POINT ** COUNTERPOINT

Can the opposition reform proposal ensure level ground for election?

The uneven ground for contest of election has been solidified by politicization and the misuse of funds and authority of the government. Hard ground needs to be broken by tremor for making it level. That tremor could be made possible by the collective voice of demand of the people. As such, the opposition's strategy of delay in negotiation would be considered reasonable if they could lead their movement outside the negotiating table to that level before concluding the negotiated settlement.

GM QUADER

O ensure free and fair election, the 14-party alliance submitted a reform proposal to the parliament for consideration of the government. The proposal was placed by the leader of the opposition and president of Awami League Sheikh Hasina on February 12.

In response, after lapse of about two weeks, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia on February 28 stated that a committee constituting members from government and opposition parties would be formed for a negotiated settlement.

Formal letter from the BNP secretary general in respect of formation of a committee was delivered to the AL secretary general on March 20. It took long five weeks from the day of placement of the reform proposal in the parliament for receiving a written response from the government side.

From that day letters are being exchanged one after another from both sides on different grounds for formation of the committee. But the fact remains that committee for negotiation could not be finalized till the beginning of April. Subsequent discussion and finally a negotiated settlement looks too far away a destination to reach before the term of the present government expires. There looks to be an attitude of

delay from both sides. Of course, from the statements of of ruling alliance on various occasions and also from the above there should not be any doubt that the government is reluctant to discuss the reform issue, more so, in case of accepting or implementing any reform in the present system. The PM recently said in a public meeting that there is no need for any reform in caretaker system or election process. She affirmed that election would take place on time under the existing system as stipulated in the constitution. Since the ruling alliance would relinquish power before election date and election would take place at a time when none of the political parties would be in position of authority, there would

the PM and other important leaders

process why did not they do that when they had been in power. When she made that accusation she conveniently forgot that due to some actions taken by her government in the recent past, reforms in the caretaker system and also in the election process have already taken place in favour of the present alliance government. This has made the necessity for some countermeasures natural at least to neutralize the effects of partisan reforms already done. Moreover, it was the

unholy intentions revealed by the

exist no opportunity for any party to

take advantage in the coming

general election. She also said if AL

felt so strongly about reforms in

caretaker system and election

said reforms and by other activities done so far during the period of 4party alliance rule prompted the opposition to demand further reforms to ensure free and fair

The constitution has been amended to raise the retirement age of High Court judges. Services of some other constitutional positions have been extended with some deliberate exceptions. Though being in a similar constitutional position, nothing was changed for the chief election commissioner and other election commissioners.

As per the 14-party opposition alliance, the first measure manipulated fixing of the position of chief advisor of caretaker government for a specific person who in the past happened to be an office-bearer of the ruling party BNP. The existing chief election com-

missioner had to go on expiry of term and a new chief was appointed as per the sole choice of the government. Positions of election commissioners were increased unilaterally by the government. Two new election commissioners were appointed by the PMO at a time when disagreements started surfacing between the new chief election commissioner and the existing two election commissioners. The new appointees have been perceived as pro-government by the opposition considering their past record and activities. It was widely believed that

the new appointments were made in an exceptional haste to provide timely support to the progovernment activities of the chief election commissioner against the resistance of the other already serving election commissioners.

The first elected president of the

4-party alliance government, Dr. Badruddoza Chowdhury, the founder secretary general of the ruling BNP, had to resign as per decision of the parliamentary party of BNP. Till date no fault could be mentioned against him excepting that he started behaving as a neutral person looking equally to all and not acting like a partisan BNP person. Being neutral is the necessity of the position of President as expected in our constitution. Subsequently, the ruling party appointed another President of their choice. The opposition feels the new president is not taking any chances and avails all opportunities to make it obvious that

he is partisan and pro-ruling party. Neutrality of President is also important for ensuring a fair election. Chief Advisor of the caretaker government along with other advisers is appointed by the President and they are answerable to him. During that period the armed forces of the country are directly under the command of the President. So, post of the President is on the top in respect of both power and position during the interim period.

The three major institutions

responsible for conducting the next general election during the interim caretaker government are Presidency, Caretaker Government and Election Commission. From the above, it may be observed that the present government has already made gross interference in all the above institutions. It is believed by the opposition that this has been done with an ulterior motive to manipulate the institutions to work in favor of ruling coalition. These manipulative reforms contradict to ensuring free and fair election. As per opposition, new reforms have now become necessary to nullify the above manipulative reforms already done by the government.

In addition to the above, the present government continued lots of other irregular, illegal and unethical activities or manipulations throughout its entire tenure. These were done to gain through corruption and also to influence the result of the next general election. It started from day one when the new government was formed. All senior government party leadership including PM had been bitterly critical of the condition of economy of the country at that time, terming it fragile and weak. But instead of taking austerity measures as would have been appropriate for them if the condition had been truly as such, the government was formed with the biggest ever ministry having about 60 ministers and 100 persons in total provided with the rank and status along with financial benefits

Ministers were being used to control the bureaucracy and the public fund to be used in favor of the government party leadership and members. Government relief, jobs. business, contracts for development works, purchases etc. that means expenditure from public fund and use of government facilities are done mainly to serve either self interest of ruling party leadership or the partisan interest of the ruling coalition through irregular and corrupt practices. Those are distributed to the party loyalist and to people who could convince that they would provide support to the ruling party in next election. All rules and norms are ignored in providing those favours.

Development works and relief distribution works carried out in different areas are being restricted or increased by control of the fund to be provided based on partisan interest. Funds are restricted and development works and distribution of relief materials are stopped to punish people who did not vote in favor of the government party candidate in the last election. The same is released partially in case they agree to support the government party candidate in the next general election. The opposite happens to the areas where government party won the election and they are reminded of the prizes they

Government party MPs and leaders are being allowed to use huge public funds regularly in different forms to allure people to vote for them in the next general election. In a poor country like Bangladesh money does play a distinct role in influencing the election results. As such, in order to keep the election free from the unholy influence of money, the total use of money has been kept within a limit by law. But. government party potential candidates including MPs and ministers have already started expending from public exchequer much more

amount before the actual election period

In order to achieve the above, the

ruling alliance government had to use persons from bureaucracy who would not only accept and implement irregular directives of the government but would promote the party in power as and when necessary. Thorough politicization of the administration had been carried out for that. Employees who could show unquestionable loyalty to the ruling party, may he/she be inefficient or corrupt does not matter, are located and are put in important key positions. Most of them received extension of service after retirement, promotions, good postings superceding senior or more qualified or efficient persons by bending or even changing the rules if necessary. Many who failed to pass the loyalty test are being made OSD (officer on special duty) or are forced out on retirement.

The Daily Star on March 25 printed a very detailed report on this subject in the first headline story titled "Promotion, changes in civil admin now rampant," with sub title "Govt. allegedly mapping out election victory by using loyalists."

The report states: "The practice of giving promotion, contractual appointments, making officials OSD and sending them to forced retirement on political consideration has now become a regular phenomenon in the civil administration and is viewed by observers as a serious attempt to use the administration during the next general election."

Proposed reforms mainly comprise of appointment of Chief Adviser and Chief Election Commissioner and other election commissioners as per agreed choice, and placement of armed forces under

the command of Chief Advisor. It would seem natural that the opposition alliance would make efforts to hurry in formation of committee and start negotiation to enhance achieving their target, but the opposite seems to be happening. What might be the reason?

It is obvious from the above that proposed reforms only cannot ensure a fair ground for election. Thorough politicization of administration and gross misuse of government funds and authority have made the environment unfavorable for conduct of a free and fair elec-

As The Daily Star reported on March 25: "Politicization of each of the departments has been so thorough that the interim government will not be able to dismantle their comprehensive control on the administration as the removal of one official would only mean another official loyal to the four party alliances assuming the post, noted many former and serving bureau-

The uneven ground for contest of election has been solidified by politicization and the misuse of funds and authority of the government. Hard ground needs to be broken by tremor for making it level. That tremor could be made possible by the collective voice of demand of the people. As such, the opposition's strategy of delay in negotiation would be considered reasonable if they could lead their movement outside the negotiating table to that level before concluding the negoti-

Iraq invasion: Three years after

One genuinely doubts whether the Bush administration understood the complexities of the Iraqi situation before undertaking the ill-fated invasion. America's high tech weaponry was able to destroy Saddam's authoritarian regime within a record time, but creating an alternative democratic structure in Iraq would need more time and greater patience. How much longer the American people will let President Bush continue with his "staying the course" strategy in Iraq remains to be seen.

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

HREE years ago, as America was getting ready to invade Iraq, most of its NATO allies, and friends from the region and beyond, had urged Washington to exercise restraint. Massive anti-war demonstrations had taken place in different cities of United States, and in most major capitals. American and international experts and analysts, who knew the region well, had pointed out the great dangers of such a military operation. Yet nothing could deter the Bush administration as they knew that the vast majority of Americans, reportedly as high as 77 per cent, supported the invasion of Iraq. Why did the nation, that had paid such a heavy price for the Vietnam War not too long ago, support another military operation so far away from home?

Well, as one looks at it from the vantage point of being in the United States, the feeling one gets is that the 9/11 terrorist attacks had transformed the American society and had created a tremendous rage in the country. The Americans were both terror-stricken and terrordriven. The administration took advantage of the situation to create an unprecedented paranoia in the country by frequently raising and lowering the colour-coded threat

The invasion of Afghanistan, and removal of the Al Qaeda terrorists and the Taliban regime, could not quell the rage as mastermind Osama bin Laden was not apprehended. Furthermore, Afghan war was viewed as a one-sided affair, whereas the Americans were looking for a "real fight." Saddam Hussein fitted in perfectly in this scenario. His track record -- invasion of Kuwait and the torture of his

own people -- were well-known. Interestingly, vast majority of Americans were also made to believe that Saddam was involved in the 9/11 attacks, though no such the Iraqi regime and Al Qaeda

terrorists. This created necessary ground for the Administration to project the invasion of Iraq as a part of their "war against terror." The US Congress rather meekly accepted the Administration's arguments and endorsed the invasion plan. Quick military victory and elimination of Saddam regime prompted President Bush to dramatically land, in a green flight suit with a white helmet in hand, on aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln and declare "Mission Accomplished" before several thousand cheering sailors. Unfortunately, such optimism was highly premature and, after thirty-six months since the invasion, the American ordeal is far from over.

So, what went wrong? Well, none of the pre-war predictions of the Administration came true. The Iraqi people did not welcome the US troops as "liberators" nor could Saddam's links with al-Qaeda terrorists be proven. More importantly, the "Weapons of Mass Destruction" which Saddam allegedly possessed, was not found despite a thorough search all over the country. This alone took away the raison d'etre for which the "preemptive" attack had been launched. The Iraqi paramilitary forces launched a resistance movement from the very beginning resulting in large scale deaths of American soldiers. Despite these setbacks, the American people agreed to give the Bush administration some time to control the situation and decided not to change their Commander-inPresident Bush was reelected in November 2004.

Three years after the Americanled forces swept through Iraq, the country continues to remain in the grip of insurgency. More than 2,500 Americans have been killed, 17,000 have been maimed or wounded. How many thousands of Iraqis have died we shall never know. American troops are haplessly bogged down in Iraqi soil, and there is no end in sight. It is apparent that the Bush administration did not have any plan to deal with post-war Iraq and that in the face of continued insurgency; it kept on shifting the goal posts from one targeted date to another. Most recently, they had expected that after the parliamentary elections and adoption of constitution in last November, it would be possible to create a democratic structure in Iraq which could facilitate their phased withdrawal from the war torn coun-However, even four months after the adoption of the constitution by the Iraqi parliament, it has not been possible to form a central Iraqi government that could exercise

authority all over the country. Iraq, a deeply divided country, has no history of democracy and it has always been ruled by the authoritarian regimes of the Sunni minority. The Shias, who constitute the majority in Iraq, have been deprived of their rightful role in the national scene, and the Kurds, an ethnically distinct minority, has suffered terrible persecution under the Sunni rule. The recent Parliamentary election has, for the first time, put the Shias in the driver's seat: but the Sunnis are vehemently reluctant to accept the Shia rule or to grant autonomy to Kurds. Consequently, there has been a steady rise in sectarian violence and the country is in on the verge of a

The American people now realize that there is no quick fix in Iraq and that the war is going to be a long drawn affair. So far the US has spent over \$360 billion on the Iraq War which is more than four times the original estimated cost. The Americans are frustrated that despite such high costs, there is no upside for their country in this war. A recent poll conducted by nonpartisan Gallup group indicate that six out of ten Americans believe that the "Iraq War is not worth it." After all, the American people are prepared to sacrifice their lives or ney only if it served the American

interest. After three years of upbeat White House assessments which do not corroborate the situation on the ground, the people's support for the Iraq war has now plummeted to 29 per cent and President Bush's job rating has reached an all time low. According to Pew Research Centre, the credibility gap between the ruler and the ruled has significantly widened and only 40 per cent people consider Bush as trustworthy, a 22-point drop from September 2003, six months after the invasion. The Gallup survey also shows a 26point drop in the number of people who find Bush trustworthy since the

This erosion of public support for the President is a sharp reversal of his standing as a strong and stable leader, especially on national security matters. In his third anniversary speeches. President Bush has taken note of people's concern, but he has continued with his sunnyside up appraisals. He has, however, frankly admitted that US troops would remain in Iraq beyond his Presidency. He knows that the huge credibility gap between him and the people has effectively diminished public support for a longterm US military commitment in

The rosy picture painted by the US administration also clashes with the assessments given by the people on the ground. The former Iraqi interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, once a blue-eyed favourite of Washington, said in a recent interview with BBC that his country was moving towards a "point of no

return" and that unfortunately, they were "in civil war." He knows that the Bush administration cannot accept this categorization, so he elaborated: "We are losing each day an average of 50 to 60 people throughout the country, if not more." He continued to say: "If this is not civil war, then God knows what civil war Interestingly, American Ambassador in Baghdad Zalmy Khalilzad has also warned of the possibility of civil war breaking out.

It is apparent that after three

years, billions of dollars and thousands of lives, the US led invasion has not produced the results the Bush administration wanted. Iraq's future remains dismal. In fact, the entire Middle Eastern region has become less stable than before the attack on Iraq. Given this complex scenario, Washington would be surely looking for a face-saving exit. It is easy to start a war but difficult to end it. The sole superpower cannot iust abandon Irag now. It has to train Iraqi army and police to take care of the security situation. More importantly, it has to hand over power to a credible Iraqi government. The problem is how to get the different Iraqi factions to a power sharing arrangement under a democratic structure. After all, democracy is unique to each country and an indigenous item: it cannot be imposed from beyond.

One genuinely doubts whether the Bush administration understood the complexities of the Iraqi situation before undertaking the ill-fated invasion. I saw a bumper sticker on a car in the UC Berkeley campus that says: "Ignorance and arrogance can lead to bad foreign policy." Perhaps this sums up the nation's predicaments. America's high tech weaponry was able to destroy Saddam's authoritarian regime within a record time, but creating an alternative democratic structure in Iraq would need more time and greater patience. How much longer the American people will let President Bush continue with his "staying the course" strategy in Irag remains to be seen.

Syed Muazzem Ali is a former Foreign Secretary.

Everyday life in Iraq

Mr. Shadid concentrated on the everyday life of the Iraqis. How the invasion has turned their world upside down. For Mr. Shadid, the job of a journalist is 'to listen and not to judge." Baghdad has been described as a "city of lanterns" and "a city of ghosts" and so on. He quoted a 14-year old Iraqi girl who kept a diary (Anne Frank of Iraq, not his characterization) in which she described Iraq as "a land of dried bread with tea," reflecting the disappearance of even the basic necessities of life. She wrote: "This morning did not begin with the roosters crowing but with bombs."

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

N April 9, 2003 Saddam than life -- statue was toppled with the help of an American tank, marking the fall of Baghdad. It was a poignant moment for it brought an end to a chapter in Iraq's history. Mr. Anthony Shadid, a reporter of the Washington Post was there to witness the historic event. He filed twenty-four front page stories in the twenty-one days from the start of the invasion in March 15, 2003 till the fall of Baghdad.

Mr. Shadid was the recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for international reporting in 2004. He is also a recipient of several other top awards in journalism including The Michael Kelly Award, an award named after Michael Kelly, the first journalist killed in Iraq after the invasion. So far 90 journalists have been killed in Iraq, highest so far in any war.

I asked Mr. Shadid the first question after his moving talk about the consequence of the invasion on the ordinary people in Iraq that he gave on April 3 at Zayed University, in Abu Dhabi. I prefaced my question with my experience of the day of liberation of Bangladesh where an oppressive, genocidal regime was overthrown.

I told him: "I was a witness to the fall of Dhaka on December 16. 1971 when Mukti-Bahini, flanked by Indian soldiers (Mitra Bahini, as they were called) marched into Dhaka amidst applause, I saw people -thousands of them -- jubilant, some with flowers in hand, others with sweets, come out to receive the victorious forces. As I watched the fall of Baghdad on CNN, I did not

the celebrations of the day and was the camera crew taking the wrong shots? What was the mood on the

Mr. Shadid chose his words carefully. He thanked me for my question then he went on to say that there is a difference between his understandings of that day from on the spot to some time later. The report that he filed for the Washington Post on the events of that day portrayed a picture of jubilation on the part of the ordinary Iragis but later he found out that the response was much more complex: there were feelings of joy, ambivalence, doubt and fear.

A more complex picture was presented in his book, Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War. By then he had more access to the minds of the Iraqi people. Many, he thought, were relieved that Saddam had gone but they were apprehensive of the foreign forces. They could not accept the occupation of their country by a foreign power. There was a feeling of grief: a sense of loss that one country was taking over

Mr. Shadid concentrated on the everyday life of the Iragis. How the invasion has turned their world upside down. For Mr. Shadid, the job of a journalist is "to listen and not to judge." Baghdad has been described as a "city of lanterns" and "a city of ghosts" and so on.

He quoted a 14-year old Iraqi girl who kept a diary (Anne Frank of Iraq, not his characterization) in which she described Iraq as "a land

see the same euphoria of jubilation of dried bread with tea," reflecting nor the huge number of people on the disappearance of even the basic the streets. Did CNN fail to capture necessities of life. She wrote: "This morning did not begin with the roosters crowing but with bombs."

Mr. Shadid explored the complexity of the insurgency through the perceptions people had. He talked to the villagers from where a suicide-bomber came. For some. he was "a martyr," some would say "nationalist," others "devout" or "one who got thousands of dollars from the Baath Party."

And indeed many people -- Shiite and Sunni -- did show up to cast their votes. Their vote was not a simple capitulation to the interests of the occupiers but they wanted to exercise a right that they were denied of for a long time. But politics was not the main focus of Mr. Shadid's observations.

He narrated one story to capture the ravages of the war on the Iraqi society. In an idyllic village on the Tigris, an informer allegedly brought a group of US soldiers and pointed out the houses of some of the insurgents. The soldiers did their job of destruction leaving a trail of four dead bodies.

Later the villagers came and talked to the father of the informer demanding that he had to kill his son for he had betrayed his community, or else following the local tradition of tribal justice they would kill the rest of his family in retaliation. One morning, the father finally took an AK-47 rifle and shot his son. While talking to Mr. Shadid later, the father told him that "Even the prophet Abraham did not have to kill his son but I had no choice.'

The author teaches at Zayed University, Abu





Chief in the middle of a War. So





