

Leeway in the opposition announcement

Make use of it, prioritise reforms

CONTRARY to the doomsday predilection of many a political pundit, the programmes announced by the opposition 14-party alliance leader Sheikh Hasina may have provided an opportunity to initiate a dialogue process on the pressing reform issues. Actually, compared to the momentum or hype built up by the opposition prior to their grand rally, the programme they unveiled at Paltan Maidan is of a less aggressive mould than we had expected. The immediate next course of action as envisaged leaves an aperture, more precisely, a leeway for trying out the softer dialogue option.

The 14-party alliance programme has two parts: first, the blockade and hartal falling on today and tomorrow; and secondly, waging of a non-stop movement from the day Justice KM Hasan takes over as Chief Adviser of the Caretaker Government with Justice M A Aziz functioning as Chief Election Commissioner. After the blockade and hartal there is a window of over a month before the belligerent part of the opposition programme namely, unrelenting agitation against KM Hasan, MAAZIZ and his colleagues in the EC, begins.

The government's proposal for secretary-general level talks between both the parties is on the table. This has the potential for defusing tension and making headway on the reform issues.

Both sides would do well to make use of the interregnum until October 27, when the BNP-led government hands over power to the caretaker government, to carry forward the much-awaited option for engagement in place of standoff presaging a violent showdown.

The BNP manifesto talks of reforms. As a matter of fact, there is a consensus between the ruling party and the opposition on the need for electoral reforms. As for the caretaker government, the fourteenth amendment to the constitution provides for alternative solutions. So, everything can be within the constitution which Khaleda Zia wants. Hasina is for reform within the constitution. Hence, they can accommodate each other within the perimeter of their respective positions.

What's the point in taking this caretaker government issue so mechanically? The sole point is that it has to be a non-party, neutral interim arrangement. If the opposition does not have confidence in a particular dispensation of the caretaker government why the latter should be insisted upon when there is alternative solution within the bounds of the constitution?

Without wasting any more time in meaningless intransigence contests and through public posturing that bred frustrations among people, both sides should now concentrate on the reform agenda.

Power supply abyss

None to answer for it!

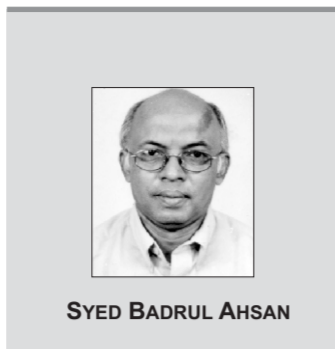
WITH as many as 19 power generation units remaining shut down, people all over the country are undergoing unprecedented hardship. The daily power supply shortfall now exceeds 2200 Megawatt (MW), the highest ever in the country. The city and other parts of the country are regularly facing power cuts quite a few times on a daily basis. Many city markets and shopping centres are using their own generators for at least three to four hours everyday. The picture is bleaker in the rural areas. Industrial output, especially of the small and medium units, is sure to fall.

We are simply appalled by the situation. No less than a PDB official has said, "The government has failed to install any new power generating unit in the last five years other than the 80 MW one at Tongi that remains shut down most of the times."

On the other hand, only as early as last week, the ECNEC has approved power distribution projects worth Tk 2000 crore. One of these approved projects is targeted to increase power consumers by another ten lakh. While the 3100 MW power generated in 2002 stayed even with the overall demand at that time, the present generation capacity of 3300MW today has to meet double the consumer demand of four years ago.

We strongly believe that behind this deteriorating state of power supply two of the major causes are sheer bad planning and over all mismanagement, particularly during the past five years. There is also a clear indication of corrupt practices in respect of spreading the distribution network through installation of poles the contract of which was given to ruling party cronies.

At this fag end of the present government, we see little or no possibility of any improvement in the situation. Already the people of the country are burdened with innumerable problems; surely they did not need yet another one to add to their miseries. We can only hope that some day those responsible will be brought to justice.



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE International Monetary Fund informed all of us a few days ago that unless the Bangladesh authorities agreed to go along with it in ensuring structural reforms, it would refuse to release the money promised as part of development plans here. On a television programme some days ago, Shahjahan Omar, a lawyer affiliated to the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party, asked rhetorically, "Who are the NDI? What locus standi do they have?" Over the past five years, Finance Minister Saifur Rahman has grumbled about the conditions that foreign donors overwhelm Bangladesh with before they are willing to free any money for the many projects the government regularly designs and would like to put into the implementation process.

It is all so pretty disturbing, isn't it? This, after all, happens to be a sovereign country where the people inhabiting its geographical spaces are expected to be masters of their destiny. And the government they elect to office is supposed to comprise individuals who will speak for them, effectively and with conviction, at home and abroad. That was the way Tajuddin Ahmed saw it long ago. Soon after the liberation of the country, a team of western aid-givers descended on Bangladesh and went briskly into the business of telling the nation's first finance minister what needed to be done to reconstruct

God is bored --- and so Daschle comes calling

GROUND REALITIES

However much the National Economic Council may meet in all the false glory that comes with power, we know that we the sovereign people of Bangladesh are ultimately dependent, for sheer survival, on the largesse that comes our way from American and European shores. And now these good Americans and Europeans busily go about trying to rearrange our chaotic household for us. See what indignity our politicians have pushed us into?

Bangladesh's infrastructure and how they stood ready to help. Tajuddin Ahmed heard them out, patiently and in all the politeness he could muster, before letting them know that Bangladesh's progress would be sketched, mapped and implemented through the efforts of its war-ravaged people. That was the end of the discussion. In Delhi for a conference in 1972, the finance minister studiously ignored Robert McNamara, despite the latter's desperate attempts to have a moment with the man who had led the Bengali military struggle against Pakistan in 1971. The president of the World Bank, formerly the man who had led America down the road to disaster in Vietnam, went back home disappointed.

It was a different world for Bangladesh in the early 1970s. Even as China and Saudi Arabia refused to accord diplomatic recognition to the new country (and the Chinese kept vetoing Bangladesh's entry into the United Nations until 1974), the government of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman refused to kowtow before them. In February 1974, he decided on his own, overruling the objections of some of his advisors, to join the summit of Islamic nations in Lahore without consulting such a good friend as Indira Gandhi. In his time, President Ziaur Rahman saw to it that Bangladesh's niche in the global diplomatic arena remained at a respectable level. Of course,

Bangladesh's diplomacy, its links with the world outside its frontiers, was not perfect. But a certain dignity marked the way the new country carried itself in the councils of the world. That is not what you experience today. All around you have people come from abroad, from the West in fact, ready to diagnose our ailments for us, to tell us what sicknesses we suffer from and how we managed to have them in the first place. So are we supposed to feel upset at the way these foreigners have been giving us lessons on democracy and the best means of arriving at economic prosperity? Of course we are upset. And certainly we understand the many ways in which these diplomats coming from foreign lands keep hurting our self-esteem, maybe without meaning to. We can, and sometimes do, let them know that we can manage our affairs on our own. But, really, can we?

In the mid-1990s, it was not Sir Ninian who decided that Bangladesh's politics needed to be sorted out. It was our political classes which convinced him and the Commonwealth Secretariat that unless he came in to mediate between our squabbling political leaders, everything would go wrong for us. Sir Ninian failed in his mission, of course, just as Stafford Cripps failed to have the Congress and the Muslim League come closer to each other in 1946. But the Cripps mission, or the Cabinet Mission as it was called, was ordained to shape a strategy

toward a British withdrawal from India through leaving the place in one, independent piece. In the 1980s, diplomatic efforts were expended toward pushing South Africa's apartheid regime out of power and into handing political authority over to the black majority. Note, though, that all such measures dealt essentially with countries or societies which politically were either not yet free states or did not fulfill the conditions in which free states operated. None of those factors applies to Bangladesh, which is why it bothers us to no end that three and a half decades into freedom we are suddenly in need of diplomats from abroad to put a democratic structure in place for us.

Between you and me, it is a traumatic situation for us. The manner in which American ambassadors over the years have openly commented on the state of our politics has left us asking ourselves some very serious questions about our self-esteem as a people, about the ability of our politicians to guide, on their own, the nation into the future. But then, you will ask, how much self-esteem does a nation have when its economy remains dependent on handouts from the World Bank, the IMF and the Asian Development Bank? Saifur Rahman keeps punching away at the national media for the "damage" they are doing to Bangladesh's image, but he simply has no way of persuading Christine

Wallich into believing that economic subsidies matter in Bangladesh, that raising the price of fuel every few months does not necessarily enhance the lifestyle of Bengalis. When donor pressure compelled us to close down Adamjee jute mills, the explanation thrown our way was that the mills had become an albatross around our necks. Jute, those powerful people whispered in our ears so bewitchingly, had gone out of fashion. And yet in that very month the giant locks were put on Adamjee, a couple of new jute mills came up in West Bengal. How is it, you might wonder, that these donors do not have the courage to proffer advice to Jyoti Basu and Buddhadeb Bhattacharya but have the gall to educate our politicians on how they should be running their country? When your prime minister or leader of the opposition travels abroad to the West, they have a hard time getting a brief meeting with heads of government there. More often than not, they do not come by any such opportunity at all. And here? Any low level official of the US State Department knows for sure he or she will be talking to your president, your prime minister and your opposition leader with little difficulty, if any. And why shouldn't they have such self-important airs about them? The alacrity and excitement with which our bureaucracy goes about setting up those important meetings for individuals like Christina Rocca or Nicholas Burns demonstrate a degree of genuflection you once thought was never characteristic of our people.

No, we are not suggesting that the National Democratic Institute should not be meddling in our politics. The fact is that our politicians have brought us all to such a pass that we tell ourselves these days that our salvation is either in the hands of God or in those of all the wonderful men and women in Europe and America. Right now,

God does not seem to be overly interested in our troubles, which leaves us waiting for Tom Daschle and Mike Moore to arrive and wipe the mildew off our walls and our floors. Justice M. A. Aziz and his friends at the Election Commission will have no embarrassment, absolutely none, when we implore them, day after day, to leave because they have so badly undermined us by taking us for a ride. But you can put a wager on your reputation they will surely think about the mess they have made of things once Andrew Bruce of the European Union acquaints them with Brussels' view on the situation. Science and Technology Minister Abdul Moyeen Khan may get some approving looks when he hurls a copy of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper at the World Bank resident representative's feet, or nearly. The bigger reality is that it will not be Christine Wallich who will be eating humble pie afterward.

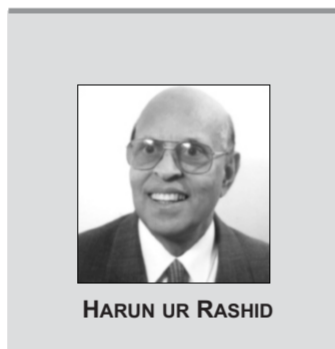
And there you are, with all your quaint, foggy notions of diplomatic norms needing to be upheld and yet compelled into looking at objective reality. That reality is simple enough to comprehend: these western nations and financial organizations watch us going to them, year after year, for alms. They oblige us, on condition that we listen to their "advice". We have no choice. However much the National Economic Council may meet in all the false glory that comes with power, we know that we the sovereign people of Bangladesh are ultimately dependent, for sheer survival, on the largesse that comes our way from American and European shores. And now these good Americans and Europeans busily go about trying to rearrange our chaotic household for us. See what indignity our politicians have pushed us into?

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Does the Non-Aligned Movement have relevance?

BOTTOM LINE

If NAM is to be relevant, it has to re-invent itself and direct its energies as a pressure group with the intention of removing poverty among their nationals. The days of political rhetoric is gone; democracy and development should be the main focus of NAM. The spirit of NAM lies in independent thinking, independent course of action, not in subservience.



HARUN UR RASHID

THE current Non-Aligned Conference was held in Havana (Cuba) with about 54 heads of state including those from Iran, India, Venezuela, Indonesia, Belarus and Bolivia participating. The last conference took place in 2003.

India's Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh probably felt uneasy sitting with some of the anti-US leaders because India has aligned itself with the US and is no longer perceived as a non-aligned nation.

It has been a good gathering of heads of state, many of the leaders seriously criticised the foreign policy of the US, especially the policy that challenges and ignores the rule-based order of the UN.

Relations between Cuba and the US are bitter since Cuban Communist revolution in 1958. The fact that it was being held in Cuba, so close to the US (only 217 km south of the tip of Florida) has not been comfortable for the Bush administration as some of the anti-

US leaders were attending and perhaps espouses policies that are not at ease with the US.

Bangladesh joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1973 and during the Cold War, non-aligned policy suited Bangladesh.

The origin

NAM was founded in 1961 in Belgrade. Only 25 countries attended the Belgrade meet. The seed of NAM was, however, sown at the 1955 Bandung (Indonesia) Conference of Asian-African leaders.

The principal purpose of NAM was to distance itself from the influence of two super powers. The origin of NAM was to espouse its own interests, not to be manipulated by either of the super powers in proxy wars or not to be under the influence of either of them. A third force emerged between the two super powers. That was a different era.

Many political scientists have raised questions about the relevance of NAM when there exists only one super power. The idea of

non-alignment from super powers during the Cold War was appropriate but after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, is NAM relevant or does it represent anything?

Now the Cold War is gone and many suggest NAM has to devise its policies and priorities if it wants to be relevant in the 21st century.

Past activities: A mixed record

NAM played a key role in the process of de-colonisation of former colonies. It provided a major thrust in the efforts for disarmament and was directly responsible for convening the 10th historic Special Session of the UN Assembly on disarmament.

Some critics say that although their efforts in the political domain are commendable, they neglected the most fundamental economic and social issue, i.e. poverty-reduction in the NAM member-countries. The leaders frittered away their energy on political and ideological issues than on "bread and butter" questions.

The NAM consists of 118 developing countries (two-thirds of humankind) and all of them are poor. The disparity between the rich and poor has widened. The gap between rich and the poor countries is larger at the beginning of the 21st century than it was at the beginning of the 20th century.

For example, the G-8 countries produce 60 percent of world's GDP. According to the UN Development Report, three richest people of developed countries have more assets than the total assets of 600 million people, living in NAM countries.

In 1960, a fifth of the world's population living in rich industrialised countries had 30 times the income of the poorest fifth. By 1995, this multiple rose by 82 times.

Currently, 12 percent of the world's people living in North America and Western Europe account for 60 percent of consumption, while the one-third living in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa account for only 3.2%. It is estimated that 800 million people go hungry in NAM countries.

The member-countries failed to make greater use of their own resources, both national and collective. Corruption and nepotism plagued almost all NAM countries. Greater dependence on imports of luxuries of life was allowed to ensure comforts of the rich to the utter neglect of needs of the vast poor majority.

Some of the leaders had no accountability, considered their countries private property and acquired weapons to crush public dissent to stay in power. Another fact is leaders are not yet ready to criticise one another, even if some of their activities are reprehensible.

Challenges for NAM:

Democratisation, public participation in decision-making process and accountability should be the hallmark of NAM leaders in their governance. They have to focus on the economic management and social harmony for the benefit of their people so that they get access to education, higher quality of life and political freedom. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen stated once that in a democratic country, famine does not occur.

The leaders have to face the impact of globalisation. Globalisation links the world through communication, migration, investment and trade. Under globalization, investors have more opportunities to diversify their holdings, businesses have more markets to serve, and more locations for productions. Individuals

can look for work outside their own countries. The NAM countries must seriously devise ways and means so that they can reap the benefits of globalisation.

Another challenge is resolution of conflicts among them. Wars or armed conflicts are bad for economic growth. Yet one rarely hears leaders of warring countries emphasising this fact. Furthermore, conflicts threaten to pull in larger players and destabilise regional peace. There is no mandatory dispute-resolution mechanism within NAM for mediation or arbitration to settle the inter-states conflicts.

Another fact that has dogged the NAM countries is the division among them. Some of them are pro-American while some are extreme leftists and anti-American. Many observers say the conference is a gathering of disharmonious voices. The split weakens the NAM as it is unable to speak in unison on issues.

Finally, if NAM is to be relevant, it has to re-invent itself and direct its energies as a pressure group with the intention of removing poverty among their nationals. The days of political rhetoric is gone; democracy and development should be the main focus of NAM. The spirit of NAM lies in independent thinking, independent course of action, not in subservience.

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

A departing prime minister and his legacy

CLOSEUP JAPAN

But what Japan's next prime minister is to inherit from Koizumi is not a society coming slowly out of economic recession with visible marks of strain, but a society bracing restlessly the fervor of nationalism that Koizumi so carefully nurtured during his tenure. This nationalist trend has harmed Japan's foreign policy a lot and Koizumi's successor is to inherit a foreign policy that many see as something at a mess.

MONZURUL HUQ writes from Tokyo

AS I'm hitting the keyboard to give this segment of writings about Japan a presentable shape, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has exactly three more days left before he steps down. His successor will be chosen on Wednesday and the official hand over of power is to take place on September 26. As a result, it is clear by Wednesday who among the three aspiring candidates is going to replace him, though indications are abundant that the race is going to be a one-sided one and the chief cabinet secretary, Shinzo Abe, is almost certain to assume the responsibility.

Five years is a long term in Japanese politics to head a government. Only few in post World War II Japan could reach that much sought after goal and Koizumi already belongs to that group of exclusive politicians in Japan. This mere fact leaves enough reason to conclude that his reign, which is to come to an end quite soon, is a significant one and will be remembered long after the curtain finally comes down.

But in politics it is never an easy task to come to a definite conclusion about things that are to take shape in the future. As a result, it seems a bit tricky to conclude right now how Koizumi is going to be remembered in Japanese politics in coming days. There are of

course several clues that can give hints of possible outcomes, but none should be taken as conclusive.

First of all, Koizumi belongs to those rare species of political figures in Japan's main ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), who became prime minister without heading a faction of the party. Hence, for him it was relatively easy to decide and move forward not towards disbanding the factions all together, but making factional politics within LDP a difficult task to pursue.

He was largely successful in this particular field thanks to the fact that the faction he belongs to constitutes the largest and most influential group within the ruling

party. The fact that he was not able to disband factions totally is also related to this peculiar position that he was holding being the prime minister.

The leader of his own faction, former Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori, would definitely not like to see faction politics disappear and Koizumi had to accommodate with the wishes of his faction leader. How far beyond his tenure this particular legacy, the ineffectiveness of faction politics, is to continue in the future, remains to be seen. More because a number of influential politicians who left the party following last September's snap general election have expressed their desires to return to the party fold. And should they return under a new party leadership, there are possibilities that faction powers too might see a return to Japanese politics.

But one particular legacy that Koizumi is most likely to leave behind has much more to do than the mere factional politics within the LDP. It is the return of nationalistic fervour in politics that Koizumi carefully nurtured throughout his long period of reign that might eventually prove to be

the single most important leftover of the Koizumi legacy in politics.

In economic policy Koizumi was largely successful in helping the country coming out of deep economic and financial crisis. But he had to pay the price for that too as Japanese society has transformed from one dominated by the existence of middle class to one where the difference between winners and losers is sharply on the rise.

A country that once boasted of its egalitarian nature in social and economic matters can no longer be branded with the same name. As the number of losers is on the rise, there is an urgent need on the part of aspiring leaders to make specific commitment in addressing the issue. Here too, Shinzo Abe seems to be outmaneuvering his rivals as he declared that should he assume the post, he would be ready to introduce a system that will give a second chance to the losers.

As a result, we can assume that in economic policy the incoming administration is ready to drift away from the rigid structural reform that Koizumi was trying to implement. But saying so, it would

also not be rational to conclude that the shift would be anything of radical nature. The new prime minister would most likely focus on the gains of economic reform to ensure that a fare share of that gain is channeled for easing the burdens of those finding themselves at a disadvantageous position.

But what Japan's next prime minister is to inherit from Koizumi is not a society coming slowly out of economic recession with visible marks of strain, but a society bracing restlessly the fervor of nationalism that Koizumi so carefully nurtured during his tenure. This nationalist trend has harmed Japan's foreign policy a lot and Koizumi's successor is to inherit a foreign policy that many see as something at a mess. The most visible manifestation of Koizumi's nationalism has been his commitment to visit the controversial Yasukuni Shrine that honours, among others, the country's wartime leaders who were convicted as war criminals by an international tribunal.

Koizumi's yearly visit to the shrine, the last of which was on August 15, the day Japan

declared end of hostilities in World War II, had done extensive diplomatic damages to Japan. Koizumi was unable almost throughout his whole tenure to sit at summit level talks with the leaders of China and South Korea, who demanded a firm commitment from the Japanese leadership of not visiting Yasukuni as a precondition for resuming the highest-level talks.

Koizumi's refusal to do so and his provocative postures reflected in his regular shrine visits were probably the most expensive foreign policy mistakes of his five years in office. It would, therefore, take much effort and sincere willingness on the part of his successor to mend the damage and channel bilateral ties with China and South Korea on a normal footing. It wouldn't be surprising at all if in the near future Koizumi is remembered as a prime minister whose regular pilgrimages to a controversial shrine cost Japan dearly.

It is quite common in many parts of the world to remember a long serving leader of a given country by few important last acts

that the leader performs before leaving the office. For Koizumi, one of such last acts had been the reflection of his passion not for politics, but for American rock and roll music and its legendary figure Elvis Presley.

During his June visit to the United States, a much publicized act that Koizumi had undertaken was a trip to Graceland, home of Elvis in Memphis, Tennessee, where the Japanese leader was seen dancing with Elvis's daughter to the song "Love Me Tender." This extraordinary excursion was President George W. Bush's gift to a departing friend who had been his staunch supporter of his Iraq policy. On their way to the destination on the presidential aircraft, Koizumi described the trip as a dream coming true.

We wonder if this is the ultimate point that the outwardly different looking departing prime minister of Japan will be remembered for by the future generations long after all his political legacies prove to be extremely short lived.