

It is good augury

People expect positive outcome

At last we see a ray of hope emerging out of the current oppressive political impasse. It is a good augury that the BNP and the AL are considering to sit for the much-awaited dialogue on electoral reform. Having taken so long in coming, with all the time wastage and the melodrama that accompanied the exercise in arranging the dialogue, it will be well for the parties to keep in mind that the expectations of the people are very high and that they are not prepared to accept a "no solution" outcome. Any attempt to dilly-dally or play games by both or either party will not be acceptable to the people.

What the people want is an election that can be held in a free and fair environment. We are afraid such a condition hardly exists at the present moment. Let us be very clear, there are three essential conditions that will have to be ensured for holding fair elections. First, there must be an Election Commission headed by a chief election commissioner both of whose credibility and credentials must be aboveboard and both must have public acceptability. Second, the flawed voter list, on which there are plenty of reservations, must be rectified. Third, reform in election financing must be in place before the election is held.

As for the chief of the caretaker government (CTG) we are constrained to say that the root cause of the dispute lies in the government's extending the retirement age of the judges, an action which the opposition saw as being motivated. It is a shame that the government failed to foresee the possible backlash of such an action given the suspicion-ridden political culture in our country.

The opposition perhaps needs to show some sagacity in regard to a person whose past association with BNP might not weigh too heavily on their thinking so as to reject him out of hand.

The long and short of it is that it boils down to the two parties to approach the situation in the most open-minded manner with a mood to compromise. In this regard the onus must lie on the ruling party to rise to the occasion. If that happens it would be rather injudicious for the opposition not to follow suit.

State minister's exit

What difference does it make?

WITH the exit of State Minister Anwarul Kabir Talukder from the power sector which has been limping under an acute shortage of electricity, this is the second time in four months that the state minister for this crucially important sector had to go.

Changing the minister or bringing in a new face is certainly not the panacea for the chronic power shortage which has had a destabilizing effect on the country as a whole. It is immaterial whether the minister resigned or he was sacked. The government has done something but not in the areas where quick action was needed to boost power generation and distribution.

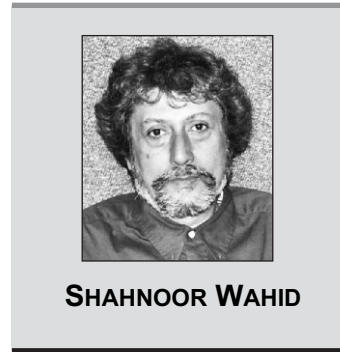
The predecessor of the dismissed minister had to go due to "interference from the PMO" when he was presiding over the slumping sector, and Talukder is reported to have spent much of the four months since his taking office in bureaucratic wrangling, a part of which stemmed from a tussle between him and the energy secretary. Clearly, he could not address the real issues.

The experiences of the two state ministers indicate that it is not enough to name a minister and hope for the system to run efficiently. It seems the state minister was not given the mandate to establish his authority on the sector and manage everything according to his plan. The result has been another unceremonious exit. The state minister was destined to fail in a sector where almost everything has been going wrong.

The government has not succeeded in enhancing power generation, though there has been a substantial rise in consumption. The distribution network has been expanded without a corresponding increase in power production. And there are countless reports of corruption and mismanagement resulting from political interference and manipulation.

The government cannot expect the desired results without getting at the root of the power crisis which is but a big gap between supply and demand. Unless this gap is bridged, the situation will not improve—a plain truth that has been either evaded or buried under the debris of political manipulation.

Let fire rage, vote us to power again ...



SHAHNOOR WAHID

GOLDEN Bengal is burning, just as Lanka burned and Rome burned in the antiquated past. Hanuman set Lanka on fire to rescue Sheeta, wife of Avatar Rama, from the clutches of Lankadhipati Raksasraj Ravana. But the mythical Lanka would not have been razed to the ground by the tail-fire of Hanuman had Ravana released Sheeta well before the attack on his capital by the followers of Rama. There is a lesson to be learned from this unique story.

The other burning incident of historical proportion took place in Rome during the reign of Nero, one of the most corrupt and debauched emperors Rome ever

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

The following analogy or correlation is worth pondering. We see the markets of essential commodities are on fire too. This fire is being fanned by the syndicates of importers and traders to make windfall profits. But where are the police with their guns and batons to charge against the syndicate members who have started this particular fire? Where is the hoonkar of the high and mighty to chill the hearts of the syndicate dons? Where are the saboteurs in this case?

had. Nero paid dearly, with his dear life to be precise, at the end of his short-lived rule as a tyrant, but not before he and his corrupt family and friends had weakened the foundation of Rome.

Let us now turn our eyes to the happenings in the present time around us. The people of Golden Bengal are setting things on fire to rescue electricity from the clutches of the many Ravnas who have rendered the sector dysfunctional through large-scale corruption.

The ten-headed (*Dashanan*) Ravnas of Golden Bengal have gobbled up almost everything that came near their ravenous mouths. Along with most other, they have eaten up the electricity sector as

well, and are now offering bullets and tear-gas shells to the people for demanding electricity during the month of Ramadan when it is most needed.

But the people do not want bullets. They want electricity. It's as simple as that. It's either electricity or fire. What a predicament staring in the face of the Ravnas in Golden Bengal! After failing abysmally to keep the situation under control for the last five years they now have a real situation in hand.

So, it's time to call the man who is supposedly an expert in "looking for *shatrus*." Though he does not have electricity to offer, he has an electrifying *hoonkar* (roar) to chill the hearts of the "saboteurs"

who are playing with fire like some crazy pyromaniacs. How dare they? He calls his men in uniform to do what they can do best—beat the life out of the citizens of the country. The images of the baton-charge are all caught on tape to be shown as example of good governance.

We, however, do not know whether a Nero is hiding in some lofty castle playing on his flute as fire rages through the country on one side and the police beat the brains out of people on the other.

Two burning issues

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importers and traders to make windfall profits. But where are the police with their guns and batons to charge against the syndicate members who have started this particular fire? Where is the *hoonkar* of the high and mighty to chill the hearts of the syndicate dons? Where are the saboteurs in this case?

It is only common sense that the fire in the markets affects almost the entire population and the fallout is more dismal and pervasive than the burning of a few tires or tree branches on the roads. The market price index affects every person on a daily basis and this can be used as a barometer to gauge the popularity of the government in power.

If a Gallup poll could be done in the country at the moment the poll results would look downright scary to the rulers. So, what steps are being taken by them to bring down the spiraling prices? None, whatsoever. We do not see the same enthusiasm in the rulers in apprehending those behind the fire in the kitchen markets as we see when it comes to shooting down people for demanding electricity.

And yet, to our utter amaze-

ment, while fire rages on in every sector like ready-made garments, electricity, fuel, food-grains, fertilizer, transport, law and order, and so on, our rulers travel to remote areas to beg for votes to the same people who are seeing mustard flower in their eyes (neck-deep in trouble).

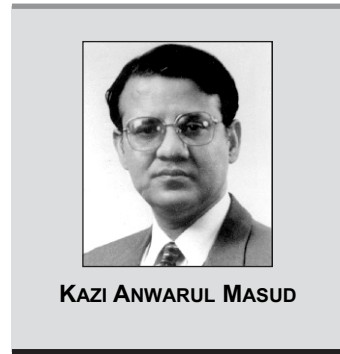
In their own uncouth ways the ruling party politicians are asking the people to vote them to power once again! They have more promises to offer. They have more stories to tell about the opposition. They have more carrots to dangle before the nose of the people.

The present money-driven system of electing public representatives has enchained the nation from all sides. The vicious system has to be broken and the nation unchained.

Unless the endeavour to create awareness among the common people to be able to reject offers of black money from corrupt men and women becomes successful, the nation will go deeper into the abyss of misfortune. The onus rests on everyone.

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

The view from Dhaka



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THE Brookings Institution and Center for Global Development, led by Dr. Susan Price, have initiated a collaborative project titled "Weak States Threat Matrix" that bills Bangladesh as having a fragile democracy where the government is unable to: a) secure the population from violent conflict; b) completely meet basic human needs like food, health, and education; and c) govern legitimately with the acceptance of the majority of the people (this last point is controversial in the Bangladeshi case given the considerable majority enjoyed by ruling party in parliament).

Anatol Lieven, an author and a former journalist who has worked in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and is now working at the New America Foundation, has also categorized both Bangladesh and Pakistan as fragile states.

According to Lieven, if the majority of scientific opinion on global warming proves to be correct, the next decades will see drastic climate changes in many parts of the world, including some of the poorest and most heavily populated countries, resulting in flooding and desertification thereby triggering state collapse.

Lieven argues that in such a situation an uncontrollable num-

GOING DEEPER

The international community, and most importantly the people of the country, are waiting anxiously for the government to join the opposition combine in serious talks, paving the way for holding a free and fair election under a truly neutral referee following transparent electoral rules. One hopes that the authorities that bear the ultimate responsibility would not disappoint the people of the country.

ber of refugees will overwhelm states like India, and possibly even the West. Given the fact that both Bangladesh and Pakistan are Muslim majority countries, whose people are, at the moment, unwelcome globally due to the war on terror waged by the West, and the war of attrition waged by a section of the Muslims wanting to take the Islamic world back from modernity to the "pristine" Arabian culture of the 6th century, Lieven suggests adoption of "developmental realism" as a strategy by a radical shift of spending from US military to US development and humanitarian aid.

The problem to be faced by the donors, however, is to prevent weak states from failing by receiving aid and assistance through institutions which themselves are failing. Besides, these fragile and failing institutions being corrupt, the prevention strategy through economic assistance would have to insist on good governance in the recipient countries. But then, since ideal governance in the Western sense may not be available in the weak and fragile democracies, it has been argued that the donors may wish to accord with the British Department of International Development's acceptance of "good enough" governance,

instead of its radical improvement, as a condition for aid.

Such an attitude may be acceptable to the neo-cons in the West, but is likely to be resisted by the liberals there, as well as the people in the developing world. But critics, like South African governance expert Alex de Waal, view consideration of governance in the abstract as an "intellectual absurdity" because governance involves politics and "to govern is to choose."

But then, by suggesting "development realism," Anatol Lieven would argue that a return to democracy without military control would probably mean the return to power of Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party or Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League, "both of which were responsible for dreadful levels of corruption and misgovernment in the 1990s."

Lieven fears that aid given to Pakistan, with its landowning class who continue to have eternal collusion with the military, the industrialists, and other elites holding power, may not reach the people and could result, sooner or later, in state failure, or a part falling under the control of Islamic extremists hostile to the West. Such a scenario would not be totally absurd given the death of Nawab Bugti at the hands of the federal forces, and the simmering

discontent in Baluchistan due to the province's exploitation by the Punjabi rulers, who have apparently learnt little from the experience of 1971.

But then, accepting the argument that the developing countries should not practice democracy, lest they fail as a country, gives credence to historian Bernard Lewis's thesis that democracy is a "peculiarly Western concept" used to administer public affairs which may or may not be suitable for others. This would be insulting, and would be accepting Francis Fukuyama's conditions for transition to democracy, which include culture and the desire of the people to practice democracy, and suggesting that countries like Bangladesh lack both, which is patently untrue.

In the case of Pakistan, the donors face a dilemma. To prevent state failure, failing governments have to be aided, but at the same time it has to be ensured that aid reaches the target group. Insurance of such a policy could mean use of intrusive methods that would not be liked by the governments of the recipient countries. In intrusive cases, the sanction of the UN Security Council would lend legitimacy to such ventures. Perhaps President Bush (and Tony Blair) would have done better to listen to Kofi

Annan's advice, before they embarked on their Iraq misadventure, that the UN always lent a legitimacy to international interferences if done through the UNSC, rather than without its sanction.

Iraq, today, is assaulted daily from within, and even the US finds it difficult to explain it away as the evil work of Saddamists or Zarqawi's followers, and is a prime candidate for state failure despite the external ornaments of government, legislature, bureaucracy, etc. Going over the heads of Kurds and secular Sunnis, the final version of the Iraqi constitution has made Islam as the official religion of the state, prompted, perhaps, by Shiite leader Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's observation that: "The religious constants and the Iraqi people's moral principles and noble social values should be the main pillars of the coming Iraqi constitution." The last British ambassador had reportedly advised his government that Iraq, despite Tony Blair's best efforts, could finally be fractured into three parts, leaving the Sunnis in central Iraq without oil resources.

To the uninitiated it may appear that a clash of ideologies is going on in Bangladesh. In a way such an impression would not be totally wrong if one considers that the opposition combine is trying to remove from power a group of plutocrats who in the last five years have presented the country with violent Islamic militancy, unbridled corruption, unaffordable price hike of essential commodities, unrest among workers in the ready-made garments sector, energy crisis with no light at the end of the tunnel (or anywhere else), deteriorating law and order

situation, gross human rights abuses, and a failed foreign policy which has seen deteriorating relations with neighboring countries and a global image of Bangladesh as an incendiary Muslim country.

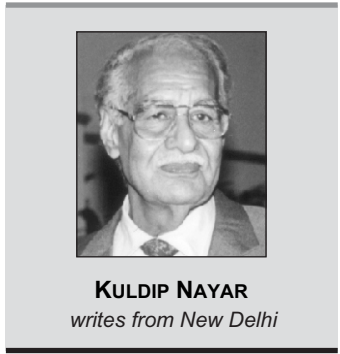
Though the economy registered a decent growth rate in FY06, due to the good performance of the agriculture, manufacturing, and exports sectors, and remittance by Bangladeshis abroad, the poor economic performance and low net inflow of foreign aid and foreign investment may cause non-realization of expected growth in the next fiscal year. Though per capita GDP and GNI have increased slightly, the gap widened with other South Asian countries.

In the light of the above scenario of conflict and deprivation in the least developed parts of the world, it is difficult for a Bangladeshi to understand the stubborn attitude of the government regarding the opposition parties' reform proposals. The government's shifting tactics could have been depicted as Machiavellian had they been crafted intelligently, but now they merely appear childish as the motive behind the tactics is crystal clear.

The international community, and most importantly the people of the country, are waiting anxiously for the government to join the opposition combine in serious talks, paving the way for holding a free and fair election under a truly neutral referee following transparent electoral rules. One hopes that the authorities that bear the ultimate responsibility would not disappoint the people of the country.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

A new Musharraf?



KULDIP NAYAR

writes from New Delhi

GENERAL Pervez Musharraf has staged yet another coup. He has ousted the Musharraf who was always worried about his image and concerned about the support within Pakistan. The new Musharraf now stalks the world stage as a confident dictator and feels that his stature abroad will help him correct the uncertain opinions prevailing at home. He will need the mullahs less and scrupulously distance himself from what the ISI does in India or Afghanistan.

The general realized some time back that a new Musharraf would have to be ushered in. But his problem was how to introduce him, when and where. Every actor, demagogue, or politician, has to make the entry carefully because he knows it is the timing that determines whether the

BETWEEN THE LINES

Why he wanted the old Musharraf to quit and the new Musharraf to enter is not difficult to comprehend. He wished to end the discussion on shedding uniform because of his occupying the office of president. It looks as if the debate has already lost the heat. Yet Musharraf's eyes are fixed on the election in 2007. Opinions in favour of Musharraf, however limited, are not going to wear out between now and the time of the election. However, the scenario could change if either of the two leaders, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, were to return to Pakistan. The new Musharraf may be talking to them behind the scenes.

different robe or the role he dons would go down well in the history of politics.

Musharraf sensed the timing when his meeting with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was fixed at Havana. His appointment with President Bush had already been arranged. He then told his publishers in America to postpone the release of his book, *In the Line of Fire*. This was his testament, written to launch the new Musharraf. His calculation was that the meeting with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Bush would provide the ambience he had been looking for. He was determined to make both meetings a success because he

had only to find the right words to mollify them.

His information was that the two leaders were disappointed, not disillusioned. Musharraf began his meeting with the premise "let bygones be bygones." This reportedly disarmed Manmohan Singh. He carried with him facts and figures about terrorist training camps and the inflow of infiltrators. But he was averse to using the data when Musharraf himself requested for a fresh start on a clean slate.

Joint anti-terrorism mechanism was Musharraf's idea. But he did not say at that time that Pakistan would also "test" India as he said in response to Manmohan Singh's statement that joint anti-terrorism

was Pakistan's best chance. There was no discordant note during the hour-long talk. Musharraf was not the one to strike because his eyes were fixed on the entry of the new Musharraf.

When he met President Bush, Musharraf was on a familiar territory. Americans have a strange fascination for strong men who "keep things under control" and assure them of the restoration of democracy. The US usually has no time frame. The Pakistan president knew exactly how to placate Bush. Washington's worry was over Musharraf's deal with the tribal leaders. The deal was struck to make them stay away

from North Waziristan that provided shelter to the Taliban, who are prowling around Afghanistan all the time.

Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai recently sought Pakistan's help to repel insurgents and provided him with information on location of Taliban's training camps and telephone numbers of their operation people. "Our friends from Pakistan came back to us to tell this information is old," says Karzai. "Maybe, but it means they were there." Bush was reportedly satisfied when Musharraf explained that he had reached a temporary truce with the tribal leaders and was now ready to concentrate on fighting terrorists within his country.

Bush could not have asked for more when his whole operation, starting from Afghanistan to Iraq, was primarily against terrorists. Place is the other essential part to make the right entry. Musharraf had already arranged the book's release, with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's consent, at the UN building. Once Musharraf had Manmohan Singh and Bush in tow, he informed Annan about the date of the book's release. There could not be a better forum than the UN

building, representing the 168 countries.

The world media was in full strength. He was all sugar and honey or "smooth and slippery," to use the words of the New York Times. Even his critics in Pakistan concede that Musharraf's PR was superb. The new Musharraf is more articulate, more indiscreet, even at the expense of tailoring facts. For example, his version of Kargil is different from even what foreign experts say.

India removed the Mujahideen and the Pakistan army personnel from the Kargil heights they had occupied. This could not be interpreted as Islamabad's victory. But then Musharraf knew how to project the book which represented the new Musharraf. It is selling like hot cakes all over the world but not many in Pakistan have even heard about Nawaz Sharif's book. Who is the traitor? The latter, who was then the prime minister, has a different version: Pakistan was defeated at Kargil.

Most disclosures that Musharraf has made are old hat. One has known them after visiting Pakistan. But his information that Washington had threatened to crush Pakistan after 9/11 has

given a new edge to the anti-American feelings in Pakistan. True, people are incensed that Musharraf caved in within 24 hours, but they are outraged because America made such a threat.

The feeling that the US is dead against Islam has also got mixed up on this point. The new Musharraf has emerged stronger than before. Many Pakistanis have come to recognize him as an astute person compared to the brand of politicians they have. The Pakistanis also applaud him for being in full control of the army, which gives them a sense of security.

A day before the release of his book, the news went around in Pakistan that there was a coup to replace him. The failure of national power grid fuelled the rumour. It was Musharraf who declared confidently from New York that there could be no coup, even though he had been absent from the country for two weeks.

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eyes are fixed on the election in 2007.

Although the polls in Pakistan are not above board, it helps if there is less estrangement among the electorate. Opinions in favour of Musharraf, however limited, are not going to wear out between now and the time of the election. However, the scenario could change if either of the two leaders, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, were to return to Pakistan. The new Musharraf may be talking to them behind the scenes.

India faces a piquant situation. Whether or not she can trust Musharraf is her predicament. His book conveys a message which is different from what Manmohan Singh has gathered from the meeting with Musharraf. Will bygone be bygones and will Pakistan start with a clean slate without prejudice or rancour? It all depends on whether the new Musharraf abandons the old ways of doing things.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.