

Severe blow to democracy Thailand faces uncertainty

THOSE who thought that perhaps Thailand had seen the last of a military coup in 1991 was awakened with a rude shock in the military takeover of that country on Tuesday, fifteen years after the last.

Power was usurped all of a sudden by the military, and all of a sudden the old order is being rubbished for new one with a new prime minister and a new constitution being contemplated to replace the old.

We regret the loss of democracy in Thailand. No pretext can justify the replacement of a democratic dispensation through an unconstitutional mechanism. It's an irony that a grossly undemocratic method was resorted to. This is a great blow to political equanimity in Thailand which had been given to peaceful democratic changes that one had witnessed over the last fifteen years.

It is gross convolution of principles and democratic norms to even contemplate, let alone allow or condone, the military's pretensions to the role of the arbiter of discord in democratic setups and decider of the particular course that the country would take. And to justify a military coup, on whatever ground, is demeaning the country's polity and the people.

We ask what right the army has to remove the prime minister of an elected government? Yes, allegedly Thaksin was corrupt. And for this he had to pay on the streets of Thailand through the humiliations he had to face, and in the April elections as well. In any case it did not take much effort for one to predict that his political career was all but over with the elections that were slated for October.

We are surprised at the apparent endorsement by the King of the assumption of the reins of the state by the military. While it is to him that the Thais turn for guidance in their times of need one felt that in this instance the King who has emerged as the greatest behind-the-scene force for good could well have used his influence on the military for a saner course.

There is very little comfort that one can take from the military's assurances of restoring democratic order in Thailand in due course. But one would like to hope that return of power to the Thai people would take place 'as soon as possible' as promised by the military leaders.

Money laundering cases

Poor state of investigation

THE Anti Money Laundering Act was made effective from 2002. Bangladesh Bank and other related agencies are yet to make any progress with as many as 45 cases lodged thereunder. This is attributable to undue bureaucratic and governmental policy tangles. Political interference in some cases may not also be ruled out.

The issue of the money laundering first came into public notice when the media reported about several accounts with specific names alleged to have been involved in money laundering aimed at terror financing. This also in turn served as an eye opener to other money launderers involved in smuggling and big time criminal acts.

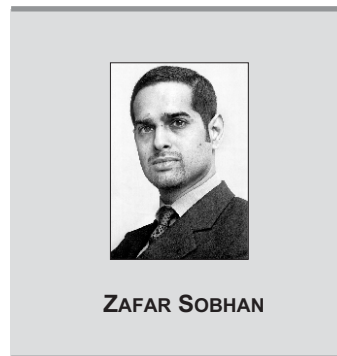
Although Money Laundering Act was first enacted in 2002 it was later redrafted in 2005 with stricter provisions to check terror financing. Strangely enough the draft law is still lying with the Crime Investigation and Prosecution and Financial Intelligence Units of the Bangladesh Bank. This needs to be introduced.

We are deeply concerned about this continued inaction on the part of the relevant agencies of the government in dealing with money laundering in general and the specific pending cases in particular. It is our impression that whenever an issue of considerable national import and public interest emerges, the government tends to delay in addressing it with any seriousness of purpose and commitment, for reasons best known to them.

Money laundering and terror financing go hand in hand. Hence, the importance of putting an effective check on it. It is our belief that no battle against terrorism can ever be won without dealing with the matter swiftly and decisively.

Looked at from a different perspective, money laundering is bound to cast a long shadow over the financial system. Let us, therefore, wake up and act here and now to checkmate money laundering. No partisan consideration should come into play in dealing with money laundering cases.

The final countdown



ZAFAR SOBHAN

BRING it on. That was the message expressed loud and clear by the head of the AL and leader of the opposition, Sheikh Hasina, at the 14-party alliance's grand rally at Paltan Maidan on Monday.

Hasina's throwing down of the gauntlet comes in response to a spate of recent statements by the prime minister and senior ruling alliance leaders, suggesting that the government is uninterested in either caretaker government or Election Commission reform, and intends to hand over power to the caretaker administration without any fundamental amendment to either institution.

Hasina essentially called out the government, and dared it to install Justice KM Hasan as chief caretaker and to keep Justice MA Aziz on as chief election commissioner, and called on the party activists and workers to take to the streets as soon as the caretaker government takes office if the AL demands are not met.

Now, as has been pointed out by

others, this does not mean that there is no room left for compromise and negotiation. The demands of the opposition are on the table and there is one month left for both sides to reach a compromise that works for both of them, and, indeed, there is plenty of common ground between the sides, especially on the need for reform of the Election Commission.

Nevertheless, the battle lines have very clearly been drawn, and the coming one month will see the government and the opposition duke it out for supremacy.

The outcome of this struggle for the upper hand, of course, depends very much on where the public stands and how far it is willing to go to support one side or the other. The first question is where the public stands on the question of reform, and the second is whether it is willing to take to the streets to ensure that its demands are met. But both sides would be making a mistake if they believe that they will be able to push through their agenda in the face of

public opinion to the contrary.

If the general public opposes what the ruling alliance has disingenuously started to refer to as the "constitutional" path, the alliance will be unable to pull it off.

So far the AL has not been able to mobilize the masses. However, its recent Paltan showing was an impressive show of strength and seems to have set the stage for the coming month.

The grand rally came on the heels of a brutal crack-down by law enforcement on the opposition's agitation programs that garnered the opposition considerable public sympathy, and subsequent blockade and hartal programs have been more effective than before. This is clearly the beginning of the final AL push in the last month of this government.

However, unless the general public gets behind it in a tangible manner and the AL can put a hundred thousand people on the streets, then it will have trouble enforcing its agenda.

Disenchantment and public

dissatisfaction with the current government is at unprecedented levels, and the anger is very real and widespread. However, the AL has not been able to turn that popular disaffection to its advantage and rally the country behind it. In fact, there is sufficient disenchantment with the opposition, as well.

Unlike in 1996, with the Jamaat and Ershad aligned with the BNP this time, it will be a much harder task for the AL to rally the country behind it. But the fact of the matter is that neither the Jamaat nor Ershad today represent the vote bank they once did, nor indeed does any other party or entity other than the AL and the BNP. The real party that the AL-led opposition will have to bring in if it wishes to prevail is the general public.

Even though all polls and surveys show that the AL is today ahead of the BNP in terms of public support, it would be misunderstanding the data to state that the AL is popular. Due to the ruling alliance's disastrous tenure in

office, the BNP may be more unpopular than the AL at present, but the more significant fact is that more people oppose both parties than support either, or even both combined. This is bad news for the BNP but not necessarily good news for the AL.

Under the constitution: "The Chief Adviser and other Advisers shall be appointed within fifteen days after Parliament is dissolved (Article 58C.2)." In practice, it has never taken so long in the past, and we are likely to see the caretaker administration sworn in within a few days of the dissolution of parliament on October 27.

Once the caretaker government is in office, however, it is a new ballgame (as we can recall from 2001). The 4-party alliance will no longer hold the reins of power. The police, for instance, will be under the authority of the caretaker government, and will no longer take orders from the 4-party alliance, and both 4-party and 14-party alliances will be on more or less equal footing.

Even though we have been roughly here before in 1996 and 2001, this particular terrain is uncharted territory for us. Indeed, when it comes to reforms, it remains unclear whether the caretaker government is even empowered to order the reform that the opposition wants, anyway. You can be sure that the 4-party alliance will (among other things) try to challenge any moves towards such reform in court.

Similarly, if the AL takes to the streets and threatens a boycott of

the elections, it is unclear what authority the caretaker government would have to order a crackdown or to impose order by force.

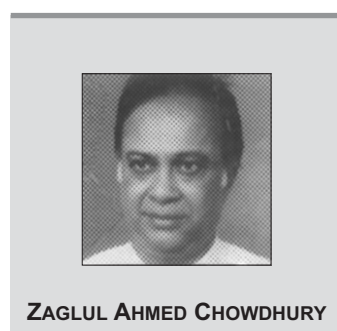
Ultimately, much depends on public acceptance of the caretaker. If the caretaker government can command the support of the general public, then it will be empowered to take decisive and even forceful measures. If the public perceives the caretaker government to be genuinely neutral and trusts it to act in the national interest, then it will support measures, even strict measures, to impose order, and such actions are not likely run the risk of sparking into conflagration.

But if this is not the case, if the general public perceives the caretaker government to be partisan or leaning towards one side or the other, then it would be very difficult for the caretaker to impose order in the face of street agitation.

The key, therefore, is a caretaker government that enjoys public confidence and that the public trusts to preside over free and fair elections. This is well within reach, and could easily be accomplished with a little statesmanship on the part of our leaders during the course of the coming month.

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Qualitative change in Indian politics Mamta Banerjee parting ways with NDA?



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

INDIAN political scene is now agog with the speculations that "Trinamul Congress" leader Mamta Banerjee may be now veering towards the main Congress, marking a qualitative change in country's political alignment. True, her party is not a force to reckon with at the national level, but Mamta herself is seen as an important leader and is also quite talked about for a variety of reasons. Once a factor in both federal and West Bengal state politics, she certainly suffered some setbacks in recent times. But firebrand Mamta refuses to concede defeats, describing political losses as temporary phenomenon. Very recently, certain developments in the West Bengal politics centering the just-concluded parliamentary and state assembly elections appear to have come up as a shot in arms for "Trinamul" chief and she believes that her party is recovering the lost ground.

However, it is her new approach of coming close to Sonia Gandhi's Congress -- which she left several

years ago revolting against the leadership -- that is making rounds in the political circles. This means as a logical corollary she is creating a distance with the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), of which she was a senior federal minister when it was in power. This is indicating a major shift in the political alignment of India even though it is still premature to assume that Mamta is finally quitting the NDA and either aligning or merging with the Congress.

Political scenario in India and more particularly that of the West Bengal are of special interest to Bangladesh because of manifold proximities. The developments in the next door neighbour evoke interests here for understandable reasons. Key players in the West Bengal political spectrum are the ruling Left Front, which maintains its tight grip on power for last three decades, Mamta Banerjee's Trinamul and the Congress. In the last state assembly polls, the Left Front led by chief minister

Bhuddhadev Bhattacharya further strengthened its hold while Mamta's party cut a sorry figure and the Congress, which is no longer a strong force is the state but is improving its position, was way behind them. All fought the balloting without any major alignment. Several "Loksabha" and "Vidhan Sabha" constituencies have gone to by-elections and it is these polls that have brought the Congress and the Trinamul closer. Important among them is the Maldah by-election necessitated by the death of elderly and well-known parliamentarian ABA Ghani Khan Chowdhury, who had returned from this constituency for consecutive eight times. The Left Front, which won 33 of the total 42 federal seats in the state, so far failed to win against legendary Ghani Khan. This time leftist were desperate to wrest this seat. But Trinamul was unwilling to give a candidate, a decision that obviously favoured the Congress. Because its votes would certainly

never go to the leftists as Mamta opposed the government tooth and nail. This helped Congress nominee Abul Hashem Khan Chowdhury, brother of late Ghani Khan, to retain the seat. Likewise, Congress's tacit support to Trinamul helped it to marginally win the Bongaon assembly seat that was crucial for Mamta's party to secure the status of main opposition in the legislature. This strategy helped both Congress and the Trinamul, but expectedly drew sharp reactions from the Left Front, which called the understanding as "opportunism". More infuriated is the BJP, the ally of Mamta, as it described the development as "devoid of ethics".

BJP and the Congress -- two main political parties in the country -- are rivals and BJP cannot relish a situation when its ally Trinamul comes closer to Congress. The BJP is weak in West Bengal, but fielded candidates in some by-elections. It goes without saying that the Trinamul

votes have gone to the Congress and not BJP where Mamta's party had no nominee of its own. This development raised uncertainty about Trinamul's future relations with the BJP-led NDA on one hand and created prospects of closer ties with Congress on the other. It is understood that Sonia Gandhi is keen to bring back Mamta into the Congress fold, if not at least establish a good relation with her and the Trinamul leader too is so willing. Both parties feel that they need to come closer for mounting challenge to the leftists in the state where the ruling front is unassailable. Mamta said after the by-elections that had Congress and Trinamul forged electoral alliance before the assembly polls early this year, the results could have favoured them.

Evidently, Mamta seems realising that her alliance with the NDA might have earlier made her party a partner in the previous NDA government in New Delhi and also made her senior minister, but in effect weakened the Trinamul in West Bengal, which is her main area of political activity. This has also tarnished her "secular" credentials since the BJP is widely seen as "communal". Besides, it is also probably dawning on her that her alliance with Congress at least in the state is necessary if she has to make any dent in left citadel. Both Congress and Trinamul are adversaries of the ruling front in West Bengal although the leftists are extending support to the Congress-led UPA government at

the centre. This support is continuing, but occasionally comes under strain.

The outcome of the by-elections are likely to promote the Congress-Trinamul understanding although it is a bit early to speculate a final breakdown in Mamta's ties with the NDA. Expectedly, she will carefully weigh the pros and cons and may merge her party with the Congress but only after detailed considerations. It is possible that such a merger may not at all come off as Mamta Banerjee may feel that separate identity is more advantageous. In any case, qualitative changes are now discernible in Mamta's ties with Congress and this may have its impact on Indian political scene as well as that of West Bengal although ascendancy of the leftists in the state remains unaltered by the by-election results. Mamta's eyes are clearly fixed on the next assembly polls and her ambition of becoming chief minister is no secret. Congress-Trinamul closer ties in West Bengal will benefit both, but are unlikely to be enough to seriously trouble the ruling front in the foreseeable future barring unforeseen developments.

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OPINION

Profile of an honest man behind the painted veil

KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

COL. Oli Ahmed appears to have been plunged into a whirlpool of lamentations over his own apparently inadvertent mistakes. These wouldn't however include his unflinching loyalty to late Ziaur Rahman either in the war field or after the country won independence in December 1971. In fact, from Ziaur Rahman's point of view, Oli Ahmed was the most trusted one. Both of them and many other Bangalee soldiers fought shoulder to shoulder against the occupation forces. Subsequent to December 16, 1971 Ziaur Rahman was elevated to the position of Deputy Chief of Staff of Bangladesh Army in the rank of a 5-star General. In the process of such promotion of the army officers who fought in the War of Liberation Oli Ahmed was made a Colonel.

True to his personal allegiance to Ziaur Rahman, Col. (ret'd) Oli Ahmed continued as a silent spectator of the fast changes that took place in the administrative and political frame-work of the country.

There was absolutely no evidence to corroborate that he openly agreed or disagreed with those changes. More interestingly he was totally unconcerned when the Jamaate-Islam chief of the time was granted Bangladeshi citizenship by the High Court without any intervention or appeal from the government. And not even when Shah Azizur Rahman, a diehard protagonist of one Pakistan was inducted in the cabinet of Ziaur Rahman as the Prime Minister. Perhaps he preferred remaining mum to avoid ideological clash with his principal benefactor.

Meantime, he had his political identity noticeably established. For being in the closer circle enjoying full confidence of the main leader and chairman of the new political party in late 1977 he was automatically inducted in the highest body. The same position granted him an edge in the cabinet as the Communication Minister. Subsequent to the assassination of Ziaur Rahman in May 1981 that edge was being quietly blunted by a

For being in the closer circle enjoying full confidence of the main leader and chairman of the new political party in late 1977 he was automatically inducted in the highest body. The same position granted him an edge in the cabinet as the Communication Minister. Subsequent to the assassination of Ziaur Rahman in May 1981 that edge was being quietly blunted by a group of new leaders belonging to his own area, Chittagong mostly. By the time he could realise that he was being eclipsed it was too late.

group of new leaders belonging to his own area, Chittagong mostly. By the time he could realise that he was being eclipsed it was too late. Things went out of his control and eventually he found himself totally out of the power base. He had the stingy pinch prior to the general election in 2001. The party high command was already divided on the issue of nomination in case of at least one constituency of Chittagong. Col. (ret'd.) Oli Ahmed was sure that he would get BNP nomination from there for that being his own stronghold for long. He was disappointed. It was awarded to a Jamaat-e-Islami candidate instead. That must have given him the shock of his life having lost the bid to one belonging to Jamaat-e-Islami.

This was the first and formal instance of leg-pulling that the valiant freedom fighter encountered.

Yet, for quite some time he was practically tight-lipped. That perhaps was taken for a weakness by his adversaries within the party. Things changed so very rapidly that he could no longer command patience and self-restraint. He thought the party image was being vitiated by corrupt practices patronised by some senior members. The concurrent role of some of the younger ones terribly shocked him. Besides, the anti-liberation elements in the so-called 4-party alliance joined hands to make his life all the more miserable even though he was on the highest body

of his party. He made a number of personal entreaties with the chairperson believably to remove the corrupt leaders to salvage the party image. She is yet to act on Col. (ret'd) Oli Ahmed's honest counsel. It was reported in the newspapers (Aug. 30) that the Prime Minister desired to square up the disagreement after she talked to Oli Ahmed personally. The heat generated on the issue of his expulsion from the party appears now to have cooled down. None knows if such silence is a prelude to a sudden tempest in the coming days. It all depends on Col. (ret'd) Oli Ahmed whether or not to accede to any compromise proposal from the other end swallowing the bitter pills he has already in his mouth.

It is yet to be known if Col. (ret'd) Oli Ahmed shall retract from his war against the "plunderers, corrupts and terrorists." Or shall he withdraw from his own statement to the press about some people "who had amassed huge amount of money over the past few years, about those who were seen peddling in the street the other day and now have their luxurious homes at Gulshan, Banani areas". What about his demand that the Prime Minister would have to take action against these elements?

Face to face with the news media on August 29, upon his return from Saudi Arabia he reaffirmed that whatever news were attributed to him were correct. He had no objection if he was expelled

from the party for his waging war against the corrupt elements, for talking about the miserable plight of the common people due to rising prices. In any case, as of now, a strange but very significant lull is persisting in respect of Oli's possible expulsion.

Let us take now a quick look at the issue of reform proposals of the 14-party alliance. Early this month BNP secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan maintained that notwithstanding the statements of the BNP leaders in public meetings rejecting the opposition reform proposals there was still time to discuss them and to arrive at a settlement. Very casually he remarked that in public meeting the speakers can say anything but to hold dialogue on such issue the statements in public meeting would have no consequence. It was indeed a very clear and unambiguous admission of a 'double standard' that he had alluded to coincidentally; on the same day (Sept 6) the Prime Minister was addressing public

meeting at Jhenidah repeating rejection of the reform proposals of the opposition. Of late, however, the PM has expressed her optimism for a dialogue between the secretary-general of BNP and AL.

The US Ambassador was talking to the business leaders, among others, on the prospect of a free and fair election in January 2007. She exhorted the FBCCI President Mir Nasir Hossain and others to do all they can for a dialogue between the government and the opposition on the issue of reform and to secure a settlement before it is too late. The ordinary citizens of the country are sure to welcome a meaningful dialogue in tune with the majority demand. That is ask the CEC and ECs to vacate and remove KM Hasan, a former BNP partyman, from the line of succession. Let someone else, selected by mutual consent, take over as the next head of the caretaker government. Give the people peace and they will give you immense prosperity.

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