

A step in the right direction

Election without reforms unthinkable

AT last the government has taken a concrete step forward. From its nebulous phone call based offer of a dialogue to the opposition, BNP secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan has sent the much-awaited letter to his AL counterpart Abdul Jalil. The BNP leader has officially sought names of opposition representatives for a PM proposed committee to discuss the electoral reform proposals submitted by the leader of opposition Sheikh Hasina. This ice-breaking development has two other positive elements. First, the whole range of electoral reform issues including those related to the caretaker government system will come under discussion as is evidenced in the open-ended offer for dialogue. Secondly, in a prompt initial response, the AL presidium members met in an emergency meeting, discussed the government invitation and promised to get back to the ruling party quickly after consulting the AL chief and their alliance partners. The graceful acceptance of the letter marks a break with the tradition of rejections.

It is noteworthy that the move towards a dialogue is taking shape following the formal articulation of proposals by Sheikh Hasina in parliament. The point we are trying to drive is, this could have happened a few months back had the opposition leader gone to parliament and tabled her proposals that much earlier.

Be that as it may, the government's letter and the opposition's first reactions augur well. From here on, a process of engagement should start replacing the hitherto stubborn one of standoff. That's what the nation expects.

There is however no underestimating the magnitude of the task ahead if we are to clear the deck for the elections. There are serious flaws literally built into the electoral system and its practical manifestations. Both the ruling and opposition parties know it. The issue of reforms is, therefore, both urgent and undeniably indispensable. The situation is further complicated by the activities of the Chief Election Commissioner and his terribly flawed voter list preparation. The election will be put in jeopardy if the reforms are not carried out.

All this compels us to assert that, without a dialogue resolving the fundamental concerns, going to the elections will be simply foolhardy. Hence, the centrality of the dialogue process which is just about to be initiated.

Ensuring food safety

Mobile court approach is not enough

ONCE again a mobile court campaign against food adulteration is about to resume after a lapse of over two months. In the meantime, the adulterators have resorted to newer techniques to avoid detection and accountability.

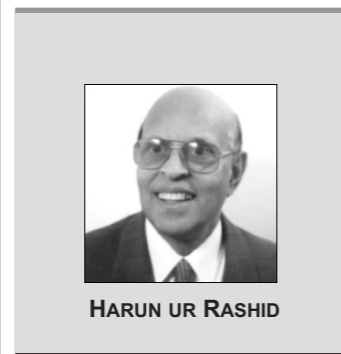
Factories producing bakery products should be under constant vigilance along with the traders indulging in the use of urea in the production of puffed rice and also as an ingredient to whiten rice. Rice is the staple food and the adverse effect of its adulteration on public health can be extremely telling and widespread. Serious attention must be given to the operation of slaughter houses also, where nothing has changed for the better despite the punitive measures taken during the last campaign.

One of our expatriate scientists, Dr. Abu Taher Khan, currently working with the Center for Food Safety and Nutrition in USA, has expressed grave concern over the increased incidence of food adulteration in Bangladesh. He has diagnosed that much of the incidence of liver and kidney malfunctioning in the country is directly related to use of harmful chemical ingredients in the food we are consuming. We share his strong view that if timely action is not taken to put a halt to this, then in time the scourge would seriously affect not only public health but also result in a serious burden on the economy of Bangladesh.

All agencies involved with food safety matters and the protection of consumer rights in general, like the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI), Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) and food directorate must be adequately equipped and empowered to be able to do their job effectively enough. Let's invest resources in them, so we don't need to have ad-hoc campaigns with short-lived effects.

A default and dangerous culture built over the years will not disappear by any hit and run campaign. We, in the media, stand in readiness to join the administration in a long term plan of action against adulteration with a prospect for durable results.

Why does the US deny the civil war in Iraq?



HARUN UR RASHID

WHAT is a civil war? It may be described as violent means of resolution of a political dispute within the borders of a state. It is also called "internal armed conflict." Examples include violent power struggles involving civilian or militia leaders, armed ethnic conflicts, and armed ideological struggles. The level of violence can range from low-level violence to sustained guerrilla insurgencies to all-out civil war. In most cases the key actors are weak governments and insurgents.

Empirical evidence suggests that ethnic and religious diversity may precipitate internal conflict or civil war. In weak, undemocratic states the likelihood of civil war increases. State strength can be measured by a state's ability to regulate social and economic relationships, extract resources, and use resources in determined ways. Strong rulers have formidable capabilities in these areas while weak rulers do not. In addition, the absence of participatory governments does not lend to legitimacy of the governments. This deep-seated legitimacy problem largely accounts for the volatile nature of Arab politics.

Max Weber observed: "Without legitimacy, a ruler, regime or governmental system is hard-pressed to attain the conflict-management capability essential for long-run stability and good government."

BOTTOM LINE
The eruption of civil war in Iraq will have many implications and would likely invite Sunni and Shi'ite participation from neighbouring Arab states. It would terminate the dream of Iraq serving as a model for other Arab countries. Vali Nasr, a professor at the US Naval Postgraduate School observed: "Just when it looked as if Muslims across the region were putting aside their differences to unite in protest against the Danish cartoons of the Prophet, the attack showed that Islamic sectarianism remains the greatest challenge to peace."

By all accounts, the current situation in Iraq may be described as the beginning of a civil war between Shi'as and Sunnis. There is no other way to depict it.

The internal armed conflict or civil war followed an unholy attack on a revered Askariya shrine on February 22 in Samarra, sparking an all-out civil war. The destruction of the golden dome, built in 1905 and one of the holiest shrines of Shi'a Islam, represented an escalation of the Sunni assault on the Shi'ites, a purposeful outrage intended to provoke an emotional backlash. Some observers described the determination of Sunnis to reassert its dominance. Since February 22, well over 600 people have been killed.

It is reported in the media that the Iraqi Minister for National Security Abdul Karim al-Enzy admitted that "we are on the edge of civil war." For the first time an Iraqi minister bitterly criticized the US by stating: "The truth is the Americans don't want us to reach the levels of courage and competence needed to deal with the insurgency because they want to stay here. They came for their own strategic interests and a lot of the world's oil is in the region." This is an anti-Washington stance by an Iraqi minister frustrated by rising violence in the country.

Newsweek (March 6) described the tragedy as "war of the mosques." The US Ambassador in Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad who was successful in Afghanistan says that

the nation seemed as close to civil war.

The US likes to describe the current situation as the conspiratorial work of foreign terrorist elements, sent purportedly by Syria and Iran, to divide the Iraqi people. They pretend to believe that Iraqis are all united and have no hand in the current situation.

The entire world has witnessed the horror of Iraq and its long suffering, 82 per cent are reportedly "strongly opposed" to the presence of coalition troops. The coalition troops are also demoralized because they see no end of the war.

Dynamics of the situation

Sunnis see the national security forces as a Shi'a-Kurd militia and in a civil war the most effective units are the ones that are communally homogeneous. Some political observers say that the bigger and stronger the US makes national Iraqi security forces, the more threatened the Sunnis feel and the harder they are likely to fight back for their self-preservation.

Kidnappings, murder, and mayhem have become commonplace in Iraqi towns and cities, and there is no question that the Iraqis have been living under a miserable time since the war. After all, what has the ordinary Iraqis in the street got to do with any of this disastrous mess created by the US-led war? Certainly they did not get themselves into it.

The Shi'ite militias have become

a menace to Iraqi security forces and they are known as death squads. An unprecedented wave of unexplained execution-style killings and abductions in Iraq has heightened fears of an underground Shi'ite backlash against Sunnis. Despite constant official denials and empty promises to disband militias that operate inside the country with impunity, Baghdad had on of its worst days on March 8. Fifty people were abducted in a daylight raid on a private security agency and the city was reeling from the discovery the night before eighteen men in an abandoned bus.

Why does the US deny it?

It is because if they admit it, it is a total failure of their policy in the Middle East and in particular in Iraq. The neo-conservatives in the Bush administration believed they would establish freedom and democracy in Iraq which would be a model of democracy for other Arab countries. Secondly, their security programme is ineffective against the background of civil war.

Vietnam was a Maoist people's war while Iraq is a communal civil war with very different dynamics. The US military strategy for Iraq now centers on "Iraqization," the program to equip and train Iraqi security forces to replace US troops. For a Maoist war, this may make sense but in civil war Iraqization may not be the answer.

The US first denied that Iraq was another Vietnam. Now they deny

that civil war is currently raging in Iraq. At a hearing at the US Senate Appropriations Committee, the US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told that the US plan "is to prevent a civil war and if civil war breaks out, it is the Iraqi military, not US-led forces, will have to deal with it."

In recent times, Rumsfeld accused media of describing the situation in Iraq as "civil war." He must have noted that the Iraqi government has put press censorship and had ordered government-run morgues and hospitals suppress the body count from execution style shootings in the aftermath of Askariya shrine bombing. Politicians in almost all countries always have a habit of accusing media as they tend to hide real the situation. It is also a convenient way to mislead the public.

Against all advice and world opinion, President Bush and Prime Minister Blair went into the war in Iraq, for reasons many believe had little to do with the destruction of weapons of mass destruction. Arrogantly they dismissed the historic antecedents which dictated that without a strong ruler, Iraq's various factions would soon be in open conflict.

Iraq is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. Its Arab population is nearly about 80 per cent, Kurds nearly 15-18 per cent, and rest are Persians and Turks. It is an Arab Shi'ite majority country, ruled by minority Sunnis until the collapse

of Saddam Hussein. When the US occupied it in 2003, its administrator Paul Bremer made the ethnic and religious diversity worse by favouring the Shi'ite community and marginalizing Sunnis. That was a big mistake as religious diversity gradually led to animosity on Shi'a-Sunni lines.

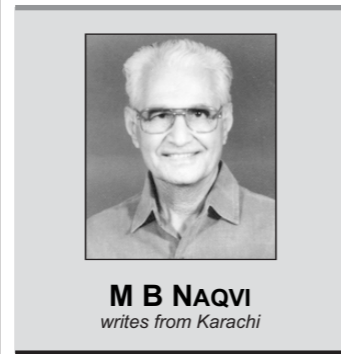
Conclusion

No talk of words like "victory" or "mission accomplished" are heard in Washington any more as the Bush administration enters its fourth year of war in Iraq next week. Pollsters were assessing the cost of the operation so far to the US at \$204 billion and another \$70 billion supplemental request was made this month to cover the cost of the military operations. The number of allied troops killed stands at over 2,525 (including 2,318 US soldiers) and more than one hundred thousand Iraqi civilians are estimated to have died.

The eruption of civil war in Iraq will have many implications and would likely invite Sunni and Shi'ite participation from neighbouring Arab states. It would terminate the dream of Iraq serving as a model for other Arab countries. Vali Nasr, a professor at the US Naval Postgraduate School observed: "Just when it looked as if Muslims across the region were putting aside their differences to unite in protest against the Danish cartoons of the Prophet, the attack showed that Islamic sectarianism remains the greatest challenge to peace."

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

Why can't Pakistan reform itself?



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

TO receive brickbats frequently is a columnist's professional hazard. One is smarting from brickbats of one category of readers. They pretend to agree with the writer's analyses about what has gone wrong with the polity and why, but the complain that "he fails to provide prescription for correcting these wrongs." This is painful. Either one does a very shoddy job of it or the readers do not care to read and imbibes. The very analysis carries in it the answer to their query.

This is adequate answer to the criticism: Read carefully and read whole. The prescription is implicit in the analysis even if unnecessarily long recommendations are eschewed. One would enunciate what is wrong with Pakistan polity and briefly describe correctives.

The writer finds two basic maladies that are linked: there is the feudalism and feudal mind set; and the feudals are in love with the military in Pakistan. The two have happily lived together. The short prescription is: abolish feudalism and spread education. The basic solution.

As for polity being dominated and occupied by the military for so long and that it threatens to per-

PLAIN WORDS
So all that is needed is to find the missing links. In concrete terms, these are leaders who will create sufficient enlightenment with a view to freeing the people from the thralldom of pro-status quo religious leaders, who with their spiritual hocus pocus -- as distinct from simple Quranic injunctions -- help the masters to keep the people down. Secondly, a political party shall be needed that will purposefully organize the people for the tasks ahead. There is no other way out. None of this is new; none of it is hard to understand. And I dare say it is not really hard to achieve, provided the requisite effort is made.

petuate itself in power indefinitely, there is only one prescription. If the people allow the military to go on monopolizing and preempting their rights, the people and only the people are responsible. A people get the government they deserve.

How can the common people -- mostly poor and unemployed, many illiterates, heavily burdened with daily cares of where their next meal will come from -- bring about a social revolution and overthrow the military? The short answer is: there is no other solution; it may be difficult but it is the only way. If the people cannot do what is necessary they will have to go on suffering the consequences. That is all there is to it.

World has however seen many cases where the people have performed this miracle. A closer look at them will reveal that there are three preconditions for success: one has knowledge of how the system works and what sustains it. The second is its other face: a certain amount of enlightenment that can undermine the system's bases and make the superstructure weaker than it seems. Third, a necessary political struggle is needed, which if mishandled, can become violent. But if the leadership is wise it can remain non-violent. Option for

violence is used by the arrogant and foolish rulers; wise politicians abhor violence. True, if the rulers insist on violent responses, a violent opposition will not fail to emerge. Such violence prone rulers dig their own graves by visiting unnecessary violence on the unarmed populace. Look around, many instances will confirm the proposition.

There is a catch in it, though. How do mostly illiterate common people can, with their daily worries, become so enlightened as to identify the foundations of the system. And further, how will they know what is required to weaken and destroy those bases so. This is indeed a tall order for common people. The missing element is the intelligentsia, however small or pedestrian. Some people have the opportunity to get educated to understand the system, know its strength and weaknesses and focus on the weaknesses in order to weaken and undermine them. In Europe the process took several centuries of Enlightenment, Reformation, and Renaissance.

But this struggle can now be telescoped. It does not require too many decades even. The means of communications are much better now. The number of people who understand is not small in absolute numbers. If they look

around and are up to their job, the means too are at hand. It is they who create sufficient enlightenment among the people -- everyone is not required to be a political thinker or social philosopher -- so that they can overthrow the hated system. The need is a political message based on knowledge and analysis that would enlighten people about their own rights and what to desire and demand and also how to struggle for them until the objectives are achieved.

Therefore what we crucially need is an intelligentsia, small as it may be, and not very good as intelligentsias go. But this is the only one we have and it has to do its job or nothing will ever get done. In this particular case we know the system rather superficially. We do see the social and economic ascendancy of the feudals and the feudal-minded industrialists and financiers. Even more obvious is the military's supremacy over the entire polity. What sustains it is the ignorance of the common man -- and the persistence of absentee landlordism.

The lynchpin that enables this exploitative system to survive is weakness, ignorance, disorganization and inadequate leadership of the people, on the one hand, and the tricks of the rulers are to recruit

allies from a tiny section of the intelligentsia: the Mullahs, on the other. Their sociological interpretation of religion is a sedative that teaches contentment over the loss of their inalienable rights and for them to go on suffering without protest. Look to the supernatural powers of the peers, fakirs or invocation of Prophet or Allah Himself. Don't struggle for your rights; be patient and pray to the supernatural some more. The services of Mullahs, as a professional group, keep the people politically quiet; that is the Mullahs function from a sociological viewpoint so as to keep the exploitative system going.

One is not concerned with specific or true interpretation of Islam that good or great Alims provide -- usually belonging to one's own sect or school. I pronounce no value judgement on religion; one only looks objectively at what religious leaders achieve for the society. But one can scarcely fail to notice the main Mullah message for the common people is "contentment at what you have and do not try to change the system or ask for more." Be content. This serves the masters -- the feudals and the military -- exceedingly well. Hence the Mullah-Military alliance, the central beneficiary of which are the

big landholders and the military. Mullahs' societal message needs to be exposed. This would disappear into thin air in next to no time, once a political program is taken to the people and it awakens them to their own rights, needs, and consequent demands.

That would set a process going which will end in a revolution which can only be mistakenly taken for a civil war. It is, however, a basic change in the laws of social and economic relationships within the society that is desired. It will yield a better land-tenure, system and a thorough reorganization of the economy with a view to achieving the ends that people hold dear.

So all that is needed is to find the missing links. In concrete terms, these are leaders who will create sufficient enlightenment with a view to freeing the people from the thralldom of pro-status quo religious leaders, who with their spiritual hocus pocus -- as distinct from simple Quranic injunctions -- help the masters to keep the people down. Secondly, a political party shall be needed that will purposefully organize the people for the tasks ahead. There is no other way out. None of this is new; none of it is hard to understand. And I dare say it is not really hard to achieve, provided the requisite effort is made.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

OPINION

Needed transparent trial of the militants

The twin arrest of Shaekh Rahman and Bangla Bhai is not enough. Their guides, mentors, motivators, organisations and people providing funds, arms, ammunition, bomb making materials and shelter should be found out and brought under the strict ambit of the law. There must be complete transparency in both the investigation and judicial process

SHAMMITA SULTANA

IF one is to analyse the character and targets of the bomb blasts over the last seven/eight years, it is apparent that the victims are the secular political parties, liberal-minded people, intellectuals and media persons. Places of worship have also not been spared. Our generally poor people have limited avenues of seeking entertainment. Even they have been targeted in cultural programs held in parks and other places, cinema halls, fairs and exhibitions held periodically.

The main two political parties would rush in to blame the other, soon after the bombing incidents without properly ascertaining the associated facts and information. The abortive attack on the then

Prime Minister in 1998, in Kotalipara, was blamed on a senior opposition leader, now minister in the current government, despite a charge sheet having been filed against Mufti Hannan, a militant leader of the Harkatul Jihad. This mind-set stems from the non-trial and rehabilitation of the killers of the founding father of the nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family. The post 1975 government removed the restriction in the Bangladesh Constitution on forming religion-based political parties to counter the secular forces. This step by the current ruling party led the current opposition party to view the former as its nemesis. On the other hand, the current ruling party always blamed the opposition for the bomb blasts despite admission

and confessions having been made by the Islamic militants.

1998 saw the first ever visit by a US President to Bangladesh. President Bill Clinton refused to visit the Jatiyo Smriti Shoudha at Savar on alleged existence of militants in that area. A spate of bombings followed in 1999 and 2000 and the country's intelligence agencies utterly failed to obtain advance information about the plans and activities of the militants. These failures by the agencies raise questions about whether they were infiltrated by members of the militant organisations.

If we look back, about a decade earlier, in 1989, the militants engaged the law enforcing forces in a clash in Shimulia and in 1996, 41 militants were arrested in Cox's

Bazar. Despite all these incidents, the administration failed to appreciate the required seriousness and its long-term implications for the country's security, peace and harmony.

Since 2001, there was an excessive and frequent increase in militant operations. These outfits had the audacity to marshal themselves with a large number of followers who were trained in subversive activities funded by local and foreign organisations sympathetic to them and whose creed was anti-secular. The media then highlighted the deep concern of domestic and international organisations, which finally led the government to ban three militant organisations.

2005's August 17 bomb blasts

across the country may have packed little strength but was significant in its implications. Courtrooms were bombed and judges and lawyers killed at a number of cities in the country. All these led to strident calls from the country's civil society, intellectuals, politicians, lawyers, judges, professionals and general public well supported by both the print and electronic media and the donor countries to take immediate and strong action against the militants. Finally, a section of the ruling party managed to prevail upon the decision-makers to begin a strong drive to nab the lynchpins in the militant outfits.

However, one sees the events -- like a "Drama" and the Tom Cruise action movie "Mission Impossible" -- the arrest of Shaekh Rahman and Siddiqui Islam alias Bangla Bhai along with some of their cohorts came within the two months pledged by the government to nab the militant outlaws. Shaekh Rahman's conditions of

surrender included to be able to talk in front of the media, which he was not allowed to. A certain military expert who is a senior and retired army personnel, has opined that nowhere in the world are terrorists allowed to make statements in front of the media soon after their arrest. I must mention that in other countries:

- The government and the opposition do not blame each other as regards militant issues
- The Islamic militants target western interests and people of other religions, their installations, whereas, the victims in our country are people of the same religion and some minorities
- Accused militants cannot obtain bail without signature by lawyers on the bail bonds
- Militants do not wage jihad to grab state power
- One will rarely hear of reported complicity by government officials in militant activities
- Members of suicide squads do not surrender

-- Arrested militants do not wish to talk to the media on their own accord

The investigation process is flawed by the officials falling prey to bribes from the accused, political influence and in some cases, negligence. Therefore, the process is impaired at the first step. Sometimes, the accused are charge-sheeted on lesser offences than what they were arrested for. According to the Law Minister, "new and stronger" laws will be enacted to try these types of militants. However, drafting the laws and making them effective will mean spoiling a lot of time and perhaps allow the top two militants enjoy delicious food in air-conditioned atmosphere.

There are intelligence reports of the existence of nearly 58 militant outfits in the country tracing back the evolution to 1976. These and their parent organisations should be brought to book at the earliest and given exemplary and deterrent punishment. There are also reports

of complicity at the top echelons, however, attention is being diverted to finding out low-level officials in the law-enforcing agencies who reportedly assisted the militants, which is a questionable process.

In conclusion, the twin arrest of Shaekh Rahman and Bangla Bhai is not enough. Their guides, mentors, motivators, organisations and people providing funds, arms, ammunition, bomb making materials and shelter should be found out and brought under the strict ambit of the law. There must be complete transparency in both the investigation and judicial process and the strictest possible punishment meted out to these miscreants who had made public life insecure besides killing and maiming so many innocent people. The people of Bangladesh do not wish to see any farcical game in the name of investigation and trial.

The writer is a former teacher of political science.