrash out the differences so as to present a consensual image of the EC thereby retaining public trust in the statutory body? Secondly, we now hear about preferring an appeal to the HC directives. Why wasn't the move contemplated to run the full legal course before resorting to the appointments? After all that has happened, there is likely to be an impression that the EC and the HC are in some kind of a conflict.

We have had enough of it. Let's draw a curtain now on all sorts of controversy about the working of the EC lest it cast a deep shadow on the credibility of the conduct of the next

### Nepal's continuing woes

*National reconciliation key to democracy* 

T is a sorry sight to see that the once peaceful Himalayan kingdom is in a state of political imbroglio. The recent killings demonstrate how far Nepal is from reaching any consensus on a peaceful reversion to democratic ways.

The situation in Nepal is considerably more complicated than appears at first sight. The triangular relationship among the monarch, the opposition and the Maoists tends to exert opposing pulls that only a sagacious pragmatic approach led by the monarch can help redress. Having taken the political parties out of the equation by dismissing the government, the King has been left to his own devices to combat the Maoists who have been fighting the establishment in Kathmandu for the last ten years to establish socialist rule by turning Nepal into a communist republic.

The renewed threats of violence by the communists in view of the proposed municipal elections have all the makings of a prolonged conflict, the latter being considered by the opposition and the Maoists as the King's ploy to legitimise his

There is no alternative to reconciliation among the three if further bloodshed is to be avoided. Although the King has formulated his own 'road map to peace', what's perhaps of equal importance is formulating a 'road map to democracy'. And this is the crux of the problem in that the monarchy's role in the whole episode is viewed as an impediment rather than a facilitator in the process of overcoming the present imbroglio.

The King cannot have overlooked the fact that the opposition political parties and the Maoists have come together to combat the monarchy from their own position without one coming in the way of the other. And although the opposition demonstrates a hardened attitude towards the monarchy, the 12-point common agenda made public in November 2005 indicates a shift in the policies of the major opposition groups towards the monarchy.

As a close neighbour of Nepal we would hope that there is a transition to democracy in Nepal, sooner rather than later, without any violence.

ASIAN HIGHWAY NETWORK

## Is bigger geo-economic picture being ignored?



HARUN UR RASHID

RANSPORTATION is considered, both nationally and regionally, as a link in the supply chains between the centres of production, distribution and consumption to reduce the transit time and cost. Transport infrastructure brings, invariably, economic opportunity and improved quality of life. The improved transport facilities have direct impact on faster mobility of labour, materials, and goods,

thereby reducing transaction costs. Gone is the era of considering transport networking system purely as a national issue. The South Asian countries face a challenge of physically integrating their transport infrastructure principally for economic reasons

In an age of increased regional cooperation, Asian Highway roadmap between Bangladesh and northeastern Indian states can be easily converted into an advantage for trade and investment.

### **Bangladesh's position**

It has been reported that Bangladesh government decided not to sign the Asian Highway Agreement because the entry and exit of the Highway would be in India from Bangladesh. The government wants it enters from Myanmar to Bangladesh and exits

Admittedly it is an ideal situation for Bangladesh if the road map connects both India and Myanmar.

But the question is, can it be done? In other words, will Myanmar agree to its use as transnational route?

Informed sources believe that the route from Myanmar to Bangladesh was consistently objected to by Myanmar from late 70s during ESCAP meetings. The objection is believed to be for reasons of national security. It continues to

Rakhine (Arakan) province has been troublesome for Yangon (Rangoon) for some years. It is reported that 40 percent of its popu-

This road is to connect Gundum in Bangladesh and Bawli Bazar in Myanmar. It is reportedly to be used for transportation between Bangladesh and Myanmar. It is doubtful whether Thailand or any other third country will be permitted to use it, even if and when they

### Transit rights

The proposed Asian Highway route provides transit rights to India

bours. This geographical reality cannot be changed. Bangladesh is roughly 4.380 percent of the size of India's territory. India is a regional power and Bangladesh has to live with it. Many small-sized countries live with bigger neighbours, for example, Switzerland with France

and Austria with Germany. The challenge for Bangladesh is how to develop a range and pattern of economic relations with India that will help Bangladesh to achieve a high rate of economic growth.

Because of the economic size and

from Japan to Russia. Some of them

(i)Emergence of China and India as major industrial powers within a few decades. (China has replaced Italy as the sixth largest economy in the world with total GDP of more than US\$1.97 trillion dollars).

(ii)Both China and India are emerging as strategic partners, not as strategic competitors, in quest for energy import and in other eco-

(iii)Both China and India have locked their economy with that of

(iv)ASEAN wants to get access to

Given the above scenario,

huge market of both China and India.

Bangladesh needs to integrate its economy with India, ASEAN and

China. It would not be prudent to

wall itself off from the rest of Asia

and the Asian Highway network

offers an excellent opportunity to be

Furthermore, Bangladesh's well-

known "Look East" foreign policy

will find its relevance in joining the

Highway with other Asian countries

in the loop with the rest of Asia.

Under SAFTA (South Asia Free Trade Agreement), the member countries will gradually cut down tariffs to 5 percent (India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka by 2013 and LDCs, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal by 2016).

SAARC member-countries at the

002 Kathmandu Summit.

The December 21-27 meeting of Trade Negotiating Committee of BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand and Sri Lanka set July 1, 2006 to implement FTA (Free Trade Agreement) on trade goods in the region. The Committee also decided to prepare a draft of investment promotion and protection agreement and exchange lists of service sectors.

SAFTA and BIMSTEC will facilitate trade flow among SAARC and ASEAN countries only when a forward looking approach is undertaken towards integrating the transport network in the region. In this context the Asian Highway assumes its significance in boosting economic development of the

#### Conclusion

Bangladesh stands between India and ASEAN. China is only 100 kilometres north across the Himalayas from Bangladesh's borders. For reasons of its strategic position and for the bigger geo-economic scenario emerging in Asia, it is argued that Bangladesh government may seriously reconsider its position in respect of signing the Asian Highway network for long-term interest. The public have the right to know from the government how refusal to sign the Asian Highway agreement serves the national interest. Let there be a public debate on this important issue, if it does not take place in the Parliament

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

through Bangladesh because both the entry and exit are with India BOTTOM LINE

Bangladesh stands between India and ASEAN. China is only 100 kilometres north across the Himalayas from Bangladesh's borders. For reasons of its strategic position and for the bigger geo-economic scenario emerging in Asia, it is argued that Bangladesh government may seriously reconsider its position in respect of signing the Asian Highway network for long-term interest.

lation is Muslim, known as Rohingya, derived from "Rohang", ancient name of the Rakhine prov

All is not well in that province because thousands of Rohingyas have occasionally fled from Myanmar and taken refuge in Bangladesh, first in 1978 and then in 1991 and in 1997.

It is reported that Myanmar does not agree on transnational route through Arakan province to Bangladesh and has been comfortable to re-route the Highway through India's northeastern states.

It seems the construction of the 130-kilometre "Bangladesh and Myanmar Friendship" road has been stalled, although Bangladesh committed to construct with Bangladesh's funds 43 kilometre road in the first phase, out of which 23-kilometre would be in Bangladesh and 20-kilometre including a 100-feet long bridge in from Bangladesh. Bangladesh government is naturally concerned about it without reciprocal transit rights from India

It seems that this is a misplaced concern in view of the fact that at the Dhaka SAARC Summit, India's Prime Minister made it clear that India was agreeable to provide transit rights to SAARC countries.

He proposed: "Let us agree, at this Summit, that all South Asian countries would provide to each other, reciprocally, transit facilities to third countries, not connecting one another but also connecting to the larger Asian neighbourhood, in Gulf, Central Asia and South East Asia".

Obviously the Prime Minister had in his mind not only transit rights within South Asia but also the road connecting 23 countries through proposed Asian Highway

**Geo-political reality** Bangladesh and India are neigh-

gains from economic cooperation will not always be equal between the two countries. Bangladesh may gain more than India in some sectors and India may gain more than Bangladesh in other sectors. It is acknowledged that gains may not evenly be distributed in Bangladesh and India.

strength of India, the distribution of

The bottom line is whether Bangladesh has gains or not. Bangladesh may not compare its gains with that for India on each sector. To evaluate differential gains for each country is a challenge for Bangladesh policy makers. It is a delicate balancing act and does not correspond to a neat mathematical

#### Bigger geo-economic picture

There is a bigger geo-economic picture involved in assessing the significance of the Asian Highway

as it will certainly boost trade and economic growth in the country. Impact of SAFTA and BIMSTEC

SAFTA came into effect notionally from 1st January of this year Reportedly it will come into force from 1st July, 2006. SAFTA is a mile stone towards South Asia Economic Union as per commitments of

nature; they may again sing flashy

songs of strategic depth. There are far too many political pitfalls. Islamabad should correctly assess

It is not necessary to detail the

past experiences of Afghanistan to a

Pakistani audience. This past

includes an element that does need

detailing. Who can ignore the possi-

bility of Pakistani unthinking think-

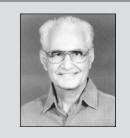
ers who may think that Afghanistan

is Pakistan's opportunity: the

Afghanistan. Kabul was then sup-

the likely cost of this venture.

# Pakistan's new role in Afghanistan?



M B Naqvi

RDINARY Pakistanis first heard it from the German Defence Minister last month that Pakistan was scheduled to play a much bigger role in Afghanistan from April next. There were other news items saying that Pakistan would assume the command of the Coalition Maritime Naval Force (sic) in the Arabian Sea on April 1st. This command comprises eight naval contingents from US, UK, Germany, Pakistan besides others.

The CMNF countries are also occupying Iraq and largely underpin the western occupation of Afghanistan. India does not appear to be a part of CMNF, although Indo-American naval cooperation is something to write home about. May be the Americans cannot yoke both India and Pakistan to the same political chariot. So they had to draw concentric circles: one naval group is to monitor and, if necessary, interdict on high seas undesirable nuclear materials being carried in merchant ships that are not under the control of IAEA or of the five recognised nuclear powers. Pakistan is of course out of that. But it is needed in CMNF because of its long and intimate acquaintance of

Afghanistan is an unattractive piece of real estate today because it is so undeveloped. But it can be of considerable importance for those who seem to control key raw material in Asia. There are rumours -- no more than that -- that there may be hydrocarbons among other minerals in the largely unexplored Afghan territories. Its current geo-strategic importance lies in its location in the soft underbelly of Central Asia where the action is expected in the coming decades.

have not found it an attractive or easy job. They have wheedled NATO to join this sorry business. NATO, for existential reasons, could not refuse. NATO, as distinct from EU, is an American baby, largely kept in existence on American insistence. But it too does not relish policing this God forsaken country. NATO per se has no geo-strategic interest in managing Afghanistan. Although, it may have agreed to relieve American soldiers the drudgery, it does not have its heart in the job. It seems that the US and mafia is a factor to reckon with.

sorry that a Kalashnikov and heroin culture was all they were left with. That a few generals made themselves extremely rich is per se not of cosmic importance; but the 1980s experiences corrupted the Pakistan politics no end. Narcotics, however, were the beginning and not the end of trouble in that there are a million or less heroin addicts in the country. What is of crucial importance is the dirty money, earned by narcotics exports, distorts and deforms Pakistan's public life; the narcotics

nation or discussion, the government seems to have assured the Americans and the NATO that Pakistan's soldiery would be there to do the dirty job that NATO troops

Pakistan government's decision to assume a bigger role in Afghanistan's security by contributing more troops cannot be riskless. The decision comes as a surprise to the people. Granted, Pakistan is not a functioning democracy; major decisions here are taken by faceless

Americans would eventually leave Afghanistan to Pakistan after the present Crisis there is overcome just as in 1990s when Pakistani generals exercised much influence in

> posedly beholden to it. All that disappeared in few weeks, though not without leaving a legacy of hatred for Pakistanis among many Afghans. Would not that hatred grow when the Afghans perceive their occupiers to be mainly Pakistanis? Who can forget that Pakistani generals had built castles in the air in the past on the basis of their America-bestowed position in Afghanistan? There may still be some of their juniors in the Islamabad establishment. They

ness piggy back on American tolerance and aid. When and if Pakistani soldiers assume the charge of policing Afghanistan from the NATO troops and Americans that would be the day when the accumulated dislike of Pakistan in Afghan hearts would begin to tell -- possibly on Pakistan's basic interests. Other than pleasing the US for the time being, Pakistan can expect nothing rewarding from its Afghanistan venture. It has no business securing Afghanistan for others.

may again dream dreams of great-

When and if Pakistani soldiers assume the charge of policing Afghanistan from the NATO troops and Americans that would be the day when the accumulated dislike of Pakistan in Afghan hearts would begin to tell -- possibly on Pakistan's basic interests. Other than pleasing the US for the time being, Pakistan can expect nothing rewarding from its Afghanistan venture. It has no business securing Afghanistan for others.

This may be one reason why the Americans started their War on Terror from Afghanistan. Factually Americans are safely ensconced militarily not merely in Middle East and Persian Gulf but also in Afghanistan. Their position in nearby South Asia is also strong with four bases in Pakistan and extraordinarily friendly ties with India. Other neighbours of India too are friendly. US is thus well positioned for the altered Great Game in Central Asia where emerging China casting long shadows. Before becoming the main controlling force over most of Central Asia, it has to somehow counter the emerging Sino-Russian challenge. Which makes wobbly Afghanistan a part of

Afghanistan is a difficult place to hold and manage. The Americans

NATO have found Pakistan a likely yeoman to do the job. It has multifaceted acquaintance of Afghanistan and is available for a

But Pakistanis' memories are not so short. Time was when Pakistan was extensively used in Afghanistan by the Americans rather cynically: they paid cash on the barrel for services received and, once the job was done, they washed their hands off Afghanistan. That was of immense delight to Pakistan's generals. The latter thought that hey can now call all the shots in Kabul. The Americans had known that they were pouring aid into rather porous vessels. What Pakistan got out of it, however, is for Pakistanis to ponder over.

The Pakistanis are immensely

This is not an irrelevant historical detail. It has a bearing on policymaking today. It is true that Americans have been helpful and have given Pakistan so much in aid during the last four years. No doubt, it was for services being rendered. A certain amount of gratitude is certainly due. But that does not necessarily mean that Pakistan must do as the donor demands without a question. True, expectations of more aid in future forces a compromise on Islamabad. But future aid will depend on the US assessment of the need for Pakistan's cooperation and not in return for continued subservience.

What is also true is that rulers of Pakistan simply cannot conceive of life without the assurance of American aid and support. Which is the reason that without any explanot agree with this decision being the political price of the aid for which Pakistan has already incurred many financial debts. Indeed, grants are politically

bureaucrats or GHQ. Pakistanis will

more expensive than simple loans that require only interests and repayments. Grants are made in expectation of earning the right to utilise donee's services for jobs the Americans may find unappetising for themselves. Doubtless, since Islamabad has received extraordinary aid and also because Pakistan's rulers cannot opt for a future without American aid, there is little to do but to accept the unavoidability of Pakistan Army again becoming involved in Afghanistan affairs. It can be a long-term engagement. Pakistani Generals may again begin weaving theories of geo-strategic

MB Naqvi is a leading columist in Pakistan.

## **OPINION**

# Repeated bomb blasts and persistent shielding of alleged masterminds

A R SHAMSUL ISLAM

EOPLE'S outcry against militancy has got all surging. The perpetrators have openly declared their identity. There is enough evidence from the confessions of the rounded up terrorists that the recent bomb blasts in Bangladesh are linked to the Jamaate-Islami, a coalition partner of the

government.  $The\,demand\,from\,the\,people\,rose$ high that the government should remove the two Jamaat members from council of ministers as a step to combat religious militancy. Not to speak of the opposition political parties, even voices from some men of the main ruling party BNP went loud and clear asking it to push out the Jamaat from the coalition government to save the BNP from being

alienated from popular support. Even the Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia reaffirmed now and then that the terrorists, irrespective of their political identities, would not be spared. Analysis began to be worked out, even from own partymen, that an alliance with the Jamaat was not politically cost effective. Noticeably, the party chief and the Prime Minister appeared not to

be snubbing at them. But in much publicised grand rally

of the BNP in Dhaka the party chief and the Prime Minister practically disappointed the nation including a section of her own party by delivering that sort of stereotyped speech accusing the main opposition of trying to subvert the wave of development the government has ushered in by releasg anarchy, terrorism in the society aided by a foreign power. The contents were similar to what the Jamaate-Islami chief and the Industries Minister Motiur Rahman Nizami said a few weeks back charging the main opposition of bomb blasts aimed at destabilising the society and tarnishing the image of the country abroad. e spotted out the Indian and Israeli intelligence agencies to be engineeringthe bomb holocaust. In the same grand rally the Prime

Minister openly administered a threat to the Leader of the Opposition to level sedition charges against her if she continued what the Prime Minister branded as state derogatory speeches and activities. As usual, the Leader of the Opposition was equally quick to retaliate alleging that the very speech of the Prime Minister tantamounted to committing acts of sedition. The mutual blame game was in full play.

Obviously, the Prime Minister's speech in the grand rally was highly relieving to the bomb blasters and

most disconcerting to the nation who hoped that she would declare a hard stance of the government against the masterminds of countrywide bomb blasts and acts of terrorism in the name of Islam, a religion avowedly of peace and tolerance. While practically it seems clear to

everybody who are responsible for blast incidents as they themselves openly declared their identities and ntentions with wide range of leaflets, booklets and confessional statements of the arrested religious extremists, it is worrying that the BNP chief and the Prime Minister is making statements absolutely reverse to the finding of the Police, RAB and belief of the greater masses of the people. It is evident that the banned

olitical party Jamaat-e-Mujahideen (JMB) is at the back of this nefarious esign. It has also come out that many of the hounded criminals of the bomb blasts are activists of the Shibir, a youth front of the Jamaat-e-Islami, and the main core Jamaat-e-Islami. That Jamaat is linked to the bomb terrorists seems out of question now. The way the topmost leadership of the BNP tries to conceal the identities of the religious militants indulging in bomb blasting including the employment of suicide squads raises many an eye brow on the fairness of the government led by the BNP to apprehend the masterminds of the bomb disasters

Many allege that the government has endowed grace to the grenade hurlers. But they are, in all probabilities, not in a mood to care the government. The political, social, economic conditions of the country do never warrant any adventurism like that and the government is bound to be

disturbed by it. Now two questions agitate our mind: (a) Why should the apparently government friendly agencies launch blasts repeatedly to the aggravated concerns of the government? and (b) Why the government persistently protect those alleged to have masterminded this carnage? Let me throw some light on these issues.

Why repeated bomb blasts?

The Islamist militants are members of International Muslim extremists organisations like al-Qaeda, Jamaatul-Mujahideen etc. These outfits have worldwide agenda of establishing 'sharia' rule in Muslim majority countries. They built up their principal citadel in Afghanistan what was demolished by the US aided by some other powers in pursuance of the US led so-called 'War on Terror'. Being

dislodged from Afghanistan the

Taliban warriors began to spread out

in other countries frantically search-

ing for a suitable abode of their own.

Bangladesh perhaps offered a safe haven for them. Its vast Muslim population, their religious conviction, grinding poverty, poor literacy, unscrupulous, corrupt political leaders, conspiratorial role of foreign intelligence agencies, availability of local agents etc. offered spaces for the international religious extremists to thrive on.

The Jamaat-e-Islami was banned by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman for its seditious role during the Liberation War of '71. President Ziaur Rahman withdrew the ban and approved its reappearance. He further cut secularism from the constitution. Military dictator President HM Ershad went a step further by incorporating Islam as state religion.

The shrewd Iamaat leadership joined the popular upsurge of '90 with the chief political parties -- the BNP and AL -- to gain practical political legitimacy.

In the council of ministers formed in 2001 the Jamaat occupied two important berths to display their higher ascendancy. They have infiltrated deep into the administration practically monopolising some vital ministries. They are now confident enough that they are not much below being at par with the BNP at least in the eye of the topmost leadership no matter how much the

BNP leaders of other ranks bark out against them.

In the past, the Jamaat had dependence both internal and external. Internally they sought the favour of the BNP and externally they collected money believably from Pakistan and Middle East countries to carry forward their mission. By now they have gathered enough administrative support and financial avenues like bank, pharmaceuticals, hospitals, transports, NGOs etc. to

stand on their own feet. The government will obviously desire that the Jamaat leadership will exert influence to reduce the number and intensity of bomb operations to pacify the public opinion. But the Jamaat leadership possibly has its own algebra as to when to exercise blast and when to part with it basing on the effectiveness of the 'pressure tactics' being sure that the BNP leadership cannot muster courage to

go against the Iamaat. The international Muslim militants have a strategy of their own to attain goal. First they take a foothold in a country, then develop gradually level by level capturing resources and power bases to finally seize state power.

Their work force is mainly collected from youths, mostly under poverty line, who are doctored to cherish a dream of becoming either

'ghazi' (conqueror) or 'shaheed' winning heaven). Military training being complete and arsenals in hand they cannot wait for long to go for attaining their goal. The recent bomb attacks may be practical test cases of the perpetrators to measure up their potency for going for final round of capturing state power.

## Why shielding of alleged masterminds?

To the greatest misfortune of the nation, the two main political parties of Bangladesh are blatantly engrossed in mutual recriminations, reprisals and finally, if anyway possible, exterminations. The AL alleges that the BNP, since coming to power in 2001, has wholesale vandalised, brutalised, killed the Awami men, property and organisations. Reportedly, when the AL was in power (1996-2001), the BNP accused the then government of having massacred BNP men and property. The BNP is now obsessed with a fear of vengeance from the AL if it is voted to power in the coming national polls of 2006. So BNP's first and foremost concern is to resist the

In vote garnering strategy the BNP's top leadership is scared not to anyway soften its relations with the Jamaat. So it always shields the Jamaat leaders alleged to be among the masterminds of bomb opera-

ALbyhook or by crook.

The BNP leadership seems some how dazed by the massive build-ups of the Jamaat in militant cadres, gigantic caches of arms and ammu-

close nexus with international Muslim militant organisations abroad, on the other. In the wake of national election the BNP chief avoids raising subtle political issues with the Jamaat in fear of muddling political atmosphere. The BNP perhaps depends a lot on Middle East in financial and other helps. The BNP top brass does

not want to make it diminished, if not

lost, by creating any fuss with the

nitions on one hand and its assumed

Besides, the BNP and Jamaat have deological and behavioural affinities. The Jamaat is a cadre-based fascist party. The BNP is also engrossed in elected dictatorship. It is remembered that some four month back the famaat chief and Industries Minister Motiur Rahman Nizami in a ward meeting in Dhaka, said that the BNP and Jamaat are two brothers born of the same mother. What a penetrating

AR Shamsul Islam is retired Principal, Govt Mohila

conclusion it was!