

Distribution of portfolios

How many portfolios can the president handle?

THE distribution of the portfolios amongst the newly appointed advisers of the fourth caretaker government has largely disappointed the people. Proving the closest guesses wrong, President Iajuddin Ahmed, who is also the Chief Adviser of the caretaker government, has retained all the important ministries under his fold, which has triggered speculations regarding his ability to handle the job efficiently. The president has taken too much on his shoulders when the popular expectation was that he would take as little as possible.

The president has kept establishment and home ministries, and Cabinet Division and Election Commission Secretariat for himself, all of which are of utmost importance insofar as holding a credible election is concerned. This move has raised questions in the minds of the people as to whether there were no competent advisers to head these vital ministries.

While we expected the advisers to play an emphatic role, now it appears that they have been reduced to holding some portfolios that are at this moment not quite significant, or have little to do with the next election. It is clear that the opposition parties are demanding substantive and qualitative changes in the decision making process at the top, not merely cosmetic ones -- a goal that a panel of advisers having only a token presence is unlikely to attain.

It is being widely talked about that even if the president has all the good intent to perform up to our expectations, the question remains whether his frail health and the severe time constraint will not prove to be major deterrent factors in attaining the objectives. His move might be viewed with great suspicion by the major opposition parties, thereby hindering the process of reaching a broad consensus on some core issues particularly when the immediate past ruling party is facing the charge of exerting too much influence on the functioning of the caretaker government.

We believe there is still time to rethink the issue of distribution of portfolios to bring the all-important credibility to the caretaker government at this critical juncture of our national life.

Opposition demands

Avoid taking extreme measures

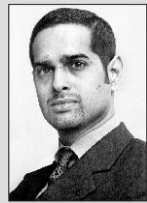
THE Awami League's judicious and constructive response to President Iajuddin Ahmed's taking over as the chief of the caretaker government, despite initial rejection, and the party's readiness to extend cooperation to the government to bring an end to the on-going political crisis has been acclaimed by all and sundry. There is no doubt that the AL's stand on the issue helped defuse the tension that was running high across the country following the violent flare-up on October 28.

Without question, the AL has grievances that have either not been addressed to its satisfaction, or totally ignored. But the picture is not all that bleak for the party: its demand that the CEC be removed and the EC reorganised in order to hold a free and fair election has assumed the overtones of national issue. And we have in this newspaper fully endorsed it many times. However, we believe that the pragmatism shown by the AL should continue and the party has to avoid committing itself to any extreme course of action rather prematurely. The caretaker government needs some time to prove its worth and much will depend on how the AL formulates its game plan in the next few days.

Obviously, it is not the sole responsibility of the AL to maintain peace but there is no denying that as the major opposition party it has to exert a sobering influence on others. AL must learn from the extreme position it took against KM Hasan. The people in general are sympathetic to many opposition demands but they are equally opposed to violence and extremism. The point will be made further clear by the fact that the gruesome incidents that took place last Saturday greatly damaged the image of both the party and the country to all those who viewed live the horrific beating to death of at least two young men in the streets of Dhaka. It sent very negative signals about the party itself and the only result could be loss of public sympathy.

We fully appreciate the points that the AL is making about changes in the EC including CEC. We have taken a stand against the lopsided allocation of portfolios to the advisers and hope that the government will try to create an even playing field for the contestants in the next election. What AL must realise that even when people agree with the opposition demands they do not endorse the extreme methods employed to realise them.

The heat is on



ZAFAR SOBHAN

IT is said that if you place a frog into a pot of boiling water that it will hop right out again, but that if you place it in a pot of cold water and then slowly increase the heat, it will stay put until it is boiled alive.

I have my doubts as to whether this is actually true, but this is hardly the point. The story is meant figuratively to suggest the potential danger of remaining impervious to small warning signals or gradual deterioration in a situation until it is too late.

Why would I bring this up in today's context? I wonder.

Count me as one who is not overtly encouraged about the current pre-election scenario. I apologize in advance for my pessimism, for my cynicism, for my failure to get with the program.

Let us not be too hasty. Let us not jump to conclusions. Let us give the process a chance. This is what is counseled by the nation's wise men, our society's mandarins, the respectable centre, the establishment. They

know best, after all. In Bangladesh we have always been rewarded for following such a patient, prudent course of action.

How could we possibly go wrong following such an eminently sensible path? Nothing to get excited about. Nothing to get upset about. Take a deep breath. The water is barely lukewarm. No problems.

Let us not draw any adverse inference from the decidedly dubious and non-transparent way in which the president was maneuvered into the post of chief adviser.

Let us not draw any adverse inference from the litany of untruths that accompanied the maneuvering or the fact that the constitutional process was not followed.

Let us not draw any adverse inference from the preposterous argument that where the constitution states that the chief adviser shall be appointed from "among the retired chief justices of Bangladesh" that this clause contemplates those chief justices

STRAIGHT TALK

The early indications when it comes to the transfer of police and administrative personnel necessary to ensure a level playing field are not encouraging. But of course it is too early to jump to any conclusions. We need to wait and see. So what then? Well, of course, since this is all speculative, it is really too early in the game to worry about such a dire eventuality. There's plenty of time. No need to rush to judgment. We can cross that bridge when we come to it. Phew, it's getting hot in here.

who are dead as well as those who are alive.

Go ahead. Roll the phrase around your tongue a few times. Among the retired chief justices of Bangladesh. Sure, it is meant to apply to the dead as well as the alive. What could be more obvious?

Why would anyone have any reason to doubt the motives or designs of those who advance such a transparently obvious interpretation?

Even-handedness dictates that we treat the argument with respect, take it seriously. Let us keep an open mind. Let us give everyone the benefit of the doubt.

Patience. Let us see how the chief adviser goes about constituting his council of advisers. So now we move to the next step in the process.

Let us not draw any adverse inference from the fact that seven of the ten names were drawn from the list sent by the BNP and only two from the list sent by the AL.

Let us not draw any adverse inference from the fact that the

first four names submitted by the AL were rejected out of hand and that no reason was given for their rejection.

This is not to cast aspersions on the final ten. I am sure that they are all fine and upstanding citizens. The ones on the list I know personally certainly are. But there are more than ten fine and upstanding citizens under the age of 72 in the country.

What would have been lost with a more even distribution between the two main parties, perhaps in line with the percentage of the popular vote that each received in the last election, if one feels that a 50-50 split would be somehow inappropriate for a body that is meant to be the embodiment of neutrality.

What would have been the problem with picking the top two choices from the list submitted by the AL? What, for instance, could possibly be the objection to ex-IGP Muhammad Nurul Huda?

And let us not draw any adverse inference at all from the fact that the key portfolios of

home and establishment have been retained by the chief adviser himself.

Perhaps it is all coincidence. Perhaps it is nothing more than the luck of the draw, the roll of the dice.

Is it just me, or is getting warm in here?

So now we move to the next phase of the proceedings. Once again we must sit patiently and wait and see what steps are taken before we draw any kind of conclusion.

All right. I won't jump to any conclusions. I will make predictions instead.

The next immediate issue is the reconstitution of the Election Commission. This demand has been termed a "new" one by the BNP secretary general. I think that tells me all I need to know about his honesty.

Suffice to say that the demand is neither "new," as the secretary general knows full well, nor is it only the demand of the AL. It also happens to be, among others, the editorial position of this newspaper and is in line with the recent findings of the visiting NDI delegation.

But once again we are set to enter the twilight zone. I do not see any way for the chief election commissioner to remain in place, but then there is the question of the rest of the body, especially the acceptability of commissioner Mohammad Zakaria.

Perhaps they will pull the old switcheroo. Then expect to hear the argument that perhaps Aziz

has blotted his copy-book, but one cannot jump to conclusions about how Zakaria will comport himself.

Of course, the real problem is that even if both Aziz and Zakaria and everyone else are removed, there is no guarantee that they will not be replaced by someone even worse. It's a bit of a Catch-22 situation. If a preferred slate of names is submitted then they can be summarily rejected, but if a slate is not submitted, then the AL runs the risk of ending up with an even more objectionable commission.

I predict, with some confidence, that the steps taken to ensure the neutrality of the Election Commission will not be sufficient to placate the AL, or indeed, the general public. I could be wrong, of course. I hope very much to be. But I have a sneaking suspicion that I may be on to something here.

The early indications when it comes to the transfer of police and administrative personnel necessary to ensure a level playing field are not encouraging. But of course it is too early to jump to any conclusions. We need to wait and see.

So what then? Well, of course, since this is all speculative, it is really too early in the game to worry about such a dire eventuality. There's plenty of time. No need to rush to judgment. We can cross that bridge when we come to it.

Phew, it's getting hot in here.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

The Sunday night schtick



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

SOMETHING happened last Sunday night that has left no taste in the mouth. We can't tell if it was sweet, bitter, hot or sour. It was like bland food served to a patient, who must eat to live and fight the disease. If it works, well and fine. If it fails, I told you so. It is hard to blame anyone, hard to claim anything, when the incumbent president took oath as the chief adviser of the caretaker government. Somehow, it felt like a clever contrivance wobbling between dirty and clean.

Perhaps the sunny side of what happened last Sunday is the economy of scale. One person will wear two hats, what is commonly known as double-hatting in corporate parlance (funnily, one legal Gulliver told us the Lilliputs on TV that he thought the idea was funny!). Not to speak of cost saving for the republic. We have got two heads for the price of one. There

are other benefits. No conflict, no ego hassle, and no time wasted in decision-making. Between Iajuddin and Iajuddin, things will run smooth and speedy.

These are the apparent plus points of having a chief adviser who is also the president of the republic. Frankly speaking, I don't blame it on the president if he chose to self-appoint himself for an additional responsibility. He had to do what he had to do, because it was unfair of others to create the mess and then dump it on him. Those who are criticizing him now are the habitual oinkers. Given the chance, they might not have done it any better than him.

Don't we know that already? If all the people who took decisions in the past had taken the right decisions, why should this country come to this soup thirty-five years after independence? Obviously, mistakes were made, incrementally and emphatically, because private interest always prevailed over the party and party

CROSS TALK

Who knows why the president took the oath of a second office last Sunday night? Is it his love of the party? Or is it his love of the country? If he can hold a free and fair election, he will dispel all misgivings. The flavour will return to food and the taste buds will wake up again. To be or not to be, God save this nation.

interest always prevailed over the country. And then eloquent men and women defended them like knights in the shining armour of their glib tongues (legal giants included).

Say, this time the president has taken a wrong decision. He hasn't followed the constitution to the letter and read between the lines before he decided to take up an additional office. What else could he do given the choice? On one side, he had a strife-torn country where people were fighting on the streets, killing each other. On the other side, the opposition was spitting fire on him to install the caretaker government within twenty-four hours.

Okay, the president may have played into the hands of the party, which brought him to power. It is also possible that he may have played a hand if the surprise of last Sunday was the outcome of any conspiracy. But who is to blame for it? Isn't it the responsibility of the chess player to carefully move his pieces so that he

can avoid a checkmate? The opposition didn't concentrate as hard on strategy as they did on showdown. If there was a trap, they walked right into it.

It is interesting to watch our legal eagles working on the double to interpret the constitution (many of them were involved in framing the caretaker government concept which they now find flawed). Some of them are asking the president to hand over the chief advisor's role even after he took the oath. Well, there are prescribed steps, which need to be taken to appoint the chief advisor. Did the president go through all those steps? He said he did, but the legal minds aren't convinced. So they are accusing the president of shortchanging the constitution. Fair game, if the president has violated the constitution. They also have the right to argue what constitutes that violation.

But what were the choices before the president? The first choice of former chief justice declined the job. The first choice

of the retired Appellate Division judge is already in the Election Commission. The next choice in one category said he would step in provided both parties wanted him. The next choice in the other category was not adequately explored. The president didn't take the matter to the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court, which he could.

The fact that he didn't do the last two things makes him suspect. But it may not be always easy to watch your steps when the house is burning. Again, how could the president perform under the stifling pressure of others breathing down his neck? The opposition gave him 24 hours to form the caretaker government. Even if he has made a mistake (hope it was not premeditated), that mistake has brought the opposition back to negotiation and restored peace on the streets.

Still, let bitterness come sooner than later. The ten advisors have been sworn in already, but those who are not convinced should come forward and stop this president before he takes further steps. It seems the politicians are not questioning his authority as much as his neutrality. But the legal mandarins are questioning his authority. They can take the president to the court before or after his term is finished.

Meanwhile, let the president-cum-chief advisor do his job without treating him like some fraternal boy looking for initiation. It is unfair to push him to deliver what three full-time governments couldn't do in the past. If you weigh the gravity of the demands, they range from instant solutions to wild imaginations. It is easy to remove the picture of the former prime minister from all offices. But crushing terrorism, recovering fire-arms, and rooting out corruption aren't quite like change of socks.

This is where the two-in-one might get stretched. And remember this president is no stud. At 72, he is already struggling with failing health and can't be an endless bundle of energy. Besides, if he could achieve so much by November 3 or even within the 3 months of the caretaker government, then why bother having an election? Make this magician President-for-Life and let him run the country!

Who knows why the president took the oath of a second office last Sunday night? Is it his love of the party? Or is it his love of the country? If he can hold a free and fair election, he will dispel all misgivings. The flavour will return to food and the taste buds will wake up again. To be or not to be, God save this nation.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

Why Dr Yunus did not get the Nobel Prize for economics

Therefore, either economics has to change its basic philosophy of remaining above criticism by not doing a value judgment, or it should limit its role in shaping policies, particularly in the Third World. All the governments in these countries, and all the international development agencies, should consider this suggestion seriously, and should consider having more technology experts in their policymaking bodies which are presently overwhelmed by economics personnel only.

DR K SIDDIQUE-E-RABBANI

IN orthodox economics one of the first lessons is: an economist cannot make value judgments -- the moment s/he does, s/he is no more an economist. An economist will only say what may happen if the situation is such and such, but s/he is never supposed to judge, or express opinion about, the situation itself; taking any real step on a judgment is beyond question. If you do not pass any judgment, nor do any real work, you do not make mistakes and stay high above criticism -- seems to be the idea.

On the other hand, Dr Yunus made this forbidden value judgment -- he even went further and tried out his judgment in the real world; therefore he no more remained an economist. This is

probably the reason behind Dr Yunus not getting the Nobel Prize for economics. This naturally brings out a serious question, what is economics for?

1. What economics does:

a. Taking cues from human experience, it attempts to fit models and develop indexes.

b. These models are then used to predict the possible implications of government policies.

c. It can develop indexes to evaluate the successes of a policy after its implementation, whether the targets are being achieved, thus providing useful feedback to the government

2. What economics is not good for:

a. It cannot innovate a policy for a new situation, since there is no previous experience.

b. If there is an innovation in

technology, or any other field that affects the economy, all predictions of economics go haywire. It is a "Big-Bang" for economics (as all laws of physics disappear in a Big-Bang). Therefore economists have an inherent aversion to innovations. (Its effect can be seen in policies governing the Third World. Naturally, the innovation and breakthrough of Dr Yunus was not eyed with reverence either.)

c. Leadership to a society, or to a nation, needs futuristic vision and imagination. So economics, adhering to past experience alone, is not suitable for giving leadership to a nation, particularly to a Third World country that has an untrodden path ahead. So the leadership here needs to innovate policies to enhance the quality of life of its common people, to

reduce the disparity among its people created mainly because of a history of colonial rule where orthodox economics has little to contribute.

3. What has gone wrong with the Third World

a. Economics was developed after the industrial revolution in Europe, so it does not have direct experience of a pre-industrial situation, while most of the Third World still remains in the pre-industrial era.

b. Third World presents an entirely new world to economics which got developed in industrialised Europe. The people, their attitudes towards life, their reactions and behaviour are entirely different here. So economic policies forced in these countries gave rise to confusion and disorder, reducing employment, increasing disparity and making the people lazy and corrupt.

c. Thus efforts to apply existing economic theories did not succeed in the Third World, nor did the political and social theories of the West. Unfortunately, the blame has been put squarely on the people of these countries, not

on the limitation of the theories or models used.

To probe further, economics does not consider as demand the basic requirements of a person who does not have the capability to purchase the same. On the other hand that person is made of flesh and blood, and in order to survive has real demands which a government has to take care of. Similarly economics does not consider a person to be loan-worthy if s/he does not have the required collateral, but Dr Yunus crossed this dictum and proved the opposite. This attitude of economics has also resulted in the choking of small industries based on indigenous technology and innovation in the Third World. The policies of the government, guided by orthodox economics, assume that any industry, whether large or small, starts with a capital investment, and so is supposed to register itself, comply with all regulations, and pay taxes right from the beginning. Unfortunately, that is not the way industrialization takes root in a country like Bangladesh which is still in the pre-industrial stage.

If we consider the basic philosophy of development, it entails the exploitation of natural resources to the benefit of mankind, it needs improvisation, innovation and vision in order to set foot on an untrodden path. Which field of knowledge and experience is most suited to these requirements? The answer would be, definitely, technology. If we now look back at global history, the phenomenal economic development of the recent times owes completely to the industrial revolution that took place in Europe, and which is still unfolding.

This revolution happened solely due to technology innovators who turned themselves into entrepreneurs as well. Arkwright, Cartwright, George Stevenson, Edison, Marconi, Ford, Sony, IBM, Microsoft -- it is all the same story. It is only the technology innovators who created large businesses in the world, no one else!

We talk about poverty alleviation in the Third World. Organised micro-credit championed by Prof Yunus has provided a breakthrough, and the initial

boost to this end, but to take the results further, and to sustain the development we need something else. This something can only come from proliferation of small industries through indigenous-technology based small industries catering to the needs of the common people around, providing affordable technical solutions for an improvement of the quality of life. This cannot be achieved through imported technology, nor through export of handicrafts only. This, in turn, needs freedom of technology innovation, and freedom to apply these results for the benefit of the common people through commercial enterprises.

Unfortunately, in most of the Third World, including Bangladesh, this freedom has been severely curbed through tax and other regulatory policies, and the inevitable harassment from corrupt officials associated with it and who mostly follow the policies of the past colonial rulers who deliberately intended to destroy local industries. Recently this freedom is again receiving a setback in the garb of globalization and free trade. Although the

champions of such global policies promote technology innovation and technology based enterprises in their own countries, the advice to the Third World has always been otherwise.

Therefore, either economics has to change its basic philosophy of remaining above criticism by not doing a value judgment, or it should limit its role in shaping policies, particularly in the Third World. All the governments in these countries, and all the international development agencies, should consider this suggestion seriously, and should consider having more technology experts in their policymaking bodies which are presently overwhelmed by economics personnel only.

The same thinking goes for leadership in the Third World. India and Malaysia were fortunate to have Nehru and Mahathir respectively -- both having educational backgrounds in science -- who could steer their countries to have sturdy foundations for development.

Dr K Siddique-e-Rabbani is Professor of Physics, Dhaka University.