

An alarming sign

Elaborate precautionary measures imperative

It is with trepidation that we look at the news of shots being fired at the former law minister Moudud Ahmed's residence barely within a week of the formation of the caretaker government. Mr. Moudud may have escaped a close shave, because he and his family were luckily away from their abode at the time of the incident. But one policeman was injured anyway.

What it basically underlines is the uncertainty and short-lived vacuum accompanying any transitional phase of governance when thugs and pursuers of vendetta could try and take advantage of the vulnerable situation. Just think of it, how many politicians on both sides of the political divide would be vulnerable to security risks at a time like this if the holes are not plugged!

We would like to express our concern for the portents it holds for wider destabilization in politics and society.

Let's not forget, however, that the exchange of threats and counter-threats between political parties and the unabated use of negative political language by them even after the installation of a caretaker government have undeniably been a contributing factor in the disquieting development. The still continuing political clashes in the outlying districts between the activists of major political parties and the upping of the confrontational rhetoric between the leaders are contributing to tension, suspicion and distrust where there should be very little of it, with a caretaker government fully in place and people's expectation have increased for better things to come.

We implore the contending political forces to cooperate with the caretaker government rather than open a three-dimensional confrontation within the system. Of course, they must feel free to speak on the caretaker government, whenever needed, in the best interest of democracy and the nation. Political reconciliation should now be the path vigorously followed at all levels. So, let's take the Moudud incident as an early warning and act accordingly in refurbishing the security arrangements and measures on the basis of sound risk assessment and analysis.

State media role

Still smacks of bias

BANGLADESH Television (BTV) and Bangladesh Betar (radio) have earned a bad name for themselves over the decades for working as vehicle to publicise the agenda of the government of the day, caring little to disseminate news neutrally and objectively. The immediate past government, like its predecessors, had used these two state media to promote their partisan news and views for long five years. But what has taken the citizens by surprise is the partisan role of a section of officials in BTV and Bangladesh Betar even when the tenure of the past government ended on 28 October.

There are allegations that officials who were given posting under political consideration during the rule of the alliance government are heading key posts and controlling programmes that tend to serve the interest of the past government.

On the other hand, the top and important posts at the External Affairs Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Institute of Bangladesh, Directorate of Films and Publications, and the Principal Information Officer continue to be in the hands of the officials who were beneficiaries of the past government. These posts are crucial as far as maintaining neutrality of the caretaker government is concerned but for some strange reasons little change has been made to instill nonpartisan character.

Our concern for neutrality stems from the fact that the vital state media highlights the functioning of the government, thereby influencing public opinion. Therefore, public media by all means must open to all political parties and provide them with equal access otherwise the concept of providing even playing field particularly during the caretaker government rule would come under severe scrutiny.

It is evidenced that the immediate past government had placed loyal officials in key positions keeping an eye on the next election. And the first and foremost task of a caretaker government is to replace those officials who hold the power to influence the process of holding a free and fair election. Therefore, in order to bring confidence back in the mind of the people and to ensure coverage of the news and views of all the political parties with equal importance, the caretaker government has to make the state media neutral for all practical purposes. Otherwise it will add a new dimension to the confrontational situation that exists in the country.

Back to square one



M ABDUL HAFIZ

IN yet another masterstroke, the BNP-Jamaat alliance has caught its opponent off-guard. The AL-led 14 party combine was compelled, under carefully built up circumstances, to sheepishly accept a caretaker arrangement which is considered far worse than the one it had rejected earlier.

The coup de main came in the wake of high drama surrounding Bangabhaban's search for a head of the caretaker government, following BNP chief Begum Zia's courtesy call on the president a day earlier. Although what transpired between the two during their hour and half long meeting remained a closely guarded secret there is tell-tale evidence that the die was cast

during that meeting. The drama came to its denouement the same day when, in a bizarre turn of events, Professor lajuddin disclosed his candidature for head of the CTG by short-circuiting all options provided for it in the constitution. By resorting to this extraordinary step, the professor committed a procedural error while trivializing the presidency itself.

At the other end of the political spectrum it will continue to be debated indefinitely why the AL so virulently, almost obsessively, opposed Justice Hasan's appointment because of his past connection with the BNP. The

PERSPECTIVES

At the same time it would be absolutely naive on the part of the opposition to expect that the caretaker government would be able, or willing, to abide by the assurance of neutrality put forward by it. It is also ridiculous that it would be able to monitor the neutrality of the advisers, one of whom has already sharply reacted to such a suggestion. The advisers should take such warnings to be more as a face-saving measure on the part of the opposition. Nevertheless it's a great relief for the nation that the violence that erupted has, for the moment, come to an end. But the calm cannot be expected to last long because its based on subterfuge, expediency, and delusion.

debate gains relevance particularly when they ultimately accepted one of the trusted BNP loyalists, whose past and present are steeped in BNP politics.

Justice Hasan understood the public mood, and responded to that by stepping aside. A similar public mood about the president, and a stream of requests, appeals, and supplications for him not to commit a procedural error, did not have any effect on the learned professor.

The president-cum-chief adviser of the caretaker government has already started drawing flak from various quarters, including the AL-led 14-party

alliance, for his bias and slow pace of action. It is alleged that the administrative changes already undertaken are mere eyewash, that the caretaker set up is still an extension of BNP government, and his advisers are chosen mainly from the list provided by the BNP. Blah blah blah. But to be honest, can Professor lajuddin, being the sentinel of his benefactor's interest, do otherwise? Can he be faulted for his subtle preference for the party that catapulted him to an exalted height almost from obscurity?

It is a different matter that the AL couldn't match the guile of the 4-party alliance. Neither could it,

according to critics, organize a mass upsurge that it had been threatening to do. But, finally, when it was backed by the public, the opposition failed to exploit this profitably in the interest of a credible election due early next year. Virtually jumping into the fire from the frying pan, the foolhardy opposition still thought that it had scored a preliminary victory by removing Justice Hasan.

When, during the recent upheaval, the public rose spontaneously against their tormentors from the previous government, it also struck a chord with the opposition demands for electoral reforms. The people saw those demands as a means for breaking out of the BNP-Jamaat stranglehold in the next general election, but AL-led 14-party alliance apparently disappointed them.

The nation is back to square one where it has been seized afresh with the anxiety whether there can, at all, be a free and fair election by removing the cobweb of intricate layers of intrigue constantly being hatched by BNP-Jamaat schemers, and their opaque political culture.

It is still a riddle whether a credible election is possible

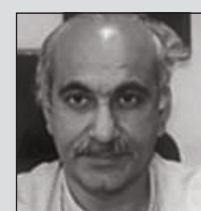
under a partisan head of the caretaker government, and an election commission and administration which is highly politicized in favour of the four-party alliance. They showed enough sleight of hand in the past and no one knows what is still up their sleeves. But everybody knows that they are past-masters in the trade.

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Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BIISS.

The Bangla heroine



MJ AKBAR

THE collective noun is a poor cousin of the proper; the singular belongs to a higher caste than the plural. There was a crucial omission from this year's list of Nobel Prize winners. Muhammad Yunus deserved the award for peace, but only half of it. The other half should have gone to the women of Bangladesh.

Yunus's now famous micro-credit idea was considered "impossible" three decades ago only because no one trusted the poor. Banks are in the business of capital. Capital is the business of the rich. The rich have only one law: the business of money is to make money. Banks don't mind being cheated by the rich, as any list of their bad debts will prove. But they will never permit themselves to be cheated by the poor. Trust, in their philosophy, leaves dark stains on the balance sheet. They would rather compromise with the greed of the rich than the need of the poor.

The poor are not mislaid angels. They are as vulnerable to temptation as any other class. The best decision that Yunus made was not to help the poor, but to help them through women. He trusted the right gender. His experiment might have collapsed if he had handed out little packets to men. Women prefer the human development index to the stock

BYLINE

I believe that the West could not have seen its dramatic rise in prosperity without eliminating gender bias, and I even more strongly believe that Muslim societies and nations cannot find a future without making women equal partners in economic growth. This is the challenge of the 21st century, and those who rise up to the challenge will find a proportionate rise in wealth, stability, and the happiness index. Bangladesh's women should have shared the Nobel Peace Prize for more than one reason. The woman who saved her family with micro-credit is a heroine of her nation and an inspiration to the world.

exchange. They know the value of food, cloth, education and healthcare. They give birth and understand death.

If Bangladesh is slowly emerging out of the basket into which Henry Kissinger once dumped it (he called the country a "basket case") it is because women have become the prime movers of economic development. The Nobel citation confirms this: "Micro-credit has proved to be an important liberating force in societies where women in particular have to struggle against repressive social and economic conditions. Economic growth and political democracy cannot achieve their full potential unless the female half of humanity participates on an equal footing with the male."

Spot on. Ninety per cent of Bangladesh's population is Muslim. It is these Bangla Muslim women who have made Yunus a Nobelist. They are also a visible challenge to the stereotyped image of Muslim women, particularly in America and Europe, as shrouded in veils. I hope photographs of women, who deserve all the credit they can be given, accompany all features on Yunus.

None of them will have their faces covered.

Almost all of them will have their heads covered. The sari is an excellent example of modest dress. One piece of cloth covers all parts of the body, including the head. In all eastern societies, both men and women have traditionally covered their heads. Those who do not wear the sari, use a scarf or a dupatta. Men wore the burmose, fez, skin, or cloth cap. Men's dresses, as much as women's, reached the ankles, and in neither gender were private parts flaunted in the manner in which, say, the codpiece stressed certain physical assets, or disguised liabilities, among men in the western middle ages. Eastern Christians followed eastern norms, as they do in Kerala. Hindus and Sikhs would never contemplate entering a temple or gurdwara with their heads uncovered.

The full-veiled Muslim is a small part of the truth, and not by any means the whole truth. A valid argument can be made for change, but that argument will not be won through either legal compulsion or public contempt.

Jack Straw had every right to raise the issue of the full veil, but

the problem was not the message but the messenger. Muslims are loath to listen to lectures from a man who is one of the principal perpetrators of war and havoc in Iraq, a man of vast power who used a lie and defends many more in the pursuit of an immoral and unacceptable war in which hundreds of thousands of innocents have died.

I don't know how many of you saw the interview with former Iranian President Khatami on BBC on Friday the third. I suppose if he had said something hysterical media would have quoted him endlessly. But he supported a moderate form of dress, pointing out as so many others have that Islam insists on modest dress for both sexes. Mr Khatami was leader of a country which has a women's wing in its armed forces, and can be seen marching in parades. The women wear scarves, not the face-veil. I suppose it is a bit difficult to shoot the enemy wearing a face-veil.

President Khatami made a much more important point, which Britain needs to address: that it is the politics of injustice, and not religion, that is fuelling anger among young Muslims in countries like Britain. They cannot understand the carnage in and international indifference towards

Palestine. They feel demonised and alienated in their own countries. They believe that the legitimate war on terrorists has illegitimate by-products, like the use of demonisation to gain public support for quasi-imperial adventures. They want to be accepted as themselves, and not as clones of another culture. All minorities need space for identity. They should not take such need to excess, for the good reason that it is silly; but anger will breed a touch of excess. At least the veil is non-violent.

The question that should worry Straw is why British Muslim women, who have not grown up in a conservative environment -- this perfectly serious pun is intentional -- are asserting themselves increasingly in this manner. Perhaps the anger is greater because Labour was the natural home of the British Muslim vote.

Multi-culturalism is no longer just a national phenomenon in some countries; it is an international fact. The success of western colonisation was bound to leave its impact on the dress code. You may have seen a million pictures of Iraq by now. I hope you have noticed that the urban Muslim bride wears a wedding dress straight out of a western Christian ceremony. Western dress was a vital part of Mustafa Kemal's reforms in Turkey, and the Arab regions of the old Ottoman Empire paid their homage to success in similar ways. One of the most remarkable facts of 20th century social history is the triumph of the trouser in male, and now female, dress.

Or maybe not. Maybe the real phenomenon is the necktie. Trousers are practical, useful, and can be elegant or comfortable or even both. I cannot think of a

single practical reason for wearing a necktie. It is no substitute for a muffler; it neither hides nor protects. There is no logic to its shape. And yet it has become the definition of formality across the whole world. Even Communism has succumbed to the tie: Mao jackets are no longer worn by the Chinese politburo.

I actually like wearing this utterly useless bit of hangman's rope. I enjoy wearing ties in a range of colours, and take more of them than I need to on a visit to Britain. But I wonder what my reaction would be if the British immigration authorities passed an order that you could not enter Britain without a tie.

Marketing, persuasion, and allure are far better alchemists of social change than political compulsion.

The most serious problem in so many Muslim countries is gender bias, and this can exist with or without the veil. Gender bias is hardly unique to Muslims; Europe corrected itself only less than a century ago.

I believe that the West could not have seen its dramatic rise in prosperity without eliminating gender bias, and I even more strongly believe that Muslim societies and nations cannot find a future without making women equal partners in economic growth. This is the challenge of the 21st century, and those who rise up to the challenge will find a proportionate rise in wealth, stability, and the happiness index.

Bangladesh's women should have shared the Nobel Peace Prize for more than one reason. The woman who saved her family with micro-credit is a heroine of her nation and an inspiration to the world.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

Then and now



DR ABDULLAH A DEWAN

ANY of my friends who read my column regularly and take ardent interest in Bangladesh politics opened a discourse the other day about Baksal. The next morning, in a surprise coincidence, an email from Badrul Islam from Dhaka underscored that some people still hark back to Baksal episode when they assess Awami League's election winning prospects.

The next day I read Nazim Choudhury's predictions about Election 2007. Analyzing the "would be voters" polling data Nazim predicted that BNP with Jamaat and JP alliance will get about 80 seats; AL and its alliance partners will get 180 and 40 seats respectively. This assumed AL is untainted from Baksal stigma and that BNP continues with its politics of scapegoat and deceptive election pledges devoid of serious stratagem.

NO NONSENSE

Nazim's analysis also revealed that Baksal may no longer be an Achilles' Heel for the Awami League even though there may still exist some scattered pent-up grievances. Meanwhile, BNP's aggressive maneuver to institutionalize DPS through political alliances with anti-democratic, anti-liberation, and non-secular political forces is a uniquely perverse innovation that will be in long public memory. People rejected Baksal and they will reject BNP-Jamaat alliance of a Dominant Party System as well with abhorrence.

I find it ungainly that people would still squabble about Baksal and chastise the present AL leadership as being liable for an episode that happened 33 years ago. The concept of one party rule (like Baksal) to a state came from Vladimir Lenin, who believed that only one party -- the communists -- could lead the workers to their ultimate aspiration and that other parties would only stand in the way.

While my ideas about writing this piece were gyrating, I consulted with several people including Col Jafar Imam, (a decorated freedom fighter and former minister under General Zia and General Ershad) who shared with me his insights on Baksal. After independence, when the dusts of the war ravaged country were still flying, Bangabandhu wanted to give everyone -- rajakars, bigots, various splinter groups of freedom

fighters and patriots alike -- a sense of unity, strength, and commonality under the umbrella of a single-party government. He offered general amnesty except to those guilty of war crimes."

Col Imam further added: "Baksal (dissolved after Bangabandhu's assassination on August 15, 1975) could not have been a conspiracy to smear the democratic institutions of a multi-party system. Bangabandhu could not have trampled our struggle for multiparty democracy once the war ravaged country is rebuilt and achieved stability and direction."

At the time there was compelling evidence worldwide that suggested multi-party systems could be divisive and incongruous for stable economic and political progress. This argument was advanced in earnest during the mid-20th century when many developing nations strived to

emulate the former Soviet Union a country which had transformed itself from a backward, agrarian nation into a superpower (albeit at the expense of basic human rights). Bangabandhu deeply believed that the Bengali nation would never countenance the thought of a Soviet-type godless society.

Make no mistake; this article is not to defend the indefensible. To all of us Baksal was a fleeting aberration, a blip in our democratic tradition. However, the present leadership of AL may distance itself by proclaiming that Baksal was a political miscalculation. Until that message reverberates the political landscape, the ghost of Baksal will continue to haunt AL and its adversaries like former Law Minister Moudud Ahmed will love to keep it alive.

In a discussion meeting on multi-party democracy at the

National Press Club on October 10, Moudud claimed: "President Ziaur Rahman and PM Khaleda Zia had played the most important role in establishing democracy in the country, while the formulation of the Constitution of 1972 was the only contribution of AL to democracy."

Referring to Baksal, he added: "Awami League destroyed its contribution by introducing one-party government through the 4th amendment of the constitution." Although Moudud's adulating statements, in all essence, were aimed at serving the Zia family, his oblique reference to Baksal is nonetheless off-putting and politically damaging to the election winning strategies of the AL.

Poring over the BNP's last five years of misrule one may conclude that BNP is culpable of relentless maneuvers to build a dominant party system (DPS) by forging alliance with those who allegedly committed war crimes and fought side by side with the Pakistani genocidal army against the freedom fighters of Bangladesh.

The DPS is a "one dominant party system" which practically becomes the government, by itself or form a coalition government. The successive conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major's reign of 18 years (1979 to 1997) in Britain is often cited as an example of a

modern day DPS.

When the party in power becomes complacent, it comes to see its position in power as all but "guaranteed." Such political haughtiness is seen as one of the reasons for the public's overwhelming rejection of the Conservatives in 1997. The same may be brewing to ensue to the BNP-Jamaat constituted DPS in Bangladesh.

During its 18 year period, the Conservatives in Britain came very close to losing the distinction between the party and the state. As a result, state's machinery for implementing policies was carried out automatically. This scenario overshadowed the Thatcher government when the civil service was seen as a mere rubber stamp of government policy to do as it was told and they were overly rewarded in the Honours lists. But the similarities between the British Conservative party and BNP-Jamaat constituted DPS end here.

Under the DPS, often referred to as "soft authoritarianism," opposition parties are legally allowed to function, but are rendered ineffective to seriously challenge electoral victory to form a government. Past experiences of the DPS with other nations, as in Bangladesh, show that the system has been marred by rampant corruption, politicization, insensi-

tivity to the popular demand for basic necessities, and poor governance.

Under DPS, opposition parties are often subject to varying degrees of harassment and forced to contend with rules and electoral systems designed to put them at a disadvantage. In some instances, they are stymied by outright electoral fraud. The BNP-Jamaat DPS has been alleged to have pursued just that which became the precursor of the 16 month long struggle, demanding reforms in the EC, CTG and other electoral issues.

The DPS politicians often insist that they are the saviour of democracy, doing a good job for the people, while the opposition parties are noxious conspirators demanding unrealistic reforms. These DPS leaders always attempt to insulate the party by shifting their failures on the oppositions. For example, during her electoral campaigns, Khaleda keeps parroting the same code words in every public meeting: development, democracy, progress, prosperity, plots, domestic conspiracy, foreign conspiracy, and what not.

No question that the country's image is at its nadir because of being ranked number one for five consecutive years. Beside, energy crisis has paralyzed the country's social and economic life. Price spiral of daily essentials has

been eating up every bit of income growth of the poor. All these including the rise of terrorism, persecution of journalists, and harassment of minorities and so on occurred during Khaleda Zia's five years of rule. She now pledges that she will eradicate corruption, solve the energy problem, and will bring down prices if voted to power. Are the voters swayed by these pledges? Not really, as revealed in Nazim's masterly analysis of the recent survey of public's voting preferences.

Nazim's analysis also revealed that Baksal may no longer be an Achilles' Heel for the Awami League even though there may still exist some scattered pent-up grievances. Meanwhile, BNP's aggressive maneuver to institutionalize DPS through political alliances with anti-democratic, anti-liberation, and non-secular political forces is a uniquely perverse innovation that will be in long public memory. People rejected Baksal and they will reject BNP-Jamaat alliance of a Dominant Party System as well with abhorrence.

Dr Abdullah A Dewan is Professor of Economics at Eastern Michigan University.