

## Is it possible in three days?

M. MANIRUZZAMAN

THE nation must thank the 14-party alliance for, at least conditionally, accepting the decision of the president to take over as the head of the caretaker government, despite their reservations. This gave the nation a breathing space after the devastating agitation which cost more than two dozen lives, and thousands injured, leaving aside the sufferings of the whole nation before and after the holy Eid festival.

But the nation's anxiety is not yet gone. The alliance has given a fresh three-day ultimatum for fulfilling their 11 point demand, with each point containing several demands. The alliance wants to see that their demands are met which, in their view, is the barest minimum to prove neutral-ity.

It is unnecessary to list the 11 points demand here as the readers are aware of them. The key question, however, is whether it is possible to fulfil all of them in a matter of days or hours while the politicians failed to even discuss them in the dialogue, not to speak of fulfilling them. The concerned citizens can also genuinely question the politicians why they did not take any initiative to resolve such issues when they were in power, alternatively, over the last 15 years.

The nation hopes that the

president-cum-caretaker chief will try to remain neutral as far as possible and practicable. It is nice that he has already taken some administrative measures just in one day. The relevant political forces must appreciate it rather than burdening him with too many demands.

Many, if not all, of the 11 point demands may be genuine in view of the present politico-administrative situation. But, it must also be realized how many of them can be met immediately, and what measures can be taken to improve the situation.

Some of the demands can be implemented fairly soon, but possibly not in a couple of days. At least a couple of them have already been met, one fully and the other partially (removing the picture of the former prime minister from government offices, and the removal and transfer of several high officials). This must be seen as a good start, and has already given a signal that the president-cum-caretaker chief has started doing what he should do over the next few months.

Fulfilling some other demands will definitely take time, and it will be unfair to the president-cum-caretaker chief, as well as to the nation, if any unreasonable ultimatum is imposed. To give just one example, correction of the voter list is a genuine demand, so is voter list with photos. But taking photographs of about 95

million voters cannot be done in a couple of days. It is not possible even in a couple of months. This will require extending the tenure of the caretaker government, which can be made up to 6 months, without amending the constitution. For this, a consensus is desirable apart from legal, administrative, and financial measures. It is, however, possible to postpone printing of the voter list until necessary corrections are made.

Another important demand is the removal of the chief election commissioner, other election commissioners, and the election commission secretary, thus reconstituting the Election Commission. This requires consensus between the major political parties, because they are divided on this issue. Even if they can agree on some change, the CEC and other election commissioners cannot just be removed. One option is resignation, which is beyond the control of the president-cum-caretaker chief. The other option is referring the case to the Supreme Judicial Council, but getting their decision is definitely not possible in a couple of days.

One political force has tabled at least 20 demands under 11 points. There are other political forces who can raise, and will definitely raise, other demands which can be completely opposite. Then what will the president-

cum-caretaker chief do? Definitely, he will not be able to please everybody. He will have no alternative other than accepting some (reasonable and worth implementing) demands of one political force, making them partially happy, and he must accept at least some of the (reasonable and worth implementing) demands of the other forces as well. The opposing forces must realise that they cannot gain everything. They must accept a win-win situation and avoid zero-sum games.

Finally, as a concerned citizen, I would like to appeal humbly to the political forces to refrain from further agitation, and to resolve the relevant issues on the discussion table rather than on the streets. Even if they do go to the streets, the nation expects that the top leaders will instruct the party workers and supporters to maintain peace, and avoid conflict with other parties as well as with the law enforcing agencies.

The political forces must realize that people do not support the burning or breaking of vehicles and other properties, and killing or beating of people in the name of politics. By doing this, they can occupy streets, but not people's mind. The sooner the politicians realize this, the better is it for the nation, as well as for themselves.

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## He must deliver

KAZI SM KHARUL ALAM QUDDUSI

THE president of Bangladesh, Professor Iajuddin Ahmed, has taken over as the chief adviser to the neutral caretaker government (NCG), in addition to his duty as the president of the state. It's now a fait accompli. The demand that has been raised by many quarters is, however, a very pertinent and time-befitting one which expresses in clear terms that the president is, of course, not non-party, but has to prove himself to be neutral, which is very much possible, but only if there is the will.

Admittedly, Bangladesh went through around three days of anarchy and lawlessness which has subsided, but has not stopped altogether. The horrific violence was, arguably, for getting a non-party, neutral caretaker chief. Would it be an exaggeration to claim that the concept itself is a defective one? Why, then, should the appointment of caretaker chief cause the loss of so many lives? Maybe the concept is not altogether a bad one. However, our political leaders have set the stage for turning it either ineffective or defunct.

In fact, the nation has not only experienced days of mayhem, it has also seen extraordinary drama and maneuverings center-

ing on Bangabhaban, as well. The wisdom of AL's agitating against KM Hasan seems a logical, but not a sledgehammer, argument, as the ground had been prepared by the BNP coalition by increasing the retirement age of Supreme Court judges. However, the BNP coalition's reasons for turning down the remaining judges has never been made clear.

To be frank, the AL and its allies made only one justice questionable, but the BNP allies stigmatized the whole community of judges. In this bloody game of revenge, AL might have won initially by forcing M Hasan to express embarrassment, and BNP might have regained the upper hand subsequently by installing their man in the key post of chief adviser by twisting the relevant constitutional provision. There is very strong controversy regarding non-compliance of systematic constitutional procedures.

But has democracy gained anything in the process? No, democracy has been served a mortal blow instead. Moreover, the caretaker concept itself has been brought to a precipice. Yes, the major political parties in the country nurture only one principle, and that is to gain or regain power, and they have no scruples whatsoever. They can be outstandingly innovative, not in promoting democracy, but in

capturing power. A little flashback might clarify my point in this regard.

Latifur Rahman -- the third chief adviser -- was brought to his position by the then AL regime by superseding other judges. Even then, however, he served the AL poorly as chief adviser, and the rest is known to all. To make the fourth chief adviser their man, the BNP coalition even went for constitutional amendment (14th amendment). What I want to convey is that neither AL nor BNP wanted to let the law take its own course, and install a person who becomes chief adviser automatically.

And their peddling for manipulation must have reached a new height when they more or less forced the president to take over as chief adviser, though he had many an option to consider and exhaust before jumping the queue. So, the president-cum-chief adviser now enjoys almost absolute power. But power is supposed to be commensurate with duties as well. The BNP is now being wallowing in satisfaction that they have been able to make the opposition parties swallow their man as caretaker chief.

Now, who is going to resist them from coming back to power? They have every reason to think in that line. They might even come back to power. Prior to all that, however, there would have to be a free, fair, and fully

inclusive election, including of course AL. Fallen dictator Ershad repeated his prediction that AL will ultimately come to the elections. I, however, do not think that AL will ultimately go for election, unless a level playing field is created by the current caretaker government.

Because, the equation is quite simple: Why should they go for election if the results have already been fixed? The president -- who was a titular head only a few days back -- is now all powerful. And it is he who will have to endear himself to the AL block. Though the president disregarded AL's plea not to assume the post of chief adviser they, rather surprisingly, offered him the olive branch. The president has now no option but to accept it.

He just can't afford to underestimate AL's accommodating attitude. The bottom line is that every citizen of the country can afford to fail once, as he may have another chance to recover. For the president, however, there is only one chance. And his shoulders now carry the full weight of the future of democracy in the country. If he falters, the whole nation will turn upside down, and so will democracy. Hollow promises will bear no fruit. He must deliver.

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## Politics is a dirty game

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

IN the underdeveloped and developed countries alike politics has become a dirty game, indeed. Power mongering politicians are determined to remain in power to play dirty tricks during election campaigns to convince the voters who are, by and large, unconcerned about national and international issues while they remain busy earning their livelihood for survival. This is equally true in respect of the US.

During the campaign trail in America, whether it is presidential or congressional elections, negative ads over electronic media play a dirty game. It has turned out to be character assassination of each candidate. Millions and millions of dollars have been invested in these negative ads. No major issues which affect the people of America are reflected in the ads.

According to one source, the national committee of the Republican Party has invested 10 million dollars in negative ads against Democrat candidates where there is a possibility of losing the seat. That is a staggering amount of money.

However, debates on TV, between the contesting candidates, reflect national and international issues. Money matters in elections in America. Believe it or not, congressional candidates have raised \$1.18 billion, which is 15 percent higher than the \$1.03

billion raised in 2004.

It is expected that both political parties and candidates will raise a total of \$2.6 billion dollars. Generally, the Republican Party is ahead in fund raising, because they depend on interest groups mostly.

November 7 is the day for congressional election in America. Every two years voters in America go to the polling stations to elect the House of Representatives and one third of the senators. For example, this year 33 senators would be contesting in the elections.

A large turnout of voters is expected to register their displeasure against many incumbent candidates whose roles are questionable indeed. Congress is considered as a rubber stamp for President Bush. 74 percent of Americans, according to very recent polls, opined against the role of the Congress.

They consider that Congress is out of touch with average Americans. Congress is charged with huge federal deficits, the unpopular war in Iraq, ignoring overseeing role of the Congress, and a string of scandals involving the indicted former majority leader in the House of Representatives Tom DeLay, indicted lobbyist Jack Abramoff, who has been in frequent contact with the White House, Representative Bob Ney, who decided not to contest before agreeing to plead guilty in the

"influence peddling" scandal that snared Abramoff and some associates, and sex scandal involving former Republican representative, Mark Foley.

The war in Iraq will dominate the fate of the elections in November 7. Other key issues are immigration, national security, global warming, health cost, and energy. Anti-war strategists are of the opinion that the war in Iraq would be crucial in the elections because a huge amount of taxpayer money has been wasted in the war.

The ruling Republican Party and the Democratic Party have geared up their campaigns in the battleground states in Missouri, Virginia, Tennessee, and New Jersey. A new poll shows that 55 percent registered voters have expressed their discontent with President Bush, the Republican-led Congress and the war in Iraq, and indicated for change.

A poll by Newsweek found that 57 percent of those surveyed disapprove of President Bush's job performance, and just 35 approve. A political scientist at Emory University in Atlanta, Alan Abramowitz, is of the opinion that: "Swing voters, independent and moderate voters are unhappy with the administration and with the Republican Congress. It is going to be hard to change those dynamics in two week's time."

The Democratic Party needs 15 seats of the 435 of the House of Representatives, and 6 seats of

the 100 member Senate, to win majority in the Congress.

With the number of deaths of American troops in Iraq rising at an alarming rate, and because of anti-war campaigns in different states, the popularity of President Bush, along with the Republican dominated Congress, has been eroded further. It is interesting to note that all polls show that the Democrats are much ahead of the Republicans.

Having seen the crisis, President Bush, First Lady Laura Bush, and Vice-President Dick Cheney, are on the campaign trail for the Republican candidates. The Republicans are now on the defensive, and are suggesting that if the Democratic Party controls the Congress, the insurgents in Iraq would win, and America would face threats from terrorists. In fact, the Republicans have begun desperate and unbecoming smear campaigns, attempting to discredit the Democrats.

For 12 years the Republican Party dominated in the Congress. In view of their mishandling of the war in Iraq, and scandals in the Congress, the Republicans might lose control of the House of Representatives, and in all likelihood the Democratic Party will gain a one or two seat majority in the Senate.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, a former diplomat, writes from Virginia, US.

## A mountain of trouble

B J LEE

THE famous autumn leaves of Mt Kumkang weren't as colorful as they normally are. A hot, dry summer had dulled the foliage, and worse, the scenic mountain was enshrouded by heavy clouds -- a harbinger perhaps of the mountain's hazy future. Heightened tensions on the Korean peninsula following Pyongyang's nuclear test in early October have prompted many South Korean tourists to cancel their trips to the mountain resort, leaving numerous hotel rooms and restaurant seats empty in this peak season. "We originally expected 40,000 tourists in October but the actual number will be half that because of the nuclear test," says Jang Hwan Bin, an executive at Hyundai Asan, the South Korean firm that operates the tour project. "If this business fails, it would be a tragic loss for not only our company but also the whole Korean peninsula."

The problems at Mt Kumkang highlight the uncertainty these days between the two Koreas. Following a Washington-led UN resolution condemning the nuclear test, the international community agreed to limited sanctions on North Korea. US Assistant State Secretary Christopher Hill isn't happy that Mt Kumkang is a cash cow for the North. Officials in South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun's admin-



istration say they might scale down the project, but refuse to close it completely. Pyongyang warned that Seoul would pay "high costs" if it succumbed to US pressures -- a threat that was echoed by northerners working at Mt Kumkang. "Our nuclear weapon is to protect both Koreas from US imperialists," said Kim Hyun Shil, a 23-year-old North Korean guide at the tour project. "The South will fight against US attempts to close the project."

In fact, the site is precious for both Koreas. For the South, it is the most significant achievement of its decade-long "sunshine policy" of engagement with the North. Since 1998, more than 1.3 million southerners have visited the mountain, which is almost sealed off from the rest of the North. In comparison, fewer than 1,000 southerners had visited the North during the previous 50 years. Seoul hopes the project will promote further detente and

eventual unification. Southern tourists, particularly young ones, say that visiting the mountain and interacting with northerners (even if they are only a handful of tour guides who spout Pyongyang propaganda) gives them a sense of filial attachment with their neighbor.

The North's motive can be summed up in a word -- cash. Hyundai Asan has paid Pyongyang about \$450 million so far for entry and visa fees, and doled out another \$450 million to pursue various business projects in the North. The company hopes to turn the area into a resort town equipped with golf courses, ski slopes and even a casino. A \$70 million golf course is scheduled to open next year.

Critics argue the money sent to Pyongyang is helping to prop up the dictatorship of Kim Jong Il, and may even help fund the production of nuclear or conventional weapons, while the North Korean peo-

ple go without food. Conservatives in Washington and Seoul assert that any benefits are exaggerated; personal contacts between northerners and southerners at the tourist site are tightly regulated, and political discussion is banned.

The nuclear test has discouraged many potential visitors. Some canceled trips because of security concerns; others because they disapproved of the provocative act by North Korea. Hotels and restaurants were more than half empty. And new tour reservations have fallen significantly since the test, according to Hyundai Asan. The company originally projected a record 400,000 visitors to Mt Kumkang this year, but its latest forecast is 260,000. Next year could be worse; Seoul is likely to eliminate some incentives for prospective tourists. One possibility: canceling the subsidies it now provides for student visits in the off-season.

Northerners, unsurprisingly, are stoic. "We have survived under US sanctions for more than 50 years," says Kim Jung Geum, a hotel-bar waitress. "Sanctions will make us even stronger." Despite her tough words, a look of concern crossed her face as she surveyed empty tables at her bar. Mt Kumkang may eventually become a gateway to unification. But right now, it's a plum target for realpolitik, as the international community tries to squeeze a dictator.

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## A civil servant's story

RABINDRANATH TRIVEDI

EXPERIENCE shows that although a government tries to find skilled and efficient officials, ultimately only political allegiance becomes the criterion for promotion, posting and recruitment. Skilled and efficient officials were pushed aside as OSD, or forced to quit the service only because of lack of political allegiance.

It is a tendency among the officers to behave like political activists. This is just to get benefits from sycophancy. Since 1975, the governments have preferred sycophants, however inefficient, to operate as their activists.

The modern Bangladeshi OSDs under BNP-Jamaat regime, assigned as such on political consideration (especially those with a Liberation War background) have a tough time of it. They have, like me, no extra money that has to be

paid as commission for a better posting, and by definition, are out of favour with the regime. They can only sit idle, not knowing what to do or whom to approach.

Today, a civil servant works under tremendous pressure, whether in the field, attached departments, corporations, or in the secretariat. When he refuses to toe the line, or resists partisan pressure, or due to his background, he is often subjected to harassment or punitive actions. Some civil servants succumb to pressure, or often volunteer in hope of personal gains, while many more suffer for their commitments to rule of law, impartiality, and conscience.

The result is a growing frustration among civil servants who are alienated for being fair and non-partisan. They go unsung and un-honoured. The syndrome is unleashed in its ugliest form when a new government assumes power. It has

become the trend that, along with the new political party centers, a new set of civil servants enter the corridor of power. They are the confidantes of political elements with whom they have been maintaining surreptitious contacts. In the incubatory days of a nascent government they wield tremendous influence, and use this fluid situation to settle their personal scores with fellow colleagues.

The result is retirement, supersession, posting as OSD, even bogus corruption/criminal charges. In the first few months the situation reaches such a pass that an officer would hurriedly scan the daily newspaper before going to office in the morning, only to be sure that he was still in the job. Those were indeed nerve-wracking months for many civil servants. As time rolled on, symptoms of politicisation became more pronounced in matters of promotion and transfer.

Hundreds were made OSD, and the set criteria for promotion was flouted. There are instances of officers making meteoric jumps from the level of deputy secretary to take charge of a ministry in less than two years, whereas officers with requisite qualification working as joint secretary for more than 12 years are superseded, and made to work under their juniors.

Forced retirement, contractual appointment, promotion and posting on political grounds during the last four years seem to have demoralised even the police administration. The government has sacked some 1,000 police officers for reasons other than corruption. The print media had said that victimization, on political grounds, in the department began immediately after the BNP-led four party alliance assumed power in 2001.

During my OSD-ship, I had a peculiar experience of the

unbecoming attitude of some junior officers at the level of deputy secretary (DS) while visiting a senior minister who is also a key office bearer of the ruling party.

The private secretary to the minister said: "Sir, you might have forgotten that we are here only because we have to act for the present government. We were thirteen deputy secretaries who got mobile telephones for sending daily report to 'that house.'"

Till that day I did not know the meaning of "that house" -- Hawa Bhaban. It may be recalled that the names of these officers were disclosed in a news item in the daily Janakantha on October 28. It is a revealing story. Everybody should be aware of these gentlemen, and how some civil servants have become a part of the espionage system of a political party.

Perhaps it was because I was the only freedom fighter

Hindu officer in Bangabhaban, but I was made OSD in November 2001.

The Bangladesh nation-state gave me honour, identity, and the power of persistence and perseverance to bear the humiliation as a freedom fighter Hindu at the fag end of service.

My memories are filled with humiliations in the post-October 2001 period. I retired from service in September 2001, after I had witnessed the passing of three and a half decades in which 23 presidents (including 2 chief martial law administrators), 7 vice-presidents, 13 prime ministers, 3 chief advisers to caretaker government and 31 advisors, and 425 ministers including advisors to martial law regimes, and state and deputy ministers, served the successive governments of Bangladesh since April 10, 1971.

I can confidently say that the year 2001 was an eventful year

of humiliation and abuse, with a political strategy of vilifying the freedom fighter officers, particularly the minorities, in the government services.

The initial few weeks' time of the new government was marred by violence against the minority community -- particularly the Hindus -- by ruling party activists. The home minister and the foreign minister, however, contested the claims and termed the reports baseless or exaggerated.

Be that as it may, there is no scope for the government to remain complacent with the plea that the matter has been exaggerated, nor should any quarter overplay or magnify the issue with a view to discrediting Bangladesh, where communal harmony has been the best, excepting occupational rapture, under the given geopolitical and economic situation. No civilized society could embark upon such unjust acts.

What are the faults of these innocent Hindus? Nothing, excepting exercising their democratic rights. Since the Hindus and other minorities here are weak, scattered, not organized, vulnerable, it is easy to attack them, loot them, rape the women, kill them, and then forget these crimes easily.

The legacy of defiling freedom fighters is now becoming a fashion with a section of the bureaucracy.

Leaving the ministry after meeting with the minister on that occasion, I looked outside the corridor at the sun that was setting in the west, and the darkness that was approaching swiftly, and said to myself, "Who governs the government? Whither Bangladesh, my dreamland?"

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