

## Prof Iajuddin Ahmed should rise to the occasion

*That is the people's expectation*

THE President, who is also now the Caretaker Chief, is in the driving seat, whether by choice or by compulsion of circumstances. And he is carrying with him the baggage of a party affiliation. The public perception of him being a party man is unavoidable since he was a BNP choice and also because of his past links with it. A person in such a position is generally object of suspicion of others. In this case the reservations about him are likely to be more acute on the part of the AL and its allies, since he was not their choice. It is thus for the President to de-link himself from the BNP and rise beyond any party or personal feelings and consider all the issues from the national perspective.

Inevitably, all eyes are on the President now, as it should be. He must be aware of the fact that every word he utters, and every deed and action of his will be under the scrutiny of the people.

The country is waiting for him to fulfill the tasks that his additional responsibility obligates him to do. First of which is to form a team to run the affairs of the state in the interregnum up to the holding of the parliamentary election. For this he must get together a council of Advisors, quickly, but after careful consideration. Not only should the Advisors be people of unimpeachable character and impeccable integrity, they must be seen to be neutral and act that way too. Secondly, he must ensure a free and fair election within the prescribed time frame. And all that is needed to retrieve confidence in some of the democratic institutions and the electoral system as a whole must be done.

Concatenations of events have thrown up a unique opportunity for the President to rise to the occasion and serve the people at this very critical juncture. We entreat him not to fail the nation. History is replete with examples where at such crucial times of a nation, leaders have risen to deliver it from potential chaos through forthright, objective and transparent actions. We call upon him to do the same.

## The AL response

*Pragmatic and constructive*

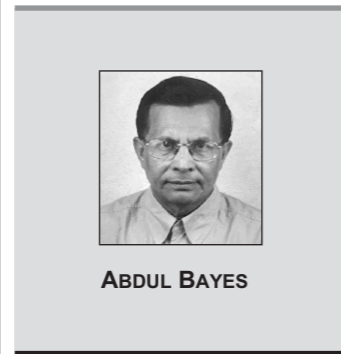
THE country's highly volatile political situation entered a new phase with President Iajuddin Ahmed taking charge of the next caretaker government. Following that development, the prime question was how the main opposition Awami League would respond to the changed circumstances. Indeed, only a constructive and pragmatic response from the AL could ensure an immediate end to the political turmoil which has already cost at least 25 lives across the country.

It's good news that the AL chief Sheikh Hasina met with President Iajuddin Ahmed yesterday and let him know her party's position on the key issues. She also requested the president to give her 24 hours for submitting the names of her party's nominees for the panel of advisors who will constitute the caretaker government. It has transpired that the AL has demanded, as it always has, the removal of the Chief Election Commissioner MA Aziz. This newspaper took the same position that he had lost the moral authority to run the EC, particularly after both the High Court and the Supreme Court found his decision to go for a new voter list to be wrong. However, the CEC is holding a constitutional post and the president can only persuade him to quit.

The political parties have to realise that the caretaker government doesn't belong to any party or individual; it's a stopgap arrangement having the sole objective of holding a free and fair election. Again, the attainment of the goal will depend largely on the role of political parties. So, the AL has rightly decided to participate in the new process and occupy its due place in it. To continue the fight against the BNP much the same way as the party did over the last five years could not be the right thing to do under the different circumstances prevailing now.

The country has already paid a heavy price for the political confrontation between the two major parties. They tried to outmaneuver each other in every possible way, while citizens were reduced to helpless bystanders. Finally, the showdown that began last Saturday crossed all limits. Now, the nation is waiting for the political parties, led by the BNP and the AL, to steer it out of the present crisis through taking a constructive path.

# The deepening crisis



ABDUL BAYES

THE allegation is that the honourable president of the country himself violated the constitution of the country. The concern has already been aired by the renowned constitutional experts of the country as well as by some former advisors of the caretaker government. We shall not deliberate on the reasons as these have come out in news papers and through electronic media.

The declaration of the ex-PM Begum Khaleeda Zia that the opposition must abide by the verdict of the president much before what the president thought about the whole situation, clearly added credence to the critics. It pointed, allegedly, to a pre-planned game in the presidential palace. And we strongly believe, staunch but sensible supporters of BNP would, with hindsight, hold the same view.

By and large, if morning goes to show the day, as critics argue, a neutral general election is unlikely to come from a partisan caretaker

## BENEATH THE SURFACE

The opposition has not lost the battle. I feel that they have already harvested their first moral victory by not allowing KM Hasan to take over. The second victory follows from the first: organizing common people and forcing the government to bow down. The opposition should continue its mobilization of people with a view to establishing people's rights and demolishing the dens of corruption and terrorism. Pitifully though, people will have to continue to fight for their freedom. But there is light at the end of the tunnel.

government. The celebratory mood of BNP supporters also partly points to that.

But crying should not continue over the spilled milk. BNP's crocodile tears over the constitutional continuity has long been on record. This time the record has only gained a new groove when the nation witnessed a naked version of the earlier attempts. We do not blame the president for whatever he has done, as we believe that BNP has ill advised him.

For the sake of arresting a further deterioration in his image and stopping bloodshed in the country, we would like to place before him the following steps that he should take up immediately to win confidence of the people. In fact, within a week or so, the inputs should be made visible to the public.

First, and foremost, the government should overhaul the Election Commission by dumping Aziz et al. and constituting the commission in consultation with political

parties. Mr President should realize that an election headed by Justice Aziz and his team will never be acceptable home and abroad. The new voter list prepared by the "Aziz factory" should be replaced by the updated voter list.

Second, within a day or two, all secretaries and other officials should be changed and rearranged for a neutral impression. Included in this are all election officials who have been hired and posted on partisan basis. Third, stop all new appointments in institutions, as existing heads are politically appointed by the previous government. Fourth, ensure that law enforcing agencies perform their duties on non-partisan basis.

These are -- if we are allowed to say -- a few of the preliminary planks upon which the president should stand on the heels the accusation that he might not be a neutral head of caretaker government. Of course, there are many other steps that would be

required.

The honourable president of the country has two choices before him. First, to act like a party man and pursue policies to suit BNP-Jamaat interest. In fact, not surprisingly, they might want him to be so. That would imply a more than two-thirds victory for them and staging a comeback to power. Only time can tell whether and to what extent that vision will succeed. But suffice it to say, perhaps, that such strategies might consign the professor turned president to the ash-heap of history.

The second option, although seemingly unlikely, might imbibe in him a "sensible" route to prove that a neutral election is possible even under him. That would require a courageous stand over and above his past political affiliations. The president should by now realize that the recent uproar in the country is just the tip of the iceberg. It took place because of the leadership of the 14-party alliance, but was participated in by



common people.

The people of this country want their voting rights to be exercised in free and fair manner. If they smell that a conspiracy is being hatched to hijack their choices, all arrangements on that count could cost heavily, not only the president but also the nation. From now on, all liabilities lie on the shoulders of the honourable president of this country.

It is, perhaps, not true that 1996 and 2006 are not the same. In fact, in 2006, people have become more conscious not only about their rights of franchise but also about their voices against economic issues. Kansat, Phulbari, and Shanir Akhra have already fingered at the fire.

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Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

# Burden of a Nobel laureate

The newly bestowed laurel has placed additional onus on Dr Yunus to speak for the suffering humanity, may it be in his beloved homeland or in any part of the globe. At this time, not only his compatriots, but the whole world will be monitoring him as to the extent he can live up to the expectation bestowed by the newly won laurel, the core tenet of which would be to advance human rights and democracy.

### MOZAMMEL H KHAN

IN 1919, following the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian Noble laureate, renounced his knighthood and wrote to Viceroy Lord Chelmsford that: "When badges of honour make our shame glaring in the incongruous context of humiliation and I, for my part, wish to stand, shorn, by the side of my countrymen who, for their so called insignificance, are liable to suffer degradation not fit for human beings. And these are the reasons which have compelled me to ask Your Excellency, with due reference and regret, to relieve me of my title of knighthood whose burden I no longer can carry."

Although he did not agree with all the political activities and nationalistic principles of the movement for independence, the humiliation of his fellow citizens shook his conscience so much that it did not allow him to carry the burden of the laurel of knighthood.

It was Friday, October the 13th (I was driving extra carefully!), 7:30 am Toronto local time. I was bound for work when I heard on my car

radio that Dr Mohammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, which he founded, have won the Nobel Peace Prize. The news was not at all surprising, but extremely joyous because of the fact that the moment had at last come for which millions of his own compatriots and admirers (of his methodology and philosophy) around the globe had been waiting for years.

I could not resist breaking the news to my students, no matter how irrelevant it was to the engineering course that I was teaching. My personal perception of Dr Yunus's contributions and doctrines fell into three categories:

Firstly, I was a great admirer of his patriotic zeal during our great war of liberation while he was a student of Vanderbilt University of Tennessee. In fact, several years ago, in the face of the ceaseless efforts to distort and expunge our glorious history, I wrote an article entitled, "Our glorious history," in which I eulogized the contributions of two of our illustrious sons, late Dr FR Khan (we incidentally attended the same university for the highest

degree), and Dr. Mohammad Yunus.

Secondly, I am a great admirer of his micro-credit theory, without understanding its detailed intricacies, the bottom line of which is to benefit our teeming millions, the "poorest of the poor."

In the third category, I was critical of his lecture which he delivered in a seminar entitled, "If I could be the chairman of the Anti-Corruption Commission."

To me, the idea was absolutely utopian in our current state of affairs of the state, which I elaborated in an open letter published in a news daily. I dreaded the worst if he went ahead to materialize his plan, and persisted with his hypothetical mission to investigate the corruption of the rich and powerful, and concluded with the heartfelt supplication: "For Heaven's sake, we do not want that dreadful tragedy to happen, Professor Yunus."

In the will and testament drawn up by Alfred Bernhard Nobel on November 27, 1895, he laid down the conditions to be fulfilled by a recipient of the Nobel Prize. Paragraph One states, inter alia,

that the award of the prize shall be made to the person who, during the preceding year "shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind."

The peace prize bears extra significance for the fact that this should be awarded to "the person who shall have done the most, or best, work for fraternity among nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses."

The multi-dimensional aspect of peace has propelled the Nobel committee to extend its periphery to recognize the contributions that may not be directly connected to what Alfred Nobel's will had envisioned. Dr Norman Borlaug, an agricultural scientist, was awarded the peace prize in 1970 by redefining "benefit to humanity." He helped, borrowing from the banner of the Bolshevik revolution, "bread and peace," to provide bread for a hungry world.

Dr Shirin Ebadati of Iran was awarded in 2003 for her efforts for democracy and human rights. The Nobel committee hoped that the prize would be an inspiration for all those who struggle for human rights and democracy in their countries.

Dr Wangari Muta Maathai of Kenya was awarded in 2003 for her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace. The Nobel citation further stressed that "Maathai stood up coura-

geously against the former oppressive regime in Kenya. Her unique forms of action have contributed to drawing attention to political oppression -- nationally and internationally."

Likewise, the Nobel Committee's citation for Dr Yunus underscored the efforts of Dr Yunus and Grameen Bank to "create economic and social development from below and, in its own way, development from below also serves to advance democracy and human rights."

It is obvious that no matter how "benefit to mankind" is interpreted, efforts to advance human rights and democracy play an important role in the selection process. While Dr Yunus has rightfully condemned North Korea's nuclear drive, his performance as a voice of conscience in his own homeland, for the last several years in particular, was far from reassuring.

Over the last several years the battered human rights situation of our dear homeland was of grave concern for many conscious souls around the globe. Oppression of minorities and opposition workers, custodial torture and deaths, the brutal techniques of custodial torture of politicians and intellectuals alike, and, probably the most despicable of all crimes committed by the government, that has been termed by human rights organizations as "terrorism by the state," where people are being killed on

daily basis in so-called "crossfire," absolutely disregarding the rule of law.

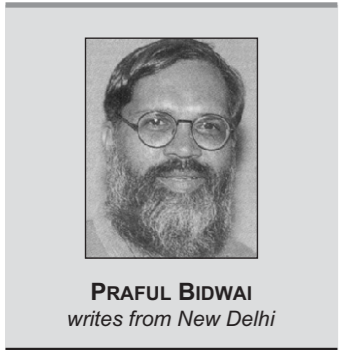
Ironically, Dr. Yunus has been totally mum on these reprehensible acts of a government that derived its authority from a constitutional process. Even the mini Jallianwala Bagh massacre of August 21, 2004, targeting the life of our former PM, failed to stimulate the conscience of Dr Yunus for expressing any words of concern for the dreadful act.

While Dr Yunus has blessings for the civil society movement to elect honest and suitable candidates, he had been totally silent when one of our brightest bureaucrat-turned politicians had been killed by assassin's grenade. It was puzzling to note the indifference of one our most gifted sons, even before he became a Nobel laureate, vis-a-vis such a heinous crime and tragedy.

The newly bestowed laurel has placed additional onus on Dr Yunus to speak for the suffering humanity, may it be in his beloved homeland or in any part of the globe. At this time, not only his compatriots, but the whole world will be monitoring him as to the extent he can live up to the expectation bestowed by the newly won laurel, the core tenet of which would be to advance human rights and democracy.

Dr Mozammel H Khan is the Convenor of the Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.

# Consumerism goes berserk



PRAFUL BIDWAI  
writes from New Delhi

THE furious wave of Dussehra-Diwali shopping in India has left many stunned with disbelief. Never before has India's middle class indulged in such frenzied acquisition of "lifestyle"-related goods -- from cars to diamonds, from Dolce & Gabbana and Fendi clothing to luxury watches, and from super-expensive chocolates to bathroom fixtures that cost lakhs of rupees. Cities across the board reported unprecedented traffic jams.

Industry sources say the August-November "festive" season will see a 30 percent year-over-year spurt in the sales of branded products. Many supermarkets registered even higher

This temporarily benefits the affluent consumer at the cost of the agricultural producer, small trader and artisan. The worst hit would be the millions of local shopkeepers who earn low margins and provide a variety of services, including credit, which are denied to most poor people. These effects will get greatly magnified if global hypermarket chains like Wal-Mart, Tesco, Carrefour, and Metro enter India. They will destroy livelihoods and a range of economic activities. There's growing resentment against these companies in Western Europe. They have bankrupted fruit, vegetable, and grain producers in many developing countries too.

growth. Nokia alone sold 400,000 cellular phones on a single day -- probably a world record.

As branded products seduce the elite, shopping and spending become its status symbols. So do free gifts and prizes. Yet, the consumer is not King in the New Consumerist Age. Rather, s/he is a passive object of manipulation by the marketing and sales promotion industry.

A survey covering 2,100 consumers and 800 retailers in 10 cities finds that "87 percent of Indians participated in some form of [sales] promotion." A whopping 53 percent are attracted to brands or shops because of free gifts. These could be: a gold/silver coin, air tickets, holiday packages, a

crockery set, a car, television sets, a house, DVD players, cash, even candles.

People don't choose gifts. They're attracted to them not because they fulfil a need, but because they are free. Your home may be overflowing with kitchen gadgets, but you'll take yet one more -- out of greed.

People in all capitalist societies are lured by discounts. They develop "loyalty" to brands. But it's perhaps only in India that gifts and guaranteed "scratch-to-win" prizes have become inseparably tied to the purchase decisions of a majority of consumers.

A special kind of greed is at work here -- acquisition of goods for acquisition's sake, irrespective

of utility/quality. The Indian consumer is not insensitive to the price of a good. But s/he's nevertheless a victim of boundless avarice.

Such avarice is typical of a first- or second-generation middle class which has internalised what sociologists term the Poverty Syndrome -- or the fear of falling into the ranks of the poor. Until recently, the Indian middle class would have saved. Now, with its steeply rising incomes -- themselves related to warped economic processes -- its upper layers are splurging.

These strata can buy houses at a young age like 28, and still spare tens of thousands of rupees every month on luxury products. The top

spenders are young people in "sunrise" service-sector businesses like Information Technology, insurance, banking, hotels, and in investment firms.

The disproportionate clout they command is reflected in faster growth of high-end goods. For instance, flat TV sales are growing by 47 percent a year, while the sales of old-style TVs are limping. Sales of semi-automatic washing machines are rising at less than half the 13 percent growth of fully automatic machines.

Sales of large frost-free refrigerators (above 300 litres) are growing at 24 percent, but smaller fridges show a negative trend. Split air-conditioner sales are rising at a feverish 97 percent.

Gift- and prize-driven consumerism has grown rapidly partly because of competition which breaks out during the "festive season," which accounts for about 40 percent of the sales of "white goods."

Riding on this consumerism is organised retail, comprising chain stores, malls, supermarkets and hypermarkets. This is the fastest-growing sector of the Indian economy, annually expanding at a scorching 20 percent-plus.

A leading business consultancy, A.T. Kearney, says the Indian organised retail business will more than triple in size, from \$7 billion to \$23 billion by 2010.

The Tata Management Consultancy Group forecasts that organised retail will annually grow at 22 percent. Its top five categories would be food, grocery and general merchandise, apparel, durables, food service, and home improvements. Big companies are trying to entice consumers with a wide choice of goods, an air-conditioned ambience, and a one-stop shopping-cum-entertainment destination.

According to multinational consultancy PricewaterhouseCoopers, a staggering Rs 19,000,000 crore (\$412 billion) of investment will flow into the Indian retail sector by 2011. Most of this will flow into "hypermarkets and supermarkets."

Half the investment will be directed to food-related retail and the remaining to non-food items. PwC is pleased that "Indian consumers' lifestyles and shopping habits" are increasingly directed at purchases of "non-essential goods such as luxury watches, cars, high-tech products, etc."

Investments in malls are growing rapidly. Of the 361 malls under construction, 227 are in the top 7 cities. The remaining are coming up in smaller cities. Close to 85 hypermarkets, 325 large department stores and more than 10,000 new outlets too are under development.

Malls have become an inseparable feature of most Indian cities -- and a favourite haunt of upper middle class youth. With 51 percent foreign direct investment allowed in single-brand stores, malls are likely to grow even faster.

Supplementing them are supermarkets like Big Bazar, which have established themselves in mid-sized cities like Lucknow, Nagpur, Ludhiana and Cochin. They have already driven the small shopkeeper into bankruptcy and are becoming predatory upon the greengrocer. The supermarkets can buy commodities at rock-bottom prices.

This temporarily benefits the affluent consumer at the cost of the agricultural producer, small trader and artisan. The worst hit would be the millions of local shopkeepers who earn low margins and provide a variety of

services, including credit, which are denied to most poor people.

Organised retailing is socially divisive and will widen rich-poor and urban-rural disparities. It's highly energy-intensive. It encourages waste: people buy more food than they need -- because of discounts. Impersonal organised retailing transforms the buyer-seller relationship, eliminating human contact.

These effects will get greatly magnified if global hypermarket chains like Wal-Mart, Tesco, Carrefour, and Metro enter India. They will destroy livelihoods and a range of economic activities. There's growing resentment against these companies in Western Europe. They have bankrupted fruit, vegetable, and grain producers in many developing countries too.

It would be suicidal for India to repeat the West's blunders and promote organised retailing.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.