LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA WEDNESDAY JUNE 28, 2006

CEC's antics continue End this tomfoolery

HAT is the Chief Election Commissioner up to? We have been asking this question ad nauseam and instead of receiving a plausible response we are only presented with more of his unintelligible and extremely irrational actions and utterances regarding the

To start with the CEC embarked upon making a completely new voters list when there was no need for that. And when the High Court put an embargo on it, he in clear defiance of its dictates, continued with the process, incurring, by some reports, a loss of almost 60 crores to the pub-

And he has been continuing with his irresponsible acts even after the Supreme Court confirmed the order of the High Court to update the voter's list on the basis of the one used in 2001 elections. It took him seven days to convene a meeting of his staff, after the EC appeal was dismissed by the Supreme Court, to discuss his next course of action and as if deliberately to compound the issue, withheld initiating any further action on the excuse that the certified copy of the verdict had not reached the EC. And once that was received he came up with the idea of the prospective voters going to the election commission offices to get enrolled. His latest move is to send his staff to the villages, again a climb down from his earlier position, but the voters would still have to go to the EC staffinstead of the vice versa.

A clear pattern has emerged from the EC's actions of the last several months. He takes a very rigid stance to start with, irrationally, only to relent halfheartedly. On every position he had taken he backtracked but assumed a defiant tone thereafter as if daring the system. And although in his latest move he has again caved in partly by agreeing to send his staff to the village level, he remains defiant in his stance of not going from house to house to enroll voters.

We feel that the CEC has failed to comprehend a very vital and essential truth, something that even a puerile mind would not miss. And that is, it is the EC's bounden responsibility to have all the eligible voters in the country enrolled. It is the EC's responsibility to provide all facilities that would assist the voters to exercise their franchise and would ensure a free and fair election. We ask, does the EC want that a sizeable segment of the eligible voters are deprived of their right to cast their vote? The CEC's modus of updating the voter's list will ensure exactly that.

When will the CEC and his two commissioners give up?

and Industry (FICCI) gave a friendly reminder about his

country's pending investment proposals worth \$1.53b to

Bangladesh. The investment initiative launched by

Malaysia relates to the first sixth months of the current

year but we are into the sixth month already; yet no deci-

sion from Bangladesh side has been communicated to

The envoy literally makes us sit up and take note of his

cautionary signal, if you like, that Dhaka's continuing

indecision might impel his government to look for coun-

tries like China, Vietnam, Pakistan and India as the likely

investment destinations. We have had \$6 billion worth of

The proposals in question are for 210km multilane

Dhaka-Chittagong highway, two power generation projects

and Aktel customer service improvement related project.

ture building initiatives. For all we know, Malaysia having

gone high-tech industrialisation-wise, is keen on relocating

its SMEs in Bangladesh. This is corroborated by the envoy's

emphatic statement that Bangladesh is 'on the radar screen

True, we should not be rushed to accepting or rejecting

any investment offer just because it is big and from a

mighty economy but at the same time we cannot afford to

lose a good proposal by procrastinating. Proposals must

be judged by their merit, and against the criterion of what

There is no denying the fact that the process of evalua-

tion and approval of investment projects in our context

has been multi-layered, cumbersome and serpentine and

often riddled with prospects of corruption and under-

The lack of quick decision on the Malaysian proposals is

out of sync with the exuberant invitations we often hold out

to prospective foreign investors. Besides, we must not for-

get that investment has a dynamism of its own and, unless

grabbed in a timely manner, has a way of eluding our grip.

hand dealings for benefiting the powerful to top it off.

is in the best interest of the country and the people.

ALAYSIAN High Commissioner in Dhaka, Abdul

Malek Bin Abdul Aziz while speaking at a meet-

ing of Foreign Investors' Chamber of Commerce

Malaysian investment

Why decision is still awaited?

Kuala Lumpur one way or the other.

investment from Malaysia since 1999.

of Malaysian investors and traders'.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

HIEF Election Commissioner M.A. Aziz enlightened us last week on his legal acumen. The experience he has gained in the legal profession over the last thirty-six years, he informed a bemused media, qualified him to conduct a class on the law for three long hours. In a mood of beaming confidence, he invited newsmen as well as eminent lawyers of the country to be present when he lectured on the law.

As if that were not enough, he informed the country at around the same time that it really did not matter who said what about his way of doing business. In effect, what Justice Aziz has been telling us is that the country is a vast arena peopled with barbarians, the likes of whom need to be brought into the fold of civilization by the likes of him. That certainly throws up an interesting situation

And the situation is simply the reality that the Chief Election Commissioner does not recognize the priorities he and his colleagues have forced upon the country. The matter is not one of teaching. Neither is it one of legalities. Indeed, if we were to focus on the legal aspects of the conundrum, the CEC and his colleagues have thrown around and over us, we would be pushed into a set of cirGROUND REALITIES

A CEC, two presidents and a ubiquity of questions

These are times of insidious intent. The continued refusal of Chief Election Commissioner MA Aziz to respect the wishes of the country and go gracefully into the sunset may well push us all into a constitutional crisis of portentous proportions. And the whispers around the presidency can only grow louder and increasingly menacing unless someone in the corridors of power deigns to tell us of the nature of the future lajuddin Ahmed has before him.

Election Commission would

When the CEC and his election commissioners studiously ignored the directives of the High Court relating to the electoral rolls through going ahead with a preparation of a new voters list, the theme of legality was carefully pushed aside. Now, of course, there s something here that speaks to us of a contempt of court. When the judiciary serves a notice on an individual or set of individuals, it is manifestation of the principle that the law of the land is supreme.

Apparently, Justice Aziz and his colleagues did not agree, which is why it became necessary for the Supreme Court to intervene. If any reiteration of the principle of law was needed in order for the Chief Election Commissioner to be induced into retracing his steps, of course along the right tracks, here it

Justice Aziz, with an alacrity that surprised even his dwindling band of supporters, suddenly adopted the position that the Election Commission could not move towards updating the existing electoral rolls before formally receiving a certified copy of the SC judgement. That was surely an admirable act, seeing that the CEC was not one to be influenced or forced into overstepping the

cumstances that neither we nor the bounds of formality. And yet the attitude rankled when you recalled the sheer carelessness with which the earlier move by the High Court against the new electoral rolls had been handled.

The crisis is not yet over, despite the Supreme Court act. A certain degree of petulance has now come into the operations of the Election Commission, with its leading figures and bureaucrats now clearly ordering intending voters to find their way to the nearest election offices and register themselves. The Election Commission, we have been informed in no uncertain terms, will not go from door to door and enlist the names of men and women who can and will vote at the next general elections. When you observe such behaviour on the part of men from whom you expect better, you remind yourself once again that these are strange times you happen to be going through.

An ostrich-like Election Commission, an abrasive set of election officials and a long series of inexplicable behaviour are what assault your sensibilities. The Chief Election Commissioner and his two colleagues, you keep saying to yourself, over and over again, should be making things easier for themselves as well as the country by making for the exit. That they have not done so far is not only

disappointing but also outrageous. It is disappointing because we expect individuals of good education and extensive experience to read the writing on the wall and then take such action as will be rendered necessary by such writing. It is outrageous because the Chief Election Commissioner has carefully and systematically been pushing an entire country into a straitjacket from which it can reemerge into freedom only with

much pain. Justice Aziz, SM Zakaria, and Justice Mahfuzur Rahman have apparently convinced themselves of their infallibility. The constitution of this People's Republic makes it patent that these three men cannot be shut out of their offices unless they agree to go of their own free will. But, yes, there is the small matter of a Supreme Judicial Council coming into play and eventually enabling the President of the Republic to remove the three officials. A cheering prospect? Far from it, for today the presidency of the republic itself wallows in the shadows of mystery.

No, there may not exactly be pandemonium in Bangladesh at this point, but there is the truth that is stranger than fiction. Even if one were not to agree with the notion of the country being home to two presidents (one of them simply happens to be acting out the role of

away the feeling that something is

going terribly wrong somewhere. President Iajuddin Ahmed, we have been led to believe, remains a sick man. That may be so, but since when has a sick President been rendered into a President deprived of protocol? Acting President Jamiruddin Sircar was the fortunate man enjoying the perks that come with being head of state on the day he welcomed President Iajuddin Ahmed back home from ingapore. The presidential standard was on Sircar's vehicle, while Jajuddin Ahmed traveled to the Combined Military Hospital from the airport almost in the manner of a former president.

Now, of course all the legal and not so legal luminaries of the existing political dispensation keep hammering the idea of Article 54 into us. That is fine with us. We have no complaints against the constitution (except wishing that it could go back to being the way it was in the euphoric, post-liberation year of 1972). But Article 54 does not educate us on the question of whether a president returning home must remain superseded by an acting president who manned the fort in his absence.

Here is the bare truth: the moment a head of state, in this instance the President of the Republic, returns home either from an official trip or vacation or hospitalization abroad, he resumes his duties without any formality coming into the act. He steps back on the soil of the country as a fully functional President, an event which naturally and automatically pushes the individual who has been acting president back into his

By that measure, Jamiruddin Sircar should have reverted to being Speaker of the Jatiyo Sangsad the moment Iajuddin Ahmed came back home. That did not happen --

president), one cannot quite wave and we as a nation are burdened, as we are burdened with an Election Commission we have lost faith in, with the spectacle of two presidents who do not probably know what to

do with or about each other. Let our thoughts not get muddled here. The country is of course big enough for both lajuddin Ahmed and Jamiruddin Sircar to share its endless spaces. But only one of them can wield presidential authority. There has so far been no clear, unequivocal statement, save only the fact that he needs rest before he can recover, from the government that President lajuddin Ahmed has been rendered physically or mentally unable or incapacitated in the matter of carrying out his presidential functions and hence has been compelled to transfer authority to the

speaker of the Jatiyo Sangsad. Besides, it was a healthy President who walked down the gangway of the plane bringing him back from Singapore, shook hands with dignitaries and then traveled down to the CMH, where he looked relaxed on a chair as he spoke to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. The mystery deepens, our doubts get thicker and our fears, somewhat, about the future of constitutional politics assume darker shapes.

These are times of insidious intent. The continued refusal of Chief Election Commissioner MA Aziz to respect the wishes of the country and go gracefully into the sunset may well push us all into a constitutional crisis of portentous proportions. And the whispers around the presidency can only grow louder and increasingly menacing unless someone in the corridors of power deigns to tell us of the nature of the future lajuddin Ahmed has before him.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Executive Editor, Dhaka

The twin crises



HE Musharraf regime is facing a serious crisis. Musharraf has to organize two elections between October 2007 to February 2008: one national general election and another to the office of the President. Postponing is no real option. These are a string of impressive people-oriented infrastruc-The world is looking forward to these elections. It wants to know whether these will be transparently free or will be manufactured through the intervention of state agencies -- at different stages.

The difficulties that President Pervez Musharraf faces are obvious. He has to win this election no matter how; he can't afford to lose. Therefore it will be necessary to watch how does the government machinery -- bureaucracy, intelligence services, and others -behave. If a grand victory of the present ruling coalition is announced, it will be received with dismay and derision. People would say the results have been manufactured because the regime had no option but to remain in power; it is an existential crisis for the rulers.

One complication is that the President is not merely the President but is Army Chief of Staff on active service simultaneously. As a

As it happens, any military coup-maker can get himself elected in a series of elections with the help of intelligence agencies and the bureaucracy. These agencies are supposed to have perfected a technique in which a ruling junta cannot lose an election, given the political backwardness of common voters. In this case, the chief threat of losing the election has been all but taken care of. This is common knowledge and is a major factor favouring the regime's survival.

serving soldier, he has no business to be in politics. But there he is and has a number of political parties and politicians supporting him who think that he is popular and Pakistanis cannot do without him whether he dons or doffs the Army uniform. If he loses either election. all hell will break loose. The whole political system he has built will collapse in a matter of hours. That will not be good for his safety and security. He has, therefore, to win,

As it happens, any military coup-maker can get himself elected in a series of elections with the help of intelligence agencies and the bureaucracy. These agencies are supposed to have perfected a technique in which a ruling junta cannot lose an election, given the political backwardness of common voters. In this case, the chief threat of losing the election has been all but taken care of. This is common knowledge and is a major factor favouring the regime's survival.

Anyone believing in transparently free elections will never certify Pakistan's bureaucracymanaged elections. It is actually wrong to pin-point only the intelligence agencies. Behind them stands the whole phalanx of civilian administration. All state resources are at the disposal of those who have to win. Basic wheeling and dealing is arranged long before the votes are cast. Each district has several vote banks and the leaders of each vote bank are ever ready to make adjustments with powers that be, specifying who will get what if they vote for the

When elections come near, various political groups, important in districts and specific regions, start changing their loyalties. They join either PPP, PML(N), or ANP, or whatever, as additional aid to their own abilities to take votes. That process seems to have begun already. Major parties as well as agencies compete and it stands to reason that promises the agencies make will carry greater weight. Which cynical vote bank leader will opt for opposition if there is King's own promise of reward? The uniform plays no part in the wheeling dealing. This is a regular phenomenon from election to election. The regime is said to be well-placed to

win the next election, warts and all. It is now time to examine as to what the regime has achieved, the

supposed criteria for the voters. It is clear that it has magnified and intensified the ideological hatred between the believers in Islamic Ideology and in other systems of governance. At least some areas in FATA have now become a Taliban territory so to say. This means electorally their representatives, MMA, are well placed in NWFP areas given the affinities between Taliban and the common

The government is supposedly against Taliban. It is supposed to be secular and would have no truck with Taliban. And yet Taliban have been all over the place in FATA's various agencies and also in other areas outside the tribal belt. They are organizing the institutions of grassroots governance and are trying to dispense rough and ready justice. Reason for being maladroit was that Islamabad had no clue as to how it should operate in a rapidly changing political and ideological situation in the area. They have made Taliban extremely popular in many adjoining NWFP areas. This Islamic "greening" is the odd result of "moderate and modern Islam" of President Musharraf.

Two separate wars are going in

NWFP. There is one between the Taliban ideology and Islamabad's supposed secular Pakistani nationalism and "modern moderate many of FATA agencies is as effecive as that of the Army. Political beliefs in much of the NWFP can carcely be different from those of Islamic clerics and the various religious extremists there being few others in the field. Secondly, laliban are engaged in a physical war in Afghanistan. They want to conquer much of Afghanistan and re-establish their Caliphate. Whether it can be done or is unlikely to succeed is another matter. But Islamabad's efforts have given a fillip to religious obscurantism throughout the

wars are going on. One is between tion of Balochistan's resources is Taliban and Karzai's Afghan soldiers, now led by Nato forces, in Punjab-dominated central govparallel with FATA's. The threat to ernment and elites of major cities. Cabul from Taliban cannot be minimized. Some of the Afghan long desultory war against areas in point of fact are under Islamabad elites. practical Taliban control, though it shifts from time to time and place to place. Like elsewhere, when Nato forces come the Taliban disappear. When the former has gone, the Talibs reappear. So the game goes on. This is one fight that cannot be ignored for its implications.

There is another. This is a proper nationalistic war for selfdetermination, Balochistan Liberation Army is waging it against Islamabad. The BLA has been struggling against Pakistan authority in different places and are also strong in some areas where the writ of the government runs only in day-time or when troops are about. BLA is said to be a small, largely MB Naqvi is a leading columist in Pakislan

disorganized force that believes in Baloch nationalism and in winning the Baloch rights from the Punjabi dominated central government. It Islam." The writ of the Taliban in is an openly anti-Centre force and wants to reorganize Pakistan on the basis of nationalities ruling their own areas and the central govern ment being content with a smaller sphere of action for promoting common causes. For the rest, it is the nationalities that must rule their own areas and become the true masters of their own resources and destiny.

Big or small, the BLA comprises committed political groups spread throughout Balochistan's purely Baloch areas. They are the staunch nationalists and want to protect the resources of Balochistan for the benefit of its In Balochistan also two separate own people. The current exploita-They look like being ready for a

> The issues having been framed, few can now ignore what the Baloch nationalists want. The question is what will the Centre decide: would they concede something substantive by way of reserving Balochistan's resources for the benefit of Balochistan itself? It is a major issue that will indirectly determine whether the election can be accepted as genuine insofar as Balochistan is concerned.

> It is issues like these, and one has not mentioned the changing world scene, that makes the 2007-08 polls crucial: another 2002 and some sort of catastrophe will follow.

Goodbye Iraq!

CLOSEUP JAPAN

But who really cares for the Iraqis? We know for sure, George W Bush and his colleagues and aides at the White House and Pentagon care more for the safety of Americans in Iraq and also for the precious resources buried deep under the Iraqi soil. And as for Japan, it was more important to show that the country is an important ally, not of the people of Iraq, but of George Bush and his company.

MONZURUL HUQ

ENDING Japanese soldiers to Iraq to help Tokyo's closest ally, giving the Iraq invasion a multi-national coloring was probably the most controversial of all decisions taken by Japan's present government under the leadership of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. Public opinion in Japan has never been in favour of the dispatch of troops and Japanese people were all along puzzled by the unresolved question of why the country had to participate in a military operation that had neither

nations of the world.

As a result, when Koizumi decided to send 600 ground troops to Iraq with the declared purpose of a humanitarian mission, a sense of unease set in, as the decision also called into question the validity of a specific article of country's constitution that prohibits Japan from any kind of military involvement overseas. The troops were anyway sent to Iraq without resolving the constitutional issue.

The government simply relied on a bill that was later approved by the Diet setting a timeframe for the deployment and went ahead with the approval of the United Nations the plan. Accordingly around 600 nor the support of the majority members of the Ground Self

Defense Force were sent to Iraq's southern city of Samawah, where a rotation of troops signifies Japanese presence in the country until the withdrawal is to be completed by early next month.

Announcing the decision of withdrawal from Iraq early last week, Prime Minister Koizumi said the humanitarian aid activities of the Self Defense Force have accomplished their role. The people of apan are obviously relieved that the withdrawal is now underway and the two-and-a-half year mission is coming to an end without the loss of a single Japanese life. Though Japanese officials are

mission, many questions related to the mission and what it indeed gave Japan remains unsolved.

We know for sure that though Japanese officials think the deployment of troops in Iraq was successful and it accomplished the purpose for which troops were sent to raq, the overall situation of Iraq did not improve at all. The sectarian violence has intensified in recent months and public security deteriorated to an unprecedented level. The living condition of average Iraqis is now far below what used to be during the days of Saddam Hussein. Can this situation be considered a proper sign of reconstruction or progress? Japanese policy makers might feel happy by telling there own people so, but no one in Iraq or its surrounding perimeters are going to

What then prompted Japanese leadership to complete a mission so hurriedly that they started with so much publicity? The short answer in obviously fear. Japan is afraid that once the protecting shield of the presence of the British boasting of the success of the Iraq troops is withdrawn; there might

be the emergence of a free for all situation when it would no longer be possible to avoid casualties.

The constitutional bindings do not allow Japanese troops to get involved in combat situation overseas. This means, despite carrying heavy weapons, Japanese troops are not supposed to use such weaponry in case a situation to do so arises. This was also the reason why at the beginning of the mission they were given the choice of a relatively safer place in Iraq to operate. Samawah is the main city of the southern Iraqi province of Muthanna, a deserted land with few localities composed of Shite majority. Hence, Samawah was seen as a safe heaven in an otherwise volatile country where the non-combative Japanese soldiers would find a friendly atmosphere to get involved in their humanitar-

But once in the field, the Japanese did not find Samawah as safe as they were told. There were a number of incidents of mortar and rocket firet on the Japanese camp and vehicles serving the Japanese troops also occasionally came

under attack. As a result, there was the security arrangements in the that hardly benefited Iraqis. a need of an effective protective shield for the Japanese troops to operate in relative safety and that protection was provided by the British military presence in the

south of Iraq. It looks funny that soldiers, a full-fledged army who went to Iraq to help Iraqis improve their own situation, themselves needed the protection of other multi-national forces. But for Japan it was no fun at all and the leadership was deadly serious in completing the noble mission. The Japanese government is now saying that since Iraq at last could get its own elected government, it is now time to allow the people of the country to take charge of their own destiny and hence the time has come for the Japanese soldiers to say goodbye to

As part of its own partial withdrawal, the British forces in Iraq have decided to hand over the security arrangement of Muthanna province to the Iragis. This prompted Japan to think seriously what might happen in case Japan area are handed over to the newly formed Iraqi military units. A total collapse is an option that cannot be ruled out and such a scenario might otherwise mean an all out assault on Japanese positions. So, the fear factor obviously played a very important role in deciding to end abruptly a so called humanitarian mission that was supposed to ease the life of Iragis. And what in reality this two-and-a-half year

long mission achieved? The main activities of the Self Defense Force in Iraq were to provide water supply within their heavily protected fortress-like camps and hire local people to rebuild and repair a number of schools and other facilities in surrounding areas. But in each and every task the security of Japanese military personnel was the top priority and in taking the decision to withdraw from Iraq also it remained so. As a result, the part of the Japanese media critical to Iraq deployment is asking the question, if there was at all a need for Japan to go for continues her presence in Iraq after such an expensive endeavour

But who really cares for the Iragis? We know for sure, George W Bush and his colleagues and aides at the White House and Pentagon care more for the safety of Americans in Iraq and also for the precious resources buried deep under the Iraqi soil. And as for Japan, it was more important to show that the country is an important ally, not of the people of Iraq, but of George Bush and his company.

Hence, the need to show the world that the "coalition of the willing" was indeed a broad based coalition played a crucial role for Japan to join and become a party of a war that has already been proved to be unjustified. What a few Iraqis in and around Samawah received in return was just the supply of water and nothing else. No wonder that in an interview given to Japan's public broadcasting station NHK, the Samawah representative of Muktada Al-Sadr's Party did not hesitate to say that the Japanese presence failed to keep up with their expectations.