

Get the dialogue started

Onus more on government

THE recent overture by the government to engage the opposition in the formation of a committee to hold a dialogue on opposition's caretaker government and electoral reform proposals has got ensnared in a political diatribe. The flicker of hope that the nation saw in the government's offer for talks seems to be disappearing, which we find very disconcerting. The tactics of dilly-dallying betray a certain degree of insincerity on the part of the ruling party in taking the process forward towards a meaningful beginning.

Much that we find the ruling party's half-hearted approach to the issue of national importance unacceptable, so also we hold that the opposition's demand that the ruling party agree in principle to their reform proposals amounts to laying a precondition to getting a dialogue started and moving. Besides, it is needless to mention that the Awami League as a seasoned political party would know it better than anybody else that a flexible and open-ended approach to a dialogue has better chances of yielding results.

At this point in time, we strongly feel that the imperative for the ruling party is to agree to the need for reforms and make its moves accordingly. That reforms are required has to be said by the incumbent in clear terms keeping no room for ambiguity. That is perhaps the principle that should be agreed upon by all sides, especially by the government as the initiator. As regards the specifics of the reform proposals, it is a common feeling that these should be left to the committee to thrash out on the table.

It appears in the light of the development of the last few days centring on the reform issue that the seriousness with which the government should have pursued the matter is absent and that people might not be off the mark in reading signs of evasion about the approach of the government.

We still however believe that an opportunity for constructive engagement between the government and the opposition is before them to iron out their differences on the reform agenda and proceed towards holding free and fair elections. For this to materialise the first order of business should be not to let the prime objective of carrying out the reforms bog down in time-wasting rituals.

Acheery win

Keep it up

OUR cricketers have made us happy by their resounding victory over the Kenyans in the first one dayer of the four-match series. But we want their confidence boosted. And why not? They have won at least one match each against all the world class teams, except the West Indies, and their one-sided drubbing of the Kenyans has made it clear that those wins were not flukes anyway.

The team, hopefully, is coming of age. The top order of the batting clicked just at a time when its brittleness was looking like a chronic affair. Opener Shahriar Nafees played a brilliant knock and must consider him-self unlucky to have missed what would have been a very well deserved hundred. And Aftab Ahmed -- who has made it into a habit of playing some swashbuckling cricket when necessary -- was at his devastating best, as he tore apart the opposition bowling. Runs came thick and fast from Rafique and finally Mashrafe Mortuza brilliantly took the team total past the 300 mark for the first time in our history. It was a tremendous team effort.

The bowlers displayed professionalism and commitment, so crucial for success at that level of cricket. They have performed well against the top sides in recent times. And the Kenyans never looked like having a real chance of reaching the target.

But the lesson to be learned from this victory is that our top and middle order batsmen must not throw away their wickets. Of course, who we are playing against is an important factor but what's obviously the big moral to draw from the previous series we have had with powerful teams is that we learn to be consistent in our performance with big match temperament and a mind to fight and win.

We congratulate the team on its success.

President Bush in India

The Bush visit has followed the advice that India be treated as a central player in the US led war on terror and radical Islamic forces in South Asia. The very fact that the situation in Burma and Nepal was mentioned in the press conference addressed by President Bush and Prime Minister Singh testifies to the possibility of wide ranging discussions on neighbouring countries and other issues of international concern at the summit meeting. The Bush visit was effectively India's coronation as a global power and perhaps as the regional hegemon in South Asia.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THE most recent visit to India by President George W Bush signalled above all that India's preferred destination has changed from Moscow to Washington. This gradual transformation in the Indo-US relations have been occasioned by, in the words of Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Sharan, "the end of the Cold War and consequent rearrangement of interstate ties." He finds the defining moment of this transformed relationship in the visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Washington in July last year when the two countries agreed to move beyond the bilateral framework towards a global partnership based on common values and common interests.

Addressing the Asia Society a few days before his visit, President Bush detailed his expectations for the forthcoming visit. US and India, he said, face the threat of terrorism (more commonly known as "threat of Islamic extremism") and he hoped to make India a "more effective partner in the global war on terror."

Unlike the US, terrorism faced by India is polycentric, ranging from Kashmiri militants to Maoists to Naga separatists to hosts of others trying to destabilize the country. The most virulent of them all being the Islamic extremists, both the US and India have found common ground to face this dreadful enemy. Indian experience in Kashmir and American experience in Iraq with terrorism, one from across the border and the other homegrown, convinced both that the practice of democracy was crucial to fight this menace. President Bush was exultant to inform his audience at the Asia Society of the Indo-US launching of Global Democracy

Initiative and of their leadership role in advancing the United Nations Democracy Fund.

India has been the largest practicing democracy in the world for over five decades. But the constraints of Cold War dynamics and India's espousal of the non-aligned movement prevented growth of Indo-US relations. But then the end of the Cold War and India's emergence as the fourth largest economy in the world (as measured by purchasing power parity) with a GDP amounting to \$3.36 trillion, among others, contributed to reassessment of the US policy towards India. India, says President Bush, is now one of the fastest growing markets for American products. India's middle class, estimated at 300 million, is greater than the entire population of the US, and India's growth is creating opportunities for American business, notwithstanding loss of American jobs due to outsourcing.

It is no secret that the Bush administration had already decided to help India become a major world power in the 21st century. This considered decision, according to Ashley Tellis (Carnegie Foundation for International Peace), was the product of the strategic vision of Condoleezza Rice that a strong and independent India represents a strategic asset, there being no intrinsic conflict between the US and India, and that this policy would not be affected by Pakistan's ire but dictated by the intrinsic importance of India and Pakistan to the US interests.

In May last year, the Financial Times published a Pentagon Report advising the Bush administration to take more seriously the possibility of China's emergence as a strategic rival to the US. Under the National Defense Authorization Act

2000, the Pentagon has to submit an annual report on the current and probable future course of the Chinese army and Chinese security and military strategy.

According to the Pentagon report, India, Russia and China are key determinants of international security environment in the 21st century. Of the three, Russia is considered a constructive partner while China "has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the US and field disruptive military technologies that could over time offset traditional US military advantage."

Despite such a disquieting report, the Pentagon advised that US policy should remain focused on encouraging China to play a constructive role in the Asia-Pacific region. There is a school of thought which believes that US recognition of India as a civilian nuclear power has probably more to do with China's investment in asymmetric military power "beyond Taiwan" than for love of Indian democracy.

Harvard Professor Joseph Nye, however, doubts that China would ever be able to achieve the position of peer competitor of the US on a global basis given the fact that the US would continue to outpace the rest of the world in defense expenditure so that the US, as promised by President Bush, would never have to enter into an armed race with any country, and the fact that the stunning Chinese economic growth is faced with inefficient state owned enterprises, growing inequality between the rich and the poor, straining social cohesion, massive internal migration from the rural to the urban areas, corruption, inadequate infrastructure etc, and no less importantly the 1996 Clinton-Hashimoto declaration as the basis of post-Cold War stability

in East Asia shall act as an impediment to nascent Chinese militaristic ambition, if any.

President Carter's National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski firmly believes that Chinese leadership is not inclined to challenge the US militarily because China's phenomenal economic growth is contingent upon good relations with the US, Japan, South Korea, and other trading partners, the US being the fourth largest trading partner and the source of largest US trade deficit.

Chinese expectation of foreign direct investment of \$100 billion in 2005, and increasing number of the Chinese middle class make it difficult to believe that the Chinese leadership could embark on any adventurous military policy against the US.

Additionally there is no reason to believe that from Nixon to Carter to Reagan to Clinton to Bush that any US president has deviated from the premise that a China that lives in isolation from the international community can be more devastating than one brought within the orbit of internationally accepted rules. There is evidence, however, that the American efforts to build up India as a global power was designed to use India as a countervailing power to possible Chinese expansionism.

After the Chinese revolution the US came to believe that the newly independent India was the only potential regional power that could check Chinese dominance of South East Asia. The American design was thwarted by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru who refused play along. After the 1964 Chinese nuclear test, the Pentagon considered the possibility of providing India with nuclear weapons under US custody. The idea was dropped as it ran counter to the non-proliferation agenda of the US administration.

Bill Clinton's March 2000 visit to India bound the two countries to "work together for strategic stability in Asia and beyond." The January 2004 declaration titled: "Next Step in Strategic Partnership" and the India Defense Relationship Agreement of June last year are believed to have China in sight, elucidated

by Ambassador Robert Blackwell's rhetorical question: why should the US want to put a check on India's missile capability that could lead to China's permanent nuclear dominance over democratic India?

But the recent Sino-Indian overtures do not give any indication at all that India, despite former Defense Minister George Fernandes's inopportune remark that China remains India's number one enemy, has any intention to play the role of the US sentinel in Asia. The Bush visit was not to strike a Faustian bargain but to recognize the reality of India as an economic and military power house.

US Under Secretary Nick Burns, speaking to the press in Delhi, frankly confessed the choice faced by the Bush administration regarding India's nuclear program: is it better to keep India in isolation or is it better to bring India into compliance actively with major international agreements that govern the disposition of nuclear materials and nuclear energy? India, the Bush administration concluded, despite having nuclear technology for over three decades has not proliferated as opposed to North Korea and Pakistan and Iran which "lied to the IAEA."

The US Congress and the 44 nation Nuclear Suppliers Group must both approve the agreement reached at Delhi which will give India access to billions of dollars of the US and other foreign atomic technology and fuel to meet India's soaring energy needs. The agreement's passage through Congress, however, is not guaranteed, particularly in an election year with the possibility of the Republicans losing their majority in Congress.

One ranking Democratic member of Congress described the deal as "undermining the security not only of the US but of the rest of the world." Non-proliferation issue aside (strongly refuted by Shyam Saran in his Washington speech), questions have been raised as to whether India (or for that matter Pakistan) needs nuclear weapons at all and of possible harm to the Indian populace from a continued expansion on India's nuclear complex. Besides, it has been claimed that the cost of producing nuclear

electricity in India is higher than the cost of producing electricity from other sources. Chernobyl scenario and disposal of nuclear waste cannot be over-looked.

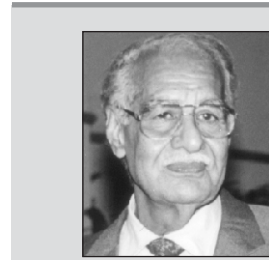
Supporters of the nuclear deal sees it not only as a way out for India's soaring energy needs but also a virtual US recognition of India as a nuclear power because, according to the Joint Statement, India will have "the same benefits and advantages as other leading countries with advanced nuclear technology like the United States." Detractors, however, point out that domestic uranium, freed as a result of uranium purchased from the international market, would be used to increase India's nuclear arsenal. It is quite possible that the Indo-US deal would start an arms race between India, Pakistan and China - all desperately poor countries though India and China are role models for the developing world.

In short, Bush's visit to India was to confer on India American blessings for India to play a global role. The Cato Institute's Hand Book for the US Congress recommends that the US administration should focus on India as a leading diplomatic and economic partner of the US in South Asia and as a strategic counterbalance to China. Cato further recommends that India be treated as a central player in the US led war on terror and radical Islamic forces in South Asia.

The Bush visit has followed this advice and more. The very fact that the situation in Burma and Nepal was mentioned in the press conference addressed by President Bush and Prime Minister Singh testifies to the possibility of wide ranging discussions on neighbouring countries and other issues of international concern at the summit meeting. The Bush visit was effectively India's coronation as a global power and perhaps as the regional hegemon in South Asia.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Shadows of parochialism



KULDIP NAYYAR
writes from New Delhi

MUSLIMS in India were genuinely outraged by cartoons of their Prophet. Their anger against President Bush was also understandable after what he did to Iraq and threatened to do against Iran. But their protest did not have to be hysterical. They did not have to come on the streets to ventilate their annoyance. This evoked a lot of misunderstanding and fear. So much so, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had to talk to some leaders of the community.

However, my reading is that the pent-up grievances of Muslims found an expression in the protest. The community increasingly felt alienated and abandoned. The cartoons and Bush's visit to India gave it an opportunity to underline the despair about improvement in its status, stature and the substance. It has been anxious for some time to project its case in a manner which would not be considered communal and would still show the fire burning within.

The problem with such types of

BETWEEN THE LINES

the challenge to the country is parochialism which some political parties have adopted as their creed. This has to be faced. Nations worth their salt have to show determination to defend their ethos. This is a quality, and faith, which is distinctive from the subjective or emotional response. Pluralism is our ethos, an ideal. This guided us during our national struggle and we even consecrated the ideology, secularism, in the constitution we adopted after witnessing the genocide in the name of religion during the partition in August 1947.

protest is that it gives a handle to fundamentalists. And this is what happened. One band from among them killed some 25 innocent men and women at a Varanasi temple, and another announced a yatra, a like of which killed thousands in its wake last time. From among Muslim extremists, one UP minister announced a reward of 51 crore rupees to the person who would kill the cartoonist in Denmark. The one from the Hindutva crowd promised crores of rupees to someone who would cut off the hands of Maqbool Fida Hussain who had painted Bharatmata nude.

The leaders of both communities have spoken against the incidents. But they have been silent over bigotry and fundamentalists. They are reluctant to do so lest they should forfeit their standing among their own community. But they are politicising the incidents in view of forthcoming state elections in Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. I do not know whether it is communalism that is rearing its

head again or whether communalism has taken the shape of terrorism. Whatever it is, the fact remains that the country is more divided and uneasier than before.

I do not think any one party can set things right. The exaggerated rhetoric of one-sided campaigns has already tainted the atmosphere. Leaders should be conscious of people's dislike for communal politics, particularly in the countryside. The BJP has still not recovered from the electorate's abhorrence over its ideology at the last general elections.

The National Integration Council, where the different parties are represented, should meet more often to assess the various happenings. It should try to find out why there is more desperation in the air and less opposition to the cult of bomb. It would be a facile inference if the council were to come to the conclusion that the state was soft. More restrictive laws or more companies of police do not necessarily curb terrorism. The BJP's criticism

that the POTA should not have been dropped is not convincing because the law did more harm than the MISA during the emergency.

In fact, the challenge to the country is parochialism which some political parties have adopted as their creed. This has to be faced. Nations worth their salt have to show determination to defend their ethos. This is a quality, and faith, which is distinctive from the subjective or emotional response. Pluralism is our ethos, an ideal. This guided us during our national struggle and we even consecrated the ideology, secularism, in the constitution we adopted after witnessing the genocide in the name of religion during the partition in August 1947. A country with 80 per cent Hindus decided not to be a Hindu rashtra but a secular, democratic polity. Those who are not reconciled to it are the ones who have been fighting against India's ethos since independence. So strong was the wind of pluralism for

many years after freedom that the party which would appeal in the name of religion was swept off like dry leaves. The Jana Sangh, the BJP's predecessor, did not even cross the double-digit figure in a parliamentary election. The Muslim League which was a byname in the forties in UP, Bihar, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh did not win even a single seat in these states after independence.

It was a welcome sight which falsified the skeptics who said that communalism was doomed to stay in India. Lately, the watershed is the genocide in Gujarat under BJP chief minister Narendra Modi, the shadows of communalism are lengthening. Political parties are thinking in terms of vote bank. Some states are worse than the other. UP, for example, has become the epicenter of parochialism. Yet, Varanasi has given an appropriate reply to the bomb blasts by holding concerts of bhakti and sufi music. Even the high priest of the temple where the blast took place has paid no attention to the purpose of fundamentalists to create communal riots.

In contrast, the action by police was shoddy and panicky. Within 12 hours of the incident, they killed a person whom chief minister Mulayam Singh said was a Pakistani but turned out to be a criminal from Madhya Pradesh. The hullabaloo about catching the culprits came to naught because there was none to identify the much-published sketches the police had drawn.

Before the Varanasi blasts, I was at a gathering of Muslim youth. They

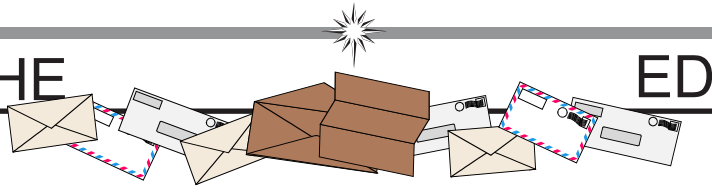
were talking about the distance between them and the Hindu youth. "Tell us, how do we span the gulf?" they asked me. "How can we participate in the nation-building activities when they do not trust us?" They have a point because they find the two communities, Hindus and Muslims, living separately, not only socially but also mentally. But there is no political party except the BJP which is going to the youth, although to poison their mind.

What has enabled the two communities to live closely for centuries is their healthy attitude towards one another. The sense of tolerance and the spirit of accommodation have provided them with the glue to stick together. That glue is drying up. I wish the communists and the Congress men could do something about it instead of talking at each other all the time.

They may find an answer in what the 23-year-old Bhagat Singh said before his execution by the British at Lahore 75 years ago on March 23. He wondered why those who agitated side by side during the non-cooperation movement in the 1920s had turned into enemies. It was strange that they participated in the agitation and yet remained strangers. Religious, political or personal considerations brought them together. But at heart, they remained biased and bigoted, only Hindus and Muslims.

Kuldip Nayyar is an eminent Indian columnist.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Smoking in bus

We know that the government has banned smoking in buses, trains etc. But we don't see the effective implementation of laws. Even we see some law enforcing personnel smoking in buses and tempos, because they have some privileges over general people. They capitalise on this. Some days back, I was returning to my workplace from my hometown Chittagong by a bus. The bus was heading towards Laxmipur from Chittagong at 7:30am. We saw 10/15 people smoking simultaneously with the driver himself and also his staff. Smoke engulfed the whole bus. The condition was suffocating for us. I think at that time women and children were suffering badly. I together with some fellow passengers tried to stop them from smoking in the bus but in vain.

The law enforcers should look into the matter.

Mohammad Anwar Hossain
Laxmipur

Food additive

Sodium Cyclamate is a chemical sweetening agent and a poisonous food additive often used in Bangladesh. But this food additive is banned in the developed countries.

This chemical is imported from abroad in container. It is very harmful and acts on the neurological system of the human body.

Mobile courts were working with the full support of the people. But they have become inactive for unknown reasons. They should start working again in the interest of public health.

Dr N Hyder
Scientific Officer, Chemistry Institute, Sweden

Deforestation at Moheshkhali

Moheshkhali is a well-known island in Bangladesh. This island is known for its natural beauty, resources and also the topography. Not only the people of Bangladesh but also foreigners are interested about Moheshkhali and Cox's Bazar as tourist spots. Now Moheshkhali has lost its beauty for many reasons. Forests in the island are being destroyed in a systematic way. And the local influential people are involved in the process.

The authorities concerned should take corrective steps to save the island from the plunderers.

Shah Jahan Siraj
Ctg. Veterinary University

Training by SEC

The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) continues to advertise in newspapers on imparting training regarding invest-

ment in primary shares, right shares, secondary shares and so on. SEC is the regulatory body of capital markets, PLC affairs, especially with regard to investors' interest. Unfortunately, the performance of SEC is rather dubious as many of us have ended up losers by investing in primary shares and in right shares.

A good number of PLC do not pay dividends for years, some do not hold AGM for years, while some do not pay dividends declared at AGM. But what is the role of SEC in setting things right?

Mahbubur Rahman
Khan A Sabur Road, Khulna

ACC in action

It is good to see that the two-year old Anti-Corruption Commission at long last has set in motion. And it has sued four retired high officials for causing a loss of Tk. 20 crore to the nation's exchequer and in another case issued a charge sheet

against the Mayor of Chittagong city for his alleged corruption in leasing 23 shops as reported in the DS of February 10. There was, however, no mention in the news of the time/period when the four officials made foul with the public money.

Last year, the country witnessed the ouster of its energy minister following allegations of receiving kickbacks from a foreign company, which was awarded works in our gas field drilling. It would be fair and an act of courage for the ACC to dog the people holding high public offices.

The ACC is here in Bangladesh at a time when Bangladesh has been given the title of the 'most corrupt country' in the world, having been ranked so by TIB five times in a row. We won't need TIB to call us most corrupt, we ourselves are the witnesses to this menace of corruption which we are every day being prey to for any service we seek from any public utili-

ties/servants. Time presses that the ACC must do things to stop the rot and in their drive to hunt the corrupt men it will without fear or favour put its foot down on whatever big shots they are and wherever they belong to, either the incumbent government or to the past governments.

ACC has already expressed its desire to bring down the corruption index to a respectable level. We support the idea.

AH Dewan
South Katrul, Dhaka Cantt. Dhaka

Reform proposals

There is no doubt that elections are the only means to hand over power peacefully in a democratic system means of government. Since the independence, it has been observed that our political parties are always very much aware of election related rights. If we ask our conscious politicians: Why are you so much vocal regarding the elections issues? Their traditional answer, in

this context, may be that the elections are important for establishing democracy in the newly independent country. Okay, it's a nice answer. If I have to give you marks, I will give 100 out of hundred. But my observations are: The three months of caretaker government are so crucial to you. When you will be voted to power, the five-year tenure should be 20 times more crucial to you. Everybody at home and abroad is praising caretaker government, but why you (political parties) are not always convinced. You have got a lot of time to establish democracy in the country, but why have you failed to establish it in the proper way? Democracy means the government with accountability and transparency; but you have made Bangladesh the most corrupt country for five consecutive years. There is a set rule about the amount of money that can be spent in the elections; are you following that rule? That

means you will establish democracy in any way you want. Political parties are crying for an independent Election Commission. How will it be independent when you frequently violate the rules set by the Election Commission? There are also many independent bodies in the country like Bangladesh Public Service Commission. BCS questions were leaked many times and PSC failed to do anything about it. Are you launching any movement to protect the brilliant students of the country, those who are nation builders of the future? The answer is NO, because it's not an election related matter that will lead you to power. You are giving proposal to appoint a chief adviser trusted by all the political parties. A question to you: do you have trust on yourself?

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