DHAKA THURSDAY NOVEMBER 9. 2006

Vitriolic rhetoric

Place the country's interests above party's

HE bellicose rhetoric of the chiefs of the two major political parties is once again pushing the country towards great uncertainty. The political scene, which has never been stable in the last few months, is getting murkier as Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina are speaking in a language that can hardly help defuse tension. The clouds are gathering ominously over the political arena, where the BNP and the Awami League are apparently reposing more faith in intimidation and muscle-flexing than popular support for attaining their goals.

As the immediate past prime minister, Khaleda Zia should have been more circumspect. But instead she was extremely belligerent. Tolerance and spirit of accommodation are not to be found anywhere in the brand of politics that the two parties are now relying on to propel themselves to an advantageous position before the next elections.

The rhetoric of the most hostile kind cannot help the cause of democracy or law and order. Though the top two leaders have set different targets, both of them are spewing the same amount of venom at the people and institutions that they seek to undermine. Khaleda Zia has virtually reprimanded the whole caretaker government, accusing it of hatching a conspiracy. And two of the advisors have come under sharp attacks for their alleged connections with the BNP's rivals.

We fail to understand who the caretaker government is conspiring against. And how could Khaleda say that it was none of the AL's business to scrutinize the activities of the CEC? Why should the opposition accept a garbled voter list and a man as the CEC whose competence has been questioned even by BNP leaders?

Sheikh Hasina, for her part, is also not playing it cool. She has said that there will bloodshed if her party's demands are not met by November 12. She seems to have little remorse even after the October 28 mayhem in which some activists turned barbaric beyond description. Have the AL leaders learnt nothing from the showdown, which has created revulsion in the public mind?

We appeal to the BNP and the AL to refrain from saying or doing anything that can only cause harm to the nation. They have to try to regain the public confidence in politicians' ability, to resolve the crisis, which has been badly eroded by the recent developments. And it is the top two leaders who have to show the way by following the rules of the game, instead of ripping them to shreds.

Grameen Phone's achievement

A landmark in cellular telecommunication

RAMEEN Phone (GP) subscribers have now reached a phenomenal level of 10 million, and that too within only ten years of their starting operation. We are happy to see the growth and dynamism of GP and its investment in Bangladesh. It is an incredible achievement taken in the context of the impact on society and culture, not to speak of the tremendous influence on our economy. The number of users of mobile phones has made a quantum jump in Bangladesh and has revolutionized our lives. And for this all the mobile telephone operators in Bangladesh deserve our thanks. Mobile telephone is no longer a tool for the privileged but a necessary implement for all those seeking to better their lot, at all levels throughout the country.

We are also appreciative of the consensus reached by the present shareholders of GP to offload its shares through the Dhaka Stock Exchange. We shall be happy to see it implemented soon and would like the other operators to follow suit. In the meantime we shall also recommend that all mobile operators consider reducing their current call rate charges that are very exorbitant. In this context we would like to cite the example of our neighbour India.

Telecommunication in today's world is an important tool for development all over the world more so for a third world country like Bangladesh. We believe the government too has to play its role in right perspective. BTTB and the telecommunication regulatory body has to be more proactive and play a more pragmatic role for further development of the sector by formulating more subscriber friendly regulations.

The fact that Bangladesh has the potential of being one of the top mobile phone growth markets in the Asia Pacific Region reaching a total 50 million subscribers must be taken note of by the government. Although BTTB in recent times, forced by market conditions of late, has issued licenses for providing landlines to a few private organizations, there are still a number of stumbling blocks that are hindering the steady growth of our overall telecommunication networking. While the private telephone operators are marching ahead, there is no reason why BTTB should remain behind?

On a collision course



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc. psc (Retd)

VEN at the risk of sounding pessimistic, the best conclusion that one can come to, looking at the current state of politics in our country is that we are heading towards a collision course, inevitably and inexorably.

The aggressive rhetoric being spewed out, particularly by the two leaders of the BNP and AL, are only making matters worse. Only the good sense and compunction on the part of the two major parties for the trouble caused to the people because of their politics can save us from a terrible uncertainty that is likely to follow should they fail to reconcile.

Over the last fifteen years of the democratic regime whatever may have been the animus displayed by the two parties towards each other during their tenure in office, the period of the caretaker government (CTG) came as a respite to the people. It was a period during which the political parties exercised a modicum of self-restrain by holding back from all the caustic politics that was

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Even some of the senior BNP leaders are on record for criticizing the CEC. Certainly election can't be held on the basis of a flawed voter list. And the lack of time for redaction is an utterly unacceptable excuse. The demands of the AL and the 14-party alliance are just, but their current methods and means of realizing those are not. The consequences are so unpredictable as to be outside the ability of the political parties to put right.

generally the order of the day before the CTG took over.

It used to be period of calm with no "lagatar hartal" or "bandh" and most gratifying was the positive turn for the better that one noticed in respect of law and order. Also, a refreshing feature was the balanced coverage in the state controlled media. It was a time when the public was spared the shameful and unbearable monopolization of the government media, particularly the BTV, by the political party in power.

It is not so this time.

The assumption of the caretaker government was preceded by near chaos and death and destruction, although the president's assumption of the office of the chief advisor of the CTG was grudgingly accepted by the opposition, because of the manner in which it was done. It is a great responsibility on the president's shoulders indeed, given his frail health and the large number of ministries and divisions he has chosen to keep under him.

Without making a value judgment of the process of the president's arrogating to himself the post of the chief of the CTG, it is perhaps no wonder that his role has come under fire, but, while so long he was the butt of the 14party alliance criticisms, he and the CTG are now under fire from both the camps. And the twopronged assault is not a good thing. The threats and counterthreats by the two camps against each other as also the threats evelled at the president and the CTG have very disturbing potential. And this is the most worrisome development for the com-

mon person.

To begin with, what should be a neutral non-party CTG is really a "some party" if not an "all party" CTG. But that does not necessarily make them incapable of acting neutrally. But what has compounded the issue is the uncompromising stand of the two camps that has put the caretaker government under tremendous pressure, something that the previous three

CTG were never subjected to.

Having to measure every

Having to measure every action and weigh the consequences of their every step in advance, lest it ruffle the feathers of one camp or the other, will certainly hamper the decision making process of the CTG. To assume that it will not act neutrally and ask it to prove its neutrality as the AL is doing and to accuse it of conspiracy as the BNP has done very recently is likely to render the CTG dysfunctional.

Surely the CTG must not only be neutral in spirit, its actions must also be seen to be so. But the pressure tactics employed by both the camps will not help in fulfilling its major task, which is to hold a free and fair election. It is interesting to note that the demands that are being made by the AL now are very similar to what the BNP was making during the tenure of the CTG in 2001. (calling for the removal of the Shafiur Rahman, one of the election commissioners, among other things) and vice-versa. But there

were no threats of countrywide siege or disruption of election or charges of conspiracy against the CTG.

However, in the middle of the pressure tactics of the two political camps we notice some very useful suggestions being made by the civil society and various citizens' group. Some members of the council of advisors have acknowledged their relevance. One would hope that these would receive the due considerations of the CTG.

The threat of continuous country-wide siege from November 13 announced by the AL and Sheikh Hasina's suggestion that there would be more bloodshed if the 14-party demands, relating to the EC were not met by November 12 causes us equal anxiety.

There are several questions that one would like to ask as a common citizen. First, whom are we laying the siege against? Knowing the serious implication of a siege, will it not amount to self-destruction when we are putting ourselves under blockade and bringing the country to a standstill? After all, there is no foreign force that we are fighting against that the siege would drive away!

And what will be the consequence if the other party tries to disrupt the siege program? The answer is very obvious. As the AL leader has said, more bloodshed. Has the party not learnt from its recent siege program? Can we afford the repetition of the barbarism that we had recently witnessed?

nd in the middle of all this

some political quarters are talking about extra-constitutional intervention. It is not only untimely, it is utterly wrong and unwise to even suggest the possibility of a military takeover. Political crisis is not something that is unknown in a democratic setup, and it must be resolved through political means alone. Having spent fifteen years in a democratic system anything other than a democratic and political solution will only demonstrate the inability of the polity to resolve political issues by themselves. It cannot bode well for us.

There is merit in the demand of the 14-party alliance in respect of the CEC, which is also the demand of the greater majority of the people. The CEC's actions have made him lose the confidence of the voters, and Khaleda Zia's certificate that it is working well will not make them change their mind unless also the voter list is rectified. Even some of the senior BNP leaders are on record for criticizing the CEC. Certainly election can't be held on the basis of a flawed voter list. And the lack of time for redaction is an utterly unacceptable excuse.

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Caretaker government: Then and now



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

ELL-meaning and concerned but dispassionate citizens are wondering as to why the present caretaker government is not displaying the now-famous admirable speed, cynics say bionic speed, of its illustrious predecessor. They are expecting real delivery in so far as creation of a level playing field is necessary to enabling the political parties to commence their election campaign.

Such expectation assumes heightened significance when seen against the background of the inclusion of the top-most bureaucrat of the preceding caretaker regime in the present council of advisers. A point of additional importance is the fact that the afore-mentioned former bureaucrat has been entrusted with the onerous responsibility of steering the advisory council committee pertaining to Home and Establishment matters.

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One does not have to be a pundit to understand that the two portfolios of Home and Establishment, retained by the president-cum-chief advisor, have profound and far-reaching impact on impartial election management. Past experience substantiates that.

Given the objective situation prevailing in the country, including the not-very-stable health of the president-cum-chief advisor, it is strongly likely that the advisor steering the above-mentioned committees on Home and

AS I SEE IT

As a regional powerhouse it could well be the economic center of the whole of

eastern South Asia. People seem to believe that huge populations are an economic

hindrance, but I believe otherwise. The greater the number of consumers, the more

the economic opportunity. Bangladesh has great human potential, give them buying

power and it will become what it was three centuries ago before the British arrived:

STRAIGHT LINE

The pretext of shortage of time to correct the voter list as reported by the Election Commission to the caretaker government is an untenable position, as national election on the basis of an admittedly flawed voters list is not acceptable. The doctrine of necessity can help us tide over the problem.

Establishment will have a dominant share in all the decisions taken thereto.

The wise advisor, who is well-known for his integrity and erudition, and has the unique advantage of real experience in a similar exercise in the near past, has already radiated confidence by pragmatic utterances in an atmosphere charged with disbelief, mistrust, and acrimony.

This is despite the fact that there are complaints from the business community that their representation is lacking in the advisory council although they were represented in the two previous caretaker governments and the apparently less-than-charitable comment that women's voice has found extraordinary respectability in the corridors of power.

The optimists will continue to pin hope on the sagacity of our present guardians, though not all of them, but the question that bothers enquiring minds is the magnitude of political and administrative dissimilarities between now and 2001. Delving into the specifics, one may see that there was almost a Hitchcockian dimension to the swearing-in ceremony of the chief adviser and all our simple folks had to guess about the appointee until the penultimate moment. This may not be the case for those smart guys who were privy to the facts behind the facts.

Compare this scenario with the lot of the immediate past chief adviser who had plenty of time to do his homework and planning before the actual assumption of

the exalted office. In fact, he entered his official residence days before the swearing-in as part of an apparent administratively convenient measure. No exception was taken and no evebrows were raised and the matter went unnoticed. Compare this with the agitated comment of the senior-most adviser of the present council or the less-thantactful modus-operandi of two advisers who went to pass a message to the leader of a major political alliance on being directed by the president-cumchief adviser.

Politicians and distinguished

lawyers belonging to the two sides of the political divide are making vociferous demands for the resignation of three advisers even before the latter are securely placed in their new assignments. This, however, is not unexpected as some political observers have commented that the present council of advisers is largely comprised of nominees of political parties and that the immediate past government is the prime beneficiary. The previous caretaker government was not tainted with such insidious remarks, at least at the formative

The fact of the matter is that the assumption of the office of the chief adviser this time has been mired in controversy and confusion of different dimension. A major political alliance has initially declined to accept the partyappointed president as chief adviser and subsequently announced a conditional welcome. It would appear that we

have been willy-nilly thrown into a bizarre situation where the head of the state and the head of the government have been placed on probation. Erudite lawyers have likened the senior-most adviser to a potential handicapped newborn requiring intensive observation.

The previous chief adviser enjoyed his job and went into substantive action from day one, may be even before that, according to his detractors. There was no reservation about his bona fides and locus standi and he traveled adequately to all the divisional headquarters along with the necessary and relevant entourage. He even found time to visit his home town and prayed at his parent's grave.

Against that scenario, con-

Against that scenario, consider the apprehended predicament of the present incumbent who is believed to be uncomfortably wearing two hats. Already there is a demand by a major political alliance to effectively separate the office of chief adviser from that of the president wherein, it has been alleged, there are scheming and partisan beneficiary functionaries who are breathing heavy over the shoulders of a weary chief executive.

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The president-cum-chief adviser is and will be under constant pressure to accede to various demands and counterdemands regarding posting and transfer of regulatory and enforcement personnel. Action in this regard has to be taken before the declaration of election schedule after publication of which the Election Commission has to be

consulted for their concurrence regarding posting and transfer of election related personnel.

As a series of actions have to be taken within a very short time under pressing and trying circumstances and opposing pulls, the question is whether the chief executive would be able to work for long hours without detriment to his health. Such fears would not normally be expressed but for the health bulletins issued by competent authority in the recent past when doubts crept in as to whether the then president was actually in charge. The president, by all accounts, was prescribed very limited activity.

Therefore, question as to whether the 76 year-old president has regained enough energy to withstand the mounting pressures of a nearly beleaquered office is a central one. A pertinent query would be whether the chief adviser's office, that is, the PMO, would remain underutilized during the incumbency of this caretaker government. The physical utilization of two offices is likely to dispel fears of biased action in as much as the two dentities of the caretaker chief needs to be displayed promi-

nently.

The caretaker government of 2001 did not have to face the contentious issues of reconstituting the Election Commission and the correction of voter list as demanded by a major political alliance. Therefore, its lease of 90 days did not encounter major obstacles in the way of realizing its principal objective, that is, the holding of peaceful, fair, and impartial election.

This time, the Election Commission displays a combative posture as opposed to the demands of its reconstitution and the correction of voter list. The suspicion is that the incumbents at the commission including the controversial chief election commissioner have become disturbingly intransigent after receiving assurances of support from the

immediate past government.

The ground reality is that the

relativistic that the Election Commission, the body which is constitutionally mandated to hold the national election peacefully, fairly, and impartially, does not enjoy the confidence of major political parties representing nearly half the electorate. So when the referee is disowned by half the players, as very rightly pointed out by an adviser of the present caretaker government, it is strongly likely that peaceful and fair election may be a casualty without last minute resolution of the issue.

The pretext of shortage of time to correct the voter list as reported by the Election Commission to the caretaker government is an untenable position, as national election on the basis of an admittedly flawed voters list is not acceptable. The doctrine of necessity can help us tide over the problem.

Unabated institution-bashing over the years that involved serious denigration of service ethos has brought us to the present deplorable state of affairs where the people do not have faith in the impartiality and neutrality of the public servants and politicians are deemed incapable to fairly effect changes in the democratic transition.

In a civilized democratic society, leaders are supposed to build institutions which in turn produce leaders to sustain the pluralist dispensation. Unfortunately, this has not been our experience. Societal guardians like the public service, judiciary, and the Election Commission have not received the due honour and importance.

Our present predicament has been caused by our servility and thus we would need men and women of substance and strong moral fibre to stall the slide downwards and keep hope alive.

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Whither Bangladesh?



T is very difficult in the third world to hold free and fair elections. The result is always contested by the loser. This has both political and economic repercussions for the state. Every regime in power uses its incumbency to tilt the elections in its favour, the normal modus operandi of pre-elections is to put its own supporters to run the local administration and the Election Commission, making it that much easier to try any number of manipulations in rigging

the elections.

For influencing the outcome of the vote there is nothing more potent in third world countries than using police functionaries at the street level. An honest election is only possible if supervised

by a genuinely neutral administration looking after governance and affairs of the state for the period leading to elections as well as transition of authority to whoever is the winner.

Sonar Bangla, Golden Bangladesh.

One of the better innovations to the Bangladesh constitution was the institution of the caretaker government to oversee general elections. The formula agreed by all parties was that the last retired chief justice of the Supreme Court would be the chief advisor.

With Bangladesh polarized equally between Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Sheikh Hasina's Awami League (AL), and both having ruled the country alternately, the institution of a caretaker entity gives credibility to an

election process, not only in the eyes of the world but more importantly within Bangladesh.

Bangladesh was lucky in the first two elections to have as chief election commissioner MA Syed, a first rate civil servant of utmost integrity. Even though AL launched country-wide street protest in the last successfully held elections that swept Khaleda Zia to power in a landslide, the elections were generally taken to be free and fair. Despite the agitation, the BNP government completed its term of office

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Leaving nothing to chance this time around, the BNP picked a chief election commissioner whose leaning was well known to be partisan towards BNP. To add to that, the man meant to head the caretaker government, the

last chief justice of the Supreme Court, Justice Hasan, was also perceived by the opposition to have deep-rooted sympathies for BNP.

The refusal of AL-led opposition to accept him as the head of the caretaker cabinet was hardly surprising. With the worst rioting in the streets for some years, causing more than a dozen dead and numerous injured, and with considerable loss of property, Justice Hasan refused the job and the president ended the impasse by taking over also as head of government and appointing a cabinet of advisors. Faced with the possibility of the army moving into the vacuum, the opposition protests subsided for

The chief advisor-to-be, Chief

Justice (Retired) Hasan, may have been a BNP supporter in his early years, but as a judge he was known to be honest and upright. In fact the BNP government was reconciled to compromising on the more potent appointment, the chief election commissioner, MA Aziz, tacitly agreeing to replace him with a more neutral person. The opposition has those lost out on both counts and obviously they are reacting badly in this situation, the threat of military intervention notwithstanding.

To avoid trouble, and given the fact that the head of the caretaker administration is a BNP-elected president, the BNP would do well to replace the chief election commissioner, this gesture will go a long way in restoring the credibility and sanctity of the electoral process. Such initiatives require political maturity. It is to be seen what route the BNP chooses, one of national compromise or the more obvious one of prolonged confrontation

At this time, the BNP may be sitting pretty, but this situation may deteriorate to BNP's disadvantage. Despite the other parties ganging up with the AL, BNP's alliance with the religious parties should give it about enough votes between to hold off any challenge. Even though the

electorate has some genuine grievances against the Khaleda Zia government, the alternative available may not be good enough to vote for a change.

Ershad, unpredictable as ever, is using his Jatiyo Party (JP) card as blackmail, his joining the BNP-led alliance would have been comprehensive insurance for another stint far Khaleda Zia as PM. Ershad's demands are steep, it is believed that other than asking for 40 constituencies allocation for his party, he is asking for quite a handsome packet of money. Some things

never change! The elections will be a close run thing. While AL has deep roots in the body politic of Bangladesh and will have far more seats than in the last parliament, it may not be enough. While a strong opposition is a wonderful tonic for genuine democracy, one hopes that if either side wins it will be enough to avoid a hung parliament or the result being close enough to give the smaller partners in a coalition a Sword of Damocles for political blackmail

While Bangladesh has politically come of age, the polarization has manifested itself in street strife, stunting the national aspiration for economic emancipation

of the predominately poor in the population. The campaign of tit-for-tat strikes has been negative politics at its worst. Whatever economic progress Bangladesh has made, and that has not been insignificant, has not been able to keep up with the population increases.

A period of political peace and respite from flood and cyclone disasters, and given that the country is floating on oil and gas, and capable of feeding and clothing itself, Bangladesh has the potential of becoming a very viable economic entity.

As a regional powerhouse it could well be the economic center of the whole of eastern South Asia, with the eastern states of India surrounding three-fifths of the country, one-fifth bounded by Burma, and the balance washed by the waters of the Bay of Bengal.

People seem to believe that huge populations are an economic hindrance, but I believe otherwise. The greater the number of consumers, the more the economic opportunity. Bangladesh has great human potential, give them buying power and it will become what it was three centuries ago before the British arrived: Sonar Bangla, Golden Bangladesh.

A word of caution for the military in Bangladesh, there will always be a temptation to "set things right," but it could well go all wrong. Numerous failures in governance have their origins in martial law. Pakistan and Bangladesh are bad examples of people coming in for short time, than staying forever till destiny decrees otherwise, limitless uninhibited ambition destroying the very fabric of society. The military-rule route should only be used as a last resort, and that too for the shortest possible time, if absolute anarchy is imminent.

The caretaker model, should be adopted by Pakistan, crafting it to local circumstances. The country's electoral system must become a credible process. Given an excellent model, one hopes that sensible leaders in Bangladesh will give the electoral process the credibility it badly needs, not only for third world countries, but as one has seen in the US in the year 2000, in the countries of the first world also.

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