

Use the parliament

Time is of the essence

THE last session of parliament during the present government's tenure has got underway. There is a growing sense of crisis outside the Jatiya Sangsad centering around the electoral and caretaker government reform issues. Pragmatism demands that the reform agenda be now internalised within the parliament and addressed wholeheartedly.

Originally, that is where the reform proposals belong, these having been tabled in the House by the leader of the opposition Sheikh Hasina as far back as on February 12. Realistically, parliament is also the place which will ultimately put the seal of approval on a constitutional amendment whereby the necessary reforms would be carried out.

Responding positively to the opposition initiative, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia had called for a joint committee to deal with the reform issues. Six months have passed since then but no headway could be made on the formation of a composite committee. On the contrary, there has been hardening of the position on both sides over their intractable difference on the issue of Jamaat's inclusion in the committee.

The standoff is now threatening to reach the point of no return as the prime minister grandstands with her singular stress on constitution taking its own course while the opposition gives September 18 as the deadline for the government to agree to the reform proposals or face a stiffer movement.

Against this simmering backdrop, and with a sense of foreboding, we urge serious efforts on the part of all concerned to take up the reform issues in parliament and resolve them to the mutual satisfaction of opposition and ruling parties. The leader of the House, the leader of the opposition and the Speaker need to play their respective roles to make things happen.

We suggest that under the rules of procedure, a special parliamentary committee be formed to deal with the reform proposals which are already on the table. Make the best use of the last session of parliament to trash out the reform question lest this spill into the caretaker government's brief tenure thereby complicating the matters beyond resolution.

Bush exposed again

His credibility touches a new low

NOW, President Bush, whose theory of Iraq's possessing WMD was effectively quashed by the failure of his own inspectors to find anything of that kind in the country, is facing another allegation of having lied to the Americans and the world at large.

A Senate panel has found that his claim of Saddam Hussein having a link with al-Qaeda is not true. The Senate finding adds further substance to the widely held view that President Bush's war on Iraq was based on falsehood and deceit that he had managed to cook up through manipulating, distorting or even warping intelligence reports.

The Senate panel deserves appreciation for undoing a lie that decisively influenced the course of events in Iraq. After all, nothing could be more effective than a Saddam Hussein link to bin-Laden to justify the war, and no one was more enthusiastic than the president himself to prove that such a link did exist.

No sane human being was ever convinced that President Bush's Iraq campaign was morally or legally tenable. He was acting on some vague pretexts the validity of which could never be tested by outsiders. But when the WMD bogey could not be established, there was reason to believe that the president might have referred to similar non-existent sources of discomfort to the average American that could be used to strengthen his case for the war. The war has already left more than 40,000 Iraqis dead against a much smaller, but still not insignificant, US casualties of around 2,700 at the moment.

President Bush's tactic of bringing false accusations against an enemy that he would pounce on brings into question the moral foundation of the democratic system that he takes so much pride in. It is also an example of how a government could lose its credibility when the president resorts to dubious practices.

The Senate panel has rendered a valuable service to the US by serving the cause of truth. However, they should also think of the great miseries that the people of Iraq have been subjected to because of President Bush's decision to attack their country and suggest ways of putting an end to the matter.

The gathering storm



M ABDUL HAFIZ

IT was indeed the prime minister's masterstroke to be able to keep a confused opposition in suspense for months, and then at long last throw the gauntlet by being dismissive of the latter's reforms proposal. Her pronouncements, on the founding anniversary of BNP and later, left few in doubt that she was determined to shove the next election down the people's throat in the way it was already scripted earlier.

Although a combative 14-party alliance, led by an apparently exhausted AL, took up the challenge rather instantly, it was more as a matter of routine political activism. Doubts abound that they will be able to match the power,

resources, and guile of their opponents.

In the meantime, the ruling alliance is far ahead of the rest of the political outfits, and in full control of election mechanisms. The BNP supremo has, in her speeches, been spitting fire and brimstone at the opposition, and lashing it with the words not found in the lexicon of democracy.

The ruling dispensation has at its disposal all that is required for electoral victory -- money, muscle, and carefully crafted publicity blitz. No one can doubt that the power wielders are, at the moment, riding the crest of the wave.

Yet the next election is not just another election; neither can the 4-party alliance be allowed a cake-walk in winning it. The nation today is at a dangerous crossroads where its compass has to be

PERSPECTIVES

Amid the dark clouds of political uncertainty there is a flicker of hope in what has, of late, been indicated by the BNP secretary general regarding the possibility of dialogue despite the prime minister's comments in her speeches. What the people want is a fair electoral game. If that is possible then they couldn't care less who comes to power.

reset in the right direction. There is a defining moment before us when we have to define our goal afresh. There is a moment of truth when that truth has to be resurrected. Over the years the enemies of our independence have surreptitiously raised their ugly heads and the collaborators of 1971 have bared their fangs. The rampart of our statehood and value system is under assault.

The regime has suddenly assumed its own real appearance -- imperious, repressive, and cynical. During its five years rule it utterly failed to deliver -- pushing the country to the brink. It, however, nourished and patronised a class of vested interests at the expense of the miseries of the millions. Together with that cabal of favoured ones, who thrive only on plunder, the regime plans to

recapture the citadel of power to guarantee the safety of their ill-acquired wealth.

Its game plan is to hold an election of sorts with its compliant election commission and a party man, who was chosen craftily through a constitutional amendment of the retiring age of the judges, as head of the caretaker government. Although the regime is pretending innocence, even a child can understand the chicanery involved.

Political power, when mixed with the lust for wealth, becomes an intoxicating brew. The regime addicted to it cannot be amenable to just gentle persuasion. They will go ahead with their game plan, and the patriots have a duty to stop them. The regime is perhaps the worst ever government in the country's history. During its rule

the country witnessed inflation and price-hike which have reached an all time high. Corruption swept the country like an epidemic. The hapless political opponents under went repression never experienced before. The politicisation of the administration in favour of the ruling regime was total. The country was witness to the bestial attack on the opposition leadership on August 21, the heinous attempt on the life of British High Commissioner, and the brutal killing of the star opposition leaders. The mystery surrounding them has yet to be unearthed.

Where do we go from here? A nincompoop opposition like AL has also failed us. In their confused political maneuverings they run from nowhere to nowhere. Its supine leadership, caught up in the same mediocrity as that of the ruling alliance, has been acutely lacking innovation. The momentum of the party activism was repeatedly handicapped by its gaffes. So much so that, on issues of urgency, the people themselves rose against the authorities, while the political parties stood by. Even within the party, its ordinary rank and file led the leaders into

action. Notwithstanding the dismal scenario, a gathering storm is visibly covering the country's political firmament. A stage managed election, if there is one, is no criterion for democratic transition, nor the last word in politics. People on both sides of our political divide must realise that there is nothing like perfection in democracy. The post-autocracy development in our country is a pointer. This is no alternative to an objective dialogue on the reform proposal. The political game must be fought on level ground. Any attempt to subvert that noble objective will plunge the country into turmoil -- extrication from which will be far from easy.

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Pakistan: Need for a restructured federation



DILARA CHOUDHURY

RECENT killing of Balochistan's separatist tribal leader Nawab Akbar Bugti, along with his two grandsons and thirty-seven supporters by Pakistan's security forces, has deepened Islamabad's political crisis surrounding the issue of its centre-province relations and its consequences. The incident, in which twenty-one members of the security forces including six officials were also killed, is a new chapter in Pakistan's on-going battle over Balochistan and its troubled history of national integration. What is this unseen battle about? What is its significance for Pakistan? How can it be mitigated?

According to Islamabad's version, after years of neglect of Balochistan by the previous central governments, the current one is trying to develop it under its new policy. Islamabad has undertaken massive development projects like building of Gawadar port, highways and cantonments by pumping millions of dollars, and believes that these developments would turn the province into a regional economic and energy hub, a land corridor between South-East Pakistan and Central Asia, bringing enormous benefits for the Balochis.

Islamabad is of the opinion that tribal leaders like Akbar Bugti, Bux Marri and Ataulah Mengal under the grab of nationalists struggling

to protect Balochi rights are trying to protect their own political turf. They are, in fact, waging the insurgency to have control of Balochi wealth and its people by preventing development and education in the area in order to retain the old Sardari system. So, once the tribal revolt is put down and the old feudal system is done away with, the Balochis would welcome government's endeavours to develop their province. The establishment also sees playing of foreign hands in inciting the armed Baloch militants -- countries that are opposed to Gawadar becoming a major trading port for Central Asian nations and China.

The political analysts, however, feel that it would be unwise on Islamabad's part to take such a simplistic view of Balochistan's situation. The forces of nationalism came into being due to the nature of Pakistan's federalism that ensured the domination and control of central government (consisting mostly of Punjabis and backed by the Army), of its constituent units. It is a common knowledge that Baloch and other nationalist leaders from the smaller provinces of Pakistan were eager to join the Constituent Assembly of 1970, which was to frame a genuine federal form of government by granting wider provincial autonomy to its provinces. The rest, as we all know, is history. Islamabad should, therefore, probe as to why

PANORAMA

What Islamabad fails to comprehend is that revolt by Bugti and others is not simply a tribal one. Bugti may have been a tribal leader with his own agenda but his struggle to protect Balochi rights has already resonated with popular feelings of the Balochis, as indicated by widespread violence in the province following Bugti killing. Islamabad should not underestimate the warning it poses as there would be no dearth of sympathisers for the cause if Balochi grievances are not addressed.

the Balochis are in sympathy with those who are fighting the very establishment which has brought a systematic focus on the province under a new policy.

The answer to that question is not very difficult to find. As mentioned earlier, the Balochis have been fighting for their rights for years. During 1947-1970, they remained voiceless under the centralised tendencies of the interim government, and even more muted under 1956 and 1962 constitutions when provinces of then West Pakistan were merged into One Unit. Tragedy is that even after the dissolution of One Unit and 1973 consensus constitution, which granted greater provincial autonomy than under any previous constitutions, a genuine federal government was not established due to: i) the non-implementation of the constitutional provisions that granted provincial autonomy and allowed straight transfer of the royalty and surcharge on natural gas, royalty on crude oil and hydroelectricity profit due to prolonged military rule; ii) failure of National Finance Commission, a body responsible for the composition of the divisible pool taxes and vertical and horizontal distribution due to its ineffectiveness during the military rule of Zia ul Haque, and resource distribution on the basis of population, that was adopted at the insis-

tence of Punjab, which worked against the interest of less developed provinces like Balochistan and NWFP who have more than half of the land area, but less than one fifth of the population.

The issue of provincial autonomy is, thus, still very much alive in Pakistan. The current controversy on provincial autonomy has two broad aspects: i) demand by political parties grouped into Pakistan Oppressed Nations Movement (PONM), whose bases are in the less developed provinces like Sindh, Balochistan and NWFP, for a new Constituent Assembly to frame a new constitution on the basis of 1940 Resolution. Even Mutti Quom Movement (MQM) has demanded provincial autonomy on the basis of 1940 Resolution; ii) on the other hand, the mainstream political parties such as Pakistan Muslim League, Mutida Majlis Amal (MMA) and Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD) all demand the restoration of 1973 constitution in its original form on the grounds that it provided sufficient quantum of provincial autonomy, which have been thwarted by non-implementation of the provisions as well as its mutilations by successive military regimes.

The military dominated regime of Pakistan, however, instead of going for straight constitutional formula, decided to satisfy the autonomy demand of the Baloch and the others by transferring powers and dis-

bursement of the development funds to the institutions of local government through Devolution of Power Plan known as five Ds -- devolution of political power, decentralisation of administrative authority, distribution of resources to the districts, de-concentration of management and functions and diffusion of the power-authority nexus. Elections to these institutions were held in phases beginning in 2000 and ending in 2005. The plan and its execution look very impressive. But a deeper look reveals that it is a reminiscent of Ayub's Basic Democracy, which attempted to create a power base for the center by-passing the provincial authority.

The scheme, thus, faced severe criticism from the political parties and provincial governments, which accused centre of interfering with provincial subject like local government and trying to divide the locals. The issue is particularly serious in Balochistan where most of the development works are being undertaken either by the Federal Government or District Government. As a result, there were no improvements in Baloch situation. Balochi dissatisfaction over power and resource sharing was evidenced by the rejection of the recommendations that were made by Senate Parliamentary Committee in 2004 formed at the initiative of the then Prime Minister Chaudhary Shujaat Hussain, by Four-Party Alliance of nationalist parties. Again in 2005, a political solution was sought by Pakistan's ruling Muslim League offering a package of incentives including constitutional amendments giving greater autonomy to the province but unfortunately it was overruled by President Pervez Musharraf and the Army who vowed to crush the rebellion militarily.

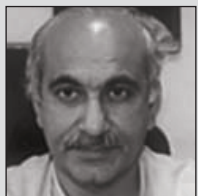
It is easily discerned from the above why the Baloch and others of the smaller provinces are alienated from the present political system of

Pakistan. Baloch nationalists, in particular have been resentful of Islamabad for taking income from its natural gas and other resources while spending little on the province. They now want to control their wealth and spend it according to their own development needs. In the absence of genuine provincial autonomy and participatory government the Balochis view Islamabad's development efforts, which they feel would not accrue any benefit for the locals, as center's own agenda and growing presence of military as a sign of subjugation.

What Islamabad fails to comprehend is that revolt by Bugti and others is not simply a tribal one. Bugti may have been a tribal leader with his own agenda but his struggle to protect Balochi rights has already resonated with popular feelings of the Balochis, as indicated by widespread violence in the province following Bugti killing. Islamabad should not underestimate the warning it poses as there would be no dearth of sympathisers for the cause if Balochi grievances are not addressed. Islamabad must realise that no national integration is possible without winning the hearts and minds of the people. What it really calls for is restructuring Pakistani Federation by re-fixing the parameters of provincial autonomy, revise the scheme on the distribution of resources between the centre and the provinces and make Balochis an integral part of an inclusive system. This is important as the fate of Balochistan will have significant consequences for the nascent nationalist movements in NWFP and Sindh.

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What a fall



M J AKBAR

I first saw the Niagara as a child, in the Readers' Digest, in the form of a retro wavy-line illustration for an article on a man who jumped over the Falls in a barrel. It was the kind of article that used to make Americans, who owned the Digest, rich, and Indians, who read it, iterate.

The chap inside the barrel was either mad or French, or possibly both, but he survived to become an international icon. Why did he dare death? Perhaps because circus had not been replaced completely by television as family entertainment, and the world still bred stuntmen who could put their heads in a lion's mouth for a living.

He could not have made that jump from the American side of the Niagara Falls, or he would have landed on hard rock and

BYLINE

What would have happened if the Niagara had been on the border of India and Pakistan? War would have broken out over the small patch of green separating the two sections, for starters: if we can fight over the frozen water of a glacier, we can certainly go to war over the flowing torrents of a fall. The most fascinating aspect of an Indo-Pak Niagara would of course be the fact that there would be no water in the fall. We would have drained the water upstream and diverted it to wheat production. At the bottom of the gorge, dhobis would be washing dirty linen in the trickle that survived the water-hunters.

reached purgatory rather than the Digest. The Niagara river sweeps to the edge of the precipice with a brisk, choppy urgency, and then divides unevenly on either side of an island before descending with a crash, a roar and a cloud into the gorge. The American falls are linear, much smaller, and hit huge boulders of rock.

The Canadian falls form a horseshoe over which an olive green river changes colour suddenly at the invisible line of descent, turning an exquisite jade interspersed with powerful, broad rolling columns of milk-white. Ever so often, foam ascends up the fall, like a salmon cascading up a perpendicular storm. The gorge is enveloped by a mist that rises into a vague, unthreatening, unsteady mush-

room cloud. Remarkably, the river turns placid very quickly, as if energy has rebounded into the air rather than traveled forward with the water. The man in the barrel understood that if he developed just a little extra momentum, he would be pushed by the force into the calm.

However, despite being mad, or French, he had the gumption not to try and repeat the stunt.

I was told of a child of five who fell from a boat gone amok on the regular part of the river, and survived because of his life vest and the unmentioned possibility that the Almighty had personally drafted his destiny. One acrobat strung a tightrope through the wet cloud, from one end of the horse-shoe to the other, strapped a

man, seated in a chair, on his back, began to cross, stopped halfway, placed the man-plus-chair on the metal wire and walked on to the other side. By the time he returned to save his partner in the act, he was still sane, but his companion had turned into a gibbering idiot.

There is something in the Niagara air that encourages dubious behaviour. For some reason -- possibly a holiday mood -- I began surging with puns. Let me offer you a particularly poor one. The Canadians have the Niagara Falls; the Americans have the Niagara Fallout.

One should have known by the signage of the first restaurant to greet us in the city of Niagara: Bar B.Q. Village Restaurant. Indian Cuisine. Pakistan and

Bangladesh Foods. Halal. There were more nations represented in the Sunday tourist melee than sit in the United Nations. A walk through the promenade was a journey through a dictionary of languages. Of those I could recognise, if not understand, Gujarati was at the top, closely followed by Tamil.

If American is given its correct due as an independent tongue, and the subcontinent variety formally disowned by Oxbridge (see placard), then English came pretty low on the list. Identities swarmed by: an Arab pushing his mother in a wheelchair; Afghan women in headscarves gossiping on the railing; a bald man in a red Suisse T-shirt; a Latino honcho with a padded crotch. The most visible faces were Chinese and Indian, a display of the new purchasing power of their surge-economies. Judging by the number of Louis Vuitton bags, Indians and Chinese are either getting richer at a fabulous pace or Chinese counterfeiters have taken over the commerce in quality brands.

Canada and America share the falls. There is the occasional spiteful jibe from Canada, which is uncomfortable with being the junior partner, but the wonder of the world is peacefully shared.

What would have happened if the Niagara had been on the border of India and Pakistan? War would have broken out over the small patch of green separating the two sections, for starters: if we can fight over the frozen water of a glacier, we can certainly go to war over the flowing torrents of a fall. Media would have constantly described it as the most scenic battlefield in the world. Every evening, frontier guards from the two countries, flaunting military plumes, would have high-goosed to assert sovereignty to the plaintive sounds of some forgotten British Indian Army hymn. The national flags would flutter high. In addition, 30 saffron banners would wave over Shiv temples on one side, and 48 green flags would test the breeze over mosques on the other. There would probably be one shrine at which troops from both countries would forget their differences and pay common homage. The most fascinating aspect of an Indo-Pak Niagara would of course be the fact that there would be no water in the fall. We would have drained the water upstream and diverted it to wheat production. At the bottom of the gorge, dhobis would be washing dirty linen in the trickle that survived the water-hunters.

Capitalism starts where nature

ends. Cross the street from Niagara, stroll up a mild incline and you suddenly arrive on a street that makes money out of fear. It is an extraordinary fact that children who do not display the slightest tremor at the ferocity of nature, available free at the Niagara Falls, pay good money to enter Frankenstein's Gothic-letting laboratory. The fear-shop managed to mix up Frankenstein with Dracula but that is a minor quibble. Puns rule on Fear Avenue: a deep baritone voice orders the passer-by to step into Frankenstein's world to kill time. Across the street, King Tut's eyes glow a deep red, his slab-shaped beard moves to and fro and periodically he utters a few words which, fortunately, I cannot decipher. Why does artificially induced fear, which needs to cross but an age-line to slip into laughter, work? It must be because the child's imagination is still pristine, endless, and unburdened by the mundane facts that govern life's reality. Is age the slow erosion of imagination?

The big debate in Canada is whether the looming labour shortage should be solved by immigration from abroad or more babies at home. (I shall bravely resist the temptation to labour away at another pun.) Canada has

enough space, a first world economy and not enough people at the bottom end of the economic pyramid, hence the soft immigration policy. Basically all you have to do is turn up, even using political asylum as your stated reason, hang around for three years and they make you legal.

An Indian working in my hotel told me that he had come for a cousin's marriage 15 years ago, and never returned. There are a million South Asians in Toronto, and Punjabi is their national language. Some turn up to claim political asylum. That is probably why the waiter with a heavy Bangladeshi accent at one Indian restaurant told me that he was from Afghanistan. My sympathies are with this young man. Canada cannot be the happiest destination for Bengali sons whose mothers ordered them to wear monkey caps when the Calcutta or Dhaka temperature dropped in November. The winter temperature in Toronto can stay at minus thirty for months. You need a bear hat around here rather than a monkey cap.

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